

# Home, work and health in the Airbnb system

by

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## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## Abstract

**Background and Objectives:** With Airbnb accommodation-sharing, a new form of entrepreneurial work is emerging and is disrupting traditional business practices. As a self-employed worker, the host lacks the protections under Ontario's Employment Standard Act, including pension, retirement benefits, paid vacation and time-off benefits, that are conventionally afforded to those under more stable employment contracts. Additionally, Airbnb does not adhere to the same strict health and safety regulations as hotels, leaving guests vulnerable in the system as well. This study explored the health and safety standpoints and experiences of Airbnb hosts and guests, particularly focusing on risk assessment and risk management.

**Methods:** Using a multi-method qualitative research design, I drew on document analysis of online posts by Airbnb hosts on the Airbnb Community forum as well as in-depth semi-structured interviews. Document analysis guided the development of the interview protocol. A purposive sample of eight hosts and nine guests was used. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or over the phone, audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and entered into NVivo qualitative data software. Data were distilled into codes. Codes were linked and compared within and across data to develop key themes.

**Results:** The findings identified key health and safety issues facing users: (1) physical risk factors including issues with cleanliness and space; (2) factors that affect their physical safety including door locks and guest verification as well as (3) psychosocial stressors. Capturing users' perceptions and experiences helped position these risks in the day-to-day contexts within which they live.

Additionally, hosts described their decision-making processes; interactions with guests and the Airbnb platform that affect their work; and strategies they used to both minimize the risks as well as maintain a good work-life balance.

**Conclusions:** The findings provided an understanding of the health and safety experiences of Airbnb users, and informed public policy choices for housing, hotels, and short-term rental companies such as Airbnb. In addition, with new forms of work emerging, there is an added pressure upon Canada's work and health systems to function and support workers well. These health and safety considerations can also be extendable to vulnerable workers working in other sharing economy types. The results will help policymakers as they formulate regulation for this growing industry, as well as encourage Airbnb users to consider their health and safety while navigating the system.

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## Dedication

In loving memory of my grandmother, *nani*

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction and Literature Review

### 1.1 Introduction

The access economy, formerly known as the sharing economy (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015), is any platform that uses a mobile app to connect dispersed networks of individuals and provides on-demand shared *access* to goods and services (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). It is a system based on reviews allowing the *access* to goods and services by sharing them, instead of requiring ownership (Yaraghi & Ravi, 2017). Statistics Canada (2017) reported that 2.7 million Canadian adults participated in the access economy between November 2015 and October 2016 and spent \$1.31 billion. Some popular examples of the access economy include Uber, Lyft, TaskRabbit and Airbnb (Zervas, Proserpio, & Byers, 2016). The access economy has been disruptive and unsettled some sectors. It is only growing and as such, some analysts suggest that it will have a permanent impact on the work of many people (Allen & Berg, 2014). Consequently, we will see a reinvention of work (Sundararajan, 2013). With new forms of work emerging, there is an added pressure upon Canada's work and health systems to function and support workers well.

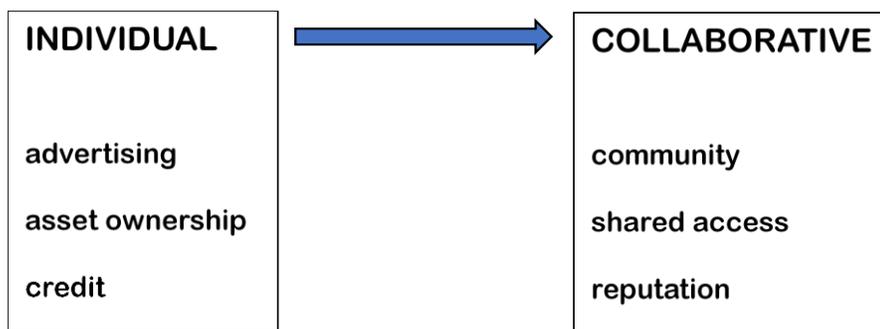
This thesis research focused on Airbnb, an accommodation-sharing platform. During the summer of 2017, there was a lot of discussion in the political realm about stricter regulations on Airbnb in various Canadian cities – namely Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver - due to the possible effect of short-term rentals on both the affordability and availability of housing (BC Almanac, 2016; McQuigge, 2017). However, the need for better regulation of Airbnb in light of the associated health and safety risks has not yet been considered. Additionally, there is scant literature on the health and safety of Airbnb and very little is known about the health and safety risks of Airbnb. To address this knowledge gap, I decided to take an interpretive approach to better understand users' experiences and understanding of the Airbnb system as well as shed light on their health and safety situation. Drawing on document analysis of posts by hosts in the Airbnb Community forum as well as in-depth interviews with Airbnb hosts and guests, my research explored how individuals perceive, assess and manage health and safety risks within the system.

This literature review, first, introduces the access economy, both the ideals and realities, to help situate the research within this larger context. Then, I provide an overview of Airbnb along with critical concerns about its operations, motivations to use, impact of Airbnb on housing and the hotel industry, response by key international municipalities to its proliferation, working conditions of Airbnb hosts, a

comparison of Airbnb and hotel regulative and safety conditions, and the role of gender in the Airbnb system. Lastly, the study rationale is discussed.

## 1.2 Access Economy

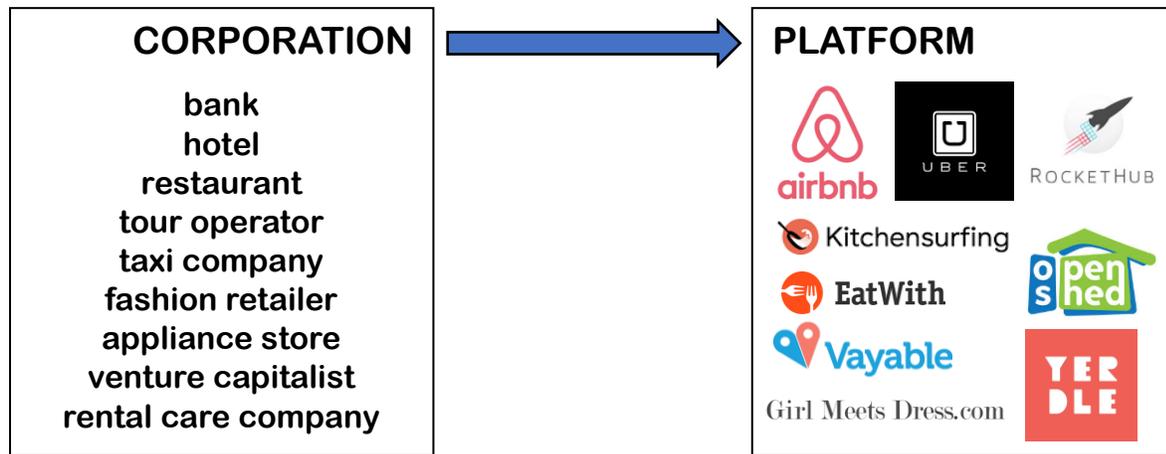
In 1937, economist R.H. Coase introduced a labour of markets theory that situated the firm as the reigning model of organizing commerce. According to Coase, the firm was a way to aggregate inventory, centralize distribution, reduce overhead by virtue of the aggregation and consequently, meet supply and demand (Allen & Berg, 2014; Coase, 1937). Seventy years later, however, digitisation and the internet became game changers giving way for a new method of distribution. In 1990, Michael Hammer (1990) pointed out that with the advent of PC's client-server technology and Ethernet, companies now could fundamentally rethink production. They could tear out their old assembly lines of doing work and reorganize work completely. As Allen & Berg (2014) suggest, with the rise of the access economy, the notion of the firm needs to be conceptualised differently. Supply and demand could now be met, not through the firm, but through networks in an access economy (Allen & Berg, 2014; Kenney & Zysman, 2016). Craigslist and eBay were the pioneers of this idea (Schor, 2014). For the past fifty years and until recently, our model of consumption has been individual. Consumers chose what they wanted, influenced in part by advertising, and made a purchase to gain ownership of the good. An individual's access to a good or service was determined by their disposable income. As shown below in Figure 1, this model of collaborative consumption has been put forward by some as a new model for consumption, wherein the good is less governed by advertising, and more by reputation from other consumers in the community (Ert, Fleischer, & Magen, 2016; Sundararajan, 2014).



**Figure 1. Models of Consumption**

Community, in this context, does not refer to the neighbourhood physically around the consumer but rather, a wider internet-enabled community. Sundararajan (2013) suggests that, we are on the verge of “reengineering” consumption, through the use of powerful networked computing devices in our pockets,

social media and accessible platforms that help facilitate digital transactions (Wang & Nicolau, 2017). Consumers have been transacting online for over a decade now and over time, have become more comfortable with digital exchange of goods and services with providers (Sundararajan, 2014). It is suggested that within this new marketplace, ownership is viewed as a very inefficient way to consume (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). This organization of production creates platforms that are fundamentally connecting self-employed individuals who have capabilities or assets with people who need them, as shown in Figure 2 (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Karlsson, Kemperman, & Dolnicar, 2017).



**Figure 2. The changing identity of the seller**

Platform business (Kenney & Zysman, 2016) has become a staple of networks and marketplaces around the world. This type of business is based on the idea of providing an infrastructure that brings two or more parties together and supports their interaction: a producer role contributes something of value to the platform, while the consumer role adopts or purchases that value. It is important to point out that these are roles, not individuals. In some cases, the same person may be providing a good or service for others to use, while using the very same good or service themselves. A triangular relationship is thus created. There is an intermediary that is the platform, the producer and the consumer. It is the job of the intermediary to marry the producer to the consumer. This interaction on the platform is initiated by the exchange of information between the participants. What follows then is an exchange of money as well as the good or service. Both exchanges may occur on or off the platform.

In the past, this economy was commonly referred to as “the collaborative consumption economy” or “the sharing economy”. However, this notion of “collaborative consumption” and “sharing” has also been contested by some to be very shallow and not a true representation of reality. This terminology is misleading because it implies a sort of communalism; however, that is not necessarily the case because not everyone is “sharing” in the benefits of this new economy. Alternatively, it is sometimes addressed as the “peer-to-peer economy” in the literature as the individuals involved are using “peer-to-peer” networks

and platforms to connect with one another (Acquier, Daudigeos & Pinske, 2017; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015; Trivett & Staff, 2013). Some have given it the nickname “gig economy” as “gig” captures what is happening from the worker’s perspective (O’Connor, 2016b). This thesis, however, will refer to this phenomenon as the “access economy,” as recommended by the Financial Times and Harvard Business Review among others (O’Connor, 2016b; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015). Eckhardt & Bardhi (2015) explained their choice of words: “This insight – that it is an access economy rather than a sharing economy – has important implications for how companies in this space compete. It implies that consumers are more interested in lower costs and convenience than they are in fostering social relationships with the company or other consumers.” On-demand shared *access* to goods and services and the triangular producer-consumer-platform relationship are increasingly become more mainstream (Zervas et al., 2016; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). PricewaterhouseCoopers (2014) has identified peer-to-peer lending, crowd funding, online staffing and peer-to-peer accommodation as key growing sectors within the access economy.

The global revenue from the access economy was estimated at \$15 billion in 2015, and is projected to reach \$335 billion by 2025 (PwC, 2014). Further, we have seen self-employed firms in the United States grow in number from 15 million in 1997 to 24 million in 2014 (Hathaway & Muro, 2016). Many factors, not least capital investments, help explain this shift. These include economic (such as the abilities to monetize excess capacity as well as to gain access of a good or service without ownership of it), social (such as the desire for community, and new social norm for increased sharing in order to meet the increasing demand for resources from a growing global population) and technological changes (such as the introduction of social networking and online payment systems). Online *vertical* marketplaces (such as Airbnb and Uber) within the access economy are becoming increasingly specialized in *vertical*, or niche, markets, while disrupting unsegmented horizontal marketplaces (Allen & Berg, 2014; Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Trivett & Staff, 2013; Zervas et al., 2016; Levine & Syed, 2015). For example, there is a tremendous amount of disruption underway now of the automobile industry since the Uber ride-sharing economy is making it possible for users to consider on-demand transportation as an alternative to car ownership. Similarly, Airbnb’s short-term rental accommodation platform is expected to disrupt the hospitality industry.

In addition to changing distribution, some researchers have suggested that the rise of the internet has shifted power, which once belonged to the firm, into the hands of the consumer (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). While a power shift is debatable, most agree that this new technological environment allows users greater access to information as well as an open space for them to express their thoughts, feelings and concerns about a brand, good or service (Labrecque, vor dem Esche, Mathwick, Novak, & Hofacker, 2013). Some journalists have optimistically suggested that, in a short while, social media will be used profusely by consumers, and will “influence business attitudes” and guide companies towards the

direction of taking more social responsibility for their day-to-day practices. This is because social media provides consumers with a voice to “demand new standards for corporate behavior and a higher commitment to purpose, not just profit” (Mainwaring, 2011). In this way, some portray consumers as having a great deal of agency in their engagement with products and service and the feedback they provide, influencing business decisions. However, others contest this view. They suggest that rather than new corporate standards, this new economy brings no standards. This changing landscape of work enables the avoidance of responsibilities and sector regulations on part of employers as well as economic insecurity and a lack of a social safety net for individuals engaged in this sector. According to Katz (2015) and many other legal experts, the access economy outdates existing regulatory framework as employers are endlessly creative in finding ways to innovate around and within set regulations. Employers do not want to be lumbered with the inflexibility and expense of full-time employment and in turn, they are putting the individuals who work for them at arm’s length.

The media romanticizes the entrepreneurial spirit of the access economy (Friedman, 2013; Kalleberg & Dunn, 2017; McKinney, 2013; Ravenelle, 2017). Further, proponents of the access economy attribute the success of the access economy to the monetization of underused and excess assets (Kalleberg & Dunn, 2017; McNamara, 2015; Yaraghi & Ravi, 2017). However, critics see the growth of this burgeoning sector as driven by profit hunger of the companies adopting this type of business model. In addition, the arrangement of the system exploits users, who provide the good or service as they are unaware of what exactly they are getting into and receive little compensation for the time and effort invested (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2017; Hill, 2015). Standing (2014) argued instead that unrestricted digitalisation is cultivating the rise of a precariat class: a new social group which exists without the predictability or security enjoyed by the previous generation of workers.

### **1.2.1 Precarious employment in the access economy**

Precarity is a growing concern in the fringes of the modern-day working society. More and more, precarious employment is solidifying as a situation in life characterized by irregular earnings, job insecurity, lower access to employability measures, and unfavourable working conditions (Benach & Muntaner, 2007). Many forms of work fit this description including part-time employment, marginal employment (working less than 15 hours a week), fixed-term employment, temporary agency work and self-employment (Lewchuk & Clarke, 2011). Though the precariously employed may not be completely uprooted and pauperized, they are operating in a state of ongoing uncertainty (Fudge & Owens, 2006).

The picture of standard employment has come apart at the seams for a whole variety of reasons, but chief among them are increased digitization, automation and artificial intelligence (Fong, 2018). A whole explosion of contingent and precarious roles has emerged to become an increasingly large portion

of the labour force such that by some estimates, as much as a third of the labour force in developed countries consists of so-called “precarious workers” (Lewchuk & Clarke, 2011). Putting it in context, research estimates that around 20% of Canada’s workforce is engaged in nonstandard forms of employment (Cranford, Vosko & Zukewich, 2003). Unfortunately, this short-term, precarious form of work was identified in 2016 by the Canadian Minister of Finance, Bill Morneau, as “the new normal” that Canadians just need to embrace (CBC, 2016).

Technology has played an active role in changing employment relations and turning the traditional job on its head (Mitchell & Murray, 2016). Like other access economies, Airbnb has introduced, both a new form of worker (the Airbnb host) and a human-computer interface (Airbnb’s online interface) in lieu of the traditional employer-employee relationship that we see between hotelier and hotel worker. This alternative mode of employment allows for flexible working hours, flexible work environment and individual expression (Hundley, 2001). However, freedom becomes a double-edged sword as nonstandard work can also be insecure and isolating. Work in hospitality can be quite stressful for a number of reasons. These include “increasing pressure and job demands that become overwhelming, having little or no control over work, a work environment that is stressful, hostile or unpleasant, long hours resulting in lack of sleep or rest, tight schedules and a job that is monotonous, repetitive or boring” (Mandal, 2001). Airbnb hosts are viewed as self-employed workers and therefore, the Employment Standards Act does not apply to them. Therefore, hosts lack the protections that are conventionally afforded to those under more stable employment contracts. They do not have a right to “health coverage, insurance against injuries, paid vacations, pensions, maximum working hours, a stable income, job security, and other safeguards” (O’Regan & Choe, 2017). Despite Airbnb’s image, there is no safety net provided to Airbnb hosts, and in turn, makes them very vulnerable and easily exploitable in the system (Tufts, 2017).

### **1.2.2 Health and the Access Economy**

Digital platforms connect customers with workers to perform tasks on demand. They match customers with workers and they use their technology to facilitate the payment, while taking a cut for themselves. They say that intermediaries are not employers, while others disagree. That is a question being threshed out in courts in the United States, United Kingdom and elsewhere around the world (De Stefano, 2018). In Canada, 20% of the work force is in the access economy. This is a growing army of workers without workplaces, colleagues or bosses. The scientific literature provides mixed reviews when it comes to the impact on nonstandard forms of employment on workers’ health (Lewchuk & Clarke, 2011). In some ways, this work arrangement could have a positive effect on workers’ health and safety. The access

economy is based on the idea of work with freedom and agency. This creates better work quality and more pride in work because the individual involved in this economy is responsible for their own outcomes.

Studies show that work flexibility is one of the best indicators for high well-being but some health experts are worried (Quinlan, Mayhew & Bohle, 2001; Benach & Muntaner, 2007). Flexibility might be good for worker's health but loneliness and isolation are bad for it. These workers do not have line managers to keep an eye out for them. Instead, their regular contact is with an algorithm, and remains very impersonal. The algorithm is their 'boss' as it just sends them tasks and monitors their performance. Some algorithms also deactivate workers from their platforms if there are performance issues. That can create pressure, and when the platform sets the fee per task, some workers feel they can only increase their earnings by working even longer hours. For health experts, there is an urgent need to investigate the benefits and the risks of this new world of work (Manyika et al., 2016; O'Connor, 2016a).

Workers are working without the securities provided by traditional employment contracts. For example, this year has seen several protests by Uber and delivery workers. They say it is impossible to make a living wage once all costs are accounted for. They are the ones taking all the risk, while the platforms are making a steady profit at their expense. Companies like Uber, Deliveroo and TaskRabbit counter the accusation saying they are creating flexible and empowering work (Young, 2018). They add that contractors are free to walk away if the work does not suit them or if they are not earning enough. According to Ravenelle (2017), there is a mismatch between the reality of the job and the expectations put forward in the recruitment process. For example, Uber drivers are not free or independent as such as they are required to maintain a minimum of a 4.6 out of 5-star rating as well as an 80% acceptance rate in order to remain on the Uber platform. Further substantiating the lack of agency in the access economy, participants in this study reported having little control over the tasks they performed on the TaskRabbit platform.

## **1.3 Airbnb**

Airbnb is a very prominent example of the access economy, and the focus of this thesis. An overview and critical discussion of this accommodation-sharing platform follow.

### **1.3.1 Growth of Airbnb**

In October of 2007, Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia needed money to pay first month's rent of their San Francisco townhouse. A design conference was in town and all the hotels were booked. Their solution was simple: they put three air mattresses on the floor and listed their place online for \$80 a night. This was the first Airbnb (quite literally, an air bed and breakfast) (Salter, 2012). Chesky and Gebbia (with friend

Blecharczyk) – co-founders of Airbnb – rose from these humble beginnings to become the world’s largest shared accommodation provider, serving over 50 million guests in 191 countries worldwide (Airbnb, 2015; McRae, 2015; Salter, 2012; Varma, Jukic, Pestek, Schultz, & Nestorov, 2016). Airbnb has grown into an online platform that allows individuals looking for a place to stay to connect with people who have space to provide. In this way, Airbnb provides an alternative to hotels as users can search all housing offers from homeowners and pick an affordable and unique place to stay that fits their needs. Airbnb constantly is making changes and optimizing the design of its service to keep pace with growing travel demands and the rapidly shifting technology landscape.

Airbnb gained popularity in April 2014 after its seventh round of funding, at which point it was valued at \$10 billion (Spector, Macmillian, & Rusli, 2014). As of September 2016, the company had a valuation of \$30 billion (Farrell & Bensinger, 2016). Airbnb’s 2015 Summer Report reported that summer travel globally had grown from approximately 47,000 in 2010 to nearly 17 million Airbnb guests in 2015 (Airbnb, 2015). From 2015 to 2016, the annual growth in Canadian Airbnb unit supply almost doubled from 52,000 active Airbnb units to a little over 100,500 respectively (The CRBE Tourism & Leisure Group, 2017). The CBRE Tourism & Leisure Group (2017) reported that as of 2016, for every entire-home Airbnb listing in Canada, there were 6.5 hotel-room listings. Airbnb continues to experience significant growth in Canada. For example, Canada’s Airbnb sector composed of a mere 1.3% of the combined hotel and Airbnb supply in 2014. Airbnb’s market share grew to 5.2% in 2016 and was projected to increase to 8% by the end of 2017 (The CRBE Tourism & Leisure Group, 2017). According to Bailetti (2012), Airbnb owes this quick global expansion to the following:

- (1) Short-term rental is a problem that is pervasive globally
- (2) As a system, Airbnb facilitates and encourages entrepreneurship
- (3) Airbnb uses web-based processes that allow for business efficacy and innovation

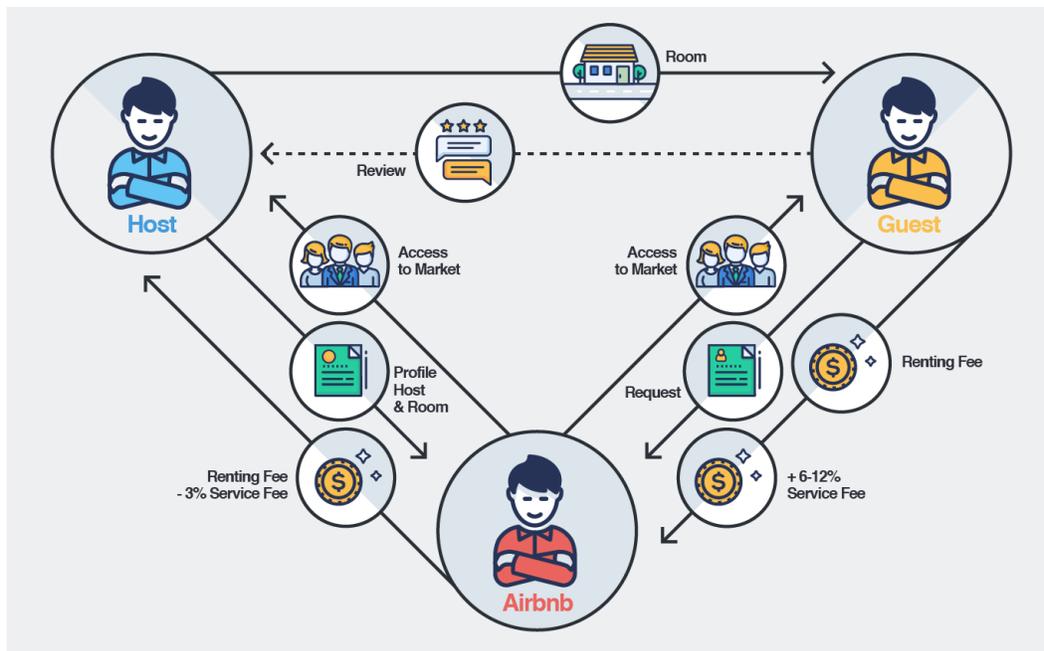
According to Varma et al. (2016), it is these web-based processes that put Airbnb in the league of the big hotel chains. Statistics Canada (2017) reported that 4.2% of Canadians used shared-accommodation services, such as Airbnb, from November 2015 to October 2016. Further, adults aged 25 to 34 years used shared-accommodation the most in Canada within this time frame, followed by 35 to 44 year olds, and 18 to 24 year olds. Hosts are usually much older than guests, and over the age of 40 (Airbnb, 2016; Airbnb, 2017a).

### **1.3.2 Airbnb’s Business Models**

Before Airbnb entered the market, the hospitality industry was a relatively consistent market where large players, such as Hilton, the Marriott and Intercontinental, coexisted with numerous small

hotels. Airbnb did not follow the standards set by hotels or the online travel agencies (OTAs) but instead it sidestepped them by directly connecting customers with homeowners through a platform network in place of owning the offered accommodations as hotels did. Despite this, Airbnb differentiated itself from traditional players in the industry by offering comparably cheaper accommodations that enables customers to live like a local as opposed to just visiting the destination. From a business perspective, it is key to illustrate how Airbnb distinguishes itself from the traditional hospitality industry by comparing the pipeline business model with the innovative platform model. Pipeline business models are characterised as one-sided markets where value is created upstream and pushed onto the market. Thus, hotels have to control tangible assets as they invest in real estate which is designed and built according to upstream requirements (Zervas et al., 2017; Parker, Van Alstyne & Choudary, 2016). After pushing their real estate onto the markets, hotels have to convert users to customers as they do not receive value from a network, but only generate revenue when customers are using their product. Unlike pipelines, platform business models (such as Airbnb) are two-, or even multi-sided, markets where users are actively co-creating content and value. By offering their accommodation on the platform, users can become producers. Only through interaction do the platform and the network become assets, and the short-rental units become products, for Airbnb. Platforms may use network effects and hence, would have no value without their user base. The disruption of the hospitality industry by Airbnb is also supported by research which has estimated that hotels are currently losing \$450 million of direct revenue per year to Airbnb (Mahmoud, 2016).

The business model, Canvas, will be used to discuss the components of Airbnb's business (Frick & Ali, 2013) as depicted in Figure 3. First, the customer segments of Airbnb consist of hosts and guests. Hosts can be differentiated based on the type of accommodation provided as well as the location. Guests can be distinguished by travel type, demographic, income bracket and interest. Second, Airbnb creates different value propositions for each user type. For hosts, Airbnb offers the opportunity to generate additional income as well the convenience and overall safety for platform-related processes involved in joining the platform and booking. Guests can conveniently choose from a variety of different types of accommodations which are often cheaper than hotels, and experience destinations more authentically.



**Figure 3. Airbnb's Business Model.** Retrieved from <https://www.code-brew.com/2018/05/08/airbnb-hospitality-accommodation-redefined/>

Airbnb offers its guests three different home types. “Entire place” gives the guest access to the whole space. “Private room” refers to an Airbnb where the guest is provided their own private room with common areas. Finally, a guest may also book a “shared room” (Airbnb, 2018a). Airbnb also provides some quite unusual types of accommodations, including treehouses, yurts, castles and RVs. In addition to providing guests with a wide selection of choices, Airbnb also provides these accommodations within a lower price bracket. These short-term rentals can be anywhere between 30 and 60 percent cheaper than traditional hotel rooms (Yaraghi & Ravi, 2017). Both user groups benefit from the online rating systems, dispute resolution and the overall “trust by design” (Aufmann, 2018) that Airbnb offers as a platform. Airbnb encourages guests to pay and communicate with hosts through the platform interface for transaction security, as well as to look at verified profiles and reviews online before booking a reservation (Airbnb, 2017b). In regard to customer acquisition and marketing, Airbnb employs social media and word-of-mouth channels. Social media plays a key role in facilitating the initial contact and continual communication between the host and guest, and aids the transaction to completion (Yannopoulou, Moufahim & Bian, 2013). User-generated branding, through the host’s profile and listing information, helps to inform the user’s decision-making process (Yannopoulou et al, 2013). Airbnb offers its users a great level of control, flexibility and accessibility by allowing bookings to be done via computer, phone or tablet (Airbnb, 2015; Varma et al., 2016; Yaraghi & Ravi, 2017). To help manage the actual transaction, Airbnb focuses on its mobile app and website, with the latter being very user-friendly with good search functionality (Yannopoulou et al., 2013).

Next, their customer relationships with hosts are mainly based on the platform's ability to generate income, provide quality guests and manage problematic issues. For both user groups, Airbnb's customer relationship is founded on dealing with customers in a manner that is both appropriate and timely, while still managing bad behaviour and risk. In respect to revenue streams, Airbnb generates revenue by charging a service fee to rental guests (5-15%), rental hosts (3-5%) and event hosts (20%) (Airbnb, 2017c). Moreover, in brief, Airbnb's key activities can be separated in managing network effects, growing user base and satisfying current users. Further, Airbnb's key resources are its network effects, listings and requests, user-generated content on web pages, technology and data, brand, platform and its skilled employees. Airbnb's key partnerships include hosts, guests, investors, payment processors, lobbyists and corporate travel partners. Finally, with regards to its cost structure, the main costs arising from this business model consist of customer acquisition costs, development costs of new features and ongoing improvements, expansion costs and payroll for permanent employees (Mahmoud, 2016; Bailetti et al., 2012).

