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Citation for final published version:

Christensen, Mathilde Dissing 2023. Doing digital discipline: how Airbnb hosts engage with the digital platform. *Mobilities* 18 (1) , pp. 70-85. 10.1080/17450101.2022.2060756

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2022.2060756>

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Title: Doing digital discipline: how Airbnb hosts engage with the digital platform

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Abstract:

Digital platforms and activities permeate everyday lives in multiple ways. They organize different modes of movement, and sometimes, who moves and who stays still. This paper takes its empirical starting point by exploring Airbnb hosts, not only through the lens of tourism labour but also within the larger context of platform-mediated work. This paper pursues two aims in exploring how trust is produced and negotiated on the platform and how the platform serves to align host performances towards corporate interests.

The paper argues that the affordances of the platform are designed to develop digital credibility, or digital capital, which in turn functions to discipline hosting performances, which become instrumentalized, measured and controlled in accordance with business interests and corporate understandings of hosting performances. In doing this, the paper argues that the development of digital capital is integral to navigating the digital platform successfully and explores how digital capital is produced and instrumentalized through the development of profiles, the review system and the superhost status. This paper contributes insights into the workings of a key platform for facilitating tourism but also adds to current discussion on the organization of interactions in platform capitalism.

Keywords: Airbnb, Digital Capital, Digital Geographies, Tourism, Collaborative Economies

Introduction

Digital platforms and activities permeate everyday lives in multiple ways. They organize modes of movement, and sometimes, who moves or stays still. Even before Covid-19 lockdowns moved activities into the digital sphere, various platforms were underlining our social worlds in complex ways. The growing influence of a multitude of platforms has inspired van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal to argue that we live in a platform society in order to emphasize ‘the inextricable relation[s] between online platforms and social structures’ (2018, 2). Along similar lines, Barns (2019) calls today the age of the platform as digital platforms function as critical infrastructure of (especially) urban societies. Several scholars argue that platform ecosystems are increasingly influencing economic transactions, local institutions and legislative frameworks and social and cultural practices (see e.g. Barns 2018, 2019; van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018; Leszczynski 2020; Söderström and Mermet 2020; van Doorn 2019).

The field of mobilities has clearly not been left unaffected by platforms, from Uber and Lyft becoming dominant forces in urban mobilities, to app operated e-scooters filling pavements around the world, to platforms providing overviews of flights and ticket prices or facilitating tourist accommodation. Mobilities research has from the early stages entailed interest in communication technologies and explored how ‘information and communication technologies is allowing new forms of coordination of people, meetings, and events to emerge’ (Sheller and Urry 2006, 207). In this sense, study of the rising influence of digital platforms that enable mobilities at various scales can be understood as essential to mobilities research, as digital platforms form part of the technological infrastructures structuring flows of people, information, and images. However, like all infrastructures, digital platforms should not be understood as a black box. Rather, we must attend to them as an active force shaping, as well as being shaped by, users’ engagement and mobilities. Clearly digital platforms are closely entangled with a variety of different mobilities as ‘they are not simply channels for

communication but actively compel, construct and configure the way that users, data and commodities are on the move' (Hill 2021, 569). However, there is significant scope to expand on the intersection between mobilities and platforms, as limited research in the mobilities literature focus on the understanding of platform interfaces. This paper adds to the mobilities literature in two main ways: firstly, by offering insights into the workings of platforms that organize and enable a multitude of mobilities, and secondly by exploring the specific platform of Airbnb as a digital infrastructure engaged with the circulation of tourism and the manoeuvres of tourism workers.

Airbnb might be one of the most iconic examples of what was early on known as the sharing or collaborative economy (for a rich discussion on various terminologies please see Dredge and Gyimóthy 2015). By mediating contact between peers, an array of technological platforms facilitates increased exchange and a greater usage of underutilized resources. It has been argued that Airbnb represents a radical change to existing modes of exchange and consumption, where the glue and tradable value is trust and social capital (Botsman and Rogers 2010; Gansky 2012; Rifkin 2014). Airbnb was launched in 2008 and has grown at an astonishing pace to offer 5.6 million listings in over 100,000 cities (Airbnb 2021). On Airbnb anyone can create a listing, offering an entire home, a private bedroom, or even a shared room for short-term rental. The platform facilitates contact between hosts and guests and supports online trust through a two-way review system, secured payment, a message system, a 24/7 customer service hotline and a one-million-dollar host guarantee.

This paper takes its starting point in exploring Airbnb hosts, as they can be understood not only as tourist agents, but also within a larger context of platform-mediated work. Specifically, I explore their use of the digital platform. Although some attention has been dedicated to understanding Airbnb hosts (Ravenelle 2017; Knaus 2020; Roelofsen 2018; Meged and Christensen 2017; Christensen 2020), limited studies explore uses and the role of the platform

in hosting practices and the role of the digital infrastructure in creating and structuring Airbnb performances (For excellent exceptions see Roelofsen and Minca 2018; and on the non-monetary hospitality platform couchsurfing Germann Molz 2014a). The platform cannot be understood as a space freed of cultural regulations, but rather as conditioned and produced through social relationships and norms practised by users, as well as those promoted through the platform affordances. The Airbnb platform has three main and interrelated functions for hosts: it displays listings to entice guests, facilitates communicative affordances that allow hosts to interact with and evaluate potential guests, and provides a safe infrastructure for handling payments. All essential in developing trust in the potential guest and transactions that are fundamental for enabling this type of mobility.

