

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# ‘Belong anywhere’: Focusing on authenticity and the role of Airbnb in the projected destination image

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## Abstract

There is little research that analyses the contribution of tourism-related digital platforms, and particularly Airbnb, to the creation and projection of international destinations' images. This study seeks to address this gap by developing a content analysis of the Airbnb Guides to more than 500 global urban neighbourhoods (globalhoods). We analysed Airbnb users' descriptions posted in the period following the Great Recession up to the COVID-19 pandemic. Content analysis shows how Airbnb projects the images of these globalhoods through a narrative based on creating a perception of authenticity but that finally projects a commodified image of destination identities and their communities.

## KEYWORDS

Airbnb, authenticity, community, COVID-19, destination image, neighbourhoods

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Among the themes that have emerged after the outbreak of COVID-19 in the tourism field, academia has observed if the consequences of the crisis caused by the pandemic may have been mitigated or exacerbated by the management of previous crises, asking whether there were big differences in the response given to them (Moreira & Hick, 2021). Significantly, pre-pandemic tourism dynamics were marked by an important wave of growth, particularly visible in urban destinations. For some researchers (Cañada & Murray, 2021), this wave began in the immediate aftermath of the Great Recession, the period of general decline observed in globalized economies that started in 2008 and continued in some countries until 2012 and that is considered the most severe economic meltdown since the Great Depression (Grusky et al., 2011). This crisis arose from a combination of vulnerabilities in the global financial system, but it was also directly connected with bursting housing bubbles in most of the developed countries. The effects of the Great Recession were very varied and numerous players went bankrupt while new ones appeared, and

investments had to be diverted from sectors as the housing market to other sectors. It is at this juncture that authors as Cañada and Murray (2021) state that tourism was seen as a 'spatial arrangement'; an activity to derive these investments.

However, in order to make this 'spatial arrangement' a reality, these actors needed the concurrence of other processes: the new growth wave in urban destinations were largely based on the emergence of new demand segments, fuelling the development of new tourism accommodation. This was now supported by the arrival of Peer to Peer Accommodation (P2PA) and particularly unicorns (start-ups valued at more than 1 billion dollars) such as Airbnb, capable of strategically controlling a large part of the sector and of absorbing and concentrating huge amounts of capital (Anselmi et al., 2021). Moreover, for Del Romero Renau (2018) the loss of purchasing power caused by the Great Recession and its impact on people's spending was also a driving force behind the diversion of much of the tourism demand towards the growth of P2PA, a model that offered accommodation at more affordable prices. Indeed, these platforms enabled high levels of consumerism in tourism to continue.

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Furthermore, an extensive literature was interested not only the development but the impact of P2PA on these cities through a series of disruptions linked to gentrification, the loss of local commerce, the degradation of community life and, especially, negative effects on housing markets (less availability and affordability) (Caldicott et al., 2020). Importantly, the neighbourhood, was at the epicentre of these processes (Cocola-Gant et al., 2020), considered as one of the main elements of differentiation used by P2PA to construct the concept of 'authenticity'. This has been a reality both from the peripheral to those neighbourhoods that are touristy and known globally, the globalhoods, that have received increasing attention (Rae, 2019), particularly in relation to the growth and spatial concentration of P2PA in them.

However, this growth would not have been so important without destination image projection channelled via virtual communities, that have exerted a great influence on tourist behaviour (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). Being accused by social movements of promoting overtourism in cities through massive destination branding strategies (Séraphin et al., 2019), during the last decade DMOs have progressively lost control over destination image projection, transferring leadership in these processes to user-generated content (UGC) (Alcázar et al., 2014) posted in virtual spaces, mainly social media platforms (Ghazali & Cai, 2014). Nevertheless, the specialized literature has largely overlooked one of the main contemporary sources of destination image projection, where UGC also plays an especially relevant role: P2PA's communication channels and particularly the ones of the most successful and valuable of these platforms, Airbnb.

Neighbourhood Guides, a series of webpages that showcase the best-known neighbourhoods in the main global tourist destinations, are the key communication vehicle for promoting Airbnb listings worldwide and, considering the huge volume of Airbnb users, one of the most important contemporary channels for destination projection. For Airbnb, these neighbourhoods become separable units whose images are projected to convince tourists that they can engage with residents' everyday life. These guides allow the platform to connect to the ideals of 'community' identity supposedly represented by the UGC posted by its users and consequently the basis for the perception of authenticity by tourism consumers. This is not a minor issue, since the company is pointing out precisely what we should understand by local 'community', in its opinion mainly represented by hosts and consumers satisfied with its model. A vision that manifestly obviates the existence of a varied group of citizens, in many cases indifferent to or even against their proposals. In fact, and as the different authors of the book edited by Farmaki et al. (2022) have analysed, the academy is increasingly interested in observing the complex relationships between the P2PA phenomenon and the resilience of destination communities, sometimes favoured and others harmed by its growth. Nevertheless, different approaches have analysed this complex relationship between P2PA and communities, but there is a gap regarding the role of these relationships in the projection of the destinations' image.

To address this gap, we analyse the nature of the image these Airbnb Neighbourhood Guides project of the main global destinations

and particularly of their neighbourhoods (globalhoods). Furthermore, we also propose observing whether this image matches the alternative paradigm of home sharing that the company is trying to create to re-engage hosts and guests with the natural world and human nature, in the words of Makkar and Yap (2020). Definitely, although authors such as Martin (2016) have already levelled some general criticism at the platform economy's narrative as a way to transition towards sustainable models, there is still a need for a more specific analysis of how P2PA project destinations' images.

## 2 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 | Destination image projection in the digital era and the debate surrounding the commodification of identities

Interest in the processes of destination image projection can be traced back to Claire Gunn's (1972) dimorphic theory identifying the importance of differentiating induced sources (formed by marketing strategies) from organic sources (guided by other influences, such as education, literature and the arts). The next great milestone in this approach appeared with Gartner's proposal (1994) that organic and induced sources have an impact on two interrelated components of the projected destination image: cognitive attributes, related to fact-based description of places; and affective attributes, reflecting emotional motivations for selecting the destination, adding a third attribute (conative) regarding tourist behaviour. The three-element attitude model (cognitive-affective-conative) has been the basis of a growing literature dedicated to the analysis of the projection and perception of the image of destinations. Over the following years, diverse authors (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Tasci & Gartner, 2007) have been interpreting these attributes, mainly in relation to tourists' perception of the destination, while others have tried to quantitatively decompose these image attributes (Pan & Li, 2011). Moreover, although most of the references have been more interested in observing these attributes from the perspective of demand (as can be seen in the meta-analysis of Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010) it is also true that new references have also been interested in knowing their role in the projection of destinations' images and therefore in their positioning (i.e., Garay, 2019) and also the gap between projected and perceived images through these attributes (i.e. Ferrer-Rossell & Marine-Roig, 2020).

