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## Experiencing P2P accommodations: Anecdotes from Chinese customers

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the key dimensions and attributes of Chinese customers' experiences with peer-to-peer (P2P) accommodations through Airbnb in China. Thirty-four in-depth interviews were conducted with Airbnb customers. Results suggest that seven dimensions underpin the customer experience with P2P accommodations: physical utility, sensorial experience, core service, guest-host relationship, sense of security, social interaction, and local touch. This indicates that unlike traditional commercial hotels, P2P accommodations appeal to customers to a larger extent for their social and cultural characteristics. Implications are provided for stakeholders, including P2P accommodation practitioners and users, to co-create experiential value.

## 1. Introduction

The sharing of assets among communities of people has existed for thousands of years, but the advent of the Internet and especially Web 2.0 has brought about myriad new ways of sharing. Technology has also facilitated traditional means of sharing on a larger scale (Belk, 2014). The phenomenon of the sharing economy is described by Belk (2014) as collaborative consumption, where people coordinate “the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation” (p. 1597). Collaborative consumption is also known as the P2P economy (Botsman and Rogers, 2010), defined by Hamari et al. (2015) as “a peer-to-peer-based activity of obtaining, giving, or sharing the access to goods and services, coordinated through community-based online services” (p. 3).

Sharing business models have emerged in key sectors of the economy, including goods, professional services, transportation, space, and money. For example, Airbnb enables people to rent out part or all of their residence for short stays. This accommodation type evolved from bed and breakfasts (B&Bs), which can be traced back several centuries. Given information asymmetry between a host and his or her guests, B&Bs only operated on a small scale for quite some time. Today, the proliferation of information technology has made it much easier for B&B operators to post rental information. An increasing number of individuals who may not have otherwise considered renting a room in a private residence for an overnight stay have come to prefer such sharing models to mainstream alternatives (Cohen and Kietzmann, 2014).

By the end of May 2017, Airbnb offered 3 million listings in 65,000 cities across over 191 countries worldwide, hosting 160 million guest

arrivals (Airbnb, 2017a). Airbnb provides more rooms than any branded chain hotel. The rapid increase in Airbnb listings has actually influenced hotel revenues, with budget hotels and hotels that do not cater to business travelers among the most affected (Zervas et al., 2017).

The sharing economy has transformed and disrupted traditional business practices, including a shift in consumption attitudes and behaviors (Brown and Swartz, 1989). Driven by increased resource accessibility, tourists are eager to build meaningful social connections directly with others and to seek authentic travel experiences (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). In a study conducted by GfK, 93% of Chinese millennial respondents named travel as an important part of their self-identity; 94% of respondents were interested in unique travel experiences (GfK, 2017). P2P accommodations therefore cater to tourists' growing need for personalized and distinctive travel opportunities.

However, as a new entrant to the hospitality marketplace, P2P accommodations are characterized by a lack of service standards given their absence of star ratings or conventional quality classification (Tussyadiah and Zach, 2017). Moreover, P2P accommodations face conceptual challenges due to the shift in service delivery from professional business entities to ordinary individuals. Scarce research has examined whether this shift has caused differences in customers' expectations and evaluations of accommodation services (Tussyadiah and Zach, 2017). Different from commercial hotel customers, P2P accommodation users are mainly motivated by social interaction (Tussyadiah, 2015) and enjoy being involved in the local community as active partners in value creation (Wang et al., 2016; Heo, 2016). Previous studies on the customer experience in commercial hotels cannot be

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applied to P2P accommodations. Few studies appear to have explored the complete landscape of experiential factors in the emerging P2P accommodations sector.

China is one of the top 10 sources of outbound guests staying with Airbnb worldwide. To date, there have been more than 5.3 million guest arrivals by Chinese travelers at Airbnb listings all over the world. Outbound travel from China grew 142% in 2016 alone. Airbnb has even announced a series of plans to better serve Chinese travelers, particularly millennials who are seeking alternative ways to travel (Airbnb, 2017b).

Customer experience is subjective, shaped by the context and situational variables in which information is received whether social, cultural, and/or personal (Sheth et al., 1999). Western tourists' perceptions of their accommodation experiences may differ significantly from those of Eastern travelers. Research on Chinese customers' experiences with P2P accommodations is especially rare; thus, it is necessary for researchers to investigate whether the increasing popularity of P2P accommodations requires adjustments in customer expectations and accommodation evaluations.

Additionally, a big research gap in the growing literature on the sharing economy, and on Airbnb in particular, is the study of consumer preference trends and culture (Brochado et al., 2017). Culture is claimed to be a primary factor influencing customers' perceptions on experience (Weiermair, 2000) and purchasing decisions (de Mooij and Hofstede, 2002). The current studies on P2P accommodation experience are mostly based on Western cultural scenarios. As one of the biggest markets of P2P accommodation, Chinese market should be investigated to see whether customers' perceptions on P2P accommodation experience are different from westerners.

The present study therefore aims to understand customers' preferences and expectations of P2P accommodation demand through the examination of their experiences with P2P accommodations in the context of the Chinese travel market.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Customer experience

The customer experience has been considered a key concept in marketing management, consumer behavior, service marketing, and retail for the last 25 years (Tynan et al., 2010). Since the mid-1980s, more and more researchers have extended their understanding of the mainstream approach to consumer behavior, which regarded customers mostly as rational decision makers, to pursue a new experiential perspective recognizing the importance of previously neglected variables such as the role of customers' emotions and feelings in their interactions with products (Addis and Holbrook, 2001).

