

In the Eye of the Beholder: Customer Experience Journey with Airbnb

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Abstract: The rapid growth of the sharing economy has transformed the tourism and hospitality landscape, with peer-to-peer accommodation platforms such as Airbnb redefining how travellers search for, consume, and evaluate lodging experiences. Despite Airbnb's global reach and disruptive impact on traditional hospitality models, limited research has empirically examined the customer experience across the full consumption journey. Addressing this gap, the present exploratory study investigates the Airbnb customer experience through the lens of Customer Journey Mapping (CJM), with the objective of identifying critical service touchpoints and proposing managerial strategies to enhance customer experience at each stage of the journey. Drawing on an integrative approach, the study combines a review of the peer-to-peer accommodation and customer experience literature with exploratory consumer insights. An initial set of customer touchpoints was identified through prior research and unstructured interviews with Airbnb hosts and guests. These touchpoints were subsequently evaluated using an online survey distributed via social media and email to respondents with prior Airbnb usage experience. Only touchpoints reported by more than one-third of respondents were retained for inclusion in the final CJM. The findings reveal that Airbnb customers engage with a diverse set of salient touchpoints across the pre-service, service, and post-service stages. Pre-service touchpoints—such as property search filters, map-based location search, host and property reviews, and host communication—emerged as particularly influential in shaping expectations. During the service stage, experiential factors related to property accuracy, cleanliness, functionality, safety, and host helpfulness were identified as central to customer satisfaction. Post-service engagement was dominated by review-writing and private feedback provision, underscoring the importance of social and customer-owned touchpoints in peer-to-peer platforms. Building on these insights, the study presents stage-specific Customer Journey Maps that integrate proposed strategic initiatives aligned with the Servuction Model, including improvements to the digital servicescape, host and customer service interactions, peer influences, and invisible organizational systems. By empirically grounding CJM in customer-reported touchpoint salience, this research contributes to the customer experience and sharing economy literature while offering actionable guidance for service innovation. Further research in collaboration with Airbnb management, hosts, and guests is recommended to refine and validate these strategic interventions.

Keywords: Customer Experience, Customer Journey Map, Service Touchpoints, Airbnb, Sharing Economy

1. Introduction

The last few years have witnessed a growing interest among business managers, entrepreneurs, consumers, regulators and academicians in the theory and practical implications of the 'sharing economy' (also referred to as collaborative consumption and peer-to-peer activity). The concept of a sharing economy evolved with the emergence of Silicon Valley start-ups like Airbnb and Uber, companies that capitalize on sharing unused resources (homes and cars) between individual consumers. Eventually, the shared resources extended from tangibles to intangibles (Choi et al. 2014; Posen 2015).

The purpose of this research is to explore the experience that travellers have with an accommodation platform such as Airbnb. To this end, we use a method that blends a review of the peer-to-peer accommodation literature and actual consumer insight and feedback to propose a Customer Journey Map for Airbnb. These maps are integral to understanding customer experience and to maximizing CJM as a strategic management tool for service innovation (Rosenbaum et al. 2017). Our exploratory research will build on the CJM to recommend concrete efforts to enhance the customer experience with the brand at each important touchpoint.

2. Sharing Economy

There is little consensus regarding how to define the sharing economy. Botsman (2013), responsible for coining the term, defines it as "an economic model based on sharing, swapping, trading, or renting underutilized assets for monetary or non-monetary benefits, enabling access over ownership". Belk (2014) defines collaborative consumption as "people coordinating the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation, using digital platforms and entailing temporary access rather than ownership". Hamari et al. (2015) offer the following definition: "a peer-to-peer-based activity of obtaining, giving, or sharing the access to goods and services, coordinated through community-based online services".

Despite these variations, there remain two constants essential to defining sharing and collaborative consumption practices: reliance on temporary access rather than ownership models of consumption, and reliance on the Internet and mobile technology to enable these exchanges (*Belk 2014*).

The sharing economy is experiencing fast-paced growth. In 2015, 17 companies operating in the sharing economy were worth more than US \$1 billion and employed more than 60,000 workers altogether. Estimates predict that the main sharing economy sectors will generate revenues of approximately \$335 billion by 2025, compared with \$15 billion in 2015 (*PwC 2015*). This massive expansion can partly be attributed to the prevalence of internet-based technologies that facilitate connectivity, a global economic crisis, and a marked shift in consumption attitudes.

