Sources of negative memorable experiences: Finnish Airbnb guest perspectives

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Abstract

Purpose – *This study aims to bridge the gaps in the extant literature on memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) and Airbnb by exploring the sources of negative memorable Airbnb experiences among Finnish guests.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This study used a qualitative approach and used data collected through semi-structured interviews. The sampling criteria for selecting participants were that they must be Finnish nationals who had booked and stayed in an Airbnb accommodation within the past 36 months. The participants were selected using a criteria-based snowball sampling technique. A qualitative empirical study was conducted using self-structured interviews that were completed by 18 Finnish tourists who had stayed at an Airbnb property in the past three years.*

Findings – *Three main sources constitute the conceptual framework of a negative memorable Airbnb experience: unclean accommodations, unpleasant host behaviour and poor customer service.*

Practical implications – *Airbnb management should make efforts to reduce guests' negative experiences. This goal can be achieved by developing service-quality-management policies and strategies that are standardised, clear and universally applicable to all hosts. In addition, Airbnb management should recruit qualified customer service personnel and equip them with service recovery skills through training and control mechanisms. Such training should focus on upgrading their ability to handle complaints.*

Originality/value – *This study responds to the need to examine negative incidents that are a part of MTEs and the sources of negative memories. The originality of this study includes the extension of the existing literature on MTEs and Airbnb, as a conceptual framework of negative memorable Airbnb experiences that comprises three main components: unclean rooms, unpleasant host behaviour and poor customer service has been proposed.*

Keywords Airbnb, Sharing economy, Memorable tourism experience, Finnish tourist, Negative memorable Airbnb experience

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

"Sharing economy" is an umbrella term for the sharing of consumption facilitated by online platforms (Hamari *et al.*, 2016). Airbnb is the most important and successful peer-based platform for accommodation sharing (Dann *et al.*, 2019). On the supply side, Airbnb enables rental hosts to act entrepreneurially by listing their available accommodation for rent on Airbnb and profiting from the same. Usually, these listings have cheaper rates than comparable hotels, which leads to savings for travellers (Varma *et al.*, 2016). On the demand side, Airbnb fulfils travellers' needs by providing accommodations at low prices as well as opportunities to interact with the local community (Guttentag, 2015). The number of Airbnb listings is growing rapidly in many countries, including Finland (Adamiak, 2020; Jokela and Minoia, 2020). Airbnb has continued to gain ground in Helsinki since its first

listing in 2010 (Jokela and Minoia, 2020). At the time of this study, there were 1,533 active Airbnb listings in Helsinki according to www.airdna.co. Only a few studies have focussed on Finnish tourists' experiences with Airbnb, which is the focus of this study.

A common bias in the tourism literature is a pre-occupation with examining tourists' positive experiences (Hosany and Witham, 2010). A similar trend can be observed in studies on Airbnb experiences (Sthapit and Jiménez-Barreto, 2018), which have predominantly examined customers' positive experiences with Airbnb (Li et al., 2019; Sthapit and Jiménez-Barreto, 2018). However, certain negative aspects of Airbnb have been identified, such as the lack of site-wide hospitality standards (Sthapit and Björk, 2019), poor service recovery and compensation (Huang et al., 2020), untrained hospitality professionals (Birinci et al., 2018) and issues related to trustworthiness (Cheng et al., 2019). These factors, among others, may result in unpleasant incidents (Sthapit and Björk, 2019) that could contribute to overall negative memorable Airbnb experiences. An example of a negative experience involved the sexual assault of a 19-year-old boy by his Airbnb host while staying in Madrid (Lieber, 2015). Some studies indicate that there is a positivity bias in Airbnb users' comments (Cheng and Jin, 2019; Sthapit and Björk, 2019) and that negative experiences are underreported (Dann et al., 2019). To date, only a few studies have explored guests' negative memorable Airbnb experiences (Sthapit et al., 2021).

