Work-family integration and segmentation in the gig economy:

Airbnb hosts' challenges and strategies

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the work-family experiences of Airbnb hosts who represent a large and growing number of 'gig' workers (approaching 700,000 Airbnb hosts worldwide). Data were collected from a sample of Airbnb hosts ($N = 181$) using Qualtrics. We examined the relationships between preference for segmentation/integration in relation to major study variables including work-family interference, satisfaction with Airbnb, intention to stay with Airbnb, and life satisfaction. While Airbnb hosts have autonomy, flexibility, and discretion in their Airbnb roles, maintaining boundaries (physical and psychological), coping with isolation, and social support needs may affect work-family relationships. Findings indicated that overall, higher work-family conflict (both WIF and FIW) was associated with lower job satisfaction, lower life satisfaction, and lower intent to stay. In addition to direct effects we also found indirect effects: both WIF and FIW mediated the relationship between segmentation preference and job satisfaction, life satisfaction, as well as intention to stay with Airbnb. Taken together, the findings suggest that work-family conflict needs to be re-examined in light of the unique demands associated with the gig economy. This study breaks new ground by studying the work-family lives of Airbnb hosts, with important consequences for individuals, families, guests, and communities. Implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords:

Airbnb, gig economy, work-family, integration-segmentation preference, intention to stay, job satisfaction, life satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

The sharing economy is an economic model that enables people to share capacities and resources via an online platform. In 2013, companies in the leading five sectors with sharing

economy models (i.e., crowdfunding, online distance work, home sharing, car sharing, and online music and video streaming) generated 15 billion dollars in sales revenue (PwC, 2015). The same study estimates that by 2025, the earned sales revenue will grow to 335 billion dollars which represents 50% of the revenues in these markets. Recent estimates suggest that 40% of the US and European workforce are involved in the gig economy (Varty, 2018).

Airbnb is a leading accommodation sharing service and has grown exponentially in the last decade. Founded in 2008, currently there are over 7 million listings across 191 countries and regions worldwide with 500 million Airbnb guest arrivals (Airbnb.com). A study by Adamiak found that the total number of Airbnb listings in countries is influenced by the level of economic development and size of inbound tourism flow (Adamiak, 2019). The same study shows that while Airbnb operates in most countries of the world, half of its supply is located in Europe. On the contrary, Asian countries are on the rise (China's active Airbnb listings rose from 13th to 3rd place). The USA covers an estimated 15% of all listings, representing a rather stable presence. Among the listings, a third of Airbnb supply is located in major cities (and another third in coastal areas). Yet, in mature Airbnb markets (e.g., Paris, Barcelona) the number of offers outside of major cities grew faster than within these cities. A rise in listings implies a growth of hosts involved.

Despite the rising number of Airbnb hosts, little is known about their experiences, as most studies on accommodation sharing services have predominantly focused on guests' perspectives (Moon, Miao, Hanks, & Line, 2019). The limited studies on the hosts fall in two main categories. The first one is about hosts' profiles and reviews presented on Airbnb's official website, which extends to rental price (Ert, Fleischer, & Magen, 2016; Han, Shin, Chung, & Koo, 2019), pricing strategy (Gibbs Guttentag, Gretzel, Yao, & Morton 2018; Magno, Cassia, &