The sharing economy is here to stay and will continue its steady growth and global expansion. There is uncertainty among business managers and theorists on how this peer-to-peer consumption platform will manifest itself in the future, but there is agreement that traditional marketing practices may be irrelevant or inadequate, particularly in the case of emerging and developing countries. Conventional businesses will find it challenging to transform themselves from traditional retailing operations into access-based (non-ownership) service providers (*Moeller and Wittkowski 2010*).

Recent academic research on the sharing economy has explored numerous questions including potential business models (*Kosintceva 2016*), pricing strategies (*Weber 2016*), competitive structure and implications (*Cusumano 2015; Wallsten 2016*), and segmentation strategies (*Godelnik 2017*).

The sharing economy has resulted in the creation of a new socioeconomic system that thrives on shared production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services among individual consumers globally. Propelled by technology and a plethora of online social network platforms, people have easy access to the sharing of resources including transportation, accommodation and even skills with one another. Collaborative consumption has revolutionized the travel and hospitality industry, enabling the success of several peer-to-peer accommodation platforms such as Airbnb (*Ferenstein 2014*). This phenomenon is interlinked with Network Hospitality, which encapsulates the ways “people connect to one another using online networking systems, as well as the kinds of relationships they perform when they meet each other offline and face to face” (*Germann Molz 2011*).

Airbnb is perhaps the exemplar of network hospitality. A thriving peer-to-peer internet platform provider, Airbnb has gained monumental popularity among its users across the world since its establishment in San Francisco in 2008. According to an Airbnb corporate source, over the past decade it has experienced rapid growth, connecting more than 200 million guests across over 65,000 cities (Airbnb (2023) About Us, Airbnb Inc. Available at: <https://www.airbnb.com/about>).

3. Airbnb

On its corporate site, Airbnb defines itself as a distinct internet platform that establishes “a trusted community marketplace for people to list, discover, and book unique accommodation around the world” and “connects people to unique travel experiences.”

Recent statistics confirm that Airbnb’s estimated value of \$30 billion has disrupted the established hotel industry and is ahead of most hospitality groups. Given Airbnb’s popularity and reach within the tourism and hospitality industries, it is no surprise that more researchers have started conducting analyses and studies on this novel phenomenon. Academic research has focused on Airbnb’s potential disruption to the hospitality and accommodation sector (*Guttentag 2015*), marketing communication and advertising appeals (*Liu and Mattila 2017*), pricing strategies (*Wang and Nicolau 2017*), and user behavior and consumer experiences (*Tussyadiah and Pesonen 2016*). According to the latter, a key attribute of the Airbnb user experience is its ability to offer an authentic tourist–host encounter that cannot be replicated by conventional hotels.

Tussyadiah examined the impact of the peer-to-peer accommodation platform on changes in consumers’ travel-related behaviors. The results from two online surveys targeting travellers from the United States and Finland suggest that the social appeals of peer-to-peer accommodations—namely travellers’ desire for more meaningful social interactions with local hosts, and their wish to participate in one-of-a-kind experiences in authentic settings—have the following effects: expansion in destination selection, increase in travel frequency, length of stay, and range of activities participated in tourism destinations. Additionally, the economic appeal of reduced accommodation cost allows travellers to select destinations and tourism activities that are otherwise cost-prohibitive.

4. Customer Experience and Customer Journey Maps

Airbnb's promise to provide a unique travel experience has prompted behavioral researchers to identify the unique dimensions and attributes that form the basis of the Airbnb customer experience. Customer experience (CX) is defined as the accumulation of customer engagement with a company or brand over the entirety of the customer-brand relationship. It is a multidimensional construct that focuses on a customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial and social responses to a firm's offering during the customer's entire purchase journey (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Customer experiences are constructed from the totality of specific, concrete and controllable elements referred to as touchpoints (Richardson 2010). According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), CX may be conceptualized as a "customer's journey" with a business over time across multiple touchpoints.

While the specific definition of CX may vary by researcher, there is agreement that consumer experience is multidimensional (Verhoef et al. 2009). Five key dimensions are consistently discussed in the literature: cognitive, affective, behavioral, sensory and social (Verhoef et al. 2009; Brakus et al. 2009; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Klaus and Maklan 2013; Schmitt 2003).

