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To cite this article: Judith Bridges & Camilla Vásquez (2018) If nearly all *Airbnb* reviews are positive, does that make them meaningless?, *Current Issues in Tourism*, 21:18, 2057-2075, DOI: [10.1080/13683500.2016.1267113](https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2016.1267113)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2016.1267113>



Published online: 11 Dec 2016.



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If nearly all *Airbnb* reviews are positive, does that make them meaningless?

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(Received 27 May 2016; accepted 28 November 2016)

Peer-to-peer business models rely on interpersonal communication for their success. In this article, we focus on *Airbnb* – an exemplar of the so-called ‘sharing economy’ – and more specifically, on *Airbnb*’s reciprocal reviewing system, which enables both hosts and guests to review one another. Our study takes a computer-assisted, qualitative approach to explore linguistic patterns of evaluation in *Airbnb* reviews. Our findings indicate that *Airbnb* reviews tend to comprise a very restricted set of linguistic resources, establishing the site’s norm of highly positive commentary, which in turn makes *Airbnb* reviews, on the surface, appear to be quite similar to one another. However, a micro-analytic comparison of positive reviews reveals that less-than-positive experiences are sometimes communicated using more nuanced, subtle cues. This study contributes to existing literature on electronic word of mouth in the tourism industry by highlighting how evaluation is communicated, while simultaneously responding to hospitality scholars’ calls for analyses which extend beyond the star ratings and also take into account consumers’ constructions of experience in the review texts themselves.

Keywords: *Airbnb*; online consumer reviews; eWOM; sharing economy; evaluation; discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Word of mouth has long been recognized as a powerful method of transferring information, especially for consumers to convey their experiences with businesses to other consumers. Over the last decade, with the growth of digital media and online communication, electronic word of mouth, or eWOM, has dramatically changed how consumers inform themselves – and each other – about businesses and products. Among the most influential forms of eWOM are online customer review systems (Dellarocas, 2003). Online reviews have been found to be significant in guiding consumer decisions, allowing prospective buyers to evaluate and compare products and services based on massive amounts of user-generated content (UGC) available on the Internet (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). According to one recent study, over 70% of consumers say that they trust online reviews and value the transparency they provide about a product or service (Mazereeuw, 2015).

Systems of rating and reviewing, and peer-to-peer mass communication between non-specialists – that is, UGC – have come to play a significant role in the travel industry. User-generated eWOM is considered especially important when it comes to travel and tourism,

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where the financial stakes for consumers can be high, and where many consumers wish to avoid making unsatisfactory decisions about accommodations and other travel experiences. For many, consumer reviews are thought to provide an ‘unbiased’ source of first-hand information that is associated with reducing risk and uncertainty for prospective travellers (e.g. Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009).

Several studies have pointed to the significance of online reviews for consumer decision-making (e.g. Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008; Fang, Ye, Kucukusta, & Law, 2016; Forman, Ghose, & Wiesenfeld, 2008). Many travellers, in particular, take the opinions and narratives provided by prior travellers into consideration before making a decision about their own travel arrangements (Black & Kelley, 2009; Filieri, Algezau, & McLeay, 2015; Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007; Vásquez, 2011, 2014a; Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009). The current study focuses on reviews found on the sharing-economy platform of *Airbnb.com*, a relatively unexplored site in terms of its user-generated reviews. For companies like *Airbnb*, the identity of their brand is, in large part, generated by users (Yannopoulou, Moufahim, & Bian, 2013), and specifically in users’ exchange of evaluative commentary based on first-hand personal experiences. Businesses like *Airbnb* are centred on human relationships, and consequently ‘real personal and “me-too” stories contribute to the creation of a strong sense of identification between the brand and the members’ (Yannopoulou et al., 2013, p. 88).

What may have seemed unthinkable just a decade ago – that is, a large, international corporation built on the practice of allowing strangers into one’s home in exchange for payment – is facilitated as much by the affordances of digital technologies as it is by individuals’ willingness to put their trust in other people previously unknown to them (Guttentag, 2015). On some level, the practice of receiving strangers into one’s home has a much earlier antecedent, dating back to ancient Greece, where the custom was known as *xenia* (ξενία) – which translates literally to ‘guest-friendship’ (Strootman, 2010) – and where an exchange of material resources was often involved as well. Today, however, hospitality is a global industry, which has transcended ‘from the sphere of physical geography to that of virtual space’ (Khayutina, 2002). Besides the more practical dimensions of online booking and online payment, the interpersonal aspect of online communication on platforms like *Airbnb* also plays a major role in the interchange between hosts and guests.

1.1. *Airbnb and the sharing economy*

According to the company’s website, *Airbnb* claims to have 40 million guests staying in over 1.5 million listings, available in more than 190 countries and 34,000 cities (*Airbnb.com*, 2015). The company’s trustworthiness, in the words of co-founder and CEO, Brian Chesky, is based on the premise that there are ‘no strangers on *Airbnb*,’ as guests and hosts can meet each other virtually, view each other’s profiles, and read reviews from others about them (Cosco, 2014). From an industry perspective, *Airbnb*’s nearly instant success and accelerated growth represents a ‘disruption,’ as an innovative business model which is currently drawing at least some segment of the travel market away from hotels (Guttentag, 2015; Lehr, 2015). In some cases, *Airbnb* also provides travellers with a more affordable alternative to paying high prices for rooms in large hotel chains, while enabling them to enjoy more of a ‘feeling-at-home’ experience (Yannopoulou et al., 2013).

The site’s trustworthiness is, at least in part, predicated on the fact that *Airbnb* uses various means to authenticate users’ identities. In exchange for providing the platform which mediates the interactions between hosts and guests, *Airbnb* receives a fee for each booking made through the site. One aspect of *Airbnb*’s appeal for consumers is the

information provided about the properties as well as about the hosts (Zekanović-Korona & Grzunov, 2014). Some of this information takes the form of reviews from previous guests, appearing alongside hosts' profiles, which typically feature a profile photo and a short biography. While previous studies have focused only on the star ratings of *Airbnb*, our study takes a closer look at the language of user reviews posted on *Airbnb*, which both guests and hosts are encouraged to write. Guests' reviews may describe their subjective experiences not only with the property itself, but also with the property's host. Unlike many other sites, on *Airbnb*, hosts are also encouraged to post reviews of the guests – for future hosts to consider. This reciprocity of reviews is a feature of *Airbnb* that both guests and hosts rely on to promote themselves and make decisions. *Airbnb* is unique in its reciprocity of reviews and ratings, and in this respect, it is unlike many other online review sites, where reviews tend to be unidirectional, with consumers rating businesses, but not the other way around. Furthermore, leaving a review on *Airbnb* requires that a prior transaction be made by both parties through *Airbnb*'s website, so this also greatly reduces the potential for review manipulation (Gössling, Hall, & Andersson, 2016).