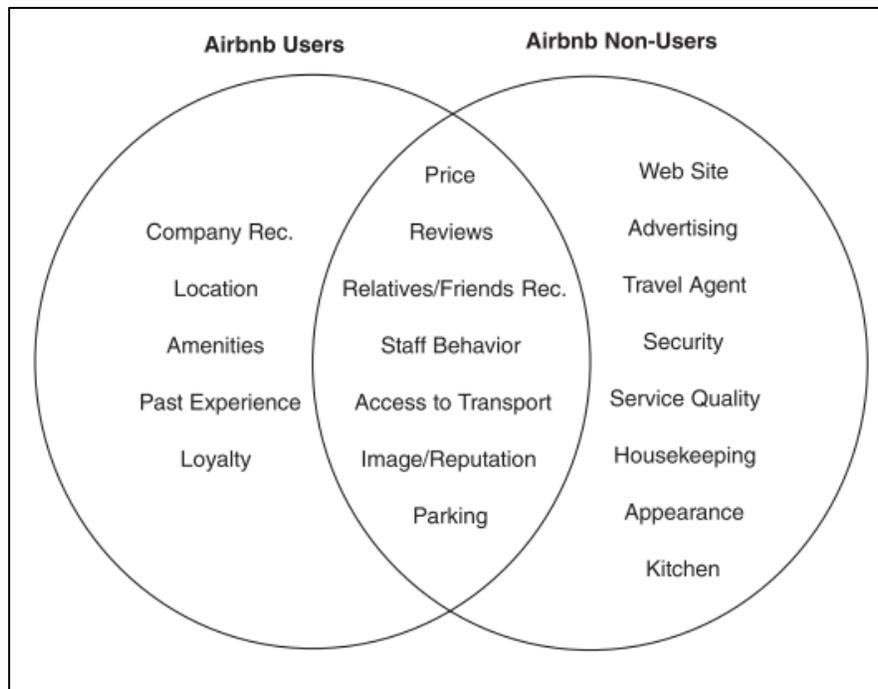
There are various suppliers for accommodation of a commercial and private nature and search engines on the Internet provide enormous amounts of information. For this reason, the suppliers have a relatively low bargaining power. Buyers, on the other hand, can make use of this broad spectrum of choices and pick what best suits them. This fact, together with Airbnb's highly interactive review-based offerings, give buyers a high bargaining power (Yaraghi & Ravi, 2017; Aufman, 2018; Bailetti et al., 2012). Consequently, the threat of substitute products is low as there are already a large variety of products on the market that seem to satisfy the customers' demands. High initial capital investments for real estate or websites as well as the importance of network effects keep the threat of new entrants low, while rivalry among existing competitors is high as there is a great number of players competing for a limited number of travelers (Frick & Ali, 2013). Unlike traditional players in the hospitality industry, Airbnb, again, situates itself as a third-party intermediary in the host-guest interaction, and avoids the real estate and operational costs of hotels. To put this in perspective, Canada's hotel sector has spent \$6 billion in capital investments between 2014 and 2017, whereas no additional expenditure was incurred by Airbnb during this time period, since the latter "repurposes" existing assets (The CRBE Tourism & Leisure Group, 2017). Airbnb has created its own distinct identity online, separate from traditional hotels. There are other providers of short-term rentals and accommodations, such as Homestay and VRBO (Guttentag, 2015), that also offer users a great level of control, flexibility and accessibility by allowing bookings to be done via computer, phone or tablet (Airbnb, 2015; Varma et al., 2016; Yaraghi & Ravi, 2017). However, Airbnb still remarkably stands out from the rest.

Airbnb's future progression shows no sign of stopping with sources going as far as estimating a revenue of \$3.5 billion by 2020. However, Airbnb's increase in size is certain to put increased pressure on its operations by external entities such as competitors, governments, providers and consumers.

Competitors, including hotels and start ups, can attempt to copy Airbnb's business model and differentiate themselves in ways that they may capitalize on Airbnb's untapped potential. Former pipeline operations are sure to adapt platform-specific attributes in the future. With Airbnb active in over 191 countries, government intervention is an unavoidable challenge due to the high variety of regulators and legislations that Airbnb will have to adapt to in time. Although the estimated increase in renters and homeowners that operate through Airbnb is good for the estimated future revenue, it also implies that quality control could become a much larger challenge in the future. In summation, Airbnb is clearly disrupting the hospitality industry enabled through new technologies such as the Internet and a trend towards more authentic means of travel. Airbnb employed an innovative business model and made great use of network efforts. Although Airbnb faces various challenges over the next years, the platform will undeniably continue to grow their market share and network.

### **1.3.3 Motivations to use Airbnb**

Varma et al. (2016) found that Airbnb is not a perfect substitute to hotels. While users do believe that Airbnb serves the needs of young adults, families and those with less disposable income well, it is not preferred in business travel and users do not express a preference for or loyalty towards this accommodation provider over an alternate for regular purposes. Figure 4 summarizes the motivational factors, as identified by Varma et al. (2016), for the decisions that Airbnb users and non-users make in their accommodation selection. While price, access to transport and reviews were described as deciding factors for both Airbnb and hotel users, considerations of security, service quality and housekeeping have dissuaded some users from using Airbnb (Varma et al., 2016).

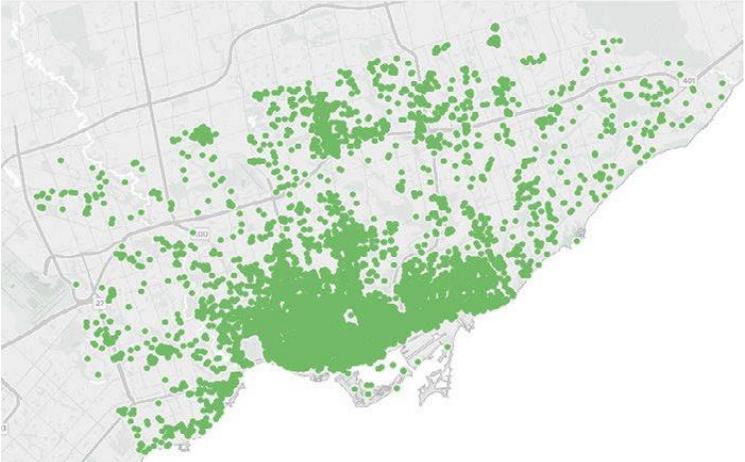


**Figure 4. Factors for Selection of Lodging Facility (Varma et al., 2016)**

### **1.3.4 Impact on Housing and Hotel Industry**

Airbnb hosts can list entire homes, apartments, private rooms or shared rooms for accommodation (Inside Airbnb, 2017a). As of June 2017, 61.9% of Airbnb listings in Toronto are located within entire home/apartment dwellings (Inside Airbnb, 2017b; Jamasi & Hennessy, 2016) or in other words, the owner purchased property to use entirely to provide peer-to-peer accommodation services. This is contrary to Airbnb’s claims that users primarily rent out only a room within their dwelling, and that too only occasionally (Inside Airbnb, 2017a). Airbnb insists that the average Canadian rents out their place four to five nights every month, earning about \$4000 to \$5000 a month to stay financially afloat (BC Almanac, 2016). Furthermore, four out of ten Toronto hosts have multiple Airbnb listings. Inside Airbnb (2017b) ranks Toronto Heritage Residences and Toronto Suite Rentals as the two top hosts, by number of listings. Neither of these Airbnb providers are residential home dwellers looking to make some side income, but instead are quasi-business entities earning sizeable incomes. This resonates with findings from the 2014 report by the New York Attorney General’s Office, which analyzed Airbnb’s private bookings between 2010 and mid-2014. During this period, 72% of these reservations violated existing New York state and municipal law. In addition, a considerable proportion (36%) of the hosts of these listings were large-scale commercial users, running multimillion-dollar operations (Schneiderman, 2014). This finding has also been supported by other reports that show a large share of Airbnb host revenue coming from commercial rentals (Stulberg, 2017).

Airbnb, like other access economies, is fast-growing in Canadian metropolitan areas, such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver (Yaraghi & Ravi, 2017). In 2016 alone, hosts from these three main cities together earned \$430 million in revenue (Wachsmuth, Kerrigan, Chaney & Shillolo, 2017). Currently, a little over a quarter of Toronto’s listings are concentrated in the downtown core. Figure 5 shows the waterfront, Liberty Village area, and the Church-Yonge corridor as areas of high concentration.



**Figure 5. Geographical distribution of Airbnb listings in Toronto, as of July 2016 (Jamasi & Hennessy, 2016)**

In July 2016, there were 10,156 Airbnb listings in Toronto, as compared to the 5,611 short-term rentals available in Vancouver. This is striking as in 2011, there were no online Airbnb listings in Toronto. Between the year-end of 2013 and mid-2016, Airbnb almost tripled in its number of Toronto listings as shown in Figure 6 (Jamasi & Hennessy, 2016).



**Figure 6. Number of Airbnb listings in Toronto (2013-2016) (Jamasi & Hennessy, 2016)**

Home and apartment units that are accommodating short Airbnb stays are removed from being long-term housing options for residents. The issues of rental supply and housing affordability are already of great concern to local residents and policymakers, so the proliferation of Airbnb adds an extra pressure to Toronto's housing (Jamasi & Hennessy, 2016).

There is also discussion on how the hotel industry might feel the effects of Airbnb, though most hotel executives deny that Airbnb is having, or will have, any significant impact on their operations (Benner, 2017; Carr, 2014; Ting, 2017). This is contrary to the existing literature on the topic. Zervas et al. (2016) conducted a quantitative analysis on Airbnb listings data in Texas. The impact of Airbnb on hotel profitability was quite measurable: for every 1% increase in the number of Airbnb listings, a 0.05% loss of quarterly hotel revenue was seen. It was suggested that Airbnb is a rival to lower-end hotels which provide similar services and facilities and has not yet created its niche in the higher-end market. This finding was supported by Varma et al. (2016). Zervas et al. (2016) did not believe that tighter regulation for hosts to only have single listings will help level the playing field. The potential effects of Airbnb on housing availability, rental supply and profitability within the hotel industry present key regulatory issues facing policymakers and key stakeholders currently.

### **1.3.5 Regulative Response**

Municipalities across Canada and other jurisdictions around the globe are beginning to regulate Airbnb practices. In 2016, Quebec implemented a new law that requires individuals who use Airbnb for more than 31 consecutive days to have a renting permit and pay a hotel tax. Contravention of this law can lead to fines for individuals. In June 2017, the mayor of Toronto proposed new legal structures to mitigate Airbnb's effect on housing in the city. Propositions include disallowing primary residences to provide short-term rental accommodation, licensing Airbnb, and rezoning land for strictly short-term rental use (McQuigge, 2017). New Toronto by-laws, effective July 1, 2018 but pending discussions, is limiting Airbnb to principal residences only and individuals can rent out up to 3 rooms or the entire dwelling, whether it be a house, condo or apartment, through Airbnb for up to 180 days per year (Rider, 2017). The City of Toronto decided to respond in this way because there is a very low vacancy rate in the city. By putting new regulations on secondary suites (units that are not lived in by the principal owner and have a self-contained floor, such as a basement apartment) in the Toronto area, this decreases the number of secondary suites that will be used for short-term rentals as well as address the gradual displacement of long-term rentals. For example, the owner of the basement apartment can no longer rent it out as a short-term rental, but rather, look for a long-term tenant. As a result, this would increase the number of rental units available in the city of Toronto.

The housing market in Vancouver is similarly being impacted by Airbnb's presence as Toronto

and the city plans to stiffen regulations as well (BC Almanac, 2016). The impact of short-term rentals on both the affordability and availability of long-term housing has been identified in the academic literature (Barron, Kung & Proserpio, 2017; Lee, 2016; Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2017). Renting a whole apartment on Airbnb for fewer than 30 days is illegal in New York, while Anaheim, California has completely banned short-term rentals (Jamasi & Hennessy, 2016). In London, a new law limits Airbnb rental unit to 90 days a year while the limit is 60 in Amsterdam. In Berlin, Airbnb hosts cannot rent out spaces for more than half the year or will be fined €100,000 (\$104,000). In Paris, Airbnb collects local tourist taxes and hosts must be registered with the city (Gilbert, 2017). The aforementioned cities have imposed tighter regulations in response to the feared impact of Airbnb on the hotel industry, housing and tax revenue. However, they have yet to act on potential health and safety risks within Airbnb’s self-regulating system.

### 1.3.6 Comparing Airbnb and Hotel Practices

Hotels are the closest comparator to Airbnb, as they both offer short-term accommodation. However, the everyday workings of the hotelier and Airbnb host are very different, especially with respect to how both individuals prepare and operate. The hotel operator must abide by various regulations as they relate to food safety, fire code, building code, licensing, insurance and employment standards, as shown in Figure 7 (van den Steenhoven, 2015).

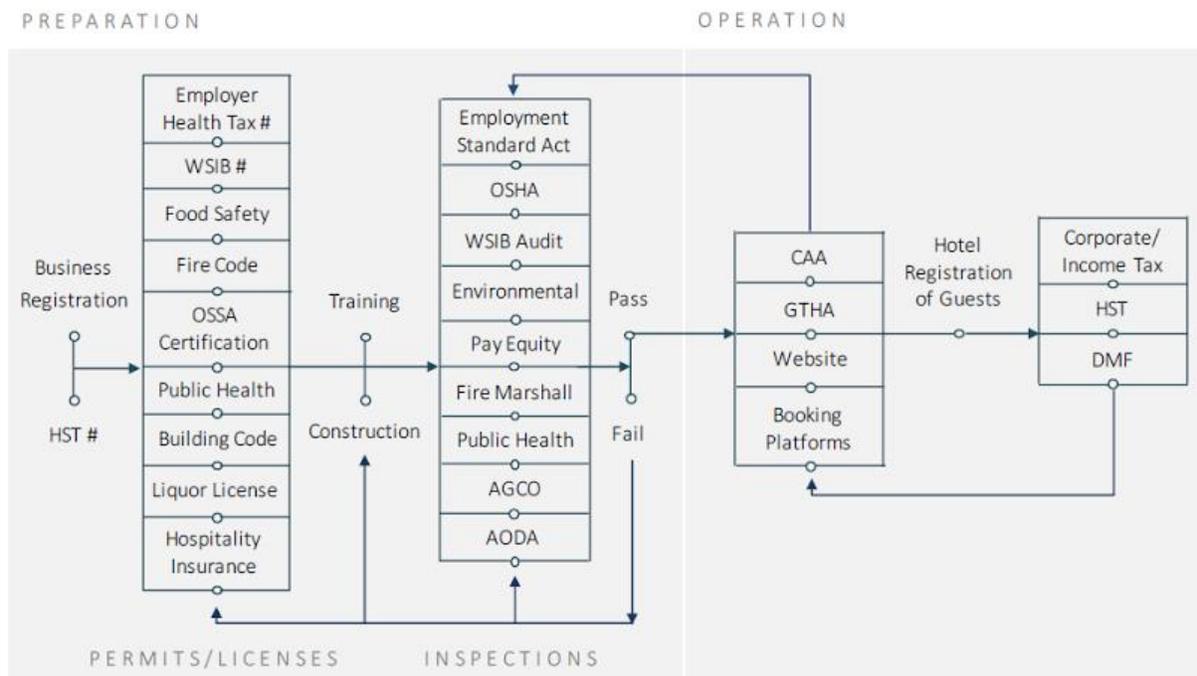
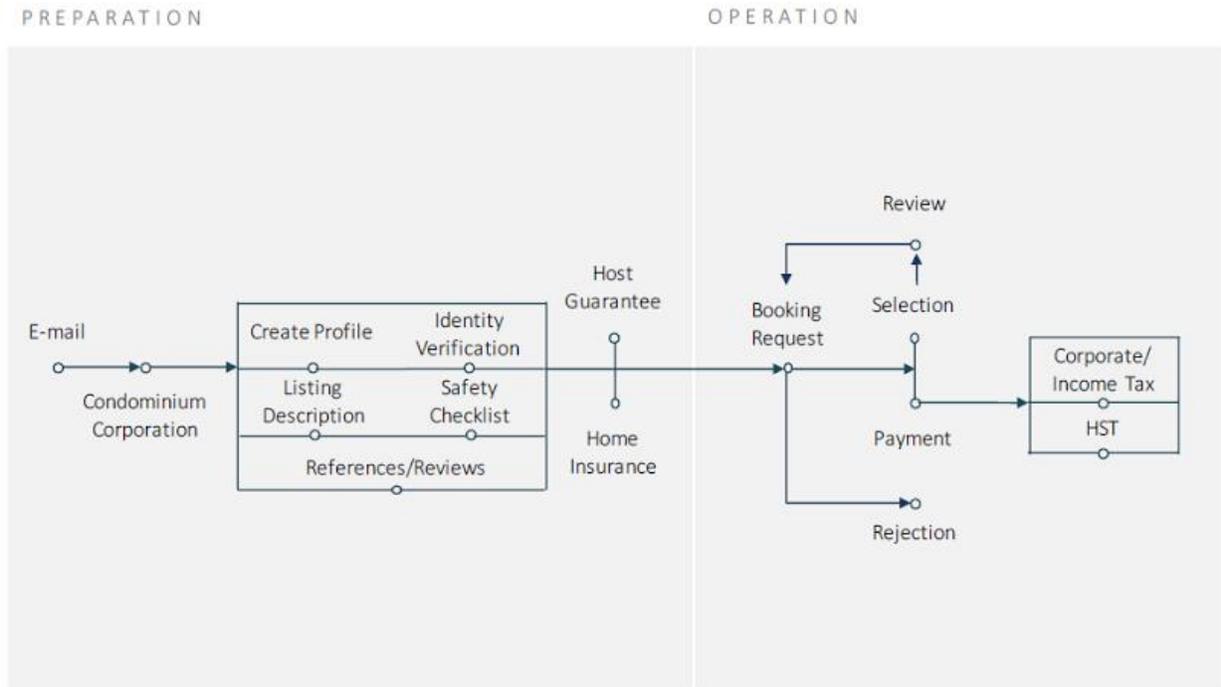


Figure 7. Journey of the Hotelier. Retrieved from (van den Steenhoven, 2015)

In contrast, Airbnb hosts enjoy many liberties and are given more leeway in their business dealings as shown in Figure 8 (van den Steenhoven, 2015).



**Figure 8. Journey of the Airbnb host. Retrieved from (van den Steenhoven, 2015)**

Airbnb hosts do not face any of the above hotel regulations, and the Airbnb business, or app, avoids responsibility and legal liability by positioning itself as a third-party entity merely facilitating the transaction between the host and guest. Airbnb hosts avoid paying the taxes imposed on hotel owners, such as expensive property taxes and value added tax (VAT), further lowering the already low overhead. Airbnb hosts also benefit from additional tax-free allowances (Gilbert, 2017; Jamasi & Hennessy, 2016), such as the £2000 sharing-economy tax allowance in Britain (Hern, 2016). By design, Airbnb provides accommodation-sharing with an unmatched and possibly unfair competitive advantage over hotels.

Airbnb has adopted a rather laissez-faire attitude in regards to ensuring health and safety of its users. Airbnb encourages hosts to install smoke and carbon monoxide detectors and offered free detectors in 2017 to the first 36,000 hosts who requested this installation. However, Airbnb hosts are working in silos: Airbnb does not confirm that these devices are present in rental units themselves and refer hosts to local laws for installation guidelines. Airbnb also suggests hosts meet safety regulations, regularly check appliances and equipment, and remove hazards from the living space (Airbnb, 2017d). Health and safety requirements and standards may, or may not, be upheld by Airbnb hosts (Jamasi & Hennessy, 2016) and

no inspections to assure the safety of hosts and guests occur. This is in contrast to hotel practices wherein it is required that hotels adhere to health and safety standards, as set by the government.

Airbnb is a largely self-regulating and informal system with various implications to health and safety. Risk is inherent in any industry, and the hospitality industry is no different. However, despite its importance, there is scant literature on the health and safety situations of Airbnb hosts and guests. Having said that, a considerable amount of work has been done on the occupational health and safety of hotel workers. Individuals in the hotel and other travel accommodation industries work in less than desirable conditions and are heavily exposed to occupational health and safety risks. Low socioeconomic status and lack of fluency in English are just two factors that elevate these health and safety risks and make these workers very vulnerable in the workplace. A disproportionate number of individuals work as housekeepers and room cleaners while suffering acute traumas, the highest injury rates and highest rates of musculoskeletal disorders. Existing literature identifies physical (“repetitive movement, lack of ergonomic equipment”); chemical (“cleaning products, latex gloves”); biological (“broken glassware, used hypodermic needles, contaminated waste, human excreta and mold/microbial contaminants”); and psychosocial (“work stress, low control of works, lack of supervisor or co-worker support, lack of respect, lack of recognition, lack of promotion prospects, harassment, violence, bullying and discrimination”) risk factors that hotel cleaners face day-to-day (Hsieh, Apostolopoulos, Hatzudis, & Sonmez, 2014). Adhering to OHS standards at the workplace, larger union representation, employers being more involved and taking all reasonable measures to ensure OHS at the workplace, first-aid training of staff, job rotation, job redesign, and stress management are some of the “multilevel, multisectoral and multi-stakeholder interventions” identified as possible strategies to improve the OHS situation of these workers (Hsieh, Apostolopoulos, Hatzudis, & Sonmez, 2014). There is a high incidence of work-related pain amongst room cleaners and the pain being severe enough warrants lost time or medical attention, however despite this, the literature shows that most workers do not report their work-related pain to management or workers’ compensation or if they do, are inadequately supported (Premji & Krause, 2010).

Besides physical well-being, there is also a growing body of literature on the social well-being of these workers. Success in the hotel industry is very much reliant on the hospitality that support staff display. Having said that, this can be challenging since hotel workers perform work that can be rather physically demanding or burdensome. Lee et al.’s (2014) study examines fatigue and associated factors, as experienced by hotel workers, due to their implications to work and health. A survey of 1,320 hotel employees working at 5 Seoul hotels was conducted. General and occupational characteristics were examined that could exacerbate emotional labour and fatigue levels. A strong association between hotel employees’ emotional labour, non-standard work schedules and fatigue was found. The authors noted that the literature shows the negative effects of emotional dissonance on one’s psychological well-being, musculoskeletal system, job

satisfaction and organizational commitment. Female displayed levels of fatigue greater than those of males. Shift work and sleep satisfaction, both of which are highly prevalent in hotel work, for female employees was strongly correlated with a high level of fatigue. Support from emotionally intelligent supervisors and colleagues were suggested to mitigate the negative effects of emotional labour, emotional burnout, alienation and fatigue.

Ozturk et al. (2014) studied the relationship between job characteristics, affective commitment and job satisfaction in the hotel industry in Turkey. Job satisfaction and organizational commitment are especially important in this industry as they are directly reflected in the quality of services that the employee provides for the customer. Affective commitment and job satisfaction were found to be strongly correlated. Contrary to previous literature findings, variety and task identify did not significantly impact job satisfaction and affective commitment, due to the short tenure and repetitive nature of frontline employees as the authors suggested. The findings showed that interaction, feedback, and autonomy were key determinants of affective commitment and job satisfaction.

Though the work environments of an Airbnb host and hotel worker are not identical, both individuals do belong to the same industry. These experiences of hotel workers are important to keep in mind as they may extend to potential health and safety risks faced by Airbnb hosts.

### **1.3.7 Risks and Discrimination for Airbnb Guests**

Since Airbnb is an unregulated community marketplace based more on peer-to-peer ratings than formal policy structures (McNamara, 2015), guest health and safety is left to the discretion of the host. The host may choose to adopt guidelines and standards of care similar to what the guest would expect from a stay at a hotel, and provide their guests with a clean, safe and secure living space. Conversely, the host may neglect, or give less importance to, health and safety. In this way, the health and safety situation of guests remain uncertain and inconsistent from one Airbnb to another.

The success of Airbnb relies on a lot of things, not least the capital infused into it. Especially noteworthy is the important role of Airbnb's online reputation system in developing trust between users. Furthermore, Airbnb is structured such that both parties play a very active role in the transaction, from start to finish. In theory, the online reviews are in place to better inform the guest's decision-making in selecting accommodation (Ert et al., 2016) and can help steer guests away from hosts and rental units with repeated negative experiences. However, several studies of online review websites, such as Amazon, Yelp, TripAdvisor, and Airbnb, have consistently found a positivity bias in the reviews provided (Bridges & Vasquez, 2016). Further, with more transparency and identifying information, also emerges issues of racial, age and gender discrimination within the system (Fisman & Luca, 2016; Yaraghi & Ravi, 2017). For example, a Harvard study found that users with distinctively African-American names are 16% less likely

than users with distinctly White names to be accepted as Airbnb guests (Edelman & Luca, 2014). Consequently, the true value of Airbnb's online reviews to its users is questionable.

Again, there is scant academic literature on Airbnb in relation to sexual assault, privacy violation, violence and discriminatory behaviour. However, media reports are available and identify troubling events although it is impossible to know just how widespread they are. In Los Angeles, however, a woman filed a lawsuit against Airbnb after allegedly being sexually assaulted by an Airbnb "superhost" (Vora, 2017). A "superhost" is a title given to distinguished Airbnb hosts who repeatedly receive good reviews online (Liang, Schukert, Law, & Chen, 2017). The "superhost" involved with the assault had a history of battery and domestic violence, which would have been revealed to the guest had a background check been conducted (Vora, 2017). Airbnb conducts limited background checks "where records are available" (Airbnb, 2017e) and does not commit to providing complete criminal backgrounds of its users. Instead, it encourages hosts and guests to be "sensible" and use other vetting tools assess one another's suitability (Airbnb, 2017e). From November 2015 to October 2016, Statistics Canada (2017) reported an almost equal number of male and female shared-accommodation users at the national level, similarly to what was seen in most provinces. A similar sex distribution is seen within the global host community, where 55% of Airbnb hosts are women (Airbnb, 2017f). Since women make up a large proportion of the Airbnb community, it is important to consider gender dynamics in the Airbnb system. Privacy is an additional concern. For example, in Taiwan, a couple found out that their stay was under surveillance when they discovered hidden cameras inside smoke detectors at their Airbnb accommodation. The couple had based their selection of the apartment on the very positive reviews it received online (General, 2017), which reinforces the fact that online reviews are not always the most reliable sources of information. Lastly, in Amsterdam, a South African guest was verbally abused with racist undertones and pushed down a flight of stairs when she was late checking out of the rental (Holmes & Farberov, 2017).

In the aforementioned instances, it was the hosts' operations that allowed for the health, safety and security of one or more guests in the premises to be compromised. These are just a few of the many possible health, safety and psychosocial considerations as they pertain to Airbnb guests, with some even extendable to hosts. Unfortunately, there are no existing literature or records to show the prevalence of these types of incidents and accurately quantify the extent of the problem. Nevertheless, they suggest a need for better measures and monitoring to protect the health and safety of guests within the Airbnb community.

## **1.4 Study Rationale**

Airbnb is the world's largest shared accommodation provider (McRae, 2015) and continues to see annual growth. Though Airbnb accommodation-sharing is a relatively new phenomenon, a new form of

entrepreneurial work is emerging with various social and economic implications. There is ongoing discussion of potential tighter regulation of Airbnb, and it is very important to include the health and safety perspective in this conversation. There is no existing regulatory framework in Toronto, or Ontario for that matter, for health and safety within the Airbnb marketplace, as compared to hotels that strongly comply with health and safety regulations. Not only do Airbnb's practices create an unlevelled playing field (Danseyar, 2017), they also neglect health and safety risks inherent in the system. Existing literature has concentrated on the economic impact of Airbnb housing and tourism, user motivation and consumer behaviour in the system. To date, the health and safety side to Airbnb is not garnering the attention of policymakers, lobbyists and the public at large. The health and safety of Airbnb presents a yet unexplored terrain. Little evidence has been gathered on this topic in Canada or internationally, so the research is warranted. With these gaps in mind, the purpose of this study was to see how Airbnb hosts and guests identify, assess and manage health and safety risks. The following objectives and associated research questions guided this research:

**Objective 1:** To document the experiences (both positive and negative) of hosts and guests in relation to Airbnb health and safety:

- What are the health and safety standpoints and experiences of Airbnb hosts and guests?
- How do hosts and guests understand and perceive Airbnb health and safety?
- What challenges do hosts and guests face when ensuring health and safety?
- What strategies do hosts and guests use to protect themselves against health and safety risks?

