

MOTIVES FOR USING AIRBNB IN METROPOLITAN TOURISM

– WHY DO PEOPLE SLEEP IN THE BED OF A STRANGER?

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“What’s Mine is Yours” has become the slogan of the booming “share economy”. In tourism, this mainly affects the accommodation sector. In addition to offering free or affordable overnight stays, share websites such as couchsurfing.org and airbnb.com also claim that visitors to cities will enjoy an authentic experience. The article focuses on the motivations and expectations of the guests as driving forces, taking Berlin as a case study, and aiming at the meaning of collaborative consumption in tourism to “explorer tourists” in search of authentic experiences off the beaten track and outside the tourist bubble.

1 Share economy and the role it plays in urban tourism

Since the book by Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers *“What’s Mine is Yours – How Collaborative Consumption is Changing the Way we Live”* (2011) became a best seller, the “share economy” has become a buzzword. Two main drivers foster this development: The Internet as an enabler and facilitator of the matchmaking process between the demand and supply side as well as changing values towards post-materialistic positions. Anyhow the share economy is not a fundamental paradigm shift, but an evolutionary development of existing societal and behavioural transformations, which is certainly being accelerated by the aforementioned multi-dimensional shift in values together with new technical resources.

Considering the central driving forces behind share offers in tourism, it can be assumed that the search for authentic visitor experiences may play a major role. For a long time, visitors have been yearning for off the beaten track-experiences outside the confined lines of the tourist bubble, particularly in city tourism (cf. Maitland & Newman 2009; Stors & Kagermeier 2013).

The present article aims to provide an empirically based contribution to the current debate on the role of the share economy in tourism. The article focuses on the motivational structure of participants in online share platforms as well as the experiences with collaborative consumption. For more information regarding the socio-demographic structure of share economy participants and Airbnb users, see Kagermeier, Köller & Stors 2015.

2 Methodology

In order to explore the research question, qualitative and quantitative research methods have been combined. In a first step, a digital questionnaire was created to gain an initial impression of the share economy participants. Convenience sampling was conducted involving tourism students and graduates as well as employees from Trier University. Sampling resulted in 271 completed questionnaires. Despite the lack of representativeness, focusing on such a target group enabled precise statements on their motivations for taking part in share activities. In a second method, these initial findings were intensified through qualitative interviews with Airbnb hosts in Berlin. The authors decided to focus on the market leader Airbnb. Since there are about 10,000 Airbnb hosts in Berlin – with a strong concentration in the central parts of the town (especially in the neighbourhoods of the former GDR capital East Berlin, cf. Fig. 1) – it was not possible to contact all of them. The number of requests was based on the number of listings in Berlin’s districts. Approximately 100 requests were sent to Airbnb hosts, resulting in 25 personal interviews.

