

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

SEDUCTION NARRATIVES: AIRBNB AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF TOURISM IMAGES OF TOURISM DESTINATIONS

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1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE

The study about the formation and projection of the images of tourist destinations has become one of the main fields of analysis of tourist activity in recent decades. Academic literature has verified that destination management organizations (DMO) have been losing weight in the projection of the images of destinations in favour of user-generated content (UGC) in virtual platforms and especially in social media (Alcázar, 2014). However, not enough attention has been paid to observe how the tourist-related sharing economy platforms, whose best exponent is Airbnb, are also influencing these processes. This study has the aim to fill this gap through the following questions: 1) what attributes are these platforms privileging in their narratives about global tourist destinations? and 2) can these narratives be interpreted as being aligned with more sustainable tourism models? Or, in the contrary, are they favouring the persistence of a tourism model based on mass consumption?

Gartner (1994) was a pioneer in proposing that the images of destinations were constructed by cognitive attributes, related to the description of the destinations, affective attributes, reflecting emotional motivations and by a third component, the conative, which directly alluded to the tourist behavior in the destination. In the following two decades, new references proposed diverse models to analyse how different stakeholders used a range of sources of information to project the attributes of tourist destinations (Zhang et al., 2014), confirming the idea that affective attributes seemed to have the highest impact in the behaviour of visiting and recommending the destination. The success of the cognitive-affective-conative model in interpreting the projected image of the destinations has been extended over time (Agapito, 2013), although these processes have been strongly impacted by the emergence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and specifically by the consolidation of social media (Donaire & Galí, 2011), that

have added a layer of complexity to them. Among other aspects, social media have caused DMOs to no longer have the control they once had over these processes and that they have lost ground in relation to the weight that the UGC has acquired over the projection of the destination image, that has become a multidirectional, interactive, dynamic, and fluid process (Zeng, 2014).

Sharing economy platforms have been largely forgotten in the study of these processes, ignoring their role and that of their peers (hosts and guests) in these processes. Since its inception, companies like Airbnb have dedicated significant resources to selling themselves as the best example of initiatives that facilitate sharing and the transition to more sustainable and resilient tourism models. This is what Yannopoulou (2013) already detected in his analysis of UGC of these platforms, where the «stranger» was redefined as «friend» and ideas such as «access», «exchange» and «authenticity» (Lalicic & Weismayer, 2017) were filtered by a high emotional component. For Richardson (2015), these platforms invite their users to «deconstruct» social and economic practices while simultaneously mobilizing the idea of «community» as a vehicle for social innovation. Through their narrative, these platforms sell the user a «feeling of belonging» expressed by the exclusive access to those places reserved for the community (Bani, 2017). These strategies are not new, but they take on a new meaning in order to improve the perceived quality of non-professionalized services (Bucher et al., 2018).

Van Nuenen (2016) also indicates that the host himself has become an ambassador for this idea, providing a presumably anti-tourist narrative but where stereotypical images that already existed before the irruption of the platforms are finally reproduced. In fact, the platform has been especially successful in generating engagement with its narratives among hosts, many of whom have a strong sense of community with the platform brand (Hardy et al., 2021). Furthermore, and as in other contexts, geography matters, and these platforms have been especially skilled in finding the most interesting territorial frameworks to highlight the role of communities: neighborhoods. Their narratives frame them as units to be explored and consumed, transforming the community space into marketable (Stabrowski, 2017). In this sense, although it extends its influence on peripheral neighborhoods where travellers can experience places «off the beaten track» (Molz, 2018), Airbnb finally highlights certain well-known global neighborhoods or «globalhoods» on its website.

2. METHODS

Neighbourhood Guides websites (Airbnb, 2019), introduced in 2012, have been the primary vehicle used by Airbnb to project the image of the most well-known *globalhoods*. The analysis of the content of these guides is the main object of our study. To do this, a capture of all the textual information of the guides of 23 cities and 605 neighbourhoods was made in the fall-winter of 2019, just before these Guides were completely remodelled and before the outbreak of the crisis caused by Covid -19. A total of 74,475 words were collected, including Airbnb's description (short and long descriptions) of the neighbourhoods, keywords highlighted by the community and the company, and information related to access via transport, both public and private. From here, a descriptive and thematic content analysis of this content was carried out. Based on the proposals of Cre-

swell (2017), the design of our method has been exploratory and sequential, starting from data collection and continuing with different stages that constitute an analysis that, following Huertas (2016), has been non-automated and qualitative.

From the stated objective, we have used Nvivo® to collect the (500) most reported words in the 605 neighbourhoods guides, including both the description made by the company (short and long) and the description of the hosts («the community says»). These words were coded from the categories of attributes (affective, cognitive, and conative) proposed by the literature related to the creation and projection of the image of destinations. As this theoretical approach presented limitations to analyse our sample, it was necessary to incorporate new conceptual approaches. Once we included dimensions of affectivity, cognitive elements of the places following Giovanardi (2012) soft cognitive attributes («soft factors») (Mengi, 2017), we conducted a second coding phase of the (500) most reported words. To ensure the validity of our content analysis, also known as credibility in qualitative analysis contexts (Guba, 1985), we proceeded to a peer review of our coding. Thus, the encodings of the different authors of this study were then shared and after consensus, we built our Codebook, which is the result of our methodological design. Once the coding was done, and through quantitative statistical software (R® and SPSS®) we obtained a quantitative description of the presence of each category in each of the 605 neighbourhoods, measured by the presence of these words in their descriptions (long, short and «the community says»). Finally, using Gephi® software for network representation, we carried out an algorithmic modularity analysis, where common indicators were observed between them. Figure 1 summarizes these explanations.