**Objective 2:** To identify possible changes to improve health and safety within the system:

- What changes in Airbnb's design and practices would better protect health and safety of both parties?
- What are the implications for policy changes?

My thesis work provided insight into the health and safety situations of Airbnb hosts and guests, and a better understanding of unmet and unaddressed needs of these users. To the best of my knowledge, my thesis project was the first of its focus, qualitative or quantitative, to address this major gap in the literature and stressed the importance of introducing user health and safety into current discussions on Airbnb's regulatory framework and best practices.

## Chapter 2

### Methods

This chapter provides an overview of the theoretical perspective and study methodology, and accounts for the choices made in the recruitment, data collection and data analysis stages of the overall study. For this thesis, the term *user* refers to hosts and guests as a collective.

#### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

Airbnb is a relatively new phenomenon and therefore, the health and safety situation of its users is very poorly understood, if understood at all. This study aimed to investigate this largely uncharted area within health research. In contrast to quantitative research that limits participants' experiences to certain predetermined response categories, the exploratory nature of this research called for a qualitative study design to really hone into the individual social experience. Since risk perception and risk management have important social dimensions, this study sought to address a clear knowledge gap as well as capture the individual contextualized understanding of the health and safety risks involved (Flick, 2009). At this early stage of knowledge, a qualitative design allowed me access to more in-depth data to gain critical insight into the 'what', in addition to the 'how' and 'why', of participants' Airbnb experiences, as they pertain to users' risk perceptions and risk management (Salazar, Crosby, & DiClemente, 2015). Qualitative methods enabled emphatic understanding (rather than external explanation) of users' meanings, interpretations and motives underpinning their behavior in the Airbnb system.

More specifically, the findings of this study were situated within the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism is in sharp contrast to positivism that posits that society is an objective reality made up of social structures and constructs that exist independently of the individuals living within them (Crotty, 1998). A positivist stance is that sociology can, and should, study society using methods and procedures like those used in the natural sciences, elucidating cause and effect mechanisms of human behaviour and predictions of future trends for example. The use of standardized research methods and careful sampling techniques enables the collection of statistical data that is quantifiable, reliable and generalizable to the overall population. This form of inquiry involves personal detachment of the research.

Conversely, differences in people's interpretations of the social world are well-embraced and captured with interpretivism. A key idea of interpretivism is that the social world exists according to how it is perceived and interpreted by people. Interpretivist researchers approach the social world as something to be understood by studying the "meanings" human construct and negotiate through their interactions. The social world is separate from the natural world and should be studied differently.

Understanding of the world is achieved by taking account of multiple realities as well as different perspectives and views. The focus is on understanding different situations in the context of different times, places and people. This stance is especially appropriate for the research topic of interest as each user has a very individual experience of navigating the Airbnb system and create different meaning from the world around them. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to make sense of users' thought processes; however, it is important to note that their understanding of their experiences has very much shaped their behavior with one another and how they function as part of a much bigger system. Table 1 contrasts these two schools of thought: positivism and interpretivism (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 1994; Williams, 2003; Fletcher, 2017).

**Table 1. Positivism vs Interpretivism**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>POSITIVISM</b>	<b>INTERPRETIVISM</b>
Social phenomena	Social fact	Social action
Orientation	Objective	Subjective
Knowledge	Scientific	Interpretive
Truth	Individual	Collective
	Validity and rigour	Multiple realities
	Generalizable	Conceptual
	One reality	Situation specific
Research problem	What? How should?	How and why?
Research position	Limited number of issues Seeking generalizability	Complex number of issues Seeking explanation and/or understanding
	Emphasis on theory-testing and measuring	Emphasis on theory building, meaning and understanding
	Prior theory used to generate hypothesis	Prior theory may be used at various times
	Deductive	Inductive
	Relatively structured	Relatively unstructured/semi-structured
	Researcher objective, external perspective	Researcher involvement as instrument
Method	Explanation of causes through theories and laws	Understanding through ideal types
Ontology	Agency as result of universal laws	Agency as expression of meaning
Epistemology	Perception/prediction sustains knowledge	Contextualized knowledge
Focus	Predict and explain natural laws	Understand social practices and relations

## **2.2 Study Design**

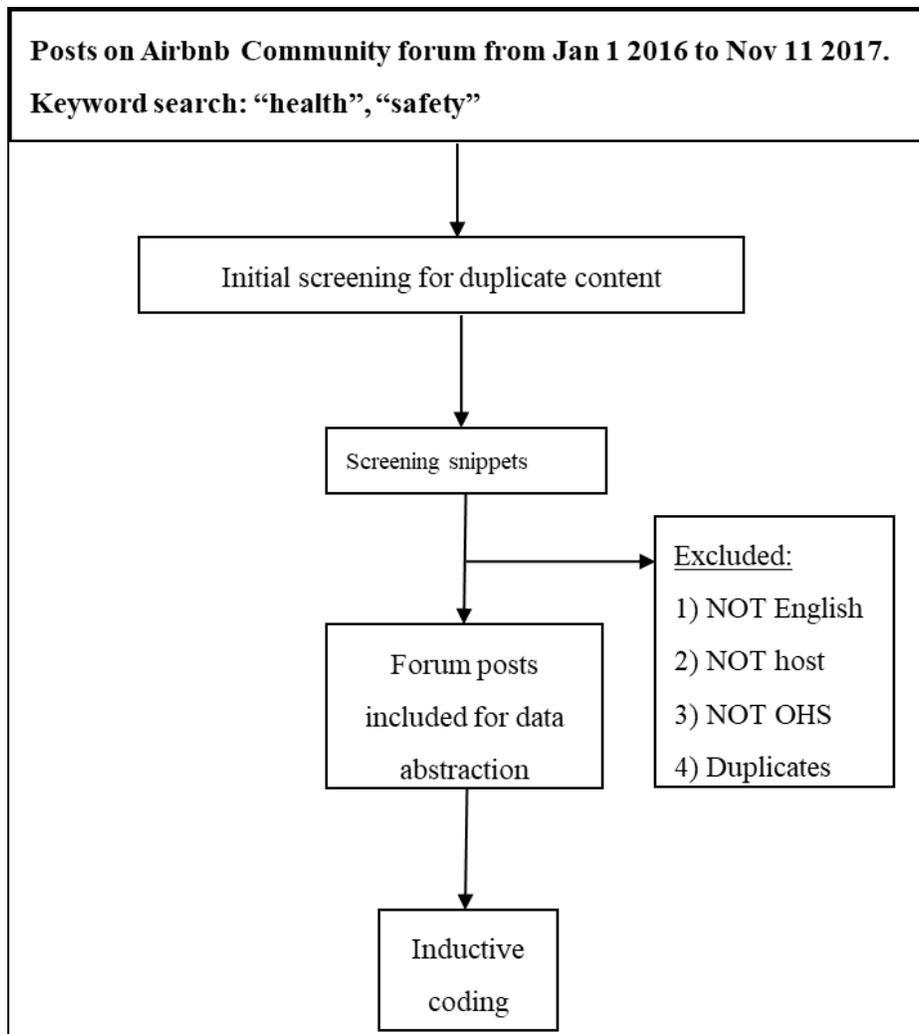
This study employed a multi-method research design. The two sources of qualitative data were online posts by hosts on the Airbnb Community forum as well as in-depth interviews with hosts and guests. Particularly, a sequential approach was used with document analysis of posts followed by interviews. Drawing from two different sources of qualitative data, a multi-method design allowed me to “triangulate” the experiences of risk perception and risk management, as described in online forum posts and interviews, in order to paint a fuller picture of user experience and corroborate findings (Frost et al., 2009; Morse, 2003; Bowen, 2009). The purpose of triangulation was to understand the differences in the two sources of data, not to achieve convergence (Bowen, 2009). The qualitative data that emerged is not numerical, but very contextual in nature (Frost et al., 2010). It provided me with thick descriptions of associated meanings and processes by those who provided them. Thick description was important because it allowed a holistic understanding of the interaction between the participant and their environment and in turn, illuminated systemic connections.

## **2.3 Data Source – Forum Data**

Document analysis is a very systematic approach to looking at documents, whether they be paper or electronic material. Several types of documents can be used including advertisements, agendas, brochures and newspaper clippings. It is a very time-efficient, feasible (due to the publicly available information), cheap (again, because of the internet) and non-obtrusive means to retrieve information relevant to the research topic (Bowen, 2009). I used document analysis to capture what Airbnb hosts described online about their occupational health and safety situation. There are a number of forums and websites that relay this information including Airbnb’s listing reviews, Airbnb Community forum, Airbnb hosts’ Facebook page, TripAdvisor, FlyerTalk, Fodors, Feedreader, airhostsforum, Reddit and Quora. For my Master’s thesis, I limited the document analysis to posts by Airbnb hosts on the Airbnb Community forum. This forum was most useful because its content is well-organized, and it has very good search functionality. The forum was suitable because it connects hosts in the Airbnb community. A limitation was that Airbnb created the forum, and likely monitors the forum posts from time to time. I did an initial scan of posts and found rather detailed accounts of both positive and negative experiences, which suggested to me that this forum would be very appropriate for analysis. Having said that, I was mindful of the potential for a misrepresentation of the health and safety situations of guests during data extraction and analysis, as those individuals with the most positive or most negative experiences are also most likely to speak about them. The two research questions that guided my search of online forum posts were:

1. What health and safety risks do hosts identify and describe experiencing day-to-day?
2. What strategies do hosts use to prevent and manage these risks?

Figure 9 summarizes the step-wise fashion of the search process, with a detailed summary of search strategy and exclusion provided in Appendix A. A preliminary keyword search of the forum yielded thousands of results. Due to the great number of forum posts (and trailing posts), the search keyword list was refined and shortened to only include “health” and “safety” information. The list included “health”, “healthy”, “unhealthy”, “safe”, “unsafe” and “safety”. After duplicates were deleted, 490 posts containing “health” information and 1597 posts relevant to “safety” were included. Online forum posts were sieved through again for irrelevance. Irrelevant posts were excluded from the inductive coding. Relevant posts were examined closely – the original post and trailing responses. Forum posts included for data abstraction were in the English language and contained information on occupational health and safety of Airbnb hosts. At this stage, posts irrelevant due to language (not in English language) or content (not OHS and not guest) were also discarded. The search was not limited to Ontario; had an international focus. A good majority of the posts were from hosts working the United States; other countries of residence included Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, the Netherlands, Israel, and New Zealand.



**Figure 9: Forum search**

## **2.4 Data Source – Interview data**

Airbnb hosts and guests acted as both expert consumers and lay experts. They were lay experts by virtue of their experiences, and interviewing them allowed me to tap into their “extensive knowledge of their own lives and [health and safety] conditions” (Prior, 2003), as opposed to a professional assessment of an outsider looking in. They were also expert consumers because Airbnb’s social media landscape enables consumer empowerment (Labrecque et al., 2013), whereby the expert consumer uses his or her voice to actively participate within the Airbnb marketplace. The perceptions and experiences of these expert consumers shape the reputation of services for future users. Capturing these lay experiences and opinions honed into individuals’ perspectives and positioned the health and safety risks in the day-to-day contexts within which hosts and guests live (Lawton, 2003; Williams, 2003). In this study, qualitative interviews

allowed for deep insight into users' thoughts, feelings, behaviour as well as subtleties in opinions, as they pertained to their Airbnb experiences (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008).

Interviews were semi-structured, and allowed participants flexibility to direct the flow of conversation. The location of interviews depended very much on the schedule and location of participants in respect to the researcher. Interviews with host participants were all conducted over the phone as they conducted their Airbnb practices in larger metropolitan and/or tourist areas, such as Toronto and Niagara Falls. The researcher resided in Waterloo and phone interviews eliminated the need for travel. Face-to-face interviews took place in a relaxed atmosphere conducive to social interaction, such as office spaces, coffee shops, cafeterias and other communal spaces. Guests, on the other hand, were all interviewed in person. Phone calls occurred in quiet spaces, primarily bookable conference rooms on the University of Waterloo campus. Despite time and resource limitations, face-to-face interviews were preferred by the researcher because nonverbal cues helped create a more contextualized and nuanced understanding of users' perceptions and experiences.

The participant was informed of the study's objectives and written consent was obtained before each interview (Appendices B and C). Interview guides (Appendices D and E for host and guest interview questions respectively) helped direct conversation towards the research domains of participant background, host/guest practices, health and safety, regulations and future improvements. Particularly, interview questions focused on participants' experience of Airbnb, the advantages and disadvantages of working/using Airbnb, Airbnb's communications and support to hosts and guests, and work and health issues including injury and illness prevention. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to a little over an hour in length. I used open-ended questions, probes, and follow-up questions to really understand and delve deeper into the participant's experiences and perspectives. Emphatic listening, sensitivity and a good rapport were very important to ensure the participant felt comfortable enough to really express his or her innermost thoughts and feelings to me (Salazar, Crosby, & DiClemente, 2015). During interviews, I avoided being directive and imposing my own framework of meanings and assumptions.

Interviews were audio-recorded. Field notes were carefully made during each interview to record initial impressions, interview context, non-verbal information and observational notes. At the end of the interview, I provided participants with a Letter of Appreciation (Appendix F) and asked them about their interest in receiving the aggregate results. Participants were informed of the arrangements in place to ensure confidentiality of data, the duration for which the data will be retained, and the purposes for which the data will be used. Preservation of the audio files during the study and dissemination phase is essential as it is the original record of data and contains many elements that preserve the flavour of the original speech and other contextual information. For example, tone of voice, hesitations and silences can all have

a strong impact on data interpretation. Audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim and entered into NVivo qualitative data software to help organize and manage the data for coding.

### 2.4.1 Sample

For this study, purposive sampling was used. This is an approach whereby participants are selected based on their relevance to understanding the social phenomenon of interest (Patton, 1990). Participants for interviews were selected based on their exposure to and experience with Airbnb as a host or guest. Airbnb hosts must have provided short-term rental accommodations for at least one year to be included while guests must have used Airbnb services at least thrice. I used length of experience as part of my inclusion/exclusion criteria to ensure participants had sufficient first-hand experience to be able to talk about it appropriately. Data collection took place in Ontario, which was analytically useful since I wanted to understand the Ontario context. Again, as Burman (1994) pointed out, the emphasis in qualitative research studies is on divergence and variety, rather than convergence and replicability. My goal, again, was not generalizability of findings but rich descriptions of the Airbnb phenomenon by those who have experienced it.

Being pragmatic, my sample size was a small and manageable number, yet large enough to provide thick description of experiences and make meaningful comparisons. The purposive sample consisted of eight hosts and nine guests. All the study participants lived in Ontario, predominantly in the Kitchener-Waterloo region and Greater Toronto Area. Airbnb reported that, as of September 2016, more than half the hosts in Ontario are female. Data from 2015 by Airbnb indicated that 53% of Ontario guests were female (Airbnb, 2016). I achieved close to a 60/40 female-male split in the gender composition of my host sample and 50/50 gender split in my guest sample, in order to have a representative sample. The age of hosts varied between 24 and 56 years, while guests were notably much younger, primarily in their mid-to-late twenties. Overall, hosts were employed and hosted on the side, while guests were mostly students at the University of Waterloo. While this may have limited the type of experiences shared with me because I restricted myself to individuals belonging to a certain age bracket and stage of life, an Airbnb user can both act as a provider and consumer of the service. Further, all host participants had experience using Airbnb as a guest. In this way, I ‘double-dipped’ with my host participant sample and asked them to share with me both their host and guest experiences. Four out of the eight total guest participants rented out entire dwellings as Airbnbs and remained off site during the duration of the guest’s stay. Guests preferred having access to their own private space, such as an apartment or a self-contained unit in a home. The average length of stay for an Airbnb guest was 3 nights, which was lower than 5.4 nights in Airbnb’s 2016 report (Airbnb, 2016). Tables 2 and 3 further detail the characteristics of study participants, hosts and guests respectively.

**Table 2. Characteristics of Host Sample**

Pseudonym	Date of Interview	Location	Age	Gender	Occupation	Type of Rental	USES G – uses as guest, IB – instant booking	Off-site or on-site host	Hosting Experience		
									# of Guests	# of Years	Mean length of stay
Amelie <sup>F</sup>	Feb 17, 2018	Toronto	38	F	Unemployed	House	G	Off site	/	3	2 nights to 4 months
Maria <sup>L</sup>	Jan 26, 2018	Toronto	49	F	Conference planner	Apartment	G, IB	Off site	/	4 or 5	A week
Monique <sup>F</sup>	Feb 12, 2018	Toronto	28	F	Former nurse	Vacation home	G	Off site	50	1.5	2 nights (winter), 2-7 nights (summer)
Norah <sup>W</sup>	Feb 12, 2018	Vineland	37	F	Engineer	Suite in home	G, IB	On site mostly	65	1	2 nights
Susan <sup>L</sup>	Mar 8, 2018	Florence	56	F	Actor, copywriter	Treehouse	G, IB	On site	100s	/	1 or 2 nights, 5 nights for retreat trips
Jacob <sup>L</sup>	Mar 14, 2018	Toronto	29	M	Hospitality experience, “works downtown”	Apartment	G	/	60	1	1 night to 1 month
Liam <sup>W</sup>	Apr 20, 2018	Toronto	24	M	Restaurant supervisor	Room in a house	G	On site	50 to 75	3	3 to 4 days
Tariq <sup>FP</sup>	May 24, 2018	Kawarthas	24	M	Software	Cottage	G	Off site	20	3	/

Note: Recruited using Facebook recruitment poster (<sup>FP</sup>), LinkedIn (<sup>L</sup>), Facebook (<sup>F</sup>) or word of mouth (<sup>W</sup>)

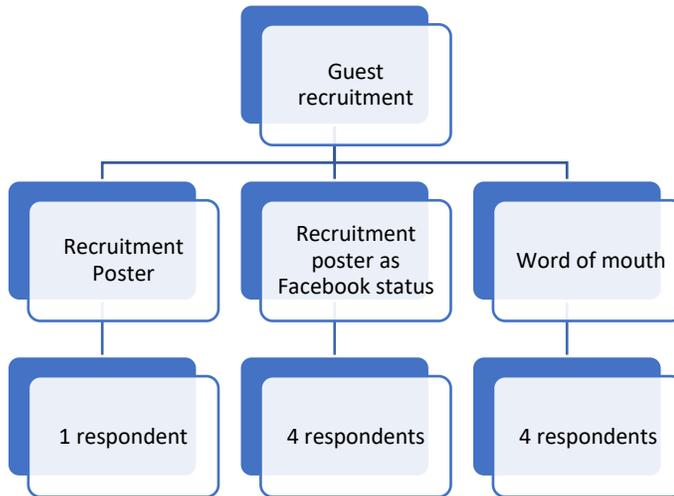
**Table 3. Characteristics of Guest Sample**

Pseudonym	Date of Interview	Location	Age	Gender	Occupation	Type of Rental	USES H – would host, IB – instant booking	Guest Experience		
								# of times	# of Years	Mean length of stay
Isabella <sup>FP</sup>	Apr 13, 2018	Waterloo	24	F	Student	Apartment	H, IB	20	5	Few days
Kristin <sup>W</sup>	Mar 12, 2018	Waterloo	27	F	Student	Hostel, room in a house	H, IB	3	3	
Rose <sup>FP</sup>	Mar 13, 2018	Waterloo	26	F	Student	Private (room or apartment)	H, IB	5 to 10	3 to 4	A week
Sarah <sup>FP</sup>	Feb 12, 2018	Waterloo	24	F	Student	Room in a house, house	H, IB		4 to 5	
Carlos <sup>W</sup>	Feb 5, 2018	Mississauga	24	M	Student	Room in a house		7	1	A night
George <sup>W</sup>	Feb 22, 2018	Toronto	30	M	Research and Development	Private (room or apartment)			5 or 6	2 to 3 days
Naseem <sup>P</sup>	Feb 13, 2018	Waterloo	24	M	Student	Private (loft, townhouse)	H	3	1	4 days
Michael <sup>W</sup>	Feb 26, 2018	Waterloo	24	M	Student	Private (room or apartment)		4	3	2 to 3 nights
Ryan <sup>FP</sup>	Jan 24, 2018	Toronto	32	M	Photographer	Single room, room in a house, apartment, house	IB	10 to 15	4 to 5	3 to 5 days

Note: Recruited using Facebook recruitment poster (<sup>FP</sup>), recruitment poster (<sup>P</sup>) or word of mouth (<sup>W</sup>)

### 2.4.2 Recruitment

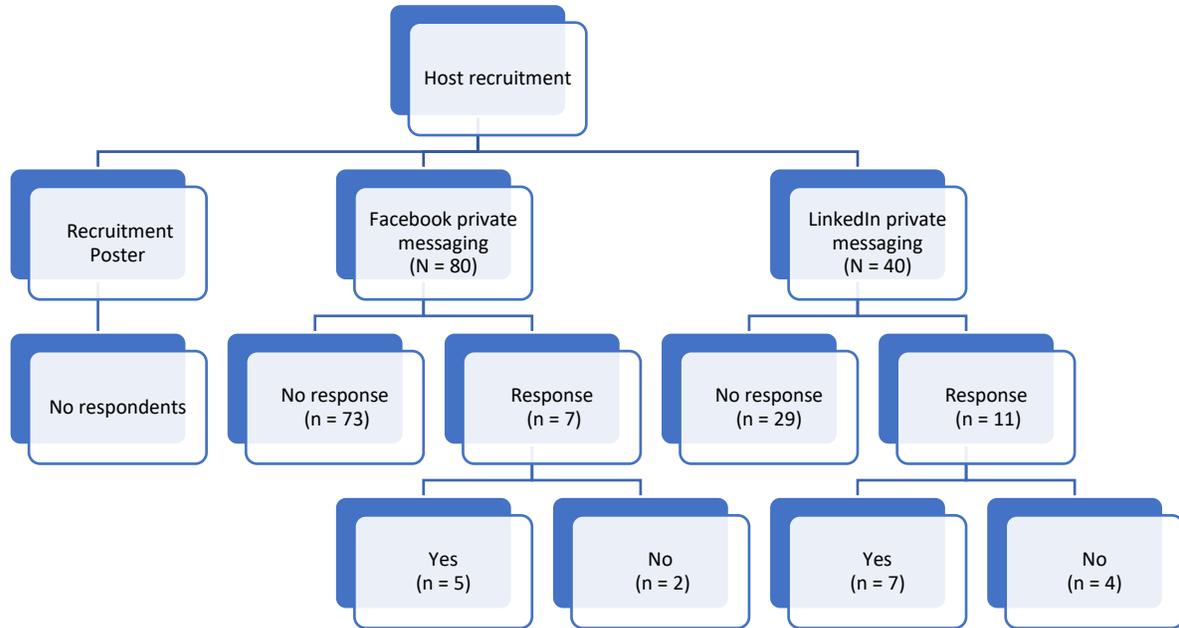
For this study, I recognized quite early on that I would need more than the standard recruiting methods to contact potential participants. Guests were recruited via word-of-mouth and snowball recruitment, as shown in Figure 10.



**Figure 10. Recruitment process for guest participants**

Hosts, however, were more difficult to recruit. Hosts are self-employed workers. Therefore, there did not exist any unions, employers or work organizations/agencies for me to approach as gatekeepers to my target population. Additionally, Airbnb has yet to establish a visible community that brings hosts together in one place. In this way, hosts are very physically isolated and became a hard-to-reach population for me as a researcher. That being the case, I had to find a creative and strategic way of contacting hosts. Initially, I thought I could message hosts over Airbnb’s online platform. I soon found out that it would not be constructive to contact hosts through the system as Airbnb de-identifies all personal information (i.e. email and cell phone number) to deter communication outside their platform. Since Airbnb has a very strong digital presence, I decided to use popular social networking websites, namely Facebook and LinkedIn, to connect with Airbnb hosts instead. Separate study accounts were created on Facebook and LinkedIn to avoid using my personal account to recruit participants. The recruitment process for host participants is shown in Figure 11. Individuals interested in participating were then screened for eligibility. A date and location were arranged for the in-depth interview with the selected participant, at his or her convenience. Participants did not receive

renumeration (financial, in-kind or otherwise) for participating. The recruitment poster and other recruitment material are shown in Appendices G and H respectively.



**Figure 11. Recruitment process for host participants**

### 2.4.3 Recruitment Reflections

By using social media to recruit interview participants, I was able to gauge their interest in participating in the study as well as establish a rapport with participants before conducting semi-structured interviews. I knew how to probe them and ask them questions during the interview based on their style of communication with me. In addition, this early dialogue with the participant helped me assess if the person fit the inclusion/exclusion criteria of my study.

From my experiences, I found that engaging in conversation with the participant, made me appear human to them (even though I was behind a screen!). It was an active form of conversation, as opposed to the more traditional recruitment email. This approach also allowed small talk with participants, and helped me establish rapport with them before conducting interviews with them. This informal means of correspondence also set the tone for a more casual, and less uptight, interview later. Social media and social networking websites being very accessible and non-restrictive allowed me access to the individuals of interest to me. With no barriers to entry as such, I was able to reach a much wider audience using social media than I would have otherwise using more conventional

means. Using social media in this context provided me with an inexpensive line of communication with a quick turnaround time as well as the opportunity for follow up if needed.

It was quick to send a message and it was quick to get a reply back. After expressing interest, it was also quick to set up an interview time. Finally, I felt that social media allowed participants to engage with potential participants in very comfortable manner. Participants could chat with me as they liked. If they felt like responding, they did. If they did not respond even after a follow-up message, their silence had a meaning: “I’m not interested”. This lack of response was not awkward as it did not occur face to face and I just left it at that. Overall, I found that there was a great deal of interest among hosts and guests to participate in this study. When recruiting hosts, I found that female hosts were especially warm and receptive towards me and wanted to support my research endeavours as a student.

## **2.5 Data Analysis**

Thematic content analysis was used to analyze study data. The final dataset consisted of posts on the Airbnb Community forum and qualitative interviews. Interview and forum data were analyzed through categorization and synthesis: raw data was organized, perused, classified and synthesized into exploratory themes in a very iterative manner (Creswell, 2009). Data were distilled into codes.

The “health” and “safety” reports from the forum analysis were organized and inductively coded using NVivo software for emergent themes. Codes were created to capture subsets of information through an iterative process. Illustrative quotes were kept aside for later. The document analysis of online forum posts highlighted hosts’ OHS concerns and challenges and informed the construction of the interview guide. All in all, the development and revision of my interview guide was a very iterative process as additional information emerged through online forum posts and interviews. Data from interviews were continuously reviewed to identify additional questions and probes for subsequent interviews.

I then created codes for the interview data that represented the essence or key attributes of the data and then, compiled emerging codes into a code structure, as shown in Table 4. Codes were either deductive (based on research questions) or inductive (emerging from the data) in nature. Codes were linked and compared within and across data to develop key themes using thematic analysis. I read and re-read the data to achieve a deep understanding and analysis. Being the researcher carried with it a huge responsibility to represent the participants behind this rich data with respect and sensitivity and as accurately as I could.

**Table 4. Code Descriptions**

	<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>
MOTIVATIONS	Why use Airbnb?	Why guests use Airbnb; how did they get introduced/exposed to Airbnb; how long they stay for; style of accommodation usually booked; what they like about the app, platform or service
	Why host Airbnb?	Why hosts host provide Airbnb accommodations; how did they get introduced/exposed to Airbnb; how did they start; how long they host for; style of Airbnbs they provide; what they like about the app, platform or service
	Airbnb vs hotel	Compare/contrast Airbnb and alternative accommodations
EXPERIENCES	Host	Both positive and negative host experiences as described by hosts
	Guest	Both positive and negative guest experiences as described by guests
	Both*	Guest experiences informing host experiences
DECISIONMAKING	Online ratings	How hosts/guests use online ratings in their decision-making processes; what they view the role of online ratings to be
	Instant booking feature*	Mention of instant booking feature on Airbnb app/online interface; what hosts/guests like and dislike about it
	House rules*	Expectations and perceptions (of hosts and guests) of house rules on a listing; the role house rules play in decision-making process
	Undesirable guests*	What makes a guest desirable/undesirable; children; pets
	Undesirable hosts*	What makes a host desirable/undesirable; superhosts; children; pets
HEALTH AND SAFETY RISKS	Physical health risks	Risks (biological, chemical, bed bugs, issues with cleanliness, issues with space, infectious diseases, noise) as described by hosts and guests
	Mental health (hosts)	Psychosocial stressors, (sexual) harassment, bullying, intimidation, feelings of discomfort or fear described by hosts. Stress of the job.
	Security risks	Physical factors that affect the physical safety and security of hosts and guests: includes locks, id verification of guests, background checks
	Risk perception*	How do hosts and guests identify and perceive health and safety risks (without being probed). Mention of having thought (or not) about the risks. Mention of how comparable or different the risks for hosts and guests are. What makes host and guests feel safe
	Strategies*	How do hosts and guest manage health and safety risks. Who do they contact about issues (health/safety and otherwise). How do hosts prepare for a guest's stay? How is work divided? How do hosts maintain work/life balance?
INTERACTIONS	Relationship with Airbnb	Interactions with the Airbnb app/Do hosts and guests find Airbnb supportive to them? The role they think Airbnb should play in daily host-guest interactions. Mention of Airbnb's insurance coverage – is it sufficient for them?
	Host-guest relations*	Interactions and communications between host and guest: vetting process and pre-booking, booking, during stay
	Gender	Any mention of gender (male/female), or gendered experiences for hosts and guests
	Changes	Areas that hosts/guests identify as needing improvement to better their experiences, including app functionality, changes in policy/regulations, communications, guest verification
	*denotes inductive codes	

For each participant, field notes were made to describe the recruitment and re-encounter, as well as capture my own reflections on key analytic findings of the interview. These field notes were then discussed with Dr. Ellen MacEachen. These discussions created a very iterative process between ‘on-field’ and ‘off-field’ work, as well as shaping of inductive codes as they emerged from the data. Memos were kept throughout interviews, transcription and coding, to start the process of synthesizing major themes. In doing so, I was methodical with process recording, keeping records and documenting my reflections throughout the course of the project. Participant experiences drove analysis of the data. I tried my best to set aside personal biases and preconceptions and instead focus on the experiences, feelings and attitudes that participants shared with me (Austin & Sutton, 2014). I immersed myself fully in the data to bring order and meaning to the vast narrative. I adopted a very cyclical and iterative process as I expected emerging themes to shift around as I engaged more with the data.