Memorable tourism experience (MTE) research, introduced by Kim et al. (2012), is an emerging field (Sthapit and Jiménez-Barreto, 2018). Kim et al. (2012) conceptualise MTE as focusing on positively recalled experiences. However, memory researchers believe that, while both positive and negative memories can have similar impacts (Jorgenson et al., 2019), negative valence leads to the creation of stronger memories than positive valence (Kensinger and Schacter, 2006). They also believe that travellers can have both positive and negative experiences during their stay at a destination (Kim et al., 2021) and that the impact of negative experiences on future behaviour is much greater than that of positive experiences (Kim and Chen, 2019). Recent studies have thus argued that negative experiences are a critical component of MTEs (Sthapit et al., 2020), and extending the conception of MTEs to consider negative sources of memories will provide researchers with a more comprehensive understanding of the essence of MTEs (Sthapit et al., 2021). Furthermore, some studies argue that the findings of Kim et al. (2012) based on the general tourism context cannot be generalised to other settings, such as Airbnb, and that the MTE scale may not adequately explain what makes tourism memorable (Sthapit and Coudounaris, 2018; Stone et al., 2018; Stone et al., 2018).

This study aims to bridge the gaps in the extant literature by answering the following research question:

> RQ1. What are the sources of negative memorable Airbnb experiences from the perspective of Finnish guests?

In this study, a negative experience refers to a tourist's recollection of an *in-situ* experience while staying in an Airbnb rental property and does not include the pre-booking experience with the platform. This study was conducted using semi-structured interviews conducted with 18 Finnish nationals who had booked and stayed in an Airbnb accommodation within the past 36 months. The interviews were conducted in English via Zoom between March and June 2021.

Literature review

Sharing economy, Airbnb and customer experiences with Airbnb

The sharing economy was born as a new business model that is based on offering multiple users (i.e. individuals or companies) temporary asset ownership of underused resources via digital platforms (Klarin and Suseno, 2021). Existing studies have identified four main

characteristics of sharing-economy organisations: firstly, they are digital platforms that enable offline transactions between users (Gerwe and Silva, 2020). Secondly, they enable transactions that involve temporary rather than permanent access to or ownership of assets (Eckhardt et al., 2019; Gerwe and Silva, 2020). Thirdly, this access is either a quid pro quo or the exchange is mediated through market mechanisms such as payments. Fourthly, using this access, the platform enhances the role of customers (Eckhardt et al., 2019). It is reported that the global sharing economy will become one of the leading consumption areas and is expected to grow to US$335bnby 2025 (Kauffman and Naldi, 2020).

In recent years, Airbnb, an accommodation sharing-economy system, has become quite popular among travellers (Jiang et al., 2019). It is a collection of private rooms, apartments and homes, each owned by an individual owner, located in different places and managed independently (Dogru et al., 2020). Airbnb offers its customers the opportunity to experience unique accommodations such as cabins, farmhouses, boats, yurts and treehouses, among others – accommodation that is typically outside the purview of the traditional hotel industry (Mody et al., 2022). The process of searching for and booking the accommodation is similar to other platforms (e.g. Booking.com and Expedia; Vassilikopoulou et al., 2022). Although a number of companies have entered the peer-to-peer accommodation market as booking facilitators, the most successful of these is Airbnb, which recorded more than 500 million guest arrivals in 2019 (Benitez-Aurioles, 2021). A host is a person or a group of people who rent out real property on the Airbnb.com platform, whereas an Airbnb guest is a person staying overnight at the listed property (Airbnb, 2022).

According to Li et al. (2019), customer experiences with Airbnb include four underlying factors: home amenities, personalised services, authenticity and social connection. Home amenities are associated with the physical facilities offered by an Airbnb rental property (Guttentag, 2015), such as a kitchen, a washing machine and a dryer. Some studies have found that home amenities are an important aspect of the Airbnb customer experience (Guttentag, 2015; Lyu et al., 2019). Personalised services enable customers to gain access to local knowledge and culture through Airbnb hosts (Li et al., 2019). This is often considered a highlight of their stay (Lyu et al., 2019). Further, authenticity refers to a sense of uniqueness originating from the local culture (Sharpley, 1994). Certain studies have indicated that it is a critical dimension of the Airbnb customer experience. Finally, social connection refers to interactions between customers and hosts and those among customers (Lyu et al., 2019). In the context of Airbnb, the interactions that occur between guests and hosts are important in shaping the customer experience (Guttentag, 2015) and have been shown to contribute to a pleasant overall experience (Lyu et al., 2019).

