

Price tradeoff or sharing partnership? Understanding guest-to-guest relationships in P2P accommodation

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ABSTRACT

Current literature of peer-to-peer (P2P) accommodation has primarily focused on dyadic host-guest relationships while neglecting another important type of interpersonal relationship in real accommodation-sharing settings: the guest-to-guest interaction. This research aims to explore interactions between P2P accommodation guests and particularly, examine the role of other guests in shaping P2P accommodation guests' motives and on-site experiences. The thematic analysis of interview data identified an uncertainty-interaction nexus consisting of four types of guest-to-guest relationships: price tradeoff, co-production of stimulating experiences, reticent sharing, and sharing partnership. Different relationship patterns are closely related to guests' diverse motives for using P2P accommodation and some reflect guests' intended collaborations and community awareness. Our findings further indicate that the relationship patterns between guests are not fixed, which can change according to the culmination of guests' P2P accommodation experiences and hosts' compatibility management. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the “sharing economy” or “collaborative consumption” underpinned by developments in information communication technology (ICT) and growing user connectivity has gained widespread recognition and popularity around the world (Botsman and Rogers, 2011; Cheng, 2016). On this basis, peer-to-peer (P2P) accommodation allows people to trade access to short-term private lodgings through online platforms like Airbnb, offering them a more flexible and interactive accommodation experience with not only local hosts but also other unacquainted travelers (Lin et al., 2019). This interactivity has been confirmed as a major incentive and unique experience element for using home-sharing services (Cheng, 2016; Tussyadiah and Pesonen, 2018).

Yet most studies of P2P accommodation have mainly focused on the host-guest interaction to investigate a wide range of topics such as trust-building (Park and Tussyadiah, 2020), intercultural encounters (Cheng and Zhang, 2019), and the impact of host-guest interaction on guests' motives, experience, and satisfaction (Tussyadiah, 2016; Sthapit, 2019). While interaction between guests and local neighborhoods has been

suggested as another factor that could influence both the guest experience and the well-being of the local community (Paulauskaite et al., 2017; Stergiou and Farmaki, 2020), interaction between guests is rarely mentioned in mainstream discourse, despite being common in the P2P accommodation experience (Lin et al., 2019). Customers who choose to rent a private or shared room often have the opportunity to encounter other guests, as they have to share public space (e.g., the kitchen and living room) or even the same guest bedroom during the stay (Lutz and Newlands, 2018). Their collective use of space often gives rise to interactions that range from casual talk to traveling together (Lin et al., 2019). Also, the rapid growth of multi-listing hosts on shared rental platforms in recent years (Adamiak, 2019) may increase the occurrence of shared accommodation between guests. Statistics show that in Airbnb, up to 62% of the supply is offered by multi-listing hosts (Adamiak, 2019). While managing multiple listing, these hosts are less likely to constantly stay with or even visit guests offline (Kwok and Xie, 2019), which subsequently lead to more guest-guest encounters and co-habitations in the case of a private room or shared room. Coupled with the growing supply of private/shared rooms offered by multi-listing hosts (Adamiak, 2019), guest-to-guest interactions in P2P settings may

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become a more common phenomenon that warrants further investigations and more in-depth understanding.

To date, the limited research on guest-to-guest interaction seems to produce contradictory findings. Some studies suggest that the attitude of guests to one another is generally positive (Lin et al., 2019). It is common for guests to share travel experiences and form friendships due to their shared interest in the destination, which in turn co-creates their experience of P2P accommodation (Lin et al., 2019; Lyu et al., 2019). However, other Airbnb users have reported feeling distrustful of and vulnerable to their fellow guests, which negatively impacts their intention to use the service (Del Chiappa et al., 2021). These seemingly contradictory findings point to the complexity of this phenomenon and the need for in-depth investigation. Besides, it still remains unclear which factors influence the guest-to-guest interaction in P2P accommodation, what are the connections between inter-guest interaction and guests' use intention and lodging experiences, and moreover, whether or not such interaction is a subjective, uncontrollable, social phenomenon for P2P service providers (i.e. hosts and online platforms).

From a service perspective, P2P accommodation guest interactions are a form of customer-to-customer interaction (CCI) that emerges from a commercial sharing service. Prior studies have demonstrated the importance of CCI on consumer's satisfaction, experience, and evaluation of the service in many service settings (Wu, 2007; Nicholls, 2010). However, the performance and influence of this interpersonal connection remain under-explored in the P2P sector. As Milanova and Maas (2017) suggest, the sharing economy denotes a hybrid exchange form combining economic gain and prosocial ideas. The community feelings and the peer collaboration among participants highlight the unique features of sharing economy regarding interpersonal relationships (Richardson, 2015; Huber, 2017). These unique traits may bring more possibilities into guests' interplay in P2P accommodation, which so far needs more investigations.

As such, this research aims to investigate the guest-to-guest relationships in P2P accommodation and explores its connections to customer's motives and experiences of shared rental stays. Here, we focus on the interactions between strangers who temporarily cohabitate with each other rather than travel companions such as families or friends, since the former reflects one of the peculiarities of sharing economy as sharing-out (Belk, 2014) between relatively unacquainted peer users, and such encounters also imply an integral yet under-researched source of the social value derived through P2P accommodation experience (Lin et al., 2019; Rihova et al., 2018). By adopting a qualitative method, this study provides a detailed account of how customers perceive, interact with, and are influenced by other temporarily "co-living" guests when using this service and produces fruitful insights into the heterogeneity and dynamics of guest-to-guest relationships in P2P accommodation. The results of this study extend the knowledge of P2P accommodation literature from a CCI perspective and are expected to provide practical implications for home-sharing services in both marketing and operation aspects.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social interactions in P2P accommodation

The rise of the sharing economy has been described as "an antidote to the narrative of economy as engendering isolation and separation" (Richardson, 2015, p. 121). Digital technologies have enabled current sharing practices to support the development of interpersonal relations on a global scale by combining online community with offline participation (Richardson, 2015). The collaborative use of resources among peer users in sharing economy also supports a more inclusive mutuality in the commercial marketplace, increasing the opportunity to build intimate interpersonal relationships beyond the utilitarian logic (Arnould and Rose, 2016; John, 2013).

