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0 Abstract

English

In the past, research about discrimination on sharing platforms has brought eye-opening results and lead to major corporations having to adjust their systems to reduce such occurrences. Most of this work has been based on prominent categories such as race or gender. Investigation of sexual orientation discrimination has found less widespread consideration on sharing platforms and no such research has yet been carried out in central Europe or Austria. With circumstances for members of the LGBTQI community varying widely across the world and worsening in many countries in Europe, the present thesis aims to shed light on occurrences of discrimination in the less frequently investigated private sector, for which no legal protection yet exists in Austria. It is one of the few studies investigating whether same-sex couples face higher chances of being rejected by hosts on the home-sharing platform Airbnb. These platforms present a unique opportunity to research the often voluntarily concealed information of same-sex relationship status. To explore this phenomenon, a field experiment (n = 104) was conducted in Vienna, Austria between January 4th and January 10th 2022, employing the method of sending out fake inquiries about availability of listings and analyzing the rates of denial or acceptance. Partial instances of discrimination were able to be discovered, which were driven by the unanticipated rejection of female same-sex couples. Possible reasoning for the found data is subsequently presented along with considerations for future research.

Deutsch

In der Vergangenheit brachte Forschung zum Thema Diskriminierung auf Sharing-Plattformen augenöffnende Ergebnisse mit sich und globale Firmen dazu, ihre Systeme anpassen zu müssen, um solche Vorkommnisse zu reduzieren. Der Großteil dieser Studien fokussierte bisher auf prominente Kategorien wie ethnische Zugehörigkeit oder Geschlecht, während Forschung zu Diskriminierung aufgrund von sexueller Orientierung auf Sharing-Plattformen spärlich und bis dato nicht für Zentraleuropa oder Österreich durchgeführt wurde. Da Umstände für LGBTQI Personen auf der ganzen Welt stark variieren und sich ihre Situationen in vielen Ländern Europas verschlechtern, zielt die vorliegende Arbeit darauf ab, Diskriminierungsvorkommnisse im privaten Sektor, für welchen in Österreich bis heute kein gesetzlicher Schutz existiert, zu erforschen. Die Studie ist eine von wenigen die sich damit beschäftigt, ob gleichgeschlechtliche Paare von Gastgeber:innen auf der Home-Sharing-Plattform Airbnb vermehrt abgewiesen werden. Solche Plattformen bieten die einzigartige Möglichkeit zur Beobachtung der Auswirkungen des oft freiwillig verborgenen gleichgeschlechtlichen Beziehungsstatus. Um dieses Phänomen zu ergründen, wurde

zwischen dem 4 und 10 Januar 2022 ein Feldexperiment im Raum Wien durchgeführt, welches sich der Methode bediente, nach Verfügbarkeit einer Bleibe zu fragen und anschließend die Raten der Zusagen und Ablehnungen zu analysieren. Diskriminierung aufgrund des gleichgeschlechtlichen Beziehungsstatus konnte teilweise nachgewiesen werden, was auf die unerwartete höhere Ablehnung von Anfragen von Frauen in gleichgeschlechtlichen Partnerschaften zurückgeführt werden konnte. Abschließend werden Überlegungen für mögliche Ursachen der gefundenen Daten vorgestellt und Erwägungen für zukünftige Forschung zu der vorliegenden Thematik präsentiert.

1 Introduction

It is impossible to imagine our modern, globalized world without sharing platforms and the ways they have changed the business environment around us. People all across the globe share goods and services such as rides, homes or simple tools with the help of digital systems. Classic linkages between producers and consumers are becoming blurrier and people from all walks of life are able to benefit from these new economic opportunities. The sharing economy does, however, not come without its downsides. Despite the seemingly more egalitarian system and the decreased face-to-face interaction, which has often been the alleged cause for discrimination of minority groups, numerous cases proving the contrary are coming to light. They range from near daily negative consumer accounts to rare instances of corporations facing legal action for discriminatory behavior taking place on their platforms. The largest problem in this regard is that laws and regulatory practices which have been set in place to combat these issues in other sectors, are lagging behind social developments in the sharing industry. Past research has brought multiple instances of discrimination in such businesses to light, however, in most cases it has focused on more prominent categories such as race and gender. Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation has barely been researched on sharing platforms and has not yet focused on central Europe or Austria.

The political landscape for members of the LGBTQI¹ community has been undergoing a multitude of changes in recent years. While same-sex marriage is being legalized in countries across the world, restrictive policies and laws allowing discrimination still exist, and currently are being put into place in others. All over Europe, right-wing political parties are gaining traction, especially in the aftermath of the COVID 19 pandemic and the decrease in perceived security it has brought to society. These developments are halting and even reversing progressive tendencies of the last decades, which is an especially dangerous situation for people who are often targets of discrimination, such as sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) minorities.

The following thesis aims to shed light on the more rarely researched area of sexual orientation discrimination on sharing platforms. By doing so it hopes to bring insights into the reality of a minority group which faces discrimination on a daily basis but has been the subject of research less frequently than other groups. By employing a field experiment on the home-sharing platform Airbnb, the aim was to distinguish whether guests who are part of a same-sex relationship face higher rates of being rejected than their opposite-sex counterparts. The data collected in Vienna, Austria in January 2022 could partially prove occurrences of

¹ The acronym LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex) makes up only one of the terms commonly used (such as LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQIA+ etc.) and definitions are constantly evolving to include varying categories. For this paper, the author has chosen to adopt the term LGBTQI due to it including a broad number of categories which are often subject to discrimination.

discrimination, which was shown to be driven by rejection of female same-sex couples. This proves to be a rather surprising trend, as literature suggests male same-sex couples to be discriminated against more frequently.

