

# Airbnb and cannabis trafficking

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*The hospitality industry is facing criticism for turning a blind eye to illegal and immoral activities that occur within its properties. However, the role of the sharing economy, particularly Airbnb, is missing in current literature. This paper uses a qualitative methodology that includes eight interviews with Airbnb hosts, as well as a content analysis of Airbnb news releases and host discussion board posts. Using a corporate social responsibility (CSR) framework, the results suggest that, while Airbnb has attempted to tackle a number of social issues, its lack of stakeholder engagement has resulted in the coercive practice of pressuring hosts to accept questionable reservations. Moreover, the lack of visibility of Airbnb CSR initiatives and host communication tools means ineffectiveness remains in combating illegal activities that occur in Airbnb properties. Lastly, the use of qualitative methods uncovers host mitigation strategies to work around corporate policies in an effort to avoid illegal drug trafficking on their properties.*

**Keywords:** *Airbnb, cannabis, drug trafficking, corporate social responsibility, marijuana tourism, Oregon*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Cannabis – which includes both marijuana (containing the principal psychoactive constituent tetrahydrocannabinol/THC) and hemp (without THC) – has been controversial throughout the history of the US (as in many other countries). In November 2012, Washington and Colorado became the first states to legalize recreational use of cannabis products, followed by Oregon in 2014. Currently 18 states and the District of Columbia (DC) have legalized recreational cannabis use, although it still remains illegal at the federal level. The legalization of cannabis allows for the growing, harvesting, and sale of regulated cannabis in ways similar to alcohol – allowing for the possession of up to an ounce (28 grams) for adults (21 and older), and provisions banning driving under the influence.

For states that have legalized marijuana, the impact has been staggering. It is estimated that the economic impact of cannabis-related sales to the US economy was \$46.2 billion in 2019 and is expected to grow to \$106 billion by 2024 (Marijuana Business Daily 2020). Many of these indirect and inducing impacts have been in the tourism industry. Drift Travel (2023) claims that:

When comparing the industry growth in states that hadn't legalized marijuana with both Colorado and Washington (2011–2015), the results showed ... legalization increased monthly hotel booking in Colorado from 2.5% to 4%, and by 1% in Washington ... booking rates jumped from 6% to 7.2% in Colorado, and Washington's increased by 3.5%. The room prices also increased in both states, rising by 2.8% in Colorado and by 3.8% in Washington.

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The Craft Cannabis Alliance acknowledges that “Southern Oregon and Northern California (are) “the emerald region”, where long, dry growing seasons and cool nights create a perfect climate for growing marijuana outdoors” (Quinton 2019). The recreational use of cannabis has provided new opportunities for rural communities, including growth in the tourism and hospitality sectors. Tauer (2022) claims that cannabis has provided Oregon with over \$1.2 billion in direct economic impacts and 12,500 jobs, and asserts that the state saw over \$110.8 million in legal cannabis sales in April 2021, a 23.5 percent increase over April 2020. It is estimated that \$19 million was raised in state and local taxes, and that tourism consumption increased sales by 19.6 percent in 2015, the first year after legalization.

However, weak enforcement of cannabis regulation has resulted in illegal production. Illegal marijuana is unlicensed production for the purpose of transportation to states where cannabis use is still illegal, and has resulted in numerous community-based challenges, including human trafficking and worker exploitation (for harvesting and transportation), COVID-19 outbreaks, water hijacking (during drought conditions), armed militias, and the release of toxic chemicals into the environment. Furthermore, evidence suggests that much of the illegal production is controlled by Central and South American cartels, as Fertig (2022) claims:

Local law enforcement officials believe that people from every U.S. state and as many as 20 countries have purchased property in Jackson or Josephine counties (Oregon). Cartels roll in and offer long-time residents as much as a million dollars in cash for their property ... as [only] 36 states have adopted some form of legalized marijuana, the black market is booming across the country. Legal states such as Oregon and California – which have been supplying the nation for nigh on 60 years – are still furnishing the majority of America’s illegal weed.

Drug trafficking is the illegal transporting of, or transacting in, controlled substances. Trafficking occurs when drugs are transported from states that allow recreational use to states that do not. By its very nature, trafficking uses aspects of the travel and tourism infrastructure to facilitate operations (Belhassen et al. 2007). In particular, Jackson and Josephine counties in southern Oregon, among others, have declared states of emergency to address their illegal growing operations, in hope of federal aid to mitigate the situation.