P2P accommodation, also known as home-sharing (Baumber et al.,

2021), denotes the phenomenon of peer-to-peer or network-based mechanisms in the short-term rental sector. P2P accommodation is a key aspect of the sharing economy and has grown into an appealing alternative to traditional lodgings (Kuhzady et al., 2020). Many researchers have identified key drivers of the rapid growth and worldwide popularity of P2P accommodation among consumers. These include the economic advantages of relatively lower costs (Kuhzady et al., 2020), utilitarian benefits like location and homely amenities (Cheng and Jin, 2019), and the environmental awareness of participants (Sung et al., 2018). More germane to this paper are the social benefits derived from various social encounters with hosts, other guests, and local communities (Cheng, 2016; Lyu et al., 2019). Lin et al. (2019) argued that meaningful social interactions highlight the difference between P2P and traditional accommodation, which contribute both to the customers' intention to use home-sharing services and their loyalty to the services (Tussyadiah, 2016; Yang et al., 2017). Such social advantages are also emphasized by online P2P accommodation platforms. For instance, Airbnb positions itself as a community-driven hospitality brand focusing on creating connections between people to improve travel experiences (Botsman and Capelin, 2016).

While the social aspects of P2P accommodation have attracted considerable research interest, this tends to revolve around the host-guest dyad, investigating the antecedents (e.g. Ert et al., 2016; Park and Tussyadiah, 2020), performances (e.g. Cheng and Zhang, 2019; Moon et al., 2019), and outcomes (e.g. Farmaki and Stergiou, 2019; Nieto García et al., 2020) of such relationships. For example, hosts' attributes such as their personal photos and online profiles usually play an important role in building host-guest trust and further significantly influence consumers' decision-making (Ert et al., 2016; Tussyadiah and Park, 2018). Cultural differences and language barriers are important issues that emerged in intercultural host-guest interactions which need special strategies for hosts to deal with (Cheng and Zhang, 2019). Host-guest interaction has substantial effects on customers' experiences and satisfaction (e.g. Xu, 2020; Tussyadiah, 2016). These studies basically view host-guest connection as the service provider-consumer relationship that falls under the business sphere and reinvestigate similar topics like motivations or satisfaction as in the traditional hospitality research (Dolnicar, 2019). There is some other research that explores the uniqueness of host-guest relationship as a peer-based relationship and analyzes it from the viewpoints of reciprocal exchange (Moon et al., 2019) or human territoriality (Wang and Li, 2020). Such studies provide a more nuanced understanding of P2P accommodation experience that distinguishes from hotel stays.

Meanwhile, some studies also pay attention to the guest-neighborhood interaction. Compared with hotels, P2P accommodations are often embedded in residential areas, enabling guests to have more chances to encounter local people and experience local life (Lin et al., 2019). Host, as a part of local communities, may play the role of "teachers" or "guides", providing more "insider tips" of travel advice or localized travel resources for guests, helping them engage in a variety of activities typically accessible only to locals (Paulauskaite et al., 2017). Such local touch with residents may significantly contribute to guests' authentic travel experience in destination (Mody et al., 2017; Paulauskaite et al., 2017). However, the guests' localized explorations could also be viewed as an intrusion into the "private spheres" of local neighborhoods, raising the residents' concerns about over-tourism, for example, the noise, traffic, and parking issues caused by the rapid influx of tourists (Gurran and Phibbs, 2017; Stergiou and Farmaki, 2020). Such negative impacts on local communities may potentially result in undesired resident-guest interactions (Jordan and Moore, 2018). Consequently, their negative encounters might jeopardize the quality of guests' experiences if a confrontation occurs between the two parties involved (Stergiou and Farmaki, 2020).

However, while host-guest and guest-neighborhood interactions have been studied closely, the same cannot be said of guest-to-guest relationships in P2P accommodation. This may be problematic due to

the marked growth of multi-listing hosts in the current P2P sector (Kwok and Xie, 2019; Adamiak, 2019). The trend of professional hosts might lead to more on-site interactions occurring between co-presented guests rather than host and guests. Moreover, there is yet little consensus on whether interactions between guests are a positive (Lin et al., 2019; Lyu et al., 2019) or negative aspect (Del Chiappa et al., 2021) of using P2P accommodation—an ambiguity that reflects the lack of in-depth investigation into the area thus far. Practically speaking, customers who opt for a private or shared room in P2P accommodation may ephemerally live with other strangers, sharing public space, and even possibly a bedroom with them. Theoretically, physical contact, dialogue, or simply observing other guests might contribute to their socialization and construct a memorable travel experience (Coelho et al., 2018). However, it might disturb or threaten customers because of the totally unacquainted relationship with each other (Lutz and Newlands, 2018; Del Chiappa et al., 2021). This study thus seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this interpersonal phenomenon in P2P accommodation, exploring which factors may impact the guest-to-guest interaction and clarifying its influence on customer's use intention and lodging experience.

2.2. Customer-to-customer relationships in service settings

The rise of the relationship marketing paradigm has directed scholarly attention beyond the customer-supplier dyad toward the multitude of relationships involved in consumption (Nicholls, 2010). The customer-to-customer (C2C) relationship, common in service settings, has attracted particular interest since the 1990s. The servicescape perspective claims that consumers' evaluations of a setting are partly dependent on other customers, who provide subjective and social stimuli such as humanistic ambience or crowdedness that may “glue” them to a service, or vice versa (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011). More importantly, direct (face-to-face) customer-to-customer interaction (CCI; Nicholls, 2010) can be viewed as an integral part of the service experience itself (Martin, 2016). Whether negative or positive, direct interaction can influence the customer's sense of involvement (McGinnis et al., 2008), their satisfaction with the service (Wu, 2007), and how they evaluate it (Harris and Baron, 2004; Kim and Lee, 2012).

CCI has received uneven coverage in the literature (Nicholls, 2010), implying that inter-customer compatibility is of greater concern to some services than others. CCI is, however, of critical importance to peer-to-peer accommodation when involving multiple guests, because the shared rental service meets the definitional criteria of a CCI-intense service (Martin and Pranter, 1989; Nicholls, 2010) in the following ways: (1) guests are in close physical proximity within a certain period; (2) they share the space and its utilities such as drawing room with other guests; (3) verbal interaction between guests is highly likely; and (4) guests may participate in varied activities organized by the host (Lyu et al., 2019).

Compared with other service settings like retail stores or theme parks, customers in P2P accommodation express varying senses of their territorial rights via their expression of control and privacy requirements for the space (Wang and Li, 2020). They share the same space for longer—often overnight—and adherence to established rules of conduct is particularly important. Despite being a lodging service as well, the CCI of hotel services typically differs from P2P in two respects. First, inter-guest interactions in hotels basically occur in specific public spaces, such as the lobby or the fitness center (Walls et al., 2011; Poria et al., 2021), and non-verbal forms such as other guests' gaze or courteous demeanor are typically the cases (Poria et al., 2021; Walls et al., 2011), whereas, in shared accommodations, guests' interactions normally take place in relatively private and constrained spaces with probably higher intensity due to their shared access to household facilities and a longer stay together. Second, hotels' professional hospitality typically limits the risk of disturbance or unfavorable contact among hotel guests. Cetin and Walls (2016) observed that managers in

luxury hotels often separate guests from different cultures by assigning rooms on different floors. They consider guests' interactions as challenging due to the guests' heterogeneity of lodging needs, eating habits, and so on, thus rarely encourage guests to interact with each other (Cetin and Walls, 2016). As Walls et al. (2011) indicate, most customers do not pay much attention to how other guests affect their hotel experience due to the less volume and intensity of inter-guest contacts. By comparison, CCI and its related compatibility issue amongst guests are a unique yet critical concern of those running P2P accommodation.