1.2. J-shaped distribution of online reviews

Several studies of online review sites have found a consistent positivity bias. For instance, in their study of *Amazon* products, Hu, Pavlou, and Zhang (2009) observed a J-shaped distribution in ratings. They found that the consumers who provided the majority of reviews tended to express their satisfaction (usually in the form of a 5- or 4-star rating on a 5-point scale), while there was a smaller, yet noticeable, number of reviews from very unsatisfied consumers (i.e. 1-star ratings). The same researchers speculated that 'people with moderate views are less passionate to exert the time and effort to report their ratings' (Hu et al, 2009, p. 145), which results in comparatively fewer 2- and 3-star reviews. These tendencies contribute to the J-shaped distribution of ratings found on other review sites as well, including both *Yelp* (Jurafsky, 2014) and *TripAdvisor* (Feng, Xing, Gogar, & Choi, 2012). Two recent studies based on large samples of data corroborate this skew towards the positive end of the rating scale in travel reviews on *TripAdvisor* (e.g. Bronner & de Hoog, 2016; Zervas, Proserpio, & Byers, 2015). Specifically, Zervas et al. (2015) found that, in their data set, the average rating on *TripAdvisor* was 3.8 on a 5-point scale. They then compared their *TripAdvisor* data with reviews for more than 600,000 listings on *Airbnb*. The average rating on *Airbnb* was 4.7 (also on a 5-point scale), indicating an even stronger positivity bias on *Airbnb*. Furthermore, around 95% of the *Airbnb* properties were rated as either 4.5 or 5 stars, and listings with ratings lower than 3.5 stars were extremely rare. Similarly, a forthcoming study reports that 90% of *Airbnb* ratings examined were either 4 or 5 stars, and that 'bad ratings on the site are very rare' (Cansoy & Schor, 2016, p. 7). This extraordinarily positive skew of *Airbnb*'s ratings has received attention from business journalists and researchers alike (e.g. Fradkin, Grewal, Holtz, & Pearson, 2015; Ho, 2015; Yannopoulou et al., 2013; Zekanović-Korona & Grzunov, 2014; Zervas et al., 2015).

While the last few years have seen a gradual increase in the number and types of sharing-economy businesses (Schor, 2014), scholarship on the topics of ratings and reviews found on sharing-economy platforms other than *Airbnb* is still minimal. One exception is a study of *BlaBlaCar*, a car-sharing company begun in France with over one million registered drivers (Slee, 2013). Mirroring findings of a positivity bias on *Airbnb*, the *BlaBlaCar* study also found highly skewed distribution in its rating system between drivers and riders: 98.9% of all ratings were 5 star, and the remaining 1.1% were 1 star (Slee, 2013). However, there are important differences in how the rating systems are set up on the two

sites. Besides the fact that *Airbnb* allows users to leave narrative reviews in addition to a star rating, another major difference between *BlaBlaCar* and *Airbnb* is that *Airbnb* has a double-blind or ‘simultaneous reveal’ reviewing system. With the aim of increasing the trustworthiness of its review system, *Airbnb* has changed its reviewing procedure so that neither guest nor host has access to each other’s submissions until they have both submitted their reviews, thus lessening the threat of retaliation (if one party’s rating is negative) that exists on other platforms, such as *BlaBlaCar*.

1.3. Factors related to the positivity bias on *Airbnb*

Numerous factors may contribute to the extreme positivity bias in ratings on *Airbnb*. Some suggest that guests’ expectations are lower for accommodations provided by individuals than they are for large-scale hotels, and that consumers’ expectations of *Airbnb* properties are more realistic, since the identity of the *Airbnb* brand centres more on individual points of view and human interactions, rather than on corporate mass marketing efforts (Yannopoulou et al., 2013). Furthermore, since *Airbnb* is a sharing-economy platform, there tends to be much more personal (and personalized) interaction between the ‘business’ (i.e. the host), and the ‘customer’ (i.e. the guest). As a consequence, criticizing or complaining about another person may be considered an especially ‘face-threatening act’ (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In other words, posting negative feedback directly after meeting another individual face to face may be difficult and awkward, and perhaps this is one reason why *Airbnb* users tend to avoid it. Furthermore, social interaction is not only an inevitable consequence of the structure of *Airbnb*, but for many people, it is actually one of the incentives to become an *Airbnb* host in the first place. While hosts are motivated by financial rewards, opportunities to forge social connections also appear to be a significant factor for many *Airbnb* users (Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015). Gratification from the sociability afforded by the experience, which is partially constructed via the reviews which hosts and guests leave for one another, may serve as motivation for at least some hosts to continue renting their properties.

Yet another reason for the positivity bias on *Airbnb* has been linked to the reciprocity of *Airbnb*’s review system. For instance, one study (Fradkin et al., 2015) of the reciprocal reviewing dynamic of *Airbnb* examined guests’ ratings of hosts, and found that 70% submitted a 5-star rating. (In comparison, the proportions of 5-star ratings on *TripAdvisor* and *Expedia* have been found to be 31% and 44%, respectively (Mayzlin, Dover, & Chevalier, 2014).) Fradkin et al argue that this disproportion is most likely due to fear of retaliation from negative reviews, and a tacit expectation of reciprocally positive reviews. They additionally found that socially induced reciprocity occurs when hosts and guests have interacted socially and, as a consequence, omit anything negative from their reviews to avoid being unkind. (It is important to note that sometime during 2015, *Airbnb*’s reviewing system changed. Currently, reviews are not posted in the order in which they are received; but rather *Airbnb* gives users a 2-week window in which to post reviews, and *Airbnb* waits until reviews have been received from both parties before posting them. This system feature reduces the likelihood, or possibility, of retaliation.) Prior research suggests that when users do leave negative feedback on reciprocal review sites – on *couchsurfing.com*, for example – they tend to be particularly sensitive in how they formulate their complaints (e.g. Dayter & Rudiger, 2013). The sense of mutual trust on online communities like *Airbnb* creates a familiarity achieved through the personal experience, making complaints very different from the more explicit criticisms found in reviews of products or professional businesses (Vásquez, 2014b). Reviews on *Airbnb* function not only to reduce risk and

uncertainty, but they also serve to create trust, which seems essential for what is arguably a more intimate arrangement than a standard business transaction: opening one's home to a stranger, and conversely, being a guest (albeit, a paying one) in someone's home.