The thesis first displays the current state of the literature on both discrimination on sharing platforms as well as discrimination of SOGI in more general terms. Based on this information, several hypotheses are developed. Subsequently the methodology of the field experiment is illustrated. The descriptive data is then presented, followed by an attempt to verify or reject the developed hypotheses. The paper is then concluded with a discussion of the results and contemplations for future research are presented.

2 Hypotheses Development

2.1 Discrimination on Sharing Platforms

Sharing platforms have changed the lives of people all around the globe for the better part of the twenty-first century and the modern electronic business environment is hardly imaginable without them. Consumers share rides, homes and services on a day-to-day basis and benefit from these newer linkages between actors in numerous ways, for instance through new economic opportunities or increased feedback options. Nevertheless, the sharing economy does not come without its unique set of problems, often brought on by exactly the closer interaction between producers and consumers which makes up their business models. In theory, the sharing economy could be a place where discrimination, usually occurring in the context of interpersonal relations, becomes a thing of the past, but reality paints a different picture. Despite most large platforms officially prohibiting discriminatory behavior, or at least ruling it undesirable in some form of code of conduct (Česnuitytė et al. 2022), numerous cases of discrimination have been brought to light and even resulted in legal action (Lee et al. 2021). While other business sectors have implemented laws and regulations to combat discriminatory practices in the past, many of these cannot directly be applied to the model of sharing platforms. Here it becomes evident how technological and societal advancement often outpace legislation (ibid.).

Research on discrimination occurring on sharing platforms has been a popular and eye-opening topic in the past. It has mainly put its focus on forms of discrimination which have gained substantial attention elsewhere, such as through race and gender. In a large-scale study investigating racial and gender discrimination on ride-sharing platforms, authors sent passengers on rides via the platforms Uber, Lyft and Flywheel. They could detect significant evidence of discrimination based on race, which presented itself in longer acceptance times for African American riders or a higher likelihood of a driver ultimately rejecting an already accepted ride for an African American passenger. The authors could also find evidence that females were taken for longer and more expensive rides in one of their experiments (Ge et al. 2016). Similar patterns of racial discrimination could be found elsewhere, for instance in a smaller-scale study on ride-sharing in Hungary, where it was evident that Arab male testers were significantly less likely to be offered a ride (Simonovits et al. 2018), or in an analysis of a German car-pooling market, which showed that drivers with Arab/Turkish/Persian-sounding names are clicked on considerably less frequently (Tjaden et al. 2018).

Comparable instances of discrimination were detected on home-sharing platforms. Edelman et al. found widespread racial discrimination against African American travelers on Airbnb. This was investigated in a field experiment, where booking requests from customers with distinctly

African American-sounding names were significantly more likely to be rejected than those from guests with white-sounding names (Edelman et al. 2017). Other researchers were able to replicate similar patterns of racial discrimination (Cui et al. 2020).

A 2019 study in Dublin could furthermore detect significant discrimination of people in same-sex relationships (SSR) compared to opposite-sex couples (OSRs), which was mainly driven by males in SSRs which were 20 – 30 % less likely to be accepted than females in SSRs or people in OSRs. In this case most refusals stemmed from nonresponse rather than outright rejection. These results are especially noteworthy since Ireland was the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage by popular vote and Dublin is considered a hub with high support for the issue² (Ahuja & Lyons 2019).

Generally, instances of discrimination occur most frequently on sharing platforms with a certain degree of “nonsocialist”, which is defined as *“the physical and/or virtual co-presence of social actions in a network, which provide an opportunity for social interaction between them”* (Perren & Kozinets 2018). These kinds of occurrences are made possible through markers of identification, such as photographs or names, which can be attributed to the user belonging to a certain minority group. As has been mentioned above, the examples of discrimination based on such cues are numerous, which is why authors generally recommend leaving out these kinds of identifying features (e.g. Ge et al. 2016, Edelman et al. 2017).

2.2 Sexual Orientation Discrimination

While race and ethnicity has been the subject of research on sharing platforms in numerous instances, some other forms of discrimination have been given much less consideration. This holds true for sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI)³ discrimination, which has been researched less frequently in general and only gained in attention in more recent years.

2.2.1 Positive Development

This is partially due to the landscape for members of the LGBTQI community having undergone a multitude of changes in the past decades, especially in the western world. In 2002, only 51% of US respondents claimed that *“homosexuality should be accepted by society”*, whereas when asked the question in 2019, the number had risen to 72%. In Europe, acceptance was higher to begin with but also increased, for instance from 74% to 86% in the UK, from 77% to 86% in France and from 83% to 86% in Germany (Pew Research Center 2020). The removal of

² It is to be noted that Ireland holds a 5% higher rating in ILGAS Rainbow Index of Europe than Austria.

