

# Hosting the comfortably exotic: Cosmopolitan aspirations in the sharing economy

The Sociological Review Monographs

2018, Vol. 66(2) 381–400

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DOI: 10.1177/0038026118758538

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**Abstract**

This article draws on interviews with 43 Airbnb hosts in Greater Boston to analyze how this novel economic arrangement brings people together across difference. The first central finding is that a majority of the participants express a keen interest in engaging with the Other, by hosting guests of foreign nationalities and cultures, but they also filter for familiar characteristics. This paradox is conceptualized as a preference for the 'comfortably exotic' – hosts want difference, but not too much of it. The second central finding is that guest–host interactions generate cosmopolitan capital, i.e., particular forms of social and cultural capital, which suggests that exclusion from the home-sharing economy has opportunity costs on not just economic dimensions, but also on cultural and social dimensions.

**Keywords**

casual sociability, contact hypothesis, cosmopolitan capital, cosmopolitanism, cultural capital, sharing economy, social capital

**Introduction**

Much has changed since DiMaggio and colleagues called for more research on the social implications of the internet (2001). Innovation in software, e.g., digital reviews, verifications, and payment systems (Sundararajan, 2016), has resulted in a newfound and transformative ability of strangers to connect, exchange, share information, and cooperate (Schor, 2014). A longstanding and much relevant debate is whether the use of information technology empowers the disenfranchised and decreases discrimination (McKenna & Bargh, 2000), or generates information upon which people discriminate, as when Airbnb hosts of color experience disproportionately low demand, compared with white hosts in the same areas, for equivalent real estate (Cansoy & Schor, 2016; Edelman &

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Luca, 2014), or when Airbnb guests of color are rejected more often than white guests (Edelman, Luca, & Svirsky, 2017). Such racial discrimination has in the United States led to the social media campaign #AirbnbWhileBlack, which draws on an oft-used reference to the racial profiling of black drivers (Rutkin, 2016).

Based on data from 43 in-depth and semi-structured interviews, I explore how young adult Airbnb hosts explain their guest preferences. Rather than asking the hosts directly if and how they discriminate, which is unlikely to yield valid data, I ask general questions about what hosting has been like for them, and probe for specific examples of their good and bad experiences. I also ask about their vetting and selection processes, and what they look for in their guests. Participants say that the ideal guest shares their characteristics, e.g., hosts who are young and outgoing prefer similar guests. However, participants are also enthusiastic about the otherness that hosting brings into their lives, because they 'get to have these really interesting interactions' which amount to 'experiencing the world,' to quote two participants. This paradox – an expressed preference for familiarity and difference – suggests that hosts want a little bit of both: they want the 'comfortably exotic.' Most hosts highlight that they have hosted foreigners, for example, but these foreigners are typically young Europeans who speak good English.

Furthermore, interview data suggest that the income-generating function of the hosting platform also helps participants accomplish a casual sociability (Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015; Lampinen & Cheshire, 2016) that yields cosmopolitan capital, that is, particular forms of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Weenink, 2007). Hosts who interact with their guests are exposed to and learn from the otherness of their guests, and a majority of them establish weak social ties with a few of their guests that go beyond the hosting period. These cultural and relational experiences suggest that home-sharing is a fertile ground for valuable interaction and that exclusion from the sharing economy has detrimental opportunity costs on not just economic dimensions (Cansoy & Schor, 2016; Edelman & Luca, 2014; Edelman et al., 2017), but also on cultural and social dimensions.

## **Internet-mediated interactions and the sharing economy**

The contact hypothesis suggests that positive intergroup encounters will under certain circumstances improve intergroup relations (Allport, 1954/1979; for reviews, see Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Interracial contact, for example, will in some cases positively affect racial attitudes (Sigelman & Welch, 1993). However, it is difficult to create contact situations between groups, and scholars have suggested that the internet might be part of the solution (Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006) because it enables greater anonymity and reduces the importance of physical appearance as 'gating features' to relationship development (McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

The internet has largely failed to live up to this bridge-making promise, for at least two reasons. First, users of information technology as a group are not as heterogeneous as one would hope. The digital divide literature has found that although physical internet access is greatly improved in the developed world, the divide persists with regard to digital skills and applications of the technology (Hargittai, 2010; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Martin & Robinson, 2007; Schradie, 2011; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014; Van Dijk, 2006). Second, access to information and communication may also strengthen, not

weaken, ingroup-outgroup division, e.g., as people gravitate towards message boards for like-minded people (Sunstein, 2009), possibly due to the longstanding view in social psychology that people favor interaction with people who share their beliefs and attitudes (Allport, 1954/1979).

The sharing economy emerged in large part because of the vast dissemination of technologies such as smartphones, broadband internet, and digital systems for trust (Sundararajan, 2016). Although some sharing economy participants are profit-maximizers, many are also socially motivated (Schor, 2015) and see the sharing economy as an opportunity to build economic markets that are based on community and personal connection (Fitzmaurice, Ladegaard, Attwood-Charles, Carfagna, Schor & Wengronowitz, 2018). The sharing economy offers ample opportunities for strangers to meet – e.g., by hosting guests in one’s home – and could in theory help to overcome the contact hypothesis’s practicality problem. However, not only are non-whites less likely than whites to use sharing economy services (Smith, 2016), they also face discrimination. Research has found that hosts screen their guests extensively (Ravenelle, 2018), white hosts charge more than black hosts for the equivalent rental (Cansoy & Schor, 2016; Edelman & Luca, 2014), and black guests are disproportionately rejected as guests (Edelman et al., 2017). Even non-profit groups such as time banks and food swaps fail to live up to the sharing economy’s widely articulated goals of openness and equity (Schor, Fitzmaurice, Attwood-Charles, Carfagna, & Poteat, 2016). I explore hosts’ guest preferences and detail the selection processes that others have quantified to understand what kind of social relations arise from participation in the sharing economy, and whether home-sharing services like Airbnb can bring people together across difference.

