When hosts trust guests and sharing platforms

Zhang, Carol; Abgeller, Neve; Li, Shina

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Trust in the sharing economy: a sociological inquiry

Abstract

The peer-to-peer accommodation business continues to grow significantly. While the sharing economy relies heavily on peer-to-peer interactions, understanding of this new form of business from the host perspective is still developing. The study employs a sociological perspective to understand trust dynamics through the lens of Chinese hosts. Drawing on in-depth interviews, this qualitative study explores the complexities involved in hosts' interpersonal and institutional trusting relationships. A conceptual appraisal of the concept of trust in the Chinese context informs the empirical work. Specifically, the study identifies different types of hosts and how their way of being a host shapes their trust behaviours.

Keywords: Trust, China, sharing economy, host, peer-to-peer accommodation

Introduction

The rise of the sharing economy is significantly changing our views on the service industry. The success of peer-to-peer accommodation platforms has been attributed to their ability to create an environment of trust between strangers (Ert & Fleischer, 2019). In peer-to-peer platforms, the initial transaction occurs online whereas the actual transaction happens offline in a physical environment. Hence, guests not only consider the attributes of the property, as in the case of conventional accommodation services, but also take into account the attributes of the host; thus building trusting relationships with the host and the platform becomes highly influential in guests' decision-making processes (e.g. Tussyadiah & Park, 2018). Within this exchange, hosts make similar considerations with regard to the platform and the guests, where the host's trust in guests and the platform are vital to the success of the sharing economy.

While research draws largely on the notion that trust builds gradually over time (Weber & Carter, 2003), the success of the sharing economy offers support for the claim that trust can also be formed quickly between strangers. Such swift trust depends on the trustor's cognitive and affective processing of initial information, and the credibility of the institutional-based structure (McKnight, Cummings & Chervany, 1998). This indicates that trust formation involves both interpersonal trust between hosts and guests (e.g. Luo & Zhang, 2016) and institutional trust (Wang, Asaad & Filieri, 2019), which subsequently facilitates interpersonal trust. Exploring the interplay between interpersonal and institutional trust could provide a comprehensive understanding of the trust dynamics, yet this has received limited attention to date.

A growing body of literature on interpersonal trust, studying the phenomenon from the guests' perspective, has increasingly focused on the attributes of hosts that can enhance trust development and stimulate booking intentions (Ert, Fleischer & Magen, 2016; Liang, Schuckert, Law & Chen, 2017; Tussyadiah & Park, 2018). Those quantitative studies highlight that trust is related to isolated individuals' psychological state and its effects are purely measured by guests' booking intention. In doing so, trust becomes a fixed psychological state. Despite social interactions being a unique feature of the sharing economy (Dolnicar, 2019) and trust being a social foundation of interaction (Lewis &

Weigert, 1985), a sociological perspective on conceptualising trust has not yet become a priority in the field. Indeed Lewis and Weigert (2012)'s reflection on decades of trust research demonstrates that only a few researchers have attempted to understand the multi-faceted nature of trust interactions despite the apparent dynamic nature of the trust phenomenon. To contribute to the continuous efforts to understand trust dynamics and investigate these dynamics within the sharing economy, a sociological approach is deemed important.

In addition, although previous studies shed light on ways of enhancing guests' booking, they overlooked the fact that it is the participation of hosts that makes peer-to-peer accommodation possible and different from conventional accommodation services. Hosts are both the service providers to the guests, and the customers and suppliers to the platform. Within the limited studies of hosts in the sharing economy, Lee, Yang and Koo (2019) found that hosts are partners to the platforms and their emotional attachment to the platform has been essential for making Airbnb a trusted community for them. Similarly, Wang et al. (2019) explored different factors that contribute to hosts' trust in Airbnb and their continuance intention. Nevertheless, we still know very little about the dynamics of hosts' trusting relationships with both guests and platforms.

The majority of existing studies have often primarily concentrated on Airbnb and therefore limit knowledge-making in the sharing economy (Dolnicar, 2019), which witnesses the participation of many local platforms. This paper attempts to redress the imbalances in previous studies by employing a sociological perspective to highlight trust dynamics within social relationships (Weber & Carter, 2003) and to offer diversity in the sharing economy knowledge-making. In addition, while Airbnb is now successful globally, Chinese guests' and hosts' trust in local platforms differs from Airbnb (Sina News, 2018), which makes the focus purely on Airbnb incomplete for knowledge-making. More importantly, the traditional Chinese philosophies Confucianism and Daoism have their own interpretations of *Xin*, 'trust' in Chinese, and those different interpretations shape trusting behaviours among Chinese people (Wu, 2003). Contextualising trust dynamics is potentially useful for fighting against the "contextual vacuum" of quantifying local-formed knowledge to measure a potentially dynamic social construct (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004, p. 31) like trust. This sociological-based qualitative inquiry aims to offer contextually and theoretically rich insights not only into what host trust perceptions are but also into why hosts choose particular trusting behaviours within their dynamic social interactions.

