

The Airbnb phenomenon: the resident's perspective

Abstract

Purpose

Media and academic attention on Airbnb focuses on user experiences, implications for traditional accommodation establishments and negative sociocultural impacts. This study explores the views of Barcelona residents who have been impacted by the proliferation of Airbnb rentals.

Design/methodology/approach

A qualitative approach was adopted, involving semi-structured interviews with residents of Barcelona.

Findings

It highlights the problem of unregistered Airbnb rentals throughout the city, carrying implications for the gentrification of neighbourhoods, the displacement of local residents, and anti-social guest behaviour. This study points to a consequent rise in anti-tourist feeling. It also reveals that the authentic experience promised by the sharing economy is illusory.

Originality/value

The paper presents a model that highlights a clash between the vaunted benefits of the sharing economy for hosts and tourists and the negative implications for a city's residents.

Key words

Airbnb Barcelona gentrification displacement illegality anti-tourism

1. Introduction

Information technology developments have led to the adoption of digital platforms encouraging “user-generated content, sharing and collaboration” (Hamari et al. 2015, p. 2047). The ‘sharing’ or ‘collaborative economy’ emerged in the United States but the phenomenon has gone global, spreading especially to European cities (Schor 2014). Indeed, in 2014 Amsterdam was the first to be labelled a sharing city, and Paris, London and Barcelona soon launched campaigns promoting their use of collaborative consumption (Dredge and Gyimóthy 2015). Peer-to-peer online platforms such as Airbnb, HomeAway and CouchSurfing have enabled hosts to be directly in contact with users (Henten and Windekilde 2016). The collaborative economy, or sharing economy, is based upon online platforms where peers can share underutilised resources (Prayag and Ozanne 2018), and in hospitality is used to connect hosts and guests (Dredge et al 2016), allowing individuals to make money from underutilized resources (PwC 2015). Whilst other peer-to-peer short term rental platforms exist, Airbnb is by far the largest and considered the ‘poster child’ of the sharing economy (Guttentag 2019).

Airbnb is seen as the major figure in the hospitality sharing industry (Ert et al. 2016), responsible for the disruption of the traditional, and more expensive, accommodation sector (Guttentag 2015). Founded in 2008 in San Francisco, it now has over 4 million listings globally, more than the top five hotel brands combined (Hartmans 2017). Its ‘Meeting the Locals’ philosophy and its reduced costs provide the online company with a competitive advantage able to attract a growing number of travellers worldwide (Guttentag 2015).

Airbnb has become a focus of media and academic attention (Burgen 2017; Aznar et al. 2017). The growth of Airbnb has generated controversy regarding its socio-economic impacts (Sans and Domínguez 2016; Frenken and Schor 2017). Nevertheless, research on the sharing economy has predominantly adopted a user-centric approach; there is less research on the sociocultural impacts of the sharing economy (Cheng 2016). Guttentag (2013) calls for research on resident attitudes in cities with an established Airbnb presence, which this paper responds to. Jordan and Moore (2018) conducted an exploratory study of resident’s perceived impacts of short term rentals in Hawaii, and called for further studies in other types of destinations with a high Airbnb presence. Barcelona is an appropriate case because tourist holiday rentals are spreading throughout the city, making Barcelona the fourth global urban destination for Airbnb stays (Lambea Llop 2017). Tasci and Knutson (2004) argue that tourism in combination with technology developments may cause deleterious socio-cultural changes in host communities, indirectly impacting on the quality of the tourist experience itself. ~~In response to the above comments by researchers on Airbnb,~~ It is for this

reason that this paper explores the resident perspective on Airbnb in Barcelona, with a specific focus on the negative consequences of a proliferation of Airbnb in the city.

~~Tourist holiday rentals are spreading throughout the city, making Barcelona the fourth global urban destination for Airbnb stays (Lambea Llop 2017).~~ It is estimated by Barcelona City Council that there are approximately 16,000 holiday rentals in the city (Burgen 2017), and the most recent published data shows that 1.24 million people used Airbnb in Barcelona in 2016, up 40% on 2015 (Skift 2017). This has strongly affected the local population (Burgen 2017). Pressure resulting from increased visitor numbers has been coined overtourism and is most evident in cities (Postma and Schmuecker 2017). Airbnb has been blamed for exacerbating this in Barcelona (Skift 2017). This paper makes an original contribution to knowledge by focusing on the resident perspective on the social impacts of Airbnb in Barcelona. The paper highlights the negative impacts on host residents of the Airbnb phenomenon, and in so doing contributes to a growing body of research on overtourism by focusing on the resident perspective. The paper concludes with a model that identifies a tension between the supposed benefits of the sharing economy for hosts and tourists and the negative impacts on residents.

2. Literature Review

This section provides an overview of current research on Airbnb, highlighting its appeal to providers and users, and the negative impacts on destinations and residents: gentrification and the resulting displacement of residents, security and public nuisance, and responsible management.

