First impressions matter: Shaping the servicescape to address anonymity and trust in peer-to-peer sharing economy services

By Edna Ozuna

The increasing number of multi-unit hosts in peer-to-peer platforms such as Airbnb poses a significant challenge to single-unit hosts, who compete in a highly professionalized market where host-guest interactions have become increasingly anonymous. However, anonymity may undermine trust and affect eWOM, crucial elements for the performance of peer-to-peer platforms, as they heavily rely on mutual trust and positive eWOM to succeed. This study investigated the effects of the presence of hosts' personal decorations and a local welcome gift on eWOM. Perceived anonymity and trust emerge as mediating mechanisms, such that the presence of personal decorations reduced the guest's perception of anonymity towards the host, which subsequently increased guest's trust and their intention to spread positive eWOM. The local welcome gift did not show any significant effects. These insights contribute to servicescape research and offer practical implications for single-unit hosts to differentiate their service experience from that of professional hosts.



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1. Introduction

The *peer-to-peer (P2P) sharing economy* describes a business model in which individuals share temporary access to goods, services, or resources directly with other private individuals, often through a digital platform that acts as an intermediary connecting both peers (Benoit et al., 2017; Wirtz et al., 2019). Particularly in the tourism and mobility sectors, well-known P2P platforms such as Airbnb and Uber have become ubiquitous and have profoundly transformed the way services are consumed, posing significant competition to traditional hospitality and mobility services. Airbnb, for instance, has more than 8 million listings worldwide (Airbnb, 2024a) and reached total revenues of 9.92 billion US dollars in 2023 (Airbnb, 2024b).

In its early days, Airbnb mainly relied on individual hosts renting a single property or an idle space in their home. In recent years, however, there has been a rapid increase in the number of multi-unit hosts who professionally manage several listings (Dogru et al., 2020). Extant research indicates that 63.5% of Airbnb hosts has two or more listings, generating around 69% of Airbnb's total revenue in the U.S. (Dogru et al., 2020). Standardization and operational efficiency enable multi-unit hosts to achieve greater performance, such that a property managed by a multi-unit host generates 27.8% more revenue per available night than a property managed by a single-unit host in a month (Xie, Heo, & Mao, 2021). This poses a major challenge for individual hosts, who compete in a highly professionalized market against multi-unit hosts and even investor firms behind such listings.

Despite the benefits of standardization and professionalization in terms of property management, efficiency, and revenue, it should be noted that these have transformed service delivery from a unique travel experience involving rich interactions with the locals to a purely commercial exchange between two anonymous parties. This shift towards anonymity may allow both hosts and guests to protect their personal privacy (Christopherson, 2007), however, it may also undermine trust between hosts and guests by reducing transparency and hindering the assessment of each other's trustworthiness. Extant literature highlights the essential role of trust for transactions in the sharing economy to occur at all, as it helps to overcome uncertainty, mitigate risks (ter Huurne et al.,

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2017), and influence customers' intention to spread positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). In turn, eWOM contributes to instigate trust in potential new guests (Sundararajan, 2019), who rely on others' reviews and experiences to inform their booking decision during the pre-core service encounter.

While some guests may appreciate the standardized and anonymous character of a professionally managed rental property, previous studies suggest that both physical and social components of the servicescape (e.g., Guttentag et al., 2018; Lu, Cai, & King, 2020; Lyu, Li, & Law, 2019; Tussyadiah & Zach, 2016) are key for shaping the guest's overall service experience. The *servicescape* describes the physical environment where services are performed, delivered and consumed (Bitner, 1992). Research across a variety of services industries and contexts (e.g., Brüggen, Foubert, & Gremler, 2011; Harris & Ezeh, 2008; Parish, Berry, & Lam, 2008; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996) informs our understanding of the role of the servicescape on customers' cognitions, behaviors, and evaluations of the service. Our study builds on these findings to examine the impact of physical and social components of the service environment in P2P accommodation services, as an exemplary prototype for a larger class of services.

With regard to the service experience, our considerations are based on the model of service encounters of Voorhees et al. (2017), which delineates three phases that span all potential encounters between the customer and the service provider: *pre-core* (i.e., information gathering and decision-making process), *core* (i.e., service delivery and consumption), and *post-core* (i.e., service evaluation) encounters (Voorhees et al., 2017). This holistic view of the service process and its division into separated phases had been previously established in service literature (e.g., Bolton et al., 2014; Fliess & Kleinaltenkamp, 2004; Moeller, 2008). Specifically, our research deals with the *core service encounter,* which represents "the moment of truth" or the period during which the primary service offering is provided to the customer (Voorhees et al., 2017).

In light of the above, our study explores two strategies for individual, single-unit hosts to address the challenge of competing against professional hosts within the platform, namely by tackling anonymity through memorable first impression cues at the core service encounter. First, we propose that the presence of host's personal decorations and the impression it generates on guests may lead to reduce their anonymity perception of the host, to enhance trust, and subsequently to increase guests' intention to express positive eWOM. This is attributed to the positive affective and cognitive states that may be evoked in the guest by the home-like environment with salient elements of the host's personality. Second, we posit that the implementation of a host-initiated relational effort (i.e., a local welcome gift) and the impression it generates on guests may also be a valuable instrument to reduce anonymity, to build trust, and to encourage guests to express positive eWOM. This is due to reciprocity (Palmatier et al., 2009), to the enhanced quality perception of the service experience resulting from the local character of the gift (Domínguez-Quintero, González-Rodríguez, & Paddison, 2020), and the emotional bond that the gift fosters between parties (Zhang, Xiong, & Lee, 2020). Although some of these aspects have been studied separately in a variety of service contexts, including P2P accommodation services (e.g., Lyu, Li, & Law, 2019; Shuqair, Costa Pinto, & Mattila, 2019; Suess et al., 2020), we find that the exploration of both physical (i.e., presence of host's personal decorations) and social (i.e., a local welcome gift) components of the service environment as strategies to address anonymity, and their repercussions on eWOM, a vital element for both platforms and service providers, has been neglected in empirical research so far.

In this sense, *we aim to investigate the impact of first impression cues during the core service encounter in a P2P shared accommodation setting, namely specific attributes of the servicescape and a host-initiated relational effort on guests' positive eWOM intentions, and to test the psychological mechanisms underlying the effect.* In particular, this study examines how the presence of decorations that reflect the personality of the host, as well as a local welcome gift understood as a relational effort of the host, contribute to a reduction in guest's perception of host's anonymity. This in turn is associated with an increase in guest trust in the host and subsequently, greater guest's intention to express positive eWOM.