Memories, negative experiences and sources of a positive memorable Airbnb experience

According to Oh et al. (2007), memory is an active, constructive process that links an experience to a tourist activity's emotive and perceptual outcomes. In fact, an individual's memory comprises an ongoing process that can incorporate the allocation of meaning to the past (Holtzman, 2006) and derive meaning from these onsite experiences (Tung and Ritchie, 2011). Tourism experiences involve complex psychological processes with a special focus on memory (Larsen, 2007). After the completion of a journey, the perception of the tourist experience is influenced by memory (Erll, 2011). The tourist experience is routinely positioned as a generator of memories, and collecting memories is widely understood as the very purpose of vacations (Edensor, 1998). Accordingly, the memory of a trip experience is an underlying dimension of the self, as it "holds a certain attraction and intrinsic reward that materialises in the moments of storytelling" (Neumann, 1992, p. 179). Episodic memory, which includes individuals' long-term storage of factual memories concerning personal experiences, is considered the most relevant type of long-term memory in the study of tourist experiences (Larsen, 2007), given that "lived experiences

gather significance as we reflect on and give memory to them" (Curtin, 2005, p. 3). These memories focus on events and permit tourists to travel back in time to subjectively re-experience previous events (Matlin, 2005).

It is interesting to note that when experiences are described and defined, researchers generally imply positive or pleasant events or feelings (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). However, tourist experiences range from positive to unpleasant and negative (Kim et al., 2021). For example, the study conducted by Anastasopoulos (1992) found that Greek tourists had a negative travel experience to Turkey, which significantly impacted their attitude. A negative tourism experience is one which results in disappointment or dissatisfaction and has a negative influence on tourists' lives (Jackson et al., 1996). In addition, although the term "memorable experience" has been used to describe an experience with a positive connotation that is associated with associated with pleasant emotions (Piqueras-Fiszman and Jaeger, 2015), some studies suggest that negative valence leads to the creation of a stronger memory than positive valence (Kensinger and Schacter, 2006; Kensinger et al., 2007). In addition, "memorable" is associated with "unforgettable" or "extraordinary" (Caru and Cova, 2003).

The study by Sthapit and Jiménez-Barreto (2018) identified social interactions with the host, the attitude of the host and the location of the accommodation as the three main sources of a memorable Airbnb experience. The host's behaviour determines guests' overall experience and intentions to return (Wang and Nicolau, 2017), while location is a factor that is commonly accepted to affect Airbnb listing prices. Location can be represented in terms of distance from the city centre, highways or local attractions (Lei et al., 2011). In another recent study, Sthapit et al. (2021) proposed a new conceptual framework of memorable Airbnb experiences comprising several sources: socialising and bonding with friends and family members, location, the host's hospitality, a homely feeling, home amenities and negative experiences (e.g. property conditions and poor or dishonest hosts). Some studies have indicated that pleasurable social experiences are connected, especially with regard to engaging with friends and family (Dube and LeBel, 2003), and this finding seems to apply to Airbnb experiences as well. Some studies also recognise the significance of hospitality in terms of the host's behaviour (Lalicic and Weismayer, 2018) and a feeling of being at home while staying at Airbnb (Sthapit et al., 2021). The experience of feeling at home is linked to home amenities, which include the physical environment, physical amenities and physical utility of the Airbnb property (So et al., 2018), and these attributes all enhance the customer experience (Guttentag and Smith, 2017). Similarly, certain studies have indicated that poorly maintained rooms and dishonest hosts negatively impact the Airbnb accommodation experience (Sthapit et al., 2020).

