

Papers

I felt at home: Analysis of reviews of collaborative hosting experiences on the Airbnb website through the prism of trust

Me senti em casa: Análise das revisões de experiências de hospedagem colaborativa no site Airbnb sob o prisma da confiança

Me sentí en casa: Análisis de las experiencias de alojamiento colaborativo en el sitio Airbnb bajo el prisma de confianza

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Abstract

The increase of virtual communities together with the recent popularization of collaborative hosting facilities in the tourism sector has enabled the consumption of non-traditional hospitality experiences that demand a high degree of travelers' confidence. This article sought to understand how guest reviews help in transmitting trust to other users on the Airbnb platform. Based on a qualitative research, a content analysis of a sample with 210 guest reviews was analyzed, all of which were published between 2018 and 2019, by users who traveled to Fortaleza/CE. The study innovates by focusing on the determinants of the credibility of an online review based on international literature (relevance, accuracy, completeness, and timeliness) for the selection of comments. The results revealed that, regarding the host, the main arguments used to promote trust were receptivity and solicitude. As to the space, location, comfort, and cleanliness stood out. Regarding the consequences of the experience, the propensity to return and recommendation were identified. We also observed a convergent relationship between the arguments identified with the feeling of familiarity and being at home that many guests reported. Surprisingly, the authenticity of the space compared to its listing and the safety of the place – which are aspects associated with risk – did not emerge significantly in the speeches of travelers.

Resumo

A proliferação das comunidades virtuais aliada à recente popularização dos meios de hospedagem colaborativa no setor turístico oportunizou a consumação de experiências insólitas de hospitalidade que demandam alto grau de confiança dos viajantes. Este artigo buscou compreender como as revisões de hóspedes auxiliam na transmissão da confiança a outros usuários para novas reservas de estadias na plataforma Airbnb. Mediante abordagem qualitativa de cunho exploratório, empreendeu-se uma análise de conteúdo em 210 avaliações de hóspedes que viajaram para Fortaleza/CE, publicadas entre 2018 e 2019. O estudo inovou ao amparar-se nos determinantes da credibilidade de uma revisão on-line retratados na literatura acadêmica internacional (relevância, precisão, abrangência e atualidade) para a seleção dos comentários. Os resultados revelaram que, quanto ao anfitrião, os principais argumentos usados para propagar confiança foram a receptividade e a solicitude. Em relação ao espaço, destacaram-se localização, conforto e limpeza. No tocante às consequências da experiência, firmaram-se a propensão ao retorno e a recomendação. Observou-se também uma relação de convergência dos argumentos identificados com o sentimento de familiaridade e estar em casa que muitos hóspedes relataram. Surpreendentemente, a fidedignidade do espaço aos anúncios e a segurança do lugar – aspectos associados ao risco – não emergiram expressivamente nos discursos dos viajantes.

Resumen

La proliferación de comunidades virtuales junto con la reciente popularización de las instalaciones de alojamiento colaborativo en el sector turístico ha permitido la consumación de experiencias de hospitalidad inusuales que exigen un alto grado de confianza de los viajeros. Este artículo trató de

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entender cómo las opiniones de los huéspedes ayudan a transmitir confianza a otros usuarios para nuevas reservas de estancias en la plataforma Airbnb. A través de un enfoque cualitativo de carácter exploratorio, se llevó a cabo un análisis de contenido en 210 revisiones de los huéspedes que viajaron a Fortaleza /CE, publicados entre 2018 y 2019. El estudio innovó centrándose en los determinantes de la credibilidad de una revisión en línea retratada en la literatura académica internacional (relevancia, exactitud, alcance y puntualidad) para la selección de comentarios. Los resultados revelaron que, con respecto al anfitrión, los principales argumentos utilizados para propagar la confianza eran la receptividad y la solicitud. En relación con el espacio, la ubicación, la comodidad y la limpieza se destacó. En cuanto a la consecuencias con la experiencia, se estableció la propensión al retorno y la recomendación. También se observó una relación de convergencia de los argumentos identificados con el sentimiento de familiaridad y estar en casa que muchos huéspedes informaron. Sorprendentemente, la fiabilidad del espacio a los anuncios y la seguridad del lugar – aspectos asociados con el riesgo – no surgieron significativamente en los discursos de los viajeros.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The troubled transition between the first two decades of the 21st century – marked by the 2008 global financial crisis– triggered significant changes in the consumption paradigms of society, which still reverberate in the global market. Resource scarcity, large-scale waste, and discussions on economic and environmental issues have brought about a new consumer model based on access instead of ownership (Botsman & Rogers, 2011).

The popularity that collaborative businesses such as Airbnb and Uber have achieved in recent years is undeniable, as proved by its commercial success (DCI, 2019; Tagiaroli, 2019), the changes in consumer habits (Exame, 2019; Vidale, 2019), the ability to provide unique experiences to its users (Farinha, 2018), and even the adaptation of city laws to fit into this new reality (Bonatelli, 2019; Ronan & Vale, 2019). The impact of hosting sharing platforms, such as Airbnb, was felt mainly by simpler hosting accommodations (Tucci & Costa, 2020). Faced with this scenario, companies have begun to rethink their strategies to deal with a market where consumer experiences now rank ahead of tangible products.

In times of real-time communication and a network society (Castells, 1999), technology, social media, and virtual communities play an important role in the functioning of collaborative business models by bringing people with common interests together, sharing information among them and enabling individuals who are anonymous to each other to build a trust relationship. Indeed, the latter aspect is the starting point of this study.

By analyzing alternative forms of hosting based on collaborative consumption, such as Airbnb and CouchSurfing, it appears that trust is “a condition for the existence of such business models” (Costa, Fernandes, & Gonçalves, 2017, p. 73). Travelers and hosts around the world have joined collaborative hosting and are therefore sharing accommodations, apartments, rooms, and even their couches with strangers. Concurrently, these new consumer experiences require a high degree of trust as they spare the traditional privacy, security, and comfort guarantees provided by hotels.

In this context, online reviews emerge as key factors of trust-building strategies among strangers, by allowing users to have unlimited access to other guests’ perceptions, opinions, and impressions about their personal experiences both with hosts and accommodations. However, while supporting consumer decision-making (Zhang, Zhao, Cheung, & Lee, 2014), there is no guarantee that the information provided is, in fact, reliable (McQuarrie, 2015).