In a pioneering study, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) proposed an experiential view of consumption, stating that the consumption experience is composed of subjective perceptions with symbolic meanings and responses to hedonic and esthetic criteria, arising from products that tend to evoke heightened levels of fantasy, feelings, and fun. This experiential view was later advocated by Pine and Gilmore in their book on the Experience Economy (1998), wherein they presented "experiences" as a new economic offering following the economics of commodities, goods, and services. In subsequent years, an increasing number of scholarly works have focused on the concept of the customer experience and its role in influencing how customers behave, particularly in services marketing and retail (Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Carù and Cova, 2003; Schmitt, 1999).

The key to building customer commitment, retention, and sustained financial success is the effective management of the customer experience across all touch points. As Pine and Gilmore (1998) pointed out, an experience is a memorable event that can be staged by a company. Many authors have agreed that the customer experience can be deliberately managed and designed (e.g., Shaw, 2005; Smith and Wheeler,

2002). Indeed, experiential cues can be used to improve the customer experience and thereby enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty (Schmitt, 1999).

### 2.2. Customer experience in tourism

Exploring the concept of experience in other disciplines helps to situate the customer experience in the tourism and hospitality industry. Tourism is at the forefront of staging experiences (Oh et al., 2007), and its main productive activity is the creation of the touristic experience (Sternberg, 1997); central to this is the tourist's quest for an authentic experience that cannot be found in his or her daily life (Oh et al., 2007). Thorne (1963) was the first to classify the tourist experience. He explored the concept of "peak" experiences from tourists' perspectives and ultimately categorized tourist experiences into six main areas: sensual, emotional, cognitive, conative, self-actualization, and climax peak experiences.

Cohen (1979) argued that people may seek different modes of touristic experiences, such that tourists do not exist as discrete types. Cohen (1979) further proposed a typology of tourist experiences that included recreational, diversionary, experiential, experimental, and existential modes, ranging from mere pleasure to a quest for core meaning. From a modernist point of view, Uriely (2005) postulated that tourism is a temporary reversal of everyday activities that represents a no-work, no-care, no-thrift situation. Mannell and Iso-Ahola (1987) contended that tourism and hospitality activities constitute a comprehensive experience that involves tourists' religious feelings, a source of personal development, effective means of escape from daily life, and the opportunity to reestablish interpersonal relationships.

### 2.3. Structure of the customer experience

The customer experience can be conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct of elementary components (Gentile et al., 2007). In previous literature, many researchers have attempted to explore these dimensions. Some scholars framed dimensions based on customers' interactions with their surroundings. As Oh et al. (2007) argued, everything tourists do, including visiting, seeing, listening, enjoying, and learning at a destination, can be experienced through behavioral or perceptual, cognitive or emotional, or expressed or implied means. Schmitt (1999) identified five strategic experiential modules in the customer experience, namely sensory experiences (sense); affective experiences (feel); creative cognitive experiences (think); physical experiences, behaviors, and lifestyle (act); and social-identity experiences (relate).

What's more, Walls (2013) suggested that the customer experience incorporates two factors: the physical environment and human interaction. Similarly, through an empirical study, Wu and Liang (2009) suggested that restaurant environmental factors and interactions with service employees and other consumers positively influence experiential value and customer satisfaction.

The B&B sector has also been thoroughly explored by many researchers. Through a nationwide survey of B&B guests in the US, Zane (1997) found that most of the important attributes customers cited for selecting a B&B pertained to service or ambience, such as a quiet atmosphere, personal attention, a homelike environment, and the innkeeper going out of his or her way to make guests comfortable. McIntosh and Siggs (2005) conducted in-depth interviews with hosts and guests at a boutique establishment in New Zealand and identified five key experiential dimensions behind the success of boutique accommodation products: unique character, personalization, homeliness, quality, and value added.

As a newly rising market sector, the attributes of P2P accommodations have been explored as well. Tussyadiah and Pesonen (2016) identified that social and economic appeals are two main driving factors of P2P accommodations. Tussyadiah and Zach (2017) further identified

**Table 1**  
Dimensions of Customer Experience.

Author, year	Study setting	Dimensions of customer experience
Gentile et al. (2007)	Retail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sensorial component</li> <li>● Emotional component</li> <li>● Cognitive component</li> <li>● Pragmatic component</li> <li>● Lifestyle component</li> <li>● Relational component</li> <li>● Homely atmosphere</li> </ul>
Gunasekaran and Anandkumar (2012)	Bed and breakfast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Value for money</li> <li>● Local touch</li> <li>● Guest-host relationship</li> <li>● The organization's influence over the customer's use environment</li> </ul>
Gupta and Vajic (2000)	Restaurant and theme park	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Customer participation</li> <li>● Social interaction</li> <li>● Environment</li> <li>● Accessibility</li> <li>● Driving benefit</li> <li>● Incentive</li> <li>● Unique character</li> </ul>
Knutson et al. (2009)	Hotel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Personalized</li> <li>● Homely</li> <li>● Quality</li> <li>● Value added</li> <li>● Hedonics</li> </ul>
McIntosh and Siggs (2005)	Boutique hotel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Peace of mind</li> <li>● Involvement</li> <li>● Recognition</li> </ul>
Otto and Ritchie (1995)	Service sector in general	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Affective experience with physical environment</li> <li>● Affective experience interaction with hotel staff</li> </ul>
Pijls et al. (2011)	Hotel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sense</li> </ul>
Schmitt (1999)	Commercial settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Feel</li> <li>● Think</li> <li>● Act</li> <li>● Relate</li> </ul>
Walls (2013)	Hotel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Physical environment</li> <li>● Human interaction</li> </ul>
Wu and Liang (2009)	Restaurant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Restaurant environment elements</li> <li>● Interactions with service employees</li> <li>● Interactions with other customers</li> </ul>

five major attributes of P2P accommodations: service, facilities, location, feeling welcome, and the comforts of home. The dimensions of the customer experience in hospitality and tourism settings are displayed in Table 1.