Our study contributes to existing knowledge in three main ways. First, we extend previous literature on the impacts of attributes of the servicescape in sharing economy services, particularly in P2P accommodation services. This is, as we investigate psychological (i.e., perceived anonymity, trust) and behavioral outcomes (i.e., positive eWOM) elicited by the presence of host's personal decorations in the rental property. By doing so, we respond to the call for research of Suess et al. (2020) to investigate P2P customers' perceptions and experiences with home-like environments, particularly by examining "specific attributes included in the accommodation homescape that influence travelers' outcomes" (p. 490). Our findings indicate that the inclusion of personalized decorations in the rental property that reflect the host's individuality and character reduces the anonymity perception of the guest towards the host. This in turn enhances trust and increases guests' intention to express positive eWOM. Given the key role of eWOM (e.g., online reviews, ratings) for the performance and success of both P2P platforms and service providers (i.e., hosts),

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our study sheds light on the relevance of the physical surroundings to affect the customer experience, and to subsequently influence their behavior.

Second, we explore the effectiveness of a common relational effort in P2P accommodation services, namely a local welcome gift, as an attempt of the host to create a good impression and signal a friendly attitude towards the guest. By doing so, we respond to the suggestion of Qiu et al. (2023) and test a personalized welcome strategy represented by a local welcome gift, as a potential mechanism to reduce perceived anonymity and strengthen trust. Interestingly, we do not find empirical evidence to support the hypothesized effects, showing that such a widespread practice among P2P hosts does not generate the desired effects, at least in terms of positive eWOM.

Third, building on Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), we test the role of perceived anonymity and trust as mediating mechanisms explaining the effects of personal decorations and a local welcome gift on positive eWOM. Our results indicate that guests who visit a rental apartment where personal items of the host are displayed, in comparison with guests who visit an apartment without such elements, exhibit a reduced perception of anonymity towards the host. This, in turn, has a positive effect on their trust in the host, which subsequently affects their intention to express positive eWOM. Conversely, hosts leaving a local welcome gift for their guests in the rental apartment has no impact on either perceived anonymity or trust. Consequently, no significant effect on positive eWOM is observed. In this sense, we extend previous research on anonymity and trust formation in P2P sharing economy services by analyzing them in the core service encounter, in contrast to previous studies that have mainly examined these issues in the pre-core service encounter phase (e.g., Banerjee, Lens, & Pal, 2022; Ert & Fleischer, 2019; Pera, Viglia, & Furlan, 2016; Teubner et al., 2024; Tussyadiah and Park, 2018). The insights of our study are valuable for marketing and service practice as they stress the importance and benefits of personal components in P2P transactions, even though professional mechanisms (e.g., property management companies, remote listing management, property management software) allow hosts to improve operational efficiency. These findings support the view of extant research (e.g., Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016; Zhu et al., 2019; Mao & Lyu, 2017) that travelers seek for the social beyond the purely transactional component when choosing P2P accommodation services and highlight the relevance of core service encounters for customers' overall judgment of service performance (Voorhees et al., 2017).

2. Literature review

In the P2P sharing economy, particularly in hospitality services, the physical and social attributes of the servicescape, along with anonymity, trust, and eWOM, represent significant areas of interest. However, they have not yet been linked in empirical research. Table 1 lists selected publications in these four areas, especially in the context of P2P sharing economy services, to delineate the contribution of our study to diverse research fields.

2.1. Impression cues: Attributes of the servicescape and local welcome gifts as instruments of social penetration

Social penetration refers to the process of gradually developing more intimate levels of communication and relationship depth as trust and comfort increase, so that people start sharing more personal information about themselves (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Based on extant literature, our research examines the impact of servicescape attributes (i.e., presence of personal decorations of the host) and a local welcome gift as instruments of social penetration to generate positive impressions on the guest, tackle anonymity, and foster trust.

2.1.1 Attributes of the servicescape

> *"We've had multiple comments that it's furnished as a family cabin and not as an 'investor property'. It's our only property and we regularly visit it ourselves, so everything we need to make ourselves comfortable is there to be shared with guests as well - from the furniture, equipment, design, etc."*
>
> — Forum entry dated March 3, 2023, by Airbnb host spince (username) on Reddit

The ability of the physical environment where services are performed, delivered, and consumed (i.e., the servicescape) to affect customers' cognitions, emotions, and behaviors was first conceptualized by Bitner (1992). It posits that customers perceive their surroundings holistically as the combination of the dimensions of spatial layout, functionality, signs, symbols, and artifacts (Bitner, 1992). Over the years, this conceptualization has been expanded to incorporate other dimensions that affect the service experience, including social stimuli (Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007) and the natural environment (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2011).

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Table 1. Review of Selected Empirical Research

Reference	Focus of Investigation	Theoretical Background	Industry Context	Research Design	Key Findings
Impact of the Servicescape on the Guest Experience					
Lyu, Li, & Law (2019)	Exploration of key dimensions that determine the service experience of Chinese Airbnb customers	Literature	P2P accommodation services	In-depth interviews	- Customers prefer P2P accommodations over traditional commercial hotels mainly due to the relational, social, and cultural experience. - Rather than standard hotel rooms, customers prefer unique accommodations with distinct architecture, interior design, and a home-like atmosphere.
Park et al. (2019)	Assessment of the relationships between the servicescape (substantive and communicative), positive affect, satisfaction, familiarity, and behavioral intentions	Literature	Hotel	Survey	Communication and cultural aspects of the servicescape significantly influence guests' emotional and behavioral responses. However, the influence of the substantive (i.e., the physical surroundings) servicescape is greater than the influence of the communicative (i.e., social) servicescape.
So, Kim, & Oh (2021)	Effects of environmental stimuli on perceived enjoyment and repurchase intention	Mehrabian-Russell Model	P2P accommodation services	Survey	- Atmospherics play a significant role in evoking guests' positive emotions. - Offering an accommodation experience that integrates the local culture is relevant for guests. - Personal artifacts such as pictures, books, or decorative items may increase the authenticity of the experience.
Challenges of Anonymity and Trust					
Lapidot-Lefler & Barak (2012)	Effects of anonymity, invisibility, and lack of eye-contact in online disinhibition	Literature		Experiment	- Broader conceptualization of anonymity, including non-disclosure of personal identity, invisibility, and lack of eye-contact. - In relation to toxic disinhibition in online environments, lack of eye-contact, leads people to feel less exposed, more anonymous, and more inclined to engage in hostile behaviors.
Lu, Cai, & King (2020)	Customer response to service failure and recovery depending on the personal vs. professional charater of the interaction with the host	Agency Theory	P2P accommodation services	Experiment	- A personal (vs. a professional) communication approach increases host–guest trust and plays a critical role in the service recovery process. - Establishing trust through host–guest interactions is more important than financial compensation after a service failure.