Furthermore, two main forces have introduced drastic changes in recent years in destination image projection. Firstly, the digitalization processes, adding a layer of complexity to these processes, both in relation to the starring stakeholders and the type of image. Regarding stakeholders, although public and private DMO still play a prominent role in destination promotion, the Internet has fostered the emergence of virtual communities, placing UGC at the centre of these processes (Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2016). DMO therefore need to consider how the stakeholders' structure of virtual brand communities (VBC) can affect the selection of sources and the nature of the projected

destination image. Moreover, most of these VBC are created in virtual spaces as social media, the realm of UGC (Ghazali & Cai, 2014), which offer new marketing, networking and knowledge opportunities. Importantly, these are environments where sociability is vital while users increasingly demand more interactive and, importantly, affective communications (Királová & Pavličeka, 2015). The importance of affective attributes in the new virtual communities has been observed in detail in different references (Ferrer-Rossell & Marine-Roig, 2020; Garay, 2019), particularly in relation to the emergence of the aforementioned UGC and the fact that users can privilege positive emotions but can also potentially project negative emotions in their reviews, comments and posts. In any case, recent references (Sun et al., 2021) also show the increasing adaptation of DMOs in terms of the projection of affective attributes and the reduction of the gap between projected and perceived affective attributes in social media contexts. Therefore, destination image projection is currently a multi-directional, interactive, dynamic and fluid (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014) process where affective and motivational narratives are gaining ground.

The other great driver behind the transformation of tourism activity in the last decades is sustainability. Also, in the context of destination image projection, concern about the need to move to more sustainable models has been focused on the commodification of the projected identities and perceived authenticity of these destinations (Cole, 2007), and this could also be transferred to destination image projection debates, since cultural environments and intangible identity dimensions have been identified among the most prevalent cognitive attributes in the emergence of UGC in virtual environments (Michael et al., 2018). Indeed, the relevance of authenticity could also be considered a cornerstone of many destinations' promotional strategies. Here, while image identity should be seen as being related to the tourist object (mainly the destination), therefore playing a very important role within projected image, authenticity should be considered as something eminently related to the tourist subject, and therefore to the perceived image. Nevertheless, being increasingly relevant to the projection of destination image, projected identity and perceived authenticity have once again become control variables, elements to be considered in the engagement of tourist consumers (Chen et al., 2020; Kim & Kim, 2020). However, several critical studies have highlighted the unsustainability and cultural commodification in destination promotion (Dorsey et al., 2004), and the role of the institutional system (mostly DMO) in (re)producing a rationalized destination image projection that serves the industrializing needs of a massive tourist industry (Gotham, 2007). The fact is that, actually, a context in which this debate has been especially intense is the projection of destinations by P2PA.

## 2.2 | Projected destination image and the role of Airbnb

Regarding the abovementioned debate, literature have showed how P2PA invite their users to deconstruct the dominant tourism practices through a series of actions related to 'access', (Richardson, 2015) and

mobilize the idea of 'community' as a framework to enable innovative forms of economic participation. By linking the projection of a destination's image to its communities, P2PA facilitate social capital creation through a circle of reputation building. For this reason, the desire for the destination to be perceived by tourists as authentic is underlined in these contexts through emotions as well as identity elements, both immaterial (atmosphere) and material (specific resources) (Yannopoulou et al., 2013). In fact, Airbnb aims to foster a sense of belonging adapted to the reality of each of the destinations ('belong anywhere') and to build a network of users creating social capital. For platforms, this social capital must be translatable into forms of 'economic value' (Roelofsen & Minca, 2018, p. 174) while UGC also constructs the ideal of the self-tourist, seeking the aforementioned 'authenticity' of destinations.

Actually, this authenticity also improves (or at least aims to) the perceived quality of the 'collaborative' experience (Bucher et al., 2018) which is essential to counteract the informal provision of what is really a hosting service that is extracting value of a hosts' private spaces (Paulauskaite et al., 2017). Furthermore, Airbnb has even been able to generate a debate involving cities' residents. This is how, according to Van Nuenen (2016), the platform has managed to generate 'insiders' among its hosts, 'ambassadors of authenticity' that provide a stylized narrative of cities' everyday lives. Definitely, this concept of authenticity is sought after in this postmodern consumption context. Living the local life and coming closer to cultural environments are important motivations for choosing Airbnb over any other type of accommodation (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016). Moreover, this role of hosts as ambassadors is emphasized by Lalicic and Weismayer (2017), for whom host performances are more significant than brand factors in understanding authenticity, which serves as a performance indicator for better understanding tourists' satisfaction and loyalty to P2PA.

Nevertheless, a study by Törnberg (2019) shows how the 'belong anywhere' paradigm hides a cosmopolitan classist proposal where places acquire their symbolic value through images of 'otherness' that act as sources of commodifiable difference and can be packaged to boost tourism production. In the end, what may have started as a reaction against the inauthenticity and commodification of consumer culture has become transformed into a cultural hegemony geared towards the production of class difference. Furthermore, the reflexivity of these cultural commodification processes implies a constant 'folding in upon itself', in which the very effects of tourism become part of the urban imaginary that attracts it. In any case, if Airbnb's discourse ('belong anywhere') sought to ignore the relevance of the territory and the impact of its activity on it, everything seems to indicate that the consequences of its activity are just the opposite.

## 2.3 | The territory matters: The commodification of urban spaces in destination image projection

As seen above, urban destinations' images have been at the centre of Airbnb's narratives as the development of peer-to-peer exchanges and their supporting digital platforms is essentially a dimension of

urban contemporaneity (Artioli, 2018). Urban tourism and urban destinations are the main object of desire for platforms, which has read the context and values of the post-modern city very well. Urban settings and their elements are seen and used as products and experiences to be commodified, where place-making and image construction have been used to attract tourists to visit, spend and consume the place as an experience, thus satisfying the cultural imperative to consume (Ashworth & Page, 2011). As these authors also pointed out, the local is explored and exploited in search of unique global competitive advantage. This raises one of the most important debates around urban studies: the rise of privatization and commodification of public spaces in the city.