Defining trust from a sociological perspective

Trust is certainly a multidisciplinary concept that has been widely recognised within psychology, sociology, economics and many other disciplines. From a sociological perspective, "trust is applicable to the relations among people rather than to their psychological states taken individually" (Lewis & Weigert, 1985; p968). This sociological perspective does not deny the psychological and intrapersonal state of individuals, but focus more on social relationships in the social context rather than isolated individuals (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Weber & Carter, 2003). Here, trust is a reflexive and dynamic social process, embedded in the social interactions between the trustor and the trustee (Mayer et al., 1995; Lewis & Weigert, 2012). Within this process, the trustor will have confident beliefs and positive expectations that the trustee will fulfil the exchange

agreement (Grayson & Johnson, 2015) where he/she will mentally suspend and bracket the associated uncertainty, vulnerability and risk (Möllering, 2001).

Trust indeed is multi-faceted; many researchers believe that trust orientations build on three interlinked modes of social experience, consisting of cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions (e.g. Lewis & Weigert, 1985, 2012; Luo & Zhang, 2016). First, trust is based on a cognitive process which distinguishes who we will trust in which respects and under which circumstances. Here, trust decisions are based on cognitive calculations, involving weighing the benefits of remaining in the trusting relationship against the associated costs and risks of breaking it (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Those calculations often are rational and draw on processing available information (Johnson & Grayson, 2005). Cognitive familiarity plays a significant role in minimising the perception of risk and reducing complexity, which helps in the development of trust (Lewis & Weigert, 2012).

The affective dimension is often considered as complementary to the cognitive evaluation within a social relationship between the trustor and the trustee (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). The affective dimension highlights the emotional bond among all those who participate in the relationship; violation of the trust relationship thus threatens to bring severe emotional pain to all who are implicated in the trust relationship (McAllister, 1995). Further, both cognitive and affective dimensions imply the action of trust. The behavioural dimension of trust involves the risk-taking act building on the confident expectation that all participants will fulfil the exchange agreement (Johnson & Grayson, 2005). Here, trust is a reflexive process and encompasses complex feedback loops between cognitional and emotional judgements which are manifested in behaviours (McAllister 1995; Möllering, 2006). Although cognitive, affective and behavioural elements are identified as the three distinct dimensions of trust, in reality they are the "interpenetrating and mutually supporting aspects of the one, unitary experience and social imperative that we simply call 'trust.'" (Lewis & Weigert, 1985, p. 972). As such, trusting behaviour can be driven primarily by cognitive, rational reasons (cognitive trust) or dominated by strong, positive emotions (affective trust) (McAllister, 1995).

Despite cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions being interlinked in an influencing trusting relationship, research on trust is most dominantly carried out from a positivist epistemology, limiting the focus mainly to its cognitive dimension (Isaeva, Bachmann, Bristow & Saunders, 2015). Therefore, those studies have overlooked the complexity of social relationships and the multidimensional nature of trust (Lewis & Weigert, 2012). In conceptualising trust from the sociological perspective, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the trust relationships in the newly emerged sharing economy context.

Interpersonal and institutional trust relationships in the sharing economy

Trust has been recognised as one of the most important drivers of the long-term success of the sharing economy. Building and sustaining trust in peer-to-peer platforms is extremely complex as the majority of the transactions tend to be one-off transactions among strangers who are merely coordinated through a peer-to-peer platform; also, while the initial transaction occurs online, the actual service delivery happens offline and often with social interactions between strangers: hosts and guests (Dolnicar, 2019). As a result, the numbers of participants in the trust relationships have been increased, thereby leading

to increased complexity, risk and uncertainty (Tussyadiah & Park, 2018; Wang et al., 2019). Although the cognitive, affective and behavioural dimension of trust is present in every instance of trust to some extent, their qualitative mix across instances is different at levels of trust (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). Broadly speaking, there are two levels of trust: interpersonal (e.g. between individual actors such as hosts and guests) and institutional/organisational (e.g. between the individual and collective actors such as hosts and the platform) (Khodyakov, 2007; Luo and Zhang, 2016).

From a sociological perspective, trust concerns interpersonal interactions; all bases trust relies on are primarily social (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). As interpersonal interactions between hosts and guests are the unique feature that differentiates peer-to-peer accommodation from the conventional accommodation experience (Dolnicar, 2019), research on interpersonal trust in the peer-to-peer context has primarily focused on enhancing trustworthiness of the host; those studies have focused on the effects of different cognitive mechanisms in developing trust, including super-host badges, online reviews, profile pictures, host self-descriptions, etc. (e.g. Ert et al., 2016; Liang, Choi & Joppe, 2018). Such cognitive mechanisms help to abate guests' perceived risks associated with security concerns pertaining to possible physical harm, theft, loss of privacy or fraud (Kamal & Chen, 2016). While those quantitative studies contribute to understanding how hosts' presentation on the platform could influence guests' intention to book, they downplay the interactive and affective nature of sharing economy and trust, thereby overlooking the perspectives of hosts within this social relationship.