Based on the above, this research is justified both by the relevance of the topic and the expansion of knowledge on collaborative hosting, which has been the object of previous studies (Costa, Fernandes, & Gonçalves, 2017; Bezerra & Ferreira, 2018). We expect that this study will contribute to a better understanding of how trust is communicated between users of collaborative consumption platforms as the main obstacles to its practice in Brazil still are “the lack of trust in people, the danger of dealing directly with strangers and the lack of guarantees in case of non-compliance with the agreement” (Confederação Nacional de Dirigentes Lojistas [CNDL] & Serviço de Proteção ao Crédito Brasil [SPC Brasil], 2018, p. 3).

That said, this paper aims to answer the following research question is: how do Airbnb users communicate trust to other users through their evaluations of collaborative hosting experiences? The goal is to understand how online guest reviews help to communicate trust to other users of hosting services within the platform.

To this end, concepts related to the collaborative consumption phenomenon, a brief overview of trust in collaborative business platforms (especially Airbnb), and the existing impasse regarding the credibility of online reviews will be addressed. Subsequently, the methodology, analysis, discussion and results, and the final remarks will be presented.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Rise of collaborative consumption

Scientific production on collaborative consumption began to intensify only from 2012 onwards (Silveira, Petrini, & Santos, 2016), although it has been an object of interest to the academic community since the 1970s. Society's interest have emerged as collaborative business models such as Airbnb and Uber have grown and become popular in various global market segments, thus attracting the attention of researchers, investors, and consumers (Vera & Gosling, 2017).

An initial conceptual sketch was outlined by Felson and Spaeth (1978), who defined acts of collaborative consumption as events in which individuals consume goods/services when engaging in activities with others, such as drinking beer in the company of friends, consuming meals with relatives or driving to visit someone. Although notable for addressing the phenomenon for the first time, this concept is far from the most recent constructs, as it does not treat collaborative consumption as an alternative that influences new business models (Silveira, Petrini, & Santos, 2016).

Commonly known as the *sharing economy*, collaborative consumption encompasses contemporary commercial habits and practices that aim to access diverse goods and services through collaboration, not necessarily resulting in obtaining ownership of a product or a cash transfer as a counterpart (Botsman & Rogers, 2011). However, some authors differentiate the concepts of sharing and collaborative consumption. For Belk (2007, p. 127), sharing is "the act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use as well as the act and process of receiving something from others for our use". The distinction consists in the presence or absence of a return: Belk (2014, p. 1597) argues that collaborative consumption includes "people coordinating the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation [...] also encompasses bartering, trading, and swapping, which involve giving and receiving non-monetary compensation".

Botsman and Rogers (2011) signal the decline of hyper-consumerist habits that characterized 20th-century society and the rise of new consumer relations based on collaboration. For them, the practices of sharing, barter, lending, negotiating, renting, donating, and exchanging acquire a new dimension through the use of technology and peer-to-peer communities. In addition, collaborative consumption is based on four principles: trust among strangers, belief in the common good, idle capacity of goods, and critical mass – i.e., the number of individuals needed for a given action to materialize and become worthy (Botsman & Rogers, 2011).

According to Botsman and Rogers (2011), Business models based on collaborative consumption can be delimited into three types of systems, namely *product-service systems*, which involve payment for the use of goods with no ownership by the user; *redistribution markets*, which provide exchange or donation of products that are no longer useful to their owners; and *collaborative lifestyles*, in which people with common interests share intangible resources such as time, space, and skills.

Airbnb is one of the most successful cases of the sharing economy and might be associated with the first and the third category mentioned above. Founded in 2008 by Brian Chesky, Joe Gebbia and Nathan Blecharczyk, the idea of sharing spaces in exchange for money started with the rental of air mattresses (Botsman & Rogers, 2011). Customers have adopted it encouraged by different reasons. In Brazil, there is evidence that the motivations for its use are essentially utilitarian, such as performance expectancy and ease of using the platforms (Christino et al., 2019), along with the desire for authenticity in the hosting experience (Branco & Teles, 2020). Its success is illustrated by the offerings of more than 6 million options of places to stay in some 100,000 cities in 191 countries (Airbnb Newsroom, 2019). According to the company's website,

[...] Airbnb exists to create a world where anyone can belong anywhere, providing healthy travel that is local, authentic, diverse, including and sustainable. Airbnb uniquely leverages technology to economically empower millions of people around the world to unlock and monetize their spaces, passions and talents to become hospitality entrepreneurs. (Airbnb Newsroom, 2019).

Couchsurfing, a network of travelers, is another example of collaborative consumption in the tourism area. Moreira and Gomes (2018) discuss the relationships established in such a network, with an interpersonal exchange perspective. When studying the motivations of hosts and guests, the authors show a range of interests with an emphasis on personal rather than collective interests – despite the network's stated mission to provide experiences of generosity, cultural exchange, and interpersonal trust.

By considering the expressive growth of collaborative hosting in the tourism sector and the tendency of an increasing number of customers to participate in unconventional hospitality experiences – whether hosting or being hosted by strangers – Costa, Fernandes, and Gonçalves (2017) point out that trust is a key element for this business model to thrive. For the authors, trust between users on collaborative hosting platforms seems to transcend purely financial or consumerist reasons. Participants' genuine intentions to build relationships and trust other people are to be considered.

2.2 Trust: the cornerstone of collaborative consumption

There is no consensus about the definition of trust among academics. As McQuarrie (2015) notes, some studies approach this social construct as an internal psychological state, while others emphasize whether an external source is reliable or not. However, Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt and Camerer (1998) point to the existence of a consensus that trust is important in many ways: it allows the cooperative behavior of the actors; promotes adaptive organizational forms, such as network relationships; reduces transaction costs and provides effective responses in times of crisis.

Trust is “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 395). In this sense, the act of trust presupposes two basic conditions: risk, conceived as the possibility of loss perceived by a decision-taker due to uncertainty regarding the action of the other; and interdependence, in which the interests of a party cannot be achieved without the dependence of other parties (Rousseau et al., 1998).

While discussing trust among strangers from the perspective of collaborative consumption, Botsman and Rogers (2011) argue that in the hyper-consumerist world, producers and consumers did not need to trust each other directly, as there was a third actor who acts as a bridge between them: the intermediary. Whether in the figure of the sales assistant, dealer, or distributor, there used to be reliable agents who mediated and controlled transactions (Botsman & Rogers, 2011).