Meanwhile, when involving multiple guests co-presented, the high intensity of CCI in P2P accommodation settings may also lead to the co-production of collective social value (Rihova et al., 2018). The positive role that CCI plays in customer experiences has been widely reported in leisure and hospitality services as diverse as river rafting (Arnould and Price, 1993), rail travel (Harris and Baron, 2004), conference (Wei et al., 2017) and cruise vacation (Huang and Hsu, 2010). All these services place small groups of participants with shared interests (rather than everyday social ties) in close proximity within a limited space (Rosenbaum, 2008). Such extended service encounters take customers away from their ordinary existences, creating feelings of communality (Rosenbaum, 2008) or *communitas* (Arnould and Price, 1993), a modality of social relationship, in which individuals, cast off socioeconomic attributes, are considered as equals, united by common beliefs and shared goals (Rickly-Boyd, 2012). Research suggests that *communitas* can ultimately lead to “extraordinary experience” (Arnould and Price, 1993) and produce authentic, emotional interpersonal connections (Wang, 1999). Mody et al. (2017) also reveal that guests who stayed at an Airbnb reported significantly greater *communitas* feelings than those who stayed at a hotel. From this perspective, guests may be united by their shared interest in the destination (Lin et al., 2019), profoundly engaged with others, and enjoy an interactive lodging experience via an array of collective activities (Lyu et al., 2019).

In brief, the sharing nature of P2P accommodation implies that more contact opportunities are provided for guests during their stays (Lin et al., 2019), which become an important aspect of studying P2P accommodation. Some of the interactions, such as host-guest interactions and guests' contact with local neighborhoods, have been carefully investigated in P2P accommodation literature. Yet, current knowledge about guest-to-guest interactions is scarce with seemingly contradictory research findings. From the perspective of customer-to-customer interaction (CCI), P2P accommodation can be a typical CCI-intensive service owing to the temporary “cohabitation” practices among strangers. The unique features such as guests' territorial consciousness, longer periods of co-presence, higher probability of guests' similar travel interests, and spontaneous sense of community distinguish P2P accommodation from other service settings and reveal the complexity of P2P accommodation guest-to-guest relationships. The present study thus adopted a qualitative approach to analyze the manifestations of and dynamics in inter-guest relationships in P2P accommodation. By mapping out customers' motives, perceptions, and practices related to CCI, this study aims to provide a relatively holistic understanding of guest-to-guest interactions and bring novel insights into P2P accommodation guest experiences.

3. Methodology

This study followed the paradigm of critical realism, which acknowledges the subjective nature of individuals' experience while still holding attention to the ways the broader social context help shape them (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This “contextualist” paradigm is well-suited to the research topic since it underscores both the constructed interpretation of individuals' lodging experiences and the influences of external social or service settings. Methodologically, the study adopted a qualitative approach, using semi-structured, in-depth interviews to collect data while thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to identify, analyze the recurrent themes within the data and report our

findings.

3.1. Data collection

Based on our research goal, individuals who had P2P accommodation experiences with other unacquainted guests in the preceding 12 months were considered qualified informants. The 12-month time frame guarantees informants reasonably valid recollections, allowing them to describe their “sharing” experiences and perceptions with greater accuracy and detail (Bernard, 2002). Snowball sampling was adopted to recruit interviewees since it is an effective and commonly used method for initially exploring phenomena and collecting data from hard-to-locate individuals (Johnson, 2005). As Holstein and Gubrium (1995) suggest, snowball sampling is “not so much to capture a representative segment of the population as it is to continuously solicit and analyze representative horizons of meaning” (p. 74). Our data collection process thus followed two phases, using the chain-referral technology to constantly select and assess meaningful cases. First, we identified a set of eligible samples from the authors’ contacts, such as friends, colleagues, or recruited acquaintances on social media. A total of 12 informants were invited to participate in the in-depth interview. In addition to having inter-guest shared accommodation experiences, these 12 participants were chosen with extra consideration of gender, age, and income to ensure adequate diversity was included at zero-stage (Johnson, 2005; Ritchie et al., 2014). This approach could aid in the formation of a somewhat unbiased sample structure in the following collection operations (Johnson, 2005). In the second phase, we informed these first-stage participants of the selection criteria of our research and encouraged them to refer any qualifying shared rental consumers they knew to participate in our investigation. This process enabled us to reach out to a wider range of P2P accommodation customers, for example, existing respondents’ college classmates located across the country, people they acquainted through online travel communities, and their friends who had previously complained about P2P accommodation services. We individually contacted these recommended candidates to check whether

they fulfilled our sample requirements and confirm their availability and willingness to participate in the study. Such snowballing stages as the solicitation of referrals to other potentially informants went on several rounds until the data saturation was reached (Glaser and Strauss, 2010). Ultimately, 31 shared rental customers were approached for interviews (see Table 1). The sample consisted of 15 men and 16 women across four age groups: nine aged 18–25, twelve aged 26–35, seven aged 36–45, and three in the group aged 46 and above. Other sample characteristics of interviewees, including occupation, educational level, monthly income, and the number of their previous experiences, are detailed in Table 1.

Interviews were conducted from March to May 2019. Some interviews were carried out face-to-face and the rest over voice/video calls depending on the informants’ availability and preferences. Before each interview, the researcher explained the research purpose to the participants and assured them of anonymity when using the data. After obtaining the interviewee’s consent, notes and audio recordings were adopted during the interviews. The interviews lasted approximately 30–50 minutes and each concentrated on three main topics: (1) how and why informants chose shared rentals as their accommodation, (2) their perceptions of other guests during the stay, and (3) their detailed experiences and actual interactions with other guests. Notably, some informants had used shared rental services more than once, thus enabling us to compare multiple experiences and identify any patterns of change in the C2C relationships. Eventually, there were 63 separate “co-living” experiences in P2P accommodation provided by 31 informants through the in-depth interviews.

