

Airbnb: A brand or a product category?

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Abstract

Airbnb, a peer-to-peer platform connecting guests with short-term accommodation in private housing has afforded entrepreneurs the opportunity to create new economic opportunities for themselves by monetizing a spare room. For many in Kenya, the term Airbnb is used to describe the entire short-term rental industry. Therefore, the study sought to find out from the short-term rental proprietors (i.e., supply-side) their understanding of the term Airbnb. Does it represent a brand or an entire product category? Using snowball sampling, the study interviewed ten (10) short-term rental proprietors in Eldoret, Kenya. This study extends Keller's customer-based brand equity model to cater for brands that may experience genericization. This is where a brand's name becomes synonymous with a general product or service category it belongs to.

Keywords: Airbnb, Short-term rental, Brand Equity, Genericization, Accommodation, Brand Knowledge

1. Introduction

One of the most novel and transformative developments in tourism and hospitality is Airbnb, a peer-to-peer platform connecting guests with short-term accommodation in private housing. This includes spare rooms in private apartments, studios, entire vacant apartments, houses, condos, villas, and more exotic listings like castles and igloos (Fabo et al., 2017). Airbnb has over 4 million hosts worldwide who have accommodated more than 900 million guest arrivals (Airbnb Newsroom, 2021). The rapid proliferation of peer-to-peer platforms like Airbnb has been propelled by innovations in technology that have made it easier for providers to enter the market, made it possible for customers to explore listings, and reduce transaction costs. Another distinguishing feature of these platforms is their supply-side flexibility. Property owners can easily list and delist the selection of products, goods or services they offer (Zervas et al., 2017).

The popularity of Airbnb has impacted on traditional accommodation providers such as hotels and has to some extent threatened their economic sustainability. For example, Austin, Texas, which has a high Airbnb supply/penetration rate, saw a 10% fall in hotel income. In comparison to higher-end, business-focused facilities, the decline had a disproportionately negative effect on "low-end," leisure hotels (Zervas et al., 2017). Dogru et al. (2020) found a 1% increase in Airbnb listings decreases hotel RevPAR (Revenue Per Available Room) by between 0.016% and 0.031% in London, Paris, Sydney, and Tokyo hotel markets. Additionally, the increase in Airbnb service quality has a direct negative impact on hotel sales pattern performance, demonstrating substitution effects (Blal et al., 2018). Morocco had a 10% in tourist arrivals in 2024 compared to 2023, but the overnight

stays in classified establishments such as hotels reduced by 5% (Hadri, 2024). However, the effect of Airbnb on hotel performance may differ across destinations. According to Heo et al. (2019), there is no direct competition between Airbnb and hotels in Paris, and the effect of Airbnb on hotel performance is nonsignificant. Similarly, in San Francisco, California, the inventory of Airbnb listings has no bearing on the projected growth in hotel RevPAR (Blal et al., 2018). Hotel managers in Ghana (2-star and above) felt Airbnb did not pose threats to their business, but managers at the lower grades like guesthouses, budget and 1-star rated hotels saw them as competitors (Issaka, Bansah, & Kuuder (2022). The above-fragmented findings may be attributed to competitive dynamics at different destinations and a variety of research, and methodological approaches used in the studies (Yang et al., 2022).

Airbnb has afforded entrepreneurs the opportunity to create new economic opportunities for themselves by monetizing a spare room or a local experience, in places where such opportunities were often limited (Olingo & Murathe, 2020). Despite Airbnb hosts often lacking formal tourism and hospitality management education or experience they tend to compete with traditional accommodation facilities like hotels (Fischer et al., 2019). However, many visitors appear to disregard the inability to provide consistent service quality since Airbnb provides an alternative value proposition that emphasizes cost savings and a more genuine local experience (Guttentag, 2019).

Private property owners may opt to list their properties on Airbnb primarily as a source of income, to connect with people (social interaction), and to make use of unused space and wastefulness of not using it (Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016). Further, this peer-to-peer platform provides people with relatively low-risk micro-entrepreneurial opportunities to learn and extend their entrepreneurship abilities, and grow their professional network (Sundararajan, 2014). Further, these “micro-hoteliars” are supported by ancillary service providers such as cleaners, interior decorators, gardeners, and couriers (Mahmuda et al., 2022).