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Table 1. Review of Selected Empirical Research (continued)

Reference	Focus of Investigation	Theoretical Background	Industry Context	Research Design	Key Findings
Challenges of Anonymity and Trust (continued)					
Rains (2007)	Impact of anonymity on source credibility and influence in computer-mediated communication	Adaptive Structuration Theory		Experiment	- Information from an anonymous source is perceived as less trustworthy, less persuasive and less benevolent than from a non-anonymous source. - Perceived anonymity of the source is negatively related to the source's competence.
Teubner et al. (2024)	Study of affective (profile photos) and cognitive (ratings) trust cues for match-making in P2P platforms	Elaboration Likelihood Model	P2P accommodation services	Experiment	- An online profile photo is an instrument to kick-start trust formation, however, this beneficial effect decays over time. - The mere existence of a rating system in the platform affects trust behavior. This effect becomes stronger over time.
Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)					
Cheng et al. (2019)	Trust peception based on online reviews	Literature	P2P accommodation services	Content analysis	- Host's attributes play an important role in guests' trust perception and encourage potential users to book. - Positive reviews build trust and increase booking intentions.
Li et al. (2024)	Exploration of different types of user-generated content in Airbnb and how they attract travelers	Social Cognitive Theory	P2P accommodation services	Spatial panel data anaylsis	- Two types of user-generated content in Airbnb were analysed: Stories and reviews. - Stories work as a push factor that attracts newcoming guests. - Reviews work as a pull factor for extant guests to compare and select accommodations.
Tussyadiah & Zach (2016)	Analysis of guests' online reviews to explain major service attribues of P2P accommodation services	Literature	P2P accommodation services	Lexical anaylisis	- The social component of host–guest interactions is consistently linked to higher rating scores and positive eWOM. - Emphasis on the experiential characteristics of the service. Guests appreciate staying in authentic, non-touristic settings.

An extensive body of marketing and service literature has been devoted to study the impacts of the servicescape on people's behaviors and cognitions, showing that it affects customer spending (Brüggen, Foubert, & Gremler, 2011), loyalty (Harris & Ezeh, 2008), satisfaction (Choi & Kandampully, 2019), the overall perception of service quality (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996), among others. With regard to hospitality services, empirical research has shown that the aesthetic features of hotels (e.g., décor, furnishings, design) play a significant role in guests' perception of the service experience and affect their satisfaction (Choi & Kandampully, 2019), positive affect (Park et al., 2019), perceived value (Worsfold et al., 2015), engagement (Choi & Kandampully, 2019), booking intentions (Nanu et al., 2020), and quality perception (Lee, 2019). Specifically, Lee (2019) suggests that the inclusion of plants, water, and natural light in hotel design elicit strong positive emotional (i.e., pleasure, arousal) and behavioral responses

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(i.e., intention to spend more money) in guests. Similarly, the study of Lockwood & Pyun (2019) found that room spaciousness positively affects customer pleasure and an aesthetically pleasing hotel design results in increased customer spending.

Although to a lesser extent, servicescape research has also been conducted in the context of P2P accommodation services. In relation to the physical surroundings, and similar to the findings in hotel settings, extant studies suggest that interior design elements (Lyu, Li, & Law, 2019), room spaciousness (Guttentag et al., 2018), and cleanliness (Tussyadiah & Zach, 2016), play a central role in shaping the service experience. Moreover, personal artifacts of the host such as pictures, books or decorative items increase the perceived authenticity of the overall experience (So, Kim, & Oh, 2021). In terms of the social dimension of the servicescape, previous studies indicate that host authenticity (Shuqair, Costa Pinto, & Mattila, 2019), personal communication (Lu, Cai, & King, 2020), and home-like feeling of the place (Lyu, Li, & Law, 2019), are key factors that influence customer trust and loyalty (Lu, Cai, & King, 2020; Shuqair, Costa Pinto, & Mattila, 2019). In particular, the home-like feeling perceived by guests in an Airbnb setting (as opposed to a hotel setting), has been found to significantly contribute to the well-being of healthcare travelers (Suess et al., 2020). To refer to the "sense of feeling at home" evoked by the physical surroundings in accommodation services, Suess et al. (2020) introduced the concept of the *homescape*, which describes "a context-based framework with a travelers' evaluation of atmospherics and design, social and community integration, and self-identity dimensions related to their accommodation setting" (Suess et al., 2020, p. 481) and represents comfort, familiarity, and social support (Suess et al., 2020). Given that travelers may opt for P2P accommodation services over hotels due to social interactions, home benefits, and local authenticity (Guttentag et al., 2018), we find a pertinent research gap concerning the role of such atmospheric and social aspects, which are typically present in accommodations managed by individual rather than professional hosts, to impact the guest's service experience. In this sense, we posit that a home-like environment with salient elements of the host's personality may be psychologically relevant for guests and elicit positive affective and cognitive states.

2.1.2 Local welcome gifts

> *"I never expect a welcome gift but when I've stayed at places that do leave one, it's always been a really pleasant surprise. I definitely reflect extra touches like that from the host that show they went the extra mile when I review. I feel like it sets a nice tone for the stay and subsequent interactions between host and guest."*
>
> — Forum entry dated October 24, 2019, by Airbnb guest chaidiamond (username) on Reddit

In general, gifts are an effective way to strengthen interpersonal relationships. A gift may have symbolic, economic, or utilitarian value; however, the gesture of gift-giving is imbued with emotional and relational connotations (Burgess, 1982). In commercial relationships, gifts are more than just economic exchanges, they are powerful tools to initiate or enhance customer–brand relationships (Eggert, Steinhoff, & Witte, 2019), to evoke reciprocity (Palmatier et al., 2009), to strengthen customer perceptions of relationship investment, and to impact customer spending (Marchand et al. 2017).

In P2P accommodation services, hosts' efforts to strengthen interpersonal relationships are particular because they might establish not only a business relationship with their guests, but also a social relationship, which involves both meeting guests' accommodation needs as well as providing them with a home-like feeling (Qiu et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2022). According to extant research, some of the hosts' relational efforts or strategies to generate positive impressions among their guests include presenting favorable personality traits, showing friendly attitudes, ensuring service quality, and promoting social interaction and sharing (Qiu et al., 2022). In addition, Qiu et al. (2023) highlight the importance of local experiences and a personalized welcome strategy to cultivate an emotional connection between host and guest, reinforce the host's identity and increase satisfaction. In terms of the local character of the products or experiences offered to the guest as a gift, those that are perceived as culturally authentic are often seen as more valuable (Zhang, Xiong, & Lee, 2020), can enhance the quality of the experience (Domínguez-Quintero, González-Rodríguez, & Paddison, 2020), and can initiate or strengthen the emotional bond between giver and recipient (Zhang, Xiong, & Lee, 2020). Leaving a welcome gift is a common strategy employed by hosts to evoke positive feelings in their guests, however, to the best of our knowledge, no empirical research to date has explored the outcomes of local welcome gifts in P2P accommodation services, for which we identify a pertinent research gap.

