
Curiosity or Certainty? A Qualitative, Comparative Analysis of Couchsurfing and Airbnb User Behaviors

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CHI'17 Extended Abstracts, May 06-11, 2017, Denver, CO, USA
ACM 978-1-4503-4656-6/17/05.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/3027063.3053162>

Abstract

This study compares user behaviors of non-monetary and monetary sharing economy services, respectively represented by Couchsurfing and Airbnb. Semi-structured interviews from six Couchsurfing and six Airbnb host users are comparatively analyzed via inductive content analyses and bottom-up affinity diagramming. This paper studies the early stages of both Couchsurfing and Airbnb users' service use: 1) writing a profile and room description, 2) receiving messages from a guest, and 3) verifying a guest user's identity. Couchsurfing hosts use these stages as a supportive friendship-forming tool to satisfy their curiosity regarding their guests, while Airbnb hosts use them for certainty and risk aversion. This study may help to generate design implications for non-monetary platforms, such as providing continuous communication tools for host users' process to verify guests' identities.

Author Keywords

Sharing Economy; Non-Monetary; Monetary; Couchsurfing; Airbnb; Peer-to-Peer Exchange

ACM Classification Keywords

H.1.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous

Introduction

Iconic sharing economy services, Airbnb and Uber, have faced serious problems in terms of public policies related to legal liability, insurance, and taxation [5]. However, non-monetary sharing economy services do not experience these problems due to their independence from the monetary system [8]. Non-monetary participants can therefore share their underutilized assets for non-monetary benefits such as time and altruistic satisfaction [12]. Monetary sharing economy platforms such as Airbnb and Uber have gained increasing scholastic attention within Human Computer Interaction communities [9]. However, only a few non-monetary sharing economy services have been studied [6]. Particularly, free sharing economies, wherein asset providers are not rewarded with obvious forms such as food sharing, have not yet been significantly explored [6]. Therefore, our goal of this study is to conduct comparative analysis of user behaviors in non-monetary and monetary sharing economies regarding to the process of service use.

In this comparative study, we focus on housing services. This is because Couchsurfing is one of the few non-monetary free sharing economy services with substantial (*12 million*) and international (*200,000 cities*) users [3]. Airbnb is an equivalent monetary sharing economy that qualifies it for a comparative study. Also, both services have same early stages of service use process: 1) writing a profile and room description, 2) receiving messages from a guest, and 3) verifying a guest user identity. These aspects make the two services be qualified for comparative study.

Both Couchsurfing and Airbnb have two types of users: a host and a guest. A host gives a guest room to sleep. Airbnb hosts receive money as a reward for sharing

while Couchsurfing hosts do not. This study analyzes the host users' behavior through semi-structured interviews with six hosts from each service. For analyzing interview data, we employed open, axial, and selective coding with bottom-up affinity diagramming.

The analysis result indicates that Couchsurfing hosts write a profile and room description as a tool to meet friends, while Airbnb hosts do as a guarantee to avoid conflicts with guests. Also, when the hosts receive room request messages from guests, Couchsurfing hosts expect the messages included the details about hosts themselves and words to feel empathy, but Airbnb hosts expect the details about guests and satisfying expression about the hosts' facilities. Regarding to verifying a guest's identity, Couchsurfing hosts verify guests via continuous communication while Airbnb hosts do via instant ways such as passport verification.

Literature has investigated the participating motivations of sharing economy service users. Belloti et al. noted that receiver-users prioritize instrumental motives, such as conveniently obtaining services, while provider-users create social connections and payment motives [2]. Ganglbauer et al. and Shih et al. explored non-monetary sharing. The authors discovered social and ecological motives from food-sharing, and a tension between instrumental versus idealistic altruistic motives from time-banking, respectively [6, 12]. Ikkala et al. and Lampinen et al. explored Airbnb host users to find that the presence of money can provide advantages in sharing-economy services, such as selecting guests' consistent preferences and the reduction of uncertainty in risky interactions [7, 9]. Liu and Lauterbach studied Couchsurfing; its hosts have practical, cultural, and emotional motives and a "voucher" reputation system, which enables a high degree of interaction and

	Gender/ Age/ Living Arrange.	No. of Hosting/ No. of Guesting
C1	F, 38, Alone	40 ↑, 3
C2	F, 25, Alone	30 ↑, 2
C3	M, 26, with Family	20 ↑, 2
C4	M, 24, Alone	7, 1
C5	M, 27, with Flat- mate	25, 2
C6	F, 26, Alone	5, 2

Table 1: Background information about Couchsurfing interviewees.