The global popularity of Airbnb can be extended to the African continent. In 2018, three out of the top eight fastest-growing countries for Airbnb guest arrivals were in Africa (Airbnb, 2018). Specifically, this study examines the Kenya’s Airbnb business model. Kenya ranked third, with USD 3.9 million, in collective earnings from hosting on Airbnb in Africa (Airbnb, 2018).

Despite property owners renting out accommodation spaces without using the Airbnb platform either partially or exclusively to make reservations, property owners and customers in Kenya often refer to these accommodation spaces as Airbnb. This may be an indication that Airbnb is transitioning from novelty accommodation to a mainstream tourist option. Therefore, this study sought to find out from the property owners (i.e., supply-side) their understanding of the term Airbnb. Does it represent a brand or an entire product category, a phenomenon known as proprietary eponym. Additionally, the study examines the perceptions of proprietors involved in the short-term rental business in Kenya.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework aims to provide a conceptual foundation regarding the effects of high brand awareness and strong brand image on brand names like Airbnb becoming generic or common names.

2.1 Proprietary eponym

According to the American Marketing Association, a brand is a name, term, sign, or symbol used to identify the goods and services of one seller and differentiate it from competition. A brand is the composite of tangible (e.g.,

product) and intangible (e.g. brand name) values and expectations attached to the product by the prospective or current consumer (Moore, 2003).

The phenomenon of a brand name or trademark becoming synonymous with a general product or service category is referred to as proprietary eponym or antonomasia (Kumar & Jayasimha, 2019) or genericization (Clankie, 2005). This can happen when a specific brand becomes so dominant in a market that consumers use the brand name to refer to the entire category of products, regardless of the actual brand (Cova, 2014). For instance, in the U.S. "Xerox" is often used as a verb to describe the act of making copies, even if the machine used is not manufactured by the Xerox Corporation.

Genericization is an involuntary linguistic and social process where a brand's name becomes the generic name for the product category it belongs to (Clankie, 2005). A major drawback of proprietary eponyms is brands may lose legal protection if their original name becomes a generic term for the product/market category they helped create. For example, brand names like aspirin, escalator, and nylon have had their trademarks cancelled. This condition in trademark litigation is commonly referred to as genericide (Taylor & Walsh, 2002).

The scope of this study was limited to viewing Airbnb as a brand that holds favourable brand image and is dominant in providing online short-term rental solutions such that consumers use the brand name Airbnb to refer to the entire category of products. The study does not examine Airbnb's risk of genericide, but rather how the consumers associate the brand name with category label.

2.2 Dimensions of brand equity in the business-to-business (B2B) context.

Brand equity is the incremental utility or value added to a product by its brand name (Yoo et al., 2000). The concept of brand equity is crucial for marketing managers in both the B2C and B2B sectors, as it highlights the value-added and differentiating qualities of brands. These qualities are vital in promoting products and services (Biedenbach, 2012). The Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) by Keller (2001) describes "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand". CBBE was originally developed for consumer markets (B2C) but can also be applied in a B2B environment (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020; Kuhn & Alpert, 2004; Sinčić Ćorić & Jelić, 2015). The CBBE model is suitable for this study because Airbnb deals with two groups of customers simultaneously. It is a peer-to-peer platform connecting guests with short-term accommodation in private housing (B2C), whereas it also deals with property owners who list their property in the platform (B2B). Therefore, for the CBBE model the term customer can refer to an individual or organization. The steps in the CBBE model include salience, meaning, responses and resonance. These are described below with each step dependent on achieving the previous one.

Brand salience is the initial step of CBBE model. Keller's concept of brand salience emphasizes the importance of creating brand awareness that comprises brand recognition and brand recall (Keller, 1993). Brand recognition pertains to the capacity of consumers to identify a brand due to them having previously seen or heard about the brand, whereas brand recall requires that consumers correctly generate the brand from memory (Keller, 2001). Brand recognition affects the probability that the brand will be included in the consideration set, which consists of the few brands that are seriously considered for purchase by a customer (Keller, 2001). Therefore, brand salience can significantly influence brand choice intention (Ngo et al., 2022). In the context of B2B organizations, while undertaking internal branding, it is important to go beyond naming and identifying the brand. It is critical for all members of an organization to possess a comprehensive and current grasp of the brand vision and how they can contribute to its realization (Kotler & Keller, 2012). This can be achieved through training, communication, and monitoring programs.