3.2. Participants

Our interviews were performed with Chinese travelers and most cases of their P2P experiences with other guests took place in domestic contexts, varying from urban destinations (e.g. Beijing, Shanghai) to coastal and natural resorts in China (e.g. Sanya, Lijiang). P2P accommodation has grown rapidly in China in recent years, welcomed by Chinese travelers as a flexible option for tourism accommodation (Xiang

Table 1
Demographic profile of informants.

Serial number	Gender	Age	Occupation	Educational level	Monthly income (CNY)	Previous experiences (number of times)
01	Male	26	Student	Master or above	Below 3000	2
02	Female	24	Accountant	Bachelor	5000–10,000	1
03	Male	23	Student	Bachelor	Below 3000	2
04	Male	48	College teacher	Master or above	5000–10,000	3
05	Female	36	Manager	Master or above	15,000–20,000	2
06	Female	23	Real estate agent	Bachelor	3000–5000	1
07	Female	23	Civil servants	Bachelor	5000–10,000	2
08	Male	36	Salesman	Bachelor	10,000–15,000	2
09	Female	32	Manager	Master or above	20,000 +	2
10	Female	23	Primary school teacher	Bachelor	5000–10,000	3
11	Male	30	Engineer	Master or above	5000–10,000	1
12	Female	20	Student	Bachelor	Below 3000	2
13	Female	45	Self-employed	Bachelor	20,000 +	2
14	Male	37	Editor	Master or above	5000–10,000	1
15	Male	37	Freelancer	Bachelor	10,000–15,000	2
16	Male	26	Worker	High school	5000–10,000	3
17	Male	19	Student	Bachelor	Below 3000	3
18	Female	32	Housewife	Bachelor	3000–5000	1
19	Male	30	Freelancer	Master or above	5000–10,000	2
20	Female	28	Office clerk	Bachelor	5000–10,000	2
21	Female	38	Civil servants	Bachelor	5000–10,000	2
22	Male	32	Engineer	Master or above	10,000–15,000	1
23	Female	32	Engineer	Master or above	5000–10,000	3
24	Male	26	High school teacher	Bachelor	5000–10,000	4
25	Male	53	Worker	High school	3000–5000	1
26	female	22	Office clerk	Bachelor	5000–10,000	2
27	Female	43	Civil servants	Master or above	10,000–15,000	2
28	Female	52	Self-employed	Bachelor	15,000–20,000	3
29	Male	29	Lawyer	Master or above	10,000–15,000	3
30	Female	29	Consultant	Bachelor	5000–10,000	1
31	Male	23	Salesman	Master or above	5000–10,000	2

and Dolnicar, 2017). Statistics show that the transaction volume of China's shared rental market nearly doubled from 2017 to 2019, reaching about RMB 22.5 billion in 2019 (State Information Center, 2020). Chinese market is also characterized by a relatively high proportion of multi-listing hosts (Adamiak, 2019) since in China the traditional sense of home is usually regarded as a private space used exclusively by family and is less acceptable for sharing with strangers (Xiang and Dolnicar, 2017). Thus, Chinese people may rent out their second homes or investment properties more often as P2P accommodation rentals (Xiang and Dolnicar, 2017). The supply structure of Chinese market corresponds to the global practical trend of host professionalization (Farmaki and Kaniadakis, 2020), as we noted above, may also result in more guests' encounters and "co-living" situations. The focus on Chinese travelers in this study thus can provide sufficient and representative cases for exploring the C2C accommodation-sharing phenomenon under the practical trend while maintaining some consistency in customers views.

3.3. Data analysis

Each audio recording was transcribed verbatim after the interviews and the transcriptions were then analyzed following the guide of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The first step involved repeated familiarization with and immersion in the data. A contextual broad-brush coding approach was used on each interviewee's case, aided by our notes taken during the interviews. Ideas were jotted down during the process which help us condense, re-label and merge the initial codes in the second step to form an early structure for further analysis. Three rough categories then emerged at the end of the second step, including guests' different motives and behaviors, their changeable patterns of CCI, and environmental and interpersonal influencing factors. In the third step, in-depth coding-on was performed by searching for basic elements line by line to identify the relevant practices, feelings, and experiences of interviewees and analyze their connections, which expanded, divided, and reconstructed categories to form an initial thematic map with tiers of sub-themes. Next, by revisiting our research objectives, the themes identified in the previous step were defined and

refined using summary memos. To ascertain the consistency and representativeness of the data set, the "story" of each theme was identified. Finally, a set of complete themes were developed and we reported it in this article accordingly.

4. Findings

Findings from the analysis suggested that the presence of other guests was invariably a factor in the decision to choose shared accommodation, as well as the participants' experiences. However, attitudes to other guests were heterogeneous and can be understood under two potential themes identified from the transcripts. The first theme, perceived uncertainty towards other guests, was the core dimension of the users' perceptions of other guests, describing the dramatic different perceptions towards other guests from "security fears", "exciting challenges" to "like-minded travelers". The second, intention to interact with other guests, covered the users' active or passive social contact behaviors and described different levels of interaction that ranged from basic co-presence to engagement in joint activity and sharing profound emotions.

When combined, these two themes produced four types of guest-to-guest relationships that describe the heterogeneity of C2C interaction patterns in P2P accommodation (Fig. 1). We further uncover the variability in the guest-to-guest relationships and highlight the host's strategic management of compatibility issues (Fig. 2). These findings are explained below using evidence from the interviews.

4.1. Four types of guest-to-guest relationships

The first type of guest-to-guest relationship in P2P accommodation is the price tradeoff, which corresponds to the passive intention to interact with other customers, who are perceived in negative or uncertain terms. This kind of guest-to-guest relationship can be described as a purely economic collaboration that basically excluded interactions with other guests and is exemplified below:

I believe it [the shared room] was the only suitable option for me at that time...you see, I needed to live in Beijing for a while for job hunting, but apparently, I can't afford the high cost of hotel lodgings, so the shared room

