

# Research on the Influencing Factors of Customer Reviews of Airbnb, Empirical Evidence from Beijing, China

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## ABSTRACT

\*In recent years, the sharing economy has ushered in a rapid growth, which is also the case in the field of shared home rental industry. After entering the Chinese market formally, Airbnb has a significant growth in Chinese marketing. Compared with American or European market, there are several differences in Chinese tourism industry, as well as Chinese Airbnb. However, for past studies, more scholars paid attention to study American or European Airbnb system, but this paper aims to China. On the other hand, there are few studies on the influencing factors of the number of reviews on shared rental platform. The samples were collected on Beijing, an international tourism city, we tested around which attributes can influence Airbnb owners' review volumes by analyzing OLS regression results. The results found that there are 12 variables has significance, such as superhost badge, cancellation policy. In addition, the findings gave approaches and suggestions to Chinese hosts on how to obtain a higher booking volume.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• : Social and professional topics; • Professional topics; • Computing and business; • Economic impact;

## KEYWORDS

Airbnb, Peer-to-peer home-sharing platforms, Influencing factors

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Recent the latest decade year, sharing economy regarded as a booming new business model in the accommodation sector of the tourism and hospitality industry [7]. Accordingly peer-to-peer vacation-rental accommodation market also have grown sharply over the last decade [20]. With the development of popularization of OTA, as an outstanding company in the peer-to-peer field, Airbnb is playing a representative role in this industry.

\*Place the footnote text for the author (if applicable) here.

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Compared with other OTA platforms, such as booking.com, Expedia, Ctrip, Airbnb has stronger hosts community power, because Airbnb provide distinctive policy for both hosts and customer, not only Airbnb allows hosts to post textual descriptions and photo about their properties and self-presentation, but also provides hosts with different optional policies to follow, such as whether it can allow customers to instant book or different level of cancellation policies. Thus, Airbnb attracts a number of scholars to study. Although based on current development tendency there were many studies paid attention to analysis Airbnb in American or European markets, there is few studies targeting Airbnb in Chinese market detailly.

In recent years, considering the Chinese's consumption power and the acceptance level of the sharing economy, Chinese Airbnb market was considered as the most potential one in all over the world. Accordingly, there is an increasingly fierce market competition on hosts. In order to take better advantages of sharing economy, especially focusing on increasing profit, there are many existed papers focuses on how to develop an attractive or popular accommodations, from which they all had a same finding that the most effective attribution for developing popularity is the number of reviews [15]. The volume of online reviews is crucial for product and service providers and higher volume of review can encourage online sales. [3]. In current online peer-to-peer accommodation markets, online reviews of products or services also play an important role of representing popularity and attraction performance [26]. Basically, customers tend to be more interested in goods with higher review volumes since the quality of such products has been purchased and evaluated by a large number of same target customers, which is an example of multitude-following mentality [25]. Besides, a study showed that consumers prefer to spend more expenses on popular accommodations, suggesting that the number of reviews is a key of further influence consumers' purchase decision making [13].

### 1.1 Related work

From the former research, not only the reviews volume can show the personal reputation of hosts, but also it can represent hosts' experience [16]. According to the previous research, the higher reputation and higher popularity both can exert positive effect on increasing order volume [24]. At same time, reputation is always be regarded as a key for developing better trust [17], which is a criteria of superhost badge.

In other words, guests are willing to concentrate on "popular" products that are displayed with higher review volume, while they make their final purchase decisions based on rating condition. [14]. For most guests, peer evaluations also are necessary information of products that can reduce uncertainty when guests making consumption decisions [27].

As my research object, the number of reviews can bring various aspects of purposes, however, all mentioned findings were finally aim to how to maximum the owners' revenue, that is means all above factors are able to lead a higher order quantity.

In practice, however, a majority of existed researches are focus on single attribution, for example: which variable can influence trust from guests or how to enhance the popularity of hosts' accommodations [24]. Consequently, my final target of this research is dedicated to how to increase the number of orders in general. Unluckily, the online sale data on Airbnb is impossible collected, the most researchers usually used review rate, which ranges from 18.6% to 72% [10], to transfer reviews to estimated bookings volume. So as the number of reviews has been concluded to reflect online sale performance [22]. Besides according to former studies, a unique design that Airbnb requires all guests and hosts to post their reviews only after completing a real stay, so we can also regard review volume as a crucial performance factor that can represent the number of booking orders. As an influential factor, this paper will dedicate to find which elements can influence the number of reviews, and the influencing level of each factor.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Date collection

In this paper, we selected Beijing as the target market for two reasons. First of all, as a typical tourism and administrative city in China, Beijing attracts over millions of visitors who travel, be on business trips, and book accommodations each year. Only in 2019, a total of 322 million tourists traveled to Beijing, which has increased at 3.6% over the past year, while Beijing is the top one of cities for online homestay booking platform in China, so it has oblivious representativeness in tourism filed.