However, the mass diffusion of technology and the advent of social networks in the last decade of the 20th century changed the dynamics of commercial relations, removing physical barriers and bringing producers and consumers closer. Consequently, an increasing degree of trust has been required from participants in online transactions, as indicated by Costa, Fernandes and Gonçalves (2017):

With the popularization of the Internet since the 1990s, we have gradually learned about this environment and elaborated other ways to trust strangers from the connections offered by digital networks. We came to believe that the people we interacted with were real. We made purchases in online stores and gave our credit card details trusting that they would not be disclosed. We bought things not only from well-known stores but also from strangers through *Mercado Livre* or eBay. Today, the forms of connections between strangers have increased: we are hitchhiking, sharing meals, and sending mail, in addition, of course, to staying at their homes. (Costa; Fernandes, & Gonçalves, 2017, p. 78).

Botsman and Rogers (2011) point out that those intermediaries have assumed the role of curators, by creating platforms that facilitate exchanges and self-managed contributions by users. According to the authors, these digital platforms – such as websites and mobile applications – support virtual communities characterized by transparency and decentralization, allowing the construction of trust among strangers.

This may involve developing the best possible gallery to show pictures of a space for rent, or a search engine to let people find what they want. It might also take the form of a well-designed reputation system that allows us to gain knowledge on strangers – interests, acquaintances, personal preferences, past actions –, thus eliminating anonymity from transactions. A positive review becomes equivalent to a first-hand reference from someone we really know, helping us to make better decisions about whom to trade with. The role of this new intermediary is, therefore, to create the right tools and environment to develop familiarity and trust, an intermediary instance where commerce and the community meet. (Botsman & Rogers, 2011, p. 77-78).

In collaborative consumption platforms, trust among strangers is built and disseminated based on expectations of reciprocity and the reputation of users (Costa, Fernandes, & Gonçalves, 2017). This is why trust appears recurrently in studies dealing with social media and hospitality (Boari & Cunha, 2017). Kremer and Cavalheiro (2018) point out that people tend to cooperate with individuals who are more likely to behave as expected and, therefore, analyze the reliability of others through previous interactions, social history, or visual and verbal cues. Networking and the democratization of information that prevails in virtual communities allow all users to have access to references related to the community members' characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes of someone who is not yet familiar (Kremer & Cavalheiro, 2018).

Costa, Fernandes and Gonçalves (2017) put forward the concept of references as a notable mechanism for building trust in Airbnb's business model. Guests and hosts must evaluate the experience through a text that will remain in each other's profile, visible to the platform users (Costa, Fernandes, & Gonçalves, 2017). The greater the number of favorable evaluations on a profile, the better one's reputation and reliability in the community of users.

Both Costa, Fernandes and Gonçalves (2017) and Kremer and Cavalheiro (2018) seem to converge to the notion that a system of references creates and maintains bonds of trust as part of these platforms. By fulfilling their role as a guest or host according to the expectations of the other party, the user receives a positive review that will become a mark of credibility for the following experiences, thus expanding transactions possibilities in the future (Costa, Fernandes, & Gonçalves, 2017). In other words, while concentrating efforts to forge a solid virtual reputation, users begin to "resist attempts to make short-term gains, to the detriment of losing opportunities for greater long-term benefits" (Kremer & Cavalheiro, 2018, p. 95).

2.3 The credibility dilemma of online reviews

Triggered by the outbreak of e-commerce and the proliferation of virtual communities, online reviews quickly emerged as a popular form of communication among consumers on the Web (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008; Jamil & Hasnu, 2013). Amazon, Airbnb, Booking.com, eBay, TripAdvisor, and Yelp are some examples of platforms where users can publicly issue positive or negative statements about their experiences with products and services (Jamil & Hasnu, 2013), usually expressed through text or graphic symbols (Bender, Löbner, Lehnhart, & Tagliapietra, 2019).

Far beyond categorical numerical scores and words loaded with subjectivity, online reviews give the user a more active stance by simultaneously making them producers and consumers of market information (McQuarrie, McIntyre, & Shanmugam, 2013). Online reviews become a source of support for consumer decision-making (Zhang et al., 2014). McQuarrie (2015) points out that the main challenge for a review website is to supply consumers with evaluations that they consider valuable; after all, trust is built through readers' continuous experience in obtaining transaction value when consulting them.

On the other hand, the main challenge for collaborative consumption platforms is the proper use of these reputation systems. Now trust is developed in connection to users and brands, products, or services. Trustworthy information for making decisions may include punitive measures to those who somehow act as to provide negative experiences for users (Farias, Barbosa, Silva & Sousa, 2019).

The credibility of reviews is constantly questioned, although they are recognized as necessary mechanisms to overcome informational asymmetry in virtual environments (Jamil & Hasnu, 2013) and reduce uncertainty in online transactions (Zhang et al., 2014). It is not so easy to decide which one to believe. The process of judging credibility becomes increasingly obscure as the reviews might be contradictory, present false/manipulated information, or turn out to be vague/biased (McQuarrie, 2015).

This dilemma is particularly critical to the success of the online hospitality experiences market. As experiences are not standardized like most tangible products, information about their attributes can only be obtained after consumption (Jamil & Hasnu, 2013), so consumers rely on social ratification emanating from other users' reviews to make a more assertive purchasing decision (McQuarrie, McIntyre, & Shanmugam, 2013). Through Airbnb's references system, for example, a guest not only needs to place trust in an unknown host, but also in the assessment written by an equally strange third party (Costa, Fernandes, & Gonçalves, 2017). The information provided by a third party is perceived as useful for a consumer depending on the quality of the information provided, the need for such specific information, and the associated credibility (Oliveira et al., 2020).

Academic literature points out four factors that can influence the perception of online review credibility (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008; Jamil & Hasnu, 2013; Thomas, Wirtz, & Weyerer, 2019):

- *Relevance* refers to new online consumers, “conscious of their time” (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008, p. 234) and eager to obtain the information they need quickly and with minimal effort;
- *accuracy* is associated with the reliability of the review, whether the reader identifies the information as correct and how the message fits his previous knowledge;
- *completeness* concerns whether the message of the review is complete, profound, broad and contains sufficient and satisfactory information;
- *timeliness* refers to the latest information that might be gathered, the frequency of review updates, and whether it represents a possible the recent status of a given product/service.