This paper illuminates the role of the digital platform in enabling an online market for hospitality and secondly explores how the relationship between hosts and company is negotiated digitally. Consequently, this paper pursues two clear aims in exploring how trust is produced and negotiated on the platform and how the platform serves to align host performances towards corporate interests. I argue that the platform is designed to develop digital credibility, or digital capital, understood as the capacity of the individual to navigate, interact and take advantage of online resources, which is in turn utilized as a disciplining instrument.

First the paper will explore the literature regarding the organization of platform tourism with emphasis on the development of trust and the role of algorithmic design in disciplining user behaviour. The analysis will begin with discussing the notion of digital capital then move on to explore, first, the role of developing listings, secondly, the review system and finally the affordance of the superhost status in producing digital capital.

Organizing platform tourism

Airbnb has inspired several threads of research, with key interest focusing on the effects on localized housing markets and gentrification (see e.g. Cocola Gant 2016; Mermet 2017; Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018), how Airbnb intersects with urban challenges of concentrated tourism (see e.g. Freytag and Bauder 2018; Stors and Kagermeier 2017; Ioannides, Röslmaier, and van der Zee 2019) or impacts upon existing hospitality industries (Varma et al. 2016; Aznar et al. 2018; Zervas, Proserpio, and Byers 2017).

A recent strain of research can be understood as an extension of ‘platform urbanism’, concerned with exploring the role of the platform in relation to urban policies. Attention centres on the political influence of the platform, exploring Airbnb’s effect on legislative processes and how the lack of reliable data challenges local legislative efforts (Ferreri and Sanyal 2018). Minca and Roelofsen (2021) argue that control over data is incremental to the governmentality of the platform and Dredge (2017) critiques Airbnb for producing ‘information asymmetries’ in the ‘slippery global world of platform capitalism’. In extension, Söderström and Mermet (2020) note that platforms like Airbnb have significant control over materiality, governance, and everyday lives in contemporary cities through control over code and data. Van Doorn (2019) understands Airbnb as a new institutional form transforming relations between market, state, and civil society actors. He argues that Airbnb attempts to frame not just policy debates on home sharing but on ‘the very fabric of city life’ as hosts are strategically utilized as part of the ‘toolbox’ of platform urbanism.

Peer-to-peer platforms are often perceived to disrupt existing businesses and legislative structures by presenting the ‘internet as an alternate sphere or space [that] allows digital work platforms and practices to be presented as not just unregulated, but also unregulatable’ and minimizing external regulation of the relationship between platform and workers, who are often categorized as independent contractors rather than employees (Graham, Hjorth, and

Lehdonvirta 2017, 153). However, digital practices do not unfold in some alternate reality but are intimately entangled with local spaces and produced through embodied practices. Leszczynski illustrates through the ‘glitchiness’ of platforms how such configurations are open to various ‘negotiations, reconfigurations, and diffractions through tactical manoeuvres rooted in everyday digital practices’ (2020, 1) and Barns (2018) emphasizes that it is through embeddedness into everyday ecosystems that platforms encourage engagement and develop infrastructural capacities.

Consequently, it is essential to explore how platforms work through examining usage. One key area of interest is the development of online trust and how the socio-technical design supports mitigation from online to offline contexts. Digital affordances to quantify experiences are essential for the development of online trust and a large part of tourist markets and platform structures relies on peer-generated reviews, yet little has been said about how this affects those subjected to it and ‘the affective and immaterial labour that underlies tourism’ (Roelofsen and Minca 2018, 176; see also Germann Molz 2014a for another exception). Roelofsen and Minca note that signing up to Airbnb entails that users ‘willingly or unknowingly submit themselves to monitoring practices that generate economic value in the form of information commodities’ (2021, 9). Accordingly, hosting entails a layer of unpaid labour in participating in what Andrejevic (2005) terms the work of watching one another.

Germann Molz argues that online trust might be predominantly a function of reputation, perceiving digital reputation as a type of currency, which once compounded can afford advantages on a given platform. Consequently, she notes that participation in collaborative consumption revolves primarily around ‘reputation capital’ rather than solely economic logics (2014b). This resonates beyond the context of the collaborative economies as Graham, Hjorth, and Lehdonvirta note that there are ‘tangible benefits for those that make it through the barriers of reputation and ranking systems’, and participants with high levels of reputation occasionally

outsource tasks to less successful participants (2017, 153). Consequently, the development of credible digital identities creates tangible benefits for participants and platforms alike. The following section will examine this relationship by exploring how such benefits are utilized as strategic motivation.

Doing digital discipline

Minca and Roelofsen argued that the Airbnb platform affordances work to discipline hosting performances in accordance with corporate metrics. As social regulation is closely entangled with digital reputation systems, such systems serve as powerful motivation for members to act in an ‘appropriate’ manner without direct corporate intervention (Minca and Roelofsen 2021). Accordingly, attention to the development of one’s digital reputation can be a form of strategic self-promotion which highlights the interwoven nature of social lives and algorithmic rationality.

Algorithms can serve as a form of ‘technology of the self’ appearing to exercise independent influence over public visibility. Van Nuenen (2019) addresses the development of an ‘algorithmic culture’ characterized by close entanglement between human thought and conduct with the logics of big data and algorithmic visibility, creating logics of knowledge, ‘built on specific presumptions about what knowledge is and how one should identify its most relevant components’ (Gillespie, 2012: 168 in van Nuenen 2019, 6). Consequently, human practices become directed at influencing algorithms as ‘based on the criteria of the algorithm in question (or by our best estimate of its workings), we make ourselves *already algorithmically recognizable* in all sorts of ways’ (Gillespie 2012, 184 original italics). Consequently, algorithms have enduring effects within the field of tourism.