As tourists become more informed, they are more apt to seek exclusive activities and authentic experiences. Tourists expect hedonism, aesthetics, escape, and social relations when travelling. As such, this study's exploration of the customer experience with regard to P2P accommodations assumes a holistic perspective.

Collaborative commerce blurs the boundaries between consumers and service providers (Heo, 2016) and influences the way people experience, consume, and/or produce tourism goods (Sigala, 2017). Service providers have shifted from business entities to individuals. Grassroots suppliers provide more diversified, long-term tourism products through P2P websites (Wang et al., 2016). Because the motivations and expectations of P2P accommodation users bear few similarities with commercial hotel customers, previous studies on the customer experience in the hospitality industry should be modified

accordingly.

#### 2.4. Sharing economy

Research on alternative modes of consumption apart from ownership is limited, with founding studies including Belk's (2007, 2010) conceptual outline of sharing and collaborative consumption and Chen's (2009) empirical study on experiential access to art via museums and galleries. Belk (2007) proposed that sharing involves "the act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use and/or the act and process of receiving or taking something from others for our use" (p. 126). Collaborative consumption is not a new concept; Felton and Spaeth (1978) first defined acts of collaborative consumption as "those in which one or more persons consume economic goods or services in the process of engaging in joint activities with one or more others" (p. 614).

Botsman and Rogers (2010, p. xv) defined collaborative consumption as including "traditional sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting, and swapping." Belk (2014) also criticized this definition as being too broad given its inclusion of marketplace exchange, gift giving, and sharing. For his part, Belk defined collaborative consumption as "people coordinating the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation," (2014, p. 1597) excluding non-compensatory activities such as Couchsurfing. Belk (2014) considered collaborative consumption to be somewhere between sharing and marketplace exchange. This definition stresses the importance of market mediation and the power of social network effects, which allow collaborative consumption to grow (Cusumano, 2015). Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012, p. 881) conflated collaborative consumption and sharing in their concept of "access-based consumption", of which collaborative consumption was a subset.

The academic literature on the sharing economy has considered several topics. Some researchers have explored the psychological approach of sharing (e.g., Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Belk, 2010, 2014; Lambertson and Rose, 2012). Others have focused on the legal issues and the financial impact of P2P sharing businesses on traditional industry (e.g., Guttentag 2015; Zervas et al., 2017). Still others have shed light on the market characteristics of P2P sharing businesses in various contexts such as vehicle-, accommodation-, and toy-sharing (e.g., Kohda and Matsuda, 2013; Tussyadiah, 2015). Tourism is one of the most affected areas of P2P sharing because local residents can share their homes, cars, tours, and meals with tourists. Many aspects of the tourism sector have been transformed by the sharing economy; however, tourism researchers have paid little attention to this emergent business model with regard to the tourism landscape (Heo, 2016). Compared with patrons of traditional tourism services, the ways in which users of P2P sharing services evaluate their perceived experiential value warrants exploration.

### 3. Method

Given the exploratory nature of this research objective, which aims to elicit dimensions and attributes of the customer experience with P2P accommodations, a qualitative research method was used to conduct in-depth interviews. Interviews followed a semi-structured format to explore which attributes contribute to a positive experience with P2P accommodations and what factors create a dissatisfying experience. An interview protocol (shown in Appendix A) was designed based on procedures suggested by Stacy and Paige (2012) to guide the interview and ensure consistency across all interviews.

Purposive and snowball sampling was adopted to identify interviewees who had used P2P accommodations within the past six months. Since the study aimed at P2P accommodation, only the Airbnb accommodations which were operated by the owners themselves were considered. Only Airbnb stays including an extensive host-guest interaction were included.

**Table 2**  
Demographic profiles of interviewees.

No.	Age	Gender	Annual income (RMB)	Occupation	Place of residence	Number of people when travelling	With whom they travelled	Travel destination	Nights of stay	Room rate/night
1	34	M	260,000	Lawyer	Shenzhen	3	Family	Japan	5	630
2	22	M	39000	Office clerk	Shanghai	2	Friends	Hangzhou	3	300
3	24	F	58500	Office clerk	Beijing	2	Friends	Qingdao	3	360
4	35	M	169000	Consultant	Beijing	4	Family	Lijiang	4	580
5	28	F	65000	Office clerk	Beijing	1	Alone	Dali	6	320
6	36	M	104000	Teacher	Beijing	2	Couple	Zhangjiajie	2	500
7	28	M	104000	Editor	Beijing	2	Friends	Dali	5	700
8	39	M	390000	Business owner	Beijing	1	Business	Shanghai	3	850
9	19	F	N/A	College student	Beijing	3	Friends	Xiamen	6	160
10	40	M	260000	College professor	Shenzhen	3	Family	Lijiang	5	600
11	25	F	45500	Office clerk	Guangzhou	2	Friends	Xiamen	3	260
12	20	M	N/A	College student	Guangzhou	5	Friends	Lijiang	8	250
13	19	F	N/A	College student	Guangzhou	1	Alone	Xiamen	3	320
14	36	F	91000	Bank teller	Guangzhou	3	Family	Hangzhou	4	380
15	20	M	N/A	College student	Shanghai	2	Friends	Xiamen	4	160
16	22	M	N/A	Undergraduate student	Shanghai	3	Friends	Qingdao	3	280
17	26	F	52000	Office clerk	Shanghai	2	Friends	Dali	2	350
18	32	F	84500	Office clerk	Guangzhou	2	Alone	Dali	5	320
19	36	M	117000	Teacher	Shenzhen	3	Family	Thailand	6	520
20	29	F	N/A	Housewife	Shenzhen	3	Family	Japan	4	2000
21	27	F	78000	Real estate agent	Shenzhen	2	Friends	Xian	3	800
22	27	F	78000	Office clerk	Shenzhen	2	Friends	Korea	3	360
23	29	F	156000	International trade specialist	Shanghai	2	Couple	Cambodia	3	460
24	45	F	325000	Restaurant manager	Shenzhen	3	Family	Taiwan	8	550
25	28	F	200,000	Government officer	Shanghai	2	Friends	Wuyuan	4	350
26	26	F	65000	Teacher	Shanghai	2	Friends	Lijiang	4	480
27	25	M	78000	Police officer	Shenzhen	3	Friends	Dali	3	550
28	26	F	65000	Office clerk	Shenzhen	2	Friends	Thailand	5	300
29	43	F	N/A	Housewife	Shenzhen	3	Family	Japan	4	620
30	20	M	N/A	Undergraduate student	Guangzhou	4	Friends	Hangzhou	6	200
31	31	F	68900	Office clerk	Guangzhou	2	Friends	Xiamen	3	360
32	25	M	104000	Civil servant	Guangzhou	3	Friends	England	6	420
33	21	M	N/A	College graduate	Shenzhen	2	Friends	Guangzhou	1	230
34	30	F	91000	Office clerk	Shenzhen	2	Couple	Taiwan	4	450