Ugolini, 2018), racial discrimination (Kakar, Voelz, Wu, & Franco, 2018; Marchenko, 2019), and satisfaction (Johnson & Neuhofer, 2017). The second one regards the psychological aspects of being an Airbnb host, in particular the motivation for hosting (see for example Guttentag, Smith, Potwarka, & Havitz, 2018), which is primarily associated with financial gains (Crommelin, Troy, Martin, & Parkinson, 2018; Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016; Lampinen & Cheshire, 2016). Surprisingly, not much is known about other aspects such as Airbnb hosts' work-family lives. Yet, as accommodation sharing services are on the rise, it is important to have a more holistic view of Airbnb hosts and their experiences. Thus, our study aims to address this research gap, by examining how hosts manage their work and family boundaries and the associated effects with work-family conflict (i.e., work interference with family or WIF, and family interference with work or FIW, work (Airbnb) satisfaction, life satisfaction, and intention to stay with Airbnb.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Accommodation is a 24/7 business and it is well-documented that individuals are subject to high levels of work and non-work conflict in the hospitality industry (see meta-analysis of Xu & Cao, 2019). Compared to traditional hoteliers, Airbnb hosts have greater control in terms of room availability and pricing, house rules, and interaction with guests. Yet, hosts might also experience interference as they might need to respond to guests requesting pre-arrival information, demanding assistance during stay, and arriving and departing at irregular non-work hours. In addition, as travelers booking Airbnb properties may hail from locations half a world away, their "urgent" inquiries may land in a host's in-box during the host's sleeping hours; this creates potential for even more interference. This might be particularly true for hosts who rent a

shared space (such as a room in their own house) and thus experience blurring spatial work-family boundaries that impact their personal life. Indeed, one of the principal challenges of self-employed individuals working from home is managing the boundaries between work and home (Mustafa & Gold, 2013).

The term *boundaries* refers to "mental fences" that individuals create to manage their environment (Zerubavel, 1991) and specifically denotes the spatial, temporal, psychological and social separation between work and family life (Standen, Daniels, & Lamond, 1999). Boundary theory postulates that individuals actively create boundaries around their work and family domains (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). Segmentation and integration are two mechanisms to manage the boundaries (Nippert-Eng, 1996). While segmentors prefer to keep activities of each domain within their respective boundaries (e.g., not solve personal issues at work, not think of work at home), integrators allow activities in each domain to influence the other (e.g., respond to work emails during the weekend, make personal calls at work).

Segmentation preference thus predicts a low degree of boundary permeability (Kim & Hollensbe, 2017), or the degree to which thoughts, emotions, and behaviors from one domain affect another domain (Clark, 2000). However, boundary permeability can be asymmetrical. For instance, for some individuals, work-related issues might rarely permeate in the home sphere (strong home boundaries) yet family-related issue might regularly infiltrate in the work domain (weak work boundary) or vice versa. Just as individuals prefer to segment or integrate, workplace environments also vary in the degree to which they promote segmentation or integration (Hochschild, 1997). For example, integrating policies such as on-site day care at the workplace, favor the blurring of work-family boundaries. Hence, segmenting and integrating

strategies are most effective when individuals' boundary preference and workplace norms, climate, and expectations are congruent (Kreiner, 2006; Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005).

Given Airbnb hosts' 24/7 expected availability and the possibility that hosts accommodate guests (work) in their home, work-related issues are likely to infiltrate the home domain and have differential impact on hosts' work-family experiences. Previous research suggested that boundary violation, such as work intruding into family time when individuals are segmentors, can result in increased work-family conflict (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009). Within the Airbnb environment, which is a high-boundary permeability condition, we expect hosts who are segmentors would experience greater work-family conflict, both in terms of WIF and FIW. For example, segmentors might have to respond to guests' urgent inquiries at times they have dedicated solely for family-related tasks, which can contribute to the experience of work-family conflict. On the other hand, hosts who are integrators might appreciate the interaction across work and home domains enabled in the Airbnb environment, such as being able to fulfill demands from both domains simultaneously. Thus, they might experience lower levels work-family conflict in comparison to segmentors.

Hypothesis 1: Higher preferences for segmentation (versus integration) will be associated with greater WIF.

Hypothesis 2: Higher preferences for segmentation (versus integration) will be associated with greater FIW.

The scarcity hypothesis (Goode, 1960) proposes that when individuals experience interrole conflicts due to the limited resources available to fulfil the dual demands of work and

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family roles, there are negative repercussions, such as stress and anxiety. In the extant work-family literature, researchers have tended to find that work-family conflict, regardless of its direction, has detrimental effect on well-being and work-related outcomes for individuals. Since previous work suggests that higher levels of work-family conflict are associated with reduced job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and intention to stay (Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011; Shockley & Singla, 2011), we expected to see similar relationships in the context of Airbnb hosts.