This ‘reputational’ and algorithmic turn in tourism has significant consequences for how people, spaces and places are shaped, perceived, booked, included, excluded and visited. Since the body’s performance in tourism becomes encapsulated in such sophisticated systems of measurement, it produces a particular ‘matching’ spatiality and set of social relations. Moreover, the ‘individual user is incapable of really experiencing the effect that algorithms have in determining one’s life as algorithms rarely, if ever, speak to the individual. Rather, individuals are seen by algorithm and surveillance networks as members of categories’ (Cheney-Lippold, 2011: 176). (Roelofsen and Minca 2018, 179).

Algorithms are occasionally described as an invisible hand structuring markets, with users unable to fully comprehend the workings. Nevertheless, algorithms are neither independent nor impartial constructions detached from social life, but rather ‘evaluations performed by algorithms always depend on inscribed assumptions about what matters, and how what matters can be identified’ (Gillespie 2012, 177).

As specific algorithmic design is not only highly complicated, but frequently kept as corporate secrets, users can be left guessing, or taking clues on how to improve their algorithmic placement. Gillespie elaborates that the discursive work which goes into describing the working of algorithms can be understood as a ‘performed backstage’. Such discursive endeavours are carefully crafted to legitimize the working of the algorithm or shape behaviours targeted at algorithmic placements, rather than at providing a clear insight into the algorithmic design. Consequently, as algorithmic descriptions are performed with intent, they will not always fully illuminate the criteria incorporated into a given algorithm, or how they are measured and weighed against each other. Such omission of information creates room for suspicions as to the provider’s intentions as well as unexplored biases and assumptions

embedded in the algorithmic design (Gillespie 2012; see also Noble 2018 on racial bias on Google).

Moreover, algorithms cannot be understood solely as abstract tools; it is equally important to acknowledge that they are designed to be embedded into everyday lives to generate the information processed (Couldry 2012; Gillespie 2012). Consequently, we should explore how algorithms are entangled into everyday lives and how sense is made of algorithmic design through practice. In investigating how Airbnb hosts interact with the platform this work contributes insights into the embeddedness of algorithmic design and explores how users utilize and are utilized through digital affordances.

Germann Molz (2014a) describes technologies of trust as relying on ‘collaborative surveillance’ and emphasizes that technology, trust, reputation, and surveillance interact to shape modes of exchange. Consequently, beyond normalizing the surveillance of strangers, technologies of trust entail dispersal, or recentralization, of power as communities are framed as self-moderating through the ‘responsibilization’ of users. This entails a transfer of risk as responsibility for taking appropriate precautions to mitigate risk is placed on the individual and their navigation of platform affordances (Graham, Hjorth, and Lehdonvirta 2017; Germann Molz 2014a; Andrejevic 2005). Germann Molz (2013) notes that the rhizomatic surveillance structure of the Couchsurfing platform enables engagement in a moral economy, guiding the norms of the community through a moral agenda of encounters. However, this invites questions as to how such affordances are employed and how the metrics utilized can express different agendas. Different contexts could challenge decentralized understandings of collaborative surveillance, as technological affordances can simultaneously be utilized to generate online trust and manage user behaviour from a top-down perspective. Gillespie (2012) argues that when encountering search algorithms users are choosing from predetermined menus or options expressing a system anticipation of what is relevant. In this sense the design of algorithms,

along with the clues given to users on how to make themselves algorithmically recognizable, counters the rhizomatic perception of collaborative surveillance, which instead becomes structured through algorithmic awareness as users orient themselves and their practices towards algorithmic placement.

This urges that we explore, from a user's point of view, how various technologies of trust are experienced and how interactions with algorithms and disciplining devices are navigated and understood.

Method

To understand how hosts navigate and are informed by the online platform in-depth qualitative interviews were employed. Thirty-three Airbnb hosts based in Copenhagen (CPH), Denmark and Philadelphia (PHL), USA were interviewed within a larger study on Airbnb.¹ Interviewing hosts in two destinations was partly a matter of convenience, as well as an attempt to collect accounts from two different contexts. However, although the different contexts illuminated different experiences within several aspects of hosting, coding the material showed limited national variance with regard to use of the platform. Potentially, as digital cultures unfold across spatial contexts, an essential success of Airbnb has been to create a format that travels across borders.

Hosts were recruited through snowball sampling across extended networks, in Facebook groups for Airbnb hosts, and by contacting hosts the author had previously stayed with. Unlike the challenges Wells, Attoh, and Cullen (2021) experienced in recruiting Uber drivers, the Airbnb hosts seemed eager to collaborate and volunteer their perspectives. The study attempted to achieve maximum variation in relation to demographic features such as age, gender, race,

and class, but also with the types of listings, accounting for hosts with both single and multiple listings, offering private rooms, shared rooms, and full homes.

I interviewed only a few hosts with a minority background. This is likely to be an extension of the skewedness toward whiteness amongst Airbnb hosts shown by Cansoy and Schor (2016) or Edelman et al. (Edelman, Luca, and Svirsky 2017). Education has also been seen as key to understanding Airbnb participation, as highly educated populations participate at higher rates (Cansoy and Schor 2016; Andreotti et al. 2017). This resonates with the interviewees of this study, who had significantly higher educational levels compared to the general population.²

Interviews were conducted at a place of the interviewees choosing, frequently within the Airbnb listing. Conversations covered a series of open-ended questions and lasted between 40 minutes and two hours. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, whilst giving pseudonyms and deleting identifying features, and finally coded into broad thematic categories by the author.