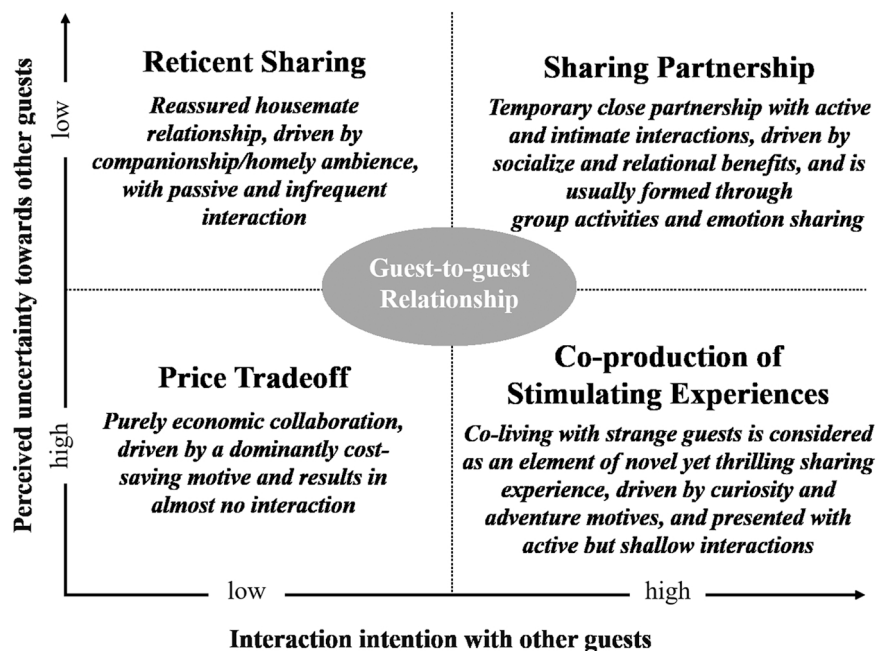


Fig. 1. The typology of guest-to-guest interaction in P2P accommodation.

became my best choice. It was my first attempt to use this accommodation service, of course, I was a little bit worried about the safety and privacy risk brought about by strangers living together—I even didn't know what kind of people I would meet, but the situation didn't allow me to think that much.

(Informant 03).

In this case, the decision to share accommodation with others was premised on the financial benefits. The informant's strong desire to pay less rent had overcome their reluctance to risk living with strangers—a typical tradeoff between economic benefit and perceived risk to safety or privacy. Individuals with this mindset seldom engaged in interactions with others and price was the determining factor, if not the only one, in choosing the P2P accommodation. Previous research identified that such “money savers” constituted a large segment of Airbnb users and the relatively low cost of P2P rental is certainly the top incentive for its usage (Guttentag et al., 2018). But our study further suggests that the economic benefits may neutralize dissatisfaction with the service: “the lower price is enough to cover all the drawbacks” (Informant 25). Moreover, when price was the only perceived advantage of P2P accommodation, users tended to avoid using it again. As one informant stated, “I only call it a special solution for a special circumstance... if I have more disposable income in the future, I may choose a nicer and more comfortable place to stay” (Informant 06).

The second type of guest-to-guest relationship can be labeled co-production of stimulating experiences. Here, participants interpreted sharing with strangers as a thrilling experience that was worth trying—and bragging about, which may reflect the relative novelty of such lodging form for Chinese travelers: “It seems a popular accommodation form in western countries, I always wanted to try it since my high school” (Informant 01). In contrast to the price tradeoff group, these customers' uncertainties about other guests stimulated their intention to interact with them. A 30-year-old male informant described his experience as follows:

It's an amazing feeling, like taking cities and seizing territory in a game. You come to a strange city, into a stranger's home, and live with other unknown users, just like landing in a new game in which you will meet other players, NPC (non-player characters), and monsters. You need to fight against or communicate with them, or even cooperate to complete the task—in this case, getting familiar with the house and the city...the gradual mastery of these uncontrollable factors brings me a sense of achievement and great joy.

(Informant 11).

In this extract, the P2P accommodation experience was understood as an interactive adventure co-created by all users, the experience of sharing accommodation conferring a sense of accomplishment. Some users in this category were also motivated by curiosity. Often as first-time users, they deliberately sought out shared rentals rather than self-contained accommodation because these “represent the most ‘sharing’ form of P2P accommodation” (Informant 22) and were “completely different from hotels” (Informant 02). Guest-to-guest interaction was viewed as an essential “sharing” element in the overall novelty of the experience. However, our interviews also suggested that the encounters between such guests, whether driven by adventure or curiosity, tended to be mild, shallow, limited to casual talk, and lacking in deep communication.

Reticent sharing, the third type of guest-to-guest interaction in P2P accommodation, described a common relationship pattern that consisted of low perceived uncertainty towards other guests and little intention to interact with them. Due to the distrust of hotels, some customers of this type often chose P2P accommodation to mitigate safety concerns while traveling alone, particularly the female participants. They usually regarded other guests as “supporters” who made them feel at ease but were not concerned to interact with them actively. Here is a typical example from a female informant:

I'm actually a very timid and introverted person with a little bit of social phobia, and I'm particularly afraid of sleeping alone. As a young girl, I'm so scared of staying in a hotel alone. The silence and emptiness of a hotel room,

along with my constant thoughts of news about crimes that occurred in hotels, make me feel insecure. But a women-only room in P2P accommodation can address my concerns. People there were very friendly and even took care of each other, like “girls help girls”.

(Informant 10).

Female participants were more likely to perceive inconveniences and dangers when traveling alone (Wilson and Little, 2008). Therefore, shared rental accommodation actually can provide an opportunity for them to seek support from other female peers by choosing a women-only shared accommodation, for example. Prior research suggests that safety benefits, as a novel type of relational benefits, can be derived from host-guest interaction in P2P accommodation (Yang et al., 2017). Our interviews further suggest that such safety benefits can also be provided by other guests especially for a female user when she has used the P2P accommodation service multiple times and feel familiar with it.

Meanwhile, according to our interviews, participants in this category may also choose home-sharing because it provides “some kind of humanized atmosphere” (Informant 13) that is partly brought by other co-habiting guests. These P2P accommodation users viewed other guests as tourists who dislike standardized hotel service and have similar travel patterns. For example, informant 27 claimed that she thought P2P accommodation “is still a niche selection for tourists nowadays.....People I met there were just like me: they don't like the formal atmosphere of hotels and the frequent disturb of service staff; they enjoyed slow and freely travels and may want to cook for themselves using the local ingredient” (Informant 27). These observed similarities of other guests helped to reduce their risk concerns of “cohabitation” in P2P accommodation and contributed an invisible sense of community without intense social interaction: “The mere presence of other guests just altered the cold atmosphere of that big house..... Although I barely communicated with them, staying with them was relaxed and reassured..... I knew we belong to the same sort of people” (Informant 04). As Richardson (2015) suggests, the imagination of community is critical in the practices of sharing economy; our investigation suggests that guests' similar understandings towards shared accommodation as a humanized alternative option to hotel promoted a less-interactive but harmonious relationship between each other.