Another possible reason for the positivity bias on *Airbnb* is the lack of anonymity. All users' reviews are linked to their profile, and there is no option to post a review anonymously. Researchers have shown that anonymous reviews are perceived by other consumers to lack credibility and trustworthiness (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013; Bronner & de Hoog, 2016; Filieri, 2015); however, lack of anonymity can also mean that authors of online reviews are less likely to be overtly negative (Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntaraporn, 2006; Wang, 2010). *Airbnb* users' online identities are authenticated by a number of means, and these procedures are not always required by other review websites (e.g. linking to a long-established *Facebook* account and displaying the number of *Facebook* friends on users' *Airbnb* profiles, or providing *Airbnb* with a copy of an official document, such as a passport). Some individuals may be reluctant to go on record publicly with explicitly negative commentary, because of the integration of their user profiles across various social media platforms. Therefore, providing this type of personal information contributes to a system perceived as trustworthy (Ert, Fleischer, & Magen, 2016), yet, in turn, may also contribute to the positivity bias in the ratings and reviews.

Finally, we also consider the possibility that some of the positivity bias could also be due to *Airbnb*'s practices. In other words, we have no way of knowing if *Airbnb* actually makes public all of the reviews that they receive, nor do we know the exact number of reviews that do not comply with *Airbnb*'s guidelines, and which are filtered as a consequence. We also do not have access to information about whether or not *Airbnb* removes listings for properties which receive multiple negative reviews. A representative from *Airbnb* verified that they censor reviews only if they violate the guidelines, and indicated that this happens 'very rarely.' However, without direct access to corporate practices, or an insider perspective, it is difficult for academic researchers to know about what goes on 'behind the screen' (Varis, 2016, p. 63).

We have pointed out several possible reasons for the extreme positive bias of ratings on *Airbnb*, discussing previous research which has highlighted the sociocultural factors of politeness and courtesy, as well as fear or retaliation, and concern about one's online identity being linked to negative comments. However, in studying the positivity bias in *Airbnb*, previous research has only addressed the star rating system. Recently, scholars studying online travel review data have argued that research on travel reviews needs to move beyond an exclusive focus on ratings, and instead turn to examining review language. In other words, 'the industry should go beyond numerical ratings and pay attention to the texts found in reviews' (Han, Mankad, Gavierni, & Verma, 2016, p. 17). This study aims to respond to this and similar calls (e.g. Rimer, 2015) for more in-depth, textual analyses to better understand the travel reviews written by consumers. Taking a discourse analytic approach – which considers not only *what* is being communicated, but also *how* it is being communicated – we turn our attention to *Airbnb* reciprocal reviews. In light of the previous research pointing to the positivity bias in *Airbnb*, our study addresses the following general research question: If nearly all *Airbnb* reviews are positive, does that make them meaningless?

2. Methods

Our data collection was conducted in two phases. The initial data set collected for this study consists of 400 publicly available reviews posted on *Airbnb.com*. The data were collected manually (i.e. not scraped) in August and September 2015. *Airbnb* requires users to select a

specific city in order to search for listings. We therefore sampled reviews from four large cities located in each quadrant of the USA, and that have not yet been the focus of research on *Airbnb* ratings or reviews: Portland (NW), Albuquerque (SW), Philadelphia (NE), and Atlanta (SE). For each city, we sampled 100 reviews: 50 reviews of properties from the guest's perspective ('reviews written by guest,' or RGs) and 50 reviews of guests from the host's perspective ('reviews written by host,' or RHs). It is worth noting that while many people use *Airbnb* as both hosts and guests, our categories of 'host' and 'guest' here are contextual: that is, a review is categorized as a 'guest' review if the reviewer is writing based on his/her experience as a guest, even if that guest also happens to be an *Airbnb* host on other occasions.

Airbnb's website allows prospective guests to filter their search by three possible property types: entire place, shared property, or shared room. By restricting our sample to only include properties listed as 'entire place,' we assumed that, of the three options, these experiences would be most comparable to staying in a hotel (where the booked space is private), and that these experiences would presumably promote the lowest levels of guest–host interactions. Moreover, according to a recent study, the majority of listings on *Airbnb* belong to the 'entire place' category (Cansoy & Schor, forthcoming).

After filtering for 'entire place,' we then selected the first 10 properties that appeared which had at least five reviews, and for which the host also left reviews for their guests, for a total of 50 guest reviews and 50 reciprocal reviews from hosts, for each of the four cities. The reviews in our sample had been posted on *Airbnb*'s site by users between March and September 2015. Each review was labelled with metadata according to its city (i.e. *pdx*, *abq*, *phl*, and *atl*), and according to the order in which it was collected: for example, *pdx*, *g1h1* refers to the first review written by a guest of the first host from the Portland data. These labels appear at the end of each excerpt presented below, to provide a sense of representativeness of the examples discussed. Furthermore, all reviews shown have been preserved in their original state: as seen in the excerpts below, typographic and grammatical errors have not been edited.

Our initial data set of 400 reviews consists of a total of 24,130 words. RGs comprise 77% of the total, with 18,539 words. RGs are an average of 75 words in length, ranging from the shortest reviews of around 15 words (e.g. *We had a great time, loved the place. Would definitely stay here again.*), to nearly 400 words for the longest review. Reviews written by hosts (RH), conversely, averaged only 28 words in length, with many consisting of only two or three words in total, and very few exceeding 100 words. A typical RH often consists of a brief evaluative comment (*Great guest. Would happily host again.*), while some provide more details about the nature of the interaction between the guest and host.

As mentioned earlier, *Airbnb* enables both guests and hosts to evaluate each other by using a numerical rating system as well as by writing a narrative review. Although the narrative reviews are displayed along with the name and profile of the author of that review, the corresponding numeric rating is not displayed. In other words, a host can see what a particular guest wrote in their review, but cannot see the numeric rating given by that guest. This means that the narrative review is the only reciprocally transparent type of information displayed that is provided by both parties. Because individual reviews do not appear alongside a numeric rating, we read each review and manually coded it as 'positive' 'negative' or 'lukewarm,' as discussed in the following section.