Digital capital

In the following sections I will explore how the platform of Airbnb supports the development of online credibility and how digital capital becomes institutionalized and instrumentalized as a disciplining power. By digital capital, I refer to the capacity of the individual to navigate, interact and take advantage of online resources. In this sense ‘capital’ is utilized in Bourdieu’s sense as a social power which can be accumulated and which gives advantages within specific social fields (Bourdieu 1984). In this sense it is an independent point that digital capital moves beyond the potential of economic gains, although such gains are certainly encompassed, and advantages are likely to reach beyond profit.

Digital capital bears a resemblance to the notion of ‘network capital’ brought forward by Larsen, Axhausen and Urry (2006), as it can relate to the capacity to utilize communication technologies to support mobility. However, ‘network capital’ is centred on the capacity to navigate, build and maintain relationships that are temporally or geographically dispersed. This is not necessarily the case for ‘digital capital’, where the emphasis on online activities is focused directly on the capacity to navigate, interact, and take advantage of online resources, whether to support mobility or other aims. It can be understood in extension of Germann Molz’s (2014a) idea of ‘reputation capital’, but developed as a broader category, also encompassing online credibility and the ability to navigate digitally, of which reputation is just one component. Consequently, digital capital reaches beyond review systems and is an interrelational quality developed and utilized through digital relationships and comprised of multiple elements: linguistic capital, online familiarity, social media profiles, online reviews, skills in navigating an online environment and multiple digital affordances designed to strengthen the online credibility of the individual. Thus, a holistic understanding would attend to the overall digital presence of the individual. However, in this context I limit myself to explore the way in which digital capital is produced and activated on Airbnb.

Digital capital is most clearly expressed through interactions between hosts and guests, as hosts try to increase their appeal and search for various clues about the credibility of potential guests. Such endeavours are in part centred on the clues available on the platform, interactions, and profiles, but credibility is also explored by confirming identities through other online profiles. High levels of digital capital were read as being ‘part of the community of Airbnb’, implying a higher level of initiation and understanding of the performances and values of the hospitality network.

It is definitely a positive if you have a somewhat older profile, if I can see that people have crazy good reviews, if they have their own home on the platform. All these things tell me

that they are part of this community that Airbnb has been facilitating for a number of years. It is an indication that they have been doing it a lot and that they are going to treat my home and my stuff well. [...] You are kind of balancing your risk when you skim these profiles, you get an image of people and clearly having been on the site for a while really makes a difference (Rasmus, CPH).

Rasmus indicates that platform seniority in itself adds to digital capital and signals that someone is part of the community, a familiar stranger, socialized in internet interactions. Thus, strong membership of the community signals a minimized risk. Roelofsen and Minca (2018) argue that the notion of community is utilized as an instrument of discipline, regulating the practices of individuals' everyday life through a normative imperative. However, an extensive digital monitoring of behaviours leads to this familiarity. On Airbnb, digital capital becomes institutionalized through the profiles and listings, the review system and the superhost status, which I will explore in the following sections.

Joining the market: a dating profile for your home?

Every user is required to create a profile and hosts additionally create a listing providing a description of their dwelling and relevant information pertaining thereto. Roelofsen and Minca note that creating a profile on Airbnb entails exposing oneself to 'practices of observation, calculation, qualification, and comparison' (2018, 176). They argue that hosts voluntarily subject themselves to digitalized profiling practices to comply with trust infrastructures and prescribed aesthetics. Indeed, participation on Airbnb does not only entail membership to a tourist community but equally to subjecting oneself to extensive comparative measurements, from guests evaluating different listings, between hosts who compare each other's listings to gauge the competition, and from the company trying to quantify host performances, to

algorithm categories. Many interviewees compared creating their listing to producing other digital profiles, most often to the creation of online dating profiles:

It is almost like you are making a dating profile for your rooms. It is like, I hate salesmen that try and sell you something or talk something up. [...] You are just trying to be overly outright and communicate what you really like about it (Daniel, PHL).

The comparison to dating profiles partly empathizes the emotional investment, but also captures ambivalent feelings of wanting to represent the dwelling attractively, whilst managing expectations and producing honest representations. Here the credibility of the listing becomes entangled with the construction of digital capital and online credibility. In development of such thoughts, previous studies show that the trustworthiness of the hosts' photographs of the dwelling not only affects the likelihood of one's listing being booked but also the possibility of raising prices on a given listing (Ert, Fleischer, and Magen 2016).

To optimize listings Airbnb offered free of charge photos by a professional photographer for first-time hosts. However, not all hosts welcomed the photographer, arguing that the professional photographs do not offer honest representations:

They have a professional photographer they send. But I opted out because they use a wide-angle camera and that seems like cheating. I just don't want photos that misrepresent (Birgitte, CPH).

Interviewees talked about 'real estate' photos and made comparisons to online shopping photos to describe representations that were not fully accurate. Birgitte refers to professional techniques as 'cheating', indicating a moral imperative as an on-going balancing act between making the listing appear as attractive as possible and on the other hand managing the expectations of guests.