The final category, sharing partnership, highlights the actual socializing behaviors among guests of shared rentals. In this category, other guests were positively appraised as “friends” or “travel-mates”. Also foregrounded were group activities and meaningful communication such as exchanging life stories, sharing daily routines like jogging, or going traveling together. Intimate peer relationships were often mentioned by more experienced and younger users of P2P accommodation, who usually traveled alone and strongly identified with its inherent social value: “I chose a shared room because it offers great networking opportunities. It's certainly not as comfortable and luxurious as a hotel, but meeting congenial people has a great value that no other lodging form can compare with” (Informant 26). Also, customers of this kind tended to select their accommodation carefully based on the social opportunities it would provide: “Admittedly, not all shared lodgings are as good as expected. Online reviews, pictures, location (near scenic areas or airports), host profiles, and user comments can tell us what kind of guests this accommodation would attract. The selection definitely requires experience and careful consideration” (Informant 24).

Some informants attributed their intimacy with other guests to the temporary and anonymous nature of their relationship: “After leaving this house, we may never meet again” (Informant 31). The anonymity of each other encouraged some informants to “speak out freely” and feel they could “just be me” (Informant 01). As Milanova and Maas (2017) suggest, the anonymity of participants in sharing practices may help avoid tense situations and group exclusion brought by the additional information disclosure and subjective judgments. The relative anonymity may also contribute to the formation of communities during the stay, as common travel interests are prioritized and social-economic attributes fade to the background (Rickly-Boyd, 2012), as the following quote indicates: “We were just travelers during the stay, which made our communication more

focused and equal...I feel our connections were pure and sincere, although I didn't know much about them even till the end" (Informant 18). Some informants mentioned that the combination of limited time and the "surprising level of intimacy" made the guest-to-guest encounters charming and precious: "We talked with each other from day to night and were really reluctant to go our separate ways" (Informant 20). Such authentic interpersonal connections were key to their memorable travel experiences.

4.2. The dynamics of guest-to-guest interaction

The four relationship types discussed above were not fixed for individual users. Rather, guest-to-guest relationships changed with shifts in uncertainty and intention to interact with other guests. Such shifts were expressed in the interactions that occurred during or around the time of the stay.

First, our interview data suggested that interaction with other guests often varied according to how much experiences of shared accommodation the informant had amassed. In this case, the "great divide" lay between first-time users and relatively experienced customers of P2P accommodation. Guests who had no shared rental experiences have limited information to assess the reliability of other co-habiting guests, as the online P2P accommodation platforms only provide customers the profiles of hosts and online contact opportunities between hosts and guests (Park and Tussyadiah, 2020). This facilitates host-guest interactions rather than those between guests. The relationship orientations of first-timers, then, were usually the "price tradeoff" or "co-production of stimulating experiences" types. These were characterized by relatively higher levels of perceived uncertainty alongside either the avoidance of risk or the attraction to other guests as a stimulus. However, customers who had previously participated in P2P accommodation already had "first-hand experiences for getting along with other guests" (Informant 10), which increased their sense of control and confidence. As guests' shared rental experiences grew, they tended to acknowledge the social benefits of guest-to-guest interaction and were more open-minded about it. Consequently, the patterns of relationships among guests might develop from, for example, "price tradeoff" to "reticent sharing", with the growth of their sense of security/belongingness, or from "co-production of stimulating experience" to "sharing partnership" with less perceived uncertainty and curiosity but a greater focus on building personal connections. As one informant remarked, "I believe it is a gradual process for me to accept this novel form of risk-taking accommodation and make closer contact with other guests. If it's a one-time thing, it's hard to enjoy the social benefits" (Informant 24).

Second, guest-to-guest contact patterns might shift during the stay as the process of encountering different guests altered (sometimes dramatically) the guest's perceived uncertainty and intention to interact. For example, one informant stated: "Other guests are pretty nice. The lodging experience was enjoyable until the second day when I met a

terrible man who couldn't stop talking about some weird and annoying things. I couldn't overcome my insecurity or fear of living with him so ended up leaving earlier than scheduled" (Informant 21). The interview data indicated that negative changes to the C2C relationship occurred when guests perceived a risk in their encounters with other guests. Unpleasant guest-to-guest contacts acted as a prominent and instantaneous barrier to interactions. They impacted participants' attitudes toward their current housing and even deterred them from using P2P accommodation in the future. Fortunately, the reverse was also true, with some guests experiencing positive changes during their stay: "That experience was really good. I didn't take the initiative in socializing at the beginning, but later I was attracted by their interesting chat and took part in some fun joint activities...I even made some friends during the stay" (Informant 07). The case vividly shows the guest's transformation from reticent sharing to sharing partnership in a one-time stay. Our interviews revealed that collective activities often acted as a catalyst for the changes: "They bought groceries and made hotpot, then kindly invited me to join in. After that, we played the role-playing board game 'Werewolf' on the balcony every night and stayed up late watching movies. All these activities quickly brought us closer together" (Informant 17). Moreover, sharing emotions and personal stories played a central role in forming more intimate relationships characterized by greater self-disclosure: "I... joined in conversations with them, sharing my happy or bad experiences in my travels, or grumbling about my boss and my crazy work. Surprisingly, we were often on the same wavelength. All these made me feel we had bonded in some way" (Informant 23).

4.3. Compatibility in guest-to-guest interactions: The role of the host

Prior research indicates that the compatibility between customers who share service in close proximity is key to a satisfying experience (Martin and Panter, 1989; Nicholls, 2010). Our empirical investigations support this view and highlight the key role of the host in managing compatibility during C2C encounters in their accommodation. To this end, three compatibility management strategies for facilitating guest-to-guest interactions were identified from the interviews.

The first strategy is to provide shared amenities in the accommodation. Many informants mentioned the importance they attached to such amenities, which greatly added to their enjoyment of the stay and "make the house lively and warm" (Informant 08). For instance, a movie projector, pool table, or board games provide the opportunity for guests to engage in activities rather than simply use the accommodation to rest. Sometimes these even became an alternative to outdoor sightseeing: "Near the end of my trip, I felt exhausted. So, I abandoned my plans and instead sat on the cozy sofa, picked up my favorite romantic movie ('I Belonged to You'), and re-watched it with other guests. It definitely made me refreshed and gratified" (Informant 13).