Once our preliminary analysis of the 400 reviews was complete, we collected a second set of additional reviews from some of the same reviewers represented in the original data set. The second round of data represents a purposeful sample, which was needed in order to be able to more closely examine if, and how, the same reviewers' language use varied

across multiple reviews. Starting with each of the 19 reviews classified as ‘lukewarm’ (explained in the following section), we collected up to five other reviews written by that same individual for their *Airbnb* experiences, in order to observe the features typical of the guest’s review writing style. This follow-up step yielded a secondary data set of 43 reviews.

In the following section, we highlight the dominant language-related tendencies in *Airbnb* reviews as they relate to categorically positive reviews. Next, we explore how negative evaluation is expressed in a handful of (exceptional) negative reviews. Finally, we consider the strategies used in ‘lukewarm’ reviews, which appear positive on the surface, but which may be indicators of a not-entirely-positive experience.

3. Findings

Once the initial data were collected, we used a concordancing software, *AntConc* (Anthony, 2014), to determine how similar the guest reviews ($N=200$) and the host reviews ($N=200$) were to one another. Concordancing software provides information about word frequencies and other patterns of word co-occurrence. We began by calculating the type-token ratios (TTRs) for each set of reviews. TTR is a measurement that indicates the degree of word variation in a given set of texts. A set of texts with the highest possible TTR (100%) would mean that no single word is ever repeated in that set, while the lowest possible TTR (0%) would mean that one single word is repeated over and over again. To provide some context for interpreting TTR, it has been shown that, typically, in spoken language, TTR is around 45–55%, while in written language, it is in the range of 65–75% (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finnegan, 1999), indicating that, in general, written communication usually consists of more word variety than spoken communication.

Our analysis found that the TTR for the guest reviews was 14.2%, and for the host reviews, the TTR was 16.9%. This means that, taken as a whole, *Airbnb* reviews rely on a relatively un-varied set of language resources. There are a number of reasons for this. First, we observed that hosts often copy and paste either the exact same wording or use very similar wording for their reviews of diverse guests. Most often, these are brief evaluative comments such as *Great guests!*, *Would love to host again!* or other, similarly formulaic, expressions. Specifically, we found that 11 of the 100 hosts used identical or near-identical wording for all their guests: *Stephanie was a great guest. She is welcome back any time* (atl, h7g1); *Scott was a great guest. He is welcome back any time* (atl, h7g2).

Next, *Airbnb* provides reviewing guidelines that may also contribute to the tone of the reviews.¹ Although the content is not specified in the guidelines, we observed that the vast majority of users – both guests and hosts – follow a rather predictable pattern in the construction of their reviews, which involves mentioning the host or guest, describing features of the property, and then summarizing the overall experience – and they do so in a generally courteous manner. Third, even when users stray slightly away from these topics, there remains a somewhat restricted range of relevant content (and, by extension – vocabulary) that reviewers rely on to describe their accommodations and related experiences. In other words, language use is always constrained by the specific domain of experience, as well as by the (limited) set of topics that will be considered relevant in any given context. In this case, the language found in *Airbnb* reviews is constrained by what is relevant when discussing travel accommodations, which means that there is a finite set of words used to communicate about this given topic.

3.1. Positive reviews

In the next stage of our analysis, we read each of the 400 reviews, and manually coded and categorized the 400 initial reviews we sampled as either positive or negative. Manually coding each review according to its semantic valence was necessary because narrative reviews are not displayed with their corresponding numeric ratings, as explained earlier. Following sentiment analytic approaches to studying review language, we considered positive adjectives (e.g. *great*, *wonderful*) as indicators of a positive review; conversely, negative adjectives (e.g. *difficult*, *terrible*) as well as negators (*not*, *un-*, *but*). Reviews with any markers of negative evaluation were coded as negative. We then re-read each review individually, coded any additional patterns in language that we observed, and used the concordancing software, *AntConc*, to obtain more information about each pattern. For example, we noted that many reviews commented on the comfort of accommodations, so we used *AntConc* to identify all mentions of words in this semantic domain (e.g. *cozy*, *coziness*, *comfy*, *comfortable*, *comfort*) and we then viewed each token in its linguistic context. We also used *AntConc* to generate word frequency lists, which allowed us to determine which words occurred most commonly throughout our data set.

Not surprisingly, in light of the findings from Zervas et al. (2015), the majority of the reviews (93%) were categorically positive in terms of their language. Besides positive adjectives (e.g. *great*, *excellent*), positive reviews exploit other resources such as intensifying adverbs (e.g. *very*, *seriously*, *definitely*) as well as punctuation for emphasis, such as multiple explanation marks (Vásquez, 2014b). These features, which serve to underscore the positive sentiment expressed by the reviewer, are underlined in the two examples below.

Example 1 *Our experience was great. The bedding was seriously comfortable, lodging cleverly appointed to meet all your needs and Paul a very considerate host. We would definitely recommend the 'Funky Pad'.* (pdx, g5h5)

Example 2 *Excellent guest!!! Left the house super clean!! Washed and dried all of the sheets! Definitely welcome back anytime!!!* (atl, g1h4)

Next, we used the concordancing software to search for word frequencies as well as commonly co-occurring patterns of words. The most frequently occurring combination of words in the reviews occurring in 37 reviews (18.5%) is *highly recommend*, which indicates that review authors are designing their comments for a reading audience of other consumers. These searches also revealed that the most frequently mentioned aspect of guest experiences was the host, followed by cleanliness and comfort of the accommodation. We found that hosts are mentioned in 179 of the 200 (89.5%) guest reviews, among which 159 (79.5%) mention the host directly by name. This often occurs at the start of the review, as in the following example.

Example 3 *Josh did a fantastic job of making us feel welcome – he left us a personalized note, bottle of wine, and the house was in great shape when we arrived ...* (atl, h4g1)

Moreover, a search for the word *host* showed that hosts are typically described using a small set of positive words and phrases, often with references made to their behaviours and their communication style (e.g. *responsive*, *easy to communicate with*, *welcoming*, *friendly*, *considerate*, *accommodating*, *understanding*, *patient*). In fact, in our data, no host is ever mentioned in any way other than positively – even in cases when the overall review is

(exceptionally) negative. For example, even though the guest in the following review had complaints about the property, she begins her review with a positive assessment of the host.

