

# New Forms of Discrimination?

—Re-examining the Online Discourses of Racial Discrimination on Airbnb—

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## Abstract

The rapid growth of the peer-to-peer accommodation provider Airbnb has not only created an alternative experience for users but also challenged the theories of racial discrimination that based on other social settings such as school and workplace. Drawing the data from Twitter and other online forums concerning racial discrimination after the Airbnb non-discriminatory policy in 2016, this article examines how different stakeholders see the racial discrimination experiences on Airbnb, as well as the retweet network regarding racial discriminatory posts. By showing the relationship between users' digital profiles and the network of their retweets, this paper contributes to both the theoretical and empirical discussions of online racial discriminatory comments and intergroup perceptions in the sharing economy.

## Research Questions

Airbnb has become one of the most widely-used peer-to-peer platforms that has disrupted the traditional accommodation sector (Cheng 2016). At the same time, however, it also becomes a major platform that creates possibilities for both hosts and guests to choose/reject each other on the basis of race and other characteristics. Issues regarding racial discrimination on Airbnb, such as discriminating against African-American or Asian guests, have been received significant attention from scholars and the public (Edelman et al. 2017; Levy and Barocas 2017; Murphy 2016; Todisco 2015). To fight against direct or unintentional racial discrimination, Airbnb has made a number of explicit rules to implement its non-discrimination policy and make sure all users undertake the principle of equity (Hynes 2016). Meanwhile, the government (e.g., the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing, DFEH) also forces Airbnb to permit the state to test and penalize Airbnb hosts for

racial bias (Levin 2017; Martin 2017).

To date, little research has systematically examined how racial discriminatory comments are presented and interpreted in the sharing economy. This paper aims to unpack such complexity by examining online discriminatory posts and the retweet network about discrimination experiences on Airbnb. To be specific, in this paper I seek to: 1) identify new forms of racial discriminatory comments in the sharing economy (Airbnb) that have not been sufficiently discussed in current literature; 2) explore how different stakeholders (hosts, guests, and advocates) as well as different racial groups, frame the ideas and comments of racial discrimination.

### Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical framework of this paper is grounded on racial discrimination and racial stereotyping theory (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Emirbayer and Desmond 2015; Hughey 2012; Lamont 2000; Omi and Winant 1994; Waters 2014). In particular, I focus on the forms of racial discrimination and racial stereotyping in the sharing economy, as well as how interactions with different racial groups reinforce such stereotypes. I argue that in specific social settings like Airbnb, people's interaction experiences reinforce their respective cultural beliefs and racial stereotypes. To be specific, such platforms end up creating possibilities for both hosts and guests to choose/reject each other on the basis of race and other characteristics.

Thus, the phenomenon of racial discrimination in the sharing economy is unique and different from systemic racism (Feagin 2006; Feagin and Feagin 1986; Gee and Ford 2011; Hughey 2015) as it is less regular and is more relevant to the ways people perceive and interact with each other in their everyday lives, whereupon a defined racial order is constructed.

Furthermore, this paper extends previous studies in the direction that it is not only showing there might be new forms of racial discrimination existing on Airbnb, it also examines the content of online posts about racial discrimination and how people react to such discrimination.

### Data and Methods

#### Research Design

Twitter data and online forum posts will be analyzed for this study. The key advantage of using Twitter data is that tweets are publicly available on a large scale, providing an ideal means to capture the ways people perceive and their public response to a particular topic. Therefore, "tweets" and "retweets" from Twitter concerning racial discrimination on Airbnb will be crawled by using python (packages used include scrapy, selenium, lxml, and requests). Key terms and #hashtags will be used as the identifiers for relevant tweets.

Given the huge amount of posts on Twitter, I intentionally select a specific timing — the

non-discriminatory policy implemented by Airbnb in 2016 when Airbnb officially responded to racial discrimination. Key information are crawled including user tweets, tweet types (tweet or retweet), user's digital profiles, key terms, and the contexts of their discourses. I then analyze the relationship between users' profiles and their retweets.

#### Data Analysis

A software program OpenRefine is used to clean the data to allow for more systematic content analysis. In the second stage, a qualitative text-mining software, Leximancer, is used to identify main themes and concepts in order to provide an initial coding scheme for the whole data set. I use inductive coding and create codes focusing on themes such as contexts, reasons, processes, reactions, and results. Several keywords such as "racial", "discrimination", "interaction", "white", "black", "Asian", "unfair", "difference", "stereotype", "stigma", etc., and other emotional terms (such as upset, feeling uncomfortable or offended) are highlighted. In the third stage, I associate retweets with different groups of users through the inductive process, such as guests, hosts, and advocates, to further identify the relations of the retweet network among different stakeholders.

#### Preliminary Findings

Through comparing the user profiles and their retweet network, who cares more about which issues gets more clear. The preliminary findings show that white hosts are more likely to retweet discriminatory posts. They also retweet more frequently to defend their positions. Through online forum posts we also found that they believe they have the "right" to choose whom to provide accommodation for; whereas people of color more openly acknowledge there is an asymmetrical power relation between hosts and guests on Airbnb based on race/ethnicity, though people of color do not really want to mobilize other users with similar backgrounds. Furthermore, in the paper I also point out that the tweets/retweets of discriminatory posts not only reflect users' experiences in hosting/renting Airbnb, but also show their perceptions of and interaction experiences with other racial groups.