2.1 The appeal of Airbnb

Much research explores Airbnb from the visitor perspective, including segmentation studies (Guttentag et al 2018; Volgger et al 2018); the importance of review attributes (Liang et al 2017; Karen and Zgenxing 2017); trust and reputation (Ert et al 2016; Tussyadiah and Park 2018; Yang et al 2018); targeted advertising (Liu and Mattila 2017); brand personality (Lee and Kim 2018); traveller satisfaction and loyalty (Zhenxing and Jiaying 2017; Mohlmann 2015; Liang et al 2018; Lee and Kim 2018; Lalicic and Weismayer 2018); and the guest experience (Paulauskaite et al 2017; Sthapit and Jiménez-Barreto 2018; Cheng and Jin 2019).

Much research highlights the appeal of Airbnb to users. For example, Oskam and Boswijk (2016) argue that Airbnb offers a financial incentive to hosts and guests alike. From the host's perspective, it

allows the monetisation of their idle spaces (Martin 2016), at competitive prices (Sigala 2017). For consumers, the global economic crisis has changed their spending habits and priorities, making them more prudent and willing to rethink concepts of sharing and access (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). Airbnb enables leisure tourists to visit destinations that would be unaffordable otherwise (Stors and Kagermeier 2015).

Researchers also highlight authenticity as an appeal of staying in Airbnb lettings (Guttentag 2015), allowing tourists to create ties with locals (Sans and Domínguez 2016). Customers are concerned not just with price, “but actually seek the authentic local experience” (Liang et al. 2018, p. 85). In their study in Berlin, Stors and Kagermeier (2015) found that the opportunity to experience the destination as a local was just as important to Airbnb users as price. This supports Walker and Moscardo’s (2014) identification of authenticity as a factor in enjoying an engaging and satisfactory tourist experience. Indeed going off-the-beaten-track to find the “real culture” (Fursich 2002, p.211) has always been a drive among travellers, especially in city tourism (Stors and Kagermeier 2017). Authentic experiences are particularly important to the younger traveller. A study conducted by Expedia in collaboration with the global consultancy Future Foundation (2016) reveals that millennials aim to experience the authentic culture of a destination. The accessibility of digital platforms has changed the way authenticity is now perceived (Dredge and Gyimóthy 2015). Authenticity is used in Airbnb’s marketing (Liang et al 2018), as in their recent ‘Don’t Go There. Live There’ campaign (Skift 2016).

Another appeal is Airbnb’s potential to minimize environmental impacts. The sharing economy is seen as a promotor of more sustainable lifestyle and business practices due to its second-hand business model (Dredge and Gyimóthy 2015), which implies less demand for new products and virgin resources (Novel 2014; Frenken and Schor 2017). However, a lack of empirical evidence on the sustainable benefits of the sharing economy has been criticised by Chen and Kockelman (2015).

The location of lettings is important. Stors and Kagermeier (2015) and Füller and Michel (2014) found that the central location of properties is highly appealing. Indeed, most peer-to-peer accommodation in European cities is concentrated in inner city areas, strategically located near tourist attractions (Dredge et al. 2016). Of course, whilst this appeals to tourists, it carries negative implications for local residents, as this paper will explore.

2.2 Airbnb and the negative impacts on the host destination, ~~Gentrification and Displacement~~

The concentration of Airbnb properties in central neighborhoods impacts upon the character of these districts (Lee 2016). The demand for more local, green, ethical and authentic consumption experiences by wealthy tourists is transforming areas, at the expense of the local community (Gonzalez and Waley 2013). This leads to the problem of gentrification, defined as “a process of socio-spatial change in which neighbourhoods are transformed according to the needs of affluent consumers, residents and visitors alike” (Cócola Gant 2015, p.4). This progressive gentrification carries negative effects and alienates local residents, as reflected in intense anti-tourism protests throughout Europe, notably in Venice, Berlin and Barcelona (Andrade and Lamela 2015). However, Stors and Kagermeier (2017) note that Airbnb cannot be regarded as the initiator of the gentrification process, rather as an intensifier.

Three major impacts of gentrification include rent increases, the displacement of long term tenants and a shortage of rental property (Edelman and Geradin 2015; Guttentag 2015; Gurran and Phibbs 2017; Wegmann and Jiao 2017; Postma and Schmuecker 2017). Landlords are increasingly forcing tenants to vacate their flats, in order to invest in short term lettings (Glind 2013). Social housing and rental accommodation are under pressure in Barcelona, Berlin, Amsterdam and Paris (Dredge 2016), New York and San Francisco (Oskam and Boswijk 2016), and Los Angeles (Lee 2016). Quality of life may be affected by the replacement of services and facilities used by local residents with those aimed at more affluent visitors (Davidson 2009). Marcuse calls this the “pressure of displacement” (1985:207), whereby residents live in an area that is slowly becoming less habitable (Davidson 2009). Gentrification and displacement will impact on the visitor experience, as non-residents become significantly over-represented (Dredge et al. 2016), and opportunities for host contact become limited (Sans and Domínguez 2016).