Method

Research design and sample selection

This study used a qualitative research approach and used data collected through semi-structured interviews. Given that storytelling is critical to understanding tourism experiences and that the richest accounts tend to centre around episodic memories (for example, personally experienced events; Bosangit et al., 2015), theorisations of autobiographical narratives (also called personal narratives) will be the focus of this study (Bruner, 2004). Self-reporting is considered a popular and valid method for evaluating experiences related to tourism consumption (Li et al., 2014). The sampling criteria for selecting participants were that they must be Finnish nationals who had booked and stayed in an Airbnb accommodation within the past 36 months. The participants were identified using a criteria-based snowball sampling technique. Snowball sampling is a common sampling method in qualitative research where the researcher does not directly recruit participants but contacts others who then connects them to the research participants (Parker et al., 2019). The first interviewees were recruited using a personal contact who fulfilled the sampling criteria. Once interviewed, the participants were asked whether they knew anyone else who met the required standards.

Interviews and data analysis

For the initial stage, four semi-structured pilot interviews were conducted in February 2021. The main participant selection criterion for these interviews was that each individual had to have had one or more negative Airbnb experiences. The pilot interviews lasted 30–45 min and were aimed at identifying the key themes and issues related to the participants' choice to book an Airbnb rental property that contributed to their negative memorable Airbnb experience.

The semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended questions that were divided into two sections. The first section of the interview focussed on demographics (e.g. gender, age, marital status, nationality and occupation) and trip characteristics (e.g. destination visited, first-time or repeat visit, travel companion(s), number of people in the travel party and purpose of the trip). The second section focussed on interviewees' negative memorable Airbnb experience(s) (e.g. "What made this negative experience the most memorable?")

A grounded theory research design was used to analyse the collected data. The grounded theory approach has been defined as a "theoretical rendition of reality" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 22). It is based on the assumption that social science theory can be built from data collected systematically in a social setting (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and is well suited for studies that use an inductive, qualitative approach.

All the interviews were conducted in English via Zoom between March and June 2021 and lasted 45–50 min. The authors acknowledge that using semi-structured interviews over Zoom limited their efficacy. Diversifying the research methods used might help overcome this research limitation in future studies. In addition to taking notes during the interviews, which were used during the data analysis, all the conversations were recorded. The concept of theoretical sensitivity was applied to the research process; this involves entering the field with an awareness of the topic but without any fixed notions about what might be discovered (Charmaz, 2006). Data analysis was ongoing throughout the period during which these interviews were conducted, and the data gathered were examined according to an iterative process that served to inform the interviewers and establish concepts for subsequent analysis (Kim *et al.*, 2009). Through continuous iteration, which involves switching between data collection and sampling, theoretical saturation was achieved during the 18th participant's interview. A three-stage procedure of open, axial and selective codings was adopted to analyse the interview data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Open coding involves the breaking down of data into distinct units of meaning (Goulding, 2002). Charmaz (2006) suggests selecting the most useful analytical codes. During this stage, every line of each interview transcript was carefully analysed to extract specific information and interviewees' views (Nunkoo and Ramikssoon, 2016). For example, "[...] The apartment was dirty when we arrived. There was garbage all over the place [...]" was coded as "apartment was dirty". Table 1 shows how the coding was done in practice. This

Table 1 Coding structure		
Open coding extracted from participants' quotes (line-by-line coding)	*Subthemes (axial coding)*	*Main themes (selective themes)*
"Apartment was dirty", "floor had old food", "stains on the carpet", "garbage all over the place", "uncleanliness", "not clean", "dirty room", "not neat and clean", "lot of waste in the premises", "apartment is horrible", "dead baby mice" and "host did not clean"	Dirty room, unclean accommodations	Unclean accommodations, unpleasant host behaviour and poor customer service contributed to guests' negative memorable Airbnb experiences
"different than in pictures", "poor communication", "very bad communication with customers", "host was bad" and "host argued with us"	Bad/unpleasant host behaviour, inadequate communication	
"poor customer service" and "customer care is very poor"	Poor customer service	

process of data analysis led to axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), which involves making connections between codes to form subthemes (Matteucci and Gnoth, 2017). The axial coding process reduced the database to a small set of subthemes that characterised the process under study. The selective coding process involved integrating the themes derived from open and axial coding to form a conceptual framework (Creswell, 2007).