The Servuction Model proposed by Hoffman and Bateson (2006) illustrates factors that influence customer experience with a service. These factors include both visible and invisible elements. Visible elements consist of the inanimate environment (servicescape), service provider and other contact personnel, and fellow consumers. Invisible systems refer to the rules, regulations and processes that govern an organization and have a profound influence on the consumer's service experience despite their invisibility. The Servuction Model demonstrates the integral role of consumers in the service process, regardless of whether their participation is active or passive. There is overarching consensus that interaction is necessary for consumer experience to occur, and therefore interaction is a prerequisite building block from which CX stems (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004).

The rewards to the company or brand of an effectively managed customer experience are manifold. The benefits include enhanced customer and employee satisfaction, greater efficiency and increased revenues. Skillful navigation of the CX also allows organizations to improve cross-functional collaborations, delivering gains at multiple levels throughout the company (Rawson et al. 2013).

Given the renewed interest in the concept of customer experience, scholars and practitioners alike have reverted to Customer Journey Mapping as a method to investigate user experience (Nenonen et al. 2008; Yoo and Pan 2014). A customer journey map is a visual depiction of the narrative of the customer experience with a particular company or brand. This tool delineates the sequence of events through which customers may interact with a service organization during an entire purchase process, enabling the organization to make sense of customers' motivations, needs and pain points (Rosenbaum et al. 2017).

The Customer Journey Map (CJM) is longitudinal and multifaceted. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) suggest that the CX process flows from pre-purchase (need recognition, search of alternatives, consideration) to purchase (choice, ordering, payment) to post-purchase stages (consumption, usage, engagement and service requests).

5. Research Design

There have been some efforts to assess and construct CJM from a theoretical perspective (Nenonen et al. 2008), however, concrete examples and instructions for managerial interpretation remain scarce. In a typical CJM, touchpoints are depicted horizontally along a process timeline, which is separated into three periods: pre-service, service, and post-service. Depending on the unique customer's experience with the brand in question, the salience or strength of each touchpoint category may differ in each purchase stage. It is erroneous to assume that all customers experience each horizontal touchpoint with the same level of intensity and importance. The more effective approach is to gauge, directly from customers, which touchpoints they deem as important to them.

This research first identified the touchpoints customers might experience throughout their customer experience with Airbnb, categorized into three stages: prior, during, and after service. The process for determining the list of touchpoints consisted of surveying the literature for behavioral research on travel platforms and conducting 20–30-minute unstructured interviews with 11 Airbnb hosts/guests. This activity resulted in the identification of close to thirty customer touchpoints, each illustrating a moment when Airbnb customers had a point of interaction with the brand. Approximately one-third of these represented pre-service touchpoints (prior to the

customers' stay at an Airbnb property), one-half represented service touchpoints occurring during the actual Airbnb stay, and the rest represented post-service touchpoints (after the Airbnb stay).

As mentioned earlier, one of the shortcomings of the Customer Journey Mapping process is the misconception that all touchpoints are equally important to all customers, and that they should all factor equally into management's planning. Further analysis of the saliency of these CX touchpoints was required, and to this end, the list was used to develop an online survey (Appendix A), which was then circulated to respondents via Social Media platforms (namely Facebook) and e-mail. Out of the 50 responses, only 31 respondents had personally booked an Airbnb Property.

6. Findings

The first question of the survey screened respondents for personal experience with Airbnb. Qualified respondents were directed to complete the remaining questions on whether they had engaged in each of the 27 identified touchpoints during their latest Airbnb experience. Based on these responses, only those touchpoints selected by more than one third of the respondents were selected to be part of the CJM (horizontal axis) for Airbnb (Table 1).

Table 1: Important Customer Touchpoints

Customer Touchpoints	%
Pre-Service	
Create an account as a new user	57
Adjust filters and other search options	96
Use the map feature to search in specific neighborhoods	79
Read through property and host reviews	100
Look for 'Super Host' status and other host quality badges	32
Communicate with the host	71
Service	
Convenience of property's location	79
Accessibility of property to major attractions	71
Availability of parking at the property	50
Degree of safety around the property	61
Accuracy of description and photos on the Airbnb property listing page	82
Availability and comfort of furnishings	68
Cleanliness of the space	86
Functionality of the space	57
Helpfulness of the host	71
Flexibility of the host and willingness to accommodate	68
Post-Service	
Write a review for the host/property on Airbnb site	87
Write a private message/feedback for the host	43

The vertical axis of the CJM consists of managerial practices that may help ensure that Airbnb customers experience each touchpoint in a satisfactory manner. These recommended practices are classified in line with the Servuction Model (*Hoffman and Bateson, 2006*), as pertaining to the 'inanimate environment/servicescape', 'contact personnel', 'other customers' and 'invisible systems'. The inanimate environment refers to all non-living living features present in the service encounter which help create some degree of tangibility. In the case of Airbnb, this may include design elements of the website as well as servicescape elements of the property. The contact personnel may include the host and Airbnb customer service representatives. Other customers include the influence (active/passive; positive/negative) that other Airbnb users may have. Finally, the invisible systems reflect the rules, regulations and processes of the Airbnb organization.