2.3 Security and public nuisance

A steady influx of visitors into a residential building or district might be undesirable for neighbours (Gottlieb 2013). Guttentag (2015) cites media reports of complaints of excessive noise, security issues and conflict with hosts. According to Filippas and Horton (2017, p.2), the main critique of Airbnb is that it “the host gets the money and the neighbours get the noise”. Airbnb guests are also said to threaten the safety, quietness and availability of public resources (Cheng 2016; Filippas and Horton 2017). Such concerns have led to calls to limit the repercussions for neighbourhood identity and security (Cheng 2016; Lee 2016; Adamiak 2018).

2.4. Implications for hotels

Many authors have focused on the impact of Airbnb upon the hotel sector in terms of occupancy, REVPAR and profitability (Gunter and Önder 2018; Zervas et al. 2016; Aznar et al. 2017; Guttentag and Smith 2017; Makarand et al 2017; Tarik et al 2017; Xie and Kwok 2017; Forgacs and Dimanche 2016). In their study of the impact of Airbnb on hotels in Barcelona, Pedro et al. (2017) found that a concentration of rentals impacted upon return on equity and revenues. Studies have also focused on legality concerns (Guttentag 2015); the impacts on employment (Fang et al. 2016); pricing (Gibbs et al 2018; Yong and Xie 2017; Kwok and Xie 2018; Aznar et al 2018).

2.35 Managing the impacts

Governments worldwide are trying to regulate the negative impacts of Airbnb (Brescia 2016). At site level, condominium associations are imposing restrictions on short-term lets (Edelman and Greadin 2015). At city level, licensing laws control the supply of short-term tourist accommodation (McKee 2017). Governments have adopted multiple approaches to reduce negative impacts on local communities in tourism destinations (Jordan and Moore 2017). In Portland (United States), hosts can rent only one or two rooms at a time, subject to safety checks and licensing (Palombo 2015). In Amsterdam and San Francisco, hosts must pay local and income taxes, provide proof of residence and meet legal safety requirements (McLaren and Agyeman 2015; Sans and Domínguez 2016). More restrictive approaches have been adopted by New York City, which considers Airbnb listings as illegal hotels, and European cities like Berlin and Barcelona, which forbid the use of residential spaces for tourism accommodation (Finck and Ranchordás 2016).

The development of a black market in tourism housing can be harmful not only to permanent residents, but also to tourists themselves who may stay in uninhabitable and illegal accommodation (Lambea Llop 2017). It also leads to a decrease in hotel revenues (Finck and Ranchordás 2016) and to the failure to pay tax (Oei and Ring 2016). Airbnb has attempted to address some of the issues raised. For instance, in 2016, it added an online tool for neighbours' complaints about annoying guests, promising to forward them to hosts (Palombo 2015). Airbnb has also created a self-regulated system through online reviews, reinforcing the concept of trust between all parties (Oskam and Boswijk 2016). However, Airbnb considers itself an intermediary, and transfers full responsibility to hosts for observing local laws applicable to short term tourism rentals (Gurran and Phibbs 2017). Palomobo (2015) believes that market and auto-regulation are insufficient to deal with Airbnb's impacts on neighbourhoods.

2.45 Airbnb in Barcelona

There have been several studies which consider the impacts of Airbnb in Barcelona. Adiamak (2016) mapped Airbnb supply in European cities, and highlighted the scale of provision in Barcelona, which had the fourth highest number of listings amongst European cities. Other studies have focused on the spatial supply of lettings (Gutiérrez et al 2017; Benitez-Aurioles, 2018; Garcia-Ayllon 2018). Benitez-Aurioles (2018⁷) analysed the concentration of Airbnb accommodation in Barcelona, and their research highlighted the importance of distance, with over 80% of listings concentrated within a 3 km of the Plaza de Catalunya, taken as the centre of importance to tourists. They noted that this concentration can lead to potential conflicts with locals. Gutiérrez et al (2017) also found that Airbnb accommodation is concentrated around the centre of the city, but covers a wider area than hotels and includes traditional residential areas, which again contributes to increased tourism pressure in the city centre. The impact on hotels has also been researched, in terms of pricing and profitability (Aznar et al 2017; Aznar et al 2018; Pedro et al 2017). Aznar et al (2017) found a positive correlation between the presence of Airbnb letting and the financial performance of hotels, which highlights the importance of high value central locations to hotels, where Airbnb lettings are clustered. These studies have focused on the spatial location of Airbnb in Barcelona, highlighting their spread to include traditional residential areas.

Some studies have considered the impacts on the local community, and they have tended to focus on the negative. Lambea llop (2017) highlighted the impacts of transforming private housing into tourism accommodation, highlighting the potential for noise and antisocial behaviour, as well as impacts on the price and availability of rental accommodation for residents. Hughes (2018) traced the rise of the anti-tourism movement in Barcelona to protests in 2014 against short term holiday lettings, with tensions rising as residents complained about anti-social behaviour by groups of young tourists. “The neighbour: a species threatened with extinction” is the slogan adopted by demonstrators from Barcelona’s Gòtic district (Cócola-Gant 2015, p.14). Tourism saturation is considered a serious problem in Barcelona (Gutiérrez et al. 2017), even above unemployment (Blanchar 2017). Cócola-Gant (2015) also refers to residents complaining of litter and air pollution. Blanco-Romero et al (2018) considered the increase in the price of rental housing as a key driver of this movement, with the ‘Airbnbification’ adding to the ongoing gentrification of the city, which can lead to displacement of commercial businesses (Cócola Gant 2015).