2.2. The challenges of anonymity and trust in P2P sharing economy services

Anonymity refers to the perception of not being identifiable (or not being able to identify another person) in a social context, due to the lack of information available to assign an identity to the person in question (Christopherson, 2007). Lapidot-Lefler & Barak (2012) propose a broader conceptualization of anonymity, more adjusted to the characteristics and interactions in online environments, which additional to the perception of unidentifia-

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bility also encompasses invisibility, the non-disclosure of personal identity, and the absence of eye-contact.

Communication research informs our understanding of the dynamics and outcomes of anonymity in online contexts, highlighting its potential to facilitate free expression while concurrently fostering negative behavior. In a digital environment such as a P2P platform, the desire to remain anonymous may result from the need to protect the personal privacy by exercising control over others' access to oneself (Christopherson, 2007). Similarly, anonymity may facilitate the unhindered expression of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, without the fear of being identified and socially evaluated (Christopherson, 2007). For example, it offers an opportunity for customers to express their true feelings and give negative online reviews after a poor service experience (Deng et al., 2021). Nevertheless, this uninhibited expression can also act as a catalyst for hostile online conduct, such as damaging others' public image or using aggressive language (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). In addition, information stemming from an anonymous source is often deemed to be less trustworthy and less persuasive than information originating from an identifiable source (Rains, 2007).

In relation to the role of anonymity in the P2P sharing economy, it poses a significant challenge because it undermines trust by reducing transparency between peers and by hindering the assessment of each other's trustworthiness. Therefore *trust*, defined as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor" (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, p. 712), is an essential element for transactions in P2P sharing platforms to occur at all. To gain insight into the relevance of trust in P2P business models, particularly when compared to B2C models in the sharing economy, it is vital to consider the specific characteristics and dynamics of trust within both contexts. According to extant literature (Hoffmann, Hartl, & Penz, 2017; Lu, Zhao, & Wang, 2010), trust can be invested in two parties in P2P environments: trust in the vendor (also known as institutional trust, i.e., in the website or platform) and trust in the peer (i.e., in the Airbnb host or guest). Trust in the vendor refers to the belief that the platform is capable of providing quality services (Lu, Zhao, & Wang, 2010), while trust in the peer is related to the performance assessment of the (usually anonymous) individual providing the service and the belief that they act in good faith (Lu, Zhao, & Wang, 2010). In general, customers perceive that transacting with an unknown individual carries greater risks than transacting with a company (Hoffmann, Hartl, & Penz, 2017), which underscores the relevance of trust-building mechanisms in P2P platforms.

With regard to trust in the service provider (i.e., the peer counterparty user), which is our object of investigation, previous research indicates that a number of factors can influence the perception of their trustworthiness, particularly depending on the way in which they present themselves on the platform. Teubner et al. (2024) state that the presence of photos increases social presence in the P2P interaction, which positively affects trust. In this line of research, Ert & Fleischer (2020) investigated the role of Airbnb hosts' photos on guests' decisions, finding that guests infer host's trustworthiness and attractiveness based on their personal photos, and hosts with a more trustworthy photo tend to charge higher prices on their listings. Similarly, Banerjee, Lens, & Pal (2022) suggest that female (vs. male) Airbnb hosts, and positive (vs. neutral) facial expressions in their profile pictures have positive effects on potential guests' trust and on their subsequent intention to book. In addition, the written self-presentation of the service provider can also influence how they are perceived by their peer users. Tussyadiah & Park (2018) found that Airbnb hosts who describe themselves in their profile as "well-traveled" are perceived as trustworthy by potential guests. Similarly, the study of Pera, Viglia, & Furlan (2016) showed that a compelling self-presentation using storytelling facilitates trust formation among Couchsurfing users. We observe, however, that empirical research on anonymity and trust in the P2P sharing economy has been mainly focused on examining these challenges in the pre-core service encounter, i.e. when potential guests are gathering information and deciding whether to book a certain listing. The study of these issues in other phases of the service experience has been neglected to date, for which our research is concerned with the examination of instruments for tackling anonymity and fostering trust during the core service encounter.

2.3. The role of eWOM for platforms and service providers in the P2P sharing economy

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) refers to "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). eWOM, usually expressed in the form of online reviews, is crucial for P2P sharing economy platforms, as they heavily rely on trust, community, and reputation to succeed (Cheng et al., 2019; Ert, Fleischer, & Magen, 2016). Online reviews are a powerful instrument for customers to evaluate the service experience and express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the service. In this sense, subsequent users tend to rely on such reviews to make their travel decisions, as they believe that they are honest and represent the genuine experiences of previous travelers (Arica et al., 2022; Li et al., 2024).

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In a study of different types of user-generated content on Airbnb, the findings of Li et al. (2024) underline the importance of reviews as a pull factor for existing platform users to compare and select accommodations, such that positive reviews increase the likelihood of a reservation. Thus, eWOM is critical for the success of individual service providers, whose performance is significantly influenced by the quality and quantity of reviews on their listings. Negative reviews of users can represent great obstacles to market access, illustrated for instance by Uber's practice to ban riders with below-average ratings (Rifkin, Kirk, & Corus, 2023; Sandler, 2019) or Airbnb suspending or removing listings with low overall ratings (Airbnb, 2024c). Moreover, Mao & Lyu (2016) found that eWOM has a significant influence on travelers intention to use Airbnb again. Hence the need of both platforms and peer providers to encourage users to post online reviews of the service, especially after a positive experience. A significant body of literature has empirically examined the relationship between eWOM and trust, establishing trust as key antecedent of the intention to express positive eWOM (e.g., Cheng et al., 2019; de Matos & Rossi, 2008; Terres, dos Santos, & Basso, 2015; Thakur, 2018). Our study follows this line of research and expands it by investigating factors that may contribute to trust building, namely information cues from the physical environment during the core service encounter.

3. Conceptual model and hypotheses development

Based on Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), we derive hypotheses about the effects of impression cues during the core service encounter, namely the presence of personal decorations of the host and the presence of a local welcome gift on positive eWOM. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model.