For the purposes of this exploratory study, CJMs for the three stages of CX with Airbnb were constructed. Based on the preliminary survey, the key customer touchpoints during each stage are listed along the horizontal axis. Airbnb’s CJM for the ‘Pre-Service’ period is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Airbnb CJM: Pre-Service

		Create account	Use map	Read reviews	Superhost' status	Communicate with host	
STRATEGIC PRACTICES	Inanimate Environment	Clear step-by-step instructions for account set-up	Map features accurate and clear markings for streets and landmarks	Allow sorting of reviews by type of traveler (business/leisure; couple/family)	Specify how long host has maintained ‘Superhost’ status		
		Simplify verification process	Map features vivid and attractive colors	Allow sorting of reviews (by number of stars)			
	Contact Personnel	Provide direct contact number for Airbnb customer service department				Make sure customers feel ‘valued’ and ‘listened to’	
		Enhance representative technical training to better handle site challenges and failures					
	Other Customers					Better monitoring of the Airbnb Community Center to ensure that accuracy of shared information and C2C mentoring	
	Invisible Systems	Enhance internal communication among various Airbnb functional departments					Redesign site mail system to include phone number, URLs and images
		Effective process for documenting and following up on service calls to better ‘keep promises’					Implement an effective case escalation process

Tables 3 and 4 replicate the same mapping for the ‘Service’ and ‘Post-Service’ stages, respectively. Some proposed strategic initiatives and service innovation strategies for each touchpoint are plugged into the matrices, where applicable. Further research - in collaboration with Airbnb management, hosts and guests - is required to propose more expansive and in-depth recommendations for enhancing the Airbnb CX at each of these touchpoints.

Table 3: Airbnb CJM: Service

		Convenience	Accessibility	Safety			Furnishings	Cleanliness	Functionality
STRATEGIC PRACTICES	Inanimate Environment	Hosts place visual map with directions to local amenities	Hosts place promotional brochures/ materials for tourist attractions	Hosts place list of emergency contact numbers	STRATEGIC PRACTICES	Inanimate Environment			
				Apartment has security systems, locks, smoke detectors & other safety devices		Contact Personnel	Airbnb 'Expert' service (one-time/ complimentary) to consult on furnishings	Airbnb 'Expert' service (one-time/ complimentary) to consult on space functionality	
	Contact Personnel		Hosts share tourist information with guests	Other Customers			Setting realistic expectations of degree of cleanliness		
	Invisible Systems		Hosts set up arrangements with local tour guides to provide assistance	Invisible Systems			Airbnb checklist provided to hosts to ensure consistent cleanliness		

Table 4: Airbnb CJM: Post-Service

		Write Review
STRATEGIC PRACTICES	Invisible Systems	Revise review submission system to allow editing of reviews after submission
		Extend the 'post-stay' period for review submission

7. Discussion

This exploratory study set out to examine the Airbnb customer experience across the consumption journey using Customer Journey Mapping (CJM), with the objective of identifying the most salient service touchpoints and proposing actionable managerial strategies for enhancing customer experience (CX). By empirically grounding the CJM in customer-reported touchpoint salience, the study responds directly to calls in the CX literature for more customer-centric, data-informed journey analyses rather than purely conceptual or firm-driven maps.

The findings demonstrate that Airbnb customers engage with a wide and differentiated set of touchpoints across the pre-service, service, and post-service stages, with varying levels of importance. Consistent with Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) conceptualization of CX as a longitudinal process, pre-service touchpoints emerged as particularly influential in shaping customer expectations. Features such as search filters, map-based location tools, and—most notably—host and property reviews were reported by a substantial majority of respondents. The prominence of host communication during this stage further highlights the hybrid nature of Airbnb's CX, which blends technology-mediated interactions with interpersonal exchange.