It must be recorded however that Zerva et al. (2019) highlighted a change in resident attitudes toward tourism with the growth of Airbnb. Thematic analysis was undertaken of Carrer, the magazine of the Federation of Neighbourhood Associations of Barcelona. Previously, tourism had been seen as a problem in itself, damaging the social and cultural life of the city. However, the level of criticism lessened after 2012, and one of the reasons given for this was the use of peer-to-peer accommodation,

which meant more people could benefit from tourism, with some residents becoming tourism managers. There is clearly then both positive and negative aspects to the proliferation of Airbnb, possibly as a function of the benefits to be accrued from involvement as a host with Airbnb. Some studies have based their conclusions on media sources. The present study extends current understanding by exploring and prioritizing the lived experience of the resident.

Dredge et al (2016) examined the impacts of regulatory approaches to the collaborative economy in a number of European cities, including Barcelona. Sans and Domínguez (2016) criticise Airbnb for contravening Barcelona's tourist and urban regulative codes as: firstly, room rentals for touristic purposes are not allowed; secondly, tourist accommodation is officially banned in central districts. The Catalan government was the first to fine Airbnb 30,000 Euros in 2014 and the municipality of Barcelona is conducting on-site inspections (Lambea Llop 2017). Larger fines followed in 2016, with Airbnb fined 600,000 euros for offering unlicensed properties (Dogrell 2018). Since then, Airbnb has introduced tools to identify illegal properties, and Barcelona City Council has set up a working committee with providers to address these issues. This has led to the removal of more than 2,500 listings (Dogrell 2018), however it is estimated that there are still around 7,000 unlicensed properties in the city (Burgen 2017)

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Airbnb has proliferated in Barcelona, as have anti-tourism protests. Much research has focused on the consumer (Cheng 2016), but more research is needed on the impact of Airbnb on host residents (Guttentag 2013; Jordan and Moore 2018; Tasci and Knutson 2004). Understanding the sociocultural impact of Airbnb is important, particularly in cities where Airbnb rentals are prominent. This study responds to calls for more studies on the resident response to the Airbnb phenomenon through a qualitative study of the perceptions of Barcelona's residents.

3. Methods

A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for a study of residents' perceptions of Airbnb as an important social phenomenon because it focuses on "the understanding of social phenomena and the ways in which people make sense of and extract meaning from their experiences" (Jones et al. 2013, p.3). It is also appropriate for research on a topic that has been under-explored (Denzin and Lincoln 2006). Narrative interviews were used because they allow a degree of flexibility and freedom of response, but they also guarantee the coverage of topics identified in the interview guide (Riessman 2008): perceptions of Airbnb's expansion in Barcelona; the gentrification of neighbourhoods; feelings towards Airbnb and tourists; Airbnb regulation.

Purposive and criterion-based sampling was adopted. Two sampling criteria were identified: participants must be adult and resident in Barcelona since or before 2011, when online private housing rentals to tourists started to increase (Lambea Llop 2017); ~~there should be a variety of nationalities in order to be reflective of Barcelona's population~~. Interviewees were contacted via Facebook following their posting of comments in response to an article about Airbnb published on the public profile of Barcelona's mayor, Ms. Ada Colau Ballano. These participants were targeted because their comments made it clear that they had opinions on Airbnb in Barcelona and could therefore shed light on the impact of Airbnb. A total of 17 people were asked to take part in the study, chosen in order to capture diversity in terms of age, gender, profession and nationality. 11 agreed; the remaining 6 did not respond. This sample may be criticised for being skewed, but the authors sought to explore residents' feelings about the Airbnb phenomenon in Barcelona, given the rise in anti-tourism feeling in many highly-visited cities, therefore this was not deemed to be a problem. A sample size of eleven may be criticised for being too small, however a small sample is justified in qualitative inquiry because the focus is on meaning and context rather than generalisation (Jones et al. 2013; Holloway and Brown 2012). The participant profile is presented below; pseudonyms are used to protect identity.

Table 1: Participant profile

Neighbourhood

Pseudonym, age, nationality, job

Vila de Gracia	Anthon, 28, Spanish, Reservations clerk
Santa Eulalia, Hospitalet de Llobregat	Helena, 42, Spanish, civil servant

Sarrià – Sant Gervasi	Lorenzo, 37, Italian, Entrepreneur
Sants – Montjuïc	Olga , 38, Spanish, Accounts manager
Sants – Montjuïc	Ana , 35, Spanish, Journalist
El Clot – Encants	Kilian , 39, Spanish, Front office assistant manager
Eixample – Gracia	Oscar , 50, Spanish, Hostel Director
El Fort Pienc	Ferdinando , 32, Italian, Retailer
Eixample – Sants Montjuïc	Andras , 25, Hungarian, Waiter
El Poblenou	Eva , 38, Spanish, Receptionist
El Fort Pienc	Paola , 29, Polish, Teacher

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Interviews were conducted in participants' neighbourhoods in Barcelona in July 2017 and lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour. Interviews were conducted in Spanish by one of the authors who is fluent in Spanish. As all of the participants spoke fluent Spanish, there were no language barriers to expression and understanding. Interviews were digitally recorded, with permission. Ethical approval was granted through the authors' university research ethics committee. A participant information sheet was developed and passed to participants, detailing the purpose of the research and promising confidentiality and anonymity. At the start of the interview, participants were informed that they could halt the conversation at any point if they wished, and that they could withdraw from the project at any time.