In particular, understanding how guests express their feelings and satisfaction through reviews has aroused growing unrest in contemporary research on tourism (Schuckert, Liu, & Law, 2015; Cheng & Jin, 2019). Given the popularization of collaborative hosting and the resulting trust-building strategies among strangers, the role words play as trust enacting vectors is evident –as McQuarrie (2015, p. 180) accurately summarized: “[they are] intangible but influential; trivial but permanent; they are only words but they hold the power of speech; an extraordinary opportunity for the ordinary person to write for strangers”.

3 METHODOLOGY

This study aimed examine the online environment that brings together users’ reviews of the Airbnb platform, to investigate how they lead to trust within the community. Based on the taxonomy by Vergara (1998), this research can be categorized both as exploratory, given that the academic production regarding the transmission of trust in collaborative hosting platforms is still at an incipient level, and as a documentary investigation for the object of analysis is formalized in the users’ evaluations, constituting virtual records of public and free access.

The platform chosen for data collection was the Airbnb website (<https://www.airbnb.com.br/>) and data was collected between December 28, 2019, and January 4, 2020. Therefore, non-probabilistic accessibility sampling was adopted, which “far from any statistical procedure, selects elements due to ease of access to them” (Vergara, 1998, p. 49). Initially, only evaluations of stays whose destination was Fortaleza/CE were considered. This decision was based on convenience for the researcher, in addition to the fact that this city is an important touristic spot in Brazil (Brazil, 2019).

The following filters were applied to the search results:

- *Price range*: stays whose daily rates ranging from 40.00 BRL to 200.00 BRL were considered as this interval includes most of the prices for accommodation offered on the platform. Furthermore, it covers a greater number of guest reviews per ad, as it contains more affordable and attractive prices to an audience that, it is worth remembering, also seeks to save money through sharing (Vera & Gosling, 2017);
- *Type of place*: the “shared room” and “whole room” options were selected to preserve the character of sharing spaces (whether bedrooms or other rooms) that collaborative consumption implies;
- *Type of property*: to ensure the close relationship between guest and host, only the options “home” and “apartment” were selected, thus filtering out hotels, inns, and other commercial establishments.

A qualitative approach was conducted through content analysis, which, according to Bardin (2016), is a range of techniques supported by the execution of structured and objective procedures in order to find evidence that provides inferences about the conditions of production and/or reception of the analyzed messages. By using the textual analysis software NVivo – which allows analyzing the frequency of occurrence of each word by grouping them by derivation – it was possible to create a word cloud containing the 50 most recurrent and representative terms of the experiences in the travelers’ speeches.

To examine the context in which the terms were used by guests, three categories of analysis were proposed prior to data collection, covering a total of 14 subcategories, which are presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1 – Categories analyzed in users' reviews (guests) on the Airbnb website about the collaborative hosting experience

CATEGORIES	SUBCATEGORIES	USERS
Host	Communication	Report ease of communication (in person or via chat)
	Receptivity	Mention the reception and hospitality
	Sympathy	Mention the friendly and pleasant attitude
	Solicitude	Mention the readiness to solve problems
	Convenience	Mention available resources (Wi-Fi, air conditioning, washing machine, etc.)
Space	Comfort	Express a sense of warmth and well-being
	Trustworthiness	Claim that the space matches the ads/photos published
	Cleanliness	Mention the hygiene of the place
	Location	Allude to the geographical location of the property
	Organization	Mention the tidiness of the rooms
Consequences of Experience	Safety	Mention security features (fire extinguisher, smoke detector, etc.), privacy, or neighborhood watching
	Gratitude	Express thankfulness
	Propensity to return	Express willingness to stay in the same place again
	Recommendation	Recommend the place of stay for other people

Source: Prepared by the authors (2019).

In addition, some eligibility criteria were established for the relevant choice of reviews that would make up the analysis. Only evaluations in Brazilian Portuguese were contemplated so that terms in different languages would not appear in the cloud. Other criteria were adopted to avoid the selection of reviews that were vague, lacking information or not credible. To formulate them, we employed the determinants of reviews' credibility based on the quality of the argument portrayed in international specialized literature (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008; Jamil & Hasnu, 2013; Thomas, Wirtz, & Weyerer, 2019):

- *Relevance*: we opted for reviews posted on the two initial pages of the comments section of each stay announcement, as people tend to look only at the first two pages of information available online (Jamil & Hasnu, 2013);
- *Accuracy*: we chose reviews that provided clear and coherent information about the experience. Thus, the subcategories related to the host and space (Table 1) can be understood as parameters that consumers have about a product/service before consulting online evaluations (Thomas, Wirtz, & Weyerer, 2019). Confusing, ambiguous, evasive reviews or those whose content was at variance with most of the aspects expressed in Table 1 were disregarded;
- *Completeness*: we opted for reviews in which it was possible to identify information related to the three main analysis categories presented in Table 1 (host, space, and consequences of the experience). Incomplete/vague assessments that addressed only one or two of the categories were disregarded;
- *Timeliness*: on the Airbnb website, guest comments are arranged in descending chronological order of posting on the stay announcement page. Therefore, we chose the most recent reviews, published between 2018 and 2019.

Finally, 306 accommodation results were gathered. Of this total, 210 reviews were collected from 91 different locations in Fortaleza. The reduction is justified by strict compliance with the selection criteria for reviews, besides the fact that, among the 306 results found, not all website ads had published comments. The time frame corresponds to the period from January 2018 to December 2019 and no new category (Table 1) emerged from the analysis.

4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

By using the NVivo software, the 210 reviews collected from the Airbnb website were submitted to frequency analyses for each term. Subsequently, the 50 most cited words were arranged in a cloud-like picture. Words with the greatest frequency of citations are centralized in the picture, in larger font sizes. (Figure 1). The words tagged are interpreted as reflections of emotions, qualities, and guest perception on their hosting experiences and may reveal deeper, more latent meanings.

For the purposes of this research, some terms were removed from the cloud because they did not add expressive meaning to the analysis, including first names, definite and indefinite articles, numerals, conjunctions, prepositions, etc.