Cities have become especially attractive for platforms thanks to their unique blend of cooperative relations, affectivities and socially diffused knowledge, forming what Negri (2018) calls the 'social factory' of contemporary capitalism. This 'space of the common' has become a privileged site for creating and capturing economic value, leading to the privatization of public as well as private spaces. Moreover, as an increasing proportion of specialized literature shows, urban neighbourhoods are the territorial measure to analyse Airbnb's impact on different processes. In this sense, Brenner and Schmid (2015) suggested that in the 21st century, a radical blurring of the urban category is occurring, decomposing it into places where identity, differences, experience and consumption play key roles. For Airbnb, selling a way of life, rather than a specific attraction is a strategy to generate repeat visits, breaking down one of the behavioural limitations of urban tourists (Selby, 2004). Importantly, traditional tourist zones, mainly located in downtown areas, are now complemented by the possibility of experiencing other unexpected places where little more than everyday life is going on (Molz, 2018).

In this context, P2PA have highlighted the image projection of some iconic neighbourhoods, referred to as 'globalhoods' by authors such as Rae (2019), giving rise to a complex mosaic of tourism micro-geographies that are still developing as the interconnections between place, culture, space and consumption unfold in an everchanging built environment (Storper & Scott, 2016). Thus, P2PA are participating in the ideological construction of what these destinations and their communities are, taking advantage and enhancing the new entrepreneurial culture that pervades the ontology of the platform economy. Airbnb's proposal, that of the 'sharing city', focuses on how residents interact with each other to share resources, spaces, infrastructures and experiences in their city (Sánchez-Vergara et al., 2021).

It is this concept of communities within sharing cities that the platform's narrative is seeking, with the aim of extracting value from these communities, marketing them globally and amplifying an 'anthropocentric production' in present-day capitalism (Rossi, 2020). Meanwhile, these transactions and interactions through digital platforms permeate our experience of the urban everyday life, reconfiguring what it means to be and to live in a city (Leszczynski, 2020). This renews the ancient notion of elusive authenticity: with listings mostly located in gentrified neighbourhoods, the displacement of locals makes interaction more unlikely. At the last stop on this journey, P2PA reduce tourists to consumers in a commodified city centre

where the remaining locals have difficulties meeting their needs in an expensive and Disneyfied environment (Oskam, 2020).

Therefore, the general objective of this article is to identify the key attributes of the image projected by one of the main contemporary sources of tourist information, the Airbnb Neighbourhood Guides. From here, the first specific objective is to observe what kind of attributes (following the cognitive-affective-conative model presented in this section) (exposed in this section) are present in the image of global tourist destinations at the neighbourhood level (globalhoods) projected by Airbnb. The second specific objective seeks to understand how Airbnb uses the identity of destinations, and potentially commodifies them, to project an idea of authenticity in order to enhance the engagement of users, both those who participate in the same projection (mainly hosts) and also potential clients. Finally, the third objective, related to the previous one and linked to the territorial reality, aims to observe if the use of the community identities of these globalhoods really serves the local communities' needs or, on the contrary, reinforces the commercialized image typically projected by traditional DMO.

### 3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

Neighbourhood Guides (Airbnb, 2020) are Airbnb's primary vehicle for projecting the image of global urban destinations. With more than 5.6 million listings, 4 million hosts and nearly 150 million users, the company is undoubtedly one of the main players in global destination image projection (Airbnb, 2021). Tourist guides would obviously not be a novel source in terms of creating and projecting destination image, and traditionally they have transmitted information through persuasion more characteristic of traditional advertisements (Calvi, 2011). However, as Bani (2017) mentions, these kinds of guides have characteristics that lie between organic and induced sources. Airbnb's guides are presented as a selection tool that allows potential guests to adapt their choice to their personality. Hence, for the company it is essential to highlight each neighbourhood community's specific elements, which it does it through UGC posted by residents, in the language of so-called informal genres (Calvi, 2011), first expressed digitally by bloggers and later seen in social media.

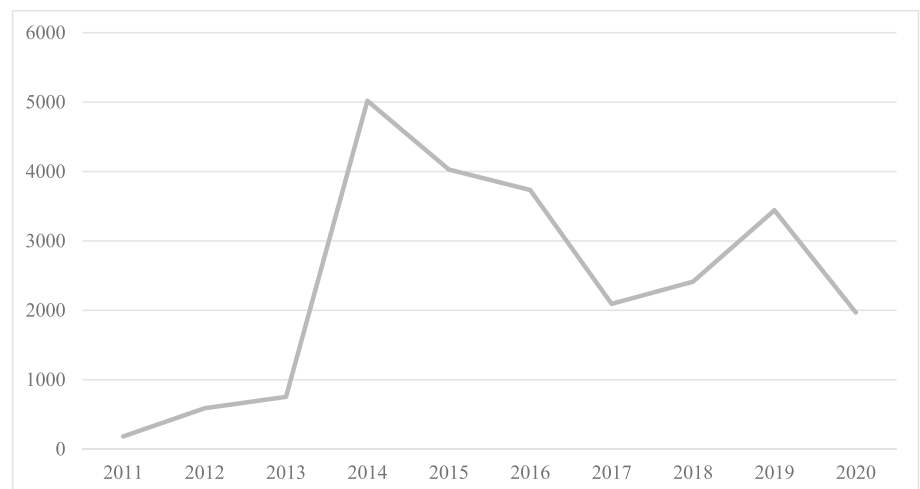
We web-scraped all the content posted in these Guides in winter 2020–2021, a period when the COVID-19 socio-health crisis was severely affecting tourism activity around the world and many destinations' accommodations supply, including that of Airbnb, was paralysed due to mobility restrictions across most of the main global tourist destinations. These Guides had not undergone any major changes since winter 2019, when Airbnb carried out a comprehensive remodelling, prioritizing UGC. Previously, Airbnb had summarized user contributions in its own description and a series of keywords, but in the updated version UGC takes centre stage, with the platform displaying it directly to project the image of each neighbourhood. Therefore, in the current version of the Guides, the narrative is supported principally by UGC (descriptive comments by users in the 'tips from locals' section) accompanied by a short (or on occasions non-existent) company description of each neighbourhood.