During the service stage, experiential factors related to accuracy, cleanliness, functionality, safety, and host behavior were identified as critical determinants of satisfaction. These findings reinforce prior research suggesting that while Airbnb's value proposition often emphasizes authenticity and social interaction, functional

service quality remains foundational. The importance attributed to accuracy of listing descriptions and photos is particularly salient, as it reflects the fragile trust-based nature of peer-to-peer accommodation. Any discrepancy between expectations and reality may disproportionately damage customer evaluations, given the absence of standardized brand-controlled environments typical of traditional hotels.

Post-service touchpoints were dominated by review-writing and private feedback provision. Reviews not only serve as a mechanism for customer reflection and expression but also function as a critical input shaping future customers' pre-service experiences. This reinforces the notion that customers in the sharing economy are simultaneously consumers and contributors to the service ecosystem.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the CX and sharing economy literature by demonstrating how CJM can be operationalized using customer-reported salience data rather than assuming equal importance across touchpoints. Integrating CJM with the Servuction Model further illustrates how visible elements (servicescape, host behavior, peer influence) and invisible organizational systems jointly shape the customer experience. The study also extends existing Airbnb research by moving beyond isolated aspects of user behavior to a holistic, journey-based view of experience formation.

Managerially, the findings suggest that Airbnb and similar platforms should prioritize investments in pre-service digital servicescape design, transparency-enhancing mechanisms, and host–guest communication tools. During the stay, clearer standards and support systems for hosts may help ensure consistency in functional quality without undermining the platform's peer-to-peer core. Post-service, refinements to review systems—such as extended submission windows or editable reviews—may enhance feedback quality and perceived fairness.

This study is subject to limitations. Its exploratory nature and reliance on self-reported survey data limit generalizability, and the sample does not account for differences in traveller segments, trip purpose, or cultural context. Future research should validate and extend these findings using larger, cross-cultural samples, longitudinal designs, and comparative analyses between peer-to-peer and traditional hospitality models to further advance understanding of customer experience in evolving tourism service systems.

Ethics Declaration

The research was granted an exemption by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Salem State University.

AI Declaration

AI (Chat GPT) was used to help with editing the abstract, and some formatting of the bibliography of this paper, according to the Harvard referencing style.

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Appendix A: Online Customer Experience (Cx) Survey

Customer Touchpoints with Airbnb

The purpose of this survey is to identify the most important aspects of customer experience when using a vacation rental platform such as Airbnb. This survey is intended only for consumers who have personally booked and stayed at an Airbnb property.

Screening Question

1. Have you ever personally booked and stayed at an Airbnb property?

Yes

No

(If No, please exit the survey.)

Customer Experience with Airbnb Registration, Search & Booking (Pre-Service)

Please think back to your most recent experience booking a stay on Airbnb. The following questions relate to the booking process prior to the actual stay.

2. Before searching for properties on Airbnb, did you need to create an account as a new user?

- Yes
- No

3. During the search process, did you use any of the following features? (Please check all that apply.)

- Adjust filters and search options (dates, number of guests, price, etc.)
- Use the map feature to search within specific neighborhoods
- Read property and host reviews
- Look for "Superhost" status or other host quality badges
- Give preference to properties offering "Instant Book"
- Give preference to properties listed as "Plus Homes"

4. Prior to or during the booking process, did you communicate directly with the host?

- Yes
- No

Customer Experience with the Host and Property During the Stay (Service)

Please think back to your most recent Airbnb stay. The following questions relate to your experience during the stay.

5. Which of the following property location factors were most important to you during your stay? (Please check all that apply.)

- Convenience (easy to find and access)
- Proximity to major attractions
- Availability of parking
- Noise level
- Safety of the neighborhood

6. Which of the following property amenities and facilities were most important to you? (Please check all that apply.)

- Garden or outdoor space
- Pool
- Accuracy of the description and photos on the Airbnb listing page
- Aesthetic layout and design of the space
- Availability and comfort of furnishings
- Cleanliness
- Functionality of the space

7. Which of the following host-related factors were most important to you during your stay? (Please check all that apply.)

- Helpfulness
- Availability during the stay
- Flexibility and willingness to accommodate requests
- Effectiveness of communication (pre-arrival, check-in, during the stay, and after check-out)

Customer Experience After the Stay (Post-Service)

Please think back to your most recent Airbnb stay. The following questions relate to your experience after the completion of the stay.

8. After your stay, did you do any of the following? (Please check all that apply.)

- Write a public review for the host/property on Airbnb
- Send a private message or feedback to the host
- File a complaint with the host and/or Airbnb