Secondly, Beijing is an international metropolis with tourists coming from all over the world. In 2019, Beijing received 3.769 million inbound tourists, which including 3.207 million foreign tourists and 562000 tourists from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. Using Beijing as the research object thus ensures a diverse sample of customers, reducing the effect of cultural background on accommodation selection.

The final target of this study is to examine how many variables can influence the number of reviews. Using a web crawler to collect data in February 2019, in order to make to overall research, I retrieved information relating to all accommodation offers by Airbnb in Beijing. At the beginning, I got 25921 accommodation lists. After removing duplicates and invalid accounts. Finally, only 15356 valid accommodations were included in further analysis.

### 2.2 VARIABLES

The dependent variable tested in this study was the number of reviews. This variable can show the capability of an accommodation to attract reviews. Although I cannot obtain the data of order number from Airbnb website, according to former studies, an unique design used by Airbnb make review volume as a crucial factor that can represent the number of booking orders. [12]

The choosing independent variables include 108 different variables such as host verification, review scores rating etc. However, there were several variables are similar expressions of one factor,

for example: the response rate and response time, so I just choose the most effective variables as research objects.

Next, according to the previous study about what kinds of factors of an accommodation are customers care about, the research variables can be categorized as four type: firstly, physical aspects: Tangible factors and intangible factors; the tangible elements includes different amenities, layout, external environment, facilities, etc.[11]; and the intangible factors more focus on service vary, such as service providers and different performance of services etc [2]. Secondly, psychological aspects, they focus on different motivations of rooms choosing, people who stay in sharing accommodations can exert different experiences on their emotions, and perceived evaluations [8]. Thirdly, social aspects talk about social interactions during customer's stay [4]. Finally, economically, the payments of staying in various types of accommodations are different, as reflected by room rates, with or without cleaning fees or extra beds fees [1].

Accordingly, there are 13 considerable groups of variables choose, which can represent above-mentioned four types significantly.

Different variables represent different research meanings. Table 1 shows the detailed definitions of each independent variables.

Superhost reflects whether or not a host has the "Superhost" badge; Badge is coded as 1 when a host is identified as a "Superhost" and otherwise 0. It is certified quarterly by the performance over the past one year and five given requirements shall be satisfied (<https://www.airbnb.com/Superhost>): "(1) completed at least ten orders; (2) maintained a 50% review rate or higher; (3) maintained a 90% response rate or higher; (4) nearly never canceled confirmed orders; (5) received a 5-star review at least 80% of the time".

Similarly, instant book refers to whether or not a host can provide instant bookable service, which can allow customers to book immediately without needing to send a book request; bookable is coded as 1 when a host shows 'instant book' service online and 0 otherwise.

I introduced dummy variable into cancellation policy, response rate and location factors. Although it makes the model more complex, it can more intuitively reflect the comparison in one classification of variables.

The number of amenities and verifications items are dedicated to represent the value of these two factors. For example, if the verification items of an owner are "Email, phone, Facebook, photo", then the number of verifications is set to 4, same as the number of amenities.