This paper uses qualitative methodologies to investigate the role of Airbnb in the facilitation and/or acquiescence of illegal cannabis production and distribution through the experiences of Airbnb hosts in southern Oregon. Using a corporate social responsibility (CSR) framework, the aim of this paper is to: establish an understanding of the impacts of illegal cannabis cultivation within the hospitality/tourism sector, using Airbnb as a guideline; determine Airbnb hosts’ mitigation strategies related to the use of their properties for illegal activities, specifically marijuana trafficking; and to determine formal Airbnb policies that support or inhibit hosts’ attempts at mitigation.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

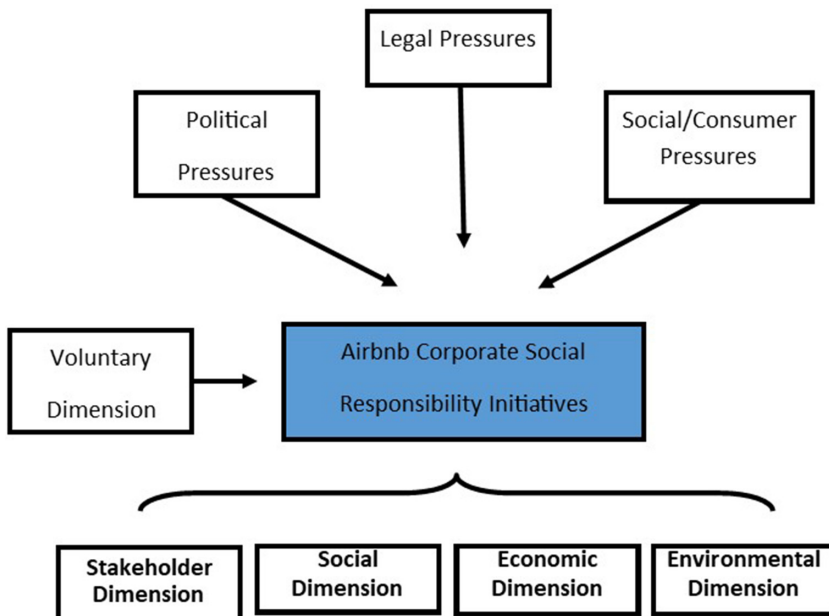
By their very nature, illegal actions, especially related to trafficking, use aspects of the travel and tourism infrastructure to facilitate operations. Specifically, hotels have come under scrutiny for their neglect in addressing these issues (Kragt 2020). Thulemark et al. (2022) are the first scholars to critically examine Airbnb policies, finding that the company does not provide support for hosts that report suspected incidences of

sex trafficking, although drug trafficking was not explicitly mentioned. They call for more research within the sharing economy, specifically within the realm of corporate social responsibility and illegal activities.

## 2.1 Corporate social responsibility

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is well documented in the tourism literature and is often equated with sustainability (Hatipoglu et al. 2019). The European Commission (2001: 8) defines CSR as “a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis”, although definitions of CSR are dependent on the stakeholders involved (Martínez et al. 2013). Dahlsrud (2008) argues that CSR requires companies to assume “responsibility” within the five dimensions of CSR, namely: the stakeholder dimension; the social dimension; the economic dimension; the voluntariness dimension; and the environmental dimension (Figure 1). Font and Lynes (2018: 1028) sum up this relationship best by explaining that “CSR is described as a process whereby individuals identify stakeholder demands on their organisations and negotiate their level of responsibility towards the collective well-being of society, environment, and economy.” The key aspect of this definition is that CSR is a *voluntary action*.

There has been significant growth in research related to CSR and tourism (Font/Lynes 2018). Much of this scholarship has concentrated on environmental management (Khatter et al. 2019; Pereira-Moliner et al. 2015), social development



Source: Adapted from Dahlsrud (2008).

Figure 1 Corporate social responsibility framework

(Hatipoglu et al. 2019; Zeng/Wang 2019), customer perception (Baker et al. 2014; Boronat-Navarro/Pérez-Aranda 2019), or financial performance (Kragt 2020; Rahman et al. 2012). Khatter et al. (2019) argue that environmental issues should be prioritized over economic, fiscal, and social sustainability as climate change is the leading risk factor for the future of tourism destinations. Rahman et al. (2012) claim that firms are either proactive or reactive in relation to CSR and that those that were more proactive had better financial performance over time. Meanwhile Boronat-Navarro and Pérez-Aranda (2019) note that transparency, specifically within customer circles that have extensive knowledge of CSR, can improve overall corporate performance; and Baker et al. (2014) determine that CSR is not a significant motivator for customers. They argue that hotels should use their success to educate travelers on the importance of CSR.