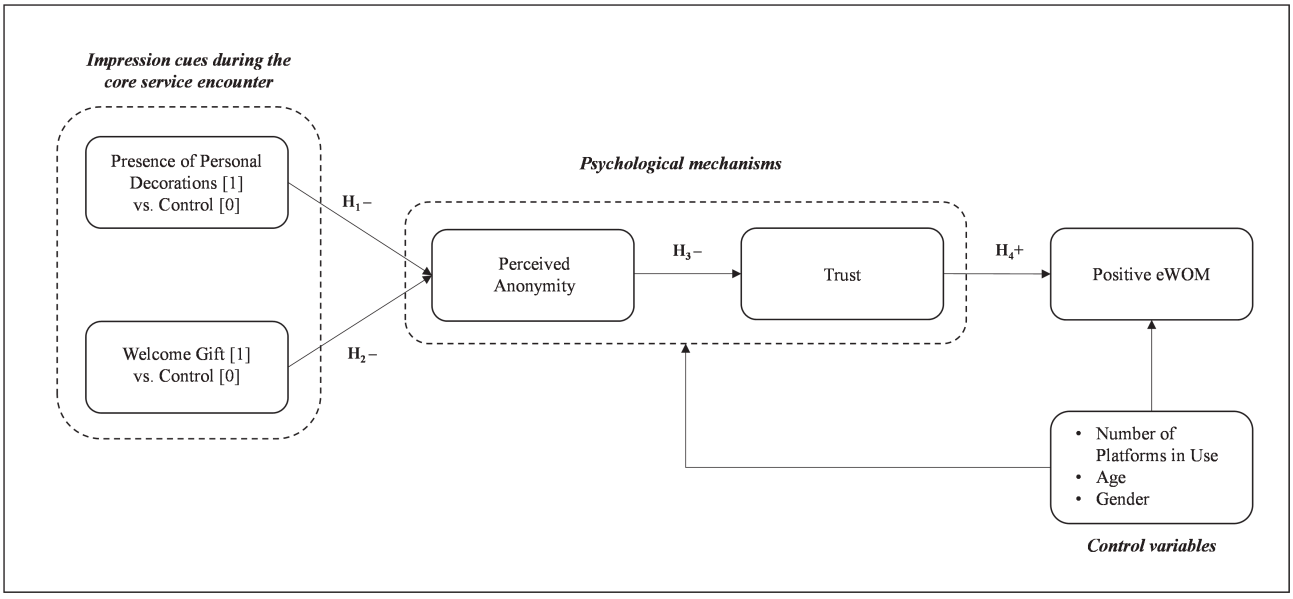

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

3.1. Social Penetration Theory

Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) proposes that interpersonal relationships evolve from a superficial to a more intimate level as individuals gradually disclose more personal information (Altman & Taylor, 1973). To exemplify the concept of social penetration, Altman & Taylor (1973) employ the metaphor of peeling an onion, illustrating the progression from superficial to more intimate aspects or "layers" of the person. As relationships develop, individuals form emotional bonds, establish trust and cultivate intimacy. However, this process is contingent upon self-disclosure, the deliberate process of revealing personal information (Altman & Taylor, 1973), which should be reciprocated to establish a balanced environment for both parties (i.e., reciprocity principle).

The original theory assumes that interpersonal relationships occur face-to-face. However, to understand the nature and development of such relationships in online environments, the Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) has been expanded to the Hyperpersonal Model of Computer-Mediated Communications (Walther, 1996). This model incorporates the impact of anonymity, an inherent feature of online interactions, on the depth and speed of relational development. Walther's (1996) model posits that anonymity allows individuals to exert control over the information they disclose and over the way in which they present themselves, enabling them to

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selectively disclose certain aspects of themselves depending on the dynamics and the expected outcomes of the online relationship. This concept, known as selective self-presentation, facilitates the conveyance of the most desired impressions about oneself (Walther, 2007).

3.2. Effects of impression cues during the core service encounter on perceived anonymity

Based on Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), specifically on its extension to online relationships through the Hyperpersonal Model of Computer-Mediated Communications (Walther, 1996), we hypothesize the effects of the presence of personal decorations and a local welcome gift on perceived anonymity.

First, we suggest that physical attributes of the rental property (i.e., decorations) which reflect the personality of the host should result in a reduction of guest's perceived anonymity towards the host. Drawing upon Walther's (1996) concept of selective self-presentation, the host can strategically manage the depth of self-disclosure, depending on the expected outcome of the interpersonal relationship, namely positive eWOM from the guest, by conveying favorable impression cues. Upon arrival at the rental apartment, the guest interprets these cues, is able to infer personal characteristics and form an impression of the host, even if they have never met in person. This on-site impression helps the guest either to add further details to the information known about the host during the booking process, or to gather completely new information, thereby creating a more detailed impression of the host as a whole and becoming less of an anonymous peer on an online platform.

H_1: *The presence of personal decorations in the rental apartment reduces the guest's perceived anonymity towards the host.*

Second, and in line with the above, we propose that the presence of a local welcome gift in the rental apartment serves as an informational cue that facilitates the guest to shape the impression of the host by inferring positive traits. The local character of the welcome gift serves as a medium of cultural exchange that fosters reciprocity and community building (Burgess, 1982). In this sense, we posit that the presence of a local welcome gift in the rental apartment should result in a reduction of perceived anonymity.

H_2: *A local welcome gift from the host reduces the guest's perceived anonymity towards the host.*

3.3. Effects of perceived anonymity on trust

P2P sharing platforms allow people who do not know each other to offer or use personal assets that might be intimate (e.g., the own living space). This entails a high degree of not only financial but also personal risk (Ert, Fleischer, & Magen, 2019; Frenken & Schor, 2017); users are exposed to uncertainty and potential opportunism of their counterparty, for which they must invest a considerable amount of trust in both the platform and in the peer service provider (ter Huurne et al., 2017).

In our study context, the host has revealed (a) intimate information about himself through the personal decorations present in the apartment, and (b) his intention to generate a favorable impression of himself, gain guest's affinity and exchange cultural traits through the local welcome gift, which serve to reduce the anonymity perception of the guest towards the host. In line with Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), the host's voluntary disclosure of personal information should facilitate the development of the host–guest relationship, particularly by enhancing the level of trust that the guest places in the host.

H_3: *A reduced anonymity perception of the guest towards the host increases guest's trust in the host.*

3.4. Effects of trust on positive eWOM

We use Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) to hypothesize the effects of trust on positive eWOM. When searching for offers on a P2P sharing economy platform, users are often confronted with a variety of information regarding different providers and services available. Given the intangible nature of services and the fact that they cannot be tested in advance, uncertainty is especially high (Grossmann et al., 2019). Learning about the experiences of other users in the form of online reviews and ratings is a helpful source of information, which greatly influences the purchase decision and reduces uncertainty (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2010; Naujoks, 2021).