Brand meaning is the second step and answers the customer question - What are you? It establishes the image of the brand in the minds of customers, and links brand associations with certain properties (Keller, 2001). This comprises brand performance and imagery. Brand performance relates to how a brand meets the functional needs of customers. For example, if the product or service is reliable, how the product looks or feels. On the other hand, brand imagery encompasses the non-functional characteristics of a product or service, focusing on how a brand seeks to fulfil customers' emotional or social requirements. It pertains to the abstract perceptions individuals have of a brand rather than the tangible actions it undertakes (Keller, 2001). Having a strong brand image is beneficial to a company because the number of competing brands advertising in a particular product category can affect consumers' ability to recall communication effects for a brand by creating "interference" in memory (Keller, 1993). Additionally, B2B organizations need to create and communicate differentiation from competitors. Through "framing" B2B marketers can ensure that customers fully appreciate how the company's products and services differ from competitors. This involves understanding how customers currently think and choose products and services within a product category and then determining how they should ideally think and choose your brand (Kotler & Keller, 2012).

Brand responses refer to what consumers believe or feel about a brand. It encompasses how they react to the brand, its marketing initiatives, and other information sources (Keller, 2001). Brand judgment and feeling are crucial components of consumer behaviour and play a significant role in shaping brand performance. Judgements focus on customers' personal opinions and evaluations about the brand. For example, a tourist can make judgments about a destination's quality of resources and infrastructure or even a destination's credibility in terms of perceived professionalism and value of visiting the destination (Yousaf et al., 2017). Developing a business with a solid and trustworthy reputation may bring advantages in the B2B market. B2B buyers typically use corporate credibility as their primary risk reduction strategy (Kotler & Keller, 2012). A company with a high level of credibility may be viewed more favourably.

Brand feelings are customers' emotional responses and reactions with respect to the brand. It is concerned with how the brand affects customers' feelings about themselves and their relationship with others. These feelings can be mild, intense, positive, or negative (Keller, 2001). Tourists' emotional attachment with the destination is dependent on the emotions they hold towards the destination (Liu, 2016). Additionally, brand-related feelings are instrumental in sponsor attitude formation, particularly in the context of sport event sponsorship (Boronczyk & Breuer, 2020). It is often assumed that the B2B brand decision process is rational with emotions being insignificant. This is because B2C brands are more effective in tapping into different types of consumer emotions (Kotler & Keller, 2012; Lynch & de Chernatony, 2004). However, Kotler & Keller (2012) postulate that feelings of security, social approval and self-respect play a key role in customer decisions in a B2B setting. However, for the chemical market (industrial), feelings toward the brands are deemed to be less important (Sinčić Ćorić & Jelić, 2015).

Brand resonance is the final building block in Keller's CBBE model. It refers to the depth of the relationship between a consumer and a brand. According to Keller (2001), there are four categories of brand resonance: 1) behavioural loyalty (repeat purchases, the volume of purchase and repeat revisit intentions of the tourists), 2) attitudinal attachment (a strong personal attachment to the brand), 3) sense of community (kinship or affiliation with other people associated with the brand), and 4) active engagement (becoming brand ambassadors and communicating about a particular brand).

Overall customer-based brand equity occurs "when the consumer has a high level of awareness and familiarity with the brand and holds some strong, favourable, and unique brand associations in memory" (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020 p.72). Keller and Swaminathan (2020) identify the two main sources of brand equity as

brand awareness and brand image. It is through these two components of brand equity that the current study examines the proliferation in the use of the term Airbnb as analogous to the concept of short-term rentals in Kenya.

3. Methodology

This exploratory study interviewed ten (10) Airbnb property owners in Eldoret, Kenya. The study participants were recruited through snowball sampling. This approach was suitable because of the largely unregulated nature of short-stay rental businesses in Kenya coupled with the prevailing government efforts to have these businesses registered. This made the proprietors difficult to access during the data collection stage. With no new themes generated after the ten (10) interviews, it was deemed that the data collection had reached a saturation point. The study obtained informed consent from participants to take part in the research and participant identifiable information was not included in the study.

