

European Customers' Perception of Safety using Airbnb Compared to Other Lodging Options

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ABSTRACT

Airbnb operates an online, peer-to-peer marketplace with over 150 million users and hosts that provide accommodations around the world. As Airbnb continues to support tourism destination growth, it must address the increased concern for guest and host safety. Safety concerns are not limited to health risks and may include overcrowding/space proximity, cleaning processes, key security, fire safety, harassment and violence prevention, and data security. What is unclear is the perception of these safety concerns based on the destination location and mode of travel (independent or part of a group). This study sought to identify perceptions of travelers and their preference of lodging accommodations based on their travel mode. Data was collected from 116 European travelers. Findings suggest that travelers perceive hotels as a safer alternative to other lodging options. Additional findings revealed concerns of safety are less important when traveling in groups. This study provides insights for Airbnb operators, future travelers, and academics to consider as the tourism industry continues to rebound from COVID-19.

Keywords

tourism, safety, lodging, Airbnb, travel, hotel, accommodations

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries in the world. This sector has seen unprecedented growth up to the COVID-19 pandemic, reporting 1.5 billion visitors worldwide in 2019, and has demonstrated steady recovery post pandemic with more than 900 million tourists reported in 2022 (Majumdar, 2023). Tourism, the travel of residents from one destination to another, requires access to accommodations, and travelers often participate in a variety of hospitality and tourism related experiences such as food and beverage, entertainment, parks and recreation, gambling, tours, cruises, etc. With any travel, travelers have the basic expectation of their personal safety. According to Anderson (2021), the top traveler risks include health risks, such as medical events

and accidents, scamming, theft, and violence. Johnson (2022) adds concerns of safety from the perspective of personal security including lost passport, petty crime, severe weather and natural disasters, and civil unrest. At the most basic level, travelers associate their safety and security with overcrowding/space proximity, cleaning processes, key security, and data security (Axelsen, 2019, Sampson, 2019).

Lodging accommodations are perhaps the most essential infrastructural requirement of tourism. For tourism to grow, there must be the availability of lodging, as travelers need a place to stay. Tourists can, for example, select between hotels, hostels, campgrounds, or Airbnb rentals. Airbnb launched in 2009 as an online, peer-to-peer marketplace that provides travelers access to accommodations around the world (Airbnb, 2022). It has rapidly grown to accommodate more than half a billion guests per year (Zebra, 2022). However, as Airbnb accommodation availability and popularity has grown, so have concerns for safety and security, compounded by safety concerns related to COVID-19. Despite traveler requirements for these basic needs, it is unclear if the perception of safety and security is influenced by the destination location and mode of travel (independent or part of a group). Accordingly, this study sought to identify perceptions of travelers and their preference of lodging accommodation based on their travel mode. To identify customer perceptions of safety in Airbnb as compared to other available lodging options, data was captured using an electronic questionnaire in a convenience sample of European travelers.

Convenience sampling was chosen as it provided easy access to potential participants and data could be quickly collected. Weaknesses associated with a convenience sample are due to the self-selection of the participants and the risk that the results may be biased (Gaille, 2020). The survey was created using the platform questionpro.com and distributed via the social media platform Facebook, specifically in the Facebook group “Airways” and the researchers’ personal Facebook walls. Additionally, a message containing the link to the survey was sent using Facebook Messenger. The questionnaire was published on the social network in October 2022 for one week. Prior to beginning the questionnaire, participants were informed that the survey was anonymous, and responses could not be traced back to individual respondents.

As part of the questionnaire, demographic data was captured including age, gender, relationship status and location participants chose to stay abroad. Data was collected from 116 European travelers.

Findings suggest that travelers perceive hotels as a safer alternative than other accommodation types. Additionally, findings revealed concerns of safety are less influential when traveling in groups. Although data collected cannot be generalized to the entire population, it provides insights to Airbnb operators, future travelers, and academics to focus on as the tourism industry continues to rebound from COVID-19.