Figure 1 – Word cloud with frequent terms in Airbnb guest reviews



Source: The authors (2020).

4.1 Host

The first category focuses on the host, whether he or she is the owner of the place or someone else designated to welcome and assist guests during their stay. Four subcategories were analyzed: Communication, Receptivity, Sympathy, and Solicitude (Table 1).

Not surprisingly, two of the words that stood out were “house” (148 mentions) and “apartment” (110). Both were used to start the description of the place of stay, but the first one carries a special connotation: it was also used by guests to express the fact that they were so welcomed by the hosts that they felt as though they were at their own home – or “at ease” (42) – during the stay. That is, in addition to its explicit material meaning, the words “home” is also used to convey the hosts’ receptivity and the feeling of familiarity with the environment, as can be seen in the excerpts below:

[...] Great breakfast and very welcoming. The residence is very central and close to everything. The house is clean and cozy, the room has a fan, a bed light, and a desk. I spent a week, but it felt like a month, I was already feeling at home. [...] (Anonymous).

Sandra’s house is wonderful. Super attention from start to finish, which made me really feel at home. Not to mention that her whole family welcomed me with great affection. Sandra takes incredible care of every detail of the house, by keeping everything always in order. [...] (Anonymous).

Wonderful days in Luana and Jaque’s apartment. Both are truly kind and welcoming, they made me very comfortable, which made me feel at home. [...] (Anonymous).

Receptivity was also frequently acknowledged. Variations of the verb “receive” totaled 61 mentions by guests. Compliments regarding “hospitality” (32) and a welcoming attitude by the hosts upon the guests’ arrivals are exemplified by “he welcomed us warmly, always in a good mood and with a smile on his face!”, “welcomes us as true friends”,

“welcomed me with arms wide open at the last minute” and “welcomes with great joy and hospitality, even in the middle of the night”.

In particular, the last two sentences seem to denote an important argument: the guests’ reports emphasized the hosts’ flexibility do for late check-ins in the face of unexpected setbacks on the route. This is confirmed in excerpts such as: “we will always be grateful that she welcomed us on the same day that we made the reservation due to an unforeseen event on our trip. More is added by a comment saying “[he] helped me at check-in, because my flight was delayed and he welcomed me without any problems, super flexible”. A quite common situation might be exemplified by “we had problems on the road, and we ended up arriving in the early hours of the morning, but even so Paula welcomed us with a smile on her face and with the house ready”. Finally, “the host offered to welcome me and my boyfriend before the scheduled check-in time, which saved us a few hours of waiting at the airport”.

In the light of the notion of trust by Rousseau et al. (1998), trust goes hand in hand with the possibility of losing something or failing to achieve common objectives. The same authors establish that trust is a psychological state related to vulnerability feelings, as a reassuring behavior is expected from others. Underlying this definition is the belief that parties in relationships will act responsibly. As noted in the reviews, travelers are often faced with various risky situations, such as arriving earlier or later than the arranged hours and having no one at the place to welcome them, having difficulty finding the exact place, feeling insecure about their privacy, not making the most of the trip for not knowing the city’s tourist attractions, etc. In all cases, these losses (waiting, stress, discomfort, frustration) can significantly impair one’s satisfaction in the scope of their travel experiences.

Participating in a collaborative hosting experience requires not only risk-taking by travelers but also willingness to be in a position of vulnerability before the host. This brings empathy into action in the dynamics of the guest-host relationship. Indeed, empathy can be a trust vector for other users. Costa, Fernandes and Gonçalves (2017) assumed that guests, while reading a host’s self-description of a personal problem, identify themselves with the situation and start trusting the other part if this one did show some repairing action. The same authors noted the relevance of practicing empathy on the host part, by “putting himself in the guests’ shoes” and understanding their longings and weaknesses. This emerges as a supportive agent against risk, a characteristic that travelers admire and inform other users about in their reviews:

[...] Nara made me feel free to get in and out of her house with no worries about schedules. Besides, she was very flexible about the check-in time, considering that I had a problem with the flight and wasn’t able to arrive on time. She was careful enough to call me several times during my journey from the airport to her house because she knew I was supposed to go by myself, at dawn, with an Uber driver. Even though she had warned the doormen about my arrival, she waited for me at the window to see when I got to the building. [...] (Anonymous).

[...]About Aurélio: to begin with, the host occupies the smaller room in the house to give the best comfort possible to his guests. From there, you can imagine how nice he is! Besides, he is the kind of person who is incapable of any prejudice or evil. I was staying there by myself but felt quite safe about sleeping with my bedroom door wide open, for example. He took me for walk on the beach, and joined me when I wanted to drink, introduced me to his friends, took me to the mall when I needed, gave me tips on how to enjoy Jericoacoara... It is impossible to have a better host! [...] (Anonymous).

Very attentive family! I injured my knee during a walk, and they offered me a chair to use during the shower and an ice bag., They let me wait in the room until 4 pm, closer to my flight departure, and they put us in a larger room, which has a staircase, but accommodated us better. [...] I feel grateful! (Anonymous).

What stands out in these comments is the appreciation of the host’s goodwill and effort to establishing a basis of trust by avoiding or solving situations that may represent risk and/or compromise satisfaction with the experience as a whole. In the first excerpt, the guest recognizes the hostess’s concern and commitment to help her arrive safely, as well as the willingness to change the check-in time to better serve her. Another user praises the host’s empathetic attitude by offering the largest room in the residence, and mitigating the initial feeling of fear, insecurity, and lack of privacy. In fact, both came to share moments of the trip, which points to a relationship of closeness and affection. The hosts’ empathy and attention were also manifested in the testimony of a guest who had an accident and reports having received assistance and special treatment up to the departure time. In an open and connected information network (Kremer & Cavaleiro, 2018), the hosts’ characteristics and attitudes, as well episodes related to the stay are constantly reproduced by the guests in reports accessible to everyone, generating trust and assisting in the decision-making of users who have yet to have any contact with their host.

Interestingly, except for generic adjectives used for any of the analysis categories (which will be mentioned later), the host’s quality that impressed guests most was “attentive” (50 mentions), which refers to the Solicitude subcategory. Travelers often alluded to the helpful conduct of sharing “tips” (40) of sights/establishments to be visited or the provision of relevant information about the “city” (38). This evidence is reinforced by excerpts such as “he was attentive to the questions I asked before finally booking and continued to be so up to checkout time”, “attentive and

helpful, always willing to help and answer any questions” and “always very attentive, recommended us nice places to visit, to that we could make the most of Fortaleza”.