Regarding their hosting expertise, interviewees self-marked between 5 and 7 (on a 7-point Likert scale).

Regarding their Airbnb familiarity, two responded as “have an experience of using Airbnb”; three selected “have searched for a room on Airbnb”; and one chose “have heard about Airbnb”

reciprocity [10, 11]. However, our study extends these prior studies to explore user behaviors in accordance with service use stages: writing a profile, receiving room request messages, and verifying a guest’s identity, rather than exploring general participation motivations. Further, limited qualitative research exists to directly compare non-monetary and monetary sharing-economy service users’ platform use behaviors.

Participants

We recruited six Couchsurfing and six Airbnb host users who had listed their rooms in Seoul, the most representative city for both services, with the largest number of users registered in South Korea (Couchsurfing has 22,922 listings [4], Airbnb has 10,380 listings [1]). Airbnb hosts have intentionally been constrained to the ones who shared living spaces with guests, called on-site hospitality or co-habitation. This constraint makes the social contexts of Couchsurfing and Airbnb users the same, with the same physical opportunities to interact with the guests.

We employed purposive sampling for recruiting. The prerequisite for interviewees was hosting experience of one or more times. An interview request was sent to the hosts who had been reviewed (referenced) by more than one guest. This was because the interview contains questions on experiences related to hosting, including the accepting the guests to stay at home. The interviewees were recruited by sending messages to the Airbnb and Couchsurfing host users using the message function on each website. We randomly selected 16 hosts satisfying the prerequisite in each service, and sent messages. We received six consent replies and ten denial or neglected replies from each service within two days. The interview request message included interview structures, reward (approx. \$12),

duration, and researchers’ affiliation. Background details of the recruited participants are illustrated in Table 1 (Couchsurfing) and Table 2 (Airbnb).

Interview Procedure

All twelve interviews were conducted in Seoul, South Korea, during July-August, 2016. Interview venues were rented meeting rooms near the interviewee’s home or workplace. Duration varied from one to two hours. Interview was conducted either in Korean or English, depending on the interviewee’s comfort level: ten of the interviews were conducted in Korean and two in English. The interview was conducted by the first author with audio and video recording upon the interviewee’s approval. In order to understand the platform use behavior of Couchsurfing and Airbnb, the interview was semi-structured into two sessions.

Session 1 investigated the types of information that hosts wished to share on their profiles and room descriptions. Researchers extracted all existing attributes from the profiles and room descriptions of Couchsurfing and Airbnb, resulting in 42 attributes. These attributes were presented to the interviewees in text form with high granularity in order to prevent bias. Examples include “photo of host,” “response rate,” and “reasons for participating in”. We asked hosts to select 14 of the most relevant attributes for writing a profile and room description. From pilot interviews, 14 attributes were determined to be an adequate number to find differences between the users. After choosing the 14 attributes, the interviewees discussed the reasons for their choices in the context of their past experiences. Their actual profiles and room descriptions were also discussed further. Session 2 studied host behavior on receiving and sending room request messages from guests. Interviewees studied their past

	Gender/ Age/ Living Arrange.	No. of Hosting/ No. of Guesting
A1	M, 32, Alone	24, 4
A2	F, 27, with Family	10, 5
A3	F, 24, with Family	12, 7
A4	M, 31, Alone	19, 4
A5	M, 38, with Family	21, 5
A6	F, 32, Alone	6, 3

Table 2: Background information about Airbnb interviewees.

Regarding the hosting expertise, interviewees self-marked between 5 and 7 (on a 7-point Likert scale).

Regarding their Couchsurfing familiarity, three selected "have joined in Couchsurfing"; two chose "have heard about Couchsurfing"; and one selected "do not know anything about Couchsurfing"

messages using their mobile application of each service. The interviewees then talked about their preferred and undesired messages based on experience. Also, their ways to verify and trust the guest's identity are discussed upon their actual cases of accepting and denying guests.