³ This term is often used together in the literature, particular in legal considerations (see for instance Lau 2018) but it must be emphasized that for the following thesis only sexual orientation discrimination is investigated. The research design does not allow for differentiation of gender identities, which nevertheless could be an important consideration for future research.

homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1973 is considered an important milestone in the delegitimization of animosity towards gay people, as is the 1972 coining of the term "homophobia" by American psychologist G. Weinberg and the subsequent discussion and assimilation of the word into commonplace language⁴ (Herek 2015 358ff). Supranational organizations such as the United Nations Human Rights Council have adopted resolutions regarding equal rights for sexual minorities and in 2016, appointed an independent expert to protect against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (UN Human Rights Council 2016). On a national level, 81 countries worldwide have implemented employment discrimination regulations in which sexual orientation is identified as a protected category (ILGA 2020), in Austria this is defined in the Federal Equal Treatment Act (§ 17 GIBG). Same-sex marriage has been legalized in multiple countries across the globe⁵, Austria has been among them since 2019. Bans on the controversial practice of conversion therapy, which constitutes "*any sustained effort to modify a person's sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression*" (ILGA 2020, 263) are becoming more commonplace (ibid.), drawing attention to the issue and consequently setting LGBTQI issues on the popular agenda. The relevance of the topic has not gone unnoticed by major corporations, which can for instance be seen by the increased sponsorship of highly visible events such as pride marches and declarations of support for the LGBTQI community from numerous companies during the official pride month of June.⁶

2.2.2 Negative Development

However, as much progress as there has been, LGBTQI people still face oppression, discrimination and harassment all over the world. Same-sex sexual relations between adults are punishable by law in 69 countries, in almost all cases the maximum sentence is several years in prison and in six countries the prescribed penalty is death⁷ (ILGA 2020). As of today, no legally binding international agreement protecting against SOGI discrimination exists (Heymann et al. 2020). Furthermore, it can be seen that discriminatory rules against SOGI are being put into effect in recent history. All of the 6% of constitutions worldwide that explicitly prohibit same-sex marriage have been amended after 2000, giving indication that this is a reaction towards advancements in LGBTQI rights (Heymann et al. 2020, 135). These sorts of regressive tendencies can also be found in Europe, for instance in Russia's infamous "Gay

⁴ See section 2.2.5 on why the term "homophobia" is considered an outdated expression.

⁵ At the date of writing/reviewing this thesis 33 countries have legalized same-sex marriage (Human Rights Campaign n.d., BBC 2022) whilst Andorra, very recently passed legislation making it the 34th (Bollinger 2022)

⁶ Vienna Pride 2022 was for instance sponsored by major international brands such as Coca Cola, IKEA, Nivea, Burger King etc. (Vienna Pride n.d.)

⁷ The countries are: Brunei, Iran, Mauritania, Nigeria (12 Northern states only), Saudi Arabia and Yemen (ILGA 2020, 25)

Propaganda Law” (Human Rights Watch 2018) or in Poland, where over 80 municipalities have claimed to be “LGBTI+ free zones” (European Parliament 2019). Austria’s neighboring country Hungary has passed more and more laws targeting LGBTQI people under their right-wing prime minister Viktor Orbán (Thoreson 2022), most prominently a widely criticized ban on education or advertising depicting same-sex relationships or gender affirmation towards minors in June of 2021 (Amnesty International 2021). Most recently, the Euro Pride March 2022, which was supposed to be held in Belgrade from September 12th to September 18th, was banned by authorities and only took place in a heavily downsized version on September 17th, with large numbers of arrests being made (Der Standard 2022a).

Austria itself only holds a mid-field position in ILGA’s rainbow index (ILGA 2022) in Europe⁸ and reports state that anti-LGBTQI violence and actions such as the vandalization of rainbow flags are on the rise (SoHo 2021). Just earlier in 2022, a hotel owner in Lower Austria made headlines for advertising his property as an “Anti-Homo-House” (Der Standard 2022b). A 2019 EU-wide survey of the LGBTI⁹ population found that 11% reported experiencing a physical and/or sexual attack for being LGBTI in the five years before the survey, the same percentage holds for Austria. 35% of Austrian respondents claimed to have experienced discrimination in areas other than employment (FRA 2020), a significant number as no legal protections are granted in the private sector as of today, a discrepancy which has been publically criticized (Der Standard 2022c). More specifically, being asked about experiencing discrimination when trying to access housing, 7% of LGBTI Austrians answered to the affirmative¹⁰ (FRA EU-LGBTI II 2020).

2.2.3 Adverse Effects of Sexual Orientation Discrimination

Sexual orientation discrimination has been linked to a multitude of problems, such as psychiatric diseases (Hatzenbuehler et al. 2010), substance use disorders including alcohol and drug use (Evans-Polce et al. 2020) and tobacco use (McCabe et al. 2019). A common explanation for this is the “*minority stress model*” which postulates that chronic stress experienced by sexual minorities result in such adverse health outcomes. Amongst these stressors are i.e. experiences of prejudice events, expectations of future discrimination, internalized heterosexism and hiding and concealment of one’s sexual orientation (Meyer 2013).

⁸ It is also noteworthy that Austria’s rating has been falling in this index since 2016.

⁹ The term LGBTI is used here intentionally, as this was the specific population surveyed.

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that in most cases lesbian women, with 11%, answered this question with “yes”, while for gay men and bi women it was 7% and for bi men 6%. (FRA EU-LGBTI II 2020)

2.2.4 Necessity of Reporting

All these circumstances make evident why finding and highlighting instances of discrimination on the base of sexual orientation is essential. Where there are no reports, there is no incentive for change. Sexual orientation discrimination is often deeply entrenched in society as well as institutions and many are not even aware of when it is occurring. This is the case for members of the heterosexual majority but may also apply to minority members. For instance, an individual who is rejected from a job due to discriminatory hiring processes might never know the true reason and therefore has no incentive to protest or report the incident (Meyer 2013).

