



Anatolia

An International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rana20>

Sharing is caring? Hosts discussions on sex trafficking in AirBnB accommodation

Maria Thulemark, Susanna Heldt Cassel & Tara Duncan

To cite this article: Maria Thulemark, Susanna Heldt Cassel & Tara Duncan (2021): Sharing is caring? Hosts discussions on sex trafficking in AirBnB accommodation, Anatolia, DOI: [10.1080/13032917.2021.1980068](https://doi.org/10.1080/13032917.2021.1980068)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13032917.2021.1980068>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 26 Sep 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 81



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Sharing is caring? Hosts discussions on sex trafficking in AirBnB accommodation

Maria Thulemark , Susanna Heldt Cassel  and Tara Duncan 

CeTLer- Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 19 March 2021; Accepted 9 September 2021

Introduction

The hospitality industry has long been an involuntary platform for sex trafficking (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018a) and hospitality staff have been touted as the guardians who can protect sex trafficking victims (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018b). With the increasing opportunities to rent accommodation through online platforms there is a transfer of sex trafficking from hotels to private accommodation providers. Hosts renting out accommodation through online platforms often feel the need to uphold some form of moral identity (Farmaki et al., 2019) and in relation to AirBnB, hosts can be pointed out as the 'new' guardians to help combat sex trafficking.

This research note acts as a starting point for further research into the relationship between AirBnB and sex trafficking. By using the on-line community forum entries written by AirBnB hosts, this research note will present an analysis of how hosts seek help and find solutions to prevent sex trafficking. Whilst research on AirBnB has increased in the last five years, very little focusses on crime (Andreu et al., 2020) and to our knowledge no studies have focused on (sex) trafficking.

Methodology

This exploratory research used thematic text analysis (Kuckartz et al., 2014). On the open access forum of the AirBnB platform we searched for all posts that included the words "sex trafficking". Fifteen original posts were found, dating between 2016 and 2020. All posts originated from hosts in the USA or Canada. Yet, answers came from hosts across the world and each original post received up to 31 replies. We divided the analysis into five stages. Firstly, all posts (original and answers) were entered into NVivo and read through to get an overview. This stage also ensured only appropriate posts were utilized. Deleted posts could be, for example, about increases in crimes in a city where sex trafficking was mentioned. Secondly, we developed the main topic categories; thirdly, each post and answer was read again with the purpose of coding; this included tracking background information on each post such as country of origin and date of publication. Fourthly, the coding structure was continually revised during the analysis process. Lastly, final categories and coding were developed leading to four overarching codes; *Host solutions*, *Support from AirBnB*, *Reviewing system* and *Hosts personal view*.

Results

Host solutions was the most discussed topics. Hosts asked questions on how to act, respond and search for help when detecting potential sex trafficking. Answers often originated from mistakes already made by other hosts who shared their experiences. Solutions such as minimum nights of stays, house rules including no visitors or one person/room, in-person welcoming, camera surveillance outside the property, no instant-booking and no locals being able to book were suggested. These are all suggestions on how the individual host can change ways of renting out, responding to and creating an opinion about the potential guest. Hosts often come back to the fact that they believe that AirBnB has a guest-centred approach and does not take account of the hosts' perspective in their rules and regulations.

Support from AirBnB was seen to be lacking. Several times, hosts argued that AirBnB focused more on guests than on hosts. Where hosts asked AirBnB for advice, they often received no reply. Or they were told that police investigation protocols were needed to claim money back or that hosts had to bear the cost of cancellation and sometimes also the cost of restoring damaged accommodation. This was summarized by one host: *"I see it this way: we honor the platform values, and they need to back ours [values]."*

The *Reviewing System*, specifically host status and getting bad reviews as a host was an important issue. Not only were hosts worried about getting bad reviews if they evicted guests or did not let them stay in the first place, but hosts were also concerned about how guests would react to a bad review of them as guests.