Hypothesis 3: Higher levels of both WIF and FIW will be associated with reduced levels of (a) job satisfaction, (b) life satisfaction, and (c) intention to stay with Airbnb.

Further, our hypotheses thus far imply the mediating role of work-family conflict. When hosts have a higher preference for segmentation, they are assumed to experience higher levels of work-family conflict because of the incongruent between their preference and the Airbnb environment. As a result, they face lower levels of job satisfaction and life satisfaction. They might also be less likely to want to stay with Airbnb. On the other hand, when hosts have a preference of integration, they are assumed to experience lower levels of work-family conflict, resulting in higher levels of job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and greater intention to stay with Airbnb.

Hypothesis 4: WIF mediates the relationship between segmentation preference and (a) job satisfaction, (b) life satisfaction, and (c) intention to stay with Airbnb.

Hypothesis 5: FIW mediates the relationship between segmentation preference and (a) job satisfaction, (b) life satisfaction, and (c) intention to stay with Airbnb.

METHODS

Sample

Prior to developing a survey, we created an interview protocol and interviewed a dozen "superhosts" about their Airbnb experiences. We felt it necessary, given how different the experience of sharing one's home with strangers as a means for generating income, to first understand—without presupposing a typical work-family conflict model—the context in which these gig workers operate. Our interview comprised open-ended questions that would help us understand: the motivation for or evolution of becoming a host,[1] the likes and dislikes of being a host, the challenges hosts experience in managing the Airbnb work/family interface (encompassing psychological, attitudinal, physical, and emotional challenges), and their plans for the future vis-à-vis Airbnb. We also gathered demographic information about their hosting experience (years hosting, hours per week spent managing their Airbnb business, percent of total income derived from Airbnb) to ensure our data collected were representative.

Our analysis of common themes in the interview data collected guided our survey development, which included well-established measures in work-family research (some items were adapted for the Airbnb context). The majority of the 184 surveys were completed online (using Qualtrics) by hosts who responded to requests (and the chance to win one of five $50 Amazon gift cards) posted on six different Airbnb-related Facebook groups. The final sample

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[1] As noted in the 2016 McKinsey study, 70% of 6000 gig workers they surveyed (which includes Airbnb, and also Uber, Lyft, and several other professions) were in the gig economy by choice while 30% were forced by economic necessity, e.g., laid off.

consists of 136 Airbnb hosts. Respondents were 81.2% female, 66.7% were married or living as married, and 76.9% had a least a bachelor's degree. All respondents actively managed their own Airbnb business, as opposed to hiring someone else to manage their Airbnb listing/s.

Measures

Measures for the study were selected from existing scales in the organizational behavior literature. Most of the scales used have been subjected to extensive development and have exhibited acceptable psychometric properties. We did, however, adapt some of the items to reflect the uniqueness of the Airbnb context, in which respondents' non-traditional, gig work as a host is somewhat predicated on 24/7 monitoring of and responses to guests' needs. Table 1 lists the mean, standard deviation and intercorrelations of the key study variables.

Dependent variables. Three outcome variables were used in this study: job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and intention to stay with Airbnb. Job satisfaction, an overall measure of the degree to which an individual is happy with his or her job, was measured using the global job satisfaction scale of Camman et al. (1979). Participants answered questions such as "in general, I am satisfied with my Airbnb work," on a five-point Likert scale. When necessary, we reverse-scored items such as "most of the time I have to force myself to do my Airbnb work" so that higher scores reflected greater job satisfaction. The Cronbach alpha of this measure was 0.65.

We used the Satisfaction with Life scale (SWLS)—a five-item construct—to assess an individual's cognitive judgment of their satisfaction with their life as a whole (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Individuals completing the questionnaire responded to statements such as "In most ways, my life is close to my ideal," using a 5-point Likert scale. The Cronbach alpha for this measure was 0.87.