Instances where minority discrimination was brought to light and resulted in promising changes exist in multitudes. It has for instance repeatedly been shown that bias against minorities exists in the hiring or application process, be it i.e against women (Johnson & Kirk 2020; Moss-Racusin et al. 2012) or racial minorities (Bertrand & Mullainathan 2004, Eaton et al. 2020). It has also been demonstrated that anonymization of applications results in better evaluations of said minorities (Johnson & Kirk 2020). This has led to countries implementing large field experiments on the matter (Krause et al. 2012), institutions such as universities trial testing anonymized applications for studies (Conway et al. 2022) and large companies implementing “blind hiring” practices to increase diversity (Krause et al. 2012). As mentioned in the section 2.1, studies have also found such discrimination to occur on sharing platforms. In Airbnb’s case, the publishing of Edelman et al.’s 2015 study lead to the company announcing changes on their platform to combat discrimination (ibid. 2017) and in 2018, it was declared that photos of guests would not be revealed to the hosts until the booking was confirmed (Zhu 2021), a measure authors had repeatedly called for to hinder discrimination (Edelman et al. 2017). Nevertheless, despite large corporations such as Airbnb, Uber and Lyft having gradually acknowledged the problem of discrimination on their platforms, they have not yet developed or employed thorough corporate policies to address the issue (Lee et al. 2021).

As was made evident, sexual prejudice is still widely prevalent in society, be it among the majority of heterosexual people or in form of internalized stigma for gay men and lesbian women. This is also the case for countries with better rankings concerning LGBTQI rights than Austria, for instance Ireland (see Ahuja & Lyons 2019). Therefore, for the present study in Vienna it can also be hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1: Same-sex couples will be rejected more often by hosts.

2.2.5 Predictors of Prejudice against Sexual Minorities

While the expression “homophobia” has been credited with bringing the topic of discrimination of sexual minorities onto the popular agenda and is still widely used all over the world, authors argue for the use of other terminology. Herek and McLemore propose the term “sexual stigma” as *“culture’s shared knowledge about the negative regard, inferior status, and relative*

powerlessness that society collectively accords to nonheterosexual behaviors, identity, relationships, and communities" (ibid. 2013, 311) highlighting the factor that this is not an individual phenomenon. Additionally, they refer to "sexual prejudice" meaning "*a negative attitude toward an individual based on her or his membership in a group defined by its members' sexual attractions, behaviors, or orientation*" (ibid.) on account of the concept not being a true phobia meaning an irrational fear. For the remainder of this thesis, this terminology will be used as a base point.

Herek further distinguishes between "enacted stigma" and "felt stigma". Where enacted stigma means all assertions of sexual stigma, felt stigma refers to the knowledge that stigma exists and the individual's motivation to act in such a way to avoid being a target of such enactments (Herek & McLemore 2013). For instance, to avoid being the target of discrimination, many homosexuals choose not to disclose their sexual orientation in public settings (e.g. Priola et al. 2014). Sexual prejudice is not only enacted by the nonstigmatized heterosexual majority but also can take the form of self-stigma, which are internalized negative feelings about homosexuality and hence towards oneself (Herek 2015).

Literature has consistently found certain characteristics to be associated with increased sexual prejudice, amongst them being for instance gender, age, religiosity and personal contact with sexual minorities (eg. Herek 2000, Lewis 2011, Schwadel & Garneau 2014, Whitley 2009).

For the following study, gender is the most significant variable which may be controlled for, in the case of both host as well as guest.

It has been repeatedly shown that men and women display differing attitudes towards sexual minorities and homosexuality in general. Authors have found this trend to follow three major patterns: Firstly, women have been shown to express more favorable attitudes than men. Second, aggregate attitudes towards lesbian women have been found to be more positive than towards gay men and lastly, the most unfavorable attitudes are those found in heterosexual men against gay men (Herek 2015).

It must be noted that in the present study no attitudinal dimensions are being investigated. While stigma enactments have been shown to be prompted by prejudice (e.g. Parrott & Zeichner 2005), it does not always automatically lead to biased behavior (e.g. Dasgupta & Rivera 2006). Nevertheless, it can be hypothesized that similar patterns as in attitudinal assessment would emerge, since the type of discriminatory behavior studied is not outwardly aggressive but of a more subtle and possibly subconscious kind.

The reasons for the reported gender differences vary according to literature. A commonly stated rationale is heterosexuals' discomfort at the thought of being the recipient of unsought sexual advances (Pirlott & Neuberg 2014). Studies have shown that people behave in

accordance with this hypothesis and express more discomfort around a homosexual person of their own sex. This holds especially true for heterosexual men, who consistently are found to express the most negative attitudes towards bisexual and homosexual men (Herek 2000). A second common explanation is the sexualization of bisexual women and lesbians by heterosexual men. Female on female depictions of sex are one of the most frequently consumed categories of pornography (Ogas & Gaddam 2011) and often cater to a male audience. Men generally place a higher erotic value on lesbianism and when controlling for this factor, it has been found to account for a large portion of the gender gap in male attitudes towards homosexuals (Louderback & Whitley 1997).

Due to the existing literature on gender differences in sexual prejudice, the following hypotheses can be established:

Hypothesis 2: Female same-sex couples will have an all over lower rejection rate than male same-sex couples.

Hypothesis 3: Female hosts will reject less same-sex couples than male hosts.

Hypothesis 4: Hosts will reject more same-sex couple of their own gender than of the opposite one.

Hypothesis 5: Male hosts will reject more male same-sex couples than other relationship types.

A further relevant factor which has been shown to influence sexual prejudice is whether or not heterosexuals have been in close contact with a homosexual person in their life. Consistent with contact theory (see Allport 1954, Pettigrew & Tropp 2006), this factor has been found to have a very large positive impact. In contrast to heterosexuals who have no close contact to homosexual individuals, those who do, express more positive attitudes and support towards the minority group (Herek & Glunt 1993, Lewis 2011).

