

Travelling the world sharing your home

Roberta Garibaldi, Francesca Forno
University of Bergamo
Italy
roberta.garibaldi@unibg.it

Means of acquisition and consumption alternative to ownership, in which access is enabled through the sharing or pooling of resources, products and services redefined via the use of technology and peer communities, is increasing. The number of people involved in the so-called sharing economy is growing steadily, and will only continue to increase. The travel industry is the sector most affected by the meteoric growth of sharing and collaborative consumption, with peer-to-peer travel sites like Airbnb and CouchSurfing literally booming. More and more frequently contemporary tourists go beyond the conventional filters and service intermediaries. In fact, thanks to the rapid expansion of information technology, nowadays tourists do not need the intermediation of conventional operators to find what they want and choose between different options. However, the lack of traditional intermediaries increases the real and perceived risk of travelling for tourists, and raises the need to find ways to lower such risk. This article will present a study on the phenomenon of home-swapping, one of the collaborative trends born as a consequence of the spread of new forms of tourism, that we will introduce and examine in detail. It will investigate how trust is built between people engaging in this form of tourism, the so-called home-swappers, and how security is provided in such a system. Moreover, given the lack of empirical studies analyzing the characteristics of the home-swappers this article will contribute to define what their socio-economic profiles, motivations and lifestyles are.

Over the last decades, tourists have greatly refined their tastes and expectations, and their reasons for travelling have changed accordingly. Several studies have talked about a 'new' type of tourist, an empowered tourist, who is becoming knowledgeable and who is increasingly seeking exceptional value for money and time, always looking out for unique, high-quality solutions and for a meaningful personal experience and striving to be engrossed by his/her trip and to feel completely engaged. 'New' tourists want to be more than spectators; they want to be more active and creative (Richards, 2011). They show great appreciation for what seems authentic and not contrived and for places said to preserve local cultural heritage.

The make-up and motivations of contemporary tourists have contributed to create a very favorable context for the development of forms of tourism alternative to the type of tourism often described as the archetype of Fordist tourism, a system of (mass) tourism (Pollock 2012) built on the industrial model of production and consumption, which turned places into products, guests into customers and market segments and experiences into packages. This has led to an increase in the demand for alternative forms of travel, that go beyond the conventional filters and intermediaries that used to characterize the tourist industry, and that place the tourists in direct contact with the local environment, giving value to all that which seems genuine and non-contrived. In economic terms, the "post-Fordist tourism" is based on the idea of *relational goods*, i.e. goods that cannot be enjoyed alone (Zamagni, 2007; Ruisi, 2004); in other words it is a type of tourism that is created and enjoyed through the establishment of interpersonal relationships in which organizers are not just profit-driven, but strive to establish an atmosphere of honest and shared hospitality.

Home-swapping is one of the new collaborative trends born as a consequence of the spread of this new form of tourism. By literally consisting in the mutual exchange of homes over varying periods of time for the purpose of holiday-making, work or study and by occurring directly between house owners from all parts of the world (and thus not envisaging the use of intermediaries), it perfectly seems to constitute an answer to tourists' growing need to enjoy new experiences while abandoning the traditional mass-tourism holidays as mentioned above (Arente & Kiiski, 2006; Grit & Lynch, 2011). It is a new and different way of travelling, that allows tourists to get in touch with local residents and to establish relationships with home owners as well as their neighbourhood.

Surely, the success of non-conventional travel options such as home-swapping has been largely due to the recent advances in information technology. In fact, as often highlighted, the development

brought about by allowing for the constitution of new forms of social interaction and Web 2.0 has had a strong impact on the current commercial environment (O'Brien 2011) including the tourist sector. Digital platforms make it easier for people (in this case tourists) to self-organize, and are therefore essential to enable new forms of collaboration and exchange.