## Cosmopolitanism

The cosmopolitan – which literally means the ‘world citizen’ – has long been envisaged as an outwards-looking member of the elite strata of society. Ideal-type examples include Herder, who stressed the Kantian conception of humankind as an organic, universal whole moving towards perfection, and Goethe, who stated that the happy or sad experiences of other people appealed as strongly as those of his own because he had a supranational state of mind (Francke, 1927). As per Hannerz’s (1996) definition, these individuals were cosmopolitan not only because they were willing to engage with otherness, but also because they were empowered enough to do so, by virtue of being part of an upper middle-class occupational and experiential culture. Lasch (1995) has argued that in contemporary times, cosmopolitans are plugged into networks of global connection, and have more in common with their partners in Manhattan, London, Singapore, or Hong Kong than with locals or nationals.

Scholars have also argued that one does not need to move across national borders to develop a cosmopolitan disposition, because cosmopolitanism has become part of the everyday experience as globalization affects people’s personal lives (Beck, 2006; Hebdige, 1990; Malcomson, 1998; Nava, 2002; Szerszynski & Urry, 2002; Weenink, 2008). Szerszynski and Urry (2002), for example, found through focus group research in the UK that most people demonstrate a ‘mundane’ cosmopolitanism even when they are based within a geographically anchored community, e.g., through consumption of global

pop culture. Lamont and Aksartova (2002), meanwhile, found that non-college-educated members of the working class use anti-racist rhetoric in their daily lives.

In the cosmopolitan literature, culture is understood as a form of power, resource, or capital (Appadurai, 1996; Emmison, 2003; Germann Molz, 2005; Hannerz, 1996; Kendall, Woodward, & Skrbis, 2009; Skeggs, 2004; Vertovec & Cohen, 2002; Weenink, 2008). Hannerz (1996) writes that the cosmopolitan must feel empowered to seek a relationship with the other. Skeggs (2004) suggests that the cosmopolitan approach to otherness does not just require power but also generates it, because a cosmopolitan lifestyle enables the appropriation of cultural difference. That is, the cosmopolitan develops a form of competence that helps her 'navigate in an increasingly diverse and hybridized global context' (Germann Molz, 2005, p. 519), e.g., through intercultural interpretive skills (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002), which demonstrate familiarity with multiple cultural forms and objects (Emmison, 2003). This competency is highly valuable in the contemporary network society, where power is located in the global movement of consumption and production through the space of flows, rather than what static spaces of places (Beaverstock, Smith, & Taylor, 2000; Castells, 1996).

Appadurai (1996) argues that the awareness of cultural difference can have critical transformative possibilities, cultivating one's sense that national or local spaces and cultures can be transcended. A cosmopolitan disposition may further be 'used' to demonstrate respect for others, develop one's moral worth, and build self-confidence (Kendall et al., 2009). Cosmopolitanism is, in sum, a source of power and can be understood as a particular blend of social and cultural capital, i.e., cosmopolitan capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Weenink, 2007). It comprises bodily and mental predispositions and competencies which help to engage confidently in globalizing social arenas (Weenink, 2008). Such arenas include international golf club events and lavish business conferences, but also arenas that are globalized by force and difficult to escape. The 'choice' to enter the global realm as consumer and laborer is often made under strained circumstances, such as 'a desire not to be poor' (Malcomson, 1998, p. 240).

My goal is to explore how companies like Airbnb facilitate cross-cultural and cross-national interaction, and to what degree hosting produces cosmopolitan capital. I put particular emphasis on social capital, which is under-examined in the literature. In a world where a growing number of positions require extensive interactions with people of multiple nationalities (Igarashi & Saito, 2014), cosmopolitan social capital is valuable, particularly because it cannot be gained through consumption, unlike cultural capital (Beck, 2006; Hebdige, 1990; Nava, 2002; Ollivier, 2008; Szerszynski & Urry, 2002).

## **Methods and data**

I interviewed people who host on the home-sharing platform Airbnb, which lists 2 million homes in 191 countries (Chesky, 2016) and dominates the market for for-profit home-sharing in the United States. A total of 43 in-depth interviews of one to one and a half hours were conducted. Following the interviews, respondents were asked to complete a short survey that included demographic information. Because I was interested in

guest–host interactions, the sample was limited to hosts who (a) rent out space in the home they live in, rather than renting out a separate property, and (b) have hosted at least five times, to ensure that they have enough hosting experience to draw from. One participant who had only hosted three times was also included because of her numerous relevant experiences as a guest. All quoted hosts are given pseudonyms. The research project was approved by the Boston College Institutional Review Board.