The technique of thematic analysis was used to treat the data, involving the four steps of transcription, familiarization, coding and categorizing (Braun and Clarke 2006). Data were analysed collaboratively in order to minimize subjectivity. Analysis led to the development of 5 themes, which are represented in the headed sections of the findings section. Photographs represent a further data source of growing interest among researchers, effective if applied in conjunction with other techniques (Merriam and

Tisdell 2015). Some photographs are included in the findings section in order to improve the richness of the data and to aid contextualisation. As is typical in qualitative research, a dialogue with the relevant literature tied to the emergent themes is held in the Findings section (see Jones et al. 2013).

4. Results

4.1 *The expansion of Airbnb, gentrification and the loss of identity*

Barcelona counts approximately 75,000 hotel beds, 50,000 tourist beds in legally licensed flats and about 50,000 beds in illegal accommodation (Burgin 2017). The current Airbnb offer stands at 17,369 listings, the majority being entire apartments (Inside Airbnb 2017). Oscar lives between *Vila de Gracia* and *Eixample*, considered by Barcelona City Council (2017) as the area with the highest density of tourist accommodation including the Gothic Quarter, *El Raval*, *La Barceloneta* and *El Born*. Oscar states:

“There’s plenty of Airbnbs here, not exactly in the building where I live because it’s quite new. There are only 2 flats per floor, so it’s not the ideal place for an Airbnb, I guess. These are normally entire flats, popular in old, large buildings, especially on the ground floor, where owners think they don’t disturb neighbours.”

Similarly, Paola who lives in the *Fort Pienc* district, located between *Sagrada Familia* and *Arc de Triomf*, and not far from the beach and main nightclubs, comments:

“I have the feeling that there are a lot of touristic flats in my neighbourhood. I have a direct experience because there is one on the first floor in my building. It’s my neighbours.”

Helena lives in an area called *Santa Eulalia* in *Hospitalet de Llobregat*, a populous town adjacent to Barcelona. She moved to *Santa Eulalia*, a quieter, residential area, to improve her quality of life. However, Airbnb and mass tourism have rapidly expanded there too such that in her building of 24 flats, only 6 are inhabited by families. The rest *“rotate during the whole year, with peaks from May to September”*.

Olga who lives in the neighbourhood known as *Sants*, commented on residents’ awareness of the spread of Airbnb:

“My feeling is that people have become much more alert to this expansion because they’re scared after the scandal of Barceloneta, which has turned into a tourist theme park. It is – similar to Sants because both have always been sort of small villages with their own identity,

sharing a strong sense of belonging. People know each other, they interact, shop at the local butcher's and so on."

As Gotham (2005) mentioned regarding the French Quarter in New Orleans, investments in the housing market along with an increase in tourism facilitate the growth of consumption-focused activities in residential neighbourhoods and their subsequent gentrification. Indeed, Eva from Poblenuou says:

"Bars and restaurants have changed over the years, adapting to tourists' eating hours and language. Before, waiters had to learn Catalan in order to work in Barcelona, now they mainly speak English and French. If you ask for a 'cigaló' (Catalan word for coffee with alcohol), they don't understand. Certainly, tourism brings money to the city but now everything is tourism-centred. Barcelona is losing its essence."

Participants have experienced an increase in food and drink prices and the progressive death of neighborhoods. The data reveal an overall negative perception of Airbnb, whose massive presence throughout the city and its immediate areas, with a particular concentration in the old town, is synonymous with a loss of neighbourhood identity and price hikes. Participants lamented the commercialisation of their city, where *"there are more Zaras than traditional 'colmados' (local shops). The government should guarantee that traditional local shops can remain part of the city instead of opening more international shops."* (Kilian) and where *"I can't afford to have dinner out so often as I used to a few years ago"* (Eva). Alongside tourism, participants feel that Airbnb is contributing to the depersonalisation of the city.

4. 2 Displacement pressure

Residents correlate the high concentration of Airbnb rentals in Barcelona with the incidence of rent increases. Ana lived in the district of *Sants* until June 2016, when the owner of her flat increased her rent by 50 euros per month:

"I was paying 350 euros for one room, which is fine for the area, when he suddenly asked for 400 and I couldn't afford it. I was forced to leave Barcelona for a nearby village."