3 Study

3.1 Choice of Platform

For the present study, the company chosen to represent the sharing economy is Airbnb. As mentioned above, many sexual minorities choose not to disclose their sexual orientation in the public sphere, due to fear of negative reactions including discrimination. Divulging this information is not a logical consideration on most other sharing platforms, for instance ride-sharing. However, on a home-sharing platform it can be considered advantageous to do so, especially if one is travelling as part of a same-sex couple. In such cases, knowing in advance whether the future host would be opposed to such a constellation is necessary to avoid unpleasant or downright dangerous scenarios.

Airbnb, one of the largest and most well-known home-sharing platforms, has existed since 2008. The firm lets hosts rent out spare rooms or entire homes to guests from around the world for a fee and has ultimately changed the way people travel. Airbnb positions itself as a progressive, inclusive company and presents a strict anti-discrimination policy in their “community commitments”, which all members must accept. The firm states: *„we’re committed to working against discrimination based on race, color, national origin, age, sex, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, and familial status—which are all issues that impact hosts and guests around the world”* (Airbnb 2020). It has however become evident from previous literature that discrimination still persists on the platform and that the corporation yet has to implement comprehensive corporate policies to combat such cases.

3.2 Method

In order to investigate discriminatory behavior by Austrian hosts on Airbnb, a field experiment was carried out in Vienna from January 4th to January 10th 2022. This city was considered an interesting area of research as Austria, despite often being considered to represent a more progressive western-European ideology and having introduced same-sex marriage in 2019, usually only holds mid-field in rankings such as ILGA’s rainbow index and it has been shown that, here too, instances of discrimination are on the rise (see section 2.2.2). The method of a field experiment was chosen because phenomena such as consumer discrimination are difficult to assess through more traditional methods, due to issues with social desirability. The approach used was similar to other such experiments conducted on Airbnb, namely that of sending out fake requests to hosts and analyzing whether or not they accepted or denied the request.

In order to be able to choose listings as similar as possible to one another and avoid confounding factors, it was necessary to use a location in Austria with a high density of offered apartments, which is why the capital city of Vienna was selected. The inquiries were sent about the weekend of May 13th to May 15th 2022 and only listings available in this time frame were taken into consideration.¹¹ Only full apartments with no shared spaces with the host or other travelers were chosen in order for them to be comparable on all other factors. Furthermore, it was made sure not to choose listings from hotels or hosting companies, as these exist on Airbnb as well. First the apartments were matched as closely as possible on price, where the average price for a stay in the chosen time frame was used as a reference point (EUR 193 for two nights). The same approach was used for host ratings (resulting in a minimum rating of 4,68) and furthermore, only spaces with at least ten reviews were chosen. Additionally, the number of possible guests and rooms were attempted to be kept as comparable as possible. Some hosts offered multiple listings fitting the criteria, in these cases only the one most closely matching the average was chosen, in order to not message the same person more than once. Similarly, in some cases co-hosts existed, these were also sorted out if they already were a main or co-host on another listing. Subsequently 105 apartments were left to choose from, from which 104 were selected randomly in order to have balanced numbers in each of the four conditions.

The four conditions were sent identical messages, only differing in whether the inquiry was sent from a male or a female profile and if they mentioned traveling with either a wife or a husband. The cues of gender came from using an either female or male name for the sender of the message (Hanna or Jürgen) and speaking of either a husband or wife with a female or male name (Theresa or David¹²). Each message inquired about the availability of the listing for the specified time frame.



Hanna 5:26 PM

Dear Manuela!

My name is Hanna and I plan to visit Vienna with my husband David from May 13 to 15th. I want to ask if your place is available for us during this time, because we would very much enjoy staying there. Hope to hear from you soon!

Best, Hanna & David

Figure 1 - An example message from the female profile

¹¹ It is not possible to say exactly how many apartments were available in this period, since Airbnb sums up every search result with over 300 hits as 300+.

¹² The names of the senders were the real names of the profiles and could not be adapted. For the spouses' names, commonly known male and female names in both English and German were selected.

This resulted in two of the scenarios including same-sex couples and two being from opposite-sex couples, with the former indicating the experimental and the latter the control group.

Table 1

Allocation of experimental groups

Gender of sender of message	Gender of spouse mentioned	
	female and female	female and male
	male and female	male and male

dark gray shading: experimental groups; light gray shading: control groups

For the senders of the messages, two real profiles were used. This was an intentional choice, as established profiles with reviews and photos¹³ signal trustworthiness as opposed to new ones lacking such information. The latter could, correctly, be interpreted by the hosts as being fake and possibly even tip them off about the true intention of the study, which could lead to altered responses. This approach is a departure from most other studies mentioned, which generally used multiple fake profiles. Hence, the verified profile of the author as well as that of a colleague was selected, which were matched as closely as possible in terms of how many reviews they had gathered and whether their tone was positive or negative. Other information on the profiles, such as location or employment, were removed for the time of the study as to avoid confounds.

Each profile sent out 52 inquiries about availability of booking the listing between January 4th and January 11th 2022. Each host was randomly allocated to a condition and a day of sending out the message. Following this, the replies of the hosts were coded into either “accepted” or “denied”, with no answer after 30 days being regarded as “denied”.

¹³ It must be noted that a photo could in fact be a confounding factor. However, hosts on Airbnb are not able to see the photo of a profile until after they accept a request. It is however possible for hosts to require a photo to exist in order to book their space. (Airbnb 2018) Therefore, the photos on the profiles were retained so as not to lose the option to book certain listings.