Moreover, much of the literature has focused on the hospitality sector, which emphasizes a service-oriented attitude where customer satisfaction, including privacy, is highly valued (van der Graaf 2018). Kragt (2020) argues that corporate culture is an important facilitator of CSR, although evidence suggests that financial targets are perceived as more important than moral decisions by management. Inoue and Lee (2011) recognize two financial measurements: short-term profitability (accounting) and future profitability (market-based).

## 2.2 Airbnb and corporate social responsibility

While literature related to the sharing economy is on the rise, little attention has been paid to the CSR practices of such companies. The sharing economy is defined as “ICT-enabled platforms for exchanges of goods and services drawing on non-market logics such as sharing, lending, gifting and swapping as well as market logics such as renting and selling” (Laurell/Sandström 2018: 63). Because the stakeholder base is different from hotels, one could argue that general hospitality studies fail to grasp the complexity of companies such as Airbnb (Martínez et al. 2013). As of June 2020, Airbnb reported over 1 billion guests and 4 million hosts in over 1000 cities worldwide, with an estimated \$150 billion payout to hosts (Airbnb 2020a).

Airbnb promotes an inclusive form of tourism whereby households are able to “share” in the tourism sector, encouraging more wide-spread benefits within destinations and unique travel experiences for guests. Kadi et al. (2022) find that 83 percent of the available properties in Vienna, Austria, were owned by single-listing hosts and 68.5 percent of available inventory is offered for rent at least 120 days per year – evidence that many properties remain locally controlled even though corporate ownership is on the rise (Kemp 2020). Additionally, scholars have emphasized the cultural interactions resulting from Airbnb rentals as primary drivers of demand. So et al. (2021) refute this claim, as they find that the Airbnb platform is designed to promote physical property attributes (such as hot tubs or outdoor spaces), and that cultural immersion is only a secondary factor. Moreover, Airbnb has been accused of digital discrimination against people “on the basis of color, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation” (Cheng/Foley 2018: 95), resulting in numerous lawsuits and undesirable media attention.

Airbnb has received extensive negative attention in relation to their CSR actions (Hassanli et al. 2022). Tie et al. (2021: 220) write, “in order to improve the reputation of the company, especially from the perspective of employees and all stakeholders, the company should accelerate the implementation of CSR”. Although Airbnb has

increased their environmental and philanthropic activities, economic CSR has weakened positive consumer attitudes towards the company (Chuah et al. 2022). Some CSR programs that have received attention include: gender and minority equality (women, people of color, and LBGTQ populations); accommodations for refugees and people impacted by natural disasters; and banning white supremacists from using their properties during controversial events.

There is scant research in the tourism literature surrounding drug trafficking; however scholarly work on sex trafficking can provide insights. For example, Paraskevas and Brookes (2018) found three determinants that increase occurrences of sex trafficking – permeable borders, complex supply chains, and individual company business practices. In the case of Airbnb, specifically within the US, these attributes are clearly present as: crossing state lines requires no border controls; Airbnb works with over 4 million accommodation suppliers; and many of the business practices lie with individual hosts who may be unaware that trafficking exists, do not know the signs of trafficking networks, or do not know how their properties support these illegal activities. In 2018 and 2019, respectively, Airbnb partnered with two organizations working to combat human trafficking – non-profit NGO Polaris and the It’s a Penalty charity – to address the problem, and was a founding member of the World Travel & Tourism Council’s (WTTC) global taskforce to help prevent human trafficking (Airbnb 2020b). According to Airbnb (2021c):

We use predictive analytics and machine learning to instantly evaluate hundreds of signals that help us flag and investigate suspicious activity before it happens. And while no background check system is infallible, Airbnb screens all hosts and guests globally against regulatory, terrorist, and sanctions watch lists. For US residents, we also run background checks looking for prior felony convictions, sex offender registrations, and significant misdemeanors.

Moreover, in response to increased CSR pressure, the company has established a number of key initiatives, including:

- Establishing a robust training curriculum for Airbnb’s customer support agents and crisis managers to help identify possible signs of exploitation and improve the reporting of potential trafficking;
- Developing smart protocols to share learning and support cooperation with law enforcement;
- Designing new methods to better flag possible exploitation on Airbnb before it happens, while still respecting and maintaining the privacy of hosts and guests; and
- Convening a range of companies and local anti-human trafficking experts to explore new areas of collaboration to strengthen the private sector’s efforts in combating trafficking (Airbnb 2020b).

