# EXPECTATION DISCONFIRMATION— THE HIDDEN MENACE OF POSITIVE AIRBNB REVIEWS

The integrity of the peer-to-peer accommodation industry relies on peer assessment and the assumption that positive reviews are more likely to guide towards positive outcomes. But problems can occur when hosts go out of their way to accommodate their guests, hoping to score positive reviews. Dr. Wei Wei from UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management and fellow researchers have found that such reviews create an online trail that encourages expectation, which is not necessarily a good thing.
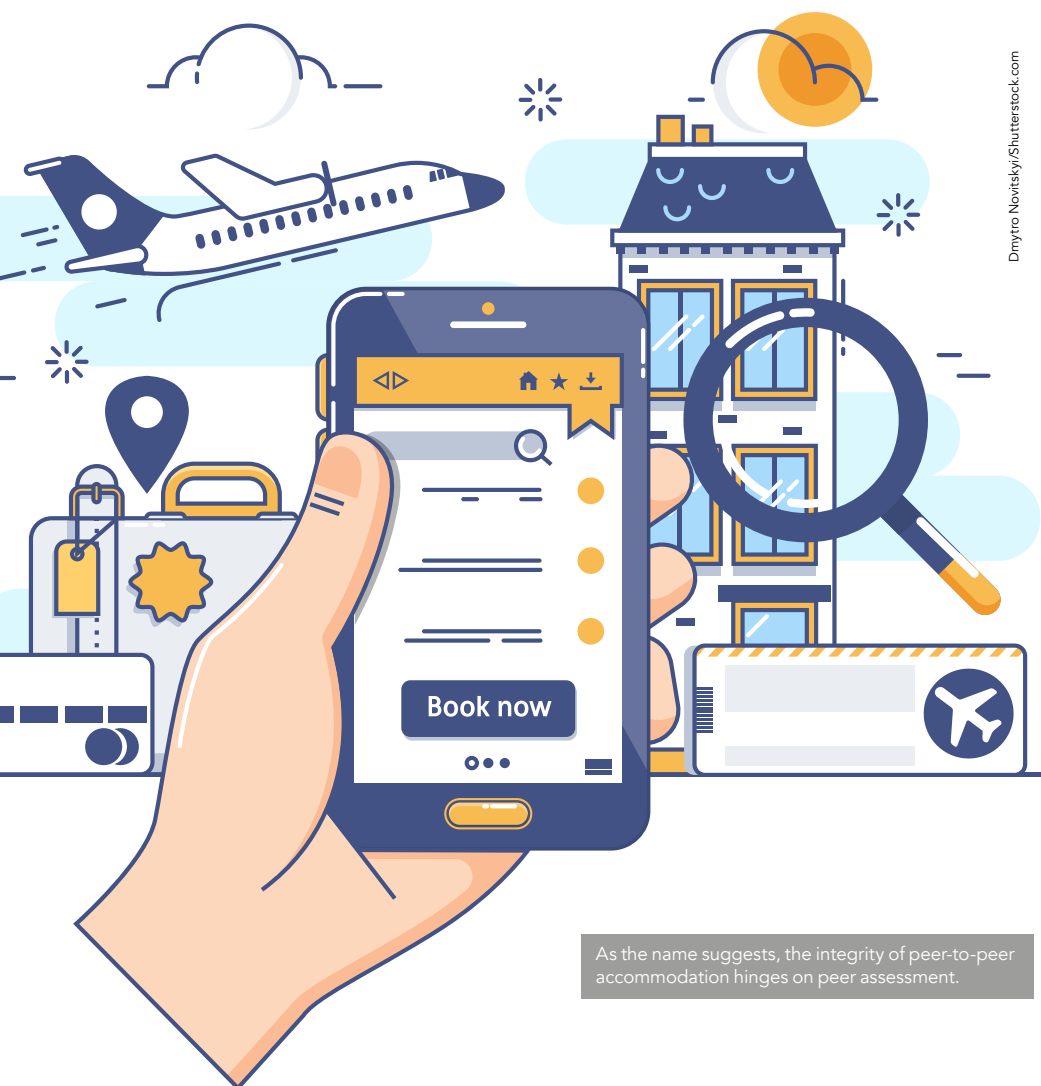
To a large degree, success in the accommodation sector in hospitality relies on managing expectations. In the professional sector, expectations are managed by proper marketing, training, and management operating within the commensurate regulations and demands of accountability. The nonprofessional sector is a little more cavalier. However, that doesn't mean it's not susceptible to the vagaries of customer expectations, especially around consistency. Dr. Wei Wei from UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management and fellow researchers have shown that positive reviews—a significant driver of the peer-to-peer accommodation industry—can sometimes backfire.

When someone books a hotel room within the professional accommodation sector, they have expectations based on previous experiences or, if it's their first visit, perceptions of what the brand offers. Importantly, they have fair expectations of professionalism and consistency across the brand. When someone books accommodation via providers within the sharing economy, such as Airbnb, they have two frames of reference for what to expect: the images and description of the accommodation and reviews by previous visitors. But what happens when expectations of extraordinary service by an Airbnb host, as suggested by reviews, are not met? And does the degree that reviewers agree matter? This is what Wei and her colleagues set out to uncover.