Sharing economy sites are disproportionately used by young and college-educated adults (Smith, 2016) and this is mirrored in the interview sample. The participants, residents in Greater Boston, were aged 21–36 (mean age 28.85). Thirty of the participants were white, the remaining 13 were black, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and Asian. I did not recruit participants through academic networks, but nonetheless ended up with a highly educated sample. Sixteen of the participants had graduate degrees, and 22 had completed or were in the process of obtaining a four-year bachelor's. Four had two-year associates degrees, and one had 'high school' as his highest education level completed (education data on one participant are missing).

The sample bias is partly explained by the general appeal of the sharing economy among highly educated Americans, and the deliberate sampling of young adults, but also because educational attainment in Greater Boston is above the national mean. A little less than 30% of the adult US population has completed at least a BA degree, compared with 45% in Boston and 75% in Cambridge, MA (US Census, 2016). There are additional reasons that the geographic focus is not representative of the rest of the country. Greater Boston is in a historically Democratic state with a diverse population, it has a thriving technology sector, numerous universities and research institutes, and has among the lowest unemployment rates in the US (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). These conditions suggest that the typical Airbnb host in this region will be a person who has been well exposed to cultural variety and is less dependent on the alternative income than others in the sharing economy (see Schor, Atwood-Charles, Cansoy, Ladegaard, & Wengronowitz, 2017).

## **Analysis**

Sociability is an important motivation for participation in home-sharing services such as Airbnb (Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015; Lampinen & Cheshire, 2016; Schor, 2015), and many people enter the sharing economy because they yearn for a socially connected and morally attuned economy (Fitzmaurice et al., 2018). The present study supports these findings. Participants say money is an important incentive, but they also find the guest–host interactions meaningful. A paradox emerged when I asked hosts about these interactions. Participants say that they want guests with familiar characteristics, but they also laud their encounters with the Other.

### *Familiarity*

It has been argued that home-sharing hosts are forced to screen potential guests for their own protection (Ravenelle, 2018). My participants are not without concerns, but few have had really bad experiences, and most hosts are adamant that their guests will behave.

My findings suggest that when hosts exchange messages with potential guests they do so in part because they prefer people who are in some ways like themselves. In the words of two participants, they want to ‘get a sense of who you are’ and ‘what you are doing in Boston.’ Hosts want guests they deem trustworthy, but also relatable.

Wei, a 26-year-old man from Shanghai who works as a healthcare analyst, explains why he likes hosting people who are in the same professional field as him (about half of his guests are):

We have a lot of interaction. Maybe they are an RN [registered nurse], maybe they are attending a conference in Boston. So we have a lot we can discuss ... I have one guest comes from University of Michigan, [where] he is doing the operation research in the healthcare system. My job is the lab operation. ... he is also getting a master’s degree, but his is an engineering degree, more focused on the operation research, process, redesigning, and mine is a policy degree, but I really want to learn more about the operation engineering side because that can really help me in my work. Also, I [have] a certification [that he wants to pursue].

Amir, a 21-year-old Iranian man who came to Boston to study filmmaking, is ‘pretty liberal’ and has had people from ‘all walks of life’ staying with him. He once rejected ‘a very old couple from South Carolina because I thought ... they might not be very open minded.’ He explains that:

If I had the option to have two guests that one of them likes like ... I don’t know, in twenties, thirties something like that and one is like fifty, sixties ... I would prefer the younger one because it’s just like easier company.

*(Why is it easier?)*

I don’t know. Maybe they are like me ... we have more relatable conversations.

Amir’s one exception confirms the rule: ‘It was just one time [a] professor from UK was staying, and I didn’t mind that he was like, sixty, seventy. He was such a cool guy.’ Salman, a 26-year-old who was born and raised in Pittsburgh and now lives in Cambridge with three flatmates, who are all renting out their rooms when they are away, says that they vet potential guests:

We don’t want a new guest maybe staying for two weeks to a month in the middle of the three housemates that all get along that all have similar personalities and somebody who is maybe bringing a lot of people over or taking over the living room, taking over the kitchen. ... We know that okay, maybe I’m going to hold off on saying yes to this person who wants to book the room. I’m going to wait a couple of days and see if somebody else will ask to request it.

Salman says they’re ‘looking for people that have similar lifestyles to us.’ Due to the substantial demand they experience, they are able to hold off on guests who could potentially disrupt the house mood, until ‘somebody else’ gets in touch.

### *Automatic filtering*

Participants suggest that Airbnb guests are, by virtue of using a sharing economy platform to find accommodation, likely to be adventurous, outgoing, and frequent travelers who are 'more interested in experiencing the city than having sort of a resort-like experience.' Karen, a white 33-year-old researcher, is one of several hosts who claims that Airbnb users are distinct:

Like just sort of frequent travelers ... They're understanding that they're staying in someone's home and because I think that you get reviewed and they get reviewed, they want to get a good review too because they want to be able to keep getting, you know, being able to reserve places ... I just feel like there's just this sort of general community feeling [among] people who uses Airbnb, especially those who use it frequently.

Airbnb guests are frequent travelers who ascribe to a 'community feeling' among users, and they are up to date on how the platform and the reciprocal review system works. Helen, a white 25-year-old, also sees Airbnb guests as a particular type:

I think that Airbnb attracts a different type of person than somebody who would just want to stay in a hotel. The first woman that we had, Marie, she was from Estonia – we extended her trip. She was great ... She wanted to stay at an Airbnb place instead of a hotel because she traveled a lot for work. When she stays in a hotel she just comes home at night, sits in her room alone, it's lonely. And she likes doing Airbnb because she can come home and have people to talk to, and hang out with, and have dinner with.