The researchers contacted potential interviewees by phone and made an appointment for a face-to-face or Skype interview. In-depth interviews were conducted during February and March 2017. In total, 34 Airbnb customers were approached for interviews. Most interviews were carried out in person in a casual environment, such as a coffee shop, where interviewees would likely be more willing to share their perceptions. The interview progressed in line with the interview protocol, starting with interviewees' most recent experience with P2P accommodations, including the motivation to select P2P accommodations and their experience before, during, and after travel.

Most interviews lasted approximately 30–50 min. During the interview process, notes and audio recordings were taken after obtaining interviewees' consent. Interviews continued until the researchers reached saturation at around the 28th interview, by which time no new insights were elicited; six additional interviews were conducted to ensure genuine saturation. This process resulted in 34 interviews with Chinese residents from Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou.

Each audio recording was transcribed shortly after the interviews, and transcriptions were analyzed using the inductive method suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1997). The text was read line by line to identify salient information categories following the open coding procedure. Three rounds of open coding were conducted to ensure no drift in the code definitions and no shift in code meaning in order to preserve reliability (Gibbs, 2007). Axial coding was then conducted to discover underlying uniformities in the original set of categories and to formulate a smaller set of higher-level concepts. Seven experiential themes emerged from the coding process: physical utility, sensorial experience, core service, guest-host relationship, sense of security, social interaction, and local touch. They will be explained in the following sections.

Operationally, the texts were read and decoded in the original language. The Chinese texts were later translated into English for the purpose of citing verbatim responses in this manuscript. Open coding work was conducted by two authors independently to identify experience related elements. During this analysis process, two authors compared the independent work frequently. The differences were analyzed until consensus was reached. The two authors continued with the axial coding to relate identified elements to each other. The coding results were then sent to the third author to assess the accuracy of coding. A final meeting was arranged for three authors to finalize the code names. To enhance validity, member checking was conducted, considered “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility in a study” by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 314). The researchers adopted the procedure proposed by Cresswell and Miller (2000) wherein the interview transcriptions and identified themes were sent to 10 interviewees. The interviewees were asked to comment on the accuracy of the transcriptions and whether the themes had been developed with sufficient evidence. Secondly, researchers incorporated interviewees' comments into the final narrative. Finally, two experts familiar with this research area were invited to act as peer reviewers and review the final product to enhance content accuracy (Cresswell, 2007).

#### 4. Customers' experiences with P2P accommodations

Demographically, 44% of interviewees were men and 56% were women, most aged between 18–35 (79%). This spread was essentially consistent with Gfk's (2017) findings that over 80% of Airbnb users in China were under 35, more than in any other country. The majority of interviewees travelled with friends and family for tourism purposes

(79.4%). Their destinations were mostly tourism cities, especially those renowned for P2P accommodation such as Xiamen, Lijiang and Dali. Slightly over half (53%) of the interviewees spent less than RMB400 per night, and 30% spent RMB400–600. Only 17% spent over RMB600 per night during their stay. The majority (85%) of interviewees reported staying with Airbnb for 3–6 nights during their most recent stay. Most agreed they stayed longer in one destination for the economic benefits of P2P accommodations. Some even said they might travel to a destination simply because of unique Airbnb properties. Similarly, Tussyadiah and Pesonen (2016) noted that P2P accommodations may motivate people to travel more frequently, stay at a destination longer, and participate in more activities while experiencing tourism destinations. Interviewees' demographic information is presented in Table 2.

In terms of the driving factor of staying with Airbnb, 23 interviewees (67.6%) placed value for money as the primary motivation factor while 8 interviewees (23.5%) viewed the desire for authentic and social experiences as the primary driving factor. The other driving factors include curiosity of the new accommodation style, keeping up with the trend, need for an entire house, etc. It echoes with the study result of Tussyadiah and Pesonen (2018) which revealed two underlying factors drive the use of P2P accommodation, namely, economic appeal and social appeal.

#### 4.1. Physical utility

Interviewed Airbnb users tended to emphasize the utilitarian benefits of P2P accommodations' physical environment. Tourists usually screened the properties online by location and price. In our study, most interviewees preferred to select accommodations that were close to train stations or attractions with easy access to transportation. This supports the research finding of Gutiérrez et al. (2017) revealing that Airbnb benefits more than hotels from proximity to the city center and the sightseeing spots. Some interviewees liked to stay in more secluded, quiet areas outside of traditional tourist spots. Aside from general location, tourists also focused on room characteristics (i.e., room type, interior design, and available furniture). The photos and reviews posted online served as a reference when tourists were deciding where to stay.