Source: Authors

**FIGURE 1** Geographical distribution of the cities present in Airbnb's Neighbourhood Guides. Source: Authors [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jr.2551)]

**FIGURE 2** Airbnb's Neighbourhood Guides. Temporal distribution of neighbourhood descriptions posted by users in the Neighbourhood Guides (2011–2020). Number of user posts by year. Source: Authors from Airbnb (2020)



Source: Authors from Airbnb (2020).

Selecting the current Guides version, we worked on 21 cities and 562 neighbourhoods, containing more than 500,000 words in 24,222 descriptions, principally taken from the huge number of user comments ('tips from locals'). The vast majority of these descriptions are in English, given that users are addressing an international audience, although some users use their local language to communicate in these spaces, especially in cities where the Spanish or French language predominates. It is important to add (Figure 1) that most of the analysed cities are among the 20 most visited cities in the world and/or are located in the 10 most visited countries in the world (Organization, 2019). In addition, they are geographically situated in the Global North, with Africa excluded, and share only Euro-American experiences which are elevated to universality.

The data gathered from the company covers the period from 2011, just as it was taking off in the wake of the Great Recession, to 2020. The universe of user comments in the Guides were divided into two samples: a main one, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 including 23,396 descriptions, and a (relatively) small sample of 826 descriptions posted after 11 March 2020 (when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic) and until November 2020, when our empirical analysis began. Figure 2 illustrates the temporal evolution of the number of neighbourhood descriptions posted by users (UGC) on the Neighbourhood Guides website, showing spectacular growth in 2014, a subsequent fall and a rebound prior to the pandemic.

From this initial data, we developed a descriptive and thematic content analysis of this narrative. As proposed by Creswell and Clark



(2017), our method design was exploratory and sequential and consisted of an initial qualitative data collection phase and a subsequent analysis phase. Following Huertas and Marine-Roig (2016), content analysis was performed manually to allow an in-depth qualitative interpretation. With this aim, using the qualitative software NVivo<sup>®</sup>, and after removing solely connecting words, we obtained the 500 most reported words in the neighbourhoods' textual narratives, including both the company's own description and the users' tips for pre-pandemic and pandemic contexts. For both the pre-COVID and post-COVID samples, the occurrences of these 500 words account for about 40% of the total content, while allowing a manageable qualitative interpretation to be made. These prevalent words were manually codified into the affective, cognitive and conative attributes categories that make up the destinations' and neighbourhoods' projected image.

It is important to note that the literature has provided us with elements of interpretation. These include information theory literature, which proposes several emotional dimensions, highlighting 11 pairs of positive and negative emotions identified by Robinson (2008). As for cognitive attributes concerning place branding, Giovanardi (2012) calls for a practical and representational cognitive conception of destinations relating to their value expression, deeming it necessary to recover the concept of hard and soft factors described by Kotler et al. (1999). Hard factors are identifiable, tangible elements in a destination (such as infrastructure), whereas soft factors are intangible constructs, such as quality of life, culture, flexibility and dynamism associated with a destination. In recent years, and as exemplified by the rise of creativity, soft factors have become increasingly important in how destinations present themselves to the world (Kotler et al., 1999). For Cleave (2014), hard and soft attributes are especially interesting in reflecting the values and aims of places. In this sense, place branding has actually become a point of reference for building virtual communities, since soft attributes are associated with a 'sense of place', and are important to fostering social interaction (Mengi et al., 2017), while hard attributes are crucial in terms of essential information on a place's attractiveness.

From these theoretical perspectives, we managed to construct our codebook, codifying the most reported words into the affective, cognitive and conative attributes categories taken from previous literature. To ensure content analysis validity a peer check was conducted in accordance with the literature (Creswell, 2012; Mayring, 2014). This check was performed by all the research co-authors and different content analysis experts. These researchers analysed and provided feedback on the codes so that it would be possible to further refine the content analysis and re-evaluate the original codes. The final version of the codebook was used to definitively codify the 500 most reported words pre-COVID and those reported during the pandemic. Subsequently, this coding served to quantify (using R<sup>®</sup> software) the presence of each category in all the globalhooths' descriptions. This revealed not only the prevailing attributes in the image of these destinations, but also the potential difference or persistence of these in the long pre-pandemic period and during the pandemic. Finally, we used quantitative content analysis KhCoder3<sup>®</sup> software to observe

co-occurrences of concepts (network diagrams that connect concepts with similar appearance patterns, that is, with high degrees of coincidence) and multi-dimensional scaling of the samples (means of visualizing the level of similarity of individual cases of a dataset).

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | Codification

The attributes categories were constructed by analysing the main words reported in these Guides in the narrative context in which they appear. Tables 1 and 2 show these categories and the most reported words in each category in the two samples. The complete word assignment to categories in each sample (July 2011–March 2020 and March 2020–November 2020) can be consulted in the open-access data present in *Omitted for review purposes* (2021). This extended table shows the similarities in the type and volume of words that both samples prioritize, as well as their distribution in the different categories shown by the attribute typologies. We can also see how cognitive attributes dominate both samples. Another common finding emerges in the need to establish new hybrid categories, mixing soft and hard cognitive attributes such as those spatial categories where tangible and intangible interpretations are mixed. The prevalence of 'reputation' items among the affective attributes is also relevant in both guides. A noteworthy element in this first glance is that aspects directly linked to the pandemic do not stand out in the during-pandemic sample. It seems that, at least in this first phase of the pandemic, the ranking of concepts related to cognitive elements is linked to spatiality, tourist amenities that attract potential clients, as well as affective attributes linked to reputation. Finally, regarding conative attributes, although they are much less prevalent, they stand out for showing different behaviours common in tourists, whether they are more active, such as the act of visiting, those related to searching, finding and acquiring, or more passive and observational.

Finally, the last phase consisted of performing a quantitative analysis of the frequency of appearance of the most reported words that served as the basis for our coding. Finally, central to our analysis, we transferred the codebook to the descriptions, accounting for the presence of these 500 most reported words in the descriptions and therefore of the categories that we have assigned to these words.