Thematic analysis of these interviews reveals recurring themes in short-term rental proprietors' perceptions of the term Airbnb, providing valuable insights into how Airbnb is perceived within the Kenyan tourism and hospitality context.

4. Main Results and Contributions

The study findings indicated that the majority of the short-term rental proprietors in Eldoret are female. This was deduced from participant responses about proprietor membership in common networking forums like WhatsApp groups. However, some of the study participants stated that their businesses are co-owned with their spouses, but who are not actively involved in the daily operations.

“In the WhatsApp group it has 240 hosts and agents. Out of these about 230 are women.” (Interview 5)

The majority (70%) of the participants had their properties listed on Airbnb and Booking.com, Interestingly only 3 out of 10 participants had a background or experience in the service or hospitality industry, and all the study participants viewed the short-stay rental business as a secondary source of income.

The proprietors considered short-term rental as a worthwhile business opportunity. There was high perceived value in short-term rental considering that even those who did not own the physical property had opted to sublet. One participant said, *“I did some research; it was lucrative then and I needed an alternative source of income”* (Interview 1) another said, *“I built my house but decided to list it on Airbnb, where I now stay, I pay rent.”* (Interview 5)

Additionally, study participants had great trust in short-stay rental and despite the risks were ready to accommodate guests in their homes and properties.

“I decided to rent my house to Airbnb due to previous damages suffered in the hands of regular tenants...Airbnb provides safety to the house as the guests will be verified before admission.” (Interview 4)

4.1 Brand Awareness

To assess their ability to confirm prior exposure to the Airbnb brand, the study participants during the interview were shown four (4) images of the Airbnb logo. Three (3) of the images were digitally altered variants of the correct Airbnb logo. Only one participant did not correctly identify the Airbnb logo from the options provided. This indicated a high familiarity and strong recognition of the Airbnb brand.

Generally, the study participants demonstrated understanding of what Airbnb was and its function. That is, a platform that connects travellers with local hosts, to provide local and diverse travel experience with affordable accommodation. Below are some excerpts from the study participants.

“Airbnb is a bed and breakfast facility that is booked virtually.” (Interview 1)

“I know the initials. It is making it easy for guests to enjoy home away from home.” (Interview 2)

“Bed and breakfast. It is like finding a hotel but more homely.” (Interview 5)

“The app! Airbnb is the broad term that covers most short-term accommodation options as well as other home-like living facilities with flexibilities to the customer.” (Interview 6)

“An alternative home- a home away from home.” (Interview 9)

In contrast, the study participants showed a lack of knowledge of when Airbnb began operations in Kenya. This was perplexing given the due diligence often exerted in the B2B market. Organizations often gather a wide depth of information pertaining to a company they want to do business with. Airbnb has been connecting Kenyan hosts with guests since 2012 (Airbnb, 2018). None of the study participants had an idea when Airbnb entered the Kenyan market. Samples of the interview responses are below:

“Early 1900s” (Interview 3)

“Airbnb started after Covid” (Interview 8)

“No idea” (Interview 9)

“I don’t know. However, I believe that it’s currently gaining market” (Interview 4)

The study participants were also asked questions to evaluate their ability to retrieve the brand from memory when given the product category, the needs fulfilled by the category, or a purchase or usage situation as a cue; brand recall (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). When the participants were asked to specify any platform that can connect guests with short-term rental options, all the study participants mentioned Airbnb. This is an indication that Airbnb has forged very strong associations with the short-term rental product/service category.

In summary, the high brand recognition and strong brand recall demonstrated by the short-term rental proprietors is an important first step in Airbnb building positive brand equity.

4.2 Brand Image

In B2B markets, brand image is a crucial aspect of marketing research activities and branding (Abd-El-Salam, 2017). Brand image is taken into consideration by consumers in determining their choice of various products on the market today (Utama et al., 2021). Brand image is related to attitudes, beliefs and preferences for a brand. Chen & Myagmarsuren (2011, p.960) defined brand image as “a subjective perception, a mental representation of functional and non-functional information regarding the product or service.” Consequently, consumers who have a positive image of a brand will be more likely to make a purchase.