The second strategy for managing compatibility is the host's on-site

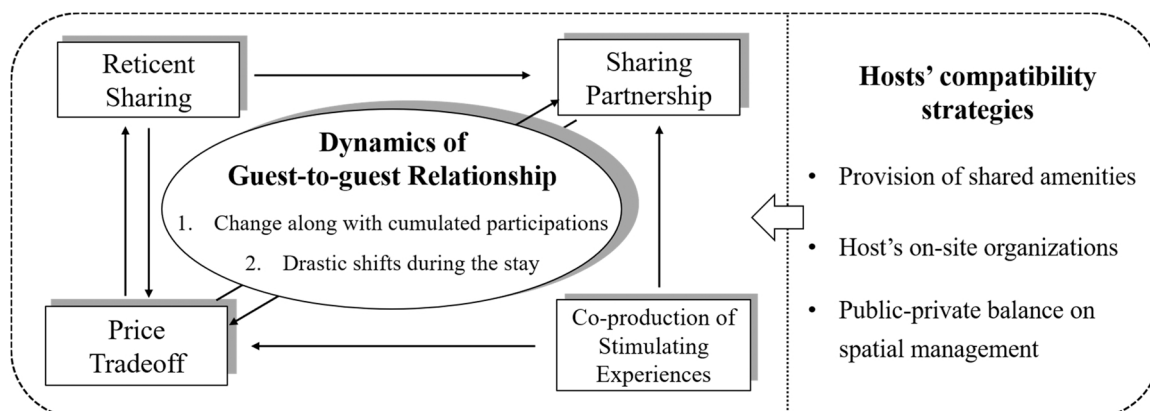


Fig. 2. The dynamics and the compatibility strategies of guest-to-guest relationships.

active organization. We found that the presence or absence of the host often resulted in different atmospheres in the accommodation. Hosts often initiate group activities, encouraging users to play board games or cook together, or organize outdoor pursuits such as grocery shopping and mountain-climbing. As discussed above, these provide opportunities for guests to quickly get to know each other, greatly promoting their interpersonal engagement. Moreover, hosts can coordinate interaction, mitigating potential conflicts between co-living guests and providing immediate solutions if required: *"I am a light sleeper, so when my roommate came back late at night and made noise several times, I told my host, and he immediately arranged another relatively quiet room for me"* (Informant 03). These findings are also supported by Han and Yang (2021) who found that guests valued the host's assistance more than any other aspect of the P2P accommodation service when staying in a shared room.

The third strategy of compatibility management reflects the need to balance private and shared space in the accommodation. While guests may be attracted by activities that enrich their experience, access to an undisturbed and private space is vital to forming good guest-to-guest relationships. This reflects the need for a "private territory" with its boundaries controlled (Wang and Li, 2020). Examples of good practice from hosts showed they had considered the need for both shared and private space. For example, separating the movie-watching and board game areas avoided the noise, interference, and possible conflicts caused by the proximity of different social activities; the provision of a shading curtain and a small lamp around each bed in shared rooms ensured the space for resting was *"perfect for privacy. Once you close the curtain, you will get a private space of your own"* (Informant 24); an independent bathroom provided in each room meant there was *"no need to worry about the embarrassing encounters with male tourists after showering"* (Informant 26). All these establishments had attempted to reduce potential interpersonal conflicts in the accommodation. More significantly, facilitated by these arrangements, the degree of openness to other guests could largely be controlled by guests themselves, creating service environments that promoted compatibility.

5. Conclusions

This study has explored on-site guest-to-guest interactions in P2P accommodation and provided an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon from the consumer's perspective. Four types of guest-to-guest relationships were identified, configured by perceived uncertainty toward other guests and the intention to interact with them (Fig. 1). Moreover, the analysis indicated that individual orientations to interacting with others during or between the stay were subject to change and the host played a significant role in managing guest compatibility and improving guest-to-guest relationships (Fig. 2). The typology and dynamics of guest-to-guest relationships demonstrate the importance of guest-to-guest interaction to customer choice and the experience of P2P accommodation, which also provide practical implications for online platforms and hosts to improve the management of CCI in P2P accommodation.

5.1. Theoretical implications

The present study adds to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting the relevance of guest-to-guest relationships when using P2P accommodation. Various interpersonal contacts have been identified as the unique facet of shared rental experiences (Lin et al., 2019) despite the majority of research has focused on understanding host-guest and guest-neighborhood interactions. Less clear yet in the literature is guest-to-guest interaction regarding its role in shared rental consumption. The findings of this study reveal that the presence of other guests is inevitably a factor influencing shared rental decision-making and on-site experience. Guests' choices of private or shared rooms are closely related to their perceptions of guest-guest cohabitation, and the intense

interactions that occur between guests also carry the potential to become a vital part of their pleasant/unpleasant experiences, subsequently affecting guests' willingness to continue using P2P accommodation. Such findings are consistent with earlier research which found that the social interaction aspect is prominent in guests' P2P accommodation experiences involving shared space (Tussyadiah, 2016; Guttentag et al., 2018). Our study further empirically reveals the importance of interactions among guests and advances understanding of accommodation-sharing practices by incorporating CCI into the sharing consumption process.

The paper also contributes to the literature by providing a typology of guest-to-guest relationships in P2P accommodation. Previous studies have yielded conflicting findings related to guest-to-guest interaction. For instance, Lin et al. (2019) and Lyu et al. (2019) indicate that customers usually have a positive attitude towards C2C interaction while Del Chiappa et al. (2021) identify it as a threat for P2P stays. This study shed light on the debates by demonstrating the heterogeneity underlying guest-to-guest interactions. For example, our study shows that not all shared room customers are open to social interaction as Lutz and Newlands (2018) suggest, some guests may view shared rental as a safer alternative to hotel lodging and enjoy the sense of belonging brought by other travelers while interacting passively. While uncertainty about fellow guests may cause negative concerns about safety issues (Del Chiappa et al., 2021), it may also stimulate customers' adventure or curious minds to try out the novel "cohabitation" with other travelers. By pointing out the nuances of guests' perceptions and behavioral intentions towards other guests, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of guest-to-guest interaction in P2P settings, highlighting the complexity beyond the simply binary view of positive or negative interactions among guests. The proposed framework of guest-to-guest interactions could be very helpful for future examinations to identify the accurate connections between C2C relationships and their managerial-relevant outcomes.

This article also extends the literature by revealing the underlying dynamics of guest-to-guest interaction during or between the stay and articulating how hosts could improve CCI in shared rental services to achieve better guest-guest compatibility. Previous studies have often taken a relatively static perspective to investigate social interaction in P2P accommodation, limited to the antecedents, contents, and consequences of interpersonal interactions (e.g. Tussyadiah, 2016; Lyu et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2019) while neglecting their potential to change. This study uncovers the changeable nature of guest-to-guest relationships, indicating that both prior home-sharing experiences and the on-site interactive experiences can bring variations to the C2C relationship. Mao and Lyu (2017) suggest that the accumulated experiences can boost guests' perceived control and lead to positive behavior intention in P2P accommodation. Similarly, our findings also indicate the generally positive role of amassed sharing experiences in guests' CCI pattern development. Meanwhile, our study also suggests that guest-to-guest interaction may dramatically change in one stay, thus pointing to the need for greater responsiveness and flexibility in the on-site management of the service. This study shows that a compatible environment successfully meets the dual needs to preserve privacy and nurture interactive social relationships, in which hosts need to act proactively as a coordinator and facilitator for guest-to-guest interactions. These findings enrich the literature by identifying strategies for managing compatibility between customers and advance our understanding of on-field management in multi-guest P2P accommodation.