### 4.2 | Most frequent words analysis

Figure 3 shows how Airbnb's destination image projection has two key elements. One is spatiality, highlighting the 'neighbourhood', and particularly traditional tourism-related amenities, in this case restaurants and shops. There are no major differences after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, except for the verifiable fact that the concept of neighbourhood acquires even greater relative prominence. If we explore the context, Airbnb UGC focusing on the 'neighbourhood'

**TABLE 1** Codebook. Hard and soft cognitive attributes. Categories based on previous literature (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Andéhn et al., 2014; Cleave, 2014; Ferrer-Rossell & Marine-Roig, 2020; Garay, 2019; Gartner, 1994; Giovanardi, 2012; Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Lucarelli & Brorström, 2013; Michael et al., 2018; Sanz et al., 2016; Taha, 2013) and codifying results. Descriptions based on academic dictionaries. Showing a maximum of three words, ordered by number of mentions

Category	Description	Pre-pandemic	Pandemic
<i>Soft cognitive attributes (Intangibles)</i>			
Community identity (history & legacy)	Historical and legacy qualities of a human group that make it different from others	Old, historic, history	Historic, old, history
Community identity (culture & lifestyle)	Cultural and lifestyle qualities of a human group that make it different from others	Food, art, full	Art, food, life
<i>Hard cognitive attributes (Tangibles)</i>			
Amenities (commercial structure)	Businesses providing goods or services to any person for compensation	Shopping, shops, stores,	Shops, shopping, boutiques
Amenities (leisure & tourist attractions)	Entertainment and facilities which cater for the leisure needs of residents and tourists	Restaurants, bars, cafes	Restaurants, bars, restaurants
Amenities (natural areas)	Natural environment that develops with or without the intervention of humans	Canal, bay, hill	Canal, ocean, outdoor
Physical landscapes (architecture & infrastructure)	Buildings and related infrastructure made for an urban setting	Home, architecture, bridge	Home, buildings, architecture
Physical landscapes (dimensions)	Concepts regarding dimensionality of something	Many, around, lots	One, many, around
Physical landscapes (public spaces)	Places that are generally open and accessible to people	Beach, street, park	Beach, street, park
Physical landscapes (transport & mobility)	Actions and infrastructure regarding the transfer of people and cargo within a territory	Bus, station, drive	Drive, station, stop
Human landscape (residents)	People who live somewhere permanently or on a long-term basis	Family	Family, families, host
Human landscape (visitors)	People visiting someone or somewhere, especially socially or as a tourist	Tourist, tourists	Tourist
Time/moment of the day	Concepts regarding a specific moment of the day	Night, day, minutes	Night, day, minutes
<i>Hard &amp; Soft cognitive attributes</i>			
Spatiality (tangible & intangible attributes)	All the elements explaining a geographical area, physically and culturally connected with a range of human communities	Neighbourhood, place, area	Neighbourhood, area, city
Destinations (tangible & intangible attributes)	A specific territory that is dependent to a significant extent on revenues from tourism	Paris, San, world	Miami, Paris, Barcelona

Source: Authors.

is created by invitation to a friendly and social place (built on relationships). In this way, the platform exploits the idea that guests can access a series of privileged spaces reserved for the local community, generating a city branding that goes beyond traditional tourist promotion, expanding access to the territory and the community. Another prominent concept, especially important in the Guides, is centre ('centre', 'central', 'downtown', 'centro'), which revealed the first contradiction between the company's ontology and its narrative. Airbnb is focusing its attention on central neighbourhoods, downtowns.

Nevertheless, urban and tourist consumption are clearly prevalent throughout the identification and relevance of amenities in the general narrative, with tourist, leisure and commercial structure being a principal element in the tourist narrative. Moreover, the appearance

of words highlighting the most fashionable and cool features in these neighbourhoods (e.g., 'chic') in a prominent position in both versions also indicates the preference for different and attractive places. Elements of community identity are also central to the narrative, defining this as 'living like a local' with the human desire for belonging at its heart. This is reinforced by the presence of positive sentiments (particularly regarding reputation), where affection is built on, and therefore creating places of affection. Finally, words referring to human landscape are also interesting as they connect to Florida's (2014) idea of the 'creative class' ('university', 'professionals', 'artists', 'culture', etc.). The conjunction between the attractiveness of the community's 'authenticity' and elements linked to visitor comfort and safety, undoubtedly seek to encourage the feeling of relevance for the reader of these guides.

**TABLE 2** Codebook. Affective and conative attributes. Categories based on previous literature (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Andéhn et al., 2014; Cleave, 2014; Ferrer-Rossell & Marine-Roig, 2020; Garay, 2019; Gartner, 1994; Giovanardi, 2012; Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Lucarelli & Brorström, 2013; Michael et al., 2018; Sanz et al., 2016; Taha, 2013) and codifying results. Descriptions based on academic dictionaries. Showing a maximum of three words

Category	Description	Pre-pandemic	Pandemic
<i>Affective attributes</i>			
Positive sentiments (availability)	Something is possible to get, buy or find	Much, easy	Much, easy, muchos
Positive sentiments (creativity)	Someone has skills to produce something new	Chic	Chic
Positive sentiments (enjoyment)	Obtaining pleasure from something or someone	Beautiful, enjoy, feel	Beautiful, enjoy, feel
Positive sentiments (novelty)	Something is interesting because it is new or unusual	New, especially	New, especially
Positive sentiments (reputation)	Something is recognized as being extraordinary	Great, famous, best	Great, famous, known
Positive sentiments (safety)	Something or someplace is safe from danger or worry	Sure	Sure
Positive sentiments (tranquillity)	Being quiet and peaceful	Quiet	Quiet
<i>Conative attributes</i>			
Verb/Action (to acquire)	To acquire something, to gain something	Need, catch	Need
Verb/Action (to be)	Something that is described or someone that is named	Be, son, está	Be, son, sono
Verb/Action (to be able)	To have the skills needed to do something		Puede
Verb/Action (to do)	To act or behave	Experience, try	Experience, try
Verb/Action (to find)	To discover somebody/something	Find, get, shows	Find, get, encuentra
Verb/Action (to have)	To have something or some characteristic	See, avec, ses	Avec, including, ses
Verb/Action (to like)	To like something or someone	Like	Like
Verb/Action (to offer)	Willing to give something to somebody	Take, first, make	Para, take, options
Verb/Action (to persist)	To continue to do something despite difficulties or opposition	Still	Still
Verb/Action (to see)	To become aware of somebody/something by using your eyes	Watching, watch, look	See
Verb/Action (to swim)	To move along in water	Swim	Swimming
Verb/Action (to visit)	To go to see a person or a place for a period	Visit, check, explore	visitors
Verb/Action (to walk)	To move or go somewhere	Walk, walking, stroll	Walk, walking, caminar
Verb/Action (to want)	To desire somebody/something	Want	Want

Source: Authors.