Twenty-five-year-old Ben, who is white, has a master's degree, and considers himself part of the upper middle class, says he and his partner hit it off with a guest from Switzerland and ended up spending 'a lot of time' with him the week he stayed in their home. He recalls similar experiences and theorizes that they occur because Airbnb 'attracts a certain type of traveler.' Like Karen and Helen, and many others, Ben suggests that Airbnb users look for social experiences, not just a cheap place to sleep. Rob, a black American man who has family in Jamaica, believes the distinct characteristics of Airbnb users makes hosting safe: 'Because it takes a certain type of person to even do peer-to-peer, the risk is kind of automatically filtered out.'

### *Cherry picking*

Despite the widespread belief that Airbnb users have some broad characteristics in common, the vast majority of the participants vet requesting guests. Typically the vetting is brief – a quick scan of the guest's profile and the initial booking request – but sufficient to give hosts a sense of control of the kind of people they might allow into their homes. As seen in the sections above, participants are open about their guest preferences, and implicit in their statements is that certain people are picked over others. Some hosts are quite explicit about it.

Emilio, a white 33-year-old marketing consultant who was a research assistant in college and says he is used to being around academics, explains that he has priced his space

‘a fair amount below what I could get’ because it ‘allows me to be very picky.’ He has by his own estimation accepted about 5% of all requests, because people who are going to ‘cause me no problems’ are more valuable than ‘profit maximizing.’ Asked how he filters out his guests, he says he looks for ‘the reason for being in town’:

As long as there is an academic or hospital affiliation or, you know, as long as they are doing something with an academic association or medical institution, that’s all the filtering I need ... If their English is high quality, that’s a good signal. If they work in the tech startup world, that’s something I would look for. If they were raised in a western style environment ... You know, I’d say I’ve hosted a number of people over the years who come from cultures that are very different from my own. It usually leads to, I wouldn’t say conflict, that would be overstating it, but it leads to discomfort. Just to give you an example, one time I hosted someone from, it was somewhere in Eastern Asia. I don’t know where exactly. The food they cooked smelled awful.

Emilio thinks of himself as an outlier host because he is not interested in getting to know his guests, and he does stand out in my sample. He is, however, like many others in the sense that he wants familiarity. To Emilio, cultural familiarity reduces the likelihood of getting guests who are ‘high maintenance,’ which many other hosts also want to avoid. Emilio says that every time he has taken on someone who he ‘kind of knew in the back of my mind they could be a problem, it’s never been worth it.’ Salman says that he would sometimes discuss potential guests with his flatmates. On one occasion, one of his cohabitants, who was going away for a trip, listed his room on Airbnb and got four overlapping inquiries:

He gave us within an email a little rundown, a little description of the four. Then at the end of the email he kind of told us what he thinks, who he is leaning towards. So the two that he was leaning towards were two students coming here for a type of course at Harvard. ... So we appreciated that. That he was reaching out and double checking with us.

*(The other two, do you remember the details on them?)*

The other two? No, I don’t remember.

Several hosts research their potential guests to get an idea of who they are and to verify that they use legitimate pictures and names, or as 27-year-old Jacob puts it, to make sure they are ‘real.’ Salman suggests that someone without a digital presence is suspicious:

I will ask them like ... can I have your last name? Can I check you on Facebook? I’m not going to add them, but I just like to make sure that this is a functioning individual in society. Somebody who is really coming in for a purpose. So I like it when they say ... I’m coming to Harvard for a course for this amount of time with this program. It’s something that’s real, something that I can Google.

Lisa, a white 29-year-old who takes pride in her research skills, says she screens and rejects a lot of people, often based on web searches. The first guest she had was extensively vetted:



I found a guy who worked in Seattle at Microsoft – I mean, I see pictures of him, I knew he was in the hiking club, I knew that he had bought a house a few years ago. And, like, I felt, like, okay, I knew he was going to be kind of dorky and weird, but that's fine, like, that's a perfect candidate in my view.

Lisa rarely accepts guests without having a 'decent idea of their background.' Implicit in the filtering practices of hosts like Lisa is the notion that people are suspicious until proven innocent. She admits that her research and vetting might exclude some groups: 'Sometimes it's hard because a lot of people that we have are Europeans, so it's a little bit more difficult to Google.' I did not ask participants if their filtering amounted to discrimination, as it would be difficult to assess the validity of their answers (interviewees would presumably be reluctant to admit to racial discrimination, for example). However, I did leave ample room for reflections on discrimination, e.g., by asking for examples of rejected guests and how they assess potential guests, and it is striking that very few hosts expressed clear anti-discriminatory policies.

### *Cosmopolitan aspirations*

More than three-quarters of the participants highlight the worldliness that hosting brings into their lives. While they want guests who are like themselves, in many respects they also welcome otherness. Amir listed his bedroom on Airbnb when his girlfriend went back to Teheran to 'make some extra money,' and finds the experience 'interesting.' When I ask why, he highlights the wide span of nationalities among his guests:

I've had like 17 trips, and like interesting guests from like, all over the world ... I guess the diversity of like, people coming and like staying over is interesting ... I had like, people from Europe, and that was nice. I could talk to them and know where they're from, like what they viewed back in the country. I had a guest from Sweden and Amsterdam ... I'm a filmmaker. So I'm interested in characters and getting to know people, like their background, like how's life back in their home.