For sociologists, "institutions are relatively stable bundles of commonly accepted explicit or implicit rules of behaviour to which most people orient their behaviour" (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011, p. 286). Actors involved in trusting relationships often believe that impersonal structures are in place to support the likelihood of transaction success (Shapior, 1987). In fact, institutions often channel interactions between actors and create familiarity to avoid any critical questions about the actual trustworthiness of trustees (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011). For Lewis and Weigert, (1985, p. 974), "institutional trust underwrites interpersonal trust". We would expect to lose trust in other persons as trust in our common institutions erodes. Understanding institutional trust relationships is complex in the peer-to-peer accommodation context; the common institution governing the trusting relationship is a medium known as the platform, which does not own any properties and does not have authority or capacity like hotels to provide standardised assurances for its guests. Hence, we do not know much about how the platform can channel social interactions and enhance trustworthiness between hosts and guests. A few previous researchers have provided some understanding of instructional trust in the peer-to-peer accommodation context. They found that the reputation of Airbnb is crucial for guests' loyalty (Yang et al., 2018) and contributes to hosts' continuance intention (Lee et al., 2019). While we understand interplay between interpersonal and institutional trust, we know very little about their interactions within the sharing economy.

Conceptualising trust and the sharing economy in China

Trust is a culturally embedded concept as the way to develop or to enhance trust is substantially different in culturally distinct social relationships (Earle & Cvetkovich, 1995). In response to the call for indigenous and diverse tourism knowledge (Tucker & Zhang, 2016), this study situates the discussions of socially constructed trust and the sharing

economy in the Chinese context. The study recognises that sharing economy studies have primarily concentrated on Airbnb and restrict other forms of peer-to-peer experience beyond Airbnb (Dolnicar, 2019). In fact, China's peer-to-peer accommodation development is distinct. While Airbnb's business model and operation are globally successful, local platforms such as Tujia, Xiaozhu, Mayi and others are regarded as favourable among Chinese tourists and hosts; Airbnb has been increasingly criticised for its failure to adapt to the Chinese culture and to enhance its trustworthiness among Chinese people (Sina News, 2018; Xiang & Dolnicar, 2018). With deep understanding of Chinese culture, Tujia, Airbnb's biggest competitor, has launched an international ambition to offer peer-to-peer accommodation service not only to domestic travellers but also to China's growing outbound travellers (Jing, 2017). Comparing and contrasting different platforms to understand institutional trust is not the objective of the current study (see Xu et al., 2017), but previous studies have shown the unique and influential role that Chinese culture played in its peer-to-peer accommodation, yet these studies have received limited attention

In China, social interactions are largely influenced by Confucius, who argued that the Chinese are 'interdependent individuals' (Hwang, 2000). For the Chinese, individuals are defined by their relationship with others, which is different from the independent self of Western people. This indicates that relational factors play an essential role in Chinese people's trust-related behaviours and influence the level of interpersonal trust (Wasti, Tan & Erdil, 2011). Indeed, trust-related studies in the Chinese context have often positioned trust as an influential factor for building strong social relationships (Tong & Yong, 1998). As the Chinese are interdependent individuals, trust-related behaviours or decisions are often strongly associated with social relationships. For example, family members are regarded as the most trustworthy among others due to the kinship (Hwang, 2000). For many Chinese entrepreneurs, interpersonal trust, building upon good relationships, is more effective in minimising risks and ensuring certainty compared with institutional trust (Tong & Yong, 1998). Hence, emotional bonded interpersonal trust plays a much larger role in understanding Chinese people's trust-related behaviours compared with cognitive institutional-based trust (Wu, 2003).

While strong emotional bonds between individuals are essential for creating and sustaining trust for Chinese people, they seem rather problematic in the short-term peer-to-peer accommodation context. In fact, such difficulties been commonly cited as the main challenges for introducing a Western-style sharing economy model to China as the boundaries between strangers are somewhat larger in China than in the West (e.g. Xiang & Dolnicar, 2018). A deep reading of ancient Confucian thinking offers some ideas for extending the possibilities. Trust, in Chinese 信 （Xin），generally refers to integrity, credibility, trustworthiness and reputation, and is regarded as one of the most fundamental virtues of being a person. For Confucius, a person without trust cannot be a real person (in Chinese, 无信不立). In business circles, *Xin* refers to a person's credit rating, and building *Xin* does take time (Tong & Yong, 1998). However, the idea of reciprocity is often embedded within *Xin* and argues for mutual trust (Wu, 2003). This idea makes building initial trust possible. Receiving trust from others, especially from strangers, often indicates a great reputation and virtue; trusting those who truly trust you becomes a natural behaviour for many (Tong & Yong, 1998; Wu, 2003). Indeed, Daoism believes interpersonal trust is the true nature of being an honest human (Wu, 2003). As a result, trust becomes a more open and dynamic concept rather than a consequence of long-term relationship that is hard

to achieve in a peer-to-peer context (Li, 2016). The idea of mutual trust opens up possibilities of understanding trust dynamics in the peer-to-peer accommodation sector in China, in particular, from the host perspective as trust is a fundamental virtue of being Chinese.

Methodology

Researchers adopting a sociological approach to understanding trust dynamics have often criticised the positivist epistemologies and allied with a more open and qualitative approach (Lewis & Weigert, 2012). This research is underpinned by a social constructionist paradigm that conceptualises trust as a socio-culturally embedded concept and highlights the interdependent nature of Chinese people (Jennings, 2005). This approach also responds to calls for a shift from 'Anglo-Western centric' epistemology to a context-sensitive approach for enhancing the diversity in knowledge-making (Tucker & Zhang, 2016). This social constructionist approach addresses the active role of hosts and has potential to offer rich, personal and in-depth perceptions of trust from individuals; it has been widely used in trust research in other fields (e.g. Wasti, Tan & Erdil, 2011).