During their stay, aside from the unique characteristics of room design, the quality of living conditions was also stressed by interviewees, including cleanliness, room size, room type, home facilities, and washing supplies. Most interviewees mentioned room cleanliness and tidiness as basic requirements. Interviewees who had travelled with family put more emphasis on room size and room type. Airbnb was also favored thanks to the wide variety of room types available, catering to customers' different needs. Home facilities, such as a washing machine and kitchen, were valued by many interviewees, especially tourists planning longer stays. For example, one female interviewee (No. 21) explained,

*I prefer to stay with Airbnb because the rooms are usually well equipped with home facilities. The washing machine is available to wash and dry my clothes every day. Also, I can cook meals by myself, which helps me to save money. It brings me a lot of convenience and makes me feel at home.*

The environment around an Airbnb property influences the customer's experience as well. Living facilities nearby the property were considered important by interviewees, particularly a variety of restaurants, local food markets, and supermarkets. Previous studies also cited the physical environment (Wu and Yang, 2010; Walls, 2013; Knutson et al., 2009), amenities (Tussyadiah, 2015), cleanliness (Knutson, 1988; Tussyadiah and Zach, 2017), and location convenience (Knutson, 1988; Tussyadiah and Zach, 2017) as influential criteria related to customers' satisfaction and return intention with regard to hotels or P2P accommodations. Our findings confirmed that compared to traditional hotels, P2P accommodation users are more interested in unique room

characteristics (McIntosh and Siggs, 2005) and home amenities (Tussyadiah, 2015), with many preferring to stay in non-tourist areas to experience local life (Guttentag, 2015; Tussyadiah and Zach, 2017).

#### 4.2. Sensorial experience

An individual's surrounding environment is multi-sensory, constituted not only by visual impressions but also by sensory elements: sounds, smells, tastes, and touch. The most common phrases interviewees used to describe sensory perceptions of Airbnb lodgings in our study were "homelike feeling" and "warm and relaxing." As described by one interviewee (No. 5),

*... Airbnb has become my primary choice of accommodations even for business trips. I really enjoy the atmosphere and ambience of Airbnb properties. After a busy working day, when you get back to the room, you see the family-style curtain and bed linens, [and] you feel like [you're] back at home.*

In this study, we found that rather than simply focusing on the utility of the property, female tourists placed considerable weight on sensorial and emotional experiences. A large number of female interviewees mentioned the lighting and smell of the room, which made them feel at home. Some interviewees also said they enjoyed the accents of literature and art in Airbnb rooms. Their comments highlighted the charm of a room's aesthetics, the natural backyard, and the decorative artworks. As one female interviewee (No. 11) explained,

*I went to Xiamen [a city in South China] with my friends last month and stayed with Airbnb for three days. We booked a room on the Airbnb website and the room was full of atmosphere of literature and art. It gave us feelings of romance and relaxing. The lighting was very soft and the host even opened the aroma diffuser before we arrived. It smelled so nice and made us feel at home. Plus it [was] a great place for selfies.*

The sensorial experience of the homelike atmosphere that P2P accommodations provide appears to be an important factor in creating guests' emotional connection with P2P properties. This is consistent with previous studies in which the sensorial component (e.g., home-away-from-home atmosphere, attractive décor, peaceful ambience) has been identified as crucial (Gunasekaran and Anandkumar, 2012).

#### 4.3. Core service

Although Airbnb users generally do not require the unlimited service provided by star-rated hotels, such as laundry service and room service, they do expect to receive some core services for the sake of convenience. For example, some interviewees mentioned they would confirm with the host whether pick-up service was provided if a property was not located in a central area. Any necessary information the host provided to assist tourists in better planning their trip was highly appreciated. One interviewee (No. 1) recalled,

*I reserved a room in Chengdu [a city in Southwest China] via Airbnb three months ago, and the host added me as a friend in Wechat before I arrived. She sent me a lot of useful information, such as the weather, transportation services, and the local [must-see] attractions, etc., which helped me a lot with my travel arrangements. The host was so nice, which made me feel more [excited] for the trip.*

Many of the interviewees in our study stayed at one Airbnb continuously for more than 3 days, and they expected daily room cleaning service. Several interviewees claimed they were not quite satisfied because the room was never cleaned by service staff after check-in, and they had to take out the garbage themselves. Pick-up service was also considered essential, especially for Airbnb listings in suburban areas.

In most Airbnb properties, there are one or two workers who help with registration, check-out, and breakfast. The friendliness of service staff gives guests a warm welcome. Guests are especially impressed if

the service staff is conscientious and responsive. These findings echo those of a study from [Petrillose and Brewer \(2000\)](#), who found that customers perceived their experience as excellent when employees were courteous, friendly, helpful, and ready to respond. According to a college student (No. 33),

*Actually, the service provided by the host is very important. I was impressed with the host in the Airbnb I stayed [at] last time in Lijiang. The wifi had some problems in the middle of the night, and I called the host. She came over and helped me to fix it, even though it was very late.*

Rather than expecting standard hotel service, Airbnb users expect more personalized service. Because they can communicate directly with their host prior to travelling, they are more familiar with the extent of service that will be provided. They can also share their personal requests with the host. This way, tourists can take advantage of special services and receive tailored treatment. As explained earlier, Airbnb users expect to be treated as an individual with unique needs, coinciding with [McIntosh and Siggs's \(2005\)](#) study in which personalized service was identified as an important component of the boutique hotel experience.