Intention to stay with Airbnb was measured by six items compiled from the 15-item organizational commitment questionnaire (OCQ) (Mowday et al., 1979). Sample items include "I feel myself to be part of the Airbnb community," and "I would leave Airbnb if offered the same job with another company" (reverse-scored). Scores from the six items, which were measured on a five-point scale, were averaged to form a composite score. Internal consistency estimates were 0.71 for this construct.

Other variables. Work-family conflict was measured separately to capture direction of the conflict. We used the Netemeyer, Boles, and McMurrian's (1996) five-item WIF and five-item FIW scales, which uses a 5-point Likert-type scale to measure work demands interfering with family and family demands interfering with work, respectively. The work interfering with family (WIF) variable (α= .90) included items such as "Things I want to do at home do not get done because of the demands my Airbnb work puts on me." The family interfering with work (FIW) variable (α= .88) included items such as, "I have to put off doing Airbnb-related tasks because of the demands on my time at home."

Preference for segmentation/integration was measured using Kreiner's (2006) four-item variable which captures individuals' desire to keep activities and thoughts about one domain separate from the other domain. Measured on a seven-point Likert scale, the items were adapted to the Airbnb environment (e.g., "I don't like work issues creeping into my nonwork roles and activities"), where higher scores represented stronger preferences for segmentation (v. integration). The four items demonstrated strong reliability (α= .93) and were averaged to form a composite score.

Data Analysis

All analyses were conducted using Mplus 8.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017) with maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors. To examine the measurement model, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to confirm the observed variables have been satisfactorily loaded onto their respective latent variables. Fit indices including chi-square statistic (χ^2), Comparative Fit Index (CFI; above .90 indicates acceptable fit), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI; above .90 indicates acceptable fit), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; below .08 indicates acceptable fit; Hu & Bentler, 1999), and Standardized Root Mean Square (SRMR; below .08 is good) were used to examine model fit. Then, a path analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses.

Previous research has suggested that men and women have different experiences in the work-family interface, thus sex was controlled. Because Airbnb hosts' family situation may influence their work-family experiences (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000), marital status was also included in the analysis as another controlled variable.

Findings

The measurement model exhibited satisfactory fit: χ^2 (335) = 446.92, $p < .01$, CFI = 0.93, TFI = 0.92, SRMR = 0.07, and RMSEA = 0.05.

Figure 1 shows the path analysis results with WIF as the mediator. Hypothesis 1 examined the link between segmentation preference and WIF. Our results supported this hypothesis, suggesting higher preferences for segmentation (versus integration) was associated with higher levels of WIF ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$).

Figure 2 shows the path analysis results with FIW as the mediator. Hypothesis 2 examined the relationship between segmentation preference and FIW. We found that higher

preferences for segmentation (versus integration) was associated with higher levels of FIW (β = 0.28, $p < 0.05$). Thus, hypothesis 2 was supported.

For hypothesis 3, we expected both WIF and FIW would be negatively associated with job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and intention to stay with Airbnb. Indeed, when Airbnb hosts experience higher levels of WIF, they faced reduced job satisfaction (β = -0.38, $p < 0.05$) and life satisfaction (β = -0.36, $p < 0.05$), as well as lower intention to stay with Airbnb (β = -0.35, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, when Airbnb hosts experience higher levels of FIW, they also experienced lower levels of job satisfaction (β = -0.41, $p < 0.05$), life satisfaction (β = -0.37, $p < 0.05$), and less likely to stay with Airbnb (β = -0.39, $p < 0.05$). Our data supported hypothesis 3.