Similarly, Helena noted:

"My 2 year contract ends in September and I've already received a fax from the owner who has decided not to renew it. They know you can't afford the price they're demanding. Tourists are much more profitable!"

Ana identified the elevation of profit above good citizenship:

“Before, landlords preferred long term renting contracts because it implied less problems for them, they cared about keeping a good relationship with neighbours but now it’s only about money”.

In many Barcelona neighbourhoods, the monthly rent exceeds the minimum wage: it is almost impossible to find a flat for less than 800 euros. According to Blanchar (2016), tourism has led to a reduced accommodation supply and increased rents. However, tourism is not the only reason for rent increases, as observed by both participants and the literature: between 2010-2013, the financial crisis led to evictions in Spain and the significant presence of Erasmus students willing to pay higher rent prices intensifies pressure on accommodation in Barcelona (Nasarre-Aznar 2015).

The introduction of rental ceilings was one of the main objectives promoted by the City Council in 2016 in response to disproportionate price increases. Barcelona’s housing committee took a trip to Paris and Berlin in 2016 to find information on their housing policies and rental pricing control measures (La Vanguardia 2017). However, the local government has limited powers in terms of housing which is influenced by regional and national governments (Lambea Llop 2017).

4. 3 The absent host

The claim that Airbnb offers cultural opportunities to visitors was explored in the interviews. Participants however classed Airbnb as merely a rental agency for a handful of operators. All participants echoed Oscar’s view that Airbnb flats are *“terribly old, unsafe, not registered, mainly sublet where the owner is absent and in most cases unknown”*. This is attested to in Helena’s story:

“I was asked for help by some tourists who arrived at night in the building. The light in the flat they rented didn’t work. so I asked them: do you have the owner’s contact details? They said they rented from an agency which was closed so they had to wait until the following day.”

Furthermore, most participants agreed with Oscar that: *‘tourists and residents have different schedules and rarely coincide’*. They do not consider Airbnb a cultural opportunity but rather a *‘form of illegal business speculation’* (Helena), advantageous for hosts and guests: *“a group of friends can split 500 euros into 7 people for a week in the centre of Barcelona. It’s a good deal”*, says Ann.

Likewise, Paola commented:

“There are people who buy flats only for listing them on Airbnb, it’s an illegal business investment, nothing to do with helping out lower income families.”

A further critique regards the illegitimate competition with legally licensed touristic suppliers such as hotels or hostels, which offer employment opportunities and impose a touristic tax, unlike most Airbnb listings. There is therefore a clash between the potential of Airbnb to offer cultural exchange between host and guest and the reality of the experience of tourists.

4.4 The regulation of Airbnb in Barcelona

In order to deal with the problem of unlicensed accommodation, Barcelona City Council (2017) has started a buildings inspections campaign against touristic flats that do not comply with the law, requiring a valid certificate of habitability with a specific number to be published on Airbnb. Moreover, citizens and visitors are being asked to report unlicensed touristic flats (see figure below).

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Some participants held radical positions against Airbnb and touristic flats, with Oscar, Ana and Helena believing they should be banned. Oscar stated:

“Cities like Barcelona, Paris, London and Amsterdam which are now saturated should collaborate to fine and eventually ban Airbnb through European Union legislation.”

Others such as Andras, Ferdinando and Anthon gave slightly different opinions, as shown below:

“Of course, Airbnb needs to be regulated. I support the measures taken by the City Council for entire flats but if individual room renting is legal, there are fewer problems for neighbours because the owner lives there and can keep control. But it’s not properly regulated yet.”
(Anthon)

Lambea Llop (2017) similarly states that regulation in terms of room rentals could be beneficial for neighbours since it might curb impacts related to antisocial behaviour and security. In response to residents’ concerns, a Tourist Accommodation Plan (PEUAT) became effective in March 2017, dividing the city into 4 areas according to their number of tourism establishments and development restrictions. New touristic apartments known as HUTs (housing used for tourism) are not allowed in the city (except in area 3), unless in blocks or within a single building designated for tourists (Barcelona City Council 2017). In recent years, conflict between Barcelona’s government and Airbnb has received international media coverage (Badcock 2017; Muñoz 2017), and it will be interesting to see how successful the Council will be in terms of regulation of Airbnb.

4.5 Antipathy towards tourists and Airbnb

Common complaints about Airbnb related to noise, litter and drunkenness. Helena described “*shouting and loud music until early morning during an ordinary Tuesday night*”, “*litter left on the landing of the building*”, and “*regular scenes of people completely drunk.. Once I saw a girl being beaten on the balcony*”. Helena lamented that “*it does affect my performance during the day because I don’t sleep*”. Paola also remarked on the problem of security:

“Unlike hotels or hostels, there’s no surveillance, no security for anyone here, either neighbours or tourists themselves, so it’s a risk for everybody”.