The tips are worth mentioning, as many guests reported not knowing the main services available near the accommodation site. They took advantage of the hosts’ personal suggestions on visiting itineraries and shortcuts to build a unique travel experience, authentically local information that they might not get from a conventional hotel.

Fátima’s apartment is excellent, great location, very airy, ventilated, and quiet. However, this is not all that matters, the main thing is Fatima. No wonder she is a super host. She is an extremely high-spirited person, attentive, and always willing to help. Want to know a good and cheap restaurant in Fortaleza? Ask her. Beach tips? Go for her. Need a map to get your bearings in the city? She has it. Much of my quick adaptation to the city happened thanks to her. [...] (Anonymous).

In the comment above, in addition to praising the accommodation, the guest attributed to the host their enabling to adapt to the city through the provided tips. We also highlight the use of the frequency adverb “always” (80 mentions) to emphasize the host’s solicitude. In that and other situations, the term is used to indicate the consistency of the host’s actions over time, which is not restricted to the first day of the stay, for instance.

4.2 Space

The second dimension involves the physical space that, in this study, consists of houses or apartments. Seven subcategories were observed: Convenience, Comfort, Trustworthiness, Cleanliness, Location, Organization, and Security (Table 1). Location has emerged not only as the most cited subcategory in guest reviews but also as the second most used word overall, with 140 hits. Investigating the context, three predominant arguments were found when referring to the geographical position of the accommodation: diversity of options, mobility, and economy.

As for the first, guests constantly described whether the place was “near” (76 mentions) or “close” (45) to commercial establishments and tourist centers in the city, such as “beaches” (101), “restaurants” (44) and “bakeries” (24). Having a wide and diverse range of services and leisure options available nearby is an paramount requirement to meet the initial expectations of most users, a fact that is made explicit in several comments fragments:

[...] The location is perfect, very close to Iracema Beach, with many bars, restaurants, clubs, the Dragão do Mar Cultural Center, shops, in short, a bunch of entertainment and leisure options for everyone, as it is in Meireles, which is one of the best neighborhoods in Fortaleza [...] (Anonymous).

A very well-located apartment, a short walk away to enjoy the waterfront, many options of bars, restaurants, and places to visit nearby. Very hospitable and understanding people. The apartment is quite comfortable and easy to locate. There are options for lunch and breakfast on the same block [...] (Anonymous).

[...] The location exceeded our expectations because it had easy access to commerce, restaurants (Coco Bambú is on the corner), Iracema Beach, the famous local fair, and the Fish Market. The accommodation is ideal for those who want to go for a walk and see the sights of Fortaleza [...] (Anonymous).

Another frequent argument was mobility, which refers to the ease of getting around and reaching the desired place. Many travelers stated that they could walk to and back from places due to the proximity, which made moving around practical. Examples include the fragments “very well located (you can walk to markets, pharmacies, shopping malls and gyms all in a radius of 2 to 4 blocks)”; “neighborhood is well located and close to many restaurants. I was walking, so that made everything a lot easier”; and “the location is also very good as there is a mall next to it and bus and taxi stops”.

“Economy” was also quoted. Several guests attested that the location allowed them to save on mobility expenses when going around in the vicinity, in addition to the existence of establishments with affordable prices. Some mentioned being close by and the use of Uber: “more than privileged location, close to everything, which facilitates transportation and helps us save money”, “when I didn’t want to walk and needed to ride an Uber, it was super cheap because of its location”, “a 5-Reais Uber ride (one dollar) will take you everywhere”, and “cheap places to eat and buy”.

The second most frequent word was “clean” (92 mentions), referring to the Cleaning subcategory. However, Comfort achieved greater general representativeness, as it had three words with identical meanings tagged in the cloud, namely “comfortable” (64), “pleasant” (33), and “cozy” (31), totaling 128 mentions. Organization ranked next, with 24 mentions. The terms of the three subcategories, in most cases, were used to specifically qualify “bedrooms” (95), “beds” (27), or “bathrooms” (22).

As in the Host category, empathy was noticed and praised by guests. Here it conveys the attention to decoration details that might provide well-being and feelings of being at home. This reinforces recent findings by Cheng and Jin

(2019) when they find that Airbnb users often appreciate the feeling of being at home associated with the facilities available in the surrounding environment.

[...] The apartment is beautiful, and the suite, in particular, is very nice, because, in addition to the comfort of the bed and the private bathroom that has Babylliss and a rotating brush, it also has a minibar that provides water. One point that caught my attention was the blackout curtains; they are wonderful for those who have trouble sleeping in bright rooms like me. [...] (Anonymous).

[...] The cleanliness and organization are impeccable, every time we went out for walks the room was tidied, cleaned and our stuff was put away, which brings harmony to the accommodation. [...] We don't have to worry about towels or bedsheets, it was impeccable. [...] (Anonymous).

[...] The accommodations are extremely clean and comfortable. Details such as the alcohol gel for hand hygiene and the scent diffuser in the bathroom show that the host cares about her guests. Clean bed linen and towels. In fact, I felt welcomed and at home during my stay there. [...] (Anonymous).

Based on the reflections of Costa, Fernandes, Gonçalves (2017), it is interesting to note that the above singled out arguments vary according to the guest's traveling interests, and characteristics, as it might be expected. Therefore, comments might be very particular, expressing whether a certain aspect was, in fact, convenient for an individual need and if it met their idiosyncratic expectations, as illustrated by the above guest claim that the blackout curtain helped to improve the quality of his sleep. As Airbnb references are essentially qualitative evaluation mechanisms, "each person can define their criteria and parameters" (Costa, Fernandes, & Gonçalves, 2017, p. 84).