Analysis Procedure

Researchers transcribed the interview verbatim. Due to the large amount of interview data, data were analyzed at three levels: 1) data of each host individually, 2) service-based data: grouping same service hosts, and 3) conducting a comparison between Couchsurfing and Airbnb. Two researchers worked collaboratively for all the analysis processes, and both researchers had to agree with one another.

1) we employed open, axial, and selective coding for analyzing each host's interview data. We began with open coding; two researchers read through the entire interview transcript and divided the text when a different issue would be mentioned. Codes were allocated based on the concepts in each division in the text. Following this, axial coding was conducted with the open coded items/texts to see the relationship or affinity between them. Finally, selective coding was conducted to understand the key categories of host behavior. This process was repeated for each host's interview. 2) researchers conducted bottom-up affinity diagramming with the key categories generated from the earlier coding. The Couchsurfing hosts' data and Airbnb data were handled separately in order to study the holistic themes of each service host user's behavior. 3) Couchsurfing and Airbnb affinity diagrams were compared to see the behavior differences in each host's behavior.

Result and Analysis

Both Couchsurfing and Airbnb hosts have the same early processes of use: 1) writing a profile, 2) receiving room request, and 3) verifying a guest's identity. To protect the privacy, all the host names were removed. Interviews done in Korean have been translated into English by authors. Figure 1 summarizes the result.

1. Writing a profile and room description

- Couchsurfing: to meet friends, not just guests

Couchsurfing hosts use the profile and room description features on the platform to meet new friends who are good matches for them. Hosts describe their taste, traits, or beliefs in their profile to meet the guests who feel empathy just as friends.

"I listed my favorite books, movies, and music on my profile. This part is exactly what I want my potential guests to read and consider in terms of what we have in common. If the guest shares similar opinion or thoughts about my favorite things, the guest might be a good friend." – interview from C6

- Airbnb: to avoid conflicts with guests

Airbnb hosts utilize the profile and room description as a guarantee to avoid conflicts such as loss of trust, disappointment, and misunderstanding. In order to circumvent mismatches between the guest's expectations and the actual Airbnb experience, hosts write about what they have to offer to their guests as clearly as possible in their profile and room description.

"If I face any conflict with a guest, I can deal with the conflict more efficiently using the profile and description. I can strongly argue what I don't have to provide to the guests by citing my profile or room description as evidence." – interview from A4

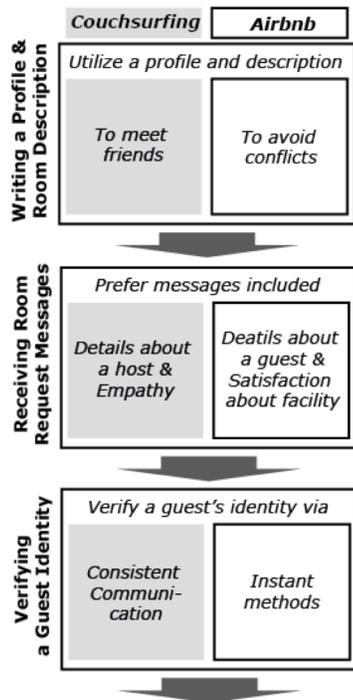


Figure 1. Summary of host behavior differences in Couchsurfing and Airbnb service platform use.

2. Receiving Room Request Messages

- *Couchsurfing*: wish to read details about hosts
Couchsurfing hosts prefer request messages that talk about themselves. If guests include information only about who they (guests) are, hosts feel a lack of sincerity. Hosts want to ensure that guests have indeed read the hosts' profiles.

"The guest, who sends a satisfactory room request message, usually selects specific information from my profile. Then the guest also describes how they feel or think about it. I feel reassured that the guest has read my profile. This makes me happy." – interview from C4

- *Couchsurfing*: wish to read close affinity
Couchsurfing hosts want to feel close affinity from the guests' messages. They want messages that express empathy with their interests, characteristics, life beliefs, and so on. They believe that the messages expressing empathy imply that the guests are truly interested in them.