Brand image is crucial to marketing and advertising research because it is the basis for tactical-mix concerns and an essential component to establishing long-term brand equity (Hsieh et al., 2004). Marketing initiatives that establish distinct, powerful associations with the brand in the minds of consumers are necessary to establish a positive brand image (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). Brand associations may be either brand attributes or benefits. Brand attributes are those descriptive features that characterize a product or service. Brand benefits are the personal value and meaning that consumers attach to the product or service attributes (Keller &

Swaminathan, 2020). These dimensions and benefits are reinforced by the following study participant responses:

With the Airbnb Platform, I am able to get diaspora clients. One is guaranteed payment will be made and received. It's guaranteed. The clients don't negotiate. Whatever I have listed is what they pay, no negotiations. However, for long stays, I have indicated that there can be some discounts. Any damages or claims are settled by Airbnb. Rating from customers can give your business a boost. (Interview 5)

"We are registered with Airbnb, which is a global platform, and our guests can book our services online through Airbnb." (Interview 4)

Wide coverage of marketing and getting guests. Once the reservation is confirmed and approved payment is made once guests check in within 12 hours. Property owners get their money after Airbnb deducts their commission. For Booking.com payment is on checkout. Covers hosts on inconvenience. (Interview 6)

The short-term rental proprietors view Airbnb as possessing relevant attributes and benefits that satisfy their business needs and wants. The study participants view Airbnb as providing a 'homely' accommodation option for their clients, hence an added incentive for them to list their properties on the platform. This line of business is relatively easier for them to enter and manage because they can run their properties pretty much the same way they do in their own homes. This is reinforced by only 3 out of 10 interviewees having a background or experience in the service or hospitality industry. Therefore, Airbnb holds favourable brand associations in the B2B context.

Contrastingly, the uniqueness of the brand association between Airbnb and the proprietors is not that explicit. This is because Airbnb shares some associations with other brands like Booking.com. It was, however, generally acknowledged by the study participants that Booking.com also serves the conventional accommodation sector such as hotels unlike Airbnb. Additionally, study participants believed that Airbnb made a strong entrance into the market and had the advantage of popularizing itself as a platform connecting hosts with guests seeking short-term accommodation options.

4.3 Brand Genericization

Sometimes, brand names can become so ingrained in popular culture that they are used to describe an entire category of products or services, rather than just the specific brand. This is called genericization of a brand. Genericization occurs when a brand name becomes synonymous with the product/service category itself (Tanya, 2022).

The research findings depict Airbnb as both a brand name and a product category. As a brand name, Airbnb refers specifically to the company that developed an online service platform that allowed individuals to list their properties, such as homes, apartments or spare rooms for short-term rentals (Cardoso et al., 2022). Travelers then book these accommodations directly through the Airbnb website or mobile app. This corresponds to participant interviews 1, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 10 which confirmed that they are listed on the Airbnb app and clients use it to make reservations. One particular property owner summed it up well:

"We are registered with Airbnb, which is a global platform, our guests have to book our services online through Airbnb." (Interview 4)

In this case, Airbnb operates as a specific brand and represents a specific service and platform that facilitates short-term rentals and unique accommodation experiences. This is supported by a few

participants who stated that Airbnb is a brand. *“Airbnb is a brand. It’s unique from the conventional accommodation set-up such as hotels.”*(Interview 9)

“It is a brand. It can be differentiated from a hotel. Airbnb is supposed to be a brand taking into consideration that it is different from other accommodation like hotels.” (Interview 3)

Beyond its role as a specific brand, Airbnb has become a product category (Stevens, 2020). Despite its origins as a specific company, the term Airbnb has transcended its original meaning. Over time, it has become synonymous with the broader concept of booking accommodations in private residences. This broader understanding of Airbnb as a product/service category reflects the popularity of the concept. From the study findings, the term Airbnb is often used colloquially to refer to any type of short-term rental, regardless of whether it's booked through the official Airbnb platform or other similar services such as Booking.com, Vrbo (Vacation Rentals by Owner), Expedia, HomeAway, or TripAdvisor.