INDUSTRY CONTEXT

Tourists are individuals who willingly leave their usual environment to visit another destination. Those individuals often take part in different activities regardless of how far or close to the

destination they are. Accordingly, the tourism industry's main objective is to serve in multiple capacities. The tourism industry is made up of four main sectors: transportation, accommodation, ancillary services, and sales and distribution. Success is measured by the positive relationship between all sectors (Camilleri, 2018). The tourism sector has expanded during the past several decades. In 1950, there were approximately 25 million travelers worldwide as compared to 1.5 billion visitors in 2019 (Majumdar, 2023; Roser, 2017). As a result of the increase in tourism, additional accommodations are required since guests need a place to stay (Alvarez-Herrin & Macedo-Ruiz, 2021).

The accommodation sector includes many forms of hospitality facilities. These facilities often include food, beverages, and cleaning services. In the accommodation sector, the level of service offered varies. From campsites to all-inclusive hotels, the range is vast. Hotels, hostels, and Airbnbs are just a few examples of common accommodations that can be found around the world. Location has generally been considered the most crucial factor for accommodation, yet other factors like price and level of service are also important (Camilleri, 2018). Self-catering accommodations like Airbnb are often less service experience oriented and can be obtained at a cheaper cost. When traveling, it is important to feel secure and confident in selected accommodations. Additionally, it is ideal for tourists to have a memorable experience and feel at home while traveling. If the lodging selection has favorable reviews, it is often associated with higher consumer trust and therefore safety (Culotta, Jin, Sun, & Wagman, 2022). However, recent research generalizes safety and security concerns as related to COVID-19, providing limited insight into specific concerns beyond pandemic factors.

Airbnb

Airbnb, Inc. is based in San Francisco, California in the United States and operates an online, peer-to-peer marketplace focused on short-term homestays and experiences with over 150 million users and hosts that provide accommodations to more than half a billion guests per year around the world (Airbnb, 2022; Zebra, 2022). Data demonstrates Airbnb has a direct economic impact based on host income as well as guest spending in a destination. As last updated in March 2022, Airbnb accommodations reached over 220 countries and regions. Since its launch in 2009, Airbnb has experienced remarkable growth (Hati, et al, 2021). However, this growth, in conjunction with overall increases in tourism, has led to issues of overcrowding. Accordingly, Airbnb is cited as contributing to increases in real estate prices and reducing locals' housing options (Alvarez-Herranz & Macedo-Ruiz, 2021).

Overcrowding is often associated with concerns of safety. Guests, hosts, employees, and neighbors all need to feel safe as their destination welcomes more travelers. Although Airbnb has stated safety is its priority, citing measures such as secure payment methods, there have been complaints of increased waste and noise pollution that have been associated with safety risk (Alvarez-Herranz & Macedo-Ruiz, 2021; Airbnb, 2022). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic heightened travelers' sense of safety risk and has influenced how consumers select accommodations based on considerations for physical separation to prevent infection. Safety concerns of travelers require more hygienic practices and influence their accommodation