An exploratory qualitative approach was adopted to collect the data through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This approach enabled the researchers to explore the topic broadly but with some structure to ensure that the interview questions were relevant to the research question (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The interview protocol consisted of two main sections: participants' socio-demographics and their experience of being hosts. Interview questions were designed around the following themes: 1) host experience and trust dynamics; 2) trust dynamics changes with focus on interpersonal and institutional trust; 3) recalling particular incidents of trust and distrust with other parties; 4) trust dynamics and potential impacts on host behaviour and experience. Before the data collection, the interview questions were translated from English to Chinese. They were then cross-checked by two of the Chinese authors to ensure that questions were understandable and reflected the researchers' aims.

In total, 26 interviews with Chinese hosts from various platforms and cities were carried out between January and May 2019. To clarify participants as 'host' for peer-to-peer accommodation, researchers ensured that participants have at least one property that is currently listed on peer-to-peer paid accommodation platforms, directly interact with guests and are not commercially registered as companies as suggested by Dolnicar (2019). The participants were recruited first through the authors' social networks as well as host social media groups on WeChat. Snowball sampling was utilised to further identify potential participants. To achieve a heterogeneous theoretical sample, different social-demographic characteristics, cities and hosting experience were considered. To enhance the trustworthiness of the researchers, officially issued university academic letters and researchers' identifications were sent to participants. Prior to the interview, the researchers explained the meaning of informed consent, making it clear that data were collected for the purpose of research and pseudonyms would be used in order to maintain participant confidentiality. All interviews were then audio recorded. The researchers terminated the data collection when it was apparent that the information being gathered was highly repetitive, effectively when the material being assembled had reached the point of saturation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). All of the interviews were conducted in Mandarin by Chinese native authors through face-to-face WeChat interviews. The average duration of

the interviews was 1 hour. As shown in Table 1, the sample is diverse in nature with regard to age, gender, life stage, geographic location, professional background and hosting experience.

Data were transcribed verbatim in Chinese for further data analysis. Following the suggestions of Decrop (1999), portions of the transcripts were cross-checked between the Chinese authors to ensure accuracy in the transcription process. Subsequently, the data from the interviews were analysed following a constructivist grounded theory approach; all of the transcribed interviews were analysed in an "iterative, comparative, interactive, and abductive" process (Charmaz, 2011, p. 361) in three steps: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Specifically, line-by-line coding (open coding) of the data was conducted by the first author, who read through the transcriptions multiple times in order to reveal the key ideas. A small reflexive memo was produced after each transcript to assist data analysis in the next step. Then, the data were later aggregated into higher order concepts through categorising and selecting recurring themes in the codes (axial coding and selective coding). The highest-level core categories and major themes were eventually identified and revealed Chinese hosts' trust dynamics in the sharing economy. To ensure the quality of codes and themes (Decrop, 1999), the data analysis was first conducted independently and then cross-checked by the Chinese and non-Chinese co-authors to reflect the data in English. Themes were further confirmed through recognising the different theoretical sensitivities of the authors during the coding verification stage. As a result, two themes around interpersonal and institutional trust are explained in the following section.

Trusting the platform? The dynamics of institutional trust building

All our participants recognised that institutional trust towards the platform is crucial and motivates them to become a host. The themes therefore discuss the trust dynamics related to the process of building and sustaining institutional trust. We do not, however, seek to compare and contrast these platforms; rather we aim to reflect on the complex trusting relationships between the hosts and the platform and explore underlying influencing factors (see Table 2).

Trust building: from affective interpersonal relationship to cognitive institutional relationship

As shown in Table 2, despite that fact that hosts may hold different opinions towards various platforms, the affective interpersonal relationship, friends and relatives' suggestions, is a striking factor in the development of institutional trust. Trust is indeed sociological. As the Chinese are interdependent in social actions (Hwang, 2000), the Chinese hosts treated friend/relative suggestions as a trustworthy source, perceiving them as an assurance mechanism or a safeguard. Some even expressed that "*while my friend has never been a host before, he travelled a lot using those platforms. I trusted him*" (P21). Affective and interpersonal trust with friends/relatives transferred here to build institutional

trust between host and platform. Often such a valuable suggestion can enhance the reciprocity trust between actors (host and their friends) (Weber & Carter, 2003). This idea is explained by P26 in the following:

> *My friend gave me the idea to list my empty flat on Airbnb. I bought the flat for myself, but because of work change, I moved away. I do not want to have long-term rental. The tenant won't care for the flat and will mostly trash it. When I want to sell it, the price could be lower due to this... She reminded me about our lovely experience overseas using Airbnb. So I listed my flat with some extra money. Also, my nice flat can be in great order. Thanks to my friend, I always said this to my friend. She is a true friend.*

It is interesting to find that some differences exist for trust building with Airbnb and local Chinese platforms. Two factors, Airbnb's internationally recognised brand reputation and the participants' familiarity stemming from their previous experiences using Airbnb as a guest, led Airbnb to be perceived as more trustworthy than the local platforms. Hosts in this category generally are younger (see Table 2) and expressed their attachment to Airbnb as P19 explained: "*my Airbnb experience in Europe is great. I lived with an artist, and it is such a unique idea. Being an Airbnb host makes me unique somehow.*" Reputation and the brand familiarity of the platform play a confirmatory role of trustworthiness (Johnson & Grayson, 2005), influencing P19's action of becoming a host. As such, cognitive reputation and emotional attachment contribute to the development of institutional trust (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Wang et al., 2019).