Example 4 *Lane, who is the host, could not have been more pleasant. A wonderful guy. However, this rental is a terrible place ...* . (abq, g2h1)

From the other perspective, reviews from hosts (RH) most commonly refer to the guest as *great, wonderful, or respectful*, and being easy to communicate with: *easy to talk to, easy to communicate with*, and *communicated easily* occurred most frequently in hosts' descriptions of guests. In addition, the hosts' willingness to receive the guests again in the future, or to recommend them to other hosts, also appeared frequently, in 71% of RHs (e.g. *would definitely host again, would highly recommend*) as did references to the condition/cleanliness in which the guest left the property (in 69% of RHs), as can be seen in the following example. We have underlined the characteristic features, which include: adjective of strong positive evaluation, reference to ease of communication, condition of property at end of visit, recommendation to other hosts, and willingness to host again.

Example 5 *Candice was a great guest! She was easy to talk to while setting up her stay and she left our place in good condition. I'd definitely recommend her to another host and she's welcome back at our place anytime! Thanks Candice!* (phl, g2h8)

In all of these respects, the aspects of experience most frequently mentioned by guests (RGs) mirrored those found in the RHs.

Thus far, we have shown the general trends found in the majority of *Airbnb* reviews, which reflect the predominantly positive experiences of both hosts and guests. These reviews look very similar to one another, and share many characteristics, such as highly positive adjectives of evaluation, intensifying adverbs, and recommendations to others. In other words, the findings show that both sets of reviews use a relatively limited set of vocabulary to address a restricted range of issues, and that overall, it is the cleanliness of the property, and the communication between the guest and host that are of the highest importance for parties involved on both sides of the arrangement. In the following section, we discuss what happens in reviews when *Airbnb* users' experiences are perceived as less than positive.

3.2. Negative reviews

As we have discussed, negative reviews on *Airbnb* are quite rare. Out of 400 reviews, only 27 (7%) were not entirely positive, and 20 of those 27 negative reviews (74%) came from guests. However, it is important to point out that most of these 27 negative reviews were actually primarily positive, with a complaint or two appearing alongside otherwise positive commentary, leaving only eight reviews out of 400 (2%) that were categorically negative. Even though they represent the exception rather than the rule, we feel that a close examination of reviews which convey at least some negative sentiment is warranted, in order to better understand how dissatisfaction is communicated in *Airbnb* reviews.

The partially negative reviews all follow a distinctive structure, and all appear to adhere to *Airbnb*'s guidelines, which request that users be constructive and 'stick to the facts.' In general, reviews with negative evaluation begin and end with positive comments, but insert a complaint in the middle. These complaints serve as a caution to future guests and/or as suggestions for improvement to the host. Most typically, statements of complaint occur with hedges and other mitigating words (underlined in the example below), which function

to downgrade, or soften, the negative evaluation. As the following example illustrates, in these reviews from guests, the tone is generally an understanding and courteous one, as the guest indicates that, for the most part, the stay was acceptable.

Example 6 *The main floor bedroom bed was very comfortable, the upstairs 2 just okay; It was pretty hot each day and, while the upstairs room had ac, the main floor bedroom didn't [...] The upstairs bathroom is big, the main floor one is miniscule. Been on a cruise ship before? That kind of small. The kitchen could use a few more basics (paper towels, microwave) but is comfortable and appointed with IKEA everything [...].* (ph1, g1h8)

Negative host reviews typically have to do with problems related to communication. The host reviews – like the guest reviews – maintain a courteous tone, and give the guests the benefit of the doubt, as can be seen in the example below, which indicates that at least one misunderstanding has occurred between the guest and the host.

Example 7 *The guest was given access to the unit at 11:00 AM. However, I did not learn until the next day that the guest was not happy and would not be staying. This lack of communication made it very difficult to get the unit ready for a new guest. [...] I think that the guest was not familiar with the area and was looking for a unit closer to Buckhead, as I received a message asking about Buckhead after they left.[...].* (atl, g4h7)

As stated earlier, categorically negative reviews are indeed rare, and the complaints in those reviews are most often due to a lack of comfort (48% of all complaints), of communication (21%), or of cleanliness (15%). These negative reviews are few and far between, and therefore appear to reflect highly exceptional circumstances. In our data set, there was only one instance of an individual *Airbnb* guest being described in unambiguously negative terms, as seen in the example below. Although this occurred in a categorically negative review, we note that the reviewer still avoids using the guest's name, and instead substitutes general nouns and pronouns (underlined below).

Example 8 *The place was trashed and it was shocking!!!! [...] It was unreal and completely disrespectful, spoiled, entitled young women. I will not have them again and do not recommend her to any host Disappointing!!!!!!!* (ph1, g1h2)

More typically, even the most negative of reviews from guests do not say anything negative about the host specifically. They avoid mentioning the host, they blame *Airbnb* for the problems, or – as in the example below (a more complete version of the excerpt shown above in Example 4) – they specify that the problem was not with the host, but rather with the property itself. In fact, this reviewer makes it a point to emphasize that the fault does not lie with the host (a renter), but rather with the landlord, who is the owner of the property.

Example 9 *Lane could not have been more pleasant. A wonderful guy. However, the rental is a terrible place [...] Cozy it is not, loft, it is not. I have to say that I feel ripped off and tricked. It is not Lane's fault. The owner is a slum lord that refuses to do the repairs. I would not recommend this to my worst enemy, or maybe I would. Airbnb should not list this hole.* (abq, g2h1)

As mentioned above, *Airbnb* reserves the right to not display reviews when necessary, so it is possible that when guests slander or attack the host directly, *Airbnb* uses their right to censor those reviews.

3.3. 'Lukewarm' reviews

We have shown that, by and large, *Airbnb* reviewers express positive evaluation, describing their experiences using a set of highly positive adjectives (e.g. *great*, *wonderful*, *fantastic*), which are often further intensified, or emphasized, in various ways. In the exceptional cases when reviewers have complaints, those complaints are nearly always inserted between positive comments. Furthermore, even the most negative of reviews refrain from criticizing the other person involved. However, we also observed that other reviewers may approach a less-than-positive experience in a different way. In these cases, the reviews, on the surface, appear to be categorically positive; in other words, no words expressing negative evaluation are included. Yet, their lack of emphatically positive language seems to be an understated way of communicating about a stay that was less than satisfactory.