"This German guest wrote me saying, 'You also majored in fashion design! So did I! If we meet, something fun will definitely happen!' There are guests who appeal to me because of their similarities with me that they state in the messages. Then, I gain some kind of promising expectations." – interview from C3

- *Airbnb*: wish to read details about guests
Airbnb hosts expect guests to write about the guests themselves such as personal information, participation motivation, or reason for visiting. It is to have certainty and trust on the guests and to avoid any chance to meet uncongenial guests.

"My most preferred message so far is this. The guest wrote 'I am attending an international conference on social work near your house. I have learned Salsa for 12 years. I found a place really famous for Salsa near your house! Besides, my grandfather is Korean. So, I would like to have an opportunity to explore my ancestor's roots and learn more about Korean culture from your family!' If the objectives of visiting my home and Airbnb use are stated clearly like this guest did, I certainly confirm the guest's stay at once. I can trust this guest." – interview from A3

- *Airbnb*: wish to read satisfaction with facilities
Hosts expect guests to express compliments or satisfaction about the host's facilities such as atmosphere, house location, furniture, or bathroom. Hosts can alleviate worries about the possible complaints that the guests may bring up during their stays in the future.

"One guest wrote me as 'I would like to stay at your home! Location is just perfect for me! Also, your house looks very neat, and well-furnished. The price is also very good for my budget!' I feel much relaxed about treating this kind of guest, because it is very likely that the guest would not be very disappointment about my home since he already indicated his satisfaction on the message!" – interview from A1

3. Verifying a Guest's Identity

- *Couchsurfing*: message constantly in the long-term
Couchsurfing hosts verify guests' identity via continuous communication for a long-term using instant messaging apps such as WhatsApp. Hosts figure out the guests' personalities or background, and build trustworthy friendship through the communication.

"Before the guest actually arrives, we continuously talk to each other through WhatsApp or WeChat. Through such continuous communication, we get to know each other much better. This is why I don't feel that guests are strangers even though I meet them for the first time. So, when the guest visits my home, I easily share my house door key password with him/her without any doubt." – interview from C1

- *Airbnb: use instant methods in short-term*
Airbnb hosts verify a guest's identity through comparatively instant ways such as passport verification, profile photo, and personal information (e.g. occupation, school, and major). Airbnb hosts prefer using formal but instant ways that consume less time and efforts.

"Airbnb is somewhat risky as I have to share a space with someone I haven't seen before. Thus, I always ask all the guests to verify their passports on the Airbnb website. For American guests, I use a website called Whitepages, where I can search for personal criminal record if I type the guest's name." – interview from A2

4. Other interesting behavior

- *Couchsurfing: Room ownership shift is not made*
The sense of ownership of the host's room does not change even after a guest comes to the room. Hosts were displeased with the guests who used the rooms like theirs. This is because hosts do not regard the guests as renters of the room, rather view as friends.

"There was a guest who did not go out of my house all days long. The guest stayed even when the owner, I, was away for work. She just used my house as hers, and turned on air conditioning all day long. It was such an embarrassing experience. She was weird and I was concerned about her behavior." – interview from C2

- *Airbnb: Room ownership shift is made to guests*
On Airbnb use, ownership of a room moves from host to guest. Hosts make clear distinction about what belongs to guests. Even separate amenities are provided. It is to respect the guest's privacy. Hosts regard guests as renters of the room.

"When a guest closes the room door, I never interact with the guest. I don't even knock on the door to ask for something. If I need anything from the guest's room such as taking out a toothpaste from the storage connected to the guest's room, I send the guest a message at least one day beforehand." –from A6

Conclusion and Future Work

Throughout service use process, Couchsurfing hosts use the platform stages as supportive tools to find friends, while Airbnb hosts use them to avoid possible risks. Understanding the host user behavior differences may help system designers in suggesting ways of building successful non-monetary sharing economy service platforms. It may provide backgrounds to support for user interaction, and to suggest information architecture designs.

This study may require further investigation, as its interviews were conducted with individuals who have lived in Korea for a long period. Therefore, cultural bias could have influenced the hosts' behaviors. Further, it was difficult to control the recruited members' age demography, as not all hosts revealed their ages on profiles, and especially Airbnb users. Consequently, Airbnb users were an average of three years older than Couchsurfing users, and this difference could have influenced interview results. Also, later processes in platform use, such as writing reviews, could be further explored to provide a complete user behavior analysis.

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