#### 4.4. Guest-host relationship

Emotional responses in a consumption situation are considered fundamental components of the consumption experience ([Mattila and Enz, 2002](#)). Interpersonal relationships comprise an essential part of the experience in many service-related studies, and a favorable guest-host relationship provides guests with pleasant memories. The guest-host relationship was heavily valued, as it was revealed to affect tourists' satisfaction.

Among all interviewees in the present study, most engaged in direct interactions with their host. However, several interviewees said they only communicated with their host via social media and did not meet the host on arrival. Most interviewees expected they may meet the host and wanted to experience local life by living with local people. Indeed, research suggests that a primary motivation for staying in B&B accommodations is individuals' desire to have a relationship with local people ([Stringer, 1981](#); [Zane, 1997](#)). An interviewee (No. 6) in this study shared,

*Basically I will contact the host first before I make a reservation. I check the photo of the host and chat with him/her to ask for more information. I will be more likely to make a reservation if the host looks nice, trustworthy, and shows hospitality and [is welcoming].*

This opinion concurs with previous studies from [Ert et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Wang and Nicolau \(2017\)](#) who found host characteristics, such as his or her photo, to play a key role in building trust between the host and the guest and lead to greater consumption intentions.

The hospitality that a host extends to his or her guest was strongly valued by most interviewees. Such hospitality can take many forms; it can be a reminder of the local weather, a welcome drink, or sincere care from the host. Additionally, some interviewees said they built a good relationship with the host because they shared something in common. As one interviewee (No. 16) explained,

*I will check the reviews and comments online from other guests on the host. I hope to meet the host who has a similar personality and interests as me, so that we can talk and make friends. I am a photography fan. Last time when I went to Dali, I met a B&B host who was an amateur photographer. The living room looked like a gallery where all his works were presented. We also shared our experiences on travelling and photography. It was an amazing experience.*

Hosts' communication with their guests after the stay is essential as well. Asking for feedback makes tourists feel valued, so they tend to post more positive comments online and recommend the property to their friends.

Studies have found that P2P accommodation users expect to receive a warm welcome and kind help from the host. They also value personal interactions, genuine encounters with the host, and a desire to share a social identity and lifestyle values. This study supports the notion that the guest-host relationship is one factor persuading guests to choose alternative accommodations ([Gunasekaran and Anandkumar, 2012](#); [Chen et al., 2013](#)). It also concurs with other research noting that the guest-host relationship strengthens the role of commercial friendship in affecting guests' cultural understanding of emotions, identity, and lifestyle values ([Hultman and Cederholm, 2010](#)).

#### 4.5. Sense of security

Given that the operators of P2P accommodation have shifted from business entities to ordinary individuals, P2P users are more concerned about the safety issues. In our study, quite a number of interviewees put safety as their first concern when selecting P2P accommodation and a key factor to evaluate their staying experiences. Several factors were found to have influence on guests' sense of security. First, the interviewees considered the renowned big companies such as Airbnb more trustworthy and they felt more guaranteed and protected by the platform. The photos of the rooms posted online should be real. Second, the physical environment of Airbnb property, such as surrounding environment and room lock. The third factor was related to the host, including the hosts' photos posted online, their appearances, and whether the host showed sincere care for the guests.

Several interviewees shared their memorable interactions with the host which gave them more sense of safety. One interviewee (No. 28) recalled her experience:

*I went to Japan with a friend and stayed in one B&B for three nights in Tokyo. One night we went out shopping. It was very late and we received a phone call from our host. The host called to check on our safety and asked whether we needed help in case we were lost. The thing that most touched us was that the host was waiting for us in front of his house. I almost cried at that moment. The host really cares about his guests from the bottom of his heart. I still feel touched even though it was several months ago. It made me feel warm and safe that I was concerned by someone in a strange city.*

However, some interviewees were still worried about the safety issues of staying with Airbnb. As one interviewee claimed,

*I went to Wuyuan half year ago and stayed in a B&B. It seemed to be an ancient house and it was totally built with camphorwood. Beautiful decoration can be found anywhere on the carved wood wall. But the room door and its lock seemed to be very old as well. The door cannot be closed very firmly. And it gave me insecurity feelings.*

#### 4.6. Social interaction

Personal relationships are not only limited to guest-host relations but also occur during interactions among guests. Given the rapid evolution of the ICT, consumers are becoming more connected than ever before. Customers seek information and advice, post comments about their experiences, and share stories in virtual communities. Through online connections, consumption has transformed from an individual experience to a collective one via co-creation processes. In our study, most interviewees claimed they would check other tourists' online comments and reviews when deciding whether to make a reservation. Some tourists would interact with others in virtual communities to collect more information about the environment and service provided by a particular Airbnb. Aside from virtual communication, the personal face-to-face interaction among Airbnb guests was considered valuable in enriching tourists' travel experiences. Some tourists made friends during their stays and kept in touch after travelling. As one interviewee recalled (No. 22),

*I went to Japan alone several months ago. I booked a room through Airbnb. It was a two-story big house with many bedrooms and a big living room. The guests were from all over the world. ... In the evening, we all hung out in the living room. The host prepared drinks for us, and we introduced ourselves, shared our travelling experiences and plans, talked about different cultures. It was a wonderful night. I was not lonely although I went to Japan alone.*

Cova et al. (2011) asserted that “authentic experiences emerge from satisfactory on- and off-line interactions among peers” (p. 238). Interviewees enjoyed the activities organized by the host, such as barbecues, cooking, and outings. By participating in interactive activities, Airbnb customers have the chance to get to know each other and make friends. Consequently, customers create value for themselves and occasionally for others through interactions with other customers and exchange of resources (Cova and Salle, 2008; Lusch et al., 2007).