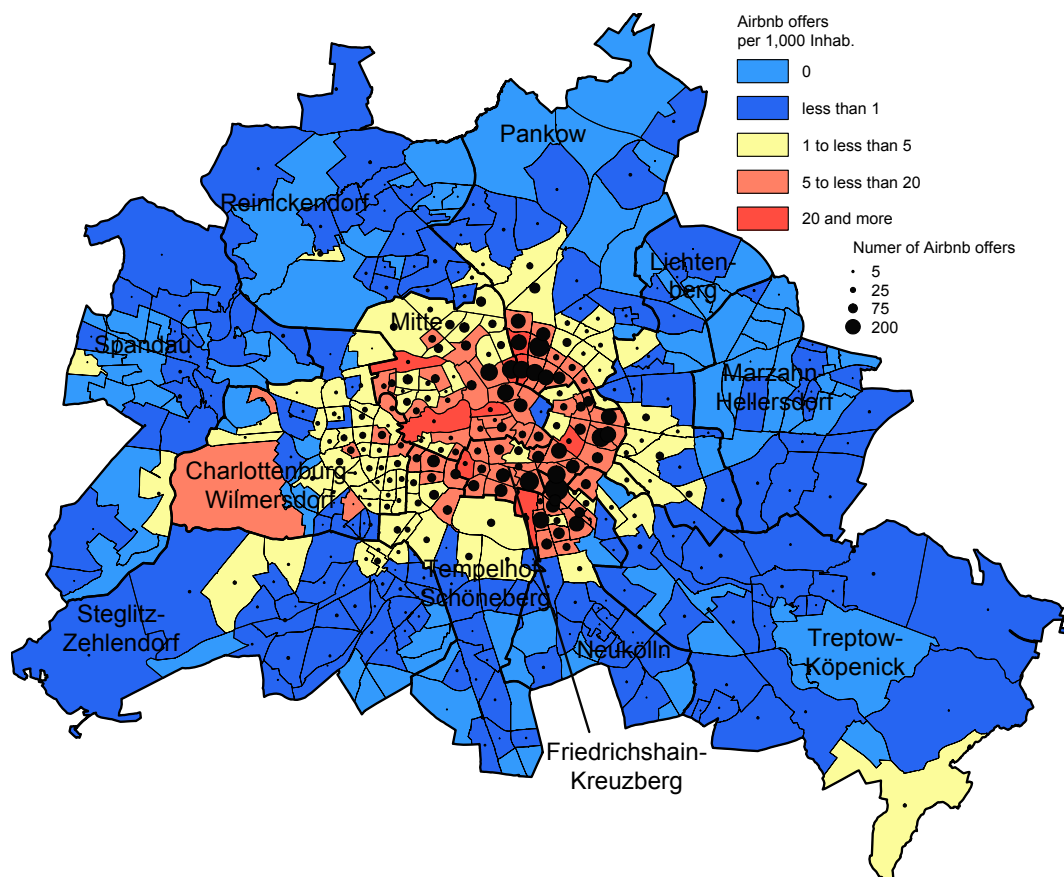


Figure 1: Airbnb listings in Berlin by neighbourhood (“Kiez”) (own design, based on data from Skowronnek, Vogel & Parnow 2015)

In a third step, a quantitative questionnaire was distributed to Airbnb guests in Berlin. The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of their specific motivations and experiences in a certain destination.

3 Driving forces behind participation in the share economy – a guest perspective

Our questionnaires contained various motives for using private share accommodation. As expected, the economic dimension within the motivational structure is of relevance (“saving money”, “visiting destinations that would otherwise be too expensive”; cf. Fig. 2), but it is not the only driving force. Visitors’ expectations related to specific experiences at the destination – such as having direct contact to the local population, gaining insider information from the host about bars, restaurants or the neighbourhood in general, and experiencing the destination from the locals’ perspective – are at least as relevant as the monetary factor.

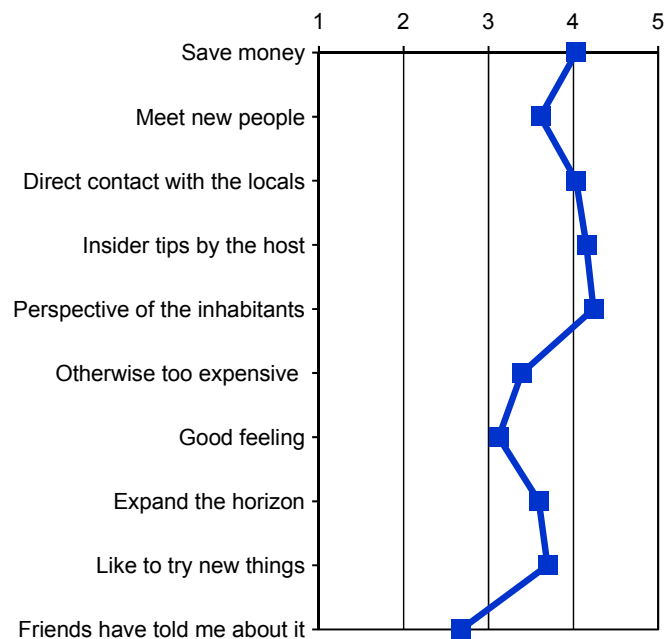


Figure 2: Motivations of share accommodation users (own online survey, N = 112)

In a nutshell, the online survey revealed two leading motivational dimensions that were supported by the findings from Airbnb hosts and guests in Berlin:

1) Monetary dimension

The role of financial motivation is key aspect in the analysis. One-third of leisure guests and half of business tourists in Berlin booked private accommodation via platforms such as Airbnb to save money. Leisure visitors also stated that these share platforms enable them to visit destinations that they would otherwise be unable to afford.