It is important to note that, outside of the press releases mentioned here, no resources for hosts could be found on the company’s websites.

### 3 METHODS

As there is scant literature on the influence of illegal cannabis use and the hospitality industry, as well as within the sharing economy, this paper employs a constructivist paradigm. Constructivism situates the researcher within an “other” context – in this case as an Airbnb host (Pernecky 2012) – and is commonly used in social science

research. Using a case study format allows for examination of specific bounded units of analysis, which can capture variable conditions by using multiple sources of data to explain *what* is happening rather than *how* it is happening (Stake 2003). The goal is to capture the shared experience of the participants within a specific study context, namely the illegal cannabis trade in southern Oregon. The author acknowledges however that this study is not generalizable across research sites.

As this is an exploratory study, qualitative methods were used. Qualitative research allows the researcher to explore the lived experience of the participants and better understand the social construction of realities (Daniels et al. 2019). Moreover, when addressing a new issue or an existing issue from a different perspective, qualitative research allows for new perceptions and experiences to be shared (Mathijssen 2019). The data were collected in two phases.

The first phase was direct approach content analysis of Airbnb discussion forums for hosts who share their concerns, and news releases by Airbnb. Content analysis works well when there is incomplete theoretical or literature support available (Qiu/Zhang 2021). Key search words included “trafficking”, “drugs”, “marijuana”, and “cannabis”. Table 1 shows the number of results per search. Broad topics were combined to form themes that ran throughout the data, which included marijuana tourism, host strategies, and Airbnb policies. These data were used to inform interview questions, and later to add depth to the analysis and situate responses.

The second phase of the research included interviews with Airbnb hosts. Requests were sent through the Airbnb owners’ blog site, using convenience sampling of eligible respondents. Saturation was reached after eight interviews (Corbin/Strauss 2014). Hosts had to be located in either Josephine or Jackson counties (which have declared states of emergency related to their illegal drug issues). All hosts had to manage the daily operation of their properties to avoid the inclusion of corporate entities unaware of local issues (Kadi et al. 2022), and could not manage more than two properties (Kemp 2020) as the goal was to assess the perceptions of local residents rather than views relating to non-local, large-scale commercial properties. Interviews were conducted in person and lasted about an hour each. Table 2 shows the study participants, with pseudonyms used to protect the privacy of the individuals. All interviews were transcribed using an online transcription program, and participants were offered an opportunity to review all transcripts. Topics were derived from the interviews, which were then combined to form the research themes. Coding and theme formation were guided by the literature review of extant studies in tourism, corporate social responsibility, and the sharing economy, as well as the themes from the content analysis using NVivo software. The four interview

*Table 1 Airbnb discussion posts related to drug trafficking*

Keyword	Number of discussion threads	Details
Trafficking	1	17 posts, 671 views
Drugs	757	Each thread had fewer than 20 replies (average of 7 replies per post)
Marijuana	334	Each thread had between 0 and 42 replies (average of 12 replies per post)
Cannabis	75	Each thread had between 0 and 22 replies (average of 9 replies per post)

*Table 2 Study participants*

Name	Location	Number of properties	Years in operation	Host lives on-site
Alex	Jackson	1	1.5	No
Betty	Jackson	1	0.5	Yes
Camille	Josephine	2	1	Yes
David	Josephine	1	2	No
Emily	Josephine	1	1.5	Yes
Francis	Jackson	2	2.5	No
Greggory	Josephine	1	4	Yes
Harriett	Jackson	2	2	No

themes were: Understanding southern Oregon; Marijuana tourism?; Working with Airbnb; and Host mitigation strategies.

## 4 RESULTS

### 4.1 Understanding southern Oregon

Rural Oregon, like many rural areas, is seeped in a personal freedom of choice value system. While Oregon has a reputation as a liberal state, with a Democratic governor and a majority in the state legislature, there is a strong conservative movement in the south, as interviewee Greggory explains:

People here are mostly Libertarian. They remain unvaccinated [against COVID-19] mostly, and everyone owns a gun. Here, people value personal liberties, which extends to illegal activities. If you want to grow cannabis without a license, most people haven't cared.

It appears cannabis use has always been a socially accepted part of southern Oregonian life. Francis explains, "We have always grown pot in the valley and we have always smoked pot in the valley. It's nobody's business." In a host discussion post, someone writes:

Come to my place in Oregon! We don't tell you if you can have a glass of wine or take a prescription medication your doctor gave you. That's none of our business. Our businesses [is] that you enjoy your stay.

However, the illegal drug trade is beginning to cause a number of social problems that is drawing more attention to illegal cannabis in the area.