While Greater Boston gets many visitors from Europe, it is notable that most of the participants highlight guests from that particular part of the globe. David, a 30-year-old data scientist, has hosted hundreds of guests. When asked to recall specific people and experiences that are memorable to him, he smiled, and enthusiastically said their names as they came back to him.

I really enjoyed spending time with my guests. I was really happy with how many Europeans were coming. There was a young couple from Munich. They had only started dating like a month before they decided to like take a trip to America. It was so cool because, you know, they were there for four or five nights, and it's almost like we're ... you know, they're learning about each other as I'm learning about them. It was so fun. We got along so well. We were close in age and everything. We went out a few times. That was fun. I think we even like, smoked weed together. ... So they were great ... I'm blown away by how many of their names I still remember.

David enjoys spending time with guests, and is particularly ‘happy with how many Europeans were coming.’ Hannah, a white 30-year-old programming teacher who has hosted about 100 Airbnb guests describes her ideal guest:

Like a young traveling girl, hopefully of another nationality. That I find a lot of common ground with, but is extremely different from me because I want to like, learn from them in that way. So I mean, different race, different family upbringing, different culture, but similar as in like age, love to travel, you know fundamentally educated at least that we can like, chat. That type of thing is awesome.

Like most of the participants, Hannah prefers hosting people who are ‘different ... but similar.’ She wants to learn from the otherness of her guests, but for the encounters to be ‘awesome,’ the same person also has to be familiar and relatable.

### *Traveling without traveling*

Several participants say that hosting is ‘like travelling’ because they get to interact with and learn from the cultural Other. Helen enjoys hosting because she gets to meet new people and can talk to them about ‘their culture, and language, and lifestyle and everything.’ She adds: ‘I’d feel like I was, like, missing that piece.’ Rob says that through hosting, you ‘get to experience the world without leaving your home.’ His example of ‘experiencing the world’ is the time he spent with his most recent guests, a couple from Belgium: ‘Now I know things about Belgium that a local would know, and the way they do things.’ To Rob, meeting people from different cultures has transformative potential:

The more people I meet, the broader my perspective comes, and the more agreeable I can become, and the more understanding I become. So I think as a person you’re more well-rounded because you’re able to pull these perspectives out that you got from other people, because I understand how these people live in this country, and how these people live in this neighborhood, and the reasons why, because they give you that. And people like to talk about their problems, and even if it’s a cultural problem, then people talk about it. You get to see their perspective.

Marge, a 26-year-old interior designer, shares a flat with her 34-year-old partner, Ethan. Two of their rooms are listed on Airbnb. Asked what they like about hosting, they say in separate interviews, like Helen, Rob, and others, that hosting is to ‘travel without traveling.’ Marge explains that she started hosting in part because she couldn’t afford to travel internationally. Having ‘people from all over the world in my home’ and other regions in the United States was a good alternative:

You make friends while you’re traveling I feel like because it’s part of conversation[s] you strike up. So that would happen without me going anywhere, which is interesting. I definitely enjoyed that, hold that responsible for continuing to do Airbnb.

Ethan, who works as a bartender, is of a similar view:

You basically kind of get to travel without traveling. You get to meet all these different cultures, you get to learn from these different cultures. You get to have these really interesting interactions and learn random words in different languages, and it's just a really rewarding cultural experience.

In search of an adequate example, Ethan gets off the sofa and walks up to his collection of liquor and places three bottles of Finnish and Swedish spirits on the table. He explains that these were gifts from a Scandinavian guest. In this living room, the two had chatted 'about booze.' '[We were] just doing some tastings of the stuff he brought. I was like, oh what is this from, and where did that come from, and what the hell is [that]. It tastes great, I will say that. Super sweet.' To Ethan, the spirit-tasting is not just about a meeting of minds – recall that Ethan is a bartender – but also a way of traveling without leaving his home. Through hosting, he was introduced to Scandinavian tastes.

### *Representing the local*

Several participants say that hosting brings them inside the trips of their guests, and that they often take on an ambassadorial role. David, who considers it a privilege to represent Boston, says 'it started meaning so much to me that these people considered it so special that I was part of their vacation or their trip.' Salman, analogously, says he will keep hosting in part because 'I like when I'm familiar with an area, and I can be a resource to newcomers who are not familiar with that area,' and Ethan, again, enjoys showing guests around:

I'm so excited to tell them about where the best place to get a lobster roll is, where the best place to get Boston cream pie ... [a host] is a friendly welcoming person who makes you feel comfortable, but also integrates you into local culture.

When participants like Ethan and Salman see Boston's culture as local culture, they adopt the view of the traveler, the visitor, and the cultural Other. While Hannerz (1996) argues that one cannot feel a strong sense of belonging to both the nation-state and the world as a whole, Beck (2003) claims that cosmopolitanism generates a logic of non-exclusive oppositions that embody a principle of 'this-as-well-as-that' (p. 16). The cosmopolitan perspective, Beck (2002) claims, is 'an imagination of alternative ways of life and rationalities, which include the otherness of the other'; it is 'thinking and living in terms of inclusive opposition' (p. 19). For hosts such as Ethan, interactions with foreign guests is like traveling, and by showing them around he also embraces his home.