According to the reciprocity principle of Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), as one person reveals personal information, the other is likely to reciprocate with similar self-disclosure, leading to deeper levels of intimacy in the relationship. Considering that the guest might not have personal contact with the host during the stay or might not be interested in such a relationship depth, we propose that the guest would reciprocate the trust placed in him through a positive behavior, namely by expressing positive eWOM about the host.

H_4: *Guest's enhanced trust in the host increases guest's intention to express positive eWOM about the host.*

3.5. Perceived anonymity and trust as serial mediators

In view of the previous considerations and drawing on Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973),

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we derive the following hypotheses about the effects of impression cues during the core service encounter, namely the presence of personal decorations and a local welcome gift on positive eWOM, serially mediated by perceived anonymity and trust.

H_5: *The presence of personal decorations in the rental apartment has a positive effect on guest's intention to express positive eWOM, serially mediated by a reduction in the guest's perceived anonymity towards the host, and an increase in the guest's trust in the host.*

H_6: *A local welcome gift from the host has a positive effect on guests' intention to express positive eWOM, serially mediated by a reduction in the guest's perceived anonymity towards the host, and an increase in the guest's trust in the host.*

4. Empirical study

To test our conceptual model, we empirically investigated the effects of the presence of personal decorations (H_1) and a local welcome gift (H_2) on perceived anonymity. Subsequently, we examined the effects of perceived anonymity on trust (H_3) and the impact of trust on positive eWOM (H_4). Finally, we tested the serial mediating role of both perceived anonymity and trust (H_5 and H_6), as psychological mechanisms underlying the effects of first impression cues during the service encounter (i.e., presence of personal decorations and a local welcome gift) on positive eWOM.

4.1. Research design, participants, and procedure

We conducted a field experiment to examine the effects of personal decorations and a local welcome gift on guests' positive eWOM, serially mediated by perceived anonymity and trust. For this purpose, we booked an apartment through a P2P sharing economy platform in a touristic region in the Northern coast of Germany. In a unifactorial design with three groups, we manipulated the presence of personal decorations and the presence of a local welcome gift. The absence of both personal decorations and a local welcome gift constituted the control group. An a priori power analysis was performed using G*Power version 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al., 2009) to calculate the minimum sample size required to test the proposed hypotheses. Considering Cohen's (1992) threshold for a medium f^2 value =.15, a significance level of $\alpha = .05$ and power = .95, the results indicated a required sample size of n = 107. In light of this, we recruited a sample of 125 German participants, their mean age was 26.7 years and 42.7% were women. Regarding their experience with P2P accommodation services, 85.6% indicated they are current users of at least one platform and on average, had stayed 7.5 nights in a non-hotel accommodation in the past year.

Participants were invited to visit the apartment and were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental groups: (1) presence of personal decorations, (2) presence of a local welcome gift, or (3) control group. Prior to every visit, the apartment was arranged accordingly. In addition, to ensure control over the elements to be manipulated, any items that could be associated with the real host of the apartment (e.g., personal belongings, pictures, toiletries, etc.) were removed. For the experimental group with the presence of personal decorations, we included elements that reflected the personal identity of the fictitious host including their social relationships (e.g., pictures with family and friends), their interests and activities (e.g. books, a guitar, a sheet music, a basketball, a yoga mat, board games), and other decorative elements to emphasize the personal character of the apartment (e.g., candles, flowers, plants). For the experimental group with the presence of a welcome gift, we removed all decorative elements from both the real and the fictitious host and prepared a gift basket with local foods, which was placed on the center table for the participants to see. Both in the group with a personalized decoration and in the group with a welcome gift, the fictitious host had left a handwritten card welcoming the guest and, in the case of the basket, indicating that it was a gift for the guest. In the control group, we removed all decorative elements from the fictitious host, as well as the gift basket and the handwritten card.

Upon arrival, participants were given a brief scenario describing the fictitious online platform *bemyguest.com*, through which they had booked a two-night stay. We asked them to imagine that they had just arrived at the apartment they had reserved. We encouraged them to take a tour at their discretion, get an impression, and familiarize themselves with the place, just as they would do when arriving at a vacation rental in real life. After completing their tour, participants filled out an online questionnaire which gauged perceived anonymity, trust, positive eWOM intentions, and demographic information.

4.2. Manipulation- and realism checks

The results of the manipulation checks supported the effectiveness of our treatments. On a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree", participants indicated whether there were personal decorations and items of the host in the apartment ($M_{personal\ decorations}$ = 6.29, SD = 1.31; $M_{control}$= 2.10, SD = 1.52; t = 15.22, p <.01), and whether they found a local welcome gift from the host at their arrival ($M_{welcome\ gift}$ = 6.65, SD = 1.34; $M_{control}$ = 2.98, SD = 2.22; t = 11.52, p <.01). The results of the realism checks confirmed that participants perceived the situation as realistic (M = 6.10; SD = 1.23), that they could easily imagine the

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described situation (M = 5.77; SD = 1.29) and envision themselves within it (M = 5.70; SD = 1.18).

4.3. Validity assessment

We adapted multi-item scales to measure perceived anonymity (Hite, Voelker, & Robertson, 2014), trust (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001), and positive eWOM (Alexandrov, Lilly, & Babakus, 2013) (see Table 2). All items were rated using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree". For data analysis we used partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4 (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2024), because it is a suitable method for analyzing complex models with several indicator relationships (Hair et al., 2019). In line with the procedure of Hair et al. (2019), we initially analyzed the reflective measurement models and subsequently assessed the structural model.

First, the reflective variables showed internal reliability and convergent validity, according to the factor loadings (≥.82), Cronbach's alphas (≥.88), rho_A (≥.88), and average variance extracted (≥.74), which exceeded the common thresholds (see Table 2). To test for discriminant validity, the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2014) was applied, and scores were found to be below the 0.90 threshold (see Table 2). Second, the structural model showed a good fit according to the standardized root mean square residual of the saturated model (SRMR = .05), and no collinearity issues were found as the variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below 5 (Hair et al., 2019) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Construct Measures