## **2.6 Ethics**

This study received ethics clearance from the University of Waterloo’s Research Ethics Board on October 18, 2018 (ORE #2259). All data collection proceeded after ethics clearance was received and in compliance with the protocols for research with human participants including the documentation of interviewees’ informed consent to participate. Written consent was directly obtained from all participants. Before consent was given, all participants were provided information on the purpose of the study, their role, how confidentiality would be handled, the risks and benefits of the study, a reminder that participation was fully voluntary, and they could withdraw for any reason, at any time. My contact information, as well as that of my supervisor, were provided if they had any further questions or concerns.

Once the data was collected, data with personal identifiers were securely stored in a locked area (‘O’ Drive on UWaterloo secure servers), and accessible only to me and Dr. Ellen MacEachen. Names associated with raw data were replaced at the first opportunity by a pseudonym system. Audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim for inductive coding and in-depth analysis. Interview data were kept confidential and I used pseudonyms to ensure anonymity of participants. Additionally, all indirect identifiers that pointed to the individual, such as street names, were noted in transcripts and replaced with generic terms, such as “[street]”. All reports from the research used a coded system of references and included no identifying information that could directly or inadvertently breach confidentiality.

I was very transparent about my intentions as a researcher at all stages of the study, but especially during the recruitment process. The Airbnb Community forum is an online public access, hosted on Airbnb's online interface. I have used direct quotations for my thesis and research dissemination efforts. However, I did not receive individual (or group) consent from participants to use their testimonies in their posts for this purpose. As a public space online, hosts do not have any expectation of privacy when they share their experiences with fellow hosts. Sensitive and identifying information is hidden by Airbnb on the online forum to ensure safety of the individual. A login and password are also not necessary to access the forum posts and the information contained within them. Under Tri-Council policy, accessing this information did not require ethics review (University of Waterloo, 2018).

## Chapter 3

### Findings

This chapter describes how users perceived, assessed and managed health and safety risks within the Airbnb system and shows the logical progression of their experiences. Again, for this thesis, the term *user* refers to hosts and guests as a collective. In addition, the term *forum host* is used to refer to a host in the Airbnb Community Center forum, while *interview host* is used to refer to a host participant in this study. To this end, the findings are organized into four phases, with each phase having its own analytical focus. This chapter follows the users' interactions from start to finish, and hones into the different aspects of the overall Airbnb experience. These include users' rationales, risk assessment, risk management and systemic pressures.

**Phase 1:** Choosing Airbnb – *rationales*

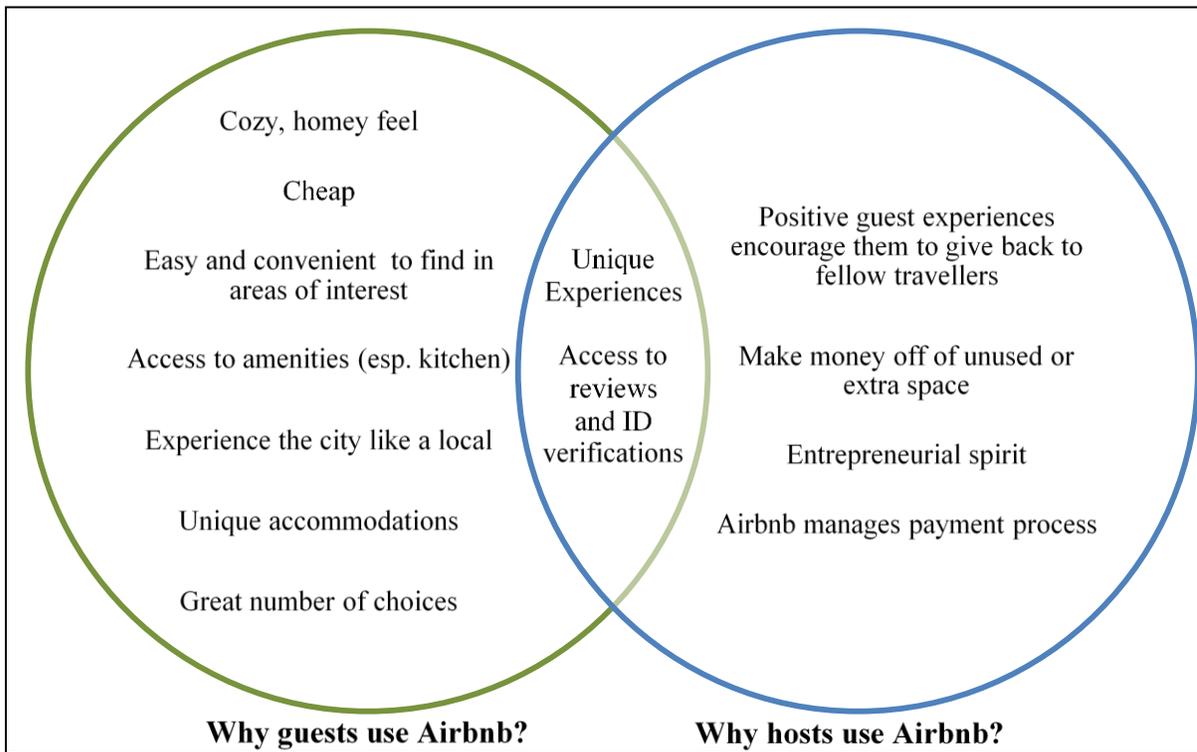
**Phase 2:** Before the Stay – *risk assessment*

**Phase 3:** During the Stay – *risk management*

**Phase 4:** After the Stay – *systemic pressures*

### 3.1 CHOOSING AIRBNB: Rationales

Airbnb offers its guests three different home types. “Entire place” provides the guest access to the whole space. “Private room” refers to an Airbnb where the guest is given their own private room with common areas. Finally, a guest may also book a “shared room” (Airbnb, 2017g). Some guests explained that they rented out a space in a home, instead of the traditional hotel, in order to explore and experience the city as a local resident. Participants in this study explained why they use Airbnb, as summarized in Figure 12.



**Figure 12. Motivations to use Airbnb**

Airbnb describes the idea as simple: hosts list their spare rooms, homes or apartments for short-term rental and guests can rent out these spaces similarly to booking out a hotel room. In this way, Airbnb claims to give hosts the opportunity of monetizing their unused or surplus space (Airbnb, 2017h). Hosts explained to me that by doing this, Airbnb has managed to repackage, and in a way re-envision, the traditional subletting process to create a new way to travel. They appreciated Airbnb’s entrepreneurial spirit as it has allowed them to make money in a “new and trendy” way. Additionally, they mentioned that Airbnb’s low barriers to entry (if the person already has a home) and a relatively low investment for their return made the idea of hosting attractive to them. A common thread that ran through all host experiences was that their guest experiences encouraged and informed their hosting practices. Hosts, in interviews, explained that these experiences allowed them to better understand what to do and say to ensure that their guests enjoyed the Airbnb, as well as the importance of appearing human in how they present themselves online. Hosts’ experiences as a guest have been positive, and so much so that they often used Airbnb themselves for their own travel purposes. A handful of hosts also described how, while staying at an Airbnb, they take the opportunity to size up their competition and are inspired by other approaches to hosting. This behavior shed light not only

on the very competitive side to the work of hosting, but also how hosts are actively learning from one another. Finally, participants explained that it became easier for them to navigate the system as a guest, once they had already created an identity for themselves as a host on Airbnb's online interface through past reviews and an already established profile, and vice versa. This convenience and interchangeability encouraged users to stick with Airbnb as both a guest and a host.

Guests described using both hotels and Airbnb and using each for different reasons. A key reason for using Airbnb was the lower cost. They described using Airbnb for personal travel. As one guest described it, Airbnb allows "the broke college student to travel." Conversely, hotels, to the participants in this study, catered more to business people who constituted a different subset of the traveler population. An added benefit of hotels, as mentioned by one participant, Ryan, is that hotels are safer than Airbnbs because they follow health and safety regulations. Having said that, overall, guests' decisions seemed to be more guided by price than safety factor. Moreover, guest participants in this study explained that it was easier for them to spend time at an Airbnb than a hotel room due to the convenience of having a host around. Some reported that, in a few cases, the host drove them to and from the airport at no additional cost. In a hotel or motel, a guest would need to pay for a third-party taxi service to do this. Guests also appreciated the added perk of hosts acting as informal tour guides for them and recommending things to do and see in the city.

As mentioned earlier, a prominent feature of Airbnb is that users can be both providers and consumers of the service. Should the opportunity arise, the guest participants of this study affirmed that they would consider hosting to earn some side income, but not only that. They appreciated their experiences with Airbnb, for both the convenience and cost, and would like to pay it forward. For example, Isabella loved the idea of showing the beauty and culture of her hometown of Barcelona, in Spain, to guests and contribute to someone else's travel experiences. Guests also emphasized that they would host (like rent out a room in their home, for example) only if they had the appropriate living space to do so. In Naseem's case, he would only be an Airbnb host if the Airbnb was not his primary residence. He associated a different meaning to Airbnb's systemic risks as a host than he did

as a guest. He felt comfortable using Airbnb as a guest but had second thoughts when he is situated at the other end of the interaction. His positionality has shaped these attitudinal differences.

### **3.2 BEFORE THE STAY: Risk Assessment**

In order to use Airbnb, users create their own personal account and provide Airbnb with two different pieces of ID to complete the identity verification process. These could take the form of government-issued ID including driver's license, passport, visa and national identity card, or a piece of the user's online identity including their Facebook profile, Twitter account or Yelp reviews (Airbnb, 2018b). According to Airbnb's Terms of Service, users must be at least 18 years of age to create a profile, whether it be for traveling or hosting purposes (Airbnb, 2018c). Hosts, both online and in interviews, explained that they required guests to provide a profile photo and sufficient personal information before they would accept a booking. Users also provided a personal description. This may include information regarding their profession, hobbies and education. Personal email addresses and phone numbers can also be provided as part of Airbnb's identity verification process. Linking up social network accounts to their Airbnb profile can make users create a more credible presence online. Altogether, this information seemed to allow the users in the social interaction to learn more about one another and better understand each other's character. Peer-to-peer ratings and communication helped with trust building to avoid risks involving physical harm, sexual harassment and undesirable users.

#### **3.2.1 Information gathering**

On Airbnb's online interface, guests can look at and search for available rental listings. Guest participants in this study described refining their search of the Airbnb database by defining the location, price, dates of travel, type of accommodation and access to certain amenities including wifi, private bathroom, cooking space and equipment. For example, access to kitchen space was desired by most guest participants since cooking meals (instead of buying them) at the Airbnb helped them to contain costs while travelling. The search results contained all available Airbnbs that fit their requirements. Users of the Airbnb website then browsed through the online listings. The guest participants in this study noted that the Airbnb listing was their primary source of information. It contained a short description of the Airbnb, list of amenities, occupancy limits, photos, features, availability, cancellation policy, house rules and online reviews. Several guests placed more emphasis on the condition of the living space than the experience of the host, especially for those

Airbnbs in which the host was not physical present on site with them. Guests asserted that the manner in which a host wrote their listing was very telling of the host's personality and expectations. For instance, guests described shying away from hosts who appeared uptight, hostile or unkind, at first read:

I guess like you can kind of get a vibe, even like in their description and stuff for like what they're saying. Like if it just sounds like sketchy, then I probably wouldn't want to go for that? If they sound really nice in their description, I'd be more likely to go with them.  
(Kristen, guest)

Putting two and two together, this information allowed guests to somewhat better predict what an Airbnb experience may look like for them and screen out unsuitable Airbnbs and/or hosts. The host's personality was worthy of note especially if the guest were to cohabit the Airbnb and interact with with the host during their stay.

Moreover, the house rules also helped shed light on the Airbnb and its host. By reading the house rules, guests could evaluate and see if their needs of the space aligned well with the host expectations of its use. House rules clarified for guests the host's stance on extra guests, smoking, off-limit areas, eating areas, cleaning procedures, laundry, parties, quiet hours and pets in their Airbnb. Hosts admitted that they worked under the assumption that guests had read their house rules before booking the Airbnb. Further, hosts believed that clear house rules about the living arrangements and their expectations of the use of space helped them attract more suitable guests:

But the point is, that thanks to these experiences, especially the bad ones, I have learned to create rules that can really protect me from the beginning to the end, starting from the reservation point until the check-out. I realized I cannot afford having unpleasant experiences because I live alone in my own house, I am self-employed, and my other job requires a very great deal of my time, accuracy, and commitment. So, having carefully elaborated rules have provided me the peace of mind I need, in case I have to deal with an abusive type of guest (hopefully, not again). (Gina, forum host, United States)

On the flipside, a few guests perceived stricter house rules as a good indicator of a conscientious host who took good care of the Airbnb. Naseem admitted that as a guest, he had once come across a "no parties" house rule for an Airbnb of interest to him and friends for a weekend getaway. However, he was prepared to "pay the price" and booked the Airbnb anyways, knowing that they would be hosting house parties. As a host, welcoming a guest into their home really just meant giving a stranger full

reign of their home, while accepting the fact that the space may be used in any which way that the *guest* found fit. Ryan gave the example of his girlfriend who did not know how to use a gas stove at one Airbnb and how her carelessness almost burned the entire place down.

The listing also displays photos of both the listing and the host. Guests remarked that they had never booked an Airbnb that did not have photos, because photos made listings look complete and real. They used photos to help get a visual sense of the space and its amenities. At the same time, they kept an eye out for picture-perfect listings as they can also be suspect. Airbnb does require a profile photo for user accounts, but some hosts online mentioned that the photo could be of anything and did not necessarily have to be of the individual. For instance, Ana (forum host, United States) noted that she received a booking request from a guest once who had a photo of vitamin bottles as their profile photo. In other cases, some hosts described cases where the profile picture did not match the guest's appearance. Several guest participants noted trusting that Airbnb listings contained updated information and recent photos.

As informative as listings are, the exact location and address of an Airbnb listing are not specified. Hosts explained online that it was not necessary for this specific and identifying information to be made public because Airbnb provides potential guests with a close approximation. They strongly discouraged their fellow hosts from giving out additional details:

There's no legitimate (or, at least, "important") reason why a real guest would need to know the exact address in advance. A 4-block radius (or 3, or 5, you get my drift) is sufficient for a potential guest to know if they're near some important-to-them venue, or within walking distance of whatever interests them. The downsides of revealing your exact location are too many. Don't do it. (Dede, forum host, United States)

The Airbnb listing also allowed guest participants access to its online reviews. Airbnb's peer-to-peer rating system allowed users to rate both the Airbnb and host from one-star to five stars across a few different spectrums, such as communication, level of cleanliness, location and accuracy for example. Rather than fixating on the number of stars an Airbnb received, guest participants focused more on extreme ratings. Many guests found the feedback provide in reviews to be very useful in informing their behaviour and decisions. Naseem (guest) explained that he opted for well-established Airbnbs with extensive reviews. With more experience, he believed these hosts had really invested the proper time and energy into their property and knew the ins-and-outs of hosting. He explained that he felt more comfortable booking with these more experienced and professional hosts:

But like the more active that person is and the more established they are, it's the way to trust them. I think if someone's never used Airbnb before, they have never rented their place out. They have no reviews, no stars, no information, there's a risk to it obviously so the number of reviews and how much they have worked on their property and how many times they have rented out, how often they do this. The more they do it, obviously the more professional they will be, the more they would know what could go wrong and what could actually be right. (Naseem, guest)

Hosts shared this sentiment and believed they should be able to know as much as they can about a potential guest before booking them into their Airbnb: the good, the bad and the ugly. Reviews also signaled to hosts that guests were prior users of Airbnb, and as a result, in order to keep their affairs in order, they did not have to give them a full rundown on everything. In this way, hosts valued experienced guests, especially those with exceptional reviews:

Online reviews are better 'cause that gives me a chance to see that they have already used the service. They already come to know what to expect. They already had the chance of a host being like "Hey. This guy is kinda messy." Or "Hey, this guy is kinda upset that I didn't cook him breakfast." Or stuff like that, I don't know. If they send me plain jane message but they have great reviews, then I don't worry about it. That's sort of messaging doesn't bother me at all. But if it's all they have no reviews and they have no message to sent me, I'm not interested in taking on that risk, that gamble. (Liam, interview host)

Hosts described that guests with a history of positive reviews are rewarded for their previous good behavior, and essentially received a free pass into the system. Some participants of this study also admitted giving people the benefit of the doubt if they only received one bad review in the past and explained that the bad experience could be due to circumstances or a language barrier. It was the former in Monique's example:

My husband's family is like very clean, very conscientious, like very responsible. There wasn't any partying. There wasn't any anything, and they ended up leaving them a bad review because I don't know. One of the beds broke and then they said it was their fault and then like, you know that's the thing so now my sister-in-law has this bad review on her profile and she's like the most responsible person you'll ever meet, you know. She's really professional, she's clean. She's tidy. You know, so I have to give people somewhat of the benefit of the doubt. (Monique, interview host)

Monique shared another major concern for hosts: not knowing just exactly who is coming to stay at the Airbnb. She explained that she did not see online reviews as particularly reliable in circumstances of group bookings. The guest who books the Airbnb is only one of the many guests staying at the Airbnb. As a host, she unfortunately did not have access to background checks and reviews to each and every individual entering her property, just to the one booking the reservation. As a host, she did not have full knowledge on all the guests for the booking and consequently, was unable to make a truly informed decision:

Another reason that I should say I don't take so much consideration, uh, about the reviews is because okay, so what? The one person that is coming may have good reviews or no reviews and they have 9 other guests coming with them, like I don't know anything about those 9 people. So, how is that going to help me? Maybe, they have had horrible experiences or whatever, I really have no way in detecting that. (Monique, interview host)

Hosts found it extremely difficult to manage the vagaries of Airbnb's policies and governmental regulations. Even though most hosts were not worried about their personal health and safety, they admitted that there was always this worry at the back of their minds that something will go wrong during the stay, whether it was an injury or accident. Here, Martin (forum host, United Kingdom) emphasized not knowing who to expect leaves hosts very vulnerable:

I have no idea who is going to turn up on my doorstep other than the name of the first guest and a number of people. Frankly, I do not believe that this is good enough. What steps are they taking to protect hosts from being vulnerable to deception, fraud or even violence and abuse? Individual hosts do not have the protection of staff numbers that a hotel would have. We are on our own and need some security in knowing who and why we are opening our doors to our customers. (Martin, forum host, United Kingdom)

Moreover, reviews are not telling of what hosts can expect if the potential guests are new to Airbnb. New users do not have extensive history of using Airbnb nor reviews to speak to past experiences. In Monique's experience, eight in ten guests were new Airbnb users so instead of using reviews, her vetting process rests on how well the first interaction with the guest goes:

I never have. I never will which means that the guest has to inquire with me first. I also check the reviews but the problem with the reviews is, um, most of my guests you know, because Airbnb is a new platform, especially with older adults, they don't tend to, tend to have extensive Airbnb histories. I mean, if someone has 15 reviews

and they are all good, I can almost guarantee that I'm not going to have a problem. But maybe like, 80% of my people have never used Airbnb before so I can't use that rule reliably. (Monique, interview host)

Monique questioned the reliability of online reviews in the Airbnb system. Additionally, an individual can reserve Airbnb bookings on behalf of a friend or loved one. This is yet another example of how people can circumvent the peer-to-peer rating system. Perhaps, a more holistic way of looking at online reviews is that their utility to users is context-dependent. All in all, online identity and branding on the Airbnb interface informs users' risk assessment process as profiles and listings can be quite informative for users as they navigate the Airbnb system.

### **3.2.2 Vetting process**

Airbnb facilitates the initial contact and continual communication between users and aids the transaction to completion through its messaging system (Yannopoulou et al., 2013). Guests can send a message to inquire about the Airbnb and start a dialogue with a potential host. Most participants in this study deeply valued this social exchange since it helped them better judge the personality and character of the other party and potentially avoid less than desirable guests such as a bachelorette party or one-night stand. In this way, users engaged with one another in a more personal manner and vetted one another before proceeding with booking. The online interface also eases communication with the owner, as compared to hotel counterparts (Varma et al., 2016). Many guests in this study explained that it was this ability to communicate with the host prior to booking that especially attracted them to Airbnb.

Airbnb's system is still very much self-regulated. Participants in this study explained that they were left to their own devices and described informal tools they used to assess risk within the system. Participants also described the clues that they looked out for in online reviews, photos and the initial contact to ascertain the suitability of a particular host or guest:

I agree, part of what makes me feel safe as a host is a knowledge that Airbnb has vetted the people staying with me and that they are who they say they are. I always take the time to ask potential guests about themselves and why they are looking to stay. I also require them to be verified through Airbnb. As a single woman opening my home to strangers, taking that extra step is very important to my feeling safe. (Stacey, forum host, Canada)

When assessing, guests appeared to mainly look for two things: one, that the individual has a wealth of hosting experience and two, has many and positive reviews. Some guests explained that they did not care much about the host, but were concerned more about the Airbnb itself:

I don't really look too much for a host. I don't really care too much.  
It would be nice to have somebody who is friendly and outgoing, and  
I actually do generally like to meet them but it's not a big deal...  
There was one experience I had which was my only negative  
experience with Airbnb and the host was just not a nice guy and I  
just didn't like it but it's not like I'm actively, like, I'm looking for a  
place, I look for the host. I look for the place, you know what I  
mean? (Ryan, guest)

Guests were adamantly against booking unreviewed Airbnbs. Hosts described shying away from guests who provide “cookie cutter” and “plain jane” introductions of themselves. Hosts also did not like ambiguous or vague responses to questions. They perceived this as the guest trying to hide something from them. Instead, they preferred personalized messages and guests who were very communicative and honest in their communications with them. In a few instances, hosts online expressed frustration with guests that did not provide them with accurate information about themselves. Hosts Arturo and Christina from the United States, for example, experienced this with one guest who was coming from Colombia, but was using a zip code from Orlando, Florida as his home address. Other hosts responded in the forum that perhaps this guest was not legally living in the United States. This may be a minor detail that is not significant to the Airbnb experience, however, it led to Arturo and Christina becoming very distrustful of the guest and, in turn, denying the guest's booking request.

In interviews and forums, participants identified some red flags that they identified during the vetting process. One red flag for Norah, for example, was when a guest once told her that she was from out of town visiting, but in fact she lived in the area. Large group bookings also made hosts feel anxious because they did not want guests to use their Airbnb space to host a crazy party. In the past, parties have not been an issue for Norah, but she explained that she always asked follow-up questions to weed out questionable guests. Like other hosts, Norah described herself as being very “hands off” and respectful of the guest's space and privacy as well. At the same time, however, she avoids asking invasive questions and prying too much into personal life details. In the first interaction with a potential guest, a handful of hosts also explained that if they felt that a guest was asking them unusual

questions, they suspected that the guest would not use the Airbnb responsibly and, as a result, they would not rent their Airbnb out to the guest.

### 3.2.3 Booking process

After the vetting process is complete, the host and guest decide if they are satisfied with the initial contact and would like to go forward with the booking. The guest participants in this study attributed the simplicity and convenience of the booking process, similar to that of the search process, to the Airbnb's web-based processes. The booking process for most reservations is as follows. The guest submits a reservation request directly to the host, and at the same time, is prompted to provide payment information (Airbnb, 2018d). The guest waits for the host to receive and accept the booking, which all could take a few days, before proceeding. Once accepted, Airbnb collects the full payment from the guest (Airbnb, 2018e). Payments are made online through the Airbnb interface. Airbnb holds the payment until 24 hours after the stay at which point Airbnb also charges the host a service fee of 3% and the guest between 5% and 15% (Airbnb, 2017c).

Alternatively and less frequently, the host may choose to book its Airbnb through the instant booking feature. This booking process is more straightforward with less back and forth between the guest and host. In principle, instant booking allows a verified guest to *instantly*, hence the name of the feature, book their stay at the Airbnb without prior contact with the host. With no vetting process, this Airbnb feature operates very similarly to booking a hotel room online. Airbnb incentivizes its hosts by giving them ranking points in the Airbnb search algorithm for using the instant booking feature and in turn, increasing the likelihood that their Airbnb appears higher in search results. Hosts also receive a badge for instant booking which helps them stand out from other competing listings on Airbnb, and possibly even adds some credibility to their listing. Most importantly, instant booking makes it very easy for guests to book and secure an Airbnb without requiring confirmation by the host.