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 ANALYSIS

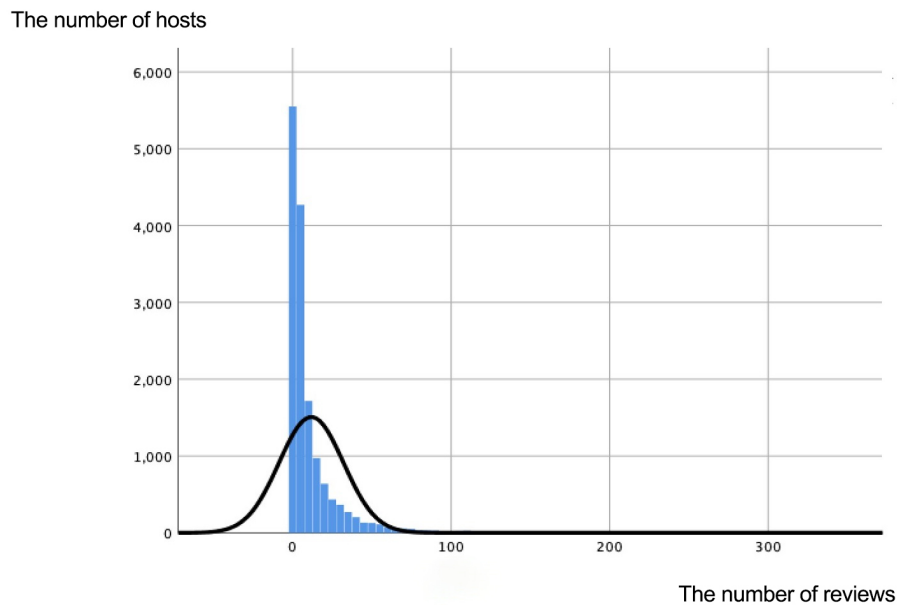
This study essentially has two mainly findings. The first relates to which kinds of variables can influence the number of reviews obviously, and the second relates to how deep can above mentioned variables influence the number of bookings.

The Figure. 1 is the column chart and normal distribution curve of the number of reviews. The accommodations in this dataset have reached an average of 11.73 reviews (SD. 20.929), most of accommodations received less than 100 reviews.

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics and the collinearity diagnostics test of all tested variables.

**Table 1: Description of tested variables**

Variable	Description
Cancellation policies	No cancellation or penalty applies. (Dummy variable).
Response rate	How quickly the hosts respond to inquiries and reservation requests (Dummy variable)
The time between the last review and the first review	The length of time that between the first review and the last review on Airbnb
The percentage of total rate by clean fee	Clean fee/price
The percentage of total rate by extra person	Extra person fee/price
Price	The total price (room rate) per night of each accommodation (including cleaning fee). (Measured in RMB)
Superhost	Whether the host has obtained and kept the “Superhost” badge (Dummy variable)
Instant bookable	Whether the host has provided instant bookable service (Dummy variable)
Total rating score	The total rating of each accommodation
The number of amenities	The number of amenities displayed in each accommodation
The number of verifications	The number of verifications displayed in each accommodation
The number of host listings	Host’s number of accommodation rentals listed in Airbnb.com
Location (Dummy variable)	Which district the accommodation belongs to

**Figure 1: Distribution of the number of reviews**

By applying a traditional OLS regression model to detect relationships between a dependent variable and 13 groups of independent variables for the whole samples (15356 observations) of the listing dataset. Table 4 shows the final results.

At beginning the test assumed that there are 13 groups of variables probably affect the volume of reviews potentiality. By the regression analysis, there are only 12 independent variables can influence reviews volumes respectively which means these 12 distinct attributions can influence the number of bookings indirectly.

The most significant independent variable is the time between the last review and the first review. According to findings, it is easy to find that the longer interval between the first reviews and the last one, the more possibility can hosts receive more bookings on Airbnb. Additionally, by existed study result, I found that the length of established time also has correlation with the number of reviews [13], but the length of interval can illustrate the activity level of users’ managerial behaviors on Airbnb better, which means this account is well managed during operating period.

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics and the collinearity diagnostics test of the variables**

Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	VIF
Number of reviews	11.73	20.292	0	312	
The time between the last review and the first review	245.75	294.649	0	3047	1.026
The percentage of total rate by clean fee	0.0960	0.6869	0	31.25	2.120
The percentage of total rate by extra person	0.0996	0.4398	0	20.40	2.140
Price	514.81	676.370	47	30001	1.010
Superhost	0.27	0.443	0	1	1.053
Instant bookable	0.65	0.476	0	1	1.022
Total rating score	152.6536	14.2238	32	160	1.037
The number of amenities	25.33	11.975	0	86	1.084
The number of verifications	5.55	2.466	0	13	1.111
The number of host listings	10.58	21.547	0	232	1.072

When consider the variables that can affect number of reviews, the “superhost” badge is one of an important influencing factor [13]. In this research, there are only 26.8% hosts gain the superhost badge, which means that only a very small proportion of hosts qualify for this badge. As described on Airbnb website, the superhosts are experienced hosts who are passionate about making guests’ trips more impressive(<https://www.airbnb.com/d/superhost>). In other words, a “superhost” badge can represent whether does a host pay attention to manage his accommodation and or whether does an owner treat their guests sincerely. As Sai Liang’s study mentioned that online hosts acquired the “Superhost” badge are more likely to receive more reviews and higher ratings. Mutually, the host on Airbnb platform who want to stimulate customers to give more reviews will try their best to satisfy the requirements of “Superhost” status [13]. Moreover, a “Superhost” badge may improve owners’ performance while requiring Airbnb to get better control over QA [5].