Construct	Items [a]	Factor Loading	M (SD)	Cronbach's α	rho_A	AVE	VIF	HTMT			Construct Correlations		
								PA	TR	PW	PA	TR	PW
Perceived Anonymity (PA) (Adapted from Hite, Voelker, & Robertson, 2014)	It is difficult for me to identify [my host] as an individual.	.87	4.49 (1.49)	.88	.89	.74	2.43	N.A.	.42	.06	N.A.	-.37	-.03
	The personality of [my host] remains unknown to me.	.87					3.04						
	I do not know who [my host] is.	.88					2.80						
	[My host] is an unknown, anonymous person to me.	.82					1.89						
Trust (TR) (Adapted from De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001)	[My host] gives me a feeling of trust.	.90	4.74 (1.27)	.88	.88	.81	2.57	.42	N.A.	.22	-.37	N.A.	.20
	I have trust in [my host].	.92					2.90						
	[My host] is trustworthy.	.88					2.18						
Positive Electronic Word-of-Mouth (PW) (Adapted from Alexandrov, Lilly, & Babakus, 2013)	*How likely would you be to do any of the following…*												
	Say positive things about [my host]'s apartment.	.93	5.86 (1.40)	.90	.93	.83	3.54	.06	.22	N.A.	-.03	.20	N.A.
	Recommend [my host]'s aparment to others.	.91					2.47						
	Recommend [my host]'s aparment to someone else who seeks my advice.	.90					3.04						

Notes: M = mean, SD = standard deviation, AVE = average variance extracted, VIF = variance inflation factor, HTMT = heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations, N.A. = not applicable.
[a] Items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

4.4. Results

We assessed our conceptual model using PLS-SEM, in order to simultaneously examine the effects of the presence of personal decorations and a local welcome gift on positive eWOM, serially mediated by perceived anonymity and trust. This approach has been used in extant marketing and service research to analyze mediation effects (e.g., Eggert, Steinhoff, & Witte, 2019; Wagner, Hennig-Thurau, & Rudolph, 2009).

We conducted a bootstrapping procedure of 5000 samples in SmartPLS 4.0 (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2024) and one-tailed testing for the directional hypotheses. We used dummy coding to transform the three categories of our independent variable into sets of distinct dichotomous variables, where the control group (no personal decorations and no local welcome gift) represented the reference category (Henseler & Fassott, 2010)[1]. We included respondents' demographics (i.e., age and gender) and experience with P2P platforms (i.e., number of platforms currently in use) as covariates in our model. Detailed results are reported in Table 3.

In H_1 we predicted that the presence of personal decorations in the apartment should have a negative effect on the guest's perceived anonymity towards the host. The path coefficient for this relationship was negative and significant (β = -.60, p <.05), supporting our prediction. Similarly, we proposed in H_2 that a local welcome gift from the host should lead to a reduction of the guest's perceived anonymity towards the host, however we did not find empirical evidence to support this claim (β = -.03, p =.43). Subsequently, we posited that a reduced anonymity perception of the guest towards the host should increase

1 *For robustness purposes, we ran the model with PROCESS 4.2 and the results were consistent.*

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guest's trust in the host (H_3). The data revealed a negative, significant effect in this case (β = -.37, p <.05), in support of H_3. Furthermore, in H_4 we predicted a positive effect of trust on positive eWOM, which was confirmed by our empirical data (β = .20, p <.05).

Finally, we put forward two hypotheses regarding the serial mediation roles of perceived anonymity and trust. First, we predicted that the presence of personal decorations in the apartment should have a positive effect on guest's positive eWOM, serially mediated by perceived anonymity and trust (H_5). In this case, we found a marginally significant indirect effect (β = .04, p = .08), for which H_5 is marginally supported. Second, regarding the hypothesized effect of a local welcome gift from the host on guest's positive eWOM, serially mediated by perceived anonymity and trust (H_6), we find no empirical support for this claim as the path coefficient between a local welcome gift and perceived anonymity was not significant and consequently, no indirect effect was found (β = .01 , p = .44).

Table 3. Results

Structural Path	β	t-Value	Hypothesis Test
Direct effects			
Presence of personal decorations → Perceived anoymity	-.60***	2.89	H_1 supported
Local welcome gift → Perceived anonymity	-.03	.16	H_2 not supported
Perceived anonymity → Trust	-.37***	4.16	H_3 supported
Trust → Positive eWOM	.20*	1.97	H_4 supported
Presence of personal decorations → Trust	-.18	.76	
Presence of personal decorations → Positive eWOM	-.15	.67	
Local welcome gift → Trust	-.11	.67	
Local welcome gift → Positive eWOM	.01	.02	
Perceived anonymity → Positive eWOM	.07	.08	
Indirect effects			
Presence of personal decorations → Perceived anoymity → Trust	.22*	2.15	
Local welcome gift → Perceived anonymity → Trust	.01	.16	
Presence of personal decorations → Perceived anoymity → Trust → Positive eWOM	.04†	1.39	H_5 marginally supported
Local welcome gift → Perceived anonymity → Trust → Positive eWOM	.01	.15	H_6 not supported
Controls			
Number of platforms in use → Perceived anonymity	.05	.60	
Number of platforms in use → Trust	-.13	1.32	
Number of platforms in use → Positive eWOM	-.04	.40	
Age → Perceived anonymity	.11	1.16	
Age → Trust	-.10	.93	
Age → Positive eWOM	-.06	.45	
Gender → Perceived anonymity	.18**	2.17	
Gender → Trust	-.05	.60	
Gender → Positive eWOM	-.17*	1.67	

Notes: Coefficients represent standardized estimates. One-tailed test for hypothesized effects.
R^2 Perceived Anonymity = 15.6% / R^2 Trust = 20.6% / R^2 Positive eWOM = 11.6% / Model fit SRMR = 0.048
†p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p <.001.

5. Discussion and implications

This study investigated the impact of first impression cues during the core service encounter in a P2P accommodation setting on positive eWOM, specifically the presence of host's personal decorations and a local welcome gift. Our research sought to explore practical strategies for individual, single-unit hosts to address the challenge of competing against professional, multi-unit hosts, who currently benefit from standardized processes in terms of efficiency and revenue. In doing so, we put a special focus on investigating the mediating role of perceived anonymity and trust as psychological mechanisms explaining the effects. While earlier studies have explored

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perceived anonymity in trust in the P2P context during the pre-core service encounter, they have not explicitly addressed these issues during the core service encounter. By means of a field experiment, we managed to capture the impressions that host's personal decorations and a local welcome gift generated in our respondents. We found that the presence of personal decorations indeed reduces the anonymity perception of the guest towards the host, which subsequently increases trust towards the host and guest's intention to spread positive eWOM. In contrast, we found no significant effects of a local welcome gift on either perceived anonymity, trust, or positive eWOM.