Regarding trust building at an early stage, what distinguished the Chinese platforms in terms of being perceived as more trustworthy was the free services and/or gifts they offered such as plants, drawings and duvet sets, as well as a free password key and, more significantly, free consultation services. The interpersonal interactions between the platform agents/consultants and the hosts and the free-of-charge help offered by those agents signalled benevolent intentions and that the platform is equally invested in the host's success, and consequently the initial trust was grounded on mutual interests. P1 also elaborated on how, in addition to her daughter's opinion (friends' and relatives' suggestions and experiences), the one-year free-of-charge consultation service had contributed towards her trust of a particular Chinese platform (Tujia) while not trusting another (Locals) due to the unreasonable charges and the deception:

> *A company called Locals first contacted me as I listed my flat for rent online. Later, I found out they were not reliable. They came to see my flat. One day later, they sent me a designed image and asked me to pay 5000 Yuan; they never mentioned this before. Ridiculous. I decided to work with Tujia after a discussion with their local manager, who was introduced by my younger colleagues; I know that the manager can offer a free-of-charge consultation for the first year. The manager was helpful and patiently explained the whole process to me. Without us, they cannot run the business... My daughter also supported my decision. I trusted them after. Trust is essential because they get a lot of information from you as a host.*

Here, affective interactions with customer services at different platforms contribute to P1's logical reasoning. Here, the idea of mutual interests, "*Without us, they cannot run the business*", is embedded in P1's narrative. This mutual interest strengthens the cognitive side of the institutional trust. Those who hold neutral attitudes towards different platforms often prioritised this notion of mutual interests. For them, "*once we have the shared interests, we will work towards attracting more guests. In this way, all platforms are the same*" (P22). While institutional trust often has its impersonal structure nature (Khodyakov, 2007), here different forms of interpersonal interactions seem to play a relatively more important role in building institutional trust in the sharing economy.

Sustaining trust: institutional trust as my guarantor

As the relationship between the participants and the platform developed and the participants embraced their new identity as hosts, different aspects such as customer service, mutual benefits and guests' ratings gained importance for sustaining trust among all platforms. While Airbnb did have some unique attributes that are perceived as essential for hosts, local platforms utilised institutional trust to some extent to provide a guarantee to those hosts, making them a real person with *Xin* ('trust' in Chinese) (Wu, 2003). These findings are presented in more detail below in this section.

Mechanisms such as guests' rating and customer services, as well as the established mutual benefits, offer structural assurance and a safeguard, fostering institutional trust development (Bachmann & Inkpen 2011; Luhmann, 2017), which subsequently facilitates the interpersonal development between the hosts and guests. Now, mutual interests have become mutual benefits (see Table 2), signalling the higher expectations of hosts to the platforms after trust was built. Sustaining institutional trust thus is not only about showing interest in hosts' property but also about the continuous profits of operating the peer-to-peer property. Trust in the platform encompasses a calculation of the associated benefits (e.g. more profits, guests) and the costs (e.g. ability to fulfil the promises). Here, trust is cognitive and relies on the platform's ability to deliver economic benefits as illustrated by P23, who mentioned that "*I trusted Qunar the most, as they will give me more guests and better profits*".

Interestingly, in the literature, the rating systems have been discussed largely in reference to guests' trust (e.g. Liang et al., 2017). The findings suggest that conviction is also relevant for hosts. The rating system associated with platforms becomes a trustworthiness medium, providing assurance for engendering interpersonal trust between guests and hosts. A few participants even emphasised trusting Airbnb instead of other platforms due to the quality of its rating system, which leads to what the participants referred as to 'quality guests', as P19 explained: "*Airbnb is international. Potentially more people ranked Airbnb. Hence, Airbnb guests often are highly educated. Some foreign tourists as well. Different platform will nurture different guests. International platform brings international guests*". Airbnb's internationally recognised reputation does help to sustain hosts' trust in it.

However, interpersonal customer services provided by local platforms help not only to build trust but also to sustain institutional trust. A few of the participants praised Tujia's quick response to their inquiries and its engagement in social groups via WeChat. P15 explained, "*the social groups were managed by Tujia's local manager and they will make sure all people in the groups are real hosts. They might be busy, but hosts in the social*

groups are normally very helpful." Institutional trust underwrites interpersonal trust between hosts. In contrast, some were complaining about the accessibility of Airbnb's customer services as P25 explained: "*It is extremely hard to contact customer services in Airbnb. They want to commission and want to regulate us without delivering much… I have started to have some offline transactions. Either way I am managing all this by myself.*" In particular, because the majority of hosts did not have any prior training in sharing economy operations, the existence of a customer services and receiving quick responses to their inquiries were perceived to offer psychological comfort and safety (Gefen & Straub, 2004), thereby playing a vital role in sustaining trust towards the platforms. In fact, none of our participants just list their properties on Airbnb. For them, Airbnb is mostly useful for bringing some extra guests of high quality, highlighting the importance that interpersonal customer services play in sustaining institutional trust in China.