Next, the instant book service which need to follow 3 requirements: “1. streamlined search: customers can filter their search to only view listings that are available through Instant Book;2.convenient: When you find the place or experience you like you can book it aromatically;3.immediate: Last-minute reservations that don’t need to wait for host confirmation ”(<https://www.airbnb.com>). In sample group, there are 65.3% host provide instant book service for customer, and 34.7% hosts still refuse showing this service. As the previous research result mentioned, instant booking will be more attractive customers that can be easier to be booked [19]. By the result of my research, the analysis also shows the same conclusion that offered instant book service in Airbnb will exert positive effects on sale performance, these accommodations be likely to attract higher booking orders.

The cancellation policy in Airbnb has three stages (“flexible”, “moderate”, “strict”), in our sample group, 21.5% of owners employed a strict booking policy, which the guests can only cancel at least 14 days before check-in, 44.7% and 33.7% of hosts used flexible and moderate policies, respectively. It is easy to know from the existed study indicated that guests are more willing to make a reservation and give a review of an accommodation whose hosts offer a stricter cancellation policy [13]. Because, compared with

strict policy, flexible cancellation policies and moderate cancellation policies both showed a negative correlation, in addition only flexible policy show an obvious significance.

This study also found that the correlation between location of accommodation and bookings volume. According to statistical analysis, we got the regional distribution analysis (Table 4) of accommodations location in Beijing city. It is easy to know that the distribution of locations is significant uneven, a huge number of accommodations are centrally located in Chaoyang district at 42.6%. The properties are clustered together in one region is also a difference between Chinese Airbnb market with other countries.

The external environment attribute includes intangible and tangible factors. Tangible properties include the geographical location and distance from main attractions, intangible elements include security situation and general atmosphere in this region [21]. There are 16 districts in Beijing, they have distinctive characteristics, for example, Haidian district reached the highest GDP in all districts, it also has the most abundant educational resources, Chaoyang district is famous by flourishing finance industry. By the result, Dongcheng, Xicheng, and Fengtai districts showed higher significance. Due to Dongcheng and Xicheng as a combination of political center and cultural center, these two districts contain majority of international famous tourism attractions, such as the palace museum, Tian’an men square, so these two regions can attract more tourists and businessmen, meanwhile, being near the top of Beijing GDP rankings, the higher GDP of a region can exert positive impact on the number of bookings [22], and these two regions include diversiform entertainment and facilities resources, which becomes another crucial attractiveness. The other district shows a high significance is Fengtai district. Firstly, Fengtai also includes several famous attractions such as Lugou Bridge, Wanping City, Beijing Garden Expo Park. More importantly, there are two railway stations located in Fengtai district: Beijingnan Railway Station which is the largest railway station in Beijing with the largest number of departures, another is Beijingxi Railway Station.

From literature reviewing, when guests give a feedback to their stay experiences in the sharing economy, guests tend to describe a greater variety of amenities, such as Wi-Fi, wash machines and air conditioners [21]. So as another part of physical attributes which

**Table 3: Model results**

Variables	t	p
response rate		
within an hour	-0.013	0.589
within a few hours	-0.024	0.482
within a day	-0.079	0.034**
a few days or more	-0.046	0.386
never		
cancellations		
flexible	-0.123	0.000 ***
moderate	-0.012	0.473
strict		0.473
location (Dummy variable)		
CHAOYANG district	0.056	0.005 ***
XICHENG district	0.14	0.000 ***
TONGZHOU district	-0.006	0.874
DONGCHENG district	0.324	0.000 ***
DAXING district	-0.042	0.321
SHIJINGSHAN district	-0.004	0.985
FENGTAI district	0.087	0.007 ***
HUAIROU district	-0.048	0.349
SHUNYI district	-0.043	0.310
YANQING district	-0.014	0.817
CHANGPING district	-0.098	0.013 **
MENTOUGGOU district	-0.093	0.387
MIYUN district	-0.074	0.129
FANGSHAN district	-0.045	0.409
PINGGU district	0.044	0.734
HAIDIAN district		
the time between the last review and the first review	0.565	0.000 ***
the percentage of total rate by clean fee	-0.009	0.329
the percentage of total rate by extra person	0.021	0.018 **
price	-0.041	0.000 ***
superhost	0.271	0.000 ***
instant bookable	0.075	0.000 ***
total rating score	0.015	0.018 **
the number of amenities	0.049	0.000 ***
the number of verifications	0.037	0.000 ***
the number of host listings	-0.037	0.000 ***