In the meanwhile, we also found out that younger interviewees held more positive perceptions and expectations on the interaction with other guests. The interviewees aged more than 40 showed less interest in socialization with other guests. As one interviewee (No. 29) depicted,

*One thing that I was not satisfied with staying with Airbnb is that you have to stand with the noise made by other guests. The room [of B&B] was not soundproof as hotel room. You know, young people like sleep late and they talked in the living room. It was a trouble for me to sleep. Maybe next time I will rent a small entire apartment rather than a single room.*

#### 4.7. Local touch

As destinations become more homogeneous, tourists are increasingly eager to experience traditions, heritage, and origin – the dimensions that constitute the sense of a set place (Lewis and Bridger, 2000). Authentic products are perceived as having a higher level of quality and value for money (Lewis and Bridger, 2000). Other than emphasizing authenticity as a tangible asset, some researchers believe it is a value placed on a product by the observer (Chhabra, 2005). Homemade authentic food or handicrafts rich in local history and culture may provide tourists with more local flavor. Interviewees stated the food provided by the host was more authentic than hotel food. As interview No. 31 explained:

*Unlike the food offered by hotel restaurants, food provided by the Airbnb host is more authentic, which is the real local homemade food. Sometimes the host invited us to have dinner together and during dinnertime, the host described the origin and cooking method of the cuisine, which helped us to better experience local culture.*

Aside from local food, the historic architecture of local houses and the room design in an Airbnb also presents authentic culture. The historic buildings or other aspects of unique accommodations are viewed as the basis of the experience the owners provide and thus play an important role in shaping guests' experiences. Our study found that, aside from the lower price and greater sense of being at home compared to a conventional hotel, guests' primary reasons for choosing to stay in a local Airbnb included the chance to take in the local culture or lifestyle and architecture of local houses. Usually B&B establishments are built or renovated from residents' houses in local residential areas or rural parts of tourism destinations. For tourists, this new alternative accommodation represents a vintage, authentic, or unique living culture.

As revealed in Nguyen and Chueng's (2015) study, local culture and atmosphere are two key factors contributing to a positive heritage experience. Local culture includes the presence of local people and religious practitioners; the atmosphere can reflect spirituality, such as the scent of incense and the sound of praying. Staying at local homes enables tourists to live in residential areas with more chances of encountering local people and experiencing local life and authentic

regional culture. For example, an interviewee (No. 3) recalled,

*One of my motives for staying in P2P accommodations is the desire to have a relationship with the local people. By interacting directly with local people, we have chances to experience the authentic local and regional culture.*

Among these reasons, being able to immerse in an authentic local cultural experience was repeatedly mentioned as one of the most memorable experience with P2P accommodations. This finding aligns with that of Wang (2007) in a survey on guesthouse customers in Lijiang, China.

## 5. Conclusions and implications

This study explored the customer experience with P2P accommodations based on in-depth interviews with Airbnb customers. Seven themes emerged from interviews with 34 research participants who had used an Airbnb in the past six months: physical utility, sensorial experience, core service, guest-host relationship, sense of security, social interaction, and local touch. Most of the dimensions identified in this study are supported by previous literature.

Compared with commercial hotel settings, the core aspects of the customer experience in terms of P2P accommodations emphasize the social and relational experience beyond routine customer-staff relations. Most consumers also desire direct interaction with the host, the local people, and other guests, which confirms the social appeal of the sharing economy (Guttentag, 2015; Tussyadiah and Pesonen, 2018). Rather than standard rooms in branded chain hotels, tourists—especially the millennial generation—now prefer to stay in unique accommodations with distinct architecture, interior design, and a homelike atmosphere. Living with the local people in the local community affords tourists more opportunities to experience authentic culture and customs, which was highly valued by most interviewees. As found in previous research, guests in P2P accommodations appreciate staying in authentic (*i.e.*, non-tourist) areas (Guttentag, 2015; Tussyadiah and Pesonen, 2016).

In addition, it is noteworthy that two experiential dimensions – sense of security and social interaction were found more emphasized by the interviewees in this study. This phenomenon may result from two main reasons. One reason is the insufficient personal credit system in China. China has not established sound personal credit reporting system that facilitates trust built among strangers in the market (Huang et al., 2016). Therefore the security issue for Chinese P2P accommodation market is more concerned than western market. The other reason may lie in the collectivism nature of Chinese culture. Chinese people embrace a horizontal collectivism orientation and focus on peer bonding, sociability and equal social relationships (Wang and Lu, 2017). Chinese tourists put more value on the socialization activities with the local community and other guests.

As a new entrant to the hospitality industry, few contextual factors have been identified for P2P accommodations, and academic research is limited, especially for the thriving Chinese P2P market. This study contributes to the literature in tourism and hospitality by enriching the dimensions of customers' lodging experiences and exploring the construct of customer experience with P2P accommodation. Compared with traditional commercial hotels, some factors were found unique for P2P users to evaluate their experiences, *i.e.* guest-host relationship, local touch. Additionally, in contrast with previous studies in context of Western P2P accommodation market, two dimensions were found more emphasized by Chinese tourists, which are sense of security and social interaction.

This study offers new insights to help P2P accommodation marketers devise better marketing and service strategies. Firstly, as identified in this study, P2P accommodation users deemed physical utility (*i.e.* location, transportation convenience, home facilities) and core service (*i.e.* pick-up service, room cleaning, and travel advice) to be

important dimensions of experience. Although economic appeal drives tourist to use P2P accommodation to a great extent, tourists quest for value for money rather than just low price. It is important for P2P accommodation to take cost-saving as the competitive advantage. Aside from the basic services provided, the value-added services that differentiate from hotel services need to be offered in order to remain competitive.