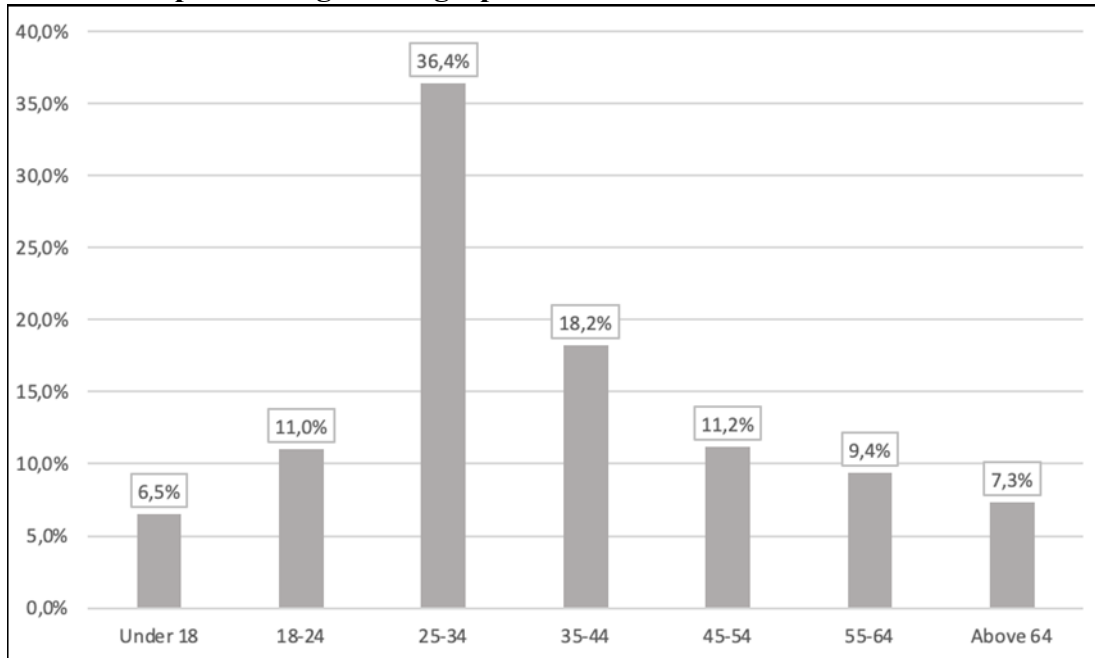
selections (Bresciani, et al., 2021). During the pandemic, Airbnb created a set of mandatory COVID-19 safety practices for hosts and guests of listings, based on guidance from the World Health Organization and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. They also encouraged guests and hosts to be familiar with general health and safety guidelines for COVID-19 safety, monitor travel restrictions and advisories, and follow destination protocols (Airbnb, 2022). However, information related to other types of safety and security concerns are scarce.

When it comes to accommodation selection, many travelers evaluate price. Travelers may choose lower Airbnb prices without understanding potential increases of risk. For example, Culotta, et al., (2022) reported if there was a higher crime record in the neighborhood of an Airbnb accommodation, hosts were likely to lower their prices to offset the higher safety issues. In addition, most visitors favor price reduction over learning about the local area and corresponding crime rates (Culotta, et al., 2022). Furthermore, reviews can boost guest confidence that an accommodation is safer, yet there may be fraudulent reviews creating unrealistic experience expectations (Culotta, 2022). Although Airbnb has demonstrated a commitment to safety related to the pandemic, there is a lack of protocol and practices when it comes to other safety concerns. Carville (2021) reported former safety agents estimated the company handles thousands of allegations of sexual assault every year and does not have a specific policy on key retrieval and return. Furthermore, survey results published in the journal *Injury Prevention* revealed that many Airbnb properties do not contain common safety equipment including smoke detectors, carbon monoxide (CO) detectors, fire extinguishers and first aid kits (Kennedy, Jones, & Gielen, 2019). As a result, the lack of safety precautions can increase the risk to travelers.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to determine whether traveler lodging accommodation decisions are influenced by their perception of safety as well as other variables such as destination location and travel mode (independent or group). The survey was created using the platform questionpro.com and distributed via the social media platform Facebook and Facebook Messenger. A total of 116 travelers participated, herein referred to as “respondents,” and 97 respondents finished the survey. Nineteen (19) respondents did not fully complete the questionnaire. Of the total respondents, 97.4% resided in Iceland, one respondent resided in the Netherlands, and two respondents lived in Turkey. Respondents represented several age groups. Most of the respondents, or 54.6%, were 25-44 years old; see table 1.