\*p < 0.1, \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < 0.01

customers care about, the result shows that the number of amenities presented a positive correlation with review volumes. If owners can provide greater variety of amenities with customers, owners are more likely to gain online reviews on Airbnb, which means more amenities described online can attract more customers to book.

Similarly, the number of verifications is positively correlating with perceiving consumers' trustworthiness and attractiveness. In addition, a study showed that not only the hosts' photos of serve as methods of identity verification, but also develop the sense of

personal, sociable, human contact, it also tested the possibility that "visual-based trust," created by browsing owners' personal photos, will influence guests' purchasing decision [6]. Therefore, more verifications mean much more owners' personal information and social platform identification were displayed, which can exert positive effect on building advanced trust with customers [24].

The last finding is the relationship between the rating with the number of reviews. Obviously, most consumers tend to focus on

**Table 4: Distribution of accommodations**

	volume	percentage
Changping	470	3.1
Chaoyang	6535	42.6
Daxing	403	2.6
Dongcheng	2250	14.7
Fangshan	220	1.4
Fengtai	785	5.1
Haidian	1935	12.6
Huairou	259	1.7
Mentougou	52	.3
Miyun	285	1.9
Pinggu	36	.2
Shijingshan	91	.6
Shunyi	380	2.5
Tongzhou	495	3.2
Xicheng	995	6.5
Yanqing	165	1.1
total	15356	100.0

products with higher positive ratings because their quality is affirmed and praised by peers [9] [23]. Similarly, in this paper, we gain a result that higher rating score can result in greater number of reviews. It means that rating scores can help consumers to make a comparison about accommodations or service quality obviously, which also helps guests to make an effective final purchasing decision [28].

### 3.2 CONTRIBUTIONS

This study offers two main contributions. First of all, it contributes to the Chinese tourism market by considering a research topic in a booming field of the current tourism industry—sharing economy. It aims to how to influence the review volume in a popular sharing economy platform—Airbnb, in Chinese market. As I mentioned in the introduction part, the volume feature of online reviews is very important and can have a direct effect on the online sales performance. Several previous studies found that a number of accommodation hosts pursue their rental business just for fun or to meet more people [18], however in Chinese market, a majority accommodation owners in sharing economy market are benefit-orientated. Actually, there are a huge number of owners in China lack of a motivation as well as an ability to manage their accounts more professionally, much less to reach ideal revenue targets. This paper can provide advisory guidance for owners to improve their business such as by Superhost badge earning, and the results of the tests demonstrate several findings that can help Chinese native hosts to know how to attract customers to make reservation decision effectively, for example by developing and changing characteristics of their services or by perfecting the account profiles. As hosts have the target of not only creating more profit but also maintaining positive increasing tendency and this process involves presenting all owners as a more professional manager.

In addition, this paper focused on research topic due to homestay sharing economy industry in China has its own particularities and

is different from American and European market, what's more, this industry has just emerged for a decade, compared with the current situation in birthplace—America, Chinese Airbnb market still need long time to well adjust to native situation. So, this paper provides a further confirmation and consideration about dissimilarities and similarities of Airbnb in Chinese market.

Although this paper illustrated several influential factors of the number of orders, there are limitations existed. Firstly, we have focused only on a one destination, and Beijing is a metropolis of what we need. However, the usage of Airbnb in Chinese third-tier or forth-tier cities has pretty low popularity. In order to get the whole picture of Airbnb development tendency in China, we should take more various kinds of cities into account. Secondly, in this study, there are many other aspects of variables are worth to be considered, such as properties type and sharing levels. In further study, I need to consider the diversity of room types and sharing levels factors into account.

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