Increased attention in the media around vagrancy and transient populations has the participants concerned about the role of legalized (or illegal) cannabis. Research commissioned in 2019 by the Oregon Community Foundation, summarized on its website (2023), found that:

Oregon has a disproportionately large population of homeless people when compared to other states: while Oregon's population represents 1.3% of the total U.S. population, Oregon's homeless population represents 2.6% of the total U.S. ... In Jackson County, the homeless population hit a seven-year high (up almost 27%) in 2017–2018.

While Moore (2018) claims there is minimal evidence to connect legal cannabis to this issue, more than one respondent believes that people come to work on the illegal

cannabis farms but cannot find long-term employment after the harvest, adding to the homelessness issues. Betty believes “there has to be a connection. We never used to have these kinds of people in our community.” David adds:

The homeless problem is using up our resources. We have the lowest property tax in the state, but how much of it actually goes to our schools and our roads? Every month, the talk is investing more resources in the homeless.

Selsky (2021) reports that there are currently four full-time employees in the Oregon Water Resources Department who are overwhelmed as creeks dry up from the illegal syphoning of water for cannabis farms. He also reports that law enforcement has the resources to investigate about 40 illegal cannabis farms a year, but it is estimated that there are over 2000 such farms between the two counties. Moreover, water theft from the Rogue River, Applegate River, and Illinois River has impacted wildlife and recreational opportunities. Harriet clarifies: “We are a big sport fishing and rafting destination. Low water levels are killing our fish and we now have a weed that grow[s] in the summer time. It’s gross, and people don’t want to wade in the water.” Camille adds: “We used to recommend some wonderful, less-known hiking trails along the river. Now, we tell guests to avoid those because of illegal grow[er]s. They could easily get shot.” Alex has also noticed some of these issues: “Water is scarce, fire seasons get worse every year. We are very protective of our water and our wildlife that depends on our water.” In fact, Parker-Shames et al. (2020) show that Deer Creek, a Rogue River tributary, dried up due to illegal marijuana harvesting.

## 4.2 Marijuana tourism?

The Airbnb hosts in this study have acknowledged that many of their guests are interested in purchasing cannabis products. One Airbnb blog shows the extent to which hosts accommodate their guests: “Out here in Oregon ... adults can enjoy or medicate with cannabis. We’re so darn amazing super hosts – We offer amenities that even enhance your stay!” While none of the participants actually offered cannabis (which requires a license to sell), they did have “favorite” dispensaries that they shared with visitors. Camille adds: “My brother manages a dispensary, and he takes good care of our guests. He finds that cannabis chocolate is very popular with out-of-state guests.” Alex highly recommends a marijuana tour company out of Ashland, Oregon, where visitors see cannabis production from “planting to refinement. It’s really cool.” There was also a Weed and Wine festival in Grants Pass, although it has remained closed since the pandemic.

Marijuana tourists bring a new set of challenges for Airbnb hosts. The law requires consumers to be at least 21 years of age, although the illegal drug trade allows youth to purchase cannabis products readily in Oregon (Quinton 2019). The study participants discussed two types of cannabis user. Emily explains: “You have the young party crowd that are trouble, then you have the respectful groups that use responsibly. It’s hard to tell the difference before they arrive, but sometimes the responsible one will ask your policies on pot smoking.” Alex adds: “Airbnb has some new policies for kids that just party and trash your place. You can report them, but that’s after the damage.”

There is more concern from the participants regarding those employed in the illegal drug trade. Gregory states: “From September until November is hemp harvesting season, but it is also prime fishing and hunting season as it’s the salmon run. I can’t close up, but I start to get anxiety about who is coming.” Betty says that many of the harvesters the

previous year were from Argentina, arriving on tourist visas but staying for the whole season. She adds: “I hate to discriminate based on Hispanic names or poor English in messages, but in the fall, I find that I do.”

A third type of cannabis visitor is the illegal harvester or transportation team that takes harvested cannabis out of Oregon. Illegal harvesters often spend 12 hours a day surrounded by fresh cannabis. David shares his story:

My property sleeps 4, but there were 6 people staying in the house. The cannabis oil from fresh buds is different than the dried stuff you smoke. The smell gets in their skin, their hair. After a month of them staying in my house, I had to throw away the mattresses and pillows. It’s a smell that is different than just smoking pot in the house. It’s rancid and will never come out.

Camille has had people use her house as a “pick-up” spot, where trucks and vans come through in the middle of the night. “They fill them full of pot and then leave. My guess is that they take it across to Idaho where it’s illegal and they can make good money. I’ve learned the hard way and now I just call the cops.”