3. FINDINGS

The Codebook regarding the categorization of the attributes of the narrative of tourist *globalhoods* is the first result of this research. On the other hand, Airbnb centres its narratives in a type of hard cognitive attribute, the «amenities», the main elements of tourist attraction of the destination. Based on tables 1 to 5, and as is shown in figure 2, this narrative has an element that stands out above all the others: the neighbourhood, which is situated as the central concept to understand the «performances» of sharing and other practices that the platform wants to highlight. The «city» is also a frequent word in the narrative, so Airbnb does not hesitate to use the privilege generated by being able to project already recognized city brands. Another prominent concept, «centre», shows the contradictions between the ontology of the company and its narrative, focusing on the famous «downtowns», most of them already under significant pressure from tourism. The more conventional tourist consumption is clearly present from the identification and relevance of numerous tourist attractions in the narrative, highlighting those directly linked to tourism, but also those of the commercial fabric that can be resources of interest to potential tourists. Finally, elements linked to the identity community are also central in the narrative, highlighting the possibility to «live like a local» for visitors. Words that refer to the human landscape also appear so prevalent (university, young people, professionals, artists, bohemians, etc.). This idea is also reinforced by the presence of concepts marked by positive emotions, giving greater strength to the ability to create an affective bond with the place.

In the analysis of the indicators that the company associates with each neighbourhood, those related to gastronomy stand out, followed by those related to shopping and other indicators of a clear tourist nature («nightlife», «peace and quiet», «good transport» and «artistic»). This is perfectly comparable with the indicators that stand out in the descriptions of the «community says»: «shopping», «quiet» and «residential». In addition, as highlighted on these websites, 90% of the neighbourhoods are easily accessible by public transport and 70% by private transport, which confirms the impression about the commercial nature of the image of these destinations together with a more frequent use innovative of other concepts that are associated with the identity, culture, and lifestyle of the communities of these neighbourhoods. If we consider the aforementioned indicators separately, without including the content of the descriptions, results confirm the idea of centrality. Moreover, carrying out a grouping analysis that uses a modularity algorithm built from the volume of indicators that the neighbourhoods have in common, a large grouping is obtained (32.10% of the total neighbourhoods) that corresponds mainly to central neighbourhoods or downtowns, many of which have undergone significant gentrification or touristification processes in recent decades. Table 6 shows these neighbourhoods ordered by the degree of relationships (shared indicators) that they have among themselves.

3.1. Frequencies and associations of coding categories

The next step was to conduct an analysis of the presence of each attributes' category in the narrative of each of the districts (short and long descriptions of the platform and descriptions of users' «the community says»). Table 7 shows how two categories stand out for their presence in the narrative; the territory described both from the perspective of its tangible and intangible attributes and also again the community, an authentic hook flag to promote the perception of exclusivity and authenticity and the feeling of being able to belong to this select group. But just after these categories, two categories reinforce our earlier view of the respect of a discourse that is complemented by the need to ensure that the visitor will have a tourist supply to consume: amenities or tourist attractions and commerce. For this study, we also carried out an analysis of the potential correlations between the different categories. These associations are again related to the need to emphasize that the visitor will find the facilities that make their trip really comfortable. In general, the idea that elements linked to the community are combined with those linked to centrality, and accessibility, very common in the narratives of tourist attraction to destinations, is also confirmed.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study proposes an analysis of the image of tourist destinations being projected by the main global platform for tourist accommodation, Airbnb. In the first place, the weight of UGC is observed, perhaps in a performativity more of prosumers that generate content within the mercantilist logic than of potentially empowered subjects that establish relationships between equals (Marino & Marín, 2018). In any case, and as has been observed in social media (Garay, 2019; Ghazali, 2014; Marine-Roig, 2015), in this platform's Guides, UGC is being used as a vehicle for projecting an image where affective

attributes have an outstanding weight. However, it is important to point out the prominence of cognition, although most of the cognitive attributes are linked to intangibility or in a hybrid position between it and tangible elements (Giovanardi, 2012). We are facing a narrative where the intangible predominates in conjunction with affectivity, a strategy that is appropriate to influence the contemporary client. The seduction of the tourist of our times does not seem so tied to the need to acquire information or knowledge but especially to an experience that is closely linked to sensory aspects and emotionality (Bastiaansen and others, 2019). In addition, although these Guides are spaces for connectivity different from social media, Airbnb seems to seek a similar effect, since it especially highlights the recommendations of hosts and the comments of users, replicating that construction of virtual communities that Lange-Faria (2012) observed for other virtual communicative spaces. It has also been seen how the platform makes a new use of the micro-geographies and specifically of the neighbourhoods' spaces, to project it on a global level (Rae, 2019), as a consumer unit for the tourist who seeks authenticity and has the need to belong to the host community.

In this construction, users do not appear as tourists, but rather have the key to access the lifestyle of these communities, their preferences and «secret» places (Liang, 2018), something a bit far from the spirit of transparency and collaboration that was originally associated with the sharing economy. As Van Nuenen (2016) partially anticipated, stereotyped images previously used by mainstream tourism are also reproduced here. An idea reinforced by the importance of downtowns in this narrative, although they are already greatly affected by the different waves of previous tourist growth. Thus, rather than proposing an alternative, the platform is pushing the expansion of mass tourism in these cities, camouflaged as an authentic experience. The most interesting thing is that the aforementioned projected image is made with the participation of the host and guest community, both unconsciously and consciously. From here, DMO clearly have the need to consider a wider range of actors involved in projecting the image of destinations and manage a response in a range of virtual spaces. Finally, it is important to highlight that this study has limitations, highlighting the dynamism of the image `projected over time, so it will be necessary to carry out new studies in the future to have a longitudinal analysis of the object of study.