Although home-swapping originated prior to the Web 2.0 era, the Internet has been essential to trigger the recent rapid development of this collaborative form of holiday. The internet, and in detail advanced communication protocol technology, has played such a role mainly by allowing tourists to establish digital connections, thus making it easier to create a relationship of mutual trust among strangers (Arente & Kiiski, 2006; Mosedale, 2011). This has clearly helped to assuage fears, to lower the swappers' perceived risk and it has contributed to foster the reaching of agreements between them. While when first born, in the Fifties, the practice of home-swapping was used to exchange home between networks of people that were not very ample, thanks to IT, swappers from all over the world can nowadays easily communicate on many interactive platforms. Before reaching an agreement swappers often meet each other via Skype and exchange many information or photographs via email, etc., and it is only after having sized each other up that the two parties choose whether to undertake the exchange or not. Furthermore, home-swapping networks and many other online social networking platforms have implemented reputation systems which are becoming an increasingly important component of online communities (Masum, Tovey & Newmark, 2012), based on members' digital footprints and feedback received, which encourage good behaviour, collaboration and new mechanisms for trust between individuals anywhere in the world.

Other means of enhancing trust between swappers and reduce the risks due to the elimination of conventional filters and service intermediaries are the possibility that swappers have to transmit and control information by means of "digital word-of-mouth" (O'Brien 2011), through websites that process offers and requests for home swapping throughout the world. In fact, when registering with such sites or preparing their home before an exchange, members put lots of effort into formulating their profile and setting out their home. Swappers are aware that reputation matters in the online community world, especially if they want to be able to repeat the experience in the future. Finally, in peer-to-peer collaborative tourism, reciprocity is the most important principle: you are entrusting your belongings to a person who will do the same to you. This principle as well greatly encourages trust between peers and fosters security within the system.

Given the recent rapid growth of the home-exchange phenomenon and its ever-increasing popularity, it comes as a surprise how hardly it has been covered academically (Grit, 2008, p.1). Because of the lack of empirical research, in 2013 a structured questionnaire was designed to carry out an in-depth study of the characteristics of the tourists who have embraced home-exchange for their holidays. The self-administered survey of about 50 questions was launched online on 20th April 2013 with a message sent to all members of Homeexchange.com network, one of the most popular home-swap organisations, by the network's central office. The survey covered many issues, and aimed at investigating home-swappers' socio-economic status (level of education, work, type of family), motivations behind the decision to exchange homes for holiday purposes, travelling and consumption habits and satisfaction levels with the services provided by their network.

A very important result of the survey on which this article focuses is the one concerning home-swappers' level of trust. Not surprisingly, given that one must possess a high level of generalised trust in order to exchange his/her home with a stranger, it was found that one significant common feature of home-swappers is their rather high level of generalised trust, i.e. trust towards strangers. In fact, as discussed above, trust plays an important role in the home-swap phenomenon, that was found to be generally more widespread in countries traditionally showing a higher generalized level of trust. Particularly interesting in this respect is the Italian case, as in comparison with other countries, Italians usually score very low with regards to their level of trust towards people they do not know, and as they also have a high sense of home ownership, which makes it hard to lower the risk perceived in entering a home-swapping practice. The data collected in Italy show that Italian swappers present way higher levels of 'generalized trust' than Italian non-swappers. Furthermore, the survey reveals that Italian swappers are highly satisfied with their home-swapping experiences. Similar results were obtained at an international level. These results indicate that home-swapping

might be set to increase. Furthermore, being home swapping intrinsically a phenomenon that entails the creation of a relation with another, unknown person, as we have previously said, and being these relationships the *conditio sine qua non* for the exchange to occur, the results obtained also demonstrate that the trust-building process as well as the risk-reducing factors that we have discussed above, have clearly obtained the desired effect on the home-swappers.

In conclusion, it has to be said that even though the number of people undertaking home swapping has considerably increased over the last few years, home-swapping is still a form of alternative travel which falls within the 'niche market' category. Among the many other results, the survey conveyed revealed that current house-swappers do not perceive high levels of risk associated to the practice of house-swapping. Thus, the future challenge for these networks will be to reach an ever wider audience and to convey the idea that swapping homes is not only a cheap and implicitly sustainable way of travelling but also, and perhaps even more importantly, safe way to visit places and travel around the world.

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