### 4.3 Working with Airbnb

Airbnb has implemented a number of new policies in support of hosts designed to curb bad behavior by guests. The Airbnb newsroom (2021a) highlights changes made during particular holidays that are associated with parties (such as Halloween, 4th July, New Year). For example:

For one-night reservations: Guests without a history of positive reviews on Airbnb will be prohibited from making reservations in entire home listings. ... For two-night reservations: ... we will deploy more stringent restrictions that may pose heightened risk for parties.

The hosts complain that destructive guests occur year-round in southern Oregon, not just on the holidays – as Harriett says:

I’m more concerned about the Monday through Wednesday booking. That’s when we get a recluse that wants to over-indulge. The prices are cheaper mid-week, and a lot of these people use their parent’s account or a friend’s account to hide that they are under age.

Betty adds:

I had 2 kids show up, they were driving so had to be 16 at least, but not much older, I had a hell of a time getting rid of them. I could report them on the website, but that didn’t get them out of my cabin. They trashed that place and left cocaine and pot all over the carpet.

As of 2021, Airbnb offers property damage protection, where “hosts may be protected with up to \$1 million if their place or belongings are damaged by a guest during a stay” (Airbnb 2021b). However a discussion post regarding property damage dated 18 February 2022 states:

I heard nothing for days, kept responding to the app, and then it says the case was closed. It’s been over a month since this happened, I was transferred to a new team member and have emailed him every day and no reply.

While Gregory did call Airbnb when he had a troublesome guest, it was used more as a scare tactic. He claims it worked and the guest left, but “Airbnb has no real authority once someone has checked in. There were all sorts of comings-and-goings,

and the place was a mess when they left. These people will just open a new account in a new name and do it again.”

Moreover, Airbnb puts pressure on hosts to accept as many reservations as possible. For example, David explains:

I had a questionable reservation. I declined it and 15 minutes later I get another request for the same dates. I declined that and then a third request came in. An hour later I got an email from Airbnb saying if I declined another guest, my account would be put on hold.

Camille had similar issues:

Sometimes it's best to let the customer back out after they have made an inquiry. Depending on why you decline them, I mean they only give you about 3 options, Airbnb will block off those dates and you can't re-rent them.

Emily claims that if you don't respond fast enough, it impacts your “Super Host” status:

You can't just ignore the bad eggs, if you are not giving quality service at all times, Airbnb punishes you. You can't even imagine some of the requests I get ... poor grammar, cursing, insane questions. It's hard to decline them, ignore them, or avoid them.

Airbnb has implemented a new policy to avoid negative stereotyping and discrimination against guests with ethnic names. This policy is currently being tested in Oregon in response to a recent discrimination lawsuit (Njus 2019). When a reservation comes in, the host now only sees a first initial. One host in Oregon posted: “I'm a bit disappointed with Airbnb that as an Oregon host I got no e-mail notice from them about this new change and only learned about it because of an article my son was reading.” Harriett is troubled by the pre-booking information she receives:

We used to get the full profile, now it seems like you can get the reviews, but not their stars for things like cleanliness or communication. You have to read through all the reviews and hope the hosts are accurate. In other words, you have to do a lot more research for a person named “S”, there's no picture, there's no personal connection, it's like a void.

#### **4.4 Host mitigation strategies**

In response to some of the challenges in southern Oregon, hosts have had to adapt and adjust their policies. Gregory advises, “You have to go with your gut. Don't underestimate your intuition.” Betty agrees: “I just get a bad feeling. After a couple of bad experiences, the feeling becomes more common. There's a fine line because if you turn everyone away, what's the point of having the business?” However, the hosts in this study have found a few innovative ways to avoid the illegal cannabis visitors.

Pricing is key, they say. The higher the price, the less likely drug runners or harvesters will be interested in a property. Harriett explains: “We went into this hoping to offer an affordable stay to a variety of people. I hate charging more, but it works.” Emily adds:

The idea of a long-term rental is nice, less time cleaning and responding to inquiries, but that really draws the cannabis harvesters and traffickers. They want to stay for six or eight weeks. I tried two-week rentals, but a one-week limit has really improved the quality of guests.

Many of the respondents also eliminated discounts for longer stays.

Others try to be very clear on their property listing page. For example, Francis states on his web page that harvesters are not welcome, and Emily states that all illegal activities will be reported to the authorities. She adds, “It works, but some still slip through.” Many also highlight security cameras on the premise, although not many actually have cameras as they are too expensive.