We also looked at the mediating role of WIF and FIW. We found that WIF mediated the relationship between segmentation preference and job satisfaction (indirect effect = -0.08, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI = [-0.15, -0.01]), life satisfaction (indirect effect = -0.08, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI = [-0.14, -0.01]), as well as intention to stay with Airbnb (indirect effect = -0.07, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI = [-0.14, -0.01]). Our data also suggested that FIW mediated the relationship between segmentation preference and job satisfaction (indirect effect = -0.12, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI = [-0.19, -0.04]), life satisfaction (indirect effect = -0.10, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI = [-0.18, -0.03]), as well as intention to stay with Airbnb (indirect effect = -0.11, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI = [-0.18, -0.04]). Thus, hypotheses 4 and 5 were supported.

DISCUSSION

The gig economy is expected to continue expanding. The particular type of gig work we explored, that of an Airbnb host, is of particular interest to work-family researchers. In this environment, hosts' work space is their home space and vice versa. Moreover, as one element of

a hosts' reputation is predicated upon their "within one hour" response time to potential (and current) guest inquiries from around the world, the blurring of the work and home boundary is a potential hazard of the work.

Our study seems to suggest that despite the lure of the highly autonomous, revenue-generating work as an Airbnb host—as "sold" by Airbnb (whether full-time or as a "side hustle"), this work is not suited for everyone. While hosts may be able to "be their own boss" and "control their own schedule," the highly permeable work/life boundary can be problematic. People who prefer segmented lives—where they can physically and psychologically separate the work and non-work roles and demands—will not thrive in this environment. As our findings demonstrate, segmentors experience greater work/family conflict (both WIF and FIW) than do integrators, and they experience lower satisfaction in their work and life in general. This finding is particularly important in light of the growing dissatisfaction among hosts who perceive a loss of power in the Airbnb platform as they cannot reject or cancel a reservation due to the associated penalty of being negatively ranked (Farmaki, Christou, & Saveriades, 2020). Yet, a host might need to reject or cancel a reservation if a non-work situation (e.g., becoming seriously ill or traveling somewhere urgently) were to arise. At the workplace, segmentors might be able to utilize medical leave or temporarily stop working (with little to no financial or career penalty), and focus on recovering. In Airbnb, however, the temporary discontinuance via cancellation of reservation might not be possible due to expectations and penalties associated with the business.

Our study also sheds light into why hosts might quit. There is anecdotal evidence that hosts exit the Airbnb business due to intrusive guests and high levels of stress related to the rating system (see for example comments found in: community.withairbnb.com). Indeed, perceived lack of control and uncertainty over how algorithmic evaluations work create anxiety

among some Airbnb hosts (Jhaver, Karpfen, & Antin, 2018). Beyond anecdotal evidence, our research shows that segmentors are more likely than integrators to express interest in leaving Airbnb.

While most of our respondents had other sources of income, when indicating the importance of "leaving a traditional job for a more flexible one" as a reason for becoming a host, 40% responded with either very important or extremely important. Indeed, previous studies has shown that the gig economy has created new jobs, additional income, and flexibility to choose where and when to work and which work to perform (Lampinen & Cheshire, 2016, Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017). Yet, our results indicate that the flexibility that comes with hosting may come with a cost—particularly for those who are segmentors— in the form of high levels of work family conflict and reduced life satisfaction. These findings add to the increasing negative outcomes (such as lack of employment benefits, job security, and promotion opportunities; see for example Calo & Rosenblat, 2017) of the growing gig economy. Future researchers might examine whether segmentors in traditional jobs experience more or less work-family conflict than do integrators in Airbnb hosting jobs, controlling for e.g., number of hours, income.

In our sample, 60.1% indicated that they expected their Airbnb revenues to increase (i.e., growing their business), while 32.8% indicated that they expected their Airbnb revenues to remain the same, in the next year. Only about 7% expected their revenues to decrease, which might be an indication of a host considering dropping out of the business or reducing the number of properties that they own or manage. With so much apparent interest in maintaining their Airbnb business, we consider several suggestions for those whose segmentation preference might not align well with the Airbnb environment.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The first set of recommended strategies for hosts concerns managing boundaries—physical and psychological. We expect that work-family conflict would be lower for hosts whose rental (i.e., work) spaces are physically separated from the family (i.e., home) space. To the degree possible, hosts might consider offering separate entries, and separate quarters for eating and doing laundry, if possible. The investment in having non-shared space may help hosts—especially segmentors—cope with the work-family boundary blurring. Along these lines, hiring an external manager, or if possible, renting out space in another structure (home, street, city) would also help with this issue. Future research in this area should consider the impact of shared versus non-shared space on the experience of work-family conflict and relevant outcomes, particularly for segmentors.