Through interviews, it appeared that not all guests were familiar with instant booking or if they were, they did not recognize it by name. Guests were divided over the effectiveness of this feature in the booking process as well. Instant booking made travel planning less stressful, particularly when guest participants in this study have found themselves pressed for time. George's experience exemplified how instant booking eased flight planning and logistics because of the certainty that it brought:

It's nice to be able to, I wouldn't say last minute, but very quickly be able to book the, location and have that specific part of the trip ironed out so that you can, in my case, feel comfortable booking the

airline stuff which is usually the order that I would do it in to make sure that I know where I will be staying so that I can where I am going to book the flights accordingly, which means it's helpful so I don't have to like do the whole "I want to stay here because blah blah blah" and then wait for them to approve you and then go back on to see if you're approved and the flight costs have increased because the time is cutting close to the day and all that stuff.  
(George, guest)

Carlos believed that instant booking was very convenient for guests, but also recognized that it may not be in the best interest for hosts. The convenience of instant booking for guests came at a cost to hosts. The instant booking feature has put hosts in a very uncomfortable position. Hosts, in interviews, weighed the pros and cons of instant booking. They wanted to enjoy the perks afforded to them by Airbnb, since it was their understanding that instant booking helped to make their listing more accessible and visible to potential guests. However, at the same time, instant booking posed safety risks as it eliminated the vetting process together:

It is not as safe for the host 'cause the host will see your reviews and stuff and be like "I don't want you here". They can filter out. When there's instant booking, they can't filter anyone out. Like I remember, there was this place that I saw in LA and I asked the girl a question. She didn't answer me but she rejected me. So, obviously I didn't meet her standards for whatever reason so, if it was instant booking, she wouldn't be able to do that. (Ryan, guest)

Many hosts recounted experiences of the instant booking feature overriding their house rules and booking an undesirable guest even though their Airbnb listing stated that they do not accept pets and/or children for example.. For hosts, this was understandably very disconcerting but, in some cases, such as Jacob's, instant booking also seemed to disorient them a bit. As a part of his house rules, Jacob did not allow guests to bring pets into his Airbnb. However, when he used the instant booking feature, he had left his health and safety as well as the health and safety of his Airbnb to chance and to the discretion of his guests. Jacob clearly trusted the Airbnb system enough to instant book anyways:

I think I have been really fortunate that so even though...if a guest instantly books my home, I can still get into a conversation, a back-and-forth conversation with him, and ask who are they bringing, what are they in town and stuff like that. All these conversations I have had on instant booking have been pleasant and I expect during this time when this conversation, for them to tell me that they are bringing pets or not but they would have actually seen it, um, in my

listing that it is not pet friendly and I would trust that these travelers who are on Airbnb that they are experienced enough and wise enough to find places with these checkboxes for that. (Jacob, interview host)

Even though, Jacob did not state it explicitly, he recognized the safety risks he assumed by using instant booking:

At the same time, I think hosts have that final relief when the instant booking that comes is like a good solid one. (Jacob, interview host)

Norah understood why hosts who cohabit with guests would not feel comfortable with instant booking because it posed direct safety risks. She did not worry as much about this risk because she is off site during the duration of her guests' stay. Further, Norah stated that she would use instant booking even if she did not feel some pressure from Airbnb to do so, because it helped her manage bookings in her already-hectic schedule:

I understand that especially if you're sharing space with your guests, I definitely understand why you wouldn't want to use it in that situation. For us, where we are not sharing personal space, I would say that there's less of a risk because you don't have to worry about compatibility quite so much, and I know that Airbnb somewhat uses that in their, like the instant book, like they do strongly enough people to use it and they take away features if you don't use it. There's definitely some incentive for a host to use it but I think we would use it regardless because it just makes our lives easier really so. (Norah, interview host)

Susan did not like instant booking as she liked to ensure guests understand the ins and outs of her Airbnb, especially as it is a unique living experience. However, she still used it because she would "disappear on the map" otherwise and not get any bookings:

[Instant-booking] makes it too easy, and especially in a place like this where I do need to ask some questions you know. If somebody is bringing a little dog for instance, I need to warn them that there are coyotes and I mean, there's just little things like that that I need to talk to them about. I really liked before when it was, they try to make the perfect fit thing where these people would ask and then I would ask them questions and then I would go ahead and pre-approve and they would book. Instant book is we disappear on the map if we don't use instant book and so I've had to use it but I've had to really beef up the language that I've used in order to, you know, "Make sure you have read this!" I know I probably sound insufferable. (Susan, interview host)

Liam (interview host) did not look too favorably on Airbnb's instant booking feature either because he preferred to play a more active role in the early decision-making process:

I think that's the dumbest thing that they're trying to push. I want time to feel out my guests. I want to see their messages. I don't want them to just instant book whatever they want. Like that's, that's, that's stupid to me. (Liam, interview host)

Liam also recognized that he may be a special case in not seeing value in instant booking as he did not rely on it to stand out to guests. His modest pricing of \$44/night (and that is in downtown Toronto) set his place apart from other Airbnbs in his neighbourhood anyway, so he did not feel the same pressure as described by other host participants in this study. Tariq (interview host) shared Liam's sentiment about risk assessment and did not instant book either. He mentioned how Airbnb keeps suggesting to his family that they give instant booking a try. Tariq and his family were so adamantly against it that they declined their offer to be superhosts to avoid instant booking altogether:

Yeah, so we have a very, very good rating and Airbnb contacted us. They said "We want you to be a superhost" but we declined to do that because we didn't want to do instant booking and like, the thing about instant booking is that it doesn't give us the opportunity to vet our guests and that is something that is really important to us. (Tariq, interview host)

Amélie (interview host) and her husband did not feel well-equipped to accommodate instant booking as hosts because they had a system of consulting with one another. For the time being, they will continue to use their current system of consulting with one another before accepting guests, but would entertain the idea of instant booking in the future when they are better established as hosts:

Possibly we feel that there is a significant chance to rent it and adjust the interaction and knowing where they are allowed to stay at my place. I mean right now we have decided to not because usually, we consult each other whenever we have a request. Yeah so maybe, I mean I'm not opposed to it right now. It's a bit above my comfort level. (Amélie, interview host)

Some guests, on the other hand, preferred to converse with the host before booking. This interaction was valued by them and they found comfort in being reassured by the host that the Airbnb was up to their standards and expectations before their stay began. Naseem, for one, was very critical of instant booking. He explained that Airbnb encourages hosts to adopt instant booking under the guise of implementing anti-discrimination policy. In his opinion, Airbnb has its own ulterior motives as

instant booking increases the rate of booking and in turn, their profits. He recognized the element of risk that exists in the host-guest interaction and viewed instant booking as risky in that it took away an important line of communication for users in the system. Finally, there were also those guests who positioned themselves in the middle. They enjoyed the convenience of instant booking, while also engaging in dialogue with the host to assess suitability. In Sarah's case, she still messaged the host to see if her travelling plans matched well with the host's preferences, and in turn, be mindful of the other people's time and expectations:

I have [used instant booking] but I generally message the people first anyways because when I've used it, we've been roadtripping and travelling and then, like if I am going to instant book, I usually look to see what their checkin and checkout times are if I think we are going to be outside of that, I'll be like "Hey, I see that we can instant book but I don't know if we're going to be there by your check-in time. We're driving from this place" and usually wait for a response back before I instant book. (Sarah, guest)

Sarah also associated instant booking as being more characteristic of hotel booking. Engaging with the host introduced a personal element into Airbnb booking, setting it apart from hotels. It appeared that Sarah really enjoyed the sociality of Airbnb's platform.

I think I actually prefer the conversation between me and the host being like "Hey, this is why I'm coming to stay", like "This is who I'm with", like "This is what I'm doing" just to like have dialogue already, like I feel like the instant booking is kinda, you know, like hotel-y where I can show up and like, they might have a lockbox on their door and I'll never see them and then, like that's the end of it and I leave and I still never see them. (Sarah, guest)

For Jenny (forum host, United Kingdom), the instant booking feature only attracted the wrong sort of hosts to Airbnb, because good hosts will always want the "final say" as to who they welcome into their space:

If it is the company's plan to make instant book mandatory for all, do they not realize that hoaxers, scammers and those who just see an opportunity to make a quick buck out of travellers will be more than happy to accept it, whereas responsible hosts are much less likely to? Those of us who care about our homes, and the experience of our guests, will always reserve the right to have the final say in who we welcome into them. (Jenny, forum host, United Kingdom)

### 3.2.4 Stress of booking

Guests found certain aspects of the Airbnb platform to be quite stressful at times. For example, George described his experience at an Airbnb in California. He did not take issue with sharing the space with multiple guests, but the host shuffled him around due to an accidental double booking:

It was a shared house myself, and I think there were let's see one-two-three, I'm gonna say four other guests than the host. That was the general setup. In that case, everybody that was staying there like guest-wise was fine. Even the host wasn't weird but mainly got like kinda he ended up shuffling me around 'cause there was some other booking that happened and I was just like "Really?". Moving me around because of other things. I just assumed that a lack of communication was the issue there in that specific context. I guess, in that case there some lack of communication. (George, guest)

This experience was stressful for George because he was in limbo. It would have been difficult for him to find alternative accommodations last minute if his host was unable to accommodate him and had to cancel on him. Further, if George was not able to arrange for a place to stay, this hiccup could have affected his entire trip, though no fault of his own. This experience reflected the uncertainty that exists in booking and securing an Airbnb.

To Norah, Airbnb was inherently less reliable than a hotel because she believed that the host could cancel on the guest for any reason any time, whether it be illness, family commitments, flooding, to name a few. The guest would then be scrambling to find new accommodations. Besides the possibility of being cancelled on, Norah also feared something going wrong in an Airbnb during her stay as a guest. However, she believed that reading online reviews allowed her to review the risks and possibly even mitigate them. This was an opinion shared by many other participants in this study. Rose further exemplified the anxiety that comes with booking an Airbnb as a guest. Her friend mistakenly booked a cheap Airbnb that later turned out to be a shack in someone's backyard:

I would be very angry if that happened to me so that would like concern me a little bit. I would definitely want to vet any Airbnb that anyone is booking. I would be upset if one of my friends did that so that could be a concern that people are just putting shacks on Airbnb. (Rose, guest)

She noted that she worried less about the listing being disingenuous if the Airbnb received four-star and above ratings. Sarah described how, at times, it can be stressful when she wants to be mindful and

respectful of the host's time, but her arrival and check-in are delayed. This was the only thing she identified as being stressful as a guest:

I think the one stress thing is that if we are like roadtripping, making sure that we're like getting there in a respectable time, even though if we have talked to them and they're like "Oh, don't worry about it", I still always end up feeling bad that we're getting there later than what they had written on their website. But maybe it's just written there for the sake that they have to put it there and they actually don't care when people show up. That's about it. (Sarah, guest)

At the same time, some guests did not find their search for accommodation to be stressful. Isabella embraced the process. She enjoyed travelling and looking for a nice place to stay. Michael did not feel stressed using Airbnb either. Rather, he shared a rather mature perspective and considered 'the stress of travel.' The lack of routine and familiar environment was disorienting for him, regardless if he stayed at a hotel, Airbnb or with friends:

I would say that it's always a bit more stressful when you're not at your usual home in your usual routine but that's just general travel stress and having to deal with new, unexpected, potentially unexpected things but that comes with any travel situation I've been in, stayed at a hotel or Airbnb or a friend's house, that would all be the same to me. (Michael, guest)

Moving to Airbnb's unclear cancellation policy, hosts in interview and forums described frustration with the current Airbnb system wherein they may be penalized for cancelling a booking and taking corrective measures towards ensuring health and safety of guests. Ainizah (forum host, Malaysia), among many other hosts on the forum, identified her apartment as an inappropriately maintained space with certain problem areas that she would like to fix before re-listing. Further, she knew that the appropriate repairs and inspector approval would take months and not be completed in time to keep her future reservations. Like other hosts in this study, Ainizah was unclear about Airbnb's cancellation policy and thus, unsure as to how to proceed with cancelling the bookings without penalty. A number of hosts were unable to manage upcoming reservation due to medical reasons. In some cases, hosts wanted to cancel a booking after learning more about the guest. Darren (forum host, Australia) described one guest who was waiting for a hip surgery and was using a wheelchair in the interim. The guest refused to cancel the reservation even though the stairs in the Airbnb were not wheelchair accessible and this was very concerning to Darren. Susie (forum host, United States)

described similar experiences with being upfront in her house rules about staircases in her Airbnb, but guests neglected to read the profile and complained about their stay afterwards:

I have a space with some quirks e.g. steep stairs, spiral staircase etc. They are hard for some people to navigate, especially if elderly, bad knees etc. I have it in CAPITAL LETTERS in my description (the main description, the one with a short word limit!) as in the past, one set of guests gave a negative review about these aspects coming as a "Complete surprise" even though it was in the description which they clearly had not read - I have screamed it at them in CAPS now! Also when I get any hint in the request that there might be an issue, I request that they read the description carefully to make sure it will suit them. Recently I had a RQ of people coming to town for surgery... turns out it was for DOUBLE KNEE replacement! I talked them out of booking, given that someone with two bad knees will really struggle here. (Susie, forum host, United States)

Hosts, when contacting Airbnb support, have been informed that they, in fact, do not get penalized for a cancellation if the guest violated the house rules. In addition to these cases, bookings were cancelled, and guests were asked to leave the Airbnb for violating house rules such as “no guests except those listed on the Airbnb reservation” and “no house parties.” Under Airbnb’s policies (Airbnb, 2018f), a lack of cleanliness and/or safety, misrepresentation and false advertisement all warrant a refund to the guest if appropriately documented. The forum was full of examples where Airbnb did not refund a cancellation that was not initiated by the guest. All in all, users took the uncertainty that exists in booking and securing an Airbnb in stride.

In short, this section discussed the second phase in users’ interaction with the Airbnb system. Users primarily used the online interface to engage with information gathering, vetting and booking. Distinguishing undesirable users from desirable users can be quite challenging; however, photos and house rules on the Airbnb listing and Airbnb’s online rating system aided the pre-booking and booking phases. Instant booking and cancellation policies were unnecessarily convoluted and confusing for users. Consequently, hosts and guests used informal tools and indirect signaling mechanisms to help them in their decision-making processes to manage their safety, business and behaviour in the system.

### **3.3 DURING THE STAY: Risk Management**

Airbnb claims that they are continually working on products and features to make their services safer, and have a Trust and Safety team “devoted to the manual review of suspicious activity” (Airbnb, 2017i). Airbnb also provides a 24/7 customer hotline and email support to its users (Airbnb, 2017i).

Airbnb provides hosts with two insurance programs to cover damages and injury incurred by guest stays. The Host Guarantee provides hosts with a damage protection of up to a million dollars excluding cash and securities, pets, personal liability, wear and tear, and shared or common areas. Its coverage for jewellery, collectibles and artwork is limited (Airbnb, 2017j). The Host Protection Insurance provides liability insurance for bodily injury or property damage of up to a million dollars with several health and safety exceptions: assault, sexual abuse or molestation, personal and advertising injury, fungi or bacteria, communicable diseases, pollution and asbestos, lead or silica (Airbnb, 2017k). Airbnb hosts also fill out online emergency cards with information on emergency phone numbers, locations of fire extinguishers and fire alarms, and emergency exit routes. Guests have this information available to them, in case of emergency (Airbnb, 2017l). Airbnb encourages guests to pay and communicate with hosts through the platform interface for transaction security, as well as to look at verified profiles and online reviews before booking a reservation (Airbnb, 2017b).

This next section showcases experiences as described by users, with particular attention to those aspects of an Airbnb that have compromised, or could possibly compromise, their health and safety. Guests did not spend too much of their time at the Airbnb when travelling. For them, Airbnb was used as a place to stay over, rather than a place to stay. Something to be noted here also was that on-site hosts and off-site hosts perceived potential risks to their personal health and safety differently. Off-site hosts in interviews and forums suggested that not being physically present at the Airbnb subject them to fewer health and safety risks. The risks identified by the participants in this study are categorized into three major types and discussed in detail. These include health risks, safety risks and psychosocial stressors.

### **3.3.1 Health Risks**

Guests and hosts identified the risks to their health they considered while navigating the Airbnb system. This included cleanliness, spread of disease and physical harm. A discussion of the health situation of users follow.

**Cleanliness and disease.** The guests in this study, though a good majority of them were students, described being mainly focused on the aesthetics and conditions of the physical space. Mould on the walls was an example given. They were satisfied with the Airbnb if it provided them with the appropriate spaces (bedroom, bathroom and kitchen) and was functional for their needs. Guests seemed most concerned about the cleanliness of the Airbnbs they stay in. For instance, Michael explained that though he is an easy-going traveller, cleanliness was very important to him. He paid

particular attention to the condition of bed sheets and the bathroom. If an Airbnb was not adequately cleaned, he would adjust and clean the space as he saw fit:

Let's say if [a location] were not kept up to my cleanliness standards or there were food or stains or stuff like that in the area around where I was, then it would be more of an inconvenience rather than a personal threat to my feeling. It would more of an inconvenience because I would take the time to clean it myself before I use a lot of those accommodations. (Michael, guest)

The physical state of an Airbnb was very important to Sarah as well, in particular, the kitchen and bathroom spaces. Particularly, she noted that if the bathroom was really dirty, she would "bite the bullet" and just not shower for the duration of her stay. Contrary to Michael's approach, she believed that a guest cleaning an Airbnb (no matter how gross it may be) would be humiliating for the host:

Especially if they're home, I feel like it's kind of an insult to be like, "Hey, do you have cleaning stuff so I can clean your bathroom more before I use it?" I don't think that would go over very well. (Sarah, guest)

Hosts and guests shared minor concerns they have regarding illness. Naseem believed that it is very important for a host to be tidy with their space. As a matter of fact, an Airbnb left in very messy condition really threw him off. He explained that since many people come in and out, the Airbnb could harbour all kinds of germs and bacteria that could easily infect future visiting guests:

I think obviously cleanliness is a huge part because when you think about it...they were making a living out of this so, that implies that that place is probably rented out 99% of the time. That means that there are so many different people from so many different places from so many different values come here, come there and they might do so many different things... There are so many different activities that could take place in that place and all of those things can impose certain health hazards for the next person coming in and renting that place out. (Naseem, guest)

George shared concerns of catching something from the host or another guest on the premises, especially since infectious diseases can spread quickly by air travel. In his case, he was worried that he would be infected by a visibly unwell guest cohabiting his Airbnb:

My first Airbnb trip, two guys were also staying there. They had come from China and one guy was like dying it sounded like and he never left. Coughing and he got super sick apparently as soon as he got off the plane and got there. So, there is that concern of just sorta

being a shared space and people coming with diseases from anywhere potentially? I guess, but even in that case, even though it was a shared house, it was...he kept to himself, living under lock and key, but the other guests...they all may still have it there. (George, guest)

Having said that, he has never been physically sick or injured as a guest, with the exception of one Airbnb where he had an allergic reaction:

One of the last places I stayed at, I guess because clothes were dried on a rack outside, the next time I put my clothes on, I broke out into crazy rashes and hives and things. I'm not sure if it was an allergic reaction or what have you, but it was allergic but I don't know if it was allergic like general allergies or if it was some kind of weird thing that was in the geographic area. I forgot. Blacked out but yeah that was recent, that was last year so I had that bad experience once. (George, guest)

As a mother, Amélie was concerned about her baby contacting whatever illnesses her guests may bring in with them:

Let's say if my little one was sick or I'm sick, I would make sure to, understandably for any guest anyways, but to change every, like sanitize everything, change bedsheets and even like protect the pillows, like put one pillow case over the other. This sort of thing but now, it's like a second nature, like we would do regardless but sometimes a concern that I have is that definitely people bringing their germs and my little one getting sick. (Amélie, interview host)

Jaylin hosted a guest who contracted MRSA a year prior. She was worried that this guest would get her other guests and herself sick, so she was constantly disinfecting kitchen, dining and bathroom surfaces. She was very visibly stressed and unsure how to respond to the situation:

But my most recent guest mentioned as he was leaving that he had contracted MRSA in the hospital last year. So now I'm freaked out - I've heard some pretty awful things about this stuff and I'm worried about how best to clean/disinfect/keep guests away until I resolve it. My main concern is the health of myself and my guests. Has anyone run into this? And what procedures should I follow? I'm ready to throw out all the bedding (which sucks because it was brand new), steam clean all carpets, wipe down the entire bathroom with bleach and Ajax, and mop and spray disinfectant everywhere. Wipe down all walls and change out the A/C filter. (Jaylin, forum host, United States)

Gerry and Rashid suggest a 'carrot and stick' approach to dealing with sick guests:

You could say, I am really worried about you, I want you to stay here, but I am not prepared to do that unless you come with me/go for a check up. It's not negotiable, I can see you are not well and I am not happy to have you become even more ill in my home. (Gerry and Rashid, forum hosts, United Kingdom)

A host may respond to hosting a sick guest in several different ways, but in every case described, the host did not appear to know the best course of action to take. Without support from Airbnb, hosts were left feeling overwhelmed while scrambling to figure on their own how to best to tend to their guest's needs. This scenario presents additional physical health risks to the host as they can be exposed to an infectious disease, or something to the like. Further, this whole experience can be rather stressful for the host too.

**Issues with Space.** Guests did not seem overly concerned about the safety and operations of Airbnbs. However, Carlos was only able to identify one host, out of all his Airbnb experiences, who overtly complied with health and safety regulations:

There was one place in particular that looked like properly done and we asked the owner and he said that he used to be an architect. So he made sure everything was up to code. So he did everything properly, which is pretty impressive. (Carlos, guest)

This host was the exception. Carlo's experience exemplified how many hosts may not be putting guest health and safety high up on their list of priorities. Guests must then fend for themselves. Some of his experiences have been in Ireland, and he assumed that Ireland, especially, would have pretty strict rules with respect to renting and hosting. Hearing this, it was apparent that some regulatory streamlining within the Airbnb realm is needed as it would get confusing for users to keep up with specific health and safety laws and legislations, from jurisdiction to another. If hosts are cohabiting the Airbnb with guests, guests will interact with hosts in one way or another. Additionally, if there are multiple guest bookings at the same time, guests may have to interact with others on site as well. Multiple guests at an Airbnb can be another cause of concern for both hosts and guests. Carlos described two Airbnbs where the hosts tried to make the most of their small space and crammed too many into the room. The Ontario Building Code defines the formula to calculate the occupancy load of a room based on its square footage and the use of the space, whether it be for assembly, residential, business or industrial purposes (OSSTF/FEESO, 2018). In this situation, the host exceeded the

occupancy load of the room. In turn, this not only presented safety risks for guests as they lived in a confined space, but they also had limited access to emergency exits:

I think the rooms were set up so one of the places were like four people. So there were four of us in the room. I think the room was probably a bit too small for four people because it was in the attic basically and the roof...you couldn't stand up basically. There was basically only one exit. There was an exit at the window but that's not necessarily the best exit. Yeah, that place was probably not the safest. Yeah, I think that was the main...there was another one where there was like a room and like a living room with a sofa bed. We stayed. I'm not sure. It was a bit tight but it was comfortable enough. I'm not sure if that would violate regulations or not, but I think it was pushing it. (Carlos, guest)

Additionally, guests sometimes misled hosts about the number of people that would be staying at the Airbnb. It can become a stressful experience for the host when more people show up than the number of guests booked. The host has no idea what to expect. Should something happen in this circumstance, hosts are abandoned by Airbnb as Tariq (interview host) pointed out, because the host loses Airbnb's insurance coverage if the number of people on the booking does not match the number of people who showed up. Hosts described having very little control over who enters their Airbnb, and how guests made use of their space.

**Physical harm.** Users, in both interviews and forums, appeared to have minimal, if any, concern for physical injury or harm. Isabella (guest) did not believe she ever stayed in an Airbnb for long enough to have to worry about this. The host participants in this study reported that no guest had ever gotten hurt or injured at their Airbnbs, and considered their Airbnb to be a rather healthy and safe space for their guests to stay:

I'm always concerned that they're going to burn the house down, because I don't trust anybody else cooking but that's about it. I think my health of the house is very good um everything...Well it's not good for a kid but anyone with any sort of common sense behind them, I think is able to deal with this house in general.  
(Liam, interview host)

Susan (interview host) did not express concern about her own personal health and safety as a host, or the health and safety of guests. On the contrary, Susan explained that hosting allowed her to exercise a considerable amount:

Actually, I think it's good for me because it makes me walk a kilometre every time I have to clean the treehouse and I also take people around to show them the first time because the trail is hard to find so I do a whole lot more walking I guess than I would. (Susan, interview host)

Monique (interview host) echoed this view, but joked that she should avoid using so many cleaning products:

Sometimes I'm like worried that I'm using too many cleaning products when I clean the house all day and sometimes, I try to switch to more eco-friendly one that yeah, it's a lot of cleaning products. (Monique, interview host)

Liam stated that if he ever experienced physical harm as a host, he would have stopped hosting:

If I am the host and I ever been purposely hurt, like they dropped something on me, I'd break a toe like whatever. But if like I got purposely hurt by them, like someone was aggressive and like purposely tried to hurt me and I would probably stop hosting totally. (Liam, interview host)

Hosts, on the other hand, appeared to be more concerned about property damage and theft than personal harm. Hosts reported guests burning kitchen appliances, destroying furniture and other furnishings, among other things. They stressed the importance of having a security deposit in order to collect for damages if necessary. Standard practice for host was to report anything stolen or left untidy and charge the security deposit (Airbnb, 2017m). The next section details the safety risks identified by users.

### **3.3.2 Safety risks**

Guests and hosts identified the risks to their safety they considered while navigating the Airbnb system. This included safety level of the Airbnb's neighbourhood, keys, security of valuables, spacing issues and identify verification. A discussion of the safety situation of users follows.

**Neighbourhood.** The safety of the neighbourhood surrounding the Airbnb was cited by guest participants in this study as their primary safety concern. Sarah was one of the many guests who described using Google maps to confirm the location of the Airbnb, and the legitimacy of the listing. She looked for Airbnbs that were located in safe neighbourhoods as well as in close proximity to tourist activities. For example, Sarah viewed Airbnbs in tourist areas as safer than those in a subdivision.

**Keys.** A few guests also mentioned that having a key to their room made them feel more safe and secure in the Airbnb. With a key, there were able to lock up their belongings *in* their room and keep unwanted visitors *out*. Further, they opted for Airbnb accommodations that provided them with their own undisturbed and private space to avoid, or at the very least minimize, encounter with strangers. A self-contained space, similar to a hotel room, was their preference. Giving a stranger the keys to one's home can be very unsettling. Hosts described a few instances where the guest had not handed back the keys to the Airbnb at the end of the stay. It was hard for them to think about because in each case, a stranger still had access to their home after the expected duration. Considering the health and safety implications involved, hosts "just have to trust that it's going to be okay and the guest is going to be a good person" (Marie, forum host, the Phillipines) in order to avoid driving themselves crazy. Melissa shared her unsettling experience with one guest who had a key to a room that she, as the host, did not even have:

Yesterday I saw my guest being fishy when he was opening the bedroom door. He was kind of holding the apartment keys really tightly in his hand while opening the bedroom door. I have never had a key for this door or any door in my apartment. I thought maybe I was imagining it. But I checked today and it was locked! How is that even possible? They already made me nervous after how they lied on their profile (I posted on this a few days ago) and now this tops it off. To be honest I don't really feel all that safe around them. I have a child and don't know how to go about it. (Melissa, forum host, United States)

Hosts also mentioned that an additional fear of theirs was to give out their keys to guests who later overstay their welcome. In only extreme cases had a host experienced a guest who refused to leave the premise and became a squatter. Instead of keys, some hosts opted for automatic keyless access using Bluetooth-enabled locks. A few participants expressed concern about the lockbox being broken into. Many participants in this study viewed this lockbox system as potentially risky if key codes are accidentally repeated, as was explained by Sarah (guest):

How people get into the house is also a big thing. Whether or not, they let them in and lock the door themselves or if they have a keybox on the door. I think the keybox is interesting because they literally would have to reset the keybox code every single time that someone stays. So like, good for them for tracking what their keycodes are every time but for some reason, they don't and someone you know has the keycode from some other time, that would kind of freak me out. (Sarah, guest)

**Security of Valuables.** Michael (guest) noted that he only has had positive experiences as a guest. He proposed that hosts are well-intentioned as they are mainly concerned with making some extra side money and satisfying the needs of their guests:

The hosts have all been very friendly and accommodating. They want to, I think for most hosts, at least what I expect is realistic, is that they do this for extra income. However, it's not like they are trying to take advantage of guests to get as much quick, easy income as possible. All the hosts I've interacted with have been very supportive and want to please, want to satisfy, whoever rents their place. (Michael, guest)

Ryan (guest) shared Michael's sentiment and was similarly unconcerned. Ryan believed an almost unspoken agreement exists between hosts and guests to take care of one another in the system:

The reason why I feel that I am not super worried and stuff like that for the most part is because I think all travellers have some sort of pact which is like "If you're a traveller. I'm a traveller. I know you don't have a ton of money and I don't have a ton of money. I'm not going to fuck you over and you're not going to fuck me over." For the most part, it works like that, you know what I mean? We all help each other so I know that for the most part, my stuff is not going to be stolen. No one is going to rob me and stuff, you know? Sure, there are some odd times where this might happen, but I think in the grand scheme of things, this percentage is very low, you know what I mean? (Ryan, guest)

However, in the same breath, Ryan also mentioned that he has his wits about him, and always carried his money and personal valuables with him. This seemed contradictory, since Ryan would not keep his items safe in that way if he did fully trust the system and its users. In this system, however, trust is all that users have. This concern in respect to the security of personal belongings was also cited by Naseem (guest), even with the most exceptional host:

Even when I was sharing that townhouse with that lady, though she was super nice, very well established on Airbnb, she was a professional at it and I totally trusted her honestly I trusted her more than a lot of my friends even but leaving my room and then, with all my stuff in it throughout the day, it was definitely at the back of my head that, that lady could totally...like she did give me a key too to lock the door...but she could totally have another set of keys and she could totally break into my room and the next thing I know, now my stuff isn't there. (Naseem, guest)

He explained that he was worried about the host having access to his room, and in turn, his valuable items. Further, if the host is not the true owner of the property, the host could steal his things and flee the scene. In this way, it may be difficult to hold the host accountable for their actions. Additionally, if a host is accommodating multiple bookings at a time, Ryan pointed out that the uncertainty of not knowing who the other guests are at the Airbnb can be unsettling for him. If the host is on site, they could pose a threat or danger to the guest. However, the guest is not necessarily safer with an off-site host. Should something happen, the off-site host may not be able to respond to the situation and the guests' needs in a timely fashion, whereas if the guest stayed in a hotel, hotel employees would make themselves available immediately.