Furthermore, the comparison to other online profiles reveals that users are never starting from scratch when designing a listing, but rather continuously adapting and transforming familiar practices. This entails a tension between the mainstreaming endorsed via a suggested layout, suggestions for content on profiles and listings and supporting the aesthetic expression of professional photographs, contrasted with the continuous adaptations being introduced as hosts reinvent their own interpretations of these existing scripts.

Beyond the creation of Airbnb listings, this indicates that performances through peer-to-peer tourism are part of a longer history of performance, shaped by, and reshaping cultural notions of hospitality and encounters. Although it might make sense to frame Airbnb as disruptive from a business point of view, from a user perspective it is more productive to conceptualize the novelty of peer-to-peer hospitality as part of an ever-moving and continuous process of performances. As such, the novelty of peer-to-peer hospitality lies in the new adaptations and reconfigurations of practices and transgressions of previously established boundaries between commercial, private and social practices.

Beyond utilizing experiences from other types of digital profiles, hosts imitate each other, as they browse through listings for inspiration.

I was just looking at the top listings, and sort of like steal stuff. Like the wording around the apartment itself, as far as the space and like... I tend to not use words like cozy or warm or homey, like kind of touchy feeling, like real estate words (Logan, PHL).

I started reading through descriptions and, to be honest, I stole something from a listing close by that described the area. I copy-pasted some of it and did some editing (Thomas, CPH).

Thomas and Logan describe an imitation game, where new hosts mimic experienced ones. This can produce a sense of an echo chamber, where listings resemble each other, as everyone is trying to perfect and adopt their listing, making language and aesthetics homogenized.

Such imitations of performances stabilize and reproduce the Airbnb market by creating, negotiating and fixing meanings within a digital space. One host had even recruited a professional content writer to author the description of her two listings. This, along with use of the professional photographer, points toward a homogenization of the expression of the Airbnb platform and a professionalization of hosting practices alongside with a tension towards a perceived authenticity in the presentation of the listing.

The listings serve the purpose of enticing the guests and managing expectations between guests and hosts. An additional and essential function of the platform of Airbnb is creating a place of encounter between guests and hosts and enabling such interactions to engender trust.

Everyone is reviewing everybody

The platform has a system of mutual reviewing. Both hosts and guests are held accountable through public reviews evaluating each other on several parameters. To supplement the publicly visible reviews the platform encourages putting helpful advice in a private message. As such, the distinction between the two feedback systems creates a digital backstage, where critiques can be kept out of sight of future guests.

Everyone is reviewing everybody. They are reviewing you and you are reviewing them! If you think they have been really filthy, you will write it their profile for everyone to see (Marie, CPH).

You are sort of living off your reviews. [...] It is what it is all about, who you are! (Julie, CPH),

Julie highlights the importance of reviews in stating that you ‘are living off your reviews’ and notes that reviews signify ‘who you are’. As earlier addressed, review systems can serve as guidelines for moral behaviour and the worth of hosting practices through a practice of ‘collaborative surveillance’ (Germann Molz 2007, 2014a). Reviews serve as a strong disciplining force and point toward a tendency where hospitality performances are constantly subjected to the pressures of being ranked within a quantitative metric. The affordances of the review system are not unique to Airbnb, but a cornerstone in most peer-to-peer platforms, from eBay to Uber, and other booking platforms, such as TripAdvisor or Booking.com will have user-generated reviews to consolidate the trustworthiness of individual users. Additionally, platforms like Trustpilot or Rotten Tomatoes has developed independent business models on offering peer-generated reviews. Web 2.0 can thus be argued to create a hyper-efficient infrastructure which generates new modes of online credibility and systematizes the form of reputation capital previously connected to word of mouth.

Hosts are acutely aware that reviews influence booking requests. Consequently, most hosts describe initially pricing their listing cheaper and raising prices after receiving adequate reviews. These types of calculating practices reveal that demand and prices are seen as dependent on the digital capital expressed through the review system; this resonates with previous empirical findings demonstrating that hosts with high ratings are able to demand higher prices (Aznar et al. 2018). This clearly indicates a relationship between digital capital and economic benefits. Additionally, the development of digital capital situates hosts in advantageous positions to increase demands in other areas, such as minimum lengths of stays.

I have five stars which is max and fairly rare. So, the more bookings I have gotten, the more I am in a position to make demands (Karen, CPH).

Karen highlights how digital capital can be transferred, not only to economic capital, but also to demanding requirements that increase hosting convenience, e.g. only allowing longer stays

or providing emotional ease by only accepting guests that one feels very comfortable with. Thus, high digital capital will allow more convenience in hosting. Simultaneously, this indicates a relationship where the guests with high digital capital, who are often more frequent users, will have more options on the platform.

Digital capital furthermore relates to a tension between emotional comfort and the ethos promoted through the platform, as everyone enters the platform without reviews and must complete a stay before receiving their first review. The intimate connection between the review system and digital credibility has somewhat exclusionary effects towards new users. Although hosts acknowledge that everyone must start to build digital credibility at some point, lack of reviews is part of balancing gut feelings:

Which reviews people have really means something. You can skim them fairly quickly and get a sense of them, and if the first five reviews are saying they were a lovely couple, then I am pretty OK. I don't think anyone ever had bad reviews, but I have tried people who were new to the platform and didn't have any reviews (Rasmus, CPH).