Location can be taken as another example: for those traveling on leisure (most of the sample), it is paramount that the shared space is close to the city's beaches, cultural centers, and commercial spots. A secluded place that makes it difficult to access entertainment and consumption options would certainly ruin the travel experience and lead to frustration. It seems logical, then, that these travelers will highlight ease of access characteristics. The same bias applies to those seeking a shared space for work or study reasons, as these tend to prioritize the comfort and convenience of the environment over the diversity of touristic options. Only those seeking accommodation with similar interests will find valuable such comments, as in the following fragment:

Great place to stay if you are going to a conference at the event center or nearby, as was my case. For those planning to do tourism and getting to know the beaches, I would suggest a place closer to the shore. The apartment is huge, and the room in which I stayed was very spacious and airy. It perfectly met my needs to have a quiet place to sleep or work a little while I was not at the conference [...] (Anonymous).

Surprisingly, the Trustworthiness and Safety subcategories – which are immediately associated with the issue of risk – did not have significant mentions. Indeed, the first failed to appear either by itself or by related terms in the NVivo cloud. As to the first, one possible explanation is that guests, after exhaustively describing the place of stay regarding other attributes (Convenience, Comfort, Cleanliness, and Organization), take for granted that they ranked the accommodation as consistent with or superior to what was announced in the listing photos or texts.

As for Safety, a probable explanation is that travelers did not face tangible safety issues in the property or on their walks around the neighborhood during their stay, which may have contributed to the few mentions to this subject. Therefore, this is an argument that goes against the traditional hotel association claims that try to highlight the differences traditional hotels might offer in terms of safety (CNDL and SPC BRASIL, 2018). It should be noted, however, that reviews are statements issued after the hosting experience, so that the level of user satisfaction with the accommodation service may have hindered previous impressions on the lack of safety.

4.3 Consequences of the experience

The third category turns to the consequences of the experience, encompassing Gratitude, Propensity to return, and Recommendation (Table 1). In general, the experiences were qualified with favorable generic adjectives such as "excellent" (84 mentions), "wonderful" (64), "best" (53), "great" (47), "good" (35), and "incredible" (34), suggesting a high degree of guest satisfaction with the services offered. At the same time, this evidence corroborates the existing literature which shows that Airbnb reviews tend to be positively biased (Cheng & Jin, 2019).

Both Propensity to return and Recommendation had the highest incidences. The verb "come back" and its conjugations added up to 82 mentions, indicating that the travelers were so pleased with the service provided, that they manifested their intention to return to the place of stay in a future opportunity. In turn, the verb "recommend" was mentioned 72 times, reiterating the guest's contentment with the experience and, in a way, repaying the host's endeavor by recommending the stay to other travelers. These results are further reinforced by the use of verbs usually linked to the term "certainty" (41 mentions), which expresses the guest's conviction in his/her statement. These findings are significant because they show a process that begins based on trust, which in turn reduces risk

perceptions, and ends with evidence of loyalty attitude expressed by a propensity to return and the recommendation, alongside the idea of building and maintaining long-term bonds of trust based on credibility (Costa, Fernandes, & Gonçalves, 2017; Kremer & Cavalheiro, 2018).

In contrast to Bezerra and Ferreira (2018)' findings on the CouchSurfing platform, Gratitude did not stand out in Airbnb reviews. As with the Sympathy subcategory in the Host dimension, the dispersion in the use of words ("thank you", "to thank", "gratefulness" etc.) spreads the frequency of each one. Among the 210 reviews analyzed, 15 presented virtual resources such as emojis, emoticons, or uppercase letters to express gratitude, or 7.14% of the total sample. The following fragments show how travelers assessed their overall appreciation for the collaborative hosting experience:

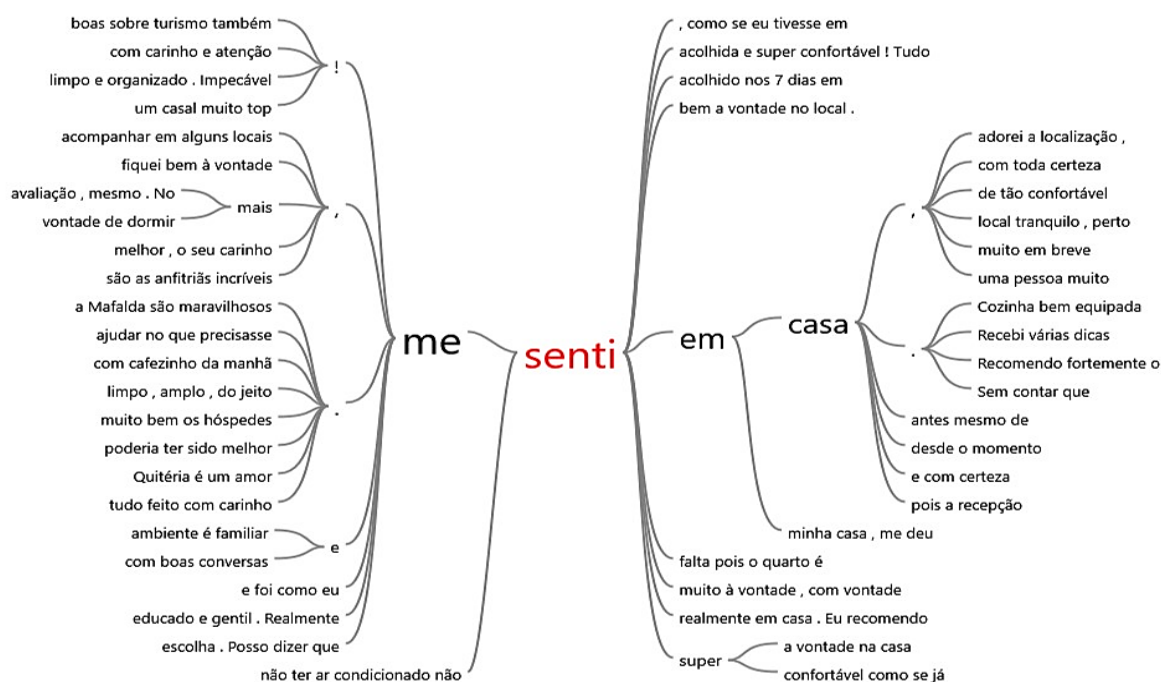
[...] Honestly, I really liked everything, the price, the location, the hostesses, the environment, and as I'm very demanding, despite being my first time here on Airbnb, it exceeded my expectations and besides recommending to everyone Christiane's apartment, I think about going back to Fortaleza more often, and I already know very well where I should stay. (Anonymous).