Hosts have cosmopolitan aspirations – they want to learn about the Other, they enjoy having foreigners and/or well-traveled people in their lives, and in some cases they take active part in the experience of learning about the world through traveling. Clearly, a cosmopolitan disposition is not cultivated in a weekend. When a host welcomes a French couple into her home on a Friday and sees little of them until they are off again on Sunday, the encounter is superficial. However, when such meetings are amassed, and more relational interactions are included in the mix, hosts bring the cultural Other into themselves and their world. That machinery produces cultural and social capital.

### *Social capital*

Only a few of the participants made close personal friends through the platform, but most have in some way expanded their social networks and thus the potential and actual resources that they have access to. Even Emilio, who stated that he does not want to interact with his guests, has stayed in touch with some former guests. He has shared several meals with two guests, went to a play with a third, and talks ‘a lot’ with a fourth. Others make deliberate efforts to get to know their guests. Jacob ‘met a lot of really cool people’ through hosting and stays in touch with most of them. The majority of the hosts are somewhere between Emilio and Jacob: they enjoy the social aspect of hosting, and have established weak ties with a small minority of their guests.

To some participants, these ties span across the world. Amir, the Iranian student, says he got some ‘interesting feedback’ on a business idea from a guest who taught entrepreneurship in London. Asked if he is going to contact him, he says he might: ‘I wouldn’t just like contact to him to be in touch. [But] if I had like a good reason I wouldn’t mind honestly to be in touch with him, but I don’t know if I have had reason yet.’ The filmmaker guest is another weak tie for Amir. He Googled the guest ‘because he was a filmmaker and I wanted to see his portfolio [and] saw a couple of his films online,’ and might get in touch with him because he is about to move where the filmmaker is based:

We kind of had a conversation on maybe getting together, and I was like, yeah, sure. I follow him on Twitter too, and this hopefully leads to something good. He’s a good kid. He stays at [American Film Institute in Los Angeles]. So it’s a very good school, so. I hope maybe even to collaborate in the future.

David says many of his guests tell him to reach out if he visits their parts of the world, because they would ‘love’ to ‘meet up.’ He would be comfortable with taking them on their word: ‘I would be more than happy to reach out to guests and say, hey, I will be in your city. Would you like to meet up? Do you have any recommendations? I would feel very comfortable.’ Asked to give specific examples of guests he could contact he struggles a bit, because there are ‘plenty’:

The couple from [Cologne]. Kris [and] Patricia from Munich. The Portuguese couple, Andreas and Maria. Oh man, I had a really fun time with these two French guys. They were buddies, and they were just coming to party. They were fun. It was ... I’d have to go find them. I’ve had so many guests. Like, I have, we went to a few house parties during their stay. Like, we had such a fun time. Francois and I don’t remember anymore, but if I was ever in Marseilles I would definitely hit those guys up. We would have an awesome time ... There [was a woman] from Seattle, Washington. She works for a restaurant group, and I love to eat, and I love dining. I love to cook. So we cooked together, and we talked so much about that. She said whenever you’re back out in Washington, let us know ... Yeah, they paid me to stay at my house, but whatever. I don’t know, maybe I’m comfortable blurring those lines a little bit.

Salman, who travels a lot for work, says that he is more likely to visit places where he can ‘rekindle the relationships and friendships that I have in different places.’ He says

hosting has given him more opportunities to do this. As an example, he mentions a ‘very nice’ French-Canadian couple who stayed with him:

I had no interest in Montreal whatsoever before meeting ... this couple from Montreal, then it just like, it gives me a little bit of information about the city. Okay, now I’m interested in it because I met somebody who had a positive impression on my life. Now I have an interest in going. Then from there I would seek out this couple. I would seek out these two people to meet up with.

Will, a white 33-year-old real estate manager, is also making travel plans that are at least partly inspired by his interaction with Airbnb guests:

The first guests I had, two girls from Germany ... They were just adorable. Like, we connect ... Then like, they were in California, and they were going back to Germany, and then they had like, a layover in Boston. So they flew here, and they were like, that day in the morning I liked something on their Facebook, and then one of them messaged me like, Will, we’re like in layover in Boston. We’re going to be here for eight hours and have nothing to do. Do you want to hang out? I was like, absolutely. I dropped everything I was doing ... My promise is to go visit them sometime.

*(What would you say is the likelihood of you actually visiting them in Germany?)*

The likelihood is great because like, I honor my word, and it was a promise to them. Whether it’s going to happen next year or not, I don’t know, probably not. Maybe two years from now. I mean, I’m going to travel to Europe anyways. So it’s an excuse to go there.

A weak social tie between Will and his German guests was formed during the hosting, and subsequently strengthened by social media usage and an unexpected rendezvous. Because Will ‘honors his word’ and is ‘going to travel to Europe anyways’ he says he is likely to visit them. For some of the hosts, like David, the list of former guests is so long that it is hard to remember guests they might reconnect with one day. Marge is working on a solution to the problem: a map with the contact information of former guests pinned to their respective locations:

[So that] wherever we ended up like going or landing, that we wouldn’t have to run through all of our previous guests and sort of remember who we knew there. We travel a lot so it comes up a lot. We’re like oh, if we’re going here, you know, Ireland. Oh, we’re going to Ireland. Oh, right. The two girls are there. We should probably contact them. Who else do we know?