Rasmus points toward a noteworthy ambivalence; on one side, a high emphasis is put on the value of reviews, whilst simultaneously acknowledging that reviews tend to be positive and not necessarily accurate. The community ethos is expressed by hosts as conflict evasive:

I think people rate too highly on Airbnb. Like the average Airbnb rating I think is more than 4 out of 5. If it was a bell curve it should be roughly: 3 is perfectly good, 4 is very good. If somebody has been on Airbnb for a while and has no reviews, I almost think maybe they weren't a great guest, but somebody doesn't want to say that. Because that is like getting really personal (Daniel, PHL).

Daniel expresses ambivalence about faith in the review system, whilst acknowledging a positive bias. He argues that Airbnb reviews are positively skewed and that he contributes to

this positive bias by his discomfort of giving negative reviews, a discomfort which was widely echoed by hosts. As such, understanding the review systems requires ‘review literacy’: an ability to understand bias and read between the lines. Insights into the positive shrewdness of reviews is supported by Zervas, Proserpio, and Byers finding that 95% of Airbnb listings had achieved a rating of either 4.5 or the maximum 5 stars. Comparatively, the average rating on TripAdvisor was significantly lower at 3.8. However, by isolating vacation rentals on TripAdvisor the patterns became more aligned, although Airbnb remained more positively skewed (Zervas, Proserpio, and Byers 2021).

Feelings towards the review system goes beyond the reliability of reviews but is also seen in attitudes towards reviews. Thus, hosts describe receiving reviews was an overwhelmingly positive experience of validation:

I have gotten some really great reviews and it has been really cool to hear that people really enjoyed my place, that people liked my home and had a great holiday because of it. I really like that. It is like an Airbnb pat on the shoulder (Caroline, CPH).

This is an often-encountered narrative amongst hosts, reviews are explained, not as surveillance, but as providing a confidence boost. These experiences of positive validation move beyond the possibility of increasing prices with good reviews, but also serve personal purposes as an emotional validation.

Digital discipline: being a super host

In addition to the review system, digital capital becomes institutionalized through the superhost status, which Airbnb assigns based on instrumentalized measurement of host performance. Superhosts are required to have completed at least 10 visits, maintained a minimum 50% review rate, with 5-star reviews at least 80% of the time. Additionally, hosts must maintain a

90% response rate, replying to guests within 24 hours and have no cancellations (Airbnb 2018). As such, hosting performances become instrumentalized as performances are measured and controlled in accordance with business interests and corporate understanding of host performances. The superhost status thus functions as a way of creating a motivational structure for workers who have no direct terms of employment with the company of Airbnb.

Achieving superhost status is a goal pursued by most hosts, who appreciate the positive signal, the potential economic value of the status and the competitive advantage of being placed more prominently within search algorithms. Additionally, hosts often perceive achieving superhost status as a competitive endeavour:

They rate you on different parameters, but basically, they made some standards, some percentages you have to meet. [...] So really you have to meet all criteria as well as possible. From the overall experience to cleaning and whether it meet your expectations and location and value for money, and the communication as well. I discovered early on that it was fun, almost like a competition (Thomas, CPH).

For Thomas, achieving superhost status became an early goal, describing it ‘like a competition’, working towards specific goals in order to receive an award, not unlike winning a computer game. This echoes notions of gamification, which Whitson (2013) argues is a form of surveillance made enjoyable through connections to play. In extension the homogenizing of rules is essential to professionalization of gamification, as it allows comparison between different users, or players.

Hosts describe the status as a form of validation, an institutionalized symbol of the qualities as a host:

I loved it when I first got it. I’m like, “hey I’m a superhost”, I tell all my friends, but I don’t know if that makes a difference in how people search, like how your place comes up when

they search (Mary, PHL).

It doesn't have much value as a host. But I think that there are people that look for that. To see that they can count on [you]. The cancellation part is the biggest part for me; reviews are subjective (Helen, PHL).

Mary perceives the superhost status as a source of pride, but other benefits appear unclear. Helen understands the superhost status as being a stronger indicator of worth compared to subjective reviews. Consequently, the superhost status is seen as a strong sign of quality, based on the accumulation of data measuring multiple aspects of host performances. However, several hosts consider that the value of the superhost status might be limited to guests that look exclusively for superhosts in their search. At a different end of the spectrum, Thomas argues that the superhost status has a direct monetary value, partly because he believes it affects the order in which his listing is shown, making more guests likely to see his listing and at the same time argues that the superhost status allows him to increase his profits:

It pushes you up in the search engine; they write that if you are a superhost it moves you up in the search results. And superhosts can charge a little more than others (Thomas, CPH).

I echo Roelofsen and Minca (2018) and argue that the superhost status functions as a way of motivating and managing hosts, by creating a reward system, and is set up with clear goals as hosts are disciplined into compliance with these standards. This type of disciplining effect is experienced amongst several hosts, who describe how the superhost requirements were shaping their performances in undesirable ways, creating a sense of stress and pressure in trying to meet demands:

You constantly had to be on the app and answer all the time. Because Airbnb requires that you score high in hosting, rated by your guests. They like you to be on 100% to make

superhost. That just seemed impossible because you can't be on the app all the time. You also have other stuff to do (Christine, CPH).

Christine experienced that the requirements about response time pressed her into an economy of attention, having to constantly check the platform to offer hospitality on demand, as digital capital is increased by being on demand.