[...] It was a totally Airbnb experience, much more than just renting a room and staying isolated, as it would be in a traditional hotel: I was super comfortable and lived with an incredible and foster family. Besides that, I was close to everywhere: very close to the beach, the city's cultural centers, downtown, anyway... I highly recommend it!! Not only because of the space of the apartment and the bedroom, which are really adorable – just like in the pictures –, but for the wonderful people as well. I warmly thank you for everything! (Anonymous).

[...] I think everyone should read all the comments about this lovely place! Because couldn't agree more with those great comments! I've always stayed in great hotels, but this place exceeded my expectations! Safe place, in the most expensive square meter in Fortaleza, close to great shopping malls and establishments, not to mention the privilege of having the incredible Leyla to welcome you and help you with whatever you need! No doubt about the cost-benefit: hotels never again! I will definitely come back whenever I can ♡ (Anonymous).

In the first comment, the guest reveals that it was his/her first time booking through the website and that even though he/she was strict in his/her evaluations – perhaps due to initial skepticism about the success of the accommodation –, he/she was delighted with the experience and convinced of the benefits obtained. Another user draws attention to the uniqueness of the experience on Airbnb when compared to traditional hotels, not limited to the act of renting a place, but also involving sharing, coexistence, and building reciprocal relationships in line with Costa, Fernandes and Gonçalves (2017). In the third fragment, in addition to ensuring the exchange for Airbnb services, the traveler encourages users to read the reviews, indicating that they were valuable in providing true market information about the stay and assisting in his decision-making, thus corroborating the statements by McQuarrie (2015) and Zhang et al. (2014).

A word from the cloud directly linked to the perception of the service by guests is the verb "feel" (70 mentions). Therefore, it is convenient to depict the context in which the term was used in the reviews. To this end, the following word tree was generated through the NVivo software, revealing other words and expressions that usually preceded and followed the term under focus:

Figure 2 – “I felt at home”: A tree of the word “feel”, generated with Airbnb guest reviews

Source: Prepared by the authors (2020).

The expression “I felt at home” clearly stands out in the center of the word cloud (Figure 2), as it was exhaustively repeated in the guests' comments as a way of vouching for the feeling of homeliness and comfort of the stay to other users. Therefore, it is related to the implicit meaning of the word “home” mentioned at the beginning of the analysis. Still, it is interesting to note that the main arguments used to spread trust identified in this research (“location”, “comfortable”, “clean”, “attention”, “tips”, “recommend”, “at ease” etc.) generally appear before or after that sentence, as if everything converges to this feeling of being at home that many guests express.

In line with the company's mission to “create a world where everyone can belong anywhere” (AIRBNB NEWSROOM, 2019), the transmission of trust among users on Airbnb seems to be anchored in this feeling of homeliness that is passed on from user to user through reviews – culminating in a feeling of being at home even in an environment that is initially unknown – relying on an argument of reciprocity when guests express their recommendation or desire to return. The tips, conversations, welcoming reception, company, convenient location, attention to the space details, concern for the guests' well-being, and other aspects mentioned in the narratives are elements of the experience recognized, valued, and disseminated by the community, as they help to break down pre-conceived stigmas that hinder collaboration and to strengthen bonds of trust and affection between guests and hosts.

5 FINAL REMARKS

This study aimed to understand how online reviews of Airbnb website users help to communicate trust to other travelers. To this end, a content analysis of comments published on the website was carried out to identify the arguments most cited by guests and to investigate the context in which they were used to disseminate trust.

The analysis focused on three dimensions of the experience (host, space, and consequences of the experience), from which additional subcategories were proposed and verified. As for the methodology adopted, based on the determinants of the credibility of the reviews, it proved to be adequate to the research objective, as the chosen evaluations presented relevant, accurate, comprehensive, and recent information about the travelers' experiences. These criteria were of great value to deal with the immense number of comments available on the website, many of which were vague and superficial, thus leading to the credibility problem pointed out by McQuarrie (2015).

As for the host, the results showed that the receptivity upon the arrival at the place of stay and the host's solicitude during the stay were the most recurrent arguments. The website reviews provided a basis for building trust in the upcoming experience. It was noted that the host's empathy and effort to solve problems in situations that could pose a risk to one's satisfaction with the travel experience are qualities recognized and valued by guests, including the flexibility of check-in and personalized tips about where to go and what to do in the city.

Concerning space, the most frequent term was “location”, used by guests to refer to the diversity of leisure and shopping options in the surroundings, mobility facilities, or the savings with transport. Other arguments such as comfort and cleanliness also came out. These arguments vary according to the travel interests and communication of trust seems to be related to the reader’s self-identification and the sharing of common interests between those who write and those who read.

Finally, as for the consequences of the experience, the propensity to return and the recommendation were consolidated. Results pointed to the use of predominantly positive adjectives to qualify the experiences, showing a high degree of guest satisfaction with the assessment of the services and the final phase of a process that begins with trust building. In addition, analysis centered on what travelers generally reported to feel demonstrated a convergence relationship between the arguments and the feeling of being at home, as if the presence of these attributes contributed to lead the guest to a sense of proximity to their own homes, acquaintance and well-being during the stay – a perception that is used to convey trust to others through the symbolic expression “I felt at home”.

This study contributes to the expansion of knowledge about collaborative hosting and consumer behavior in the online market, as well as provides practical evidence of one of the main trust-building instruments that integrate Airbnb’s sophisticated reputation system.

However, this study has limitations. Due to the complexity involved in the use of terms in different contexts by guests, there was some difficulty in defining which subcategory each word would fit into. Some seemed to belong to two distinct subcategories (e.g., “quiet”), others seemed not to fit into none of them (e.g., “super”, “extremely”). Furthermore, the dispersion in the use of certain terms may have contributed to the absence of words related to some subcategories in the cloud.

Another limitation concerns the credibility determinants used for the selection of reviews since they have not yet been fully validated. Scientific studies in this arena are recent and in ongoing development. Moreover, due to the wide scope of data and the plurality of possible interpretations, not all words in the cloud could be analyzed. However, the results were satisfactory in offering answers to the concern that originated this study.

Finally, an intriguing fact was identified: two aspects directly related to the risk – the authenticity of the space compared to the photos/texts announced in its listing and the space safety – did not yield significant results. Therefore, we suggest that future research investigate the reasons behind this fact and whether it can be related to the user’s final satisfaction with the experience.

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