As Guttentag (2015) observes, noise complaints and security concerns are major causes of conflict among neighbours and Airbnb hosts. Goffman’s (1959) theory of back stage and front stage regions is relevant here. The front stage is where the performance is given, whilst the backstage is defined as “a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (p.69). For those working in the tourism sector, the front stage is where they perform their role, whilst the backstage is where they live, “where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude” (p.70). This study indicates the importance of the back region, where residents can be relaxed, and tourists may be seen as intrusive to this region. Weaver (2005) suggests the need for destinations to recognize the importance of these regions, either through formal or informal designations, arguing that backstages are needed so “local residents can retreat and recuperate after their exposure to tourists in the frontstage” (p.155). This runs contrary to the ‘meeting the locals’ philosophy of Airbnb, and is an issue that needs to be considered by local authorities.

Anti-social behaviour in resident areas, along with tourism gentrification, rent increases, loss of neighbourhood identity and displacement are among the main reasons for the intensification of anti-tourism protests organised by residents in Barcelona (Andrade and Lamela 2015). In January 2017, a coalition of over 40 host community groups from the entire city marched on *La Rambla* (the most touristic boulevard in Barcelona) not only against the overwhelming presence of Airbnb touristic flats, but also against tourism in general, including hotels and cruise ships (Burgen 2017). In addition, banners and stickers against tourism have spread throughout the city (see examples below), means used to express frustration and scare visitors.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

As Anthon explained:

“People are getting aggressive because they have reached their tolerance limit. They do not want more tourists. It’s not racism; actually they don’t really care about nationality. Tourists are all the same to them, people just can’t take anymore.”

Andras identified overcrowding as the key problem:

“The streets in the city centre are overcrowded. It’s impossible to walk on the Rambla, I never go there. Tourism flows are intense all year round. There’s Airbnb, the hotels are full, and then there are the cruise ships in the harbour!”

Vociferously rejected by participants is alcohol tourism, which is seen as a threat to the liveability of the city, as observed by Lorenzo:

“This Mallorca-style tourism is unfortunately spreading in Barcelona. There is an image of a party place, which is significantly promoted by tour operators and hotels with their all-inclusive formula.”

Barcelona’s social carrying capacity has been exceeded according to participants, as reflected in protests from residents who desire a more controlled and responsible tourism model, and who reject low cost and all-inclusive options. As argued by Eva:

“The mayor should not only fight against Airbnb, I understand that this is convenient for hotels and hostels because they are directly affected by the illegal touristic flats in terms of revenue, but the city has a serious problem of congestion, all those low-cost flights to Barcelona stimulate arrivals as well as the cruise ships that arrive every day!”

Airbnb here is perceived as an additional element of disruption within the already saturated tourism context in Barcelona. Participants were in favour of a responsible approach to tourism in Barcelona, and recognised its importance to the economy:

“It’s clear that tourism is one of the main motors of the city but Barcelona needs a responsible and sustainable tourism, which is not felt as a threat by residents but a source of prosperity for everyone.” (Olga)

Thus, if tourism is properly managed, residents will reap the benefits and anti-tourism sentiments will abate. All participants agreed that Airbnb needs to be sustainably and responsibly managed in order to preserve the city’s identity and to curb the negative impacts felt by its residents.

5. Conclusion

Technology improvements together with the commercialisation of the web 2.0 have encouraged interactivity, co-creation, and collaboration. As a result, in recent years, a more experience-centred

customer lifestyle has spread among travellers who are enthusiastically adopting so-called sharing economy practices (Hamari et al. 2015). Airbnb has become a leader in the hospitality industry, attracting attention from both academics and the media, ~~mainly~~ focused on the implications for traditional accommodation establishments as well as on user experiences. The views of host communities impacted by this growing phenomenon are under-represented, and this study has helped to fill a gap in knowledge by exploring the social impacts of Airbnb rentals in Barcelona and the implications for the host community.

The literature shows that the main motivations for using Airbnb for both hosts and guests is economic, followed by perceived authenticity and interaction with locals (Tussyadiah 2015; Stors and Kagermeier 2015). However, with respect to Barcelona, this study shows that Airbnb is generally not a promoter of cultural exchange; it is a ~~a (mostly illegal)~~ business opportunity for hosts, and a low cost and precarious option for guests. There is thus a clash between expectations, promises and reality.

Furthermore, this study, in line with much of the relevant literature, contradicts Airbnb's statement on the location of its listings. The company claims that 70% of its listed accommodation is outside the main touristic areas, thus decongesting and expanding the touristic hospitality offer without negatively affecting hotels and locals (Airbnb 2017b). Previous research identifies that 80% of listings are within the central city district (Benitez-Aurioles, 2018). ~~However, this study points to a massive presence of unregistered Airbnb rentals throughout the city, with~~ Indeed this is corroborated by participants in this study who identify its main concentration in *Ciutat Vella* (Old Town), where ~~the~~ current regulations prohibits the opening of ~~any kind of~~ new touristic accommodation (Barcelona City Council 2017).