**Identity verification.** As discussed in a previous section, the identity of users are verified before they are able to use Airbnb's interface. Guests did not seem too concerned about Airbnb's identity verification process and background checks, but conversely, hosts appeared to be very critical of them. Sue's experience shed light on the need for guests to provide hosts with more identifying information:

I've just cancelled a guest as I was getting a very bad vibe and they kept asking me to cancel. I refused as it is costing me \$100 because of their lack of research and ignorance but in the end for my safety I'll have to wear the \$100. I decided to check their Govt Id Verification... It clearly states they will have a first and Last Name...Nope! This Girl is just Diana from Oxford. (Sue, forum host, Australia)

Mani and KP also believed that the current system of identity verification did not serve to fully protect the host. In their opinion, identity authentication using social media did not suffice, and Airbnb should require guests to provide government-issued ID:

I totally agree that Airbnb is more biased towards guests. It only allows me to require Government issued ID if I turn Instant Booking on, which I don't want to. I want to be able to see who is booking before I accept them. Social media account verification means nothing unless its a Facebook account with more than 50 friends. Most people add Google+ account which anyone can create in 5 minutes. (Mani and KP, forum hosts, United States)

From interviews, it was clear that guests had a poor understanding of what Airbnb really did, and did not do, behind the scenes. Guests assumed that Airbnb carried out background checks to "okay" both Airbnb and host before booking is made possible:

I don't think they have much of a role. I mean, they have to go and okay the home so like, I feel like they kind of done their due diligence that way and the fact that they are allowing them on the website in the first place means that someone has gone and looked into the place and okayed it and done, you know, health and safety interaction.” (Sarah, guest)

Hosts, on the hand, were more aware of how Airbnb's identity verifications system worked:

You'd be a fool to think AirBnb takes the time to run background checks on all the guests...They don't have a clue as long as they bring in more revenue they are welcome to come stay at your place. Requiring for a photo ID is the only guarantee and check performed by them. (Giovanni, forum host, United States)

Having said that, hosts expressed their disappointment with inadequate background checks. Clarisse (forum host, United States) described her experience with a suspect guest. Prior to booking, the guest insisted on paying in cash. When Clarisse searched the guest's name online, she found out that the guest was a felon with multiple arrests for theft and fraudulent gift cards. Considering his criminal record, it made sense that the guest tried to move the transaction off the Airbnb interface to avoid being identified and removed from the system. Furthermore, Airbnb can only hold users accountable, if they carry out transactions using the platform (Airbnb, 2017h). If Clarisse had accommodated the guest outside of Airbnb, she would not have been protected under Airbnb's safeguards including Airbnb's Terms of Service, Payments Terms of Service, cancellation and refund policies, Host Guarantee as well as the Host Protection Insurance program. Consequently, she would be putting herself at a greater risk of fraud and other security issues (Airbnb, 2018g). In Rick's case (forum host, United States) his prospective guest was previously convicted of driving under the influence, assault and burglary. Despite the guest's run-in with the law, he still accessed and used the platform which calls Airbnb's safety and security into question, much like Clarisse's example. However, fortunately for Clarisse and Rick, they did not instant book their Airbnbs. Consequently, they discovered the true identity of the potential guest, and rejected the request before booking could begin. If they used instant booking, both hosts would have to host questionable guests and suffer the consequences of doing so. Unfortunately, this was the case for Susan (interview host). She shared her experience with a guest who was previously convicted of child pornography offences – a detail that somehow escaped Airbnb's notice during the verification process:

He was using a false name and, I found that out after he arrived...he was using the wifi here at the house and that put a violation on his

parole. But I didn't know that until just before he was leaving because of something he had let slip and not about that, but about his name, about what his real name was and I was able to Google him...I was a little bit worried that if my grandchildren had come over, you know exposing them to him. (Susan, interview host)

She believed that Airbnb could have done more to verify the guest's identity and prevent the booking altogether, since her grandchildren could have been exposed to a child sexual predator. Using an alias name complicated the situation without question, but Susan's experience also shed light on the possibility of hosts and guests creating fake accounts online. Airbnb has not developed any formal mechanisms to control what occurs within its platform. Extending this further, hosts also saw the possibility of a user creating a new Airbnb account to wipe the slate clean after receiving a less-than-desirable review as well:

Like one time, I had a request from a guy who apparently had flooded someone's house. I don't know how, but that was what the last host said. It's like okay fine, I'm wondering, I'm always wondering how easy it would be for him to just set up a new profile because obviously, if you have that on your profile, you're not going to get any bookings so maybe he can just re-verify, and just close off and open a new account like people do like on Facebook and these kind of sites. (Monique, interview host)

Airbnb would appear to have no way in managing that, especially if additional new accounts under different names were used, as we saw with Susan's guest. Hosts and guests alike believed that the current process did not serve their needs, nor protected them against undesirable situations.

### **3.3.3 Psychosocial stressors**

Psychosocial stressors have been well articulated in the academic literature on hotel work. These include "work stress, low control of works, lack of supervisor or co-worker support, lack of respect, lack of recognition, lack of promotion prospects, harassment, violence, bullying and discrimination" (Hsieh, Apostolopoulos, Hatzudis, & Sonmez, 2014). Airbnb is also in the hospitality realm but participants in this study spoke to psychosocial stressors differently.

**Host-guest interactions.** Some guests remarked that with Airbnb, they desired the comfort of their own home in someone else's home. Consequently, not feeling at home in the Airbnb causes additional stress and discomfort for them. Sarah (guest) provided the example of one host who was very protective of her home and so much so that Sarah and her boyfriend felt very awkward and

uncomfortable for the whole duration of their stay. In Sarah's opinion, the host acted quite hostile towards them:

Like it was just very like "This is my home and even though I'm not going to be here this whole time. I'm your host. Just do what I say"...She was a lot and like you know, for a town is going out of business, for this begin a small source of your income, like given the fact that this town is going out of business, I would be a little kinder to people. (Sarah, guest)

Sarah was a bit put off by the way the host chose to trap the dog downstairs when it could have just been wandering around the house, freely. Additionally, this host had very strict dos and don'ts. Sarah and her boyfriend had brought camping plates and cups with them, which they ended up using and washing at the Airbnb to avoid using any of the host's stuff. Reflecting back on the experience, Sarah was astonished that the host's controlling behaviour was not accurately captured in the Airbnb's reviews. Hosts were not particularly concerned about experiencing harassment, bullying and/or violence during a guest's stay. Susan described feeling almost a comradeship with her guests, and in instance, explained feeling more than comfortable hosting her "camping people" guests:

The kind of people that I get at the treehouse are camping people and generally they're, I'm sure they're bad camping people, but I think for the most part, they're just into camping and not into...so I haven't had anybody intimidate me or threaten a bad review or want something you know more than, I don't know what it would be, extra wood because they can have extra wood if they need it. I have never had any kind of intimidation, tactics or anything. All of those guests tend to be, they tend to be great like I said 99%.  
(Susan, interview host)

As Tariq (interview host) described, the Airbnb app is an online communication tool and physically separates the host and guest. If a guest did not make a good first impression and acted confrontational via messaging, Tariq and his family did not accept the guest's booking request. A guest can sometimes be aggressive towards the host via text after their stay as well:

If we see any red flags at all, we usually just decline the guest and usually, whenever we see anything that would saying "If you don't do this, we'll do this" like threatening. It's been over text message and we usually just, it's usually after a stay so like, when the person brought too many people, when they brought their extended family, we gave them a bad review and they said like "Can you...you must take this down. Like we don't want to pay this extra amount" and then they tried to report it and then, like, they said, I don't know

what they threatened about but I just remember it wasn't a good experience, but like, we did, we were, everything worked out for us in the end but it was still like, there was not, they were still not very happy with it all. (Tariq, interview host)

This could work vice versa as well. Users sometimes also discriminated against one another based on several factors including gender, race and age. Tariq (interview host) admitted this, for example:

Like if it's a young crowd and if it's all women, I think my parents would prefer all young women versus all young men. And by young, I mean like college age or like even younger. Like their age, their gender. My dad even looks to see ethnicity if they have too many people...because we have noticed that a lot of [families from certain cultural backgrounds] are booking like 10, 12 people. (Tariq, interview host)

**Undesirable Guests.** There were many hosts who felt that their Airbnb was not a suitable and/or safe space for certain guests and wanted to protect themselves against liability, property damage, theft and undue stress. However, systemic pressures led to many participants in this study hosting these guests anyway. Under the instant booking feature and Airbnb anti-discrimination policy (Airbnb, 2018g), hosts are required to make accommodations for the guest wherever appropriate. Andrea gave an example of children in an Airbnb that is not child-friendly:

Seriously, what if a host DID let somebody with a toddler into their non-childproofed home because Airbnb said 'MAY not be safe....' and the parent decided "What the heck, do it anyway", and that child then fell down a longflight of stairs?? or pulled something out of a shelf and something heavy from hi0067her up crashed down on their head?? Would Airbnb take the brunt? Not sure about that. (Andrea, forum host, Netherlands)

Similarly, a host may choose not to accommodate guests with pets. Hosts described that pets, primarily dogs and cats, affect their home's cleanliness and odour. With pets in the Airbnb, the host would have to devote more of their time towards cleaning and removing pet hair from carpeting, furniture and upholstery. Pet hair was of particular concern since future guests, or even the host, may have pet allergies. On online forums, hosts described their frustration with a loophole that allows guests to bring pets into their Airbnb. Airbnb has policy in place that protects guests with assistance animals (for example, guide dogs for the visually impaired), and reasonably so. Hosts, when contacting Airbnb support, have been informed that emotional support dogs are considered assistance animals.

For one particular host in the United States, Barb, the guest did not even have a legitimate service dog in their profile but, regardless, she still had to accommodate the guest under Airbnb's instant booking policies. A host is not allowed to ask for proof of a service dog's training or the need for one. Further, as hosts mentioned in response to Barb's inquiry, it becomes awfully awkward for a host to discern a service dog apart from a pet, should a guest have an invisible illness. In the United States, asking for documentation on service animals is permissible under the Americans with Disabilities Act; however, a host cannot *require* documentation. In other words, a host is free to ask for documentation; however, if the guest claims they do not have it, there is nothing more a host can do. In addition, hosts were unable to charge guests a pet fee to recuperate their cleaning and maintenance costs, and they were not very happy about Airbnb's firm stance on this matter:

I need to re-emphasize that I am not excluding dogs from my homes. I just don't appreciate guests cheating the system or Airbnb reinforcing that behaviour. I wouldn't dream of charging someone with a legitimate service animal fees but when you want to bring your emotional support pugs and expect me to waive fees.... are you trying to make a mockery of the disabled? There are expenses involved with allowing dogs in our homes and we pride ourselves in running a very clean operation and replacing things that are worn or damaged immediately. (Sandra, forum host, United States).

Currently, similar federal disability policy does not exist in Canada which further complicates this situation in Canada (McColl, Schaub, Sampson & Hong, 2010). All in all, it is evident that more clarity is needed around Airbnb's policies and regulatory controls because when users were asked to describe their understanding of them, they had a hard time doing so.

In forums, many hosts also described experiences and challenges of guest with mental health issues that were evident during their Airbnb stay. Carla shared her experience with a guest who was suffering from mental illness. She did not feel well-equipped to support a guest self-described as "hypervigilant" and "having different trigger." She was very conflicted and did not know what to do, commenting "I don't necessarily like that I feel unsafe, but not trusting my gut is never good" (Carla, forum host, United States). She wanted to deny the booking request to avoid a less than desirable situation and reached out to hosts in the forum for advice.

This uncertainty of now knowing how to proceed as a host was also reiterated by Moran. Moran noticed that her guest was showing signs of an eating disorder and she felt a genuine concern

for the guest's well-being. She sought advice from her fellow hosts on the forum as to how she could reach out and encourage her guest to get the help they needed without overstepping her mark:

It's been a little more than a week since she has arrived, and I could spot immediately she has an eating disorder. Over the weekend we got to know each other a little better, we've opened up to one another, and it seems like she's in denial to her illness, but at the same time the shield is cracking. She needs help, but I don't know which kind of help I could give her. Ignoring this situation by telling myself that this is not my business is something I am not willing to do. Not only I feel responsible for her as my guest, this is illness like any other that should never be ignored. Many of us knows what it feels like. I do have a reason to believe it started recently, by trying to gain control over her life.  
(Moran, forum host, Israel)

Liz, an American forum host, shared Moran's sentiment and described her encounter with a person likely suffering from schizophrenia:

I just had a man show up at my doorstep who reeked of urine and could not utter a single coherent sentence. (my neighbors later told me they had seen him in town talking to the air). Obviously he is schizophrenic and gearing up for a severe episode. There is no law (in the US) against being crazy, but crazy people can have their issues elsewhere, not in my home. I am not running a halfway house for the mental health community. Check into real estate law and discrimination for your area. There might be some loopholes under which you can put your foot down with Airbnb. For me it is about safety, since they will be in my own home. (Liz, forum host, United States)

Liz identified the guest as being beyond her comfort level and decided against hosting him in order to prioritize her health and well-being. Liz advised her fellow hosts on the forum to read into real estate and discrimination laws for their cities and find loopholes to create sound and legitimate grounds to deny certain bookings from undesirable guests.

Connie (forum host, New Zealand) described an experience with a guest who made a suicide attempt during their stay. She described feeling helpless and not knowing who to contact to relay her experiences. Connie's experience is very telling of the invisible stress of working as an Airbnb host. Connie described feeling "stuck" and "trapped" because the guest had nowhere else to stay. The situation was far less than ideal, especially since Connie came to find out that the guest suffered from very poor mental health, while also dealing with personality disorder, mood disorder with suicidal

ideation, and intense sexual abuse therapy. Connie went on to describe the undue pressure of hosting this guest:

But I'm not supporting a health system using my home in this way without any offer of support or disclosure so a proper discussion can occur to see if it was ever going to be a fit for EVERYONE. Behind the Guest whose family was less than an hour away, but where were they? Undisclosed mental health patients requiring specialist support, are using Airbnb homes as part of a next step in the mental health re-housing program. (Connie, forum host, New Zealand)

She felt the guest deceived her by not disclosing his mental health condition prior to booking her Airbnb. Connie described hosting these sort of guests as “an abuse of [her] good will”. Her use of emotionally charged words, capitalization and exclamation marks spoke to her frustration with the challenge of hosting ill guests. Hosts were not familiar with humans rights and privacy laws and seemed to expect that guests should disclose mental illnesses.

In the context of Ontario, the Ontario Human Rights Code protects individuals with mental health disabilities and additions from discrimination and harassment due to their health conditions (OHRC, 2016a). Of course, in this case, the guest may be unable, or unwilling, to ask for assistance or disclose the nature of their disability, but the host must follow the “principles of accommodation (respect for dignity, individualization, integration and full participation)” (OHRC, 2016b). On principle, Airbnb guests with mental health disabilities and other health complications have “right to equal treatment and equal access to facilities and services” as those guests without (OHRC, 2016c).

The aforementioned are just a few of the many examples of host experiences with difficult and challenging guests. In all these cases, the guest posed a potential risk to the health and safety of the host, and the host is required make spur-of-the-moment decisions. These experiences pointed to a need for better safety measures to ensure the health and well-being of users, but also a professional approach to human rights and privacy as they pertain to mental illness and disclosure in the Airbnb system.

**Role of Gender.** Female guests shared their experiences as being the only guest group at the Airbnb during their stay. If they had social interactions, it was with the host. If their Airbnbs accommodated multiple guests at the time, more people on site presented more opportunity for interaction between male and female individuals. In addition to having an off-site host, single guest bookings appeared as an additional protective factor against sexual harassment and/or assault.

Isabella understood how a female guest could experience sexual harassment or assault while staying at an Airbnb but explained that she always travels with friends, so she never come across this herself. She suggested a possible mitigating effect of travelling in a group:

I understand that usually when, like it would be a completely different experience for me if I was alone. That's the thing. If you're with your group of friends, you don't really have to worry about that but yeah, definitely alone, would be a different experience. I cannot say because I have never done it. I cannot say like say how I've been assaulted by anybody, but I understand that like how people could feel like that. (Isabella, guest)

Rose stated that she has never experienced harassment (sexual and otherwise) nor violence during her Airbnb stays. She travels alone for conferences but stays in hotels. She stays with friends when she uses Airbnb on vacation. She recognized that female travellers expose themselves to more risks in the system than male counterparts:

Like you're going into a stranger's house. Sleeping in their room so yeah, safety I guess like they could always, if I were a really paranoid person, then I'd be worried that they could always get you but then it's not the kind of thing that would stop me from like booking an Airbnb but obviously...like when I've done Airbnbs in the past, for the most part I've been going with like a male partner so then, I'm not as concerned but if I were to go with a group of like, you know, females, then I'd be a little afraid that we are all putting ourselves in more danger. (Rose, guest)

Sarah also echoed this sentiment, opting for hotel bookings when travelling alone as well:

I think that I just find like as a female, who is like a pretty small individual, that I just feel safer staying in a hotel where there is more people and where there is people, like security, and people who are paid to make sure their guests are okay. As opposed to staying in like someone's home by myself for like literally anything could happen. (Sarah, guest)

George described his discomfort with a male host who was homosexual and hit on him:

I shouldn't say that I discriminate against male hosts, but I definitely look for non-male hosts now because I had an experience in Washington. The host was gay. I thought that would be cool but he kind of hit on me throughout the entire stay there. Um, it got really weird. He tried to get me drunk. Yeah, it was really weird. This might be a plus for other people but it wasn't for me. (George, guest)

His experience singularly disrupted the dominant gender discourse of sexual harassment, being a male. He did not discriminate against male hosts, but he preferred non-male hosts to avoid similar encounters. This example showed how gender adds a layer of complexity in the host and guest interaction. A person may experience unwelcome advances by someone of the opposite gender (in heterosexual relations) or same gender (homosexual relations). The person is not aware of this subtlety, until they experience it. Naseem also explained that in situations where the individual is in a new place that they know nothing about, vulnerability transcends gender, as a shared experience between both male and female individuals:

For me, I do think I am less vulnerable than a female especially from, maybe in the time that I was in Waterloo maybe not, because in comparison to someone who was raised in Waterloo as well, both of us have a lot of resources and we know how to navigate the place very well. And I think if I, pretty much, most of Canada would be the same but like let's say if I go to a different country, a different continent, let's say I go to Europe and I rent a place. I am just as much vulnerable as a female. (Naseem, guest)

Hosts also recognized differential experiences by gender. Naseem felt that, as a male guest, his experiences were different from a female navigating the Airbnb system:

Physically speaking, I am more capable of defending myself than if a huge guy attacks me, in comparison with a female and then there's obviously that risk of sexual harassment obviously for a female. So I think I am much less vulnerable than a woman, on average, but yeah, to be honest, it has never been a concern of mine...Sexually speaking, no. That is definitely not a concern of mine. (Naseem, guest)

Ryan (guest) expressed a similar sentiment, commenting:

I don't ever have to be worried about getting hit on by the member of the opposite sex or someone overpowering me when a woman does have to worry about that so that's probably why they would be worried about safety things than me. (Ryan, guest)

A good majority of female hosts in interviews and forums described challenges with navigating the system as a female host. Experiences described by online hosts were much more graphic and explicitly sexual in description than those described in interviews. Female hosts, in person, appeared indifferent and presented themselves as stoic while online, they expressed concerns about

unwelcomed advances and suggestive language from male hosts and guests. Olivia (forum host, United States) shared her experience of sexual harassment as a female host:

One of my guests repeatedly asked me if I had a boyfriend (I do, and said so), and repeatedly made grabs for my lower back. After I dodged a few grabs, he succeeded in grabbing my ass when I bent over to plug something in. I swatted his hand off, yelled, "no, I REALLY have a boyfriend," and jumped away from him. As I was showing him the patio, he tried to kiss me. Again, I swatted. Then I told him that I was going to go, and when I went inside to retrieve my purse before leaving, he blocked the door in an effort to keep me inside. I had to hit him to make him leave the door. (Olivia, forum host, United States)

Since the guest was scheduled to stay at Olivia's place for an entire week, she contacted Airbnb about the incident and unfortunately, Airbnb representatives were not very responsive to her situation. Further, she sensed a victim-blaming culture on Airbnb's side. Having said that, not only were hosts disappointed in the response by Airbnb and police, they were shocked that Olivia had told Airbnb that the money was more important to her than her safety. She had been sexually assaulted yet she did not mind if the guest stayed. She was more worried about losing rental income.

As a result of the unwelcomed sexual advances, female hosts described in forums that they felt much more comfortable and safe restricting themselves to only hosting female guests. Maxine shared that she only provided accommodations to female guests or couples. During the booking process, she was upfront and frank with potential male guests about her hosting preference:

I'm a female living alone in a house and I have a bedroom for two guests. I do not mind guests who are a couple but I have rejected all male guests. Maybe it sounds a bit exaggerated but I simply feel uncomfortable and I tend to trust my instinct. When I reject them, I simply tell them the truth, that I'm a female living alone and for security reasons I prefer not to have all male guests and that this is nothing personal to them. (Maxine, forum host, Malta)

Cathy, among other hosts, did not view this hosting choice as being sexist:

If someone has been raped by a man and yet needs the income of Airbnb and feels safer having female strangers in their home, while they are sleeping at night, I personally see nothing wrong with that. (Cathy, forum host, United States)

Instead, it appeared that a wide-spread "Hosting is safer with female-only guests as a female host" rhetoric existed among female hosts. Female hosts described feeling safe and at ease knowing that

their conscious decision to not host male guests reduced the possibility of sexual harassment and assault. Susan described her experiences with male hosts (and male guests for multiple guest bookings) to be very positive, and attributed her positive experiences to reading online reviews. This seemed to suggest that Susan used online reviews to better identify and assess risk while navigating the Airbnb system as both a host and guest.

The majority of Liam's guests have been female, and he noticed that on first meeting him, they were trying to feel him out. He found this behaviour understandable:

I think it's first meeting me that [female guests] really, they're trying to size me up and I understand why There's nothing wrong. I come from a predominant female family like I got sisters, I got my mom. Like my grandmother is the matriarchy. It's really female so I understand why they're sizing me up so I just try to be courteous, respectful and keep my head down. If they want to take the first lead, you know, on jokes or if they want to take the first lead on space and boundaries, I let them do that till then, I give them the most respectful birth that I can. (Liam, interview host)

Liam gave an example of his roommate, Ben, hitting on a female guest. In this situation, the guest did not seem to mind the attention, but Ben's actions could just as easily have made her feel uncomfortable:

There was this French woman who came in and she was beautiful, just elegant and a stunning woman. The accent did not harm the ears and we come home and Ben's supposed to meet her so we come home so there they are sitting in the kitchen. Ben cracks out this garbage bottle of mid-blend South American wine and like, I have never seen a man more awkwardly hitting on a girl, trying to look refined. (Liam, interview host)

As Liam has three male roommates, he explained that he often invites his female friends over to his Airbnb when he hosts female guests to help with the gender imbalance:

There were these 2 girls that were very timid around us and very open around our girlfriends or like I mean like friends that are girls that were over, and they were like super cool with them but when it was just us in the house as you can tell like there was a change in atmosphere and environment from them. They were very much just in their room and don't really want to see us, or interact with us and we were like "Okay. Sure, sure. We'll give you all the space you need." (Liam, interview host)

Jacob (host) attributed his emotional intelligence and understanding of boundaries with female guests to growing up with two elder sisters. This extended to hosting female guests as a male host. He noted

there had not been any instances of sexual tension between him and his female guests. However, he is very proactive and, like Liam, mentioned that he brings his girlfriend to the premises of his Airbnb to make single female guests feel at ease staying with him as a male host. This form of accommodation would be unlikely in a hotel:

I have two elder sisters and I think that helps as a male host especially understanding kind of like my boundaries...it actually helps that I sometimes, my, I would ask my girlfriend to visit me as well and that would help to make the female guest feel more comfortable if that makes sense. (Jacob, interview host)

In conclusion, the risks identified by users, both in interviews and forums, fell into three categories: health risks, safety risks and psychosocial stressors. In particular, users identified health risks including cleanliness and spread of disease, spacing issues and physical harm; safety risks including safety level of the Airbnb's neighbourhood, keys, security of valuables, and identify verification; and psychosocial stressors including host-guest interactions, hosting undesirable guests, and the role of gender in the system. In addition to the health and safety risks in the system, hosts also experience systemic pressures, which will be the focus of the discussion for the next section, as well as the strategies that hosts use in order to manage their work/life balance and work environment.

### **3.4 AFTER THE STAY – Systemic Pressures**

All in all, hosts described the challenges they face when navigating within the Airbnb system. They did not know what options they have when they find themselves in certain situations, and in many ways, struggled with juggling the rules of being an Airbnb host. Airbnb's policies and practices in Canada, and elsewhere around the world, are constantly changing. This study accounted for the health and safety situation and related policy as they stood between 2017 and 2018. It is possible that with Airbnb's continued efforts to address gaps in the system, its practices and response to user health and safety have changed since engaging with forums and interviews for this study.

#### **3.4.1 Financial pressures**

Hosting was largely depicted as a positive and rewarding experience by hosts in interviews and forums; however, as was described in previous sections, it is not always easy for them. Still, hosts cited that they "could not imagine closing up shop" (Paul and Trino, forum hosts, United States) irrespective of their frustration with how Airbnb functions as a system, due to the financial security that it provided them. Hosts also described feeling pressure to get as many bookings as possible, in

order to make the most amount of money in the least amount of time. From interviews and forums, some hosts described feeling stressed, especially when they were just starting out, because expenses pile up quickly. They hoped their rental income would help offset the start-up cost as well as the maintenance, utilities and cleaning costs, or at the very least, help them break even. Seeing some Airbnbs around them run at a loss and shut down do make hosts nervous, but it also pushes them to keep an eye on their day-to-day operations.

A possible saturation of the market as more Airbnbs enter the short-term rental market remained a concern for hosts. Wendy (forum host, United States) restated an Airbnb competitor website's statistic that the number of listings had more doubled in 2017; however, that being said, the increased number of listings is not necessarily being met with an increased appetite for them. Hosts reported adding personal touches and "going the extra mile" in order to stay competitive. There was an agreement among forum hosts that listing photos can be used effectively to showcase the perks of an Airbnb and in turn, capture the attention of the target market by making the Airbnb look exceptionally nice. Hosts also asserted that listing photos, apart from being of high quality, should also be kept up to date. Jay, an American forum host, even suggested hosts to have "seasonal photos changed out every quarter" to this end.

### **3.4.2 Stress of hosting**

There is very little known about user experiences within this access economy platform. As aforementioned, Airbnb provide hosts with strong incentives to enable instant booking for their listings. Many hosts did not like instant booking and while it is true that they are not forced to use it, they described using this feature for these incentives, and wished the rules associated with it were a little softer. Moreover, hosts described shying away from cancelling guests, if it could mean getting their superhost status revoked:

We recently had a guest cancel at the last minute and we called Airbnb to give them a full refund. And then we received a email to review the guest and they can review us even though they never stayed with us and we never met. We pride ourselves on being superhost and giving our guest the best possible when they stay with us. And now someone may write a bad review even though we have never met them and they never stayed with us. (Lance, forum host, United States)

Judy shared her concerns with losing her superhost status or appearing lower in Airbnb search results, should she close her listing for a month due to health reasons. Additionally, hosts interviewed in this

study have never had a bad experience with a guest and they did know how Airbnb's insurance policy worked. They had heard horror stories of guests trashing an Airbnb and causing thousands of dollars' worth of damage. In addition, it took months for Airbnb to sort out the situation. Again, they had no personal experience of this themselves, but they were not overly confident that Airbnb would help cover them if needed. The current regulatory situation with regards to taxation, health and safety, as well as the terms and condition of service does not put Airbnb in the same footing as hotels. Hosts and guests did not appear too aware of the current political and legal environment of Airbnb, or if they were, kept the discussion very surface level. They also found it difficult to identify changes they would like to see in policies to better their experiences, in relation to health and safety as well as other aspects of their experience. This was certainly surprising to see as these policies and discussions would directly impact their line of work.

Monique (interview host), however, touched on the very harsh reality of hosting work: hosting was not as flexible and free as Airbnb lets on. Airbnb hosts could not afford to be choosy, literally and figuratively, and at times, accepted less than ideal guests knowingly because their livelihood depended on it:

I always hope for the best and I hope, my hope is that eventually our place will become so popular that we don't even have to consider guests who could be problematic but when you're at the stage that you're looking for business, you're like "I'll take whatever I can get". But yeah eventually, if I have like more verified adults and vacation groups, repeat customers, that would just decrease a lot of that anxiety if you have these try and true people. (Monique, interview host)

Liam (interview host) described a string of particularly eventful stories with bizarre guests that he had hosted in the past. He described a case of altercation and domestic abuse with one pair of guests. Another guest invited a homeless man over to Liam's Airbnb. The homeless guy was doing stick and poke tattoos in the basement, and the guest kept trying to convince Liam to allow the homeless man to spend the night in the basement. Liam was afraid that the guy would just never leave his house. In another episode, Liam also caught this guest one time catching his fire on hair when he was cooking on the gas stove in the kitchen. The guest justified it by saying, "Maybe subconsciously, I wanted my hair to be on fire." These guests exemplified just how stressful and unpredictable hosting work can be.