Results

Overall profile of the interviewees

Among the 18 Finnish interviewees, 15 were female. Their ages ranged from 22 to 41 years, and the majority were single (nine). The interviewees held diverse occupations. In response to the question of what destination (city) they visited on their trip, the responses ranged from Rome to New York. The stays took place between March 2018 and February 2021. Most of the trips were to international locations (16), and many of the interviewees were repeat visitors to their respective destinations (12). The duration of the trips ranged from 4 to 28 days. Regarding travel companions, the most common answer was friends (8). The number of people in the travel parties ranged from one to six, and most participants had travelled in groups of more than two (12). Seventeen interviewees had travelled for leisure. In response to the question regarding whether they had stayed in the same Airbnb rental property, most said no (16). A majority of them had booked multiple rooms in a single Airbnb rental property (12). In response to the question about when they had made the Airbnb booking, seven interviewees reported having done so two to seven days before the trip, while the rest had done the same two to three weeks before their trip (six). All interviewees reported having booked the Airbnb rental property on their own (Table 2).

Sources of negative memorable Airbnb experiences

Source 1: unclean rooms

When describing what made their negative Airbnb experience the most memorable, many interviewees mentioned unclean rooms. Interpretive codes such as "apartment was dirty", "floor had old food", "stains on the carpet", "garbage all over the place", "uncleanliness", "not clean", "dirty room", "not neat and clean", "a lot of waste in the premises", "apartment is horrible", "dead baby mice" and "host did not clean" are all indicative of the significance of

Table 2	Profile of interviewees				
Interviewee code	Gender	Age	Marital status	Nationality	Occupation
IN1	Female	31	Cohabiting	Finnish	Teacher
IN2	Male	28	Single	Finnish	Research Assistant
IN3	Female	22	Single	Finnish	Student
IN4	Female	24	Single	Finnish	Student
IN5	Female	30	Cohabiting	Finnish	Sales Assistant
IN6	Female	25	Single	Finnish	Student
IN7	Female	31	Cohabiting	Finnish	Nurse
IN8	Female	25	Single	Finnish	Student
IN9	Female	38	Married	Finnish	Real estate agent
IN10	Female	41	Married	Finnish	Sales Manager
IN11	Female	28	Single	Finnish	Caregiver
IN12	Female	22	Single	Finnish	Student
IN13	Female	32	Married	Finnish	Nurse
IN14	Female	29	Cohabiting	Finnish	Kindergarten Teacher
IN15	Male	35	Cohabiting	Finnish	Researcher
IN16	Female	24	Single	Finnish	Sales Assistant
IN17	Female	26	Single	Finnish	Sales Assistant
IN18	Male	37	Cohabiting	Finnish	IT Specialist

unclean rooms in guests' Airbnb experiences. This is further highlighted by the responses given by four interviewees.

One said, "I had a very bad experience with Airbnb [. . .] My partner and I had visited New York for our vacation for two weeks. This was our first Airbnb experience [. . .] We got into the property with a code and had no problem. It was not clean. There was dust everywhere [. . .] stains on the mattress and bugs near the bed. The bathtub was dirty, and the smell was very bad. There were no facilities that were shown on the website, and the property looked neglected [. . .] We informed the host, but she never turned up. We spent our time mostly outside and was disappointing [. . .] Such a very bad experience with Airbnb and was not worth the money we paid. We felt cheated and will not use Airbnb again [. . .]" (IN2, male, 28, visiting New York).

Another said, "[. . .] The apartment was dirty when we arrived. There was garbage all over the place. The host did not clean after the last people were there. The beds were unmade, and the bathrooms were dirty and covered with used towels. We called the host immediately and were told that she would come by after work, which in this case was over six hours away. I complained and told the host that the place was dirty and that she needed to take care of it now. She said she could not do it, as she was busy at work and that if we were unhappy, we could just leave and she would refund us – which we did in the end. We were able to find a good hotel at the last minute and the trip was good, but this Airbnb was the dirtiest we have stayed in. The host was bad [. . .]" (IN5, female, 30, visiting Umea).