Specifically, we found 19 examples of reviews that were not negative, but nonetheless were lacking the more enthusiastic language found in the majority of the other positive reviews. These 19 reviews were usually shorter, and used more 'lukewarm,' or weaker, positive descriptors such as: *good*, *nice*, *as expected*, *as advertised*, and *basics were there*. In research on reviews from other websites, Vásquez (2014b) identified a trend of downgraded evaluation. In other words, rather than expressing a positive meaning, the word *good* instead signals an average or mediocre experience; similarly, the word *ok*, when used in a review, often communicates exactly the opposite – that is, *not ok*. We observed that several of these 'lukewarm' reviews ended with a qualified recommendation such as *recommended for short stays* (atl, h10g2) or *I recommend to non-smokers* (atl, h10g5). These comments may indicate that while reviewers have no explicit complaints, there could be foreseeable problems associated with the accommodation: for instance, the space may not be comfortable enough for longer stays, or some guests may be unhappy about a 'no smoking' policy. In Example 10 below (which is the entire review text, not just an excerpt), the reviewer mentions no complaints; on the surface then, this appears to be a positive review.

Example 10 Interesting stay in a nice neighbourhood (phl, g3h7)

However, in comparison to the majority of other positive reviews previously described, there is a noticeable lack of the kind of enthusiasm expressed in other reviews through intensifying language (e.g. *definitely*, *very*) and expressive punctuation. Instead of using strongly positive words like *great* or *wonderful*, this reviewer uses different words: *interesting*, and *nice*. In addition, this reviewer does not make mention of any of the topics that we found to be most common in other reviews, that is, the host, the cleanliness and comfort of the property, and recommendations for other guests.

There are two possible explanations for this reviewer's seemingly terse review: (1) the reviewer simply ignores, or is unaware of, the user-established norms of enthusiastic, highly positive evaluations on *Airbnb* – in which case, we would expect *all* of his reviews to be equally as terse, or (2) the reviewer had an unsatisfying experience, yet he writes as positive a review as he can, without alluding to any negative aspects of his experience (perhaps deliberately withholding such information). In order to determine which explanation is more likely, we turned to our second data set ($N=43$) to explore the reviews that this guest (identified in our data as *phl*, g3) had left for other hosts, which alongside his Philadelphia review, are displayed in Table 1.

We observed that this particular reviewer had left reviews for five different *Airbnb* accommodations. In comparing all of his reviews, it is clear that he has developed his own rhetorical formula for writing *Airbnb* reviews. In reviews from two to five, he mentions

Table 1. Multiple *Airbnb* reviews written by same guest user: *phl, g3*.

1	<i>Interesting stay in a nice neighborhood.</i>
2	<i>We had a wonderful stay at Isabell's apartment in Brooklyn. The apartment was ideal for us with two small kids and very convenient to go into Manhattan or to Prospect Park. Isabelle provided us with plenty of information before our arrival and responded quickly during our stay. Overall, a great AirBnB experience.</i>
3	<i>We really enjoyed Karl's cottage in North Creek. For a large family like ours, it was ideal to go out to discover the beauty of the Adirondack during the day and come back to a cozy and comfortable cottage in the evening. We even had a family bonfire with marshmallows one evening. Overall, a very enjoyable experience.</i>
4	<i>A very nice stay in Stowe. The apartment was very comfortable and ideal for a large family like ours. The staff at the Mountain Resort was also very helpful. Overall, we had a great time in Stowe.</i>
5	<i>We had a wonderful stay in Roberta and Chris's loft. The loft has been renovated very well and is very comfortable. The bagels are great in the morning. The location is very convenient, with trains every 5 minutes to Manhattan. Overall, a great place to stay in Brooklyn.</i>

the location of his stay, the type of accommodation, and the comfort and convenience associated with it; he provides one or two details about the experience (e.g. bagels, the natural surroundings, helpful staff, roasting marshmallows); and he finishes with a positive summative evaluation (*Overall ...*) of how *great* or *enjoyable* the experience was. In reviews 2–5, this reviewer relies on unambiguously positive descriptors such *great*, *ideal*, *convenient*, and *comfortable*, and he uses the adverb *very* multiple times to intensify positive evaluations.

In contrast, in review 1, of the accommodation in Philadelphia, this reviewer deviates from the formula which he used in all four of his other *Airbnb* reviews, and instead changes his choice of descriptors from highly positive to comparatively less enthusiastic alternatives. This type of comparison leads us to consider that perhaps this reviewer's experience in Philadelphia was not quite satisfactory. Yet, instead of complaining or including any negative evaluation, this reviewer chooses to describe the entire experience very concisely, relying on an ambiguous adjective (*interesting*) and a single, relatively weak, positive adjective (*nice*) to describe the location; it is worth pointing out that neither of these two terms appears in any of his other reviews. Not surprisingly, there are also no intensifying words such as *really* or *very* in review 1.

In addition to guests leaving 'lukewarm,' or downgraded, positive reviews for hosts, we also found hosts doing the same, in their reviews of guests. Table 2 displays the reviews left by one Albuquerque host (user *abq, h8* in our data) for all of her guests. In these data, this host says nothing overtly negative about her guests, and she includes a smiley emoticon, *:)*, in each of her reviews. She employs intensifying adverbs, such as *super*, *very*, *totally*, *so*, and she frequently includes exclamation marks, underlined in the examples below. In addition, she describes her guests as *cool*, *friendly*, *nice*, and *easy and fun to talk to*.

Table 2. Multiple *Airbnb* reviews written by same host user: *abq, h8*.

1	<i>Oh <u>super</u> nice! even though we only talked on phone and message :)</i>
2	<i><u>Very</u> friendly and low key :) <u>totally</u> cool dude!</i>
3	<i>:)</i>
4	<i><u>Very</u> friendly very nice, we were <u>so</u> happy to host these two :)</i>
5	<i><u>Cool</u> peeps! <u>easy</u> and <u>fun</u> to talk <u>too</u>! wish we could have had tea. Recommend! :)</i>

However, in review 3, the same host reviewer leaves only a smiley emoticon. While a smiley might be interpreted as conveying positive sentiment, by contrasting this review to her style of writing across her other reviews, a minimal review consisting solely of a smiley (with no accompanying text) gives the impression that this particular review is, at best, impersonally neutral. It is possible that by saying nothing – apart from her signature emoticon, which appears in all of her reviews – this host is avoiding the communication of anything explicitly negative.