Another practice is to engage in online conversations with prospective guests. Camille values guests who will engage in these dialogues: “If a guest does not have a 5-star rating, then I have to approve the booking. I want to know who they are traveling with and why they are coming to the area. Most people will chat with you.” Harriett adds: “In the end, it’s about my comfort level with guests. Most people are good, but the stress gets to you, especially in the fall. I want someone who is excited to be here and have a good experience. It’s like developing a relationship.”

## 5 DISCUSSION

The overarching goal of this research is to better understand the impacts of illegal cannabis cultivation within the hospitality/tourism sector, using Airbnb as a guideline. By using a corporate social responsibility framework, this research has provided insight into the formal company policies that support or inhibit hosts’ attempts at mitigation. It has also highlighted Airbnb hosts’ mitigation strategies related to the use of their properties for marijuana trafficking. Airbnb as a driving force in the hospitality industry is better understood. Figure 2 shows the company’s approach to CSR using Dahlsrud’s (2008) framework.

Corporate culture is vital to the success of CSR and influences the depth of its adoption (Kragt 2020). As a voluntary action, Airbnb has focused their CSR attention on initiatives that have received media attention or have been addressed in lawsuits, firmly focusing on short-term accounting profits over long-term strategic CSR strategies (Inoue/Lee 2011). Their primary motivation has been legal pressure, often in the form of legal sanctions that have motivated their CSR initiatives. Therefore, Airbnb’s level of voluntary engagement is limited. Moreover, policies must be adapted to the company’s stakeholder base (Dahlsrud 2008) – in this case its hosts. However, in the sharing economy, the hosts are not considered part of the corporation, instead often viewed as “contractors” who must follow the policies set forth by the parent company (Thulemark et al. 2022). At the same time, hosts often feel as if they are small business owners who must establish workable policies that meet the specific challenges they face. Airbnb is viewed as a top-down, authoritarian structure rather than a partnership, where negative incentives (such as suspending accounts or removing Super Host status) demotivate hosts and add stress to the booking process. By neglecting the social situations inherent in rural communities where cannabis is legalized (Dahlsrud 2008), one could argue that Airbnb has invoked a reactive CSR response (Rahman et al. 2012). This paper does not address consumer perceptions of CSR; however, in a study of CSR and Airbnb, Chuah et al. (2022: 1) found that, “while the overall trust–corporate reputation link is strengthened by the environmental and philanthropic CSR, it is weakened by economic CSR, which can lead to unfavorable consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions”.

Airbnb is a service-oriented business and expects its hosts to offer guests a quality experience (van der Graaf 2018). While a number of CSR initiatives are in effect, Airbnb has been slow in “pushing” out information, instead relying on hosts to browse the company website to access resources or learn about policy changes.