Secondly, tourists seek relational experiences with hosts, local communities and other guests, and they quest for local touch and authentic experiences different from their daily life. The most memorable experiences they can recall are mainly those peak experiences, such as the emotional touch from the host, the barbecue night with other guests. As Pine and Gilmore (1998) pointed out that experience is a memorable event that can be staged by the service provider. The host should assume the role of experience facilitator for guests by staging an experiential environment. Hosts and service staff need to transform from being merely executors of service delivery mechanisms to facilitators of experience architecture to contribute to memorable guest experiences (Bharwani and Jauhari, 2013). Interactive activities among guests, such as barbecues and potlucks, can be held to foster personal interaction and enhance customer satisfaction. Local cultural elements like food and customs should also be incorporated into the environment to create authentic cultural experiences for guests.

Thirdly, security issues of P2P accommodation are highly concerned by Chinese tourists. The deficiency of security and trust is a unique challenge for Chinese P2P market. In contrast with the mature personal credit reporting system in western countries, China has not established a sound personal credit information system (Huang et al., 2016). Faced with this situation, online service platforms such as Airbnb should take the roles to build effective transaction platforms strengthening host-guest trust. For example, the platforms should reinforce supervision over P2P accommodation hosts to ensure the information posted online is accurate, thereby strengthening trustworthiness and protecting the rights of hosts and guests. Additionally, it is necessary for P2P accommodation platforms to optimize tools such as P2P feedback, utilizing a rating scheme to build trust between both parties. For instance, the gamification design of the “Superhost” award developed by Airbnb motivates hosts to improve their service and incentivizes them to increase their review volume and establish host-guest trust (Liang et al., 2017).

Fourthly, tourist not just seek for pleasure in travel, but also quest for core meaning, which includes escape from daily life, personal development and reestablishment of interpersonal relationships (Cohen, 1979; Mannell and Iso-Ahola, 1987). Social and cultural experience is contingent on the guest’s subjective initiatives. To use Airbnb well, guests are encouraged to seek related information online and to communicate with the host before making a reservation. Active participation in the experience and interaction with others significantly contributes to enhanced attention and memorability of the tourist experience (Campos et al., 2015). Guests can actively participate in value co-creation activities through various means, such as by searching for information about what a service offers, sharing feedback with the service provider, assisting other customers if they need help, and so on. P2P accommodation platforms and hosts should build friendly environment (on-line and off-line) to facilitate guest engagement in experience and value creation.

As a disruptive business model of lodging industry, P2P accommodation has brought big challenge for commercial hotels, especially budget hotels. Commercial hotel businesses should rethink their strategies to stay competitive. First, hotel management needs to dig up their unique advantages and strengthen them among customers, such as personal security, information privacy, and diverse services. Second, hotels can cooperate with local tour operators to develop experiential activities for customers to experience local culture and interact with local community. Third, hotels can also take advantage of their loyalty programs to build community among club members. Interactive

activities and value-added service can enhance customers’ sense of community.

Despite its interesting findings, this study is not without limitations. First, the researchers analyzed the data manually, which may introduce bias. Second, the study identified dimensions of the customer experience related to P2P accommodations; however, which dimensions or factors were most important to guests remain unknown. Therefore, quantitative research is necessary to further explore the weights of each dimension. In addition, this study result was gained only based on 34 in-depth interviews, hence the patterns identified in this study should be explored with generalizable quantitative study.

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### Appendix A. In-depth interview protocol

#### Purpose

- To find out the demographic information of the interviewees and the factors that motivate them to stay with P2P accommodation.
- To explore the dimensions of their experiences of staying with P2P accommodation.

#### Participants

The interviewees should meet the below criteria:

- 1 The interviewees should be adult Chinese residents.
- 2 The interviewees should have stayed with P2P accommodation in the past six months.
- 3 The P2P accommodation should be Airbnb properties operated by host him/herself in the experience business.

#### Sample size

The interview will keep on going until data is saturated.

#### Sample selection

Convenience sampling and snowball sampling will be adopted to recruit the interviewees. The information on the interview need and requirement will be posted on the Wechat (Chinese facebook) and call for volunteers. The basic demographic profile of the volunteers will be collected and the researchers decide on the interviewee list accordingly. The principles to select interviewees are 1) the diversity of the sample and 2) the quality of the sample. The volunteers who have different demographic profiles and those who are talkative and willing to share will be primarily considered. The volunteer will be awarded with a shopping coupon after the interview. Each volunteer is encouraged to share the interview call for information on their Wechat. The researchers will contact the volunteers and repeat the previous procedure.

#### Permission and invitation

Researchers will introduce the research in terms of its objective and implementing plan to interviewees and explain their responsibilities and rights during the interview. If the interview is agreeable, the researcher then makes appointment with him/her for the interview. The interviews will be conducted face-to-face or *via* skype.

#### Consent process

The researchers will let the interviewees understand that their



confidence will be held, and they have right to withdraw from the study at any time. A consent letter will be signed by the interviewee before the implementation of interview.

### Recording interviews

During the interview, hand written notes will be used to take down the key points. As a supplement of the notes, the whole process of interview will be taped. A tape recorder is required. Researchers will ask for permission from the interviewees before the interview.

### Interview questions

- 1 Tell me the details of your last stay with Airbnb. (i.e. when, where, travel purpose, with who, stay nights, room rate)
- 2 Why did you want to stay with Airbnb rather than commercial hotels for this travel? (driving factors)
- 3 How do you evaluate this stay experience? Why? (Experiential dimensions: physical, sensory, service, host, social, local...)
- 4 What experiences do you find different from staying with commercial hotels?
- 5 What experiences are most memorable for this stay? (story sharing)

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