Intrigued by this example, we further compared this particular host's reviews with the reciprocal guest reviews written about her place, by the same individuals referred to in Table 2, reviews 1–5. We found that the reciprocal reviews left by this host's guests (which were mentioned in reviews 1, 2, 4, and 5) were categorically positive. However, the guest who she reviewed in review 3 above left the following review for this Albuquerque host.

Example 11 *The price was a bit expensive for the property. The whole place smelled like humidity. Still the host made everything to make us feel comfortable even though we booked with less than 36 hrs and arrived extremely late. The only thing I can suggest is to try to put a humidifier and the whole place will be a lot better. Thanks for having us!*

In this example, the guest reviewer includes a statement which could be considered a complaint (*The whole place smelled like humidity*), along with an even more indirect complaint about the high cost, which co-occurs with a characteristic hedging device (*a bit*). Following these comments, the reviewer's comments fall in line with the aforementioned trends, as she refers to the host in courteous terms.

This host's reviews for all her of guests (as shown in Table 2), along with the reciprocal reviews written by her guests, strongly suggest that this particular reciprocal review pairing (i.e. number 3 in Table 2, and Example 11) is a case of both parties avoiding mention of anything explicitly negative. What we have identified in these examples points to a possible tendency in the expression of evaluation in *Airbnb* reviews: the way in which a non-positive experience is communicated in this particular reviewing context may have more to do with what is *not* stated rather than what *is* stated in a particular message. Of course, such a communication strategy is only interpretable to a reading audience who is able to read 'between the lines,' to pick up on subtle cues (such as what kinds of linguistic signals are missing), and ultimately, to discern between a genuinely positive review, and a seemingly positive review that actually describes a non-positive experience.

To summarize, our findings point to three principal trends in *Airbnb* reviews. First, both reviews written by guests and reviews written by hosts are highly positive, and they most frequently mention the other party involved, the ease of communication, and the cleanliness of the accommodation. Second, negative evaluation is extremely rare, and when it does occur, it is expressed in a mitigated manner, and tends to be sandwiched between positive comments. Furthermore, with the exception of a single outlier, none of the other negative reviews expressed negative evaluation about another individual. Lastly, some reviewers deviate from the norm of leaving glowingly positive reviews, and instead leave a neutral, or lukewarm, review. These reviewers make no explicit mention of a complaint, but they simultaneously avoid the overwhelmingly positive language that we found to be so prevalent in our data set. Our closer look at multiple reviews written by the same individuals suggests that the lukewarm review is perhaps a strategy that is used by some *Airbnb* reviewers to communicate non-positive evaluation.

4. Discussion

Our analysis of the language used in 400 *Airbnb* reviews confirms prior research reporting a positivity bias in online consumer reviews on various sites. Specifically, our linguistic analysis found that 93% of our *Airbnb* reviews were categorically positive. This trend is consistent with the results from Zervas et al. (2015), who found the average rating on *Airbnb* to be 4.7 out of 5 stars. Each *Airbnb* listing appears with a single composite star rating which is further broken down into six aspects of experience: accuracy, check-in, cleanliness, communication, location, and value. Of these six aspects, our analysis found that nearly all reviews allude to the cleanliness of the accommodation and the communication with the other party. Furthermore, we found that 89.5% of guests mention the host directly, usually by name – an especially noteworthy finding, given that we restricted our sample to reviews of ‘entire place’ only. This suggests that for travelling consumers who choose *Airbnb*, the perceived quality of the contact with the hosts ends up playing a major role in the evaluation of their overall experience.

Prior research has suggested that the large proportion of positive reviews on *Airbnb* may be due to sociological effects influencing people to be more tactful in their complaints when reviewing another human (Zervas et al., 2015), especially after a feeling of mutual trust and familiarity has been established through the experience (Dayter & Rudiger, 2013). Furthermore, even when a guest-and-host interaction has taken place mostly, or entirely, online – as appeared to be the case in the majority of our reviews, where guests rented an ‘entire place,’ as opposed to a shared space – the person-to-person nature of this type of collaborative consumption seems to play a very strong role in the positive evaluation found in these reviews. This observation is further supported by our finding that in most negative reviews, the negative comments have to do with the property or the location, rather than with the host.

Besides identifying the mitigated complaint strategies used in a handful of negative reviews (which represented a very small segment of our data set, only 7%), we also took a closer look at what we have referred to here as ‘lukewarm’ reviews. These reviews included no negative evaluation or complaints and thus, on the surface, appeared to be positive. Yet, at the same time, they deviated from the prototypical positive *Airbnb* review, whose characteristic features include a set of highly positive adjectives (*great, excellent, fantastic, wonderful, enjoyable*), intensifying adverbs (*very, definitely, super, so*) and recurrent strings of words associated with unambiguously positive meanings (*would highly recommend*). By further examining patterns in multiple reviews written by authors of lukewarm reviews (i.e. the secondary data set), we observed that the lukewarm review is most likely *not* the expression of an individual’s idiosyncratic reviewing style, but rather a deliberate strategy for indirectly communicating evaluation about a non-positive experience. The extent to which members of the *Airbnb* community are able to interpret such reviews as less-than-glowing is an empirical matter, and one which certainly merits further study.

Norms governing communication and interaction become established in a particular online space by the community members who interact with one another in that space. As Kiesler, Kraut, Resnick, and Kittur (2011) point out,

normative behaviors may be codified and articulated or may be left implicit, and they may be contested by some members at times, but most of the time, people will agree about behaviors that are acceptable, and those that are not. (p. 3)

Rules for online communication may be developed, negotiated and co-constructed by a community of users, or they can be set a priori and regulated by site moderators. Both of

these possibilities – community-developed norms and formally regulated behaviours – exist on *Airbnb*. While *Airbnb* does not by default edit, censor, or delete reviews, they reserve (and act upon) their right to remove reviews that contain personal information, personal insults, opinions not supported by specific examples, or reviews that contain profanity, discrimination, and other such social improprieties (2015). Concurrently, a set of norms for reviewing other individuals has also been constructed by members of *Airbnb* community, with the prototypical *Airbnb* review as a short, glowingly enthusiastic account of categorically positive experiences. In comparison to reviews found on other travel sites (e.g. *TripAdvisor*), the especially strong positivity bias on *Airbnb* – reflected both in ratings and in review language – may have something specific to do with the highly personal nature of the sharing economy. This avoidance of negativity online may also be part of a wider trend found in some forms of digital media. For instance, scholars of internet communication (Tagg, Seargeant, & Brown, forthcoming) have observed a strong tendency towards ‘online conviviality,’ where differences are reduced and conflict and negativity are avoided. This

appears to be an overarching principle for [...] ‘ego-centred’ social media encounter[s], that is, where participation is to some extent structured around personal connections. (p. ii)