A third participant said, "The negative experience that made Airbnb memorable was the dirty room. The room was unbearable, and there had not been a thorough cleaning before our arrival. The marks on the carpet also made it clear that the cleaning had not been done properly. The doors had stains on them [. . .] Not a positive Airbnb experience. The room was so dirty and not very clean. I could not relax, and it was uncomfortable to sleep in. The host was not on site to tell about my concerns. They did not have fans, air conditioners or anything, and it was just terrible [. . .] I wished the accommodation had been as it was listed because it was a nice place and we would have enjoyed it very much' (IN9, female, 38, visiting Tartu).

Another participant said, "[. . .] I will not be back. Terrible experience. Unbelievable. Floors, walls, counters, microwave and fridge had old food. The sink was blocked; there was no water available. The apartment smelt like smoke even though it was non-smoking. Towels and bathroom were definitely not clean. The apartment wall was eroding. Not even worth the 60 euros we spent per night. Everything about this apartment was horrible [. . .] neighbours yelling at each other late at night. Our stay consisted of flooded toilets, filthy balconies, dead baby mice and paper-thin walls with zero isolation. It was a real shame, and we felt cheated" (IN12, female, 22, visiting Porto).

As evidenced by our findings, the condition of the rental property (namely, the cleanliness of the room) is not standardised; hence, service quality is dependent upon hosts' hospitality and capabilities. Thus, Airbnb guests are likelier than hotel guests to experience unpredictable service quality (Sthapit, 2019). Some studies have indicated that a poorly maintained room has a negative impact on other service-quality attributes, such as the condition of the facilities (Ert *et al.*, 2016) and the Airbnb accommodation experience (Sthapit *et al.*, 2020). As the main product in an overnight stay, the accommodation provided by the host is considered a key service-quality dimension of Airbnb (Ju *et al.*, 2019) and hygiene and cleanliness are significant concerns among Airbnb customers (Cheng and Zhang, 2019).

These findings support studies indicating that the physical environment – in this context, the room conditions (Cheng and Jin, 2019) – is considered crucial for guests staying in Airbnb properties. They also contradict studies indicating that Airbnb significantly outperforms all three hotel classes (hotels/motels, upscale hotels and mid-range hotels) in terms of

traditional hotel attributes, especially cleanliness (Guttentag and Smith, 2017). One reason for the poor service quality (poor condition of the room) that many interviewees experienced may be that Airbnb hosts are not trained service providers (Birinci *et al.*, 2018). Other reasons may include transaction partners on Airbnb (the host and guest) being unable to inspect and evaluate the service before purchase and use and Airbnb listings being unregulated (Ert *et al.*, 2016).

Source 2: poor customer service

The second source that contributed to interviewees' negative memorable Airbnb experiences is poor customer service, which is highlighted by the following interpretive codes: "poor customer service" and "customer care is very poor". This is further highlighted by the response given by two interviewees.

One participant stated, "The poor customer service experience [. . .] It was so hard to speak with the customer service on the phone because many times, when we called, the number was not connecting, which made us very worried. It was difficult to start communication when we needed help [. . .] Customer service was not good and did not solve our problem. They did not communicate very well" (IN13, female, 32, visiting London).

Another participant related, "The customer care is very poor, and they offered me the worst customer experience. The apartment was dirty and not accurate in their description. We moved out immediately from the apartment and spent hours on the mobile to report this, but customer care agent was not able to help me. Customer care made me feel very bad and did not care about the wellbeing of their customers [. . .] I spent a lot of time trying to get back my money. They did not give me any refund and hung up on me while talking. I lost all the booking money [. . .] I will stay away from Airbnb and use Booking.com [. . .]" (IN17, female 26, visiting Tallinn).