### 4.3 | Category analysis

Table 3 shows that most of the categories in the two sub-samples coincide, again confirming that the narrative has not changed despite the hard lockdowns around the world in the months immediately after the outbreak of the pandemic and the mobility crisis. The analyses of these categories, whose contextual examples can be seen in *Omitted for review purposes* (2021), reveal the weight of the image projection of amenities together with community-related attributes. This narrative therefore blends classic elements of tourism marketing with the exploitation of the destination's image and the 'authenticity' of its community (culture and lifestyle). These aspects reappear in cognitive attributes referring to mobility and connectivity, and visitors' need for contact with residents.

Regarding concept co-occurrence, Figure 4 shows the prevalence of tourist amenities, those related to the resident community, as well as positive affective attributes that draw users to these

globalhoods, which is similar to traditional tourist marketing. In the case of the pre-pandemic sample, the co-occurrence of terms related to amenities can be observed, including the concept of neighbourhood (group 1), the community (group 2), expressions that highlight elements of positivity and reputation (group 3), elements linked with mobility (group 4) or tourists themselves, but also the concept 'home' (group 5). In the pandemic time sample, reputational elements (group 1) are the most extensive group, followed by amenities and the neighbourhood concept (group 2), mobility and moments of the day (group 3) and elements linked with the community, its lifestyle and history (groups 4). Finally, Figure 5 shows how the neighbourhood narrative forces the relationship between the concepts of the tourist space (neighbourhood, city, area, street) and its main amenities (restaurant, cafe) and also the commercial sector (shop), which is transformed into a type of amenity. Also important is the relationship between concepts that allude to spatiality and those referring to people and the adjectives that show all of them in a positive way (people, best, great, amazing).





Source: Authors.

**FIGURE 3** Airbnb's Neighbourhood Guides. Most reported words. Word Cloud where the size responds to the largest number of citations. Source: Authors

**TABLE 3** Airbnb's Neighbourhood Guides. Most reported attributes. Average number of occurrences in neighbourhood descriptions and standard deviation

Pre-pandemic context			Post-pandemic context		
	Mean	SD		Mean	SD
Reputation	0.274	0.636	Tangible & intangible attributes	1.534	2.325
Tangible & intangible attributes	0.259	0.624	Dimensions	1.462	2.417
Leisure & tourism attractions	0.255	0.677	Leisure & tourism attractions	1.191	1.594
Dimensions	0.228	0.602	Culture & lifestyle	1.073	1.879
Destinations	0.141	0.459	Reputation	0.967	1.364
Public spaces	0.133	0.420	Destinations	0.879	1.966
Culture & lifestyle	0.132	0.460	Public spaces	0.815	1.626
Commercial structure	0.121	0.404	Commercial structure	0.573	1.023
Time/moment of the day	0.061	0.279	Transport & mobility	0.255	0.714
Transport & mobility	0.052	0.303	To offer	0.247	0.574
To walk	0.046	0.225	History & legacy	0.232	0.622
History & legacy	0.036	0.216	Time/moment of the day	0.220	0.550
Enjoyment	0.035	0.194	Architecture & infrastructure	0.217	0.535
Natural resources	0.030	0.188	To walk	0.166	0.490
Architecture & infrastructure	0.030	0.192	Natural resources	0.154	0.645

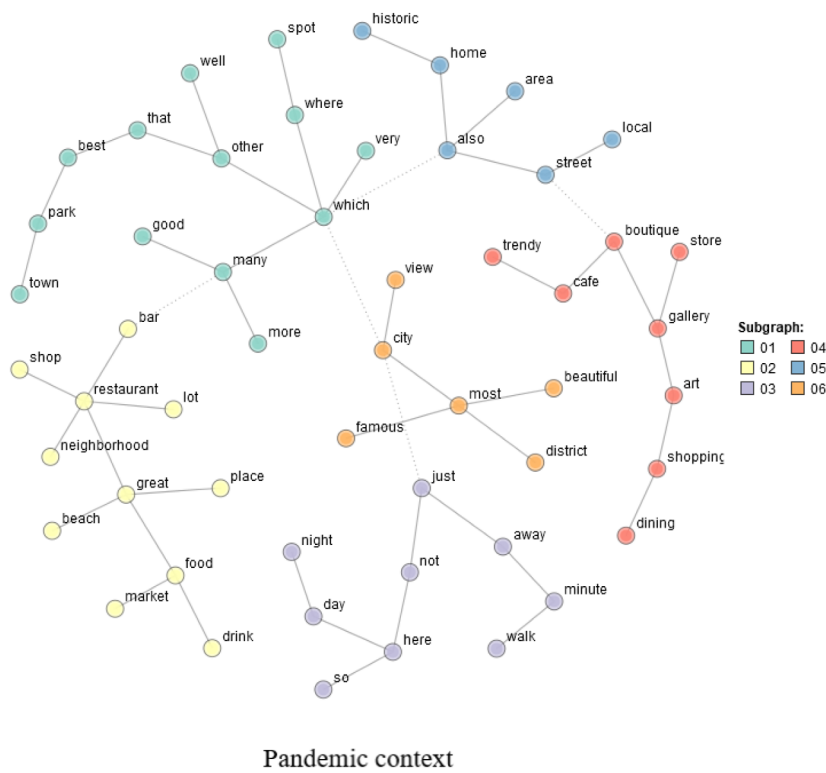
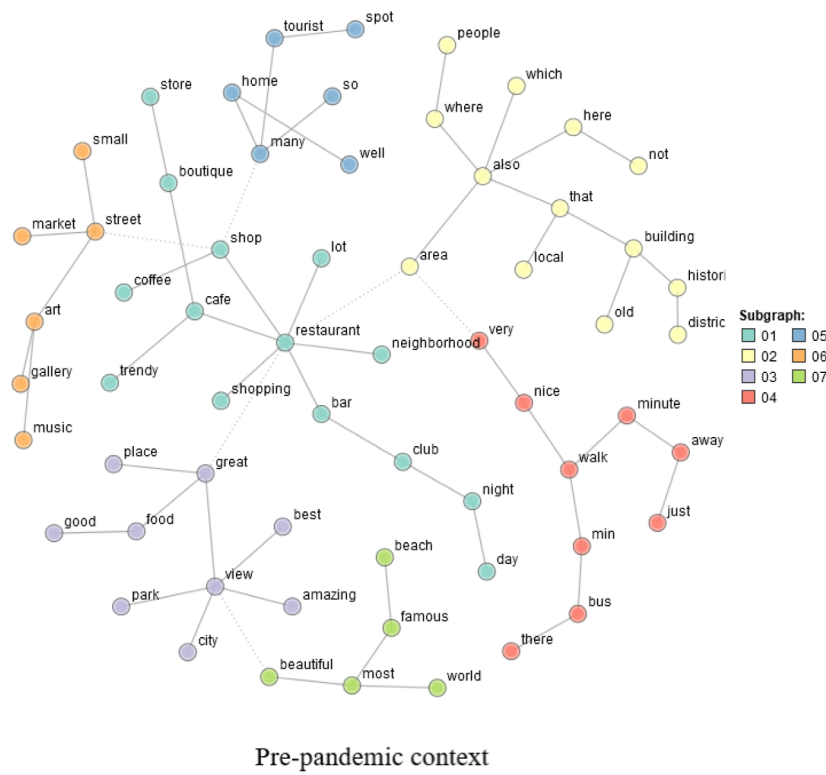
Source: Authors.