### ***Awkward encounters***

Hosts and guests form ties when they spend time together. Sometimes, both parties expect the home-sharing experience to be social, e.g., when a guest booked a room in Helen’s home because she did not want to be alone in a hotel, and when Ethan goes out with guests because he enjoys introducing folks to the local culture. Other times, hosts

and guests get to know each other due to the absence of organizational norms. As noted by Schor et al. (2016), practices in the sharing economy are still being worked out. In comparison to many established markets there are far fewer rules and individuals have a great deal of freedom in how they engage with each other. This ambiguity will at times create misunderstandings and awkward situations that make it difficult for the host and/or guest to act according to the other's expectation. Such embarrassing situations, or the potential for embarrassment, make the structure 'elastic,' that is, involved parties will work together to resolve the awkwardness (Goffman, 1956).

Karen invited an Italian guest to dinner because there was a 'natural bond' between the guest and her partner, who is also Italian, and because the guest was alone on Good Friday. But when I asked how they invited her, she said that the guest reached out to them because she did not understand some of the English-written instructions. Helen says she sometimes converses with her guests because 'it might be kind of weird to have someone stay with you that you don't even ever meet.' This 'weirdness' does not exist in a hotel, where roles are crystallized and even unpredictable events are dealt with by written and unwritten guidelines (Sherman, 2007). Ethan says he and Marge once had a 'beautiful experience' and got to know a Chinese guest better because she had made the wrong purchase:

She bought a box of cake mix, thinking that like, she would open the box, and there would be cake inside this box. She had never baked, and she was explaining to Marge, like, there's just no ovens where she is in China ... so she was really kind of sad about it. So Marge was like, okay, alright. She went out and got eggs and the two of them just baked this cake together. She was so happy to have this cake. It was just like, I was like, oh this is such a beautiful experience.

Language problems and a shopping error resulted in an awkward situation, and in dealing with it, Marge got to know her guest. Marge, who travels a lot, says she will 'definitely reach out [to her] if I went to China.'

Like many others, Amir usually saves guests' phone numbers in his contact list. Because his phone automatically adds all contacts to Snapchat, he is now connected with several former guests through that network, even though this was never his intention. Emilio, who tries to keep his interactions transactional, says he got to know four guests through conversations in the kitchen:

I would say what facilitated [getting to know guests] was the interacting in the kitchen. It, you know, I'm Italian. So it feels a little weird to interact around food and not talk to somebody. If we were interacting, and interactions went really well, then we kept interacting.

Ben's first guest was a young man who was 'reserved and withdrawn,' which made his stay 'awkward' due to the layout of the apartment and the relative lack of privacy for the guest: 'you literally can't give anyone space in our apartment because they're in your living room and you get from, like, our room to the kitchen, you walk through their room.' He attempted to assuage the awkwardness by 'kind of trying to talk to him and, like, get him out of his shell a little bit.'

Karen, again, says the terrorist attack on the Boston Marathon in 2013 got her to reach out to her guests, because she really did not know what to do:

I got to know them because ... he finished the race just before the first bomb went off ... I went down to talk to them right as soon as I got home from work. ... They were really, you know, totally shaken up, of course. They were incredibly impressed with sort of the city's camaraderie. People were giving clothes to the runners because they just ran and then had to walk back and they were freezing from their sweat ... So they wanted to like do laundry and things like that I wouldn't often. ... We don't allow people to do laundry. We don't and obviously in that situation I was like, please, just do whatever you want. ... I stayed downstairs with them for a little while ... Just talking to them and hearing their stories because I think they were like in shock a little bit ... they came back the next year. I knew then that I could have made more money but felt like they were sort of our bombing guests so I let them stay again for cheap.

The shock facilitated interaction, made Karen and her partner toss aside hosting norms, and even resulted in a return visit the following year. This is not the only example of shock events having an impact on guest–host interactions and relations. A former guest contacted Ethan and Marge because she remembered that they were going to France around the same time as the country's capital was attacked in November 2015:

Sandra who is coming tonight, she is a repeat guest ... she actually reached out to us ... So we were right in Paris when all that happened. Right away she sent a message, this was like four months after she had left, and she just sent a message being like, hey, I remember you were telling me, like you were supposed to be in France like around this time. Are you guys okay?

Like most Airbnb hosts we've talked to, Ethan and Helen's guests typically stay for a few days and then move on. But during the moments they have together, some of which are shaped by mistakes and unexpected events, ties are formed.

## Discussion

My first central finding is that the income-generating function of Airbnb also helps hosts accomplish a cosmopolitan sociability that, under certain circumstances, produces cosmopolitan capital. Participants say that by hosting they are experiencing the world – they meet people, learn from different cultures, and acquire new perspectives. Some of these encounters produce weak social ties that outlive the initial hosting relationship. A majority of the participants have means to contact former guests and would be comfortable doing so, or are actually in touch with them. Such ties are often formed because hosts and guests desire a social relationship, but another factor is that the peculiarities of unprofessional hosting create awkward moments that are fertile for social interaction. In hotels, organizational routines and professional training are put in place to increase efficiency and reduce ambiguity, but in shared homes, interaction is sometimes facilitated by 'weirdness.'