According to Ju *et al.* (2019), Airbnb's value proposition includes 24/7 customer service to help guests resolve problems. Despite this claim, two interviewees reported that Airbnb's customer service division did not seem to perform its intended function adequately to remedy their negative Airbnb experience. They found Airbnb customer service lacking and failed to resolve their problems properly or promptly, for instance, by offering compensation for a service failure. In addition, these interviewees mentioned feeling helpless because of the lack of responsiveness and empathy from the customer service personnel at Airbnb, and one of the interviewees planned to switch from Airbnb to an online travel agency (Booking.com) because of their disappointment with the service provided by the Airbnb customer service personnel. Further, a vital feature of customer service is communicating with customers; however, a lack of communication from the Airbnb customer service executives led to the customer (guest) feeling discouraged. This finding is in line with studies that have identified Airbnb's poor customer service as one of the inherent flaws or weakest features of the sharing-economy platform and one of the most common complaints against it (Sthapit and Björk, 2021).

Source 3: unpleasant host behaviour

Some interviewees also mentioned unpleasant host behaviour as a source of negative memorable experiences with Airbnb. Interpretive codes such as "different than in pictures", "poor communication", "very bad communication with customers", "host was bad" and "host argued with us" are all indicative of the importance of unpleasant host behaviour in guests' Airbnb experiences. Unpleasant host behaviour is further emphasised by the following accounts provided by three interviewees:

"The apartment was quite different than in pictures. It did not match the pictures [. . .] It was shocking to realise that the property had been misrepresented [. . .] There was no internet

connection. The tram station was 30 minutes walking [...] The address was not the one reported on the website. There was no elevator [...] Most importantly, the rooms were not properly equipped for us. The host argued with us about a broken window that had already been damaged. He asked us for 200 euros as compensation [...] The host was very bad and did not behave well with us. It was not up to my expectations. We left the house after one day, and we went to a hotel" (IN1 female, 31, visiting Alicante).

"I had booked an apartment in Manchester. During the booking, the communication went well with the host, and we went through all the details. When I arrived there, the host's mobile was switched off, and he was out of reach. I tried to reach him through email, but he did not reply. I waited for a couple of hours outside the building, but he did not arrive [...] During the evening, I received a message saying that he tried to call me many times, which is a total lie [...] In the end, I did not get to stay in the apartment. I lost money and a lot of time. I went to the nearest hotel [...] I will never book again with Airbnb" (IN16, female, 24, visiting Manchester).

"In my opinion, the host was very bad. The communication was very weak, and the service quality was very poor. The premises were not neat or clean. There was a lot of waste on the premises. He also behaved very rudely and did not respond to our calls during the stay [...] The whole experience was very negative [...]" (IN18, male, 37, visiting San Francisco).

Hosts play an important role in the Airbnb service experience; consumers value experiences with hosts who are friendly, conscientious and responsive (Lyu *et al.*, 2019). As indicated in previous studies, individual hosts' actions are not homogenous (Sthapit and Björk, 2021). According to Ariffin and Maghzi (2012), the quality of a host's behaviour not only contributes to the development of a strong bond between the tourist and the accommodation but also enhances the emotional value of the tourist's experience. Some studies have demonstrated the significant role played by hosts in tourists' choice of Airbnb accommodations over other types of accommodation (Guttentag and Smith, 2017). The study by Sthapit and Björk (2019) highlights the significance of the host's hospitality in the Airbnb context from the guest's perspective while taking into consideration that the sharing economy challenges the experiences offered by the hotel industry. Positive service attributes for peer-to-peer hosts include being understanding and caring (Lalicic and Weismayer, 2018). Hosts without these attributes are seen as badly behaved and providers of poor service quality (Sthapit *et al.*, 2021) and can be categorised as dysfunctional (Grönroos, 1982). This finding corroborates previous studies' findings that guest dissatisfaction with home-sharing businesses, such as Airbnb, is largely because of the hosts (Shuqair *et al.*, 2019); it also contradicts other studies indicating that Airbnb guests enjoyed more personalised service (Mao and Lyu, 2017) and experienced remarkable customer satisfaction levels (Ert *et al.*, 2016).