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive Data

Out of the 104 hosts messaged, 102 responded, either by personally replying or immediately sending a request to book. Only two people did not send any answer, which were coded as “denied” after the specified time frame of 30 days had passed. As mentioned before, it was attempted to keep the listings as comparable as possible, first in terms of price. The observed prices for two nights ranged from EUR 147 to EUR 232 ($M = 191.60$, $SD = 20.35$). Furthermore, the rating of the host was paid attention to, resulting in a range from 4.68 to 5, which is the highest possible rating a host can obtain ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.08$). Matching the size of the apartments presented to be more difficult, as the exact amount of squared meters is not required to be filled out by the hosts and only 33 of the listing descriptions included this information. Therefore, the number of possible guests were regarded, with most apartments being able to house two (45.19%), followed by four guests (35.58%). The same was done for the number of bedrooms, with the large majority of listings having only one (87.5%) and the remainder consisting of studio apartments with no extra bedroom.

By regarding the hosts’ profile names and photos¹⁴, it could be found that 49 (47.12%) were female, 41 (39.42%) male and 14 (13.46%) listings were hosted by two people, usually couples. Amongst the couples 12 were of a mixed gender setting, one consisted of two sisters and in one case it was not possible to determine the gender of one of the individuals. It can be noted that each couple contained at least one female. Additionally, it was observed whether they were regular hosts or “superhosts”, a title awarded by Airbnb indicating that certain criteria of experience and ratings are met and the hosts are meant to provide great stays for their guests. (Airbnb n.d.) In the present sample, 77 people (74.04%) were superhosts.

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

4.2.1 Hypothesis 1: Same-sex couples will be rejected more often by hosts.

In order to deal with the first hypothesis a two-way table with measures of association was constructed. The relationship type constituted the binary independent variable (IV), which showed whether the senders of the message were in an opposite-sex relationship (OSR) or a same-sex relationship (SSR). The also binary dependent variable (DV) was whether the

¹⁴ If this information was not conclusive, the reviews by guests were searched for gendered pronouns. The author is aware that this method works with external attributions rather than information provided by the hosts themselves. However, as the same rationale is used for the gender identification of the inquiring parties by the hosts, it is considered appropriate.

request was rejected or accepted. A χ^2 test was carried out along with the computation of Cramer's V.

While same-sex couples constituted the majority of denied requests with 77.78%, the overall results were only significant on the lowest conventional level of $p < 0.10$ ($p = 0.081^*$, $V = -0.171$).

Generally people in SSRs received a denial of their request almost 3.5 as many times as their opposite-sex counterparts. More precisely, SSRs were denied in about 13.5% of cases, while for OSRs this only happened approximately 3.8% of the time. A visualization of the acceptance and denial rates may be seen in Fig 2.

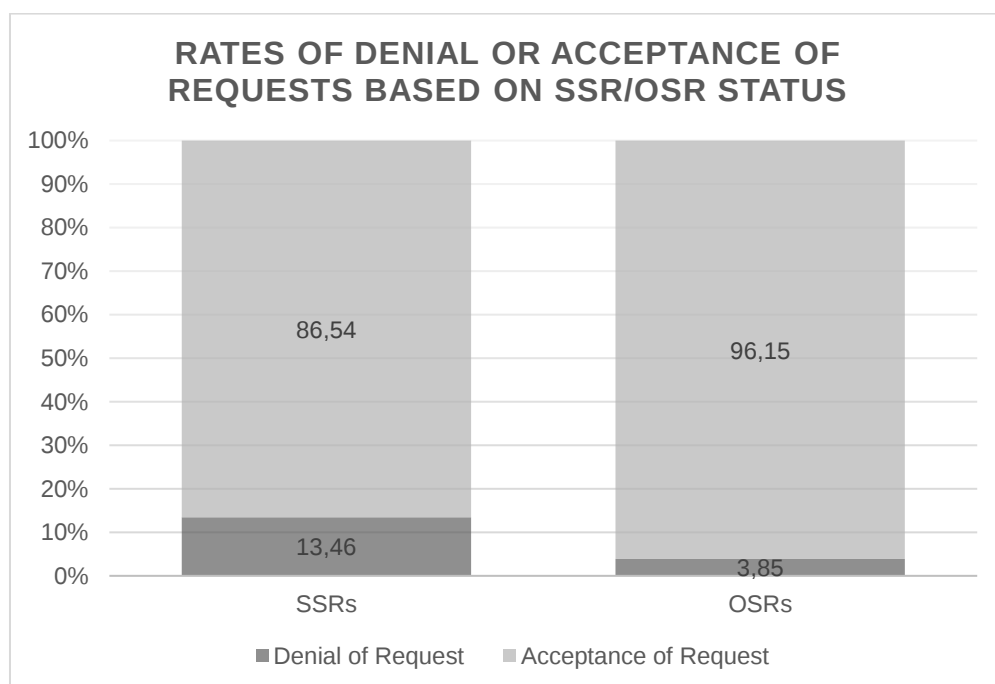


Figure 2 – Rate of denial or acceptance of requests based on same-sex relationship or opposite-sex relationship status

The data therefore shows a significant link between the relationship type and whether the request is denied only on the lowest conventional significance level. Hypothesis 1 can therefore partially be verified.

4.2.2 Hypothesis 2: Female same-sex couples will have an all over lower rejection rate than male same-sex couples.

When the same computations were carried out for the individual relationship types, from which it could be identified whether the sender of the message was male or female and which gender their spouse had, it became evident that the largest proportion of denials was given to female SSRs (55.56%) ($p = 0.027^{**}$, $V = 0.217$). The relationship type accounting for the next largest proportion of denials was male SSRs (22.22%) ($p = 0.840$, $V = -0.020$). The OSRs, with one

message being sent from a woman and the other from a man, also accounted for 22.22% of denials together ($p = 0.314$, $V = -0.099$).