The second central finding is that hosts want both familiarity and difference. Due to insufficient data about the guests it is impossible to say if the preference for familiarity

is due to class homophily, but an implicit and sometimes explicit dislike of ‘too much’ difference is found throughout the sample. And yet, hosts highlight the cultural and geographical diversity of the people they get to meet. When probed for specific examples of memorable interactions, their stories invariably included the otherness of the guest, such as details about where they were from, where they had been, and what they were doing. Familiarity and difference seem contrary, but the periphery of each one of them overlap like a Venn diagram, and the ideal-typical guest to the hosts is a hybrid – she or he is different, but also familiar. She or he is ‘comfortably exotic.’

Hosts experience at least some conflicting requests and are therefore forced to make choices, and it logically follows that some guests are selected over others, by their preferences. While I can only speculate on the exact measure of such discriminatory practices, in part because it is not possible to get valid data about this through interviews, most hosts say that they vet their guests in some way or another. The Eurocentric guest preference arguably ushers in the cultures of Western Europe and North America, much like the global movement of expatriates who are from (or were educated in) those parts of the world. Marge is a rare case of genuine cosmopolitanism, i.e., someone with an intellectual and aesthetic openness towards divergent cultural experiences (Hannerz, 1996). Like many others she says hosting is ‘like traveling,’ but when I asked her to explain, her first example is when she hosted a Mandarin-speaking couple who were ‘fighting, like bickering’ in their rented bedroom, a ‘not-really-typical experience’ she felt she could only have if she was living in China. She says that hosting people from different parts of the world puts her in ‘uncomfortable situation[s]’,

... so you end up just kind of opening your mind to unusual things or different things, and the differences that we all have as people from ... numerous countries around the world and how different we all are, just an empathy for that ... as opposed to a fear.

To most hosts, the ideal guest is what they often called a ‘low maintenance’ person who has a cultural background that is interesting, but at the same time makes hosting easy.

Airbnb now asserts that hosts ‘may not ... decline a guest based on race, color, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or marital status’ (Airbnb, 2017), but hosts are still free to decline requests for other reasons and it will be difficult to enforce the policy. While the policy might discourage some discrimination, it can also be argued that the note is another example of how actors in the sharing economy are responsabilized (e.g., Ladegaard, Ravenelle, & Schor, 2017). That is, cases of Airbnb discrimination can now be blamed on hosts. A potential improvement would be to make it harder for hosts to identify the race and location of potential guests. Public profiles on Airbnb currently display given names, and the company asks users to upload ‘clear frontal face photos’ because they ‘are an important way for hosts and guests to learn about each other.’ This information might not be necessary. Studies of e-commerce platforms like eBay have found that reputation systems such as review scores establish sufficient trust for people to engage in economic exchange with strangers (Diekmann, Jann, Przepiorka, & Wehrli, 2014). Mail-ordering a product from a pseudonymous online vendor probably requires less trust than Airbnb hosting, but Airbnb hosts have additional means for establishing trust in their potential guests that could reduce the emphasis on



familiarity. Some hosts rely on Airbnb's own systems, notably identity verification, which ensures that the guest has verified his/her account by uploading a scanned identity card to the website, and reviews from other Airbnb users. Hosts also exchange private messages with potential guests. While the interview data suggest that an inexplicit aim of such communication is often to obtain information about the guest's socioeconomic status and other markers of familiarity, such communication is also an opportunity for two parties to establish sufficient rapport to finalize a booking.

## Conclusion

My participants experience the sharing economy as inclusive. The technology that connect hosts and guests across the world has both literally and metaphorically opened doors to a market through which they can amass economic, cultural, and social forms of capital. This is significant for two reasons. First, the findings illuminate the non-economic opportunity costs of exclusion from the sharing economy and add weight to the argument that the sharing economy may, despite its promises of openness and egalitarianism, increase inequality (Schor et al., 2016, 2017), much like other opportunities that information technology has created (Hargittai, 2010; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Martin & Robinson, 2007; Schradie, 2011; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014; Van Dijk, 2006). Second, this suggests that home-sharing platforms do bring people together across difference, and that if design and regulation prevents or at least reduces discrimination of those who are 'too' different, home-sharing might foster a more genuine cosmopolitanism.

To some participants, contact with the Other reinforces their preference for the familiar. Albert, who has hosted people in Singapore and in Boston, prefers the latter location because he now has 'more Americans than foreigners.' In Singapore, he 'would have some weird experiences sometimes with the language barriers or with strange customs. Sometimes that's interesting and exciting. Sometimes it's you know, more excitement than you care for.' To most hosts, however, otherness is appealing, and evidence in support of the contact hypothesis (see Paluck & Green, 2009) suggests that hosting the Other can be sufficient to reduce prejudice. A recent study found that even a single 10-minute conversation between intergroup members can reduce intergroup prejudice (Broockman & Kalla, 2016), and as I have shown in this study, many guest–host interactions go well beyond that time span. Did I mention that Ethan and Marge first met as guest and host?

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Juliet Schor, Alessandro Gandini, William Attwood-Charles, Luka Carfagna, Mehmet Cansoy, Robert Wengronowitz, and Ruben A. Gaztambide-Fernandez for reading and commenting on this article. I also want to thank Alison Wawrzynek, who conducted 10 of the interviews.

## Funding

This research was funded by the MacArthur Foundation, as part of the Connected Learning Research Network under Subaward #2011-2018.

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