Conclusion and theoretical implications

This study adds to the existing literature on MTE and Airbnb by proposing a conceptual framework of negative memorable Airbnb experiences that comprises the following components: unclean rooms, unpleasant host behaviour and poor customer service. Although the term "memorable" has a positive connotation, the findings of this study suggest that travellers also recall less positive Airbnb stay experiences.

From a micro-level perspective, guests reported negative memorable Airbnb experiences because of poor room conditions and unpleasant host behaviour. Room cleanliness can be linked to the broader concept of property readiness. At the micro level, poor customer service also resulted in negative memorable Airbnb experiences for Airbnb customers (consumers). Dirty rooms are linked to Airbnb's facility service quality, while unpleasant host behaviour is related to host service quality (Ju *et al.*, 2019). Poor customer service can be linked to poor communication by customer service executives. Certain studies indicate that

poor communication leads to service failure in the Airbnb context, which subsequently makes guests feel devalued as customers (Sthapit and Jiménez-Barreto, 2018). This was evidenced in the current study. The findings of this study, in conjunction with much of the extant literature, support the conclusion that Airbnb consumers cannot determine service quality until they experience it, which results in negative guest experiences (Wu *et al.*, 2017).

Our study responds to the recent calls to explore negative experiences as a part of MTEs and the negative sources of memories (Sthapit *et al.*, 2020; Sthapit *et al.*, 2021). The theoretical contributions of this study include the extension of the existing literature on MTEs and Airbnb (Kim *et al.*, 2012; Sthapit *et al.*, 2021) by proposing a conceptual framework of negative memorable Airbnb experiences that comprise three main components: unclean rooms, unpleasant host behaviour and poor customer service.

Managerial implications, limitations and future research

The results of the current study offer important implications for Airbnb hosts and management. The main motives driving tourists to book Airbnb rental properties include price and location. Therefore, Airbnb hosts should provide more affordable prices than traditional accommodation providers for the same locations, accurate pictures of their rental properties and clear descriptions of their accommodations' proximity to tourist attractions.

The results of this study have several managerial implications for Airbnb and its hosts. Firstly, Airbnb management should make efforts to reduce guests' negative experiences. This goal can be achieved by developing policies and strategies for service quality management that are standardised, clear and universally applicable to all hosts. In addition, Airbnb's management should provide hosts with training to maintain service quality and a checklist to ensure adherence to quality standards across listings. Hosts must also be monitored to ensure that they maintain service quality standards and must also be held accountable for the negative situations that they are responsible. For example, hosts should be liable when there are substantiated complaints of a given Airbnb rental unit being in a poor condition.

Secondly, Airbnb management should recruit qualified customer service personnel and equip them with service recovery skills through training and control mechanisms. Such training should focus on upgrading their ability to handle complaints. Airbnb management should also direct customer service personnel to promptly address customer complaints with apologies. In addition, the company should invest more resources into setting up live chat functions on their website to facilitate immediate communication with customer service representatives and into providing diverse contact methods (through telephonic communication, emails and their website).

Thirdly, Airbnb management should hold hosts accountable if they are frequently reported as behaving unpleasantly with guests. Airbnb's management should define hosts' responsibilities and train them in hospitableness such that they learn to enact behaviours that are considered respectful of guest requirements. Hosts should be required to remain well-mannered when welcoming guests to their properties and should be caring and help mitigate guests' negative experiences. They should also treat guests in a friendly manner, which includes settling any problems they face related to accommodation. In addition, Airbnb management should incentivise hosts to provide accurate and credible information about their listings, including their profile, the accommodation description and property pictures. At a minimum, the service advertised by a host must be provided with 100% uniformity.

This study has certain limitations. The data was collected post visit, and data collection relied on varying periods of memory among the respondents (up to 36 months after travel). The current study acknowledges that there may be incongruence between remembered

experiences and on-site experiences; thus, future studies should interview tourists soon after their Airbnb experiences. Another limitation is the use of snowball sampling, as researchers could obtain biased information when they rely on participants recruited using this sampling method.

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