In addition to such disciplining effects, unpredictable elements can affect the status beyond the control of the individual host. Reviews are subjective and differing review literacies coexist on what should merit a 5-star review. As previously indicated, some argue that the average of reviews ought to be in the middle value, whereas others believe that you should start at the maximum and only deduct points if something goes wrong during the stay:

I will have people, that don't necessarily give 5 stars. They don't understand that you start at 5 stars. Well, that is my understanding that you start at five stars and then you lose it if you don't meet expectations, or you start to do not the best. Everybody is the best experience until they are not. People have sent really nice stuff and put in a private message, really nice stuff, and there is no negative feedback on anything, and it will still be 4 stars. And I am like... This kind of hurts my ratings. It is hard to keep superhost status (Jacob, PHL).

These discrepancies in 'review literacy' are broadly shaped by the extent to which hosts actively pursue superhost status and cause friction when guest and host perceptions are not matched. As such, Jacob has had experiences of guests who seem very content, and nevertheless return a 4-star review, which is not sufficient to achieve superhost status. Unclear understandings of ratings leave hosts, who are focused on their superhost status, in 'review anxiety'. This is based on a feeling that the measurements utilized to instrumentalize host performances are not adequately aligned with hosts' perceptions of quality.

Sanctions imposed by Airbnb are often designed to influence the superhost status. Thus, the status is actively utilized as a disciplining power: the measurements of performance are used as instruments to increase the productivity of the individual. However, such instruments are often faced with opposition from hosts, who argue that they feel limited in their freedom to decide over the use of their dwelling.

I have been a superhost for three years, but I have never received my status, because I had one cancellation, which I had agreed on with Airbnb, that it was all right. But still, they are punishing me, because if you have a cancellation, you can't make superhost (Birgitte, CPH).

Julie had been in a similar situation and describes having to cancel a guest reservation due to water damage. Although having cleared the cancellation with Airbnb, a 50\$ fee was deducted, and she was warned that a total of three cancellations would result in cancellation of their account.

I understand that it [cancelling guest reservations] creates uncertainty for guests and makes Airbnb look unreliable, but at the same time it creates uncertainty as a host, that you can't cancel if you have a bad feeling. Because it is still your home, and you are there voluntarily (Julie, CPH).

Connecting the superhost status to cancellations highlights discord between the interests of the company, Airbnb, and those of the hosts. This is rooted in tension between control over dwellings and emotional comfort versus the aspiration for conforming to the institutionalized understanding of performance as the disciplining instruments are experienced as being in violation with host autonomy. The tension between corporate and host interests is furthermore exposed by having the digital capital of the individual tied up on the platform of Airbnb.

The configuration of a peer-to-peer hospitality network with Airbnb as a dominant platform raises questions about the mobility of digital capital. Currently, much capital is locked into the

platform, giving hosts the incentive to stay on the platform and creating barriers for new, competing platforms. As such, dominant firms, where users' digital capital is accumulated, create a market consolidation, whereby only a few platforms become dominant since the 'identity you worked to build is locked down on the platform':

I have 96 reviews on Airbnb. If I leave the platform, they are lost to me. The whole representation or identity you worked to build, also as a guest, but especially as a host you are locked down on the platform (Karen, CPH).

This illustrates the relationship between online and offline activity. In this sense, the immobility of digital capital to be transferred beyond the platform, simultaneously creates barriers in the possibility of hosts moving their activities to alternative platforms.

As building credible digital identities is essential, hosts are continuously navigating various constellations of digital capital to maximize their own listings. Receiving good reviews thus becomes one of several strategies to increase attention and guest flows:

I want good reviews; it does influence the flow of guests. It influences your standing in the list of postings, so if I have better reviews, if I'm a superhost, stuff like that, then my listing will pop up first. Where if I have series of bad reviews or lose my superhost status, then my listing will be lower on the thing, and that has financial impact for me (Helen, PHL).

Helen notes many attempts to comply with Airbnb guidelines for excellence to 'pop up first'. Here, Helen speaks of the way Airbnb organizes and ranks users in their search algorithm. Aware that the order of appearance in guests' searches is imperative to succeeding as a host, practices that carry the promise of improving this placement are dedicatedly pursued.

This type of algorithm awareness, mentioned by Helen, is illustrative of how social reputation is integrated into the economic system of Airbnb. Thus, increasingly digitized hospitality practices are producing a tremendous amount of data. However, the use of this data is often

alienating to everyday hosts, for whom the construction of 'the algorithm' had an almost mythical status, not knowing exactly how it was composed other than it affects the search order. As specific algorithms are kept as business secrets, hosts are continuously guessing and taking clues on how to improve their placement within the search algorithm. Thus, the algorithm produces tension between the diversity of performances and mainstreaming, not only through the way hosting is quantified to fit into data to be processed in the algorithm, but also through the way knowledge of the algorithm becomes appropriated through host performances, trying to adapt their performances to the measurements included in the algorithm.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have demonstrated how Airbnb hosts navigate the digital platform and argued that the development of digital capital, the capacity of the individual to navigate, interact and take advantage of online resources, is essential to the development of trust. Hosts' online performances contain an on-going balancing act between trying to attract guests and appearing as attractive as possible and on the other hand managing the expectations of guests. As such, Airbnb hospitality can be understood as a complex constellation of performances, navigating a digital landscape and well as offline contexts, balancing financial rationality with other considerations through novel adaptations of familiar performances.

I argued that when creating online content hosts are imitating other digital performances, from other platforms or from other users of Airbnb. Digital performances are often produced in an imitation game of familiar performances, and continuously balance social, cultural and financial considerations. Thus, scripts of digital hospitality are in part adopted from other contexts, other hosts and through the affordances of the platform, which serve to build digital

capital and online credibility, whilst simultaneously disciplining hosts into instrumentalized host performances.