I know this guest is going to give me poor reviews, and I am going to take the hit and warn other potential hosts w[ith] an honest review [of the guest] . . . this just isn't ok.

Leaving honest reviews also had other consequences. In the quotation below, honesty in a review is connected to the feeling of safety and security as a host.

I felt unsafe leaving them a bad review - in case they came to my home and did something out of retaliation.

This feeling of being unsafe as a host was also related to issues that occurred when guests had checked in. One female host described a situation where she felt she needed to wait for her husband to come to the accommodation before confronting the guest as she was afraid that the consequences of the eviction could be violent. Another host was trying to talk to the guests asking if they needed help and was met with violence before leaving the property and harassment through 'new' AirBnB accounts, which she felt became threatening.

Finally, *Host's Personal View* highlights the grey zone of sex work, prostitution, and sex trafficking which hosts need to navigate according to their own ethical values and where individual country legislation must be considered. Commonly these (mostly female) sex workers/prostitutes/victims were portrayed as vulnerable individuals, yet not all hosts felt it was their personal responsibility to help and safeguard these women. However, when talking about sex trafficking, which is illegal globally, sharing is caring! It is evident that some hosts care not only about their own property and safety but also about the victims of trafficking.

Conclusion

This research note should be viewed as a first glimpse into the relationship between the platform economy, sex trafficking and the tourism system. Previous studies in the field of sex trafficking in the hospitality industry have mainly looked at commercial accommodation. Therefore, studies on crimes within the platform economy related to tourism and hospitality is an important step to take.

Further research is needed in the fields of prostitution/sex trafficking and the sharing economy as well as in the broader field of hospitality research. From a search at the community forum at AirBnB there are approximately 100 original posts related to prostitution, indicating an ongoing "business"

that affects hosts. Within this discussion it is also important to take into consideration the blurring of the concepts of sex work, prostitution, and sex trafficking in relation to legislation, ethical concerns, and social responsibility.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by BFUF (the R&D Fund of the Swedish Tourism & Hospitality Industry)

Notes on contributors

Maria Thulemark has a PhD in Human Geography and work as a senior lecturer in Human Geography in the Centre for Tourism and Leisure Research (CeTLeR) at Dalarna University, Sweden. Her research focuses on mobilities, tourism work and workers with a special focus on decent work.

Susanna Heldt Cassel is a Professor in Human Geography in the Centre for Tourism and Leisure Research (CeTLeR) at Dalarna University, Sweden. She has done research in tourism studies and human geography, specifically issues of constructions of gender and place based identity in tourism.

Tara Duncan is a Professor in Tourism Studies in the Centre for Tourism and Leisure Research (CeTLeR) at Dalarna University, Sweden. Her research focuses on the intersections between mobilities work and tourism, with a focus on young budget travellers, academic mobility and sustainability within tourism and hospitality careers.

ORCID

Maria Thulemark  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3517-6650>

Susanna Heldt Cassel  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4919-4462>

Tara Duncan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1845-7001>

References

- Andreu, L., Bigne, E., Amaro, S., & Palomo, J. (2020). Airbnb research: An analysis in tourism and hospitality journals. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 14(1), 2–20. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCTHR-06-2019-0113>
- Farmaki, A., Stergiou, D., & Kaniadakis, A. (2019). Self-perceptions of Airbnb hosts' responsibility: A moral identity perspective. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2019.1707216>
- Kuckartz, U., Metzler, K., & Kenney, F. (2014). *Qualitative text analysis: A guide to methods, practice & using software*. Sage.
- Paraskevas, A., & Brookes, M. (2018a). Human trafficking in hotels: An “invisible” threat for a vulnerable industry. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 30(3), 1996–2014. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-04-2017-0213>
- Paraskevas, A., & Brookes, M. (2018b). Nodes, guardians and signs: Raising barriers to human trafficking in the tourism industry. *Tourism Management*, 67(2), 147–156. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.01.017>