

P2P platforms as a way to making Tourism an effective tool for rural development in post-Covid19 era: a research proposition.

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In recent years, a revolution has disrupted the tourism industry. Various platforms, so called “collaborative” or “shared economy”, also technically known as peer network or peer-to-peer (P2P), have entered the market with force and have modified both the way of traveling and the outgoing or incoming markets (Pastor & Rivera García, 2020). We refer to “collaborative tourism” when a tourist reserves his accommodation, transportation or other services related to their trip through collaborative economy platforms (Cánovas et al., 2015).

The rise of the sharing (or collaborative) economy and especially its biggest exponent, the AirBnb accommodation platform, has attracted the attention of academics and researchers in the tourism and hospitality industry (Heo et al., 2019). However, it is not only the accommodation tourism sub-sector that has made a strong landing on the P2P shared economy platform industry: transport, hospitality and experience sharing, including free walking guided tours (Rivera & Pastor,

2022), among other services, have also done so.

As the UNWTO states (2020), tourism is one of the fastest growing and most resilient socio-economic sectors of our time. It represents 7% of world trade and has exceeded the economic growth of the last decade. It is a major employer and generates millions of direct and indirect jobs. The benefits of tourism in general and of the collaborative platform economy in particular, including increased employment and gender opportunities, have been concentrated in urban and coastal areas, contributing to the distribution of wealth and opportunities in the economy in the form of territorial inequality. In addition, pressure on the most visited places entails risks such as overcrowding, unsustainable demand for natural and cultural resources and possible disruption of the social network and community life. In addition, urbanization is a predominant trend throughout the world. According to the United Nations, by 2050, 68% of the world's population will live in

urban areas and cities will produce 85% of the world's economic output, leaving behind a staggeringly high human and environmental impact and imposing a high cost on surrounding rural areas. This trend contrasts with the fact that 80% of all people living in "extreme poverty" live in rural communities (UNWTO, 2020).

So far, there is a line of academics who have carried out studies on the impact that the business of P2P platforms has on local communities in cities, how it affects the local economy and even its contribution to the negative process of gentrification of some of them. Many have focused mainly on the impact on the traditional hotel sector based on primary data obtained from institutional statistics and reports or from multinational hotel companies. This previous approach is basically the one that is most abundant in academic articles related to the rise of Airbnb and the collaborative platform economy (Guttentag, 2016; Zervas et al., 2017). However, given that the urban environment receives practically all the empirical (and even media) attention, one aspect which has been practically unstudied so far is the analysis of the impact of this type of economy on the local economy of small rural populations (Morales-Pérez et al., 2020). There are few theses and some articles which attempt to go further in this direction.

Nonetheless, there are several authors who see the period of the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to critically reconsider the growth trajectory of tourism and to question the logic that more tourists imply greater benefits (Gössling et al., 2020). This approach is aligned with UNWTO's vision that this year 2020 ("Year of Tourism and Rural Development") reports on how the growing, intrinsic and inevitable connection between cities and rural development has been accelerated by the current crisis.

As it would appear wise to foresee that, during this phase of de-escalation, the priorities of tourists during their holidays will focus more on hygienic measures, which guarantee healthy and safe tourism, than on other more playful and less pragmatic aspects of the trip, in the new era of post-Covid tourism, variables such as the massiveness of the destination, the size of the hotel, the number of guests to share transport or accommodation, the limited maximum capacity of activities with the necessary social distance or even the CoVid-Free certifications will be crucial. A new trend is perceived that brings a different approach to mass tourism that prevails to date and some of these developments are fully in line with the most well-known characteristics of rural tourism.

The collaborative economy could also develop and promote entrepreneurship in rural areas and thus increase the vitality of these areas (Uusitalo, 2019). The essence of the collaborative economy in rural areas is to achieve the distribution of benefits to producers and consumers by changing the relationship between ownership and the right to use goods (Hu, 2018).

The main question this research note seeks to address is whether the current type of collaborative economy based on digital platforms can help revitalise rural areas in a sustainable way, both economically and socially.

This research note presents four proposals that are intended to be refined and elaborated by the tourism research community. These proposals are closely intertwined.

Proposition 1: Rural destinations that lack or have very limited tourist accommodation infrastructure have difficulty in aspiring to boost their tourism industry as accommodation is key as a first step in attracting tourists. Short term

tourism rentals, carried out through P2P platforms, could help boost the local economy and tourism in rural destinations that still have a lack of developed hotel infrastructure.

Research proposition 1: There is a positive relationship between the rise of Airbnb and the development of the tourism industry in emerging rural destinations. The growing supply of accommodation on digital collaborative accommodation economy platforms complements the limited supply from the traditional accommodation industry and attracts more tourists to the region, especially in peak seasons, allowing other tourism companies to increase the variety and quantity of services offered.

Proposition 2: Since the 1990s, several authors have referred to disintermediation, defending e-commerce as a source of leverage to reduce intermediaries along the tourism experience value chain. In recent years, the process of transformation of tourism distribution has given rise to a new and complex multi-channel map, in which new actors emerge and new marketing strategies are developed, which must be understood in order to make effective marketing decisions (Rodríguez-Zulaica & Pastor, 2017). In this context, tour operators and travel agencies do not have the capacity and/or interest to promote emerging rural tourism in small towns, either because their own turnover would not result in a significant economic return or because they do not have the capacity to contract in such a fragmented market.

Research proposition 2: The collaborative economy of digital platforms applied to rural environments will lead to a major disintermediation in the tourism industry.

Proposition 3: Rural tourism is perceived by consumers as more aligned with safer hygiene and health measures

(Covid-Free) than conventional mass tourism as it appears to guarantee better measures of social distance and more time in the open air.

Research proposition 3: the demand for the rural tourism niche will grow during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Proposition 4: Dolnicar & Zare (2020) state that COVID19 has disrupted the disruptor Airbnb. Based on the main drivers of Airbnb's growth in the past, and on recent developments related to COVID19, they predict that the proportion of capitalist hosts will decrease, and the proportion of friendly and ethicist hosts will increase, bringing Airbnb back to its original ethic of sharing space among ordinary citizens. While space trading through online platforms will recover again, they predict that an upper limit of supply will be reached because some capitalist hosts will move into the long-term rental market.

Research proposition 4: In this context AirBnb, as well as other similar platforms, will in the near future focus more of its commercial efforts on the rural than on the urban environment.

This research note aims to provoke an academic discussion on rural tourism and its future integration into digital collaborative economy platforms. The potential of rural and community-based tourism has grown during the Covid-19 pandemic as a social phenomenon and it seems to have arrived, by accident, but to stay as indicated in the UNWTO forecast. Therefore, online collaborative economy platforms, which are not alien to market trends, have increased their offer in these areas and local communities have seen in these tools an opportunity to increase their profits from the tourism industry. But examples are still rare and almost all are based on the accommodation sector.

Since tourism has proven to be a tool for economic diversification and a major employment engine with a multiplier effect on other sectors that contribute to rural development (UNWTO, 2020), this note recommends that tourism researchers begin to investigate the possibilities and practical applications in rural tourism of other types

of collaborative economics that impact on green mobility, transport, activities and experiences or restaurants, among others. This way tourism in rural areas can particularly benefit traditionally disadvantaged groups such as women, youth and indigenous people.

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