Regarding the rates of acceptance and denial, female SSRs were denied more than twice as often as male SSRs or the mixed gender setting. This is visualized in Fig. 3 below.

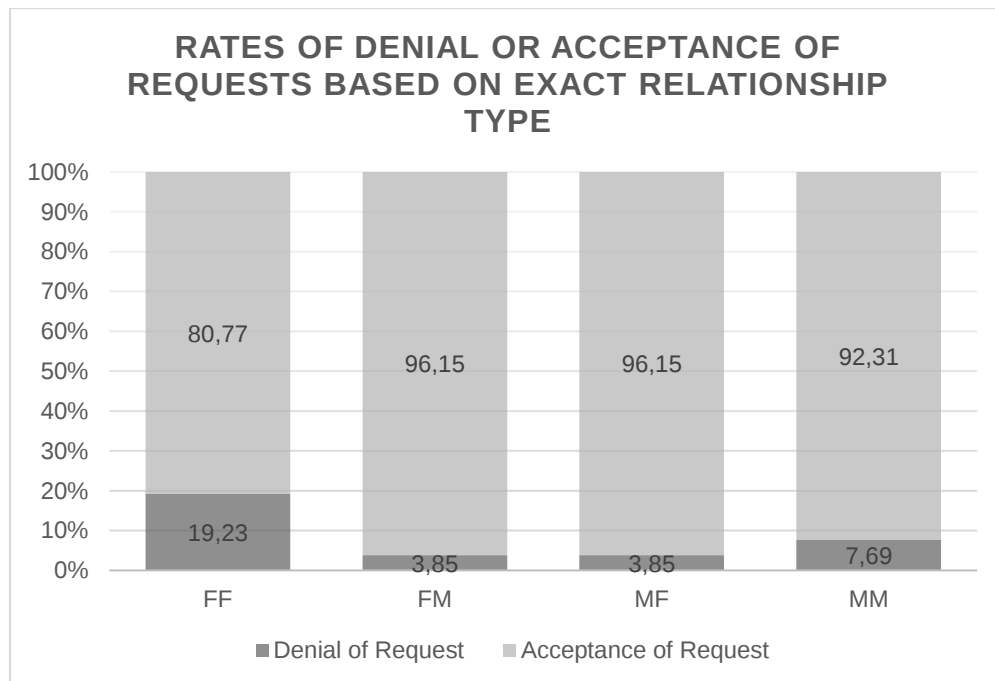


Figure 3 – Rates of denial or acceptance of requests based on exact relationship type

It became apparent that messages sent from a female mentioning a wife were significantly less likely to be accepted than any other relationship type, including male SSRs. Hypothesis 2 must therefore be rejected and it must be pointed out that the direction of the effect was the exact opposite of the one predicted.

Table 2 displays the marginal effects of the studied variables on whether a request is denied. Once again, only being in a female SSR is found to have a significant effect.

Table 2

Marginal effects on whether the request is denied

	Marginal effects on denial of the request
Sender is in SSR	0.104 (1.56)
Sender is in female SSR	0.112 ** (1.97)
Sender is in male SSR	-0.013 (-0.20)
Host is female	0.057 (0.90)
Host is male	-0.057 (-0.90)

Absolute value of z-statistics in parentheses

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.**4.2.3 Hypothesis 3: Female hosts will reject less same-sex couples than male hosts.**

In order to investigate the remaining hypotheses, which deal with gender differences of the hosts, firstly it was investigated whether there was a general difference in acceptance rates pertaining to gender. Significant results could be found for neither females ($p = 0.347$, $V = 0.099$), males ($p = 0.233$, $V = -0.122$), nor couples ($p = 0.420$, $V = 0.079$).

To examine the relationships on acceptance or denial, interaction terms with the gender of the host as well as the relationship types were constructed. Once again, the two-way tables were analyzed with the χ^2 statistic and Cramer's V . While in both the cases of male and female hosts, more SSRs were denied than OSRs, the results were nonsignificant. Male hosts accepted 100% of all OSRs ($p = 0.126$, $V = -0.150$) and only 90.48% of SSRs ($p = 0.874$, $V = 0.016$), whereas female hosts rejected 11.11% of OSRs ($p = 0.373$, $V = -0.087$) and 16% of SSRs ($p = 0.134$, $V = 0.147$).

As the data showed female hosts to accept less SSRs than males and since the results were nonsignificant on all conventional levels, Hypothesis 3 can not be verified.

3.2.4 Hypothesis 4: Hosts will reject more same-sex couple of their own gender than of the opposite one.

For the following hypotheses, the interaction terms between gender of the host and individual relationship type on the rate of denial were regarded once again. The data showed that male hosts rejected 8.33% of male SSRs ($p = 0.967$, $V = -0.004$) and 11.11% of female and female

ones ($p = 0.784$, $V = 0.027$). Female hosts did in fact reject female SSRs in 18.75% of cases ($p = 0.118$, $V = 0.153$) compared to 11.11% of male SSRs ($p = 0.784$, $V = 0.027$).

Due to the results being nonsignificant, Hypothesis 4 must also be rejected.

4.2.5 Hypothesis 5: Male hosts will reject more male same-sex couples than other relationship types.

As mentioned above, male hosts in fact displayed a higher rejection rate of female SSRs than male SSRs. OSRs were generally never rejected by males, irrespective of the message being sent from a man ($p = 0.399$, $V = -0.083$) or a woman ($p = 0.235$, $V = -0.116$). As the data could not corroborate the hypothesis and the results were again nonsignificant, Hypothesis 5 can not be verified.