The Chinese translation of trust, *Xin*, is regarded as one of the most fundamental virtues of being a person (Wu, 2003). Most participants often expressed their willingness to be a person with *Xin*, and the institutional trust system, especially offered by the local platforms, seems to contribute to their desire to acquire *Xin*. In this vein, the platform becomes a guarantor not only for a smooth transaction but also for the hosts' reputation as a person. While rating systems are usually treated as part of a cognitive process of assessment of trustworthiness, it had more of an affective nature among the participants to the extent of them interpreting it as an illustration of their own trustworthiness as explained by P16: "*my rating is always high. I can show this to my friends so that they see how trustworthy I am as a person. I am a person with* Xin". Correspondingly, when they received lower ratings, the emotional pain of such 'distrust' in their manifest behaviour influenced their perception of themselves. P17 recalled an incident where a guest gave him a lower rating: "*I was surprised. He said the heating was not as what I explained... You won't get central heating from Shanghai... I am always trustworthy... I feel terrible*".

Local platforms indeed have extra verification procedures which contribute to hosts' *Xin*, thereby sustaining institutional trust. Many hosts explained that unlike Airbnb, many local platforms carry out background checks not only with the hosts but also with the guests and other service providers to ensure smooth transactions. P11 explained "*Xiaozhu registered all the information of guests, including their official identification* (addressed)*, which also linked all their past travel experience and rating.*" Unlike Airbnb, official documents must be provided when registering as a user in local platforms. Similarly, P21 said：

> *As official identification is linked with the police station and the guest must use their real name rather than nickname, the platform did a brilliant job to secure safe booking for me... Zhenguo and Xiaozhu are good... they have many other services, including special insurance and cleaning service.*

Here, platforms act as a third-party guarantor and contribute to smooth transactions. Some hosts expressed that "*only a trustworthy person like me can work with trustworthy people*" (P11). Institutional trust endows the host with desire for *Xin*, making gaining trust from strangers possible. Receiving *Xin* indicates that those hosts have a great reputation and virtue (Tong & Yong, 1998), and further sustains institutional trust. Additionally, many hosts are pleased with the verification of their property. As P13 said "*a common worry*

from guests is the actual flat authentically reflects the claims online. Tujia took the pictures for free. They are beautiful and they show to the guests that my flat is authentically checked. I am trustworthy." For many other hosts, this verification stage delivered by many local platforms add value and reason for the commission, and they feel that a verified property would eventually bring more guests and profits. Also, as P13 expressed, institutional trust is further enhanced when additional evidence is added to his *Xin*.

The dynamics of interpersonal trust behaviour: types of Chinese hosts

In respect of interpersonal trust, the study finds hosts have their own views on the nature of interpersonal interactions and thereby influence interpersonal trusting relationships between guests and hosts. Additionally, trust is indeed multidimensional (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). Hosts actively make sense of the sharing economy and find innovative actions to search for trustworthy guests. Different searching criteria that have been listed by hosts indeed reflect their different cognitive and affective responses to social interactions with guests (see Table 3). Chinese people are interdependent individuals, whose social behaviours largely depend on social interactions (Hwang, 2000). In this vein, the paper finds that differences among those searching criteria actually reflect hosts' self-conceptualised view of themselves as hosts. Hence, this reflective process provides powerful tools for this paper to categorise hosts within four groups, namely, romantic hosts, intuitive hosts, fearless hosts and rational hosts (see Table 3). To supplement Table 3 and to show how cognitive and affective dimensions influence those four groups of hosts, Figure 1 is provided. This section therefore focuses on discussing these four groups of hosts and their interactive trusting relationship with guests.

Insert Table 3

Insert Figure 1

The first group is romantic hosts. For them, trusting behaviour was primarily motivated by the affective dimension, valuing their interpersonal relationships with guests. Hence, mutual trust becomes natural behaviour, initiated simply by booking the property. With relatively strong emotional bonds, hosts often do not require a deposit, a manifest behaviour that exhibits high levels of trust. While putting emphasis on Word-Of-Mouth, these hosts also invested in building long-term trusting relationships with their guests. They had a romantic notion of being a host, referring to this as *Qinghuai* in Chinese, which means a romantic feeling leading to an emotional attachment to the guests. Those who have *Qinghuai* tend to differentiate themselves from others. P14 said:

I operate the flat with Qinghuai; some hosts might pursue profits. I treat my guests with true heart and decorated my place with detail and my style. If a guest books my place, they trust me. I will then trust them. Most of the time, I even do not want to have the deposit, and they can make a booking directly through WeChat… my guests are the same; they respect me and my property.

The notion "*treat my guest with true heart*" demonstrates P14's romantic feeling of being a host and a high expectation of the similar reciprocal behaviour from the guest. Similarly, P23 added "*when I am away, my guests will help me to welcome the new guests. We become families.*" Trusting those who truly trusted you becomes a natural behaviour for them (Tong & Yong, 1998), indicating their strong belief in *Xin*. However, any betrayal of *Xin* is indeed emotionally painful (Lewicki & Weigert, 1985) and influences romantic hosts' future intention. P2 recalled a recent incident that makes her wonder whether she should continue running the sharing economy business. She said:

> *A young lady booked my property and had so many parties during her stay inside. The room was extremely dirty and couple of my art pieces were broken. I asked her to share the cost. She said it was my choice to not ask her for the deposit. I therefore need to pay for my childish decision.*

Indeed, some romantic hosts tended to attribute that violation to misconception of the sharing economy rather than the guests. As P24 said, "*a few guests hurt my feelings in the past; I tended to explain the nature of the sharing accommodation and our difference with a hotel. It is our shared Qinghuai brings us together.*" Those romantic feelings and strong belief in *Xin* is uniquely different from previous studies (e.g. Wang et al., 2019), where hosts' trust behaviours are limited to its cognitive aspects.