Table 1: Respondent Age Demographics

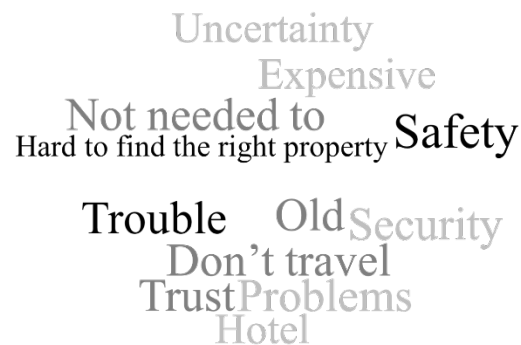


Forty-three percent (43%) of respondents were male, and 57% were female; 0% identified as other. Twenty percent (20%) of respondents were single; 44% identified as being in a relationship, 35% stated they were married, and 1% selected “other.”

Data Findings

Respondents were asked if they had ever booked and stayed at an Airbnb accommodation while traveling abroad. 54% of respondents said they had used Airbnb prior while 43% of respondents said they had not used Airbnb. For respondents that responded they have not used Airbnb, they were encouraged to offer qualitative comments. Many respondents alluded to the convenience or familiarity with hotels; respectively the word “hotel” was stated 12 times and respondents described their preferred use of hotels with words/phrases that included convenience, sense of ease, prior experience, safety, and security. Respondents shared feelings described as “lack of trust” with Airbnb, being unfamiliar with this type of booking, and it not being available as an option. The word cloud below captures direct comments.

Image 1: Word Cloud, Why Respondents Have Not Used Airbnb



Accordingly in a follow up question, 97% of respondents identified that they feel safest staying at a hotel, 1% said Airbnb, 0% hostels, and 2% of respondents chose “other.” Respondents were asked to identify if the destination affected their feeling of safety while staying at an Airbnb: 67% of respondents said the destination of their travel affects their feeling of safety at an Airbnb while 13% of respondents said the destination would not affect their feeling of safety and 20% of respondents chose “neither.” Respondents were also asked when traveling alone, what was their accommodation preference. Eighty-one percent (81%) of respondents said they would choose to stay at a hotel, 1% at an Airbnb, 2% stay at a hostel, and 16% chose the option “does not matter.” Accordingly, regardless of gender, the primary preference was hotel accommodations. However, when traveling with others 39% of respondents said they would choose to stay at a hotel while 27% said they would stay at an Airbnb. One percent (1%) of respondents responded they would stay at a hostel, and 33% said when traveling with others, where they stay does not matter. The type of accommodation was less important when traveling with others, and more respondents were likely to select an Airbnb when traveling as part of a group. In summary, 54% of respondents had used Airbnb while traveling abroad, but most of them selected a hotel while traveling and 96% felt safest while staying at a hotel. These results demonstrate high use of Airbnb accommodations in the past, but respondents feel safest staying at a hotel. Notably, there was no significant finding to demonstrate respondents feel safe at Airbnb accommodations.

Airbnb is projected to continue its rapid growth and should do so with an increased focus on safety and trust beyond COVID-19 travel precautions and tips. This study suggests the need for further research to explore the relationship between perception of safety and technology. For example, will guests associate increased safety and trust with the use of mobile technologies? Additionally, data should be collected periodically, post pandemic, to identify if travelers redefine or reprioritize “safety and security” concerns. Consumer behavior, despite concerns of safety, has not necessarily translated to financial losses for hosts or Airbnb as an entity. This lack of impact may deter further investment into processes, procedures, and technology to address travelers’ needs; however, to increase Airbnb use, the company should focus on strategies and promote how it mitigates travelers’ concerns related to each unique safety and security consideration. Furthermore, additional studies may provide insights into the long-term impact of COVID-19 safety concerns and if those concerns mask the need to address other safety issues

related to crime and violence. Overall, if Airbnb wants to compete against hotels, it must focus on how to change the customer perception that hotels are safer. Similarly to how the company showcases their response to COVID-19 with offering travel tips, it should consider highlighting more specifically how it addresses other traveler concerns and provide appropriate resources. As such, Airbnb should focus on establishing basic safety requirements and document processes for all hosted properties that include sexual harassment and violence reporting, smoke detectors, carbon monoxide (CO) detectors, fire extinguishers, and first aid kits.

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