THE VALUE OF REVIEWS
As the name suggests, the integrity of peer-to-peer accommodation hinges on peer assessment. When someone looks for somewhere to stay on Airbnb, they can check the star rating for a quick evaluation. A five-star rating is a sure sign they can expect all boxes ticked in terms of cleanliness, communication, check-in, location, value for money, and accuracy compared to the description. The real value for the consumer sits within the reviews, and it is here where they may find suggestions of extraordinary service, generally by the host, that'll prompt them to book. This could be, say, a bottle of red wine or freshly-cut flowers upon arrival, or a lift to or from the airport. A host may provide such ancillary products or services on the fair assumption they will encourage positive reviews. However, if they do, they will also come with a caveat: expectations. If a reviewer mentions that a host went out

of their way to secure transportation to the airport, a potential guest may think it is fair to expect the same. If they don't receive it, they experience what is known as expectation disconfirmation.

Professionals within hospitality know this. If a restaurateur offers a table of diners a complimentary bottle of wine, nearby diners within earshot won't celebrate the gesture; they'll wonder where theirs is. Hotel brands rely on expectation consistency across their brands to secure customer loyalty. If a particular hotel doesn't measure up to customers' expectations of its brand, those customers may shift allegiance. However, the effects of expectation disconfirmation are largely unexplored within the sharing economy. Wei and her colleagues wondered what would happen when Airbnb consumers saw positive reviews of a property that mentioned an ancillary service only to find their expectations challenged, and whether

the consistency of reviews made any difference. They were also interested if the outcome would differ from when a property description referred to an ancillary service that later failed to materialize. Theoretically, in that scenario, consumers should place the blame squarely on the host.

TAKING THINGS PERSONALLY
The researchers selected people who had used Airbnb in the past year and presented them with one of two scenarios: they find a property on Airbnb at which, according either to the property description or to the reviews, the host provides free rides to the airport. Respondents reacted positively in both cases, suggesting they valued the ancillary service. Those who were told about the reviews were then

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property and Airbnb. Importantly, their overall experience was still negative.

THE NEED FOR CONSISTENCY
This research provides enlightening considerations for accommodation hosts within the sharing economy. One of the most important is that consistency is critical. It is impossible to satisfy everyone's expectations to the point they will provide a glowing review. Research shows that even inclement weather—beyond any host's scope of influence—can trigger unfavorable reviews. However, when a host overtly offers ancillary services in the hope of securing bookings, it creates expectations, and when a host doesn't deliver, it can carry significant costs. And the offer doesn't have to be overt—if it is made to guests to garner positive reviews, that creates an online trail of expectation.

However, considerations also extend to companies such as Airbnb, VRBO, and Homeaway that provide these services. Expectation disconfirmation impacts them too. Wei and her colleagues showed that regardless of whether property descriptions or reviews shaped consumers' expectations, if what they experienced differed significantly it contributed to an overall negative experience with the service. In the researchers' study, Airbnb didn't escape negative feedback. These companies should therefore ensure they have policies and communications in place to guarantee that hosts provide the services they describe and that they are aware that, should they offer ancillary gifts or services to guests, they should prepare for the expectations that may follow.

The professional hospitality sector can draw on experience, the training it generates, and the discipline from good management to provide the services guests expect. It must be tempting for nonprofessional hosts to go out of their way to ensure that guests enjoy their stay and perhaps leave a positive review online to guide someone else's decision. However, Wei and her colleagues have shown that expectations carry costs. For this reason, their research has value beyond the sharing economy. The whole hospitality industry relies on making guests feel welcome, and excellent service can be rewarded when those guests have a voice online. However, positive reviews encourage expectation, and when that expectation isn't met, the impact can be damaging.

informed that either the average score of 211 reviewers was 4.3 (out of five) and that the reviews were reasonably consistent or that the average score of 211 reviewers was 4.3 (out of five) but that the reviews were inconsistent—some reviews were highly positive, but there were also some very negative ones.

The respondents were then told that after booking and arriving at the property, they

As hypothesized, respondents reacted negatively when a property description on Airbnb told them the host offered a lift to the airport only to find the host couldn't when one was needed. They considered it akin to misleading advertising. But for those guided by reviewers, Wei and her colleagues discovered that the consistency between reviewers mattered. If there was a high level of agreement between reviewers, respondents reacted more negatively when

> *IF THERE WAS A HIGH LEVEL OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN REVIEWERS, RESPONDENTS REACTED MORE NEGATIVELY WHEN EXPERIENCING EXPECTATION DISCONFIRMATION—THEY TOOK IT PERSONALLY.*

asked for a ride to the airport in three days, but the host said they would be too busy on that day and unable to do so. The respondents were then asked how likely they would recommend the property and use Airbnb again.

experiencing expectation disconfirmation—they took it personally. If, however, there was a disagreement between reviewers, respondents were more likely to rationalize their expectation disconfirmation, thereby slightly mitigating their negativity towards the

RESEARCHERS
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RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Dr. Wei aimed to provide a more holistic understanding of how consumers of peer-to-peer accommodations respond to a negative expectation disconfirmation experience.

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PERSONAL RESPONSE

How can the peer-to-peer accommodation industry realistically minimize the negative effects of expectation disconfirmation?

❚❚ The peer-to-peer accommodation industry needs to ensure that policies pertaining to service provision should indicate that a service advertised by a host must be provided (with penalties for a failure to do so). Additionally, policies on 'surprise' (and possibly inconsistent) services should be written in such a way as to set realistic expectations for consumers who may or may not receive the amenity or service. The peer-to-peer accommodation industry should also take more proactive steps to educate homeowners and encourage them to provide consistent offerings to their target market. ❚❚

Dr. Wei Wei

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Wei and her colleagues discovered that consistency between reviewers mattered.