Second, most hosts seem to belong to the category of intuitive hosts. Although highlighting the importance of mutual trust, all hosts in this category particularly emphasised that trusting a guest will largely depend on their subjective feelings and intuition. To a degree, they shared romantic hosts' desire to have *Xin*, but their trust behaviour did include more rational and cognitive thinking (see Table 3). Consequently, intuitive hosts' trust was mainly affective intertwined with some cognitive elements of rational evaluation of the guests' personality and different characteristics (see Figure 1). For them, operating a peer-to-peer accommodation was more of an interest as each had different occupations. This allowed them to be more selective and to focus especially on interpreting the social interaction cues in developing trust with guests. As P11 explained:

> *The interpersonal trust between us depends on a subjective feeling. More times, if the guests willing to interact with me let me know their purpose of travel and some details, I will accept the booking. If not, I will become suspicious.*

Like romantic hosts, intuitive hosts to a certain degree adhere to the idea of building mutual trust and are affected by Word-Of-Mouth. However, their trusting behaviour is not motivated by *Qinghuai* but rather is influenced by self-identified measures for minimising harm to the property and to their personal reputation (Kamal & Chen, 2016). Those measures include their willingness to trust loyal customers who are endorsed by their friends. Like the romantic hosts, they demonstrated a passionate behaviour by offering direct bookings and discounts. For them, "*trust is established because they have proved themselves trustworthy*" (P9), highlighting that building *Xin* with intuitive hosts does take time (Wu, 2003). With strangers, however, these hosts, especially those who shared their living spaces, admitted that intuitive trust and stereotyping often direct their trust behaviour. Here, intuition is often used as explained by P5: "*I met a man with a girl. He is*

from the city. Why does a local man need to book a room? I suspected the girl is his mistress. I then never rented my room to him."

As discussed in the preceding sections, the local platforms often have a social group on WeChat to facilitate interactions between the platform and hosts. Here, those social groups have become a medium to find trustworthy guests. Hence, interpersonal trust developed among hosts is transferable (Weber & Carter, 2003) and guide trust behaviour between hosts and guests as P25 said: "*Other hosts will find nearby hosts and introduce their guests to you due to full booking. As they already checked the guests, I often trust those guests introduced by other hosts.*" An underlying narrative of this often indicates the position of the property. When hosts shared guests with other hosts, they tended to choose property with a similar price range to ensure the quality of the room. For them, those "*who can afford it normally are better educated and well-behaved*" and therefore could be trusted. Using price as a control mechanism also highlights the need for more institutional safeguards to ensure the development and sustainability of interpersonal trust between the hosts and guests. In his statement below, P20 summarises the issues pertaining to the price of a listed property and its implications on trusting the guests:

> *It is risky to be a host. In hotels, guests are supervised through the national security system. Here you cannot have security camera installed. If something bad happens, you cannot control it. For a while, I did not get many bookings. I lowered the price. Some people booked my flat; they looked like drug users. My flat became a drug place. Imagine that. But I cannot ask them to leave; it is all my suspicions. After that, I increased the price and ask people's purpose in booking.*

The third type of hosts, called fearless hosts, argues that the cost, if trust is betrayed, is low. Despite the existence of an affective element, trust was mainly grounded on more cognitive and rational bases (see Table 3 and Figure 1), deriving from the confident belief that the risk of betrayal is low. Although it could be argued that the romantic, intuitive and fearless hosts have high levels of initial trust and place significant value on mutual trust, the latter resumed a less interactive behaviour with the guests and paid less attention to the potential effects of Word-Of-Mouth. All three types of hosts discussed similar thoughts: "*if they do not burn down my houses, I am fine. Some might steal a couple of small things and make the flat dirty. Easy to fix. Similar to open any stores*" (P7). P15 added that "*some hosts think identification and deposit is important. I never check. We do not have good equipment to detect fake identifications. If they want to lie to you, you cannot do anything. Just book online and the mystery remains between us. That's trust*".

The last group, called rational hosts, focused on cognitive trust building (see Table 3 and Figure 1), secured in logical choices and safety nets. Like fearless hosts, they are more aware of the temporality of the relationships between the hosts and guests, and therefore personal interactions were less prominent and valued; Word-Of-Mouth was linked to the issues concerning the property itself rather than to the interpersonal relationships. Although they were not registered companies, the majority of these hosts treated peer-to-peer accommodation as a form of business for living. They employed a materialist viewpoint to understanding trust, where building trust was an instrument in securing profits. For these hosts, trust was not easily given, and the hosts seek deposits and insurance to decrease the associated risks (Kamal & Chen, 2016). As P26 said, "*deposit is a very good invention.*

They give me the deposit. So I trust them to use my room. I also purchased insurance. Double secured."