This study also shows that Airbnb is perceived by residents to be a contributor to the gentrification of the city. Neighbourhoods in Barcelona are progressively losing their identity, and price increases are a concern, as is antisocial behaviour from Airbnb guests. The most serious implication for host communities of unlicensed Airbnb listings in Barcelona regards rent increases, caused by growing demand and an absence of rental ceilings, leading to evictions, displacement and supply shortage within the long-term rental market (Blanchar 2016; Lee 2016). In this context, residents become intolerant not only of Airbnb but of tourists in general, a sentiment expressed through protests and even vandalism (Hunt 2017). It must be noted however that this feeling results not just from Airbnb's presence but also from low-cost flights and cruise ships arrivals.

The rich data generated by this qualitative study have informed the creation of a model that depicts the resident experience of the sharing economy and highlights a clash between the vaunted benefits of

Airbnb for hosts and tourists and the possible negative implications for a city's residents. The Figure below portrays the perceived negative implications of Airbnb for Barcelona's residents. Though the study focuses specifically on Airbnb and Barcelona, the model below ~~can~~ could be transferred to other cities affected by this particular manifestation of the sharing economy. The model could be used as a framework for further research on the Airbnb phenomenon. It could also act as a framework to develop indicators to help measure impacts on host communities. Clearly, findings from qualitative studies are not generalisable, therefore there are caveats to be made for differences in context in further use of the model.

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

As the above figure highlights, there is a clash between the promise of the sharing economy and of Airbnb in particular and the resident experience. Both the academic literature on Airbnb and Airbnb's own materials cite as benefits the dispersal of rental properties throughout a destination, low prices, an income source, and cultural exchange between host and guest. This study highlights the deleterious consequences of the uncontrolled ~~and unregulated~~ spread of Airbnb for Barcelona's residents. These include gentrification and loss of identity, which lead to the displacement of residents, and ~~antipathy~~ antipathy toward tourists extends beyond Airbnb to all tourists. Furthermore opportunities for cultural exchange are limited, and Airbnb guests are often the cause of anti-social behaviour, further impacting negatively on guest/tourist relations. Guests may be drawn to use Airbnb because of a desire to achieve authentic experiences, but this study shows that when they enter the 'backstage', negative impacts are felt by residents, including gentrification and displacement. Ironically this may lead to less authentic neighborhoods that are increasingly commercialized as investors move in and ~~that~~ adapt to the lifestyles of (potentially wealthier) visitors. The only solution to this impasse as put forward by participants is the development of a responsible tourism strategy.

This study carries a number of practical implications. Current regulations intended to ban illegal tourism accommodation and to limit the number of visitors in inner neighbourhoods through buildings inspections, residents' collaboration with the Council and the implementation of the PEUAT are a first step towards placing restrictions on Airbnb. ~~However, further measures are recommended by the authors, deriving from this study's findings and a review of the academic literature and media reports on Airbnb in Barcelona:~~

To address the issues of displacement and gentrification, rental housing market regulations must be agreed at national government level, inspired by best practices from Paris and Berlin where a pricelist is adopted, depending on the location and the characteristics of the property. The duration of contracts in Barcelona is on average 3 years, unlike in Berlin where new contracts generally last 10 years ~~and~~

~~the increment limit is 10% compared to the last contract~~ (Cols 2016). Finally, inspections should be conducted ~~also~~ to limit subletting, a practice that is widespread in the city.

~~A de-marketing strategy should be adopted to control overcrowding, which is affecting the wellbeing of residents in Barcelona. The local and national governments should cooperate in order to discourage the low-cost market segment from visiting the city, which impacts not only on Airbnb use but also on low-cost airlines. The number of cruise visitors should be limited (as in Santorini) through the charging of premium prices. Overnight stays in Barcelona bring a compulsory tourist tax whose amount varies depending on the rating of tourism accommodation: in Barcelona this is cheaper than in Amsterdam or Berlin, and should be raised.~~

~~As a consequence of gentrification and an associated demonization of tourism there are calls for a~~
~~more~~To manage the negative sociocultural impacts of Airbnb on host communities, which can only serve to instil anti-tourism feeling, a *responsible approach to tourism management at a local level should be adopted* to include ~~—This goal can be achieved only if~~ all stakeholders **including** (tourists and residents) ~~adopt an ethical code that rejects an individualist approach to tourism business.~~ This may involve accommodation zoning ~~so that the impacts of tourism on residents are managed as well~~ **as** and regulations on the quantity and location of Airbnb dwellings.

The limitations of this study must be acknowledged. Firstly, the study concentrates only on Airbnb in Barcelona. Further research could therefore target other destinations in order to capture a diversity of experience. It would be useful to investigate the residence response to the Airbnb phenomenon in both saturated destinations as well as in those where Airbnb is less prominent or where it is better managed.

Secondly, this study is based on interviews with residents who had taken the time to respond to an article about Airbnb, and who may have had strong opinions on the topic. This study therefore is not representative of the whole community and in particular of those residents who benefit from and therefore who may support Airbnb. It is also based on a small sample of participants, and the findings are therefore not generalizable. Further research might conduct a quantitative survey of resident opinions in order to detect a more diverse picture.

Finally, this study raises the issue of local government regulation of Airbnb. It would be useful if future research examined the impacts of such regulations in a variety of destinations, including Barcelona. The findings of such a study could be used to develop best practice for the management of urban tourism.

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