## 5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### 5.1 | Discussion and scholarly conclusions

This study presents a series of proposals that enrich the debate about contemporary destination image projection. It shows how the most recent literature on this subject emphasizes the relevance of digitalization and virtual communities. In these spaces, researchers have

detected a growing relative weight of user-generated content (UGC) (Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2015) as opposed to traditional DMO projection. This has increased the relevance of affective attributes and cognitive attributes based on intangibility, since now one-way communication (DMO to consumers) has been replaced by communicative environments that seek not only to project an image, but also to socialize (Kirářlová & Pavlíčka, 2015). Indeed, and giving answer to our first specific objective, our results demonstrate how Airbnb has



Source: Authors.

**FIGURE 4** Airbnb's Neighbourhood Guides. Most reported words co-occurrence networks. Groups of words that tend to be together, where words linked by highlighted lines show the strongest relationships. Source: Authors [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

been able to reproduce this socializing potential in its Neighbourhood Guides in order to foster engagement that allows the company to attract users while also covering the need to guarantee quality

standards (Bucher et al., 2018). Our results show how the projected destination images in Airbnb's Guides are mainly constructed from affective and 'soft' cognitive attributes (Giovanardi, 2012) based on



identity aspects; the kind of attributes that the literature has indicated have a greater impact on potential visits (Pan & Li, 2011; Van Asperen et al., 2018).

Moreover, and following the second specific objective, Airbnb has been particularly astute to use UGC created by its hosts to construct its narrative about global urban neighbourhoods, or global-hoods. Under the label of 'tips from locals', the company simulates an environment of trust where users themselves speak to potential tourists, apparently without any interference from the company. This agrees with Van Nuenen (2016) idea that these platforms are taking advantage of these 'insiders', real ambassadors of authenticity, who provide an unconventional image of destinations, far from the one traditionally sold by standardized marketing strategies. If, according to Lange-Faria and Elliot (2012), social media provide the context for an 'ideological' construction of virtual brand communities, these Airbnb Guides must aim to emulate these communities. Nevertheless, in this case, although the ideological construction is also based on UGC, it is ultimately the company's responsibility.

Unlike other studies that have basically analysed the company's marketing (Molz, 2018), this article fully enters the destination narratives projected in their own Guides. As it shows, Airbnb has shifted the principal role in the construction of their narratives from the business to UGC. Our results show UGC as central to projecting the tourist image of cities, but also to constructing the basis of Airbnb's ideal of authentic tourism: 'belong anywhere', which has been its slogan for years. This is not a minor issue, since with this message Airbnb is telling its users that they are not 'conventional tourists' who crowd cities, but alternative 'travellers' who blend in and end up becoming part of the communities they visit. This connects with the second noteworthy element in this work, the importance of the projection of identity elements and the desire that they be perceived as authentic.

Literature has already shown how this desire for destinations to be perceived as authentic has become a new sales pitch for destination image projection (Chen et al., 2020; Kim & Kim, 2020), sometimes with practically opposite consequences (Gotham, 2007). This has also been shown how digital platforms (including Airbnb) have exploited this commodification of identities to attract users (Paulauskaite et al., 2017). This article's findings show how important the community is and the possibility of being part of its day-to-day. Here, Airbnb users are not tourists, they have privileged access to these communities' way of life, their tastes, hobbies and secrets (Liang et al., 2018), shared by locals in their comments. Indeed, all the authentic narrative seems more linked to the need to create many stimuli so that clients lose sight of the fact that the quality of the service offered is sometimes difficult to control, as anticipated by authors such as Bucher et al. (2018).

However, this article's findings show that much of the image projected in these spaces is also reproducing stereotypical forms of tourism imagery, in line with Van Nuenen (2016). In addition to these elements linked to the community, the specificities, and the authenticity of globalhoods, other categories relate to accessibility, comfort or proximity to tourist amenities. In these experiences, amenities are at the centre, as are tourist hotspots. However, as shown in our results, thanks to the information shared by users in the Neighbourhood

Guides, tourist paths can be expanded out of typical hotspots and contribute to constructing significant relationships with the local space. A more detailed observation allows us to verify how these attributes are not usually concerned about resident communities or other aspects related to tourist pressure or destination resilience. Rather, they are in favour of the transformation of communal space into legal and profitable commodified space (Stabrowski, 2017) and turning urban settings and differences into products. Globalhoods are indeed consumable destinations for tourists to explore and experience. Airbnb participates in the ideological construction of these spaces, which now exist especially because of their hedonistic consumption capacity. With the 'belong anywhere' tagline there is a desire to dilute the differences between visitors and residents. The platform ultimately participates in the expansion of traditional mass consumption in cities, camouflaged as an alternative and authentic experience. The most interesting of all is that this new image of the destinations is finally co-created (duly manipulated) both consciously and unconsciously by residents or locals.