Moreover, Susan mentioned in passing that that it takes three bad reviews for a host to be ousted by Airbnb. The power of online reviews shed light on just how precarious hosting work is. Hosts can be kicked off the system any time, as Astra (forum host, United States) illustrated:

My employer, Ash was a SuperHost for 6 yrs who hosted the CEO in her home twice, & she had over 100 5 star reviews as both a host and a guest for 6 yrs, and 2 months ago, she got a message from someone at Airbnb saying they were taking down her account & would not give any valid reason. We have heard of this happening many many times. (Astra, forum host, United States)

Airbnb is a community marketplace very much mediated by user trust and reputation. As a system user, one guest's perceptions and experiences of an Airbnb shapes the reputations of both the Airbnb and host for future guests. In this way, hosts described being at the guest's beck and call to ensure five-star ratings and positive reviews. In addition, this placed an extra emphasis on reviews and pressure on hosts to deliver on their promises or better, exceed guests' expectations. Some hosts even noted that they primarily focused on building an online reputation for themselves and to that end, subject themselves to whatever inconveniences and risks need be. The interviews and forum posts were full of examples of hosts bending over backwards for their guests.

Norah's (interview host) Airbnb, for instance, was child-proof and well-equipped with the amenities that would be well-appreciated by guests who are bringing children with them, including a high chair and 'pack n play'. Amélie (interview host) also accommodated families with young children and asked guests before their stay what she could do to help them travel lighter. Amélie also mentioned that she always leaves coffee as well as bread and butter for her guests to avoid the need for them to have to go out and grab essentials after a long travel. This was well-received by most of her guests but she found it strange that a few took her generosity in another way. A few guests mistook the kind gesture and described it as "clutter in the fridges" in reviews after their stay. As a result, Amélie, like other hosts, described treading gently to make sure they are not overstepping their boundaries as a host.

### **3.4.3 Online Reviews**

All guest participants in this study described very minimal interaction with the host, and vice versa, after an Airbnb stay. The final component in the host-guest interaction is the peer-to-peer review process. After the stay, hosts and guests are given the opportunity to provide feedback to one another on the experience they shared. Airbnb publishes reviews on its website only after it has

received both the host's *and* guest's individual feedback on the experience. Both reviews are then released online simultaneously. According to Tariq (interview host), Airbnb's bi-directional rating system is designed in this way in order to prevent retaliatory remarks and give both parties less incentive to leave a dishonest rating. He also expressed comfort with this arrangement as he described feeling protected by it. If his family leaves a poor review about a guest, Tariq found comfort in knowing that the guest is unable to respond with a defamatory attack to his online reputation as their review cannot be tampered with. Additionally, participants explained that online reviews empowered them as consumers of the Airbnb service and gave them a voice to share what went well for them, and what did not.

Guests resorted to private messaging to the host, instead of public reviews, to discuss the 'nitty and gritty' as well as small inconveniences (for example, if a lightbulb burnt out). Guests did not want to blow something minor out of proportion and tarnish the host's online reputation. In addition to this subtlety, users' sensitivity to online reviews and ratings was also discussed. Some host and guests interviewed in this study felt attacked or undervalued at times when they received negative feedback. Tariq described an instance where his dad took a guest's review to heart:

My dad, he's very sensitive so we got a, I think we got a 4 star review by somebody who said "I really liked the place but the TV is really old and doesn't work really well" so then my dad went out and bought a new TV. Yeah, he's very sensitive about that. I was like "Hey dad. What are you doing?" I mean it was good deal but still, it was like a \$400 TV but he's just really sensitive. That's just who he is. (Tariq, interview host)

Monica (forum host, Canada) described her frustration when her efforts to make her space as homely and inviting as possible were unappreciated by her guests in reviews:

I spent a whole day decorating my listing for the Christmas guests...So you see, I thought I would get a great review because I always have for the past three years when renting to Christmas guests. I hung hand made Christmas quilts on the walls, put up a ceiling height Christmas tree with hand made ornaments, put Christmas table runners on all the tables and side boards, put up a complete Christmas village on one wide window sill. Garlands throughout the house... So I said to myself...next year I will not decorate! (Monica, forum host, Canada)

It can be especially frustrating for hosts when they check in with their guest during the stay, but still receive a poor review:

It can be frustrating because we have guests who I'm following up with or, you know, I'm trying to be, go about above and beyond and back over backwards and I would check in to make sure if they have everything they need and they say "Yeah, everything's perfect" and then they leave like a bit of a harsh rating because there's not like a box of Kleenex in the bathroom. You know, it's usually not a big deal but you know you had an opportunity to tell me. (Amélie, interview host)

Susan described her experience with a particular guest that was a no-show. Two days later, the guest requested a refund and when she did not receive one, she retaliated by posting up a very nasty review about Susan's Airbnb. Airbnb took down the review, but Susan described that, in times like that, the review system can be rather stressful and bothersome. In a few cases, hosts went so far to as to threaten and harass guests because they were unhappy with reviews they received:

[The host] is making threats and sending harassing tone of messages to me because I provided a negative review of my experience. Because of my negative review, she is apparently seeking to retaliate and take action against me (both on and off the Airbnb platform) which is a threat and harassment to my family, and I would not expect that using Airbnb would've ever led to feeling threatened by another host. This person is quite possibly mentally and emotionally unstable and clearly appears to be unfit for hosting in this open, sharing Community of Airbnb. I'm appalled and alarmed and now I'm honestly frightened and scared for the safety of my family in my own home. This host seems like she could be volatile and violent and easily angered. I'm afraid. (Megan and Chris, forum guests, United States)

Both hosts and guests alike questioned the reliability of Airbnb's online rating system and some even suggested the presence of positivity bias in peer review. Jacob, interview host, suggested that users felt social pressure to give out five-stars for overall ratings:

Most people just click 5 stars because they don't know, because they feel like oh the other guy will see how you rate and then the social pressure to put 5 stars for everyone but once they come down to the part where they say like you know, cleanliness and such, that's when people can get a little more granular and sometimes, the introspection will give people some room to be a little more honest. (Jacob, interview host)

Guests, like Carlos, claimed to never have seen a single negative review in their experience using Airbnb. A handful of hosts avoided writing negative reviews out of concern for their safety as well. Guests could get back at them, since guests now knew where the host lived. The peer-to-peer system

appeared to be more of a formality than anything else, with almost an unspoken agreement between host and guest to give one another favourable reviews:

They can be a little bit skewed obviously because ...for example, I can give you an example. The same time I rented an Airbnb, the person who rented it to me, like the host, at the end when I said bye, she asked me to basically give her a great review so she can give me a great review back. So, it's not something, in my opinion, always spontaneous. It's not something that people go out of their just to make a great review. They might, but not necessarily all the time. It's almost like an exchange that "Okay, you're a decent person. I'm a decent person." (Naseem, guest)

As a result, several participants in this study reported that reviews, sometimes, were not an accurate reflection of the Airbnb. Airbnb pushes for reviews to be completed after every stay, but is unable to ensure that the reviews are complete in the information they provide. Both hosts and guests described times where users did not measure up to their good reviews. Monique shared an example of an Airbnb being incongruous with its "stellar" reviews:

We went to Ottawa and I stayed in like a private room by myself without my husband and this place had stellar reviews. It was a superhost. I showed up. The place was dirty. The bathroom was dirty. There were no towels, like no hand towels. Nothing. It was just like gross. The kitchen was unclean and then like 3 o'clock in the morning, there were other guests staying in the house. They were like having a party. They ordered pizza. They ordered food. They woke me up. You know? Which was like, I was shocked because the reviews were so good which kind of made me realize like people aren't always super honest in their reviews because I showed up. There was a condom on the floor in the bedroom I was staying in. There was a mini fridge that was full of someone's like leftover food they hadn't cleaned out. Like, it was just truly gross and yeah, that was not what I was expecting because the reviews were like stellar. (Monique, interview host)

Airbnb's appraisal system is based on a very subjective scale of measurement. Participants in this study came from various cultural backgrounds, and these appeared to shape their expectations of a host and therefore their ratings of the host. Additionally, it was noted that hosting practices vary across countries. In North America, for example, hosts act very casual towards their guests while in Europe, guests described Airbnb hosting to be much more professional, formal and more akin to a commercial hotelier. Additionally, cultural norms around hosting are not the same around the world as they are in Canada, or North America. Amelie provided the example of one stay where she had a

very uncomfortable bed and no air conditioning. From her experiences, she identified air conditioning as a feature of North American Airbnbs, and less so for European ones. With this in mind, Amelie made a judgement call to not leave a bad review. Having said that, if other past guests also obscured their full experience in reviews, future guests are not in the know of the actual living situation at the Airbnb. In this way, peer-to-peer reviews that incompletely describe Airbnb experiences can be misleading.

Susan, interview host, was very candid about her dislike of the rating system, for a slightly different reason. She remarked that guests often think “five stars to mean the Hilton.” In her opinion, there is a discrepancy in how Airbnb describes three stars to hosts and guests. To hosts, three stars results in Airbnb threatening to shut down their place because the guests are dissatisfied with the services provided. Conversely, Airbnb describes three stars as “good”, four stars as “great” and five stars as “excellent” to guests. In this way, the review process can become quite stressful and frustrating for hosts because, as it stands now, an Airbnb that guests view to be “good” enough for three stars may be qualified by hosts as five stars. Susan also pointed out that publicly responding to a guest’s remark just draws more attention to the negative review. In this way, hosts have no true way to ‘clear their name’ so-to-speak. In addition to subjectivity, it appears that the unclear rating system creates unreliability and inconsistency in reviews.

#### **3.4.4 Work/life balance**

Hosts, both in interviews and forums, recognized the possibility of anything happening during or after a guest’s stay and prepare accordingly. They were prudent in how they managed and maintained upkeep of their Airbnb between guests. Norah (interview host) emphasized her attention to detail as well as the time she invests in ensuring her Airbnb is very clean for the next guest. Maria, another interview host, did the same and was very diligent with keeping her Airbnb well-maintained and checked regularly:

I have a handyman who is constantly just fixing things on the property, like if there is anything loose, if there is anything...you know, I try to make the environment as safe as possible. I also have a security system and I also have a, like a brand new smoke and carbon monoxide detectors that are hooked up to my security system so every time, someone sets the smoke alarm off in which there have been multiple cases, I get notified first and then I can decide whether or not to dispatch the fire department... Although, it’s very annoying because there are lot of false alarms, I’d rather see the false alarms than not have that available, especially because we have a

wood-burning fireplace. We have a barbecue. You never know what people are going to get themselves into. (Maria, interview host)

Sometimes, the Airbnb's upkeep may involve professional help for certain tasks such as gardening, dusting and vacuuming, and cleaning laundry in a continuous fashion from one guest to the next. All hosts were very explicit that they had a well-developed, and in turn efficient, system in place. In this way, hosts cited appreciating guest feedback as it allowed them to improve this system over time and improve their operations. If hosts were ever pressed for time, they really felt the pressure because in many cases, Airbnb has become their "bread and butter":

It's very hard, especially during our high rental months. and it's hard to decline them because that's our bread and butter, that basically covers our daycare fees for our son...It's very hard especially if I don't have like the time or, you know, if I only have one evening to put the house and like having a toddler... can be lots of work and it's really hard to keep the house clean and tidy. (Amélie, interview host)

Hosting can get stressful and quite busy with inquiries and booking requests from guests. Norah mentioned that she might start spending some time off every year to give herself a break and a chance to recuperate. In addition to scheduling tools, hosts described using the Airbnb app to help manage and receive real-time updates on their bookings. This line of work is fast-paced and hosts sometimes struggled to keep pace with their demands. Hosting can be especially stressful in certain times of the year. Jacob stressed the importance of time management in order to maintain a solid work/life balance:

One big thing about work life balance is that, you know, you have to know how to manage your time and if you manage your own time, it can get really stressful especially when you're starting out but once you have kind of developed a system of, you know, saying "bye" to your current guests and greeting the next one in 2 hours, you know that to maintain that, you have to maintain your time, maintain your happiness, you need to maintain your time. (Jacob, interview host)

Some hosts briefly touched on the stress of balancing the demands of Airbnb with other work commitments:

I mean it can be little bit stressful sometimes, you know especially when you are working full time like it's not primary job so, from the perspective, it can be a bit stressful. (Norah, interview host)

In Susan's case, working as an actor and copywriter allowed her the flexibility to work from home, which extended to her being able to tend to clean her Airbnb as soon as the guest leaves. Working

from home has taught her how to maintain a work/life balance within her home and compartmentalize appropriately.

### **3.4.5 Support from Airbnb**

All participants in this study agreed with Airbnb's laissez faire approach and hands-off role in the host-guest interaction. They liked that Airbnb managed the payment for them and helped facilitate direct contact with other users on the Airbnb platform. They were able to inquire about more information and availability. On the Airbnb website, users are encouraged to notify Airbnb if another user made them feel uncomfortable or tried to move the conversation and/or payment outside Airbnb. If this is the case, users are advised to report the messages by 'flagging' them (Airbnb, 2018g). Hosts, both in interviews and forums, described their efforts to directly contact Airbnb administration for next steps when faced with tough situations such as canceling a booking request due to unforeseen circumstances; however, they were met with a rather callous response. For example, Anna (forum host, Brazil) explained that representatives told her that her level of hosting did not allow her to contact the administration directly. Hosts also noted that Airbnb's representatives, as well as the help and support line, come short. Airbnb is not quick to respond unless it will become a big news item possibly damaging their image. Henry described his frustration about the delay in Airbnb's response to pressing circumstances:

As a LONG term Airbnb host, I know what a joke it is to be suggested to "Contact Airbnb". We once had guests that refused to vacate the apartment and were doing some sort of satanic ritual when our housekeeper arrived, freaking her out to the point of feeling VERY unsafe and threatened. And even in THAT emergency it took me almost two HOURS of holding (while calling internationally, I might add!) to actually get through to someone! (Harry, forum host, United States)

With respect to conflict resolution, users explain that Airbnb has a philosophy that bigger issues warrant their resources and attention more so than lesser ones. Ideally, hosts would not worry about the minor details and focus entirely on issues that affect the big picture. However, without much support and clarity from Airbnb, hosts described "sweating the small stuff and the big stuff" as they remained uncertain, even after all this time hosting, who their point of contact is:

I am really annoyed with Airbnb - the reason is simple - when something goes wrong for a host it is impossible to get it sorted out, so hence I am putting it on this forum in order to get a response. Once upon a time you could contact Airbnb direct and get a response

those days are no longer. It can take literally hours of trawling through Airbnb pages to find a contact point that is relevant. (Chris, forum host, Australia)

Guests clarified that they did not have emergency contacts and hospital information readily available to them, unless the host provided it to them. They assumed that it would not be hard to contact the right people, whether it be medical professionals or Airbnb, if needed. However, they did admit that they probably could be more proactive in ensuring their well-being:

I don't really know who I would contact but I would look for an Airbnb contact. Like as of now, I really have no idea who to contact...I would be surprised if it's not easy but I really have not tried it. I haven't even checked which is something important to. (Naseem, guest)

Across interviews and forum discussions, both hosts and guests underscored the need for centralized information systems where users can obtain the information they need in the event of an injury or accident, for instance, all from one place.

Conversely, the efficiency and quickness of Twitter as a means of direct communication with Airbnb representatives surfaced in forum discussions. Twitter did not come out so much in interviews, with the exception of Norah (interview host) who mentioned using the @AirbnbHelpline handle on Twitter to directly contact Airbnb support. Robin (forum host, Australia) gave her fellow hosts step-to-step directions as to how they are able to use Twitter to get in touch with “a higher level of expertise than through the call center”. By doing this, Robin suggested that hosts would receive a speedy response by the Airbnb representatives authorized to make executive decisions. Getting in contact with senior customer service staff did not make things easier for users in the system however. A lack of transparency in case management was an additional concern to hosts. Taryn (forum host, United States) was confused about the decisions that case managers made because they went against Airbnb's policy even with the appropriate documentation. George (guest), blamed Airbnb's bureaucracy and incompetent staff for stretching out his claims process beyond the limitation period:

I find to be overly bureaucratic. They actually misfiled one of my requisition claims recently into something that caused it to not get dealt with for months and even then, they were like, “Well, now that we have finally gotten this sorted out, it looks like we can't actually process this because of such and such reason” so I found them not to be supportive. (George, guest)

Hosts described having a very difficult time contacting and seeking help from Airbnb. Therefore, they navigated the occupational health and safety risks by themselves without much guidance from Airbnb, highlighting Airbnb's limited commitment to health and safety. Understanding the experience of hosts and guests is important because it provides insight into what resources, supports and supporting strategies are necessary for a positive working trajectory. Hosts and guests were not familiar with the current policies in place. In reality, there were few regulations in place to regulate Airbnb's practices and users even had difficulty with identifying changes in policy and practices that would better their experiences. Airbnb's online platform is constantly evolving, and this makes it even harder for users to keep up with the changes.

### **3.4.6 Strategies**

As previously discussed, navigating health and safety within the Airbnb system can be rather daunting for users. This is especially true for hosts. Hosts discussed online possible strategies to help manage the risks identified. In their opinion, low pricing repels the right guests and welcomes the wrong ones. Instant booking makes this situation worse because hosts are then forced to book them:

I agree! I NEVER do Instant Book. Must get to know each Guest by asking questions. Being the absolute Cheapest Room in the area will get you booked but will also be the "Bottom of the Barrel" from my experience! You live and you learn! (Jeanette, forum host, United States)

Christine (forum host, United States) suggested that hosts use surge pricing to weed out potential one-night stands. Trina and Paul, also American hosts, agreed with Christine's approach and explained how they increased their rental prices in light of incoming "undesirable" events to dissuade similarly undesirable guests from booking their Airbnb. At times, they have blocked off certain event dates on their Airbnb calendar to make their Airbnb unavailable for booking. Sebastian (forum host, United States) reiterated this selectivity strategy and suggested that different features of an Airbnb, such as price and availability, attract different types of guests.

Moreover, hosts also discussed ways in which they could arrange their space so that "the guest does not get too comfy and forget their place":

Michelle, I know the DC area can be expensive. So I would go that route and jack the price up. The other option is to lower the price and treat your place like a hostel - the "guest" can bring their own sheets and towels (or rent yours). No amenities, one battered aluminum pot,

two night maximum stay... Lock the fridge but give them an ice chest to use ... you get the idea.” (Jay, forum host, United States)

Some hosts emphasized the need for hosts to verify ID and meet the guest before allowing them to stay in their Airbnb:

Our guest must have verified ID and we have been very lucky with over 100 guests and only a few problems. There are always those that don't read the listing and that is probably true for every host. I never let anyone self check in and always meet and do a tour showing what they need to know. I think when people pay less, they don't feel as responsible. (Cathy & Ed, forum hosts, United States)

It also appeared that the more experienced hosts become, the less they worry about safety. That, or hosts found that over time maintaining a positive mindset has allowed them to better cope with the challenges of being a host:

I try to cut my anxiety aside but yes, in the beginning, oh my god! What was not an anxiety! Everything! So, I think I definitely you know, someone, you know, just slipping from the stairs or, especially children here, and I always, and it's a disclaimer that I have that although we have a little one, the house is not child-proof per se or family proof because our son always likes to go around the room so we're trying to, I'm trying to basically keep my mind at ease saying that I have marked that as a disclaimer and whatever happens happens but the more guests we've had, the more at ease. I have to rationalize and not overthink or I would drive myself nuts. (Amélie, interview host)

A few hosts in interviews even remarked that reading their positive reviews helped them stay positive in down times as they were reminded of all the good work they have done, and how well it has been received by guests. In the same vein, a few participants highlighted the importance of establishing rapport and positive relationships as users in the Airbnb system. Should an incident arise, an unfavourable relationship between the host and guest only created additional stress in an already stressful situation, as Naseem (guest) exemplified:

I don't think that was a healthy reaction neither for the host nor for some of the guests, and particularly for that child. You know it was a very stressful situation for that child too because he just showed up to his house with so many people there and then his father got very angry and started yelling. And they were French but the father was speaking English. He didn't really know much English so it was definitely a stressful situation for the child too you know? In a very

mild form, but it can get much more extreme and so I think the mental part of it is very important too. (Naseem, guest)

Through these early interactions, both hosts and guests are feeling each other out and can guard themselves against foreseeably aggressive or hostile people. In addition, hosts and guests can learn a great deal about one another and feel more comfortable about the Airbnb booking. Jacob added that his vetting system helped him manage the stress of hosting:

“Mental stress never occurred to me, when it came down to my guests because of the system I put in place to make sure that the guests I receive are guests. That’s why that never leads to an infringement of my mental health.” (Jacob, interview host)

Hosts explained that their vetting processes help keep their minds at ease. With the pre-work done, they do not worry too much about the guest because they have taken the time to get to know the person.

In this chapter, the Airbnb user experience was deconstructed into four different phases and in the order that they occurred. In Phase 1, the user chooses Airbnb and the rationale behind this choice was explored. Phase 2 captured how users assess risks in the system through their initial interaction in which they gather information on one another. Phase 3 dealt with the process of risk management during the Airbnb stay. Participants identified risks concerning their health (including cleanliness and spread of disease, spacing issues and physical harm); safety (including safety level of the Airbnb’s neighbourhood, keys, security of valuables and identify verification) and psychosocial stressors (host-guest interactions, undesirable guests, and the role of gender in the system). Finally, Phase 4 explored user experience after the Airbnb stay, with attention to the host. Hosts can struggle in the system as they juggle the unclear rules of Airbnb and harsh demands on them. These pressures include financial pressures, the stress of hosting, online reviews, efforts to maintain work/life balance and relations with Airbnb.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Studying the health and safety situation of Airbnb fits very nicely within the qualitative mode of inquiry as this is a phenomenon that is so multi-faceted and complex to understand and interpret; the interest is not just the objective event but also how the event is explored; and the social interaction and context are important (Creswell, 2018; Sofaer, 1999). Revisiting the objectives of the study, I designed this study to gain a better understanding of users' perceptions, experiences and understanding of Airbnb health and safety, as well as possible systemic and policy changes to better protect the health and safety of users. In this chapter, key findings are discussed and extended to the existing, yet nascent, body of literature on this topic. In addition, the working conditions, systemic pressures and other aspects of hosting work are discussed. Finally, strengths, limitations and future areas of research close this chapter.

#### **4.1 User rationale**

In such a short while since its inception in 2006, Airbnb has managed to create a name for itself in the short-term rental market, and set itself apart from other websites, such as VRBO and HomeAway. It is remarkable how quickly Airbnb has become the 'go-to' hotel alternative: if Airbnb does not have appropriate accommodation, only then do guests choose a hotel. For most guests in this study, hostel and alternative short-term rental companies do not even cross their minds. All in all, hosts and guests in this study had positive experiences overall and will continue to use Airbnb in the future, despite a few hiccups here and there.

Airbnb provides some quite unusual types of accommodations, including treehouses, yurts, castles and RVs, to its guests (Yannopoulou et al., 2013). In addition to providing guests with a wide selection to choose from, Airbnb also provides these accommodations within a lower price bracket. These short-term rentals can be anywhere between 30 and 60 percent cheaper than traditional hotel rooms (Yaraghi & Ravi, 2017). Income, social interaction and sharing have been identified as the main drivers for host activity on Airbnb (Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016). Participants in this study explained why they used Airbnb, and their reasons very much aligned with the literature review in Chapter 1 (Varma et al., 2016).

In retrospect, users identified risks concerning their health (including cleanliness and spread of disease, spacing issues and physical harm); safety (including safety level of the Airbnb's neighbourhood, keys, security of valuables and identify verification) and psychosocial stressors (host-guest interactions, undesirable guests, and the role of gender in the system). Sometimes, participants in this study appeared to not be directly cognizant that their concerns with the Airbnb system were very much health and safety risks. Guests did not concern themselves much with the health and safety of Airbnb. It appeared through interviews that cleanliness of the living space was of utmost concern to them. Guests, all in all, recognized that an Airbnb does not provide them with certain securities of a hotel such as health and safety inspections and 24/7 on-site support staff; however, these services come at an additional cost. With Airbnb, they pay only for basic needs which was more important to them that extra services provided to them by a hotel.

Risk is inherent in any industry, and the hospitality industry is not immune. However, even though Airbnb is also part of the hospitality industry, hosts placed emphasis on different physical and psychosocial stressors than hotel workers in the academic literature. For example, hosts in this study did not describe physical exposure to a poor physical environment, violence or bullying as concerns. There was no discussion by interviewed or forum hosts about experiencing musculoskeletal pain caused by repetitive motion or lack of ergonomic equipment, chemical exposures or biological exposures (Hsieh et al., 2014). Instead, hosts in this study focused their attention on psychosocial stressors that were of a slightly different nature to those cited by hospital workers in the academic literature (Hsieh et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2014, Ozturk et al., 2014). Particularly, hosts described emotional stress in the booking process as well as dealing with difficult guests. Work stress, poor job autonomy and fatigue caused by non-standard work schedules were shared amongst hosts in this study and OHS risks for hotel workers in the literature.

Participants liked Airbnb's passivity in the back-and-forth exchange between host and guest. Having said that, some hosts took more issue with their communications with Airbnb representatives, whether it was regarding troublesome guests, cancellation requests or general inquiry. From interviews and forums, it appeared that users were not always well-supported by Airbnb and did not necessarily know their way around the interface. Users in this study seemed dissatisfied with Airbnb's indifference in the customer service it provides, and believed it could respond more timely especially

in emergency situations. They found it especially frustrating to engage with an automated support line to access 24/7 support.

It was clear that more clarity is needed around Airbnb's policies and regulatory controls because when participants in this study were asked to discuss their understanding of them, they had a hard time doing so. Additionally, they had difficulty identifying changes in policy that could improve their Airbnb experiences. It was clear that users really did not know how things worked in the system, and were unsure about the supports they were entitled to. They described feeling insecure because they were working off of their own interpretation of the policies, instead of a clear list of dos and don'ts. They recognized, however, that the system was not regulated and left themselves vulnerable to all sorts of harm.

## **4.2 Risk Assessment**

Guests did not concern themselves much with the health and safety of Airbnb. It appeared through interviews with them that the aesthetics and physical conditions of the living space were of more of concern to them. With the exception of one host and one guest (who served on her workplace's Joint Health and Safety Committee and worked in healthcare consulting respectively), participants admitted to not really have thought about health and safety of Airbnb before conversing with me since they have normalized the risks associated with Airbnb. Participants left the interview with a greater awareness of health and safety risks. Existing literature discusses the role of risk perceptions, or "an individual's perceived susceptibility to a threat" to health behaviour changes (Ferrer & Klein, 2015) and in the context of my study, increased risk perceptions of participants may lead to them behaving in the system and thinking about Airbnb differently going forward. All in all, users feel the physical health and safety risks for hosts and guests are comparable; however, recognizing that the host has more to lose financially than the guest.

Guests are misinformed about the role of Airbnb in their interaction with hosts and their overall experience. Airbnb is not clear about its role in the triangular producer-consumer-platform relationship, very characteristic of access economy work (Zervas et al., 2016; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012), and as a result, users also were misinformed about the health and safety risks associated with Airbnb. They assumed that Airbnb carried out regular health and safety inspections of its listed short-term rental units and background checks of its users, before appearing online. However, Airbnb has a rather soft commitment to ensuring health and safety of its users and Airbnb does not enforce specific

safety standards. Unfortunately, guest participants were acting in the system under this assumption and trusted Airbnb very much. Further, Airbnb is situated itself as a private space (as someone's home as opposed to a commercial hotel room) and OHS inspections and laws do not apply to private spaces. In this way, hosts do not uphold healthy and safety standards in the services they provide guests nor does a OHS management system exist to ensure health and safety for hosts.

It is apparent that with hosts, there is a clear distinction between perceived risks and actual risks. Like all work, there are various occupational health and safety risks that come with hosting work, and these risks should not be overlooked. The severity of risks, as well as the impact of them, are unknown. This lack of knowledge and awareness about health and safety risks can make hosting work quite challenging as hosts described now knowing who or what to expect. Users are then disproportionately concerned about some risks and under concerned about others. In some instances, a guest may present the host with, little to no, actual risk but may be inconvenient to accommodate. A host then may not want to accommodate this guest. In these circumstances, does the guest really present the host with a risk to their health and safety, or is it just discrimination in disguise? Hosts described experiences of guests with children, pets or needing some accommodations and though in these instances, hosts paint their guest concerns as risks, when in reality, they are just perceived inconveniences. As Airbnb continues to grow and redefine itself, it is important to think about the fine line between discriminating against guest types and hosting preferences. It is ironic in a way that Airbnb has set up instant booking and policy to avoid discrimination; however, it has only downplayed it. Using recurring patterns and personal biases from past experiences, users very much are discriminating against one another based on stereotypes and generalizations. This presents an opportunity for Airbnb to perhaps intervene to correctly inform users of the involved risks and how to best manage them.