“Airbnb is a product category. I see clients want different things, and I think Airbnb offers these options. For example, if you want a short or long stay, or one bedroom, you can get it with Airbnb.” (Interview 2)

“It is a product category based on the popularity of the word. For example, if I said I am looking for a lodging it sounds old and bad” (Interview 06)

“Product category. It covers a number of different businesses like rentals, private homes, and shared facilities”. (Interview 7)

“Airbnb is a product category. Because Airbnb offers what hotels and other hospitality facilities offer.” (Interview 8)

The genericization of the term Airbnb demonstrates its evolution from a brand name to a widely recognized descriptor for short-term accommodation in Kenya. However, this comes with the threat of genericide (Johansson, 2023). Genericization may initially indicate strong Airbnb brand awareness, but it can also pose a risk to the brand's distinctiveness, legal protection (Tanya, 2022), loss of exclusive rights and may no longer be eligible for trademark protection. As such, Airbnb must carefully consider its branding strategies to avoid becoming too generic and losing its distinctiveness. However, this was beyond the scope of the current study.

4.4 Future Research Recommendations

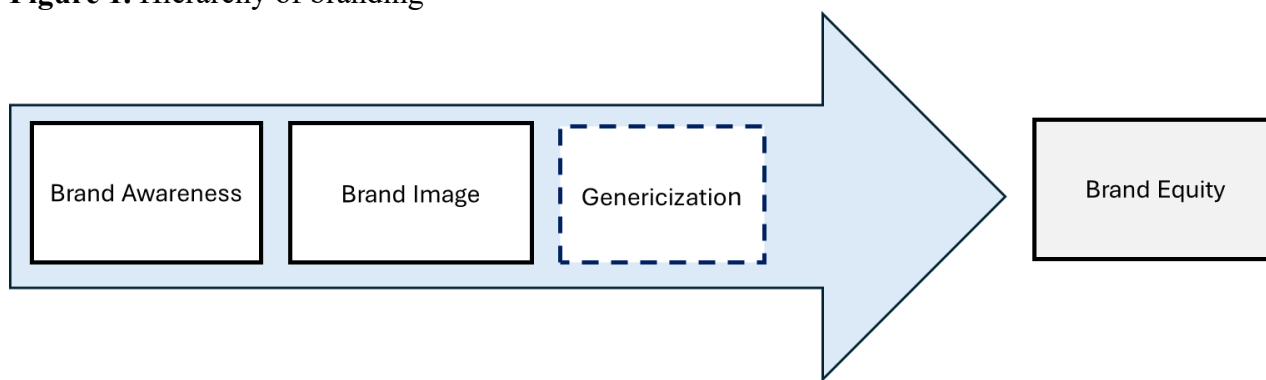
Brand image is the mental picture that constitutes the strength, favourability and uniqueness of a brand association. Consequently, the source of brand associations with Airbnb may also be of interest in understanding how brands develop a favourable image. This is because short-term rental proprietors can form brand associations through direct experience, marketing activities by Airbnb and even through third-party sources like consumer reports. Therefore, the study recommends research geared towards understanding the source of brand associations. This may help guide those tasked with branding on how to build a strong brand.

5. Conclusion

This study extends the customer-based brand equity model to cater for brands that experience genericization. The study postulates that brands that experience a high level of awareness and familiarity with customers, and hold strong, favourable, and unique brand associations in the memory of customers may reach yet another level whereby a brand's name becomes synonymous with a general product or service category it belongs to, a phenomenon referred to as genericization (see Figure 1). The term Airbnb in Kenya has become synonymous

with the short-term rental product/service category that lumps together villas, serviced apartments and flats, guest houses, vacation homes, beach cottages and homestays. In Kenya, Airbnb is now a noun and a verb used to describe an entire industry (Airbnb Newsroom, 2024). It is important to note that very few brands may reach this level where a specific brand becomes so dominant in a market that consumers use the brand name to refer to the entire category of products, regardless of the actual brand. It is for this reason that the box in Figure 1 representing genericization has broken lines.

Figure 1. Hierarchy of branding



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