2) Interaction between hosts and guests as part of the visitor experience

Personal interaction between hosts and guests plays a major role for the majority of the tourists interviewed. In particular, visitors from the leisure segment consider it very important to get to know new people (significant deviation to business travellers) and to receive personal information and recommendations from the host (also a significant deviation). This element is also reproduced in the contact intensity between hosts and guests (cf. Fig. 3).

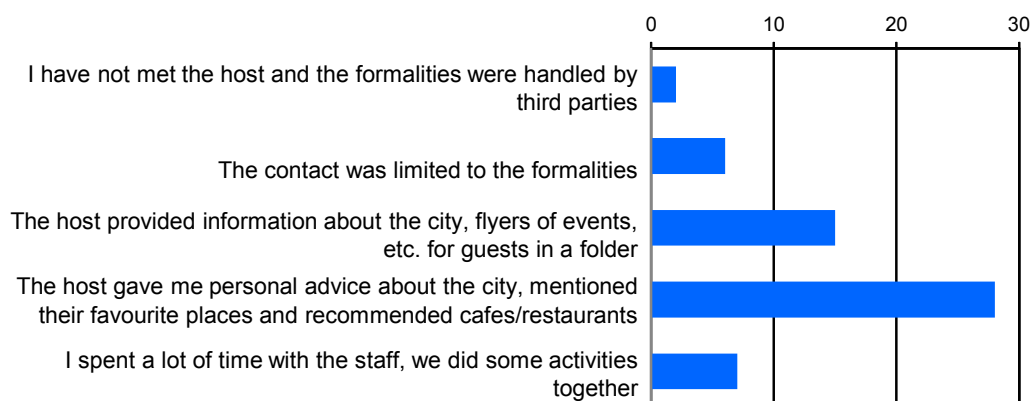


Figure 3: Interaction between hosts and guests (own offline-survey of Airbnb guests in Berlin; N= 58)

Interviews with the hosts confirmed that most had personal contact with their guests. These personal contacts often include brief conversations about the city, the host's favourite sights or insider tips: "I told him about the sights that I think are interesting" (Host-21; author's translation).

In addition to these two general motivational dimensions, a third specific aspect was identified in the course of the on-site personal interviews.

3) Individuality of the facilities and design of the accommodation

The interviews with the hosts revealed an element that was underestimated in the previous quantitative surveys. Airbnb hosts were able to observe that visitors greatly appreciate the ambience of private accommodation that they like to have something more individual than a hotel. As a result, not only direct contact with the host and the creation of an inside perspective contribute to the specific visitor experience of Airbnb and the like, but also the design and amenities of the accommodation: *“And those who participate in something like that [Airbnb], and say, I don’t want to go to a hotel (...) but prefers the charm of an old Berlin building. (...) But I think – for a relatively low price – they want this feeling: that’s Berlin. A hostel, in contrast, is of course completely interchangeable; it always looks the same everywhere. I think that’s the first thing they want”* (Host-15; author’s translation).

Finally, further aspects are also relevant when it comes to choosing private accommodation in the share economy. Some visitors stated that the online platforms are easy to use, offering an easy comparison of accommodation and prices, and fast access to relevant information. For others, the straightforward contact with the host is the greatest advantage. In addition, the interviews revealed that the specific location within a city may be highly relevant to visitors, and may be the decisive factor for choosing private accommodation over a hotel.

4 Summary

As expected, the monetary dimension naturally plays an important role when it comes to choosing share economy accommodation. However, the survey revealed that other dimensions are at least as important. In addition to practical reasons (hosts are less bureaucratic, cooking space, practical overview in Airbnb, instant mailing with host, more flexible), aspects relating to authenticity also play a major role. This concerns not only social interaction between guests and hosts, but also the location of the flats/rooms within the city (in residential quarters). Personal contact is a key motivation for both hosts and guests – even if it is not usually very intense. In particular, social interaction between hosts and guests can be presumed to be the “authentic” experience that certain travellers long for.

However, it is impossible to predict how visitors will respond to a recipient commercialisation of professional suppliers, which is expected to occur when the share economy reaches maturity stage. Overall, the share economy appears to be nothing other than a further step in the traditional product innovation cycle, where new offers are invented by pioneers and innovators to become commodified and demanded by a broader public.

References

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