The initial stages of our analysis of *Airbnb* reviews from both guests and hosts revealed little linguistic variation. That is, on the surface, the majority of *Airbnb* reviews appear to be very similar to one another, with explicitly stated negative evaluation nearly absent. However, our closer, fine-grained analysis revealed that there is actually a wider range of meanings that are communicated in *Airbnb* reviews, and often, it is only by considering the language that is *not* included that cues readers to an interesting paradox: that is, what on the surface seems to be a positive review may actually be describing a *non*-positive experience. The discursive norms established on *Airbnb* make it possible for users to construct such nuanced meanings without overtly expressing them, perhaps because doing so would be uncomfortable after establishing trust with another person – and especially when the review is linked to the author’s online identity, which extends beyond the *Airbnb* website.

5. Conclusions

Our study has provided empirical evidence for some of the communicative norms that have become established in *Airbnb* reviews, yet we remain cognizant of several factors which potentially limit the generalizability of our findings. First, the data for our study comprised a small set of 400 English-language reviews of listings found in four major cities located in each quadrant of the USA (NW, NE, SW, SE). We selected cities from several different regions in the USA in order to reduce the possibility of any city-specific or region-specific tendencies in the data. However, whether or not these cities are representative of each region remains an unanswered question. Furthermore, future research using different *Airbnb* data sets – which represent other cities, countries, and languages – is needed to either confirm or complicate the findings of the present study, and may perhaps shed additional light on the various ways in which online reviewers communicate evaluation: especially about their less-than-positive experiences vis-à-vis the sharing economy.

In addition, our data set was limited to *Airbnb* reviews of ‘entire place,’ based on the presumption that there would be more distance between the host and guest than in the other possible options. The person-to-person nature of this type of collaborative

consumption seems to play a very strong role in the positive evaluation found in reciprocal *Airbnb* reviews. Thus, additional analysis of reviews of ‘private room’ or ‘shared room’ listings could help determine whether these types of properties yield similar findings. In line with previous research which has identified a positivity bias² on *Airbnb*, it is not surprising that the majority of reviews in our sample were unambiguously positive. However, considering that our most suggestive findings are related to the more ambiguous reviews in our data set, we believe that further research specifically targeting non-positive or ambiguous reviews can help expand our knowledge about how complaints are communicated on travel-related sharing-economy platforms. This line of research could also be extended to reviews of other home rental platforms, such as *HomeAway* and *TurnKey*. (Incidentally, throughout this article, we have used the term ‘positivity bias’ following prior research in this area (e.g. Zervas et al., 2015). However, as one reviewer has pointed out, from a statistical viewpoint, this would suggest that there is a true mean value for guest rating – and such a value has not yet been established.)³

We also recognize the limitations of our descriptive discourse analysis of review language. Given our study’s design, we are unable to address related questions such as: To what extent do users attend to review information? To what extent, and how, do they actually act on information in reviews? How do users interpret different types of review language? And how aware are users that, in this specific reviewing context, negative experiences may be signalled with downgraded positive evaluation, rather than with explicitly negative evaluative language? Building on our findings, additional user-based research is needed to address these important questions. Until then, we recommend that consumers should approach *Airbnb* reviews with at least some degree of scepticism, and pay particular attention to those lukewarm reviews that stand out from the majority of enthusiastically positive reviews. When in doubt, users may also be able to glean additional information by reading other reviews written by a lukewarm reviewer. To return to the question posed at the onset of our inquiry (i.e. *If nearly all Airbnb reviews are positive, does that make them meaningless?*), we would respond ‘no.’ Nevertheless, we are aware that being able to accurately discern between the truly positive reviews and those which *only* appear to be positive on the surface – yet, in fact, are signalling a non-positive experience – involves a good deal of skill at ‘reading between the lines.’

In sum, the high star ratings alone that are associated with a property on *Airbnb* are likely not informative enough for users to make an informed consumer choice, making individual reviews a useful tool for users’ decision-making. Yet, not unlike reviews elsewhere on the web, *Airbnb* users also need to determine what is accurate and most relevant among an abundance of information: scrutinizing reviews should be included in the process of determining which property or guest to consider for future transactions. Reviews on *Airbnb* may all appear similar on the surface, but they nonetheless hold power as each one increases the amount of unique information available to other users, potentially reducing uncertainty for future hosts and guests. Our study confirms previous research focusing on star ratings: positive ratings and reviews are clearly the norm on *Airbnb*. No doubt, many positive reviews are the result of consumer experiences which frequently *are* genuinely pleasant. Nevertheless, users should be mindful that there may be a number of other reasons for the strong positive orientation in so many *Airbnb* reviews: negative aspects of experience may be minimized, or left unmentioned, in reviews, due to factors such as sociocultural norms of politeness, established trust among host and guest, review and rating reciprocity, lack of anonymity, as well as *Airbnb*’s possible removal of reviews which violate their guidelines. Therefore, less-than-positive experiences may be concealed

in lukewarm reviews where reviewers avoid overt negativity: for instance, in comments such as ‘Interesting stay in a nice neighborhood.’ As a result, users should be aware that meaning resides not only in the information that is given, but also in the information that is excluded.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. A representative from *Airbnb* verified that they censor reviews only if they violate the guidelines, and indicated that this happens ‘very rarely.’
2. *Airbnb.com*’s review guidelines state:

When creating a review or review response, we ask that you stick to the facts. The best reviews provide constructive information that helps the community make better decisions and is educational for the host or guest in question. We strongly discourage personal insults, opinion that’s not backed up by examples, or generally unsociable behavior. (Airbnb, 2015)

3. Throughout this article, we have use the term ‘positivity bias’ following prior research in this area (e.g. Zervas et al., 2015). However, as one reviewer has pointed out, from a statistical viewpoint, this would suggest that there is a true mean value for guest rating – and such a value has not yet been established.

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