Psychological boundary management will be more difficult, given the expectations of an Airbnb host to be available 24/7. However, one suggestion is for hosts to clearly indicate the times during the day (denoting the time where their rental space is located) in which they will respond within the hour versus those when this will not happen. Again, this suggestion will be met with resistance due to the expectation of host availability and "punishment" for slow response time that show up in the ever-important star ratings.

Another practical implication of our study is addressed to the company Airbnb. The organization could provide a more balanced view of the pros and cons of the role of hosting in their website, and perhaps offer suggestions and solutions that enable hosts to have a less conflictual and more satisfying experience. While such an approach might seem to undermine business opportunities (less hosts, less properties, less revenue for Airbnb), being transparent

about the consequences of working in the gig economy might help preserve the image and reputation of Airbnb which have been increasingly degraded via social media.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

Although this study provides insights into the work-family dynamics of Airbnb hosts, several limitations should be noted. The sample size, although adequate, could be larger. Women comprised a disproportionate share of the sample, but it was not possible to determine the extent to which this sample is representative of the Airbnb host population. In addition, missing data limited the sample size for some statistical analyses.

At a more granular level, the overall means for two key study variables—WIF and FIW—on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high) were 2.29 and 1.83 respectively. Compared to prior work/family research, these numbers were relatively low, suggesting that while the experience of work/family conflict was indeed related to preference for segmentation and lower satisfaction (job and life) and intent to stay, it may be that those who work in the Airbnb context have reduced their—or are are prone to less—work/family conflict than those in more traditional workplaces. More research is needed to adequately assess this phenomenon. Moreover, as we suggest, while hosts whose rentals reside in their homes will experience greater boundary blurring and work/family conflict, future research should examine whether hosting a shared v. nonshared space has a significant effect on the relationships.

Finally, as the gig economy continues to grow, researchers need to examine both traditional and contemporary individual and contextual characteristics relating to gig employment, while controlling for the level of involvement in the gig economy relative to other compensated employment. For example, some hosts worked only five hours a week, on average,