This work has demonstrated how the affordances of the Airbnb platform serve to discipline host performances according to corporate guidelines. Platform attributes are essential in developing digital capital, which grants the hosts more leeway on the platform. I discussed how digital capital becomes institutionalized on the platform of Airbnb and how it is instrumentalized as a disciplining power. Consequently, the affordances of the review system and the superhost status serve a dual purpose: as positive validation and emotional reward for hosts and they are equally perceived to be essential in profit maximizing hosting performances. Positive ratings are perceived to earn hosts better placements in search algorithms and thus provide a market advantage. Placement within the algorithm can be understood as the company of Airbnb creating incentives for a certain type of hosting behaviour, trying to influence host performances, and the cultural rationalities entangled with these performances, to comply with their notions of professional performances. Accordingly, reviews, superhost status and other affordances understood to affect algorithm placement serve the function of disciplining hosting performances, which become instrumentalized, measured and controlled in accordance with business interests and the corporate understandings of hosting performances. Simultaneously the consolidation and immobility of digital capital on one platform creates barriers of entry for competing platforms by lowering incentives of successful agents to move their activities to new platforms.

Studies of how digital credibility and capabilities are developed and quantified are not inherently new or unique to the collaborative economy. Quantification of credibility has long been utilized in US credit scores, a mechanism designed to classify people according to credit risk which has found application beyond the credit market, for instance it is contended that half of US employers consider personal credit history when hiring (Kiviat 2019). Scholars argue

that such classification structures individuals' life-chances by creating a 'cumulative pattern of advantage and disadvantage with both objectively measured and subjectively experienced aspects' and that such tendencies are part of a general shift from collectivisation to individualisation (Fourcade and Healy 2013, 559). Simultaneously, such tendencies are not solely the result of changes in political economy, but can equally be understood as an extension of technological development and especially the development of big data and the ability to compose and manage rich data on masses of individuals (Curran and Smart 2021).

The Chinese social credit system expands dramatically on such reputation systems. In what has been described as a marriage between communist oversight and capitalist can-do (Botsman 2017) the government collaborates with eight companies, amongst these Sesame Credit, closely affiliated with Alibaba and Alipay, and a string of companies working with ride hailing, matchmaking or social media in rolling out pilot schemes (Chan 2018; Botsman 2017). Through the development of centralized data infrastructure, the ambition is to develop a modernized surveillance system based on 'enabling the state authority to manage, monitor, predict, and govern each actor in its political, economic, and social domains' (Liang et al., 2018, 426).

The system was launched as a collection of blacklists based on prior misbehaviours, but is projected to be rolled out on a larger scale and made mandatory (Chan 2018). However, its goals has expanded to assess the trustworthiness of Chinese citizens in accordance with not just legal rules, but also professional, moral and ethical standards (Liang et al. 2018). Such ambitions leave significant scope for dystopian concern over the potential applications, especially considering the richness of data available, leaving some commentators to name it 'gamified obedience' (Botsman 2017). Currently the Chinese news social credit system has already blocked people from taking 11.14 million flights and 4.25 million high-speed train trips (Chan 2018), clearly indicating the spatial impact of such systems in organizing mobility.

This clearly illustrates that technologies of trust interact not solely with mobilities of ideas and technologies, but also with the spatial movement of people and objects alike.

Within the field of tourism key voices are currently contemplating how a post-Covid revival can happen on more socially just terms (for an excellent discussion see Sheller 2021); however, this study adds that we should not focus these discussions solely on the movement of tourism and implications for local communities. I urge that it is equally appropriate in the present-time to attend to the role of platforms in organizing such tourist movements. There is much critique surrounding Airbnb centres on the implications for cities, housing markets and existing industries. However, this paper indicates that attention should additionally be focused on the workings of the online platform and the growing importance of platform-based economies and how digital platforms are managed. More research should be done to counter perceptions of digital platforms being impervious to global regulation, not just in their effect on cities where initial legislation is being introduced, but also regarding the management of loosely affiliated workers. Consideration should be given to the development of a trade of trust structuring businesses around the development of digital capital, creating a world of review-based businesses, organizing not just labour in a gig economy but increasingly permeating multiple aspects of everyday life. This paper and the notion of digital capital are not uniquely relevant to the understanding of the phenomenon of Airbnb, but equally importantly it sheds light on the growing influence of platforms in various societal contexts and modes of movement.

This study is just one addition to a growing scholarship on the entanglements of platforms and everyday lives. As is the case with any research, this study is imbued with a string of limitations and more research would be appropriate to expand on the insights presented in this paper. In such endeavours it would be helpful to look beyond the use of one platform to develop more holistic insights into how digital capital is produced, utilized, and entangled with everyday lives and across different digital ecosystems. Similarly, studies into how guests utilize the platform

would add greatly to a more holistic understanding of how digital capital is navigated on Airbnb.

¹Ethics approval was granted from Drexel University's internal review board, Office of Research and Innovation. At the time there was no formalized approval structure in Denmark applicable for this research. Informed consent was achieved through the provision of detailed information on the study and emphasis on voluntary participation.

²Most interviewees held a Bachelor's degree or higher, with only few exceptions. Comparatively this is true 27.1% of Philadelphians over 25 (United States Census Bureau 2018) and 52.8% of Copenhageners (Københavns Kommune 2018).

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