Finally, and following the third specific objective, another relevant element that underlies in this articles' findings is related with this 'belong anywhere' idea: the fact that the aforementioned identities can be 'acquired' and that destinations' particularities only serve as a sales pitch, leading us to reflect on the territory itself. In fact, Airbnb's Neighbourhood Guides are one of the best examples of contemporary use of 'glocalization' and the creation of social patterns of urban consumption. Here, geography matters, as Airbnb narratives project neighbourhoods on a global level, helping to transform them into 'globalhoods' (Rae, 2019) and commodifying the common element of the urban fabric and private spaces. Their tourist image is mainly based on a set of cognitive attributes, particularly intangible (Giovanardi, 2012) and emotional ones (Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2016), forming the presupposed 'authenticity' of these places which are also public spaces, facilities, services and homes in a subtle process of privatization. Therefore, Airbnb is contributing to the radical blurring of the urban category advanced by Brenner and Schmid (2015) for the 21st century. Meanwhile, these transactions and interactions through digital platforms permeate our experience of everyday urban life, reconfiguring what it means to be and to live in a city (Leszczynski, 2020) from an Euro-American perspective that pretends to be universal.

Airbnb's performativity views the urban as a series of interconnected sub-systems grouped with symbols and a range of icons which allows the experience of place consumption to be differentiated. The city is then a patchwork of consumption experiences where everyday life is the most important attraction for generating repeat visits to urban destinations, but where the very rhythms of life are finally commodified. A context in which the company has focused its promotion efforts on downtowns and central neighbourhoods, acting as a key agent of the ongoing re-globalization and 'overtouristifying' of places, intensifying competition between cities at a global level (Rossi, 2020). In this endeavour, we have already seen the relevance of some of the residents, the hosts themselves, in the very propagation of this imaginary. Linking it with the territory, we could reflect on the role of the 'creative classes', which these hosts likely belong to, in the

overcrowding of the cities where they live. This actor perfectly links many of the elements discussed above, because in Florida's (2014) conception, this 'creativity' is simply the result of 'social interaction', 'identities' and 'authenticity', which together generate the 'power of and are the reflection of social tolerance'. Nevertheless, our findings emphasize the controversial role of this actor (here represented by hosts) in reinforcing the socio-spatially exclusionary effects of their urbanism proposal (Wilson & Keil, 2008).

Lastly, our findings show a current image of how Airbnb narratives are dealing with COVID-19. As seen, this is not referenced directly and only safety, as a category, has emerged in our analysis. During the current pandemic, Airbnb has focused on emphasizing the reputation of neighbourhoods and reminding its users of the consumption universe located there. Elements of the pandemic's impact have been avoided. So far, many academics' hopes of a transition to new, fairer tourism models have not materialized, although the post-pandemic context should be propitious for this purpose.

Definitely, this article meets the objective of observing the nature of the projected image of globalhoods created by Airbnb and the complex relationships established with these destinations' communities. In particular their interpretations regarding identity elements and the underlying processes of commodification or preservation projected. We understand that this adds a new perspective to recent studies (Farmaki et al., 2022) that precisely observe all the existing complexity in relation to the P2PA phenomenon and its relationship with these local communities. This work does so by demonstrating that in this P2PA context, starred by Airbnb, the destination image is mainly projected by a group of users, the company's hosts, through affective and also intangible cognitive attributes that highlight diverse community-related identity aspects. Although this projected identity seeks to transmit a perception of authenticity, it ends up reproducing the commodification of destinations already identified by the literature in other spaces. It also moves the company away from the goal of equity and sustainability that it has been defending for some years and that different actors perceived as a real possibility in the post-pandemic context. All this leads us more than ever to the need to review the implications of these actions by the different stakeholders involved.

## 5.2 | Managerial implications

The nature and results of this study confirm that it is increasingly relevant for public administrations and the private tourism sector to have detailed information about the predominant spaces, players and narratives in destination image projection. Without this knowledge, many actions may be misguided or ineffective. The first actor to question should be the company itself. Airbnb is a major player in many of the world's leading tourist cities and is concerned with creating a certain image of them and, specifically, their neighbourhoods. Despite the criticism levelled at it, the company has the power to influence the projection of destination images and make potential

users aware of the possible impact of tourism on them. In this sense, the company could consider how it addresses the complexity and differences in the territories to overcome the current process of simple commodification, thereby genuinely enriching its users' experience while minimizing the effects on residents. As we have also seen, Airbnb have a wide path to distribute the tourist flows and enrich the image of tourist destinations of the global south, and not only those ranked as the main tourist destinations globally. Overcoming this sort of neo-colonialist perspective, the platform could enriching the image of destinations if they want to continue prioritizing identity and community aspects.

This study also identifies elements that should also be considered by other stakeholders, particularly Airbnb's host, which should consider the importance of making their guests aware of the potential impact of their stay on the destination. In addition, there is room to project an image not involving stereotypes, in which other practices that are not always consumerist have a place. Here, obviously, public administrations also have a part to play. Although these have lost some of the power they once held as the main DMO projecting their destinations' image, their role, especially in virtual spaces, is still relevant. They can decide to what extent to de-escalate the promotion of the destination or what type of attributes they want to highlight. They can even point out those that may affect aspects such as sustainability, without this having to be a variable to measure the arrival of more visitors. Also, without having to censor any communication, their narrative can also denounce the commodification of their communities' identity, a criticism that will most likely reappear in public spaces spurred on by another relevant stakeholder: social movements.

## 5.3 | Limitations and future research guidelines

The image projected by the platform is dynamic and evolves over time, so longitudinal studies would be necessary to observe possible changes in the results presented here. Furthermore, it is a qualitative study, and will therefore always have certain biases related to the authors' interpretations. The findings of this study also open the door to potential future studies. For example, it would be very interesting to compare the destination images projected by Airbnb with those of other intermediation platforms with some characteristics in common and some notable differences. Thus, it would also be interesting to observe whether the image projection of other types of destination (for example, sun and sea or rural) include differential elements with regard to spaces, actors and the nature of the image attributes. Evidently, new qualitative studies could delve into more specific aspects, such as the hosts' view of their guests or establish more particular territorial comparisons. In fact, as has already been pointed out in this work, territorial analysis, whether from a geographical or sociological perspective, still has a long way to go in specialized studies on destination image projection and the performance of the digital economy.



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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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