Conclusion

This qualitative inquiry has focused on discussing trust dynamics of Chinese peer-to-peer accommodation hosts. This paper contributes to theoretical understanding of the sharing economy and trust in three ways. First, the study extends discussion on trust dynamics from a sociological perspective and offers fresh insights into the discussion of trust dynamics within the sharing economy (e.g. Tussyadiah & Park, 2018). Indeed, while trust is certainly a multidisciplinary concept, only a few researchers attempted to explore the multi-faceted nature of social trust interactions despite the apparent dynamics nature of the trust phenomenon (Lewis & Weigert, 2012). The sharing economy is an ideal subject area to discuss social trust dynamics as social interactions often are regarded as its unique features (Dolnicar, 2019). Although previous quantitative inquiries often limit trust purely to its cognitive dimension, our analysis confirms trust's multi-faceted nature and shows cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions of trust are interlinked and concern social relationships (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). Specifically in the sharing economy, the paper discusses this multi-faceted nature at two levels of trust: institutional and interpersonal. With regard to institutional trust, our analysis focuses on social relationships between hosts and platforms. Here, building and sustaining trust is not purely reliant on cognitive and rational elements (e.g. Wang et al., 2019), but also on affective elements. Importantly, the interpersonal trust relationships developed between hosts and local Chinese platforms' representatives is extended to trusting the platform in general. With regard to interpersonal trust between guests and hosts, our analysis shows social interactions clearly demonstrated that hosts have their own views on the nature of interpersonal interactions and thereby influence interpersonal trusting relationships between guests and hosts.

Second, the study contributes to new understanding of the sharing economy (e.g. Dolnicar, 2019; Ert & Fleischer, 2019; Liang et al, 2017; Tussyadiah & Park, 2018). The boom of the sharing economy has gradually changed our views on the service industry and ways we interact. From the sociological perspective, trust is indeed a very interactive social concept (Weber & Carter, 2003). However, previous studies have prioritised the guests' perspective to enhance booking (e.g. Ert et al., 2016; Liang et al., 2017); the current study focuses on the hosts' perspective and highlights the interactive features of trust and the sharing economy. While previous studies often separately analyse interpersonal and institutional trust (e.g. Wang et al., 2019), the current study provides a comprehensive discussion and empirically demonstrates the link between institutional and interpersonal trust. Additionally, the study identifies four different types of hosts, namely, romantic hosts, intuitive hosts, fearless hosts and rational hosts. The finding shows that cognitive and affective dimensions distinguish those four groups of hosts and their associated interpersonal trusting behaviours with guests. This understanding is essential as previous studies often treat the hosts as a homogeneous group, and we could utilise a standardised measure to improve their online presentation for booking (e.g. Ert et al., 2016; Liang et al., 2017). Our analysis shows hosts as service provider for guests, and as supplier and partner to platforms; they are indeed as complex as guests. In acknowledging that different types of hosts exist, the study explains why hosts choose particular trusting behaviours within their dynamic social interactions.

Third, the study contextually enriches the sharing economy knowledge-making from a Chinese perspective. Specifically the study shows that the traditional Chinese philosophies Confucianism and Daoism have their own interpretations of *Xin*, 'trust' in Chinese, and those interpretations shape trusting behaviours among interdependent Chinese people (Hwang, 2000; Wu, 2003). Concerning trust, for Chinese people, building stronger social relationships is considered more important than any cognitive information (Tong & Yong, 1998). In this paper, our analysis shows that hosts often have their own approach to interacting with guests and those differences were reflected in themselves as hosts. For example, romantic hosts often pay less attention to guests' cognitive features. They actively believe that booking is a form of mutual trust and trusting back with no reservation is indeed a natural behaviour with *Xin*. This reflective and interdependent nature of Chinese hosts shows that social interactions to an extent reflect the hosts' self-identity and trusting behaviours. Additionally, while previous studies have prioritised research about Airbnb (Dolnicar, 2019), this contextually rich study offers dynamic trusting interactions beyond Airbnb through including discussions about local Chinese platforms. The study shows when sustaining institutional trust, instead of focusing on the trustworthiness of hosts within the platform (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011), local platforms often provide a certain degree of guarantee to those hosts, making them a real person with *Xin,* a virtue of being a person (Wu, 2003). Here, *Xin* becomes a social system, where members of social groups act according to this notion of trust.

Practically speaking, the study explains different approaches that local platforms have adopted to win hosts from Airbnb and argues that integrating the concept of *Xin* is essential. It empirically demonstrates the way in which local sharing economy platforms could enhance trustworthiness through prioritising indigenous ways of conceptualising trust. Also, as the study recognises that different types of hosts exist, platforms should understand their distinct characteristics and thus try to facilitate their trusting behaviours. The findings also point out areas where hosts can better operate peer-to-peer accommodation, for example through realising their social group category and learning the importance of trust in managing social interactions with guests and platforms.

As is true for all research, the study has its limitations, resulting from the positions or perspectives of the information and the researchers. As the growth of the sharing economy is gradually slowing down, it would be interesting to investigate hosts who gave up their sharing economy business and the role trust played within the decisions. It would be beneficial to test the four different types of hosts in a cross-cultural quantitative study. Also, as with all qualitative studies, the authors' Chinese and European backgrounds and affiliations could all be reflected in the criticality of this qualitative interpretation.

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