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in their Airbnb business while maintaining fulltime employment. Whether Airbnb hosting represents a side hustle, a fulltime gig separate from a host's traditional job (part or fulltime), or the entirety of hosts' working hours and income generation would be important to include in future research. As the nature of work and working evolves, so too must our research on the lives of individuals working in these "new" contexts.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Study Variables.
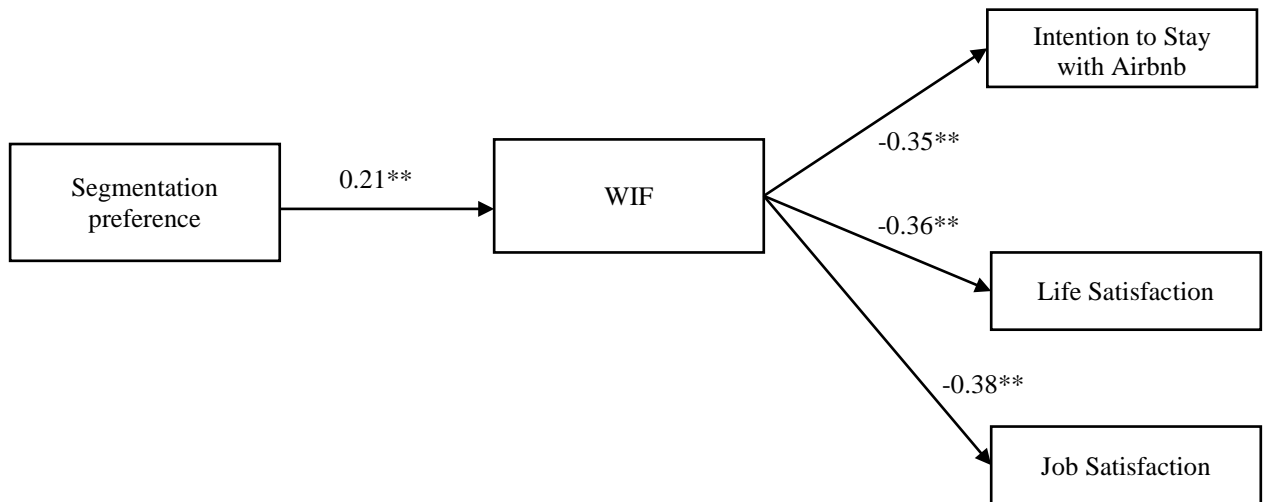
	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Segmentation Preference	4.56	1.60					
2. WIF	2.29	1.06	.22**				
3. FIW	1.83	0.85	.29**	.74**			
4. Job Satisfaction	2.92	0.45	-.22*	-.39**	-.42**		
5. Life Satisfaction	3.99	0.80	-0.09	-.35**	-.32**	.37**	
6. Intention to Stay with Airbnb	3.53	0.72	-0.06	-.34**	-.37**	.39**	0.11

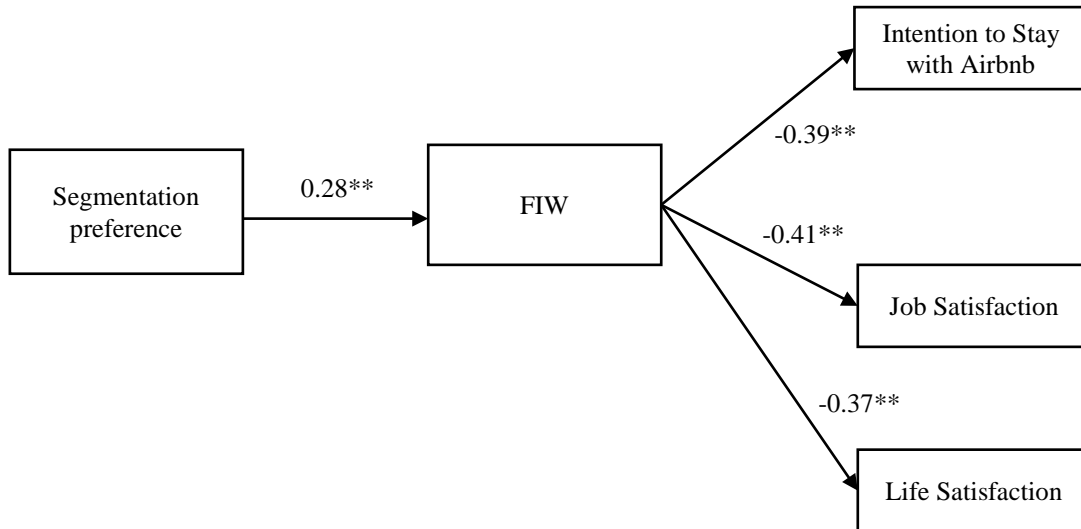*Note.* N = 136.

*p < 0.05. **p < 0.01.

Figure 1.

Path Analysis Results with WIF as mediator.

Note. Model included direct paths from segmentation preference to Intention to Stay with Airbnb, Job Satisfaction, and Life Satisfaction, which were not significant. For visual clarity, their estimates were not included in the figure.

Figure 2.

Path Analysis Results with FIW as mediator.

Note. Model included direct paths from segmentation preference to Intention to Stay with Airbnb, Job Satisfaction, and Life Satisfaction, which were not significant. For visual clarity, their estimates were not included in the figure.

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