Exposure to illness by visiting guests was a major concern to hosts, which is in sharp contrast to what we would expect in a hotel. In a hotel setting, the hotelier would not be required to continue to host the guest, if he or she got an infectious disease during their stay. In California and other jurisdictions in the United States, for example, a hotelier can refuse to provide accommodations and even evict a guest with a "infectious, contagious or communicable disease" to ensure the safety of other guests at the premises (Mayock, 2014). In the Canadian context however, under the Residential Tenants Act of Ontario that governs landlord and tenant relationships in Ontario, there is no clear

indication that a residential landlord or hotelier (depending on how Airbnb operations are classified legally) is able to evict a guest for carrying an infectious disease (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2018). Hosts, described going through extraordinary lengths in other ways as well, including finding legal loopholes in one instance, to guard themselves against undesirable guests.

As a business, Airbnb engages with self-employed hosts, and therefore not responsibility for their health and safety, which is effectively downloading risks. Users are essentially told to take care of their health and safety on their own and have learned to expect little from Airbnb by way of protecting their health and safety. Hosts lack collective power and they accept their work conditions as they are.

### **4.3 Risk Management**

With little to no policy, the Airbnb system is very much governed by regulation by reputation. Users, host and guests alike, described how informative online ratings were for them while navigating the Airbnb space. In addition, communicating with one another on the online interface allowed users to appear “human” to one another. Through all these communications, hosts need to be very professional in their social exchange with guests.

Guest experiences also seemed to inform hosting experiences. By being guests, hosts get a better sense of how to present themselves, house rules and their Airbnb to attract more quality traffic to their listing. As indicated in interviews and forums, users sometimes may not feel comfortable putting themselves on display for others to see online; however, the peer-to-peer system within the system encourages them to share information with one another. The importance of trust on Airbnb’s platform is very representative of the access economy (Hawlitshchek, Teubner & Weinhardt, 2016). The literature review for this thesis discussed the unique nature of the access-economy business model and key drivers for its success (Varma et al., 2016). Airbnb also follows this model and taps into an underutilised good, which is living space, by monetizing it or forgoing the purchase of it altogether (PwC, 2014). Its digital environment allows for business efficacy and innovation to the point of putting Airbnb in the league of the big hotel chains (Varma et al., 2016). Users also benefit from Airbnb’s web-based processes, as discussed by all participants in interviews, throughout the preliminary stages of information gathering, vetting and booking. Airbnb is a complex social network

with multiple nodes (actors: hosts, guests and Airbnb as an overarching identity) and ever-changing links (interactions) that connect them (Teubner, 2017). However social it may be, the Airbnb system is still very much self-regulated. Existing literature on the role of trust in the access economy emphasizes just how helpful this dialogue between the host and guest is in helping users find the right fit (Hawlitschek, Teubner & Weinhardt, 2016).

Based on guests' experiences, it appears that guests have different experiences of health and safety. Certain factors of travel could help eliminate, or at least mitigate, the health and safety risks. Guests can be safer and healthier if they:

1. Travel in groups
2. Read online reviews beforehand and interact with the host
3. Ensure the neighborhood of the Airbnb is safe
4. Opt for private room or full dwelling Airbnbs (to avoid interaction with host and other guests)

Based on hosts' experiences, it appears that risk exposure very depended on the nature of hosting. That is, the host was more exposed to the aforementioned health, safety and psychosocial stressors if they:

1. Cohabited the Airbnb with the guest: this allowed more interaction between host and guest. When a host is off site, the health and safety risks appear to be off of mind as well
2. Hosted more frequently, especially the stressful nature of having multiple back-to-back bookings)
3. Had many years of hosting experience: with experience, hosts were able to create a cleaning and maintenance system that allowed them to manage their Airbnb practices well, and address issues as they arose.
4. Had multiple listings: Hosts with multiple listings had greater exposure to health, safety and psychosocial stressors with increased exposure to hosting work

The strategies described hosts by hosts in this study to manage OHS risks are described in Table 5.

**Table 5. Hosts' strategies to address OHS risks**

OHS Issue or Risk	Strategy
Stress of preparing for guest's stay	Hosts set up a cleaning and management system
Undesirable guests	Online reviews, vetting process Female hosts may choose to only host female guests (and vice versa) to avoid unwelcomed sexual advances
Pressure to host	Vetting process (instead of using instant booking)

#### 4.4 Airbnb's Outlook

Airbnb has a very guest-centric business model. They have made many changes over the past decade, many, if not all, of which have been for the comfort and convenience of users in order to increase attention and retention of Airbnb services among users. Airbnb runs its operations much like any other business, in addressing and accounting for user needs when making business decisions. They perhaps recognized that guests find waiting for a host's response to a booking request to be rather inconvenient and introduced the instant booking feature to create a truly guest-focused experience and appeal to guests. Despite how Airbnb chooses to brand instant booking to users, this feature was sometimes avoided by hosts, as they are unable to vet their own guests. This feature can be problematic and come with safety risks for the host.

However, Airbnb is organized such that, in a way, both hosts and guest are customers. Guests being customers is very intuitive since they are a direct recipient of the Airbnb's shared-accommodation service. Hosts, in a way, are customers to Airbnb in the sense that Airbnb has to ensure that they are satisfied *enough* to host on their interface. All in all, it seems that a fragmented support system exists for Airbnb hosts and guests, whether it be cancellation policy, identity verification, instant booking, process of payment or health and safety. Since there is no monitoring of host or guest activity on or off the Airbnb interface, in theory then, an Airbnb could be used to host all sorts of inappropriate behaviour, whether it be human trafficking, drug dealing or other criminal activity.

Airbnb has a relatively low commitment to ensuring health and safety of its users as compared to hotels. In this study, it appears that no visible efforts or intentions have been made by

Airbnb to safeguard users against undesirable interactions and experiences. In this study, guests explained that they sometimes compromised quality of accommodations to save money. Hosts described constantly thinking about the trade-off between health and income when making day-to-day decisions, and oftentimes, jeopardized their health and well-being in order to maintain business practices. Money drives much of the decisions that hosts make. They try to make as much money as possible while containing costs. It is possible that hosts are just not in a strong financial position to implement good health and safety systems. The health of the host, and relatives, should be not be trumped by a guest's need for accommodations. For instance, by penalizing hosts for cancellations, then Airbnb appears to prioritize the health and well-being of guests over that of hosts. From experiences described in forums, dispute resolutions appear to be mostly settled in favour of the guest. Hosts described navigating the occupational health and safety risks by themselves without much support by Airbnb, and feeling in a state of uncertainty and vulnerability.

#### **4.5 Work conditions**

A substantial body of research point to society moving away from the employment model of the post-war era and becoming more precarious (Cranford, Vosko & Zukewich, 2003; F). It is well-recognized in both academic and grey literature that there has been a fundamental change in the labour market, from the standard employment relationship (that is, full-time and permanent jobs with benefits, good pay and unions) and towards a new form of work that is increasingly insecure, contract and temporary (Lewchuk & Clarke, 2011). The '9 to 5' caricature of work no longer exists.

Access economy platforms introduce a new form of worker, the 'micro-entrepreneur', as well as a human-computer interface in lieu of the traditional employer-employee relationship. This alternative mode of employment allows for flexible working hours and flexible work environment (Hundley, 2001). However, freedom becomes a double-edged sword as nonstandard work can be insecure and isolating. The worker, additionally, lacks the protections that are conventionally afforded to those under more stable employment contracts: pension, retirement benefits, paid vacation and time-off benefits (Lewin-Epstein & Yuchtman-Yaar, 1991). For platform work, the self-employed status and working conditions of hosts exist within a context of a very large corporation benefitting from their labour. Airbnb facilitates the creation of self-employed individuals who have become involved in a franchise-like employment network. This work arrangement allows Airbnb to avoid responsibility and legal liability towards its users altogether by positioning itself as a third-party entity merely facilitating the transaction between the host and guest (Airbnb, 2017b; Airbnb, 2018g).

It is very hard to classify Airbnb hosting work. Unlike other access economy work such as Uber, Airbnb has also managed to brand hosting work as elite and entrepreneurial that provides hosts with agency and job autonomy. In this way, hosting does not appear as ‘dirty’ work.

In the context of Ontario, Airbnb’s lack of responsibility for workers destroys protections outlined in Ontario’s Occupational Health and Safety Act and workers compensation systems. No recourse or protections exist for hosts should they experience injury, harassment or sexual harassment while working. Despite these challenges, hosts feel motivated to continue with hosting to help financially sustain themselves. Occupational stress is very prominent in hosting work: doing work without support and guidance, undefined job description and expectations, busy and tight schedule and a lack of work/life balance (Lam & Lo, 2005). Evidence suggests that the experience of occupational stress is not specific to Airbnb or platform workers, but spans precarious work.

The findings also shed light on the effect of Airbnb work on mental health of hosts who, like precarious workers, have insecure incomes. With precarious employment growing rapidly in Canada, existing literature indicates a strong correlation between precarious employment and poor mental health. Particularly, precarious workers have an increased risk of psychological stress, depression and suicide ideation relative to non-precarious workers (Han et al., 2017). To add, it has been shown that precarious work is a significant risk factor on the mental health status of young workers (Canivet et al., 2016). Mental health and well-being are growing priorities at the workplace but the mental health risks posed by the growth of the access economy are still unknown.

The association between self-employment and health has been well-studied, but the findings are rather inconclusive. In the literature, self-employed work is correlated with better health outcomes than waged work, particularly in respect to the number of health conditions, self-reported health and mental health (Rietveld, Kippersluis & Thurik, 2015). According to Hundley (2002), the self-employed are more satisfied with their work than those in more standard forms of employment due to the higher autonomy, flexibility and skill utilization and job security that their work provides them. The effect of hosting work, which falls in “self-employed” work on hosts’ physical and mental well-being was also hard to discern from interviews and forums. Existing literature on self-employment may not apply very well to platform self-employment, because the context of this work, including all the rules and conditions, make it quite different. Therefore it is unclear whether the better outcomes associated with self-employment fit with Airbnb hosting work.

The focus of my research was to understand risk perceptions and risk management of users in the Airbnb space. The exploratory design of my study allowed me to tap into the knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of the health and safety risks associated with Airbnb. However, in order to better contextualize users' attitudes and choices, it was important for me to try to understand what drives hosts to enter and operate in the Airbnb shared-accommodation space. Despite Airbnb's entrepreneurial spin on hosting work, interviews and forums revealed just how much the design of the platform constrains and shapes the behaviour of users on the platform. The nature of Airbnb hosting work suggests the possibility of misclassification of work, that is they should be perhaps be categorized as Airbnb employees instead. From the data in this study, it seems that hosts are constrained by systemic rules. This study's findings dispel the myths of the 'free and flexible' working in the gig economy, and force us to rethink the work and health situation of these workers.

#### **4.6 Blurry line between home and work**

Home as the workplace has been commonplace. Increasingly, there has been more attention to the blurry line between home and the workplace, and understanding how individuals cross the line between what is personal and what becomes professional. There is a growing body of literature on the blurry line between home and workplace and the challenges in maintaining a work/life balance with no physical barrier between home and work while reporting high job satisfaction (Bourgeault et al., 2012; Mirchandani, 2000; Ammons & Markham, 2004; Hilbrecht, Shaw, Johnson, & Andrey, 2008; Martin-Matthews, 2007). In particular, some homeworkers can find it difficult to "negotiate the social, personal, temporal and physical transitions between the boundaries of home and work" (Crosbie & Moore, 2004).

In the context of Airbnb, home and workplace is one and the same and hosts' experiences align well with the existing literature on homeworkers. Hosts in this study were satisfied with their work despite its stressful nature, but also hosts also described the challenge of drawing the line between home and workplace: *at what point does someone's home stop being home and starts to become their workplace, and when does it switch back?* Tariq (interview host) illustrated the unclear boundaries between home and work when he was probed about his physical health concerns as a host. He shared that he found it difficult to distinguish between work-related and non-work-related injuries because as a host, they are one and the same. The blurry line between "home" and "work" spaces allows for hosts to fail to recognize occupational health and safety risks, or perhaps allows them to

not take these risks too seriously. From interviews, hosts were aware of some dangers and risks of providing Airbnb services, but merely accepted it as being inherent in the job.

Someone's home is a very intimate space for them. Besides security concerns, opening one's home to a guest also makes the host vulnerable in the sense that they are sharing a very intimate space and in turn, a very personal part of their life, with a complete stranger. Participants in this study did not know exactly how to behave and act in this quasi-new setting. They discussed the challenges in gauging how normal behavioral norms when visiting someone's home translate to an Airbnb: *should they treat the Airbnb as an intimate space, a commercial rental or somewhere in the middle?* Hosts also reported difficulty with gauging just how hospitable they should be acting towards their guests. They wanted to make themselves available to their guests but at the same time, they did not want to overstep any boundaries. They were doing this delicate dance around being the host who was inviting, and the host who was respectful of the guest's personal space. Altogether, users found their interaction within the Airbnb system to be awkward at times because the rules of etiquette in the system are not defined.

#### **4.7 Suggestions for Airbnb OHS improvements**

From interviews and forum posts, users identified, or implied in some cases, a number of improvements to the current Airbnb system they thought would improve their overall Airbnb experience:

1. User reassurance from Airbnb that hosts and Airbnb listings are legitimate
2. Spot checks for Airbnbs to assess hosts' adherence to health and safety regulations to uphold a standard of health and safety
3. Address glitches in the functionality and calendar of Airbnb's online platform
4. Introduce messaging app similar to Facebook Messenger or Whatsapp, for hosts and guests to receive direct Airbnb notifications and host/guest updates without having to log in to their email accounts
5. Less ambiguity (more clarity) in Airbnb policies regarding insurance, terms and conditions and host risk
6. More transparency in Airbnb's role in the triangular producer-consumer-platform relationship that exists

## **4.8 Strengths and Limitations**

Research on Airbnb's health and safety is particularly relevant and valuable to the present discussion in various municipalities across the globe to tighten regulations. In emerging literature, there is a considerable discussion on the access economy in the academic realms of economics, psychology, sociology and travel and tourism, to name a few (Mahmoud, 2016; Bailetti et al., 2012; Yaraghi & Ravi, 2017; Yannopoulou et al., 2013; Varma et al., 2016). There is very little on platform work as an experience, and even less with findings grounded in conversations with people who do this type of work. The health and safety considerations add an additional critical lens to this very complex issue, and better inform policy making and practice for housing, hotels and Airbnb, itself. A multi-method qualitative design allowed for an exploratory allowed for a very well-informed interview guide and triangulation between emergent data from two sources.

As a master's student, however, there were time and resource constraints, both of which limited the scope and study sample of my project. Additionally, I had to restrict my methods to online document analysis and in-depth interviews in the Waterloo area. If time and funding allowed, I would have also incorporated an ethnography piece to my study. I would use covert observation to tap into the guest experience and see first-hand the guests' world by participating myself in the day-to-day activities as a guest at a few Airbnb rental units. This use of ethnography would nicely complement my online document analysis of hosts' descriptions of their experiences, because it would better inform me of the health and safety concerns to keep in mind while interviewing guests.

Additionally, I do not have the legal expertise to analyze or comment on legislation and policy. As aforementioned, stakeholders and policy makers with a strong background in law and policy were not being interviewed as key informants of the Airbnb access economy either. Consequently, my research may speak to the concerns of the unregulated and informal system at present as it focuses more on the policy context rather than providing policy critique. The data analysis necessary to make recommendations and guidelines was out of scope for this project.

## **4.9 Future Directions**

It would be interesting to also capture experiences of Airbnb hosts and guests from different cities in Ontario, and Canada, to make interjurisdictional comparisons. Perhaps, participants would report different challenges and experiences related to health and safety depending on the city's size and location, as well as how attractive it is to tourists. If time allowed me, I would have spoken with key informants, stakeholders and policymakers to understand both the microenvironment and

microenvironment of Airbnb. In addition, interviews with hotel workers would give me insight into workers' perception of Airbnb, sense of job security and job satisfaction. Interviewing with hotel users could provide additional insight as I wonder if the health and safety concerns described by guests are just a consequence of travel and unfamiliarity to a new location, or if guests associate the risks strictly with Airbnb being a nonconventional form of travel accommodation. Hosts did not speak about this in interviews, but it would be interesting to see the trickling effect of health safety. If hosts managed multiple listings of Airbnb, much like a hotel with multiple room bookings, they would definitely need to hire help for the day-to-day upkeep and maintenance. In this work arrangement, the health and safety of the hired workers, as well their working conditions, would be also be something to consider.

Study findings may be applicable to other access economy platforms, so another future research direction could be a cross-platform comparison study of health and safety risks. Specifically, a possible extension of my findings could be to elucidate the complex link between access economy platforms (Airbnb and others of the like) and mental health. The health consequences of being self-employed in the access economy is a research problem that could be studied using an interdisciplinary approach to evaluate the effects of technological complexity and innovation as well as identify potential solutions in an unpredictable future of work.

It is important for us to learn how workers understand the system as well as if they are able to react to the occupational pressures. It is really important for us to keep in mind who these workers are. How old are they? Are they male? Are they female? Where do they come from, and are they pursuing platform work full time or on the side? As a researcher, an academic or policy maker, it is really easy for us to disconnect ourselves from them. It is important for us to understand the context of this type of industry and to capture their story and meanings of their life world in the purest form.

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## Appendix A

### Summary of Search and Selection of Forum Posts

A search was conducted on October 24, 2017 on Airbnb Community forum for content on occupational health and safety of Airbnb hosts. Search results for my initial keyword list was refined are shown table below.

<b>Keyword</b>	<b>Number of discussions</b>	<b>Years</b>
Health	391	2016-2017
Healthy	112	2015-2017
Unhealthy	8	2015-2017
Safe	1,461	2015-2017
Safety	1,561	2015-2017
Unsafe	259	2015-2017
Danger	201	2015-2017
Dangerous	285	2015-2017
Risk	1,531	2015-2017
Risks	221	2015-2017
Risky	171	2015-2017
Hazard	80	2015-2017
Hazardous	13	"
Harm	306	"
harms	24	"
Harmful	46	"
Stress	572	"
Stressful	293	"
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,535</b>	

Due to the great number of forum posts (and trailing posts) resulted, my search keyword list was refined and shortened to only include "health" and "safety" information.

Search carried out in <b>Airbnb Community forum</b> on Nov 11, 2017		
Posts collected over 2016-present		
<b>Theme</b>	<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Results</b>
Health	Health	392
	Healthy	119
	Unhealthy	8
Safety	Safe	790 (of total?)
	Unsafe	271 (of total?)
	Safety	743 (of total?)
<b>Total</b>		<b>At least 2308</b>

- (1) Every 10 posts were saved as a PDF and then combined into one PDF file using CombinePDF. The hyperlink to posts were maintained. The files were saved in pdf format because Microsoft Word did not retain formatting of the posts and the hyperlinked titles were removed. These PDF files were then combined to form a single pdf for each keyword. Keyword PDF files were then combined to create a PDF file for each theme. At the end of this process,
- (2) Using CopyLeaks, duplicate content between files of each theme was removed.
- (3) New totals were calculated and recorded. The number of duplicates removed are recorded

**Duplicates chart**

<u>Keywords</u>	<u>Duplicates</u>
<b>THEME: health</b>	
Healthy (n=199), unhealthy (n=8)	0
Health (n = 392), unhealthy (n = 8)	0
Health (n = 392), healthy (n = 199)	29
Total (n =519)	
<b>THEME: safety</b>	
Safe (n=790) and safety (n=743)	123
Safe (n=790) and unsafe (n=271)	29
Safety (n=743) and unsafe (n=271)	55

After duplicates were deleted, 490 posts containing “health” information and 1597 posts relevant to “safety” were included. Online forum posts were sieved through again for irrelevance. Irrelevant posts were excluded from the inductive coding. Relevant posts were examined closely – the original post and trailing responses. At this stage, posts irrelevant due to language (not in English language) or content (not OHS and not guest) were also discarded. Comprehensive HEALTH and SAFETY files were inserted into NVivo for coding. Codes were created to capture subsets of information through an iterative process.

## Appendix B: Letter of Information



[insert date here]

Dear Participant:

This letter is an invitation to participate in a qualitative study I am conducting for my Masters thesis at the School of Public Health and Health Systems, University of Waterloo. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part.

I am studying the sharing economy and Airbnb accommodation-sharing. Specifically, I want to explore and understand the health and safety risks for Airbnb hosts and guests. The questions will be largely open-ended and will focus on your role as a host/guest, health and safety, regulations and future improvements. This research will not benefit you directly. Conducting this research, I hope to gain insight into the safety and health standpoints, experiences and challenges of both Airbnb hosts and guests, while considering gaps between policy and practice.

Participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately an hour in length to take place in a mutually agreed upon location and time. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time by advising the student researcher. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded to facilitate collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis. All information you provide is considered completely confidential. Your name or any other personal identifying information will not appear in any publication and dissemination of findings; however, with your permission anonymous quotations may be used. Notes and/or tapes collected during this study will be retained for one year in a secure location and then destroyed.

The risks for participation in this study are minimal. Some people may get upset describing their experiences. If this happens to you, please feel free to skip the questions that you do not want to answer or to stop the interview completely.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me by email at [j4goyal@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:j4goyal@uwaterloo.ca).

I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee. However, the final decision about participation is yours. If you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact the Chief Ethics Officer, Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567, ext. 36005 or [ore-ceo@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:ore-ceo@uwaterloo.ca)

I very much look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project.



Yours Sincerely,

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Julia Goyal

## Appendix C: Consent Form



### CONSENT FORM

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a qualitative study being conducted by Julia Goyal for her Masters thesis at the School of Public Health and Health Systems, University of Waterloo. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.

I am aware that I have the option of allowing my interview to be tape recorded to ensure an accurate recording of my responses.

I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in the Masters thesis and any publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous.

I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time by advising the student researcher.

This project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee. I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns resulting from my participation in this study, I may contact this Office at 519-888-4567 ext. 36005.

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

YES  NO

I agree to have my interview audio recorded.

YES  NO

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in the Masters thesis and future publications to come from this research.

YES  NO

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in future research projects/publications developed by Julia Goyal.

YES  NO

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (Please print)

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (Please print)

Witness Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Appendix D: Interview Guide for Host Participants

For my Masters research, I am studying health and safety risks in the sharing economy, particularly Airbnb. I am interviewing Airbnb hosts and guests to capture their experiences. I will start off by asking a little about your background, then I have questions about your role as a host, health and safety, regulations and future improvements.

### Participant background

- 1) Can you tell me how long you have worked as a host? What did you do before this? What attracted to you working in this capacity?
- 2) What type of short-term rentals do you provide your guests, and typically for what duration?

### Host practices

- 3) Can you walk me through the process of how you prepare for a guest's stay?
- 4) What signs/clues do you look out for to decide if an individual is a suitable guest for you?

### Health and safety

- 5) What are your greatest concerns as a host?
- 6) In your view, what is the usefulness of online reviews? How about as a measure of health and safety?
- 7) In your experience, what makes hosts safe while providing accommodation? What makes guests safe while renting?
- 8) In your view, what poses risks for hosts? Guests?
- 9) What concerns you the most about your health and safety while working as a host?
- 10) What concerns you the most about Airbnb user health and safety? In what way is this different or comparable to how guests might see it?
- 11) In your view, is risk different for Airbnb hosts and guests? If so, how and why?
- 12) In event of an accident or incident, what is the procedure? Who is the contact person? Who is liable?

### Regulations

- 13) What regulations/procedures/practices are currently in place to encourage and assure host safety? What is the insurance coverage for hosts – how do you find it?
- 14) What regulations/procedures/practices are currently in place to encourage and assure guest safety?
- 15) There is currently a ton of debate as to how municipalities should react to emergence of Airbnb? What is your view on the proposals of stricter regulation of the system?

### Foresight

- 16) From your experience, what changes could be made to improve guest health and safety?
- 17) From your experience, what changes could be made to improve host health and safety?
- 18) Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

## Appendix E: Interview Guide for Guest Participants

For my Masters research, I am studying health and safety risks in the sharing economy, particularly Airbnb. I am interviewing Airbnb hosts and guests to capture their experiences. I will start off by asking a little about your background, then I have questions about your role as a guest, health and safety, regulations and future improvements.

### Participant background

- 1) Can you tell me how long you have been a user of Airbnb? What sort of accommodations have you rented and for what duration usually?
- 2) Why did you, and perhaps continue to, decide to use Airbnb instead of a hotel room?

### Guest Practices

- 3) Can you walk me through the process of how you search for accommodations?
- 4) What signs/clues do you look out for to decide if an individual is a suitable host for you?

### Health and safety

- 5) What are your greatest concerns as a guest?
- 6) In your view, what is the usefulness of online reviews? How about as a measure of health and safety?
- 7) In your view, what poses risks for guests? Hosts?
- 8) In your experience, what makes hosts safe while providing accommodation? What makes guests safe while renting?
- 9) What concerns you the most about your health and safety during your Airbnb stay?
- 10) What concerns you the most about Airbnb host health and safety? In what way is this different or comparable to how hosts might see it?
- 11) In your view, is risk different for Airbnb hosts and guests? If so, how and why?
- 12) In event of an accident or incident, what is the procedure? Who do you contact? Who is liable?

### Regulations

- 13) What regulations/procedures/practices are currently in place to encourage and assure guest safety– how do you find them?
- 14) What regulations/procedures/practices are currently in place to encourage and assure host safety?
- 15) There is currently a ton of debate as to how municipalities should react to emergence of Airbnb. What is your view on the proposals of stricter regulation of the system?

### Foresight

- 16) From your experience, what changes could be made to improve guest health and safety?
- 17) From your experience, what changes could be made to improve host health and safety?
- 18) Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

## Appendix F: Letter of Appreciation



### LETTER OF APPRECIATION

University of Waterloo

Date: **[insert date here]**

Dear **[insert name of Participant here]**

I would like to thank you for your participation in the qualitative study I am conducting for my Masters thesis at the School of Public Health and Health Systems, University of Waterloo. As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to explore the health and safety situations of Airbnb hosts and guests.

The data collected during interviews will contribute to a better understanding of Airbnb accommodation-sharing, specifically the safety and health standpoints, experiences and challenges of both Airbnb hosts and guests.

Please remember that any data pertaining to you as an individual participant will be kept confidential. Once all the data are collected and analyzed for this project, I will share this information in my Masters thesis. I may also share this information with the research community through seminars, conferences, presentations, and journal articles. If you are interested in receiving more information regarding the results of this study, or would like a summary of the results, please provide your email address, and when the study is completed, anticipated by December 2017, I will send you the information. In the meantime, if you have any questions about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me by email or telephone as noted below. As with all University of Waterloo projects involving human participants, this project was reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee. Should you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Maureen Nummelin, the Director, Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567, Ext. 36005 or [maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca).

Julia Goyal

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Applied Health Sciences

647-648-5505

[j4goyal@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:j4goyal@uwaterloo.ca)



## Appendix G: Recruitment Poster



### Applied Health Sciences University of Waterloo

#### **PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH on the Health and Safety of Airbnb**

I am looking for volunteers to take part in a study that explores the health and safety situations of Airbnb hosts and guests.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to participate in an open-ended interview of approximately an hour. The questions will focus on your role as a host/guest, health and safety, regulations and future improvements.

This research will not benefit you directly, but we hope to learn more about the safety and health standpoints, experiences and challenges of Airbnb hosts and guests while considering gaps between policy and practice.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

*Julia Goyal*

*School of Public Health and Health Systems*

at

[insert study number] or

Email: [insert study address]

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee.



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## Appendix H: Additional Recruitment Materials

### Script for social media and online forums

Hello,

I'm a graduate student at the School of Public Health and Health System, University of Waterloo. For my Master's work, I will be studying the health and safety situations of Airbnb hosts and guests in Ontario. Would you be free for a casual interview that would last about an hour and be kept confidential? For more information, please contact me at [j4goyal@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:j4goyal@uwaterloo.ca).

Thanks,

Julia

### Script for LinkedIn message to potential Airbnb hosts

**Subject title: *Interview request -- University of Waterloo***

Hi \_\_\_\_ [first name] \_\_\_\_\_,

I'm a graduate student at the School of Public Health and Health System, University of Waterloo. For my Master's work, I will be studying the health and safety situations of Airbnb hosts and guests in Ontario. Particularly, I am interested in how exploring Airbnb hosts and guests identify, experience, and perceive health and safety risks within the system. Would you be free for a conversational-style interview that would last 30 minutes to an hour? I could meet you at a mutually agreeable time and place. Your identity will be confidential. If you have any questions at all, you can reach me at [j4goyal@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:j4goyal@uwaterloo.ca) or [insert study telephone no. here].

Thanks,

Julia