Lastly, the findings of this study correspond to the prior research that peer collaboration and community awareness offer useful perspectives to understand sharing behaviors in P2P settings (Richardson, 2015; Huber, 2017). Belk (2014) argues that collaborative consumption often involves the cooperation among peers (e.g. hosts and guests) in resource acquisition and distribution for gaining compensation. Our findings suggest that the interaction among guests also concerns alike process in which guests engaged in the coordinated use of space (Huber, 2017) for

various kinds of rewards, resulting in different forms of contact. For example, the type of “price tradeoff” implies guests’ intentional collaboration consciousness to share space with additional guests for obtaining further economic compensation whilst the pattern of “reticent sharing” points to a sense of open alliance with guests’ mutual understandings and support during the stays to seek safety benefits or homely ambiance. Moreover, the findings that guest-to-guest interactions in P2P accommodation often stem from customers’ purposeful “collaborations”, in contrast to CCI studied in traditional service settings, such as retail stores, theme parks, or hotel lodgings where CCI usually occurs as an unplanned, secondary outcome of the service exchange (Baron et al., 2007; Walls et al., 2011). Compared with CCI in hotel settings which takes place in lower frequency and mainly in public space (Walls et al., 2011; Poria et al., 2021), the private nature of cohabitation (Tussyadiah, 2016), as well as the longer duration and closer physical proximity among P2P accommodation guests, provide guests sufficient environmental conditions to develop closer ties; meanwhile, the group identification, for example, being visitors or female travelers and having similar travel interests, further boosts the sense of community among guests. From functional interdependence to community-based intimate bonds, this study highlights the unique features of CCI in the shared rental context, which has deepened our understanding of both the guest experiences in P2P accommodation and the CCI phenomena in sharing services.

5.2. Practical implications

The heterogeneous and dynamic patterns of guest-to-guest interaction identified in our study provide a basis for proactively managing shared accommodation with multiple guests and marketing it on platforms.

First, the online marketing of P2P accommodation should disclose more detailed and clearer information relevant to guest-to-guest contacts, which, on the one hand, reduces guests’ perceived uncertainty toward cohabitation with other guests, and on the other hand, helps attract more compatible customers sharing similar attitudes toward guest-guest cohabitation. The strategies might include detailed photographs of the accommodation, for example, the public living room used for sociality, or a private bath in each bedroom. The host can also proactively show his/her concern about the compatibility management of guests in the online profile or comment reply, emphasizing their timely assistance for CCI issues even if he/she does not show up offline, or describe skills and rich experiences of managing multiple guests (e.g. good at communicating or organizing social activities). Such strategies will provide more information about the intangible factor of compatibility and position the listing within the market, thereby attracting more homogenous customers with similar habits and expectations of their stay.

Second, at the on-site participation stage, the host should attend to the needs of guests for both privacy and sociality by ensuring the accommodation space is used in a balanced way. There are still many managerial tactics for hosts to improve guest-guest compatibility even if they don’t stay with guests. For example, in a shared area, the host can provide shared interactive amenities such as a pool table or board game and mention it in advance in the pre-arrival host-guest contacts, which can facilitate guests to participate in group indoor activities and cultivate a pro-interactive environment. Meanwhile, hosts should pay more attention to the environment of bedrooms when they need to serve multiple guests at the same time, preparing a quiet, secure, and undisturbed sleeping environment for guests. Notably, these public-private settings should be adjusted in accordance with the accommodation’s market positioning. For example, economical-dominant listings (often presented with lower prices) should attend more closely to privacy and safety management by providing facilities such as women-only rooms or installing curtains around beds to minimize mutual disturbance, while hosts positioned their rentals as a good place for interpersonal

experience should focus on homely decoration, public shared amenities and organized group activities.

Third, online P2P accommodation platforms should incorporate additional design features that emphasize the relationships between guests, which may become more important considering the trend of host professionalization. For instance, platforms can provide hosts guidance and training on compatibility management by helping hosts establish a code of conduct for guest interaction, encouraging hosts’ instant responsiveness for CCI, and regularly publishing and promoting best practices in the management of multi-guest shared accommodation. In addition, the online platform might add additional rating items and collect genuine customer feedback on the host’s organization and involvement, the level of interactivity between guests, and the social activities available.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This study also has some limitations which have to be considered in future research. First, this study collects data from Chinese participants. The findings may probably link to the specific socio-cultural context. For instance, some participants’ concern with security may partly be explained by the insufficient personal credit system in China (Huang et al., 2016) or the general distrust towards the hotels in China (Ying et al., 2021), and some guests’ pursuit for personal bonding might be closely related to the collectivist nature of Chinese culture (Wang et al., 2016). Furthermore, the results of our findings regarding guest-to-guest interactions were derived from the guests in the same national or cultural background, and the C2C relationships may change in international contexts. Further studies are encouraged to examine whether the typology of guest-to-guest relationships applies to other cultures or intercultural/international settings.

Second, although our findings suggest C2C relationship types may vary according to spatiotemporal conditions (i.e., the participant’s prior experience of P2P accommodation and the balance between shared and private space), given the exploratory nature of the study, there may be other factors influencing participants’ perceived uncertainties and intention to interact with other guests. Future research can explore the remaining factors behind the diverse manifestations of C2C relationships, such as personality traits like sense of power (Liu and Mattila, 2017) or macro-environmental factors such as the social acceptability of the sharing economy (Baumber et al., 2021).

Lastly, the data for this research were gathered before the COVID-19 pandemic, which may impact the current relevance of our findings. For example, the uncertainty towards other guests in P2P accommodation may have temporarily increased during the outbreak due to awareness of the COVID transmission risk. Negative perceptions of other guests and more conservative interaction patterns associated with the “price tradeoff” type may become predominant among P2P accommodation users during the pandemic. However, the national lockdown practices may also have driven individuals to socialize more after the pandemic (Wang et al., 2021), boosting their intention to interact with other guests, and fall into guest-to-guest relationship types such as sharing partnership. Therefore, it will be interesting yet meaningful to examine the possible changes of guest-to-guest interaction patterns in the post-COVID era, and such research may help evaluate the long-term effects of the pandemic on the P2P accommodation from the social interaction perspective.

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Conflict of interest

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