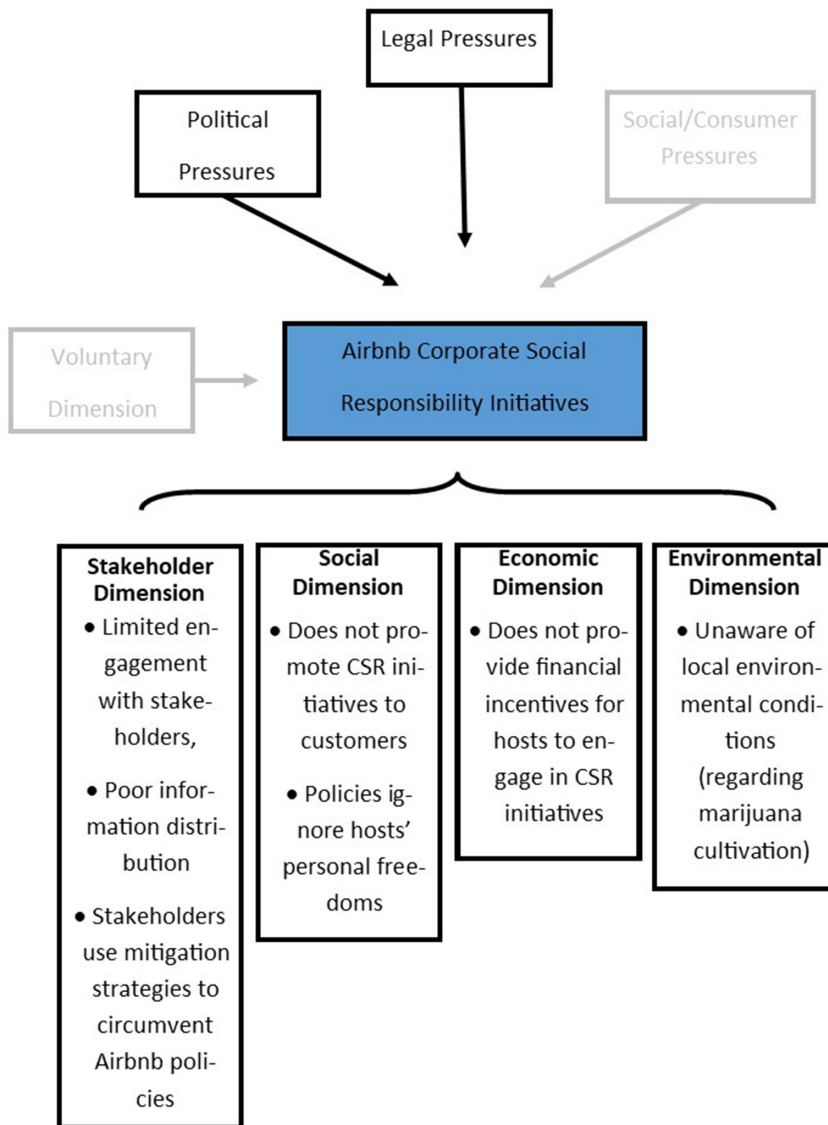


Figure 2 Airbnb's performance using Dahlsrud's CSR framework

Kragt (2020) shows that clear guidelines are needed for effective CSR policy implementation, including information to help hosts recognize illegal activities and avenues to report and remove guests who break the law. For example, the company says it has attempted to provide “a robust training curriculum for Airbnb’s customer support agents” (Airbnb 2020b), although this study shows that Airbnb support for illegal activities is not supportive within the drug-trafficking realm. They also are attempting to design “new methods to better flag possible exploitation on Airbnb before it

happens”. Again, evidence suggests that, while Airbnb is addressing party tourism, it has not yet established a mechanism to prevent illegal activities in its properties.

As a result of this short-term approach, the participants in this study feel that the guest is often favored over the hosts, thus reducing trust in the Airbnb brand (Chuah et al. 2022). Especially within the sharing economy, where advanced technology is leading the way in innovation, a more inclusive policy environment could support a more socially responsible management philosophy (Boronat-Navarro/Pérez-Aranda 2019). Moreover, as market forces change in support of CSR and sustainability, companies like Airbnb must become proactive, giving equal credence to hosts and guests in relation to both policy development and information sharing. As it stands, Airbnb appears to turn a blind eye to the issue of drug trafficking.

However, hosts have found creative ways to bypass the Airbnb policy environment and find ways to address illegal activities on their properties. Communication appears to be the key resource these hosts use, which still falls within Airbnb guidelines. By engaging in conversations and being explicit on their listings, hosts have seen a decline in their properties’ use for drug trafficking. Moreover, the Airbnb host platform provides avenues for learning about and sharing these mitigation strategies. In other words, Airbnb hosts are mitigating marijuana trafficking without the direct support of Airbnb.

In conclusion, Airbnb has received negative media attention, as have many technology companies (Laurell/Sandström 2018; Cheng/Foley 2018), and has invested resources to increase the visibility of its CSR initiatives (Airbnb 2021a). Some of these initiatives are a direct result of litigation (Njus 2019), while others appear to be a result of increased competition in the sharing economy (for example Vrbo). As Airbnb is a multinational organization, many of its policies address broad issues that impact hosts around the globe. Problems specific to a small rural region therefore appear to be under the radar at the moment.

## 5.1 Limitations and future research

This study presents the findings of a small study in southern Oregon, and is not generalizable across geographies. As cannabis legislation becomes liberalized across the US, future research should continue this investigation as a means to find best practices for tourism and hospitality practitioners in relation to drug trafficking, particularly in regions with different political and philosophical values systems than rural Oregon. Moreover, an understanding of hosts’ needs can better inform guests as reservation approval becomes more selective in response to “troubling” visitors. As Inoue and Lee (2011) acknowledge, understanding consumer perceptions of Airbnb policies related to CSR could encourage the company to be more proactive in combating illegal drug activities, which in turn could increase its positive consumer image (Chuah et al. 2022). Much of the Airbnb literature has focused on urban areas, whereas this paper draws attention to the challenges facing rural communities. Therefore, broader research that compares and contrasts the role of the sharing economy in different regions is important in understanding the role that the sharing economy plays in the tourism and hospitality sectors.

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