The testing of marginal effects on the denial of the request also produced nonsignificant results for Hypotheses 3 through 5.

5 Discussion

Generally speaking, the collected data could only partially verify one of the established hypotheses. While an effect of being in a same-sex relationship on the rejection rate of requests could be found, it was only significant on the lowest conventional level and the effect size can be considered rather small. It was however very interesting to see, that it was driven primarily by the denial of requests from guests in female same-sex relationships, not as hypothesized and often found in other research, male and male relationships. This unanticipated effect could have several potential reasons. For one, a clear labeling of the female partner as someone's wife might have given stronger signals of the two women being in a relationship than other wording. For instance, Rishi and Ahuya's 2016 study used the term "girlfriend", which in contrast to "boyfriend" might not have had romantic connotations to some of the hosts. The higher rejection rate in the present study might therefore represent a more accurate picture. A further potential reasoning might be due to the consistently higher attitudinal rankings of female same-sex relationships often largely being driven by males sexualizing lesbians and bisexual women, with the gender difference in heterosexual male attitudes towards homosexuals disappearing once this factor is controlled for. Since in the present study no apartments which share spaces with the hosts were regarded, the interest many heterosexual males show in female same-sex relationships might have been negligible, as they would not have any contact with the couple.

In general, the low effects of being in a same-sex relationship on acceptance as a guest may be due to a number of factors. First, the sample size of the present study was fairly small ($n = 104$), due to the author's capacities and because of the limited number of listings which were able to be selected. This concerns listing prices, host rankings and also the focus on non-shared spaces. It is possible that hosts, who have little to no contact to their guests, even if they held prejudice against people in same-sex relationships, would choose to ignore these qualms as they would not need to associate with the people themselves. This might be especially true after the COVID 19 pandemic, in which vast numbers of people in the tourism sector, including hosts on Airbnb, were deprived of their income and are now more desperate for additional earnings to make up for their losses.

Furthermore, the chosen city of Vienna, which as a capital city housing nearly two million inhabitants is home to a multitude of people from all walks of life, can be considered rather progressive and therefore not representative of the entire country. The literature has shown that, the more personal contact heterosexuals have with homosexual people, the less prejudiced they will be towards them. This might very well have an impact on hosts in Vienna, as they are more likely to have friends, colleagues, or acquaintances who are homosexual, than people in more remote areas.

It must also be pointed out that the present study, in contrast to comparable ones, used existing Airbnb guest profiles which had been verified and contained reviews of previous hosts' experiences with them. Literature has shown that reviews in particular have led to less discrimination on sharing platforms (Cui et al 2020). In most other studies, the researchers made use of a number of fake profiles to contact the hosts. The increased trustworthiness of the real profiles may have led to higher acceptance rates than in comparable research.

Stemming from these points, several considerations for future research present themselves. It would be interesting to see if a larger sample in Vienna would bring similar results, especially if the scope of the analysis were expanded to include and then control for factors such as more expensive listings and lower host rankings. An analysis of apartments including shared spaces might provide interesting material for comparison with the present study, as it is very much possible that hosts behave differently if they have to be in close personal contact with people in same-sex relationships. In this case special attention should be paid to the hypothesized gender differences, such as increased discomfort due to being around homosexuals of the same sex. Future research might take other cities or areas in Austria into consideration, or attempt a comparison with other capital cities in Europe, especially paying attention to current socio-political developments.

Since in this study female same-sex relationships faced the most, and only statistically significant, rate of non-approval, more research into the matter would be advisable. As much as gay men face discrimination and oppression, the double-minority status of being a woman and part of a same-sex relationship must not be overlooked. If such results can be replicated in larger studies, qualitative insights on why this takes place in Vienna might be worthy of contemplation. It can furthermore be noted that an experiment on hiring practices in Austria from 2003 was also able to find significant discrimination against lesbian women. While it should be pointed out that only heterosexual females were used as a comparison and not homo- or heterosexual men (Weichselbaumer 2003), it might be of interest to investigate if such increased rates of discrimination against females in same-sex relationships are more prevalent in Austria than in surrounding countries.

A further possibility would be to take issues of gender-identity into consideration, as these aspects have largely been overlooked or not uniquely emphasized in past research. Intersex, transgender, nonbinary and gender nonconforming people face unique and harrowing oppression and discrimination in all aspects of life and these issues must not be overlooked.

In summary, it is important to re-emphasize the importance of research on various forms of discrimination, including on sharing platforms. These types of economic models have changed the landscape of business and our daily lives and will very likely continue to do so in the future. Bringing instances of discrimination to light is a necessary initiator of change, as past research

has shown. Large international corporations like Airbnb must be made aware of their role in such practices, especially considering the lagging behind of laws and regulations for this market. They should also acknowledge that their global platform awards them unique possibilities to improve the lives of minorities by taking their community commitments seriously and preemptively combating discriminatory practices. A company such as Airbnb, which fosters contact between people from all over the world, can play a crucial role in decreasing discrimination simply by letting people meet and thus reducing prejudice. They should take their role in this process seriously and continuously try to improve their system, possibly leading the charge by implementing more binding and thorough practices on their platform.

Studies as the present one might also give rise to more careful discussion about SOGI discrimination in aspects of life other than the workspace. Austria to this day lacks legal protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in the private sector. Bringing instances of discrimination to light is an important step towards a more inclusive and safer future for all of us, which should be a goal we all aspire to.

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