We contribute to service research in three ways. First, we contribute to servicescape research, especially in the context of P2P accommodation services, as we investigate psychological (i.e., perceived anonymity, trust) and behavioral (i.e., positive eWOM) outcomes of the presence of host's personal decorations in the rental apartment. The findings of this study are consistent with those of previous research (e.g., Choi & Kandampully, 2019; Lyu, Li, & Law, 2019), suggesting that the physical surroundings exert an influence on guests' cognitions and behaviors, and is a crucial factor in their evaluation of the service experience. Furthermore, extant research indicates that travelers may choose P2P accommodation services over hotels for a home-like (e.g., Li, & Law, 2019; Suess et al., 2020) rather than a standardized experience, and that the presence of personal items of the host (e.g., pictures, books, decorations) may contribute to increasing guest's perception of authenticity (So, Kim, & Oh, 2021). Despite the present study did not explicitly investigate authenticity, it provides substantial empirical evidence for inferring that the presence of personal decorations of the host is indeed an important instrument to shape the service experience and convey the home-like feeling that, according to previous research (Li, & Law, 2019; Suess et al., 2020), users of P2P accommodation services are looking for. Specifically, we put forth that the mere presence such personal items may favor the host–guest connection, as the guest is able to form an impression of the character and personality of the host, who is no longer perceived as an anonymous individual.

Second, our research explores the effectiveness of a common relational effort among P2P hosts, namely leaving a welcome gift for their guests. In doing so, we respond to the suggestion of Qiu et al. (2023) and test a personalized welcome strategy represented by a local welcome gift, as a potential mechanism to reduce perceived anonymity and strengthen trust. To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to empirically investigate this practice in the context of P2P accommodation services. Despite the well-documented positive effects of gifts on personal and commercial relationships (e.g., Eggert, Steinhoff, & Witte, 2019; Marchand et al., 2017; Qiu et al., 2022), we found that a local welcome gift does not contribute to reducing perceived anonymity, enhancing trust or increasing guests' intention to spread positive eWOM in our research context. These findings may be attributed to three factors. First, bearing in mind that the practice of offering welcome gifts or courtesies, irrespective of their size or monetary value, is a widespread custom not only in P2P accommodation services but also in hotels (e.g., a welcome drink, a complimentary bottle of water, coffee or tea in the room, chocolates, etc.), it is probable that guests may assume that such amenities are an inherent component of good service, and as such, must be included. Consequently, guests do not regard these gestures as a relational effort, but rather as a matter of course. Second, guests may fail to identify the local character of the gift if it is not explicitly communicated as such. In consequence, the function of the local gift as a means of cultural exchange (Burgess, 1982) is not fulfilled and it is not perceived as a special gesture. Third, given the reciprocity component of gift-giving behavior in general (Burgess, 1982; Palmatier et al., 2009), guests may question the host's intention behind the gift and be apprehensive about accepting it, as they infer there is an implicit obligation to give something in return.

Third, our research offers a novel approach to investigate anonymity and trust formation in the sharing economy, namely from the perspective of the model of service encounters of Voorhees et al. (2017) and building on Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Previous studies (e.g., Pera, Viglia, & Furlan, 2016; Teubner et al., 2024; Tussyadiah & Park, 2018) have concentrated on the investigation of the outcomes of anonymous communication in digital environments and the examination of initial trust (i.e., during the pre-core service encounter). Specifically, a significant body of literature has been dedicated to the exploration of the information and personal characteristics of hosts displayed in their online profiles that might help to create a trustworthy impression on guests, and how this impression influences guests' decision to select a certain listing. In contrast, our study focuses on mechanisms to address anonymity and foster trust in a subsequent phase of the service experience, namely in the core service encounter, where the initial impression generated during the booking process is put to the test. Our empirical results indicate that the presence of personal decorations in the P2P rental apartment contribute to a reduction in perceived anonymity, which subsequently enhances trust.

The findings of this study suggest two managerial implications. First, the presence of decorations or items that reflect the personal identity of the host such as social relationships, interests, and activities, is a helpful instrument to tackle anonymity, one of the most significant

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challenges for services in the P2P sharing economy. In addition, our data indicate that a reduced perception of anonymity increases guest's trust in the host, which in turn positively affects guest's intention to share positive eWOM. In this sense, hosts should consider incorporating such personal items into the decoration of their rental properties, as this can be an effective instrument for shaping guests' service experience, particularly by evoking a home-like feeling and strengthening social bonds. Through the implementation of this strategy, individual hosts may gain a competitive edge over professional hosts, as they would be able to offer a rich service experience that extends beyond the bounds of mere, standardized lodging.

Second, and contrary to our predictions, a local welcome gift does not have an effect either on perceived anonymity, trust, or positive eWOM. These results suggest that, despite this is a common relational practice by hosts in P2P accommodation services to signal a friendly attitude towards the guest and generate a positive impression, it does not achieve the expected results. Given that preparing such gifts can be a costly and time-consuming endeavor, we suggest that hosts should implement other strategies such as promoting social interaction, providing help (Qiu et al., 2022), or improving communication with their guests.

6. Limitations and further research

Our research offers an initial examination of the role of first impression cues, namely the presence of host's personal decorations and a relational effort of the host represented by a local welcome gift on cognitive (i.e., perceived anonymity, trust) and behavioral (i.e., positive eWOM) outcomes in the context of P2P accommodation services. The limitations of our study suggest some promising avenues for future research.

First, although we were able to deliver a very realistic setting for conducting our field study, it is important to acknowledge that, due to its experimental nature, its external validity may be limited. Furthermore, to ensure the privacy of the real host of the apartment we rented and to carefully control the conditions of the experiment, we created a fictitious host and arranged the scenarios according to the personal characteristics and interests of this fictitious person. Consequently, though very realistic, it is a staged setting. Therefore, we call for further studies that investigate the cognitive and behavioral outcomes of impression cues with real hosts, considering guests' perception of authenticity of the servicescape. Additionally, future research should shed light on guests' reactions and potential negative effects for hosts and platforms if guests do not perceive the servicescape (i.e., the host's personal decorations) as authentic.

Second, in investigating the impacts of impression cues on guests' cognitions and behaviors we only consider leisure as the purpose of the trip. Future studies should explore other purposes (e.g., business, visiting friends or relatives) as contingency factors that may influence guests' trust, perceived anonymity, and intention to spread positive eWOM. Similarly, in our experiment we described a scenario of a two-night stay. Analyzing longer and/or shorter stays could provide insightful findings on the influence of servicescape attributes and relational efforts from the host depending on the length of the stay.

Third, our study revealed that in general, the presence of host's personal decorations in a P2P accommodation is a helpful mechanism for reducing perceived anonymity and enhancing trust. However, we acknowledge that this strategy might not be as effective in other hospitality contexts, given that guests' expectations of the service may vary from one type of accommodation to another. To extend this line of research, we call for future studies to explore boundary conditions of the physical and social servicescape that may influence anonymity and trust across a wider variety of hospitality contexts (e.g., communication, personalization of the service, host engagement, etc.). As well, future research should investigate potential outcomes of first impression cues during the core service encounter beyond eWOM, for instance, reuse intention, willingness to pay, or platform loyalty, to name a few.

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