

# WHY AIRBNB IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MASSIFICATION OF TOURIST DESTINATIONS?



"Lose yourself in Trastevere like another Roman." "This little cafe in the Latin Quarter of Paris is a marvel". "Tips to feel like a real Berliner". With this type of claim more and more collaborative economy platforms such as Airbnb are contributing to creating and projecting the image of tourist destinations in the digital world.

Paradoxically, although with their narrative they try to foster a perception of authenticity, of not being a tourist but just another local, in reality, according to the conclusion of a study led by researchers from the New Perspectives in Tourism and Leisure (NOUTUR) group of the UOC's Economics and Business Studies, they take advantage of the identities of destinations and their communities, and commodify them, without taking into account the needs of the inhabitants of the neighborhoods they advertise. **The consequence is that they end up contributing to further overcrowding of already saturated tourist destinations.**

"We have seen that Airbnb is one of the most relevant actors today when it comes to attracting tourists to a city. And it achieves this, above all, through its users and, especially, the hosts, who become prescribers and sell you the image of the neighborhood where you will go, which is where the platform has business," says Lluís Garay, a researcher at NOUTUR, professor at the UOC's Faculty of Economics and Business and co-author of the study, which is published in the International Journal of Tourism Research.

## A Big Data Analysis of Airbnb

The NOUTUR group has been studying for years the impact that these online tourism platforms, and especially Airbnb, have on the cities they advertise. In this new work they focus on analyzing how, specifically, this platform creates images of tourist destinations. To find out, they have applied a methodology they developed in previous work and have analyzed a huge volume of data from more than 24,000 descriptions that Airbnb users themselves have made of some 500 urban neighborhoods spread across cities in the northern hemisphere between 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Specifically, they dissected the cognitive and affective attributes of destination descriptions and sorted them by category, and found that the images of cities projected by Airbnb guides - a series of pages showing the best-known neighborhoods of major tourist destinations, often based on comments posted by guests and hosts - are the main authenticity claim to convince tourists to visit a city by becoming a resident.

## Bonding Experts

"Airbnb has been particularly astute at using host-created guides with which to build its own narrative about global urban neighborhoods and to forge affective attachments to places," says Soledad Morales, academic director of the university master's degree in Sustainable Tourism and ICT and a member of NOUTUR.

"Under the label of recommendations, the company simulates a trusted environment in which owners talk to potential tourists, apparently without intervention from the company. But these platforms turn hosts into 'ambassadors' and prescribers of their brand and philosophy, as well as the creators of the affective bond with destinations, which is the main key for the tourist to revisit the destination in the future," adds this researcher.

Interestingly, Airbnb does not work with guides for all destinations, but only for neighborhoods that are in the most visited cities in the world, already saturated by tourism. "It is a colonialist vision, it mainly projects the neighborhoods of cities that are among the twenty most visited in the world and geographically located in the global north, excluding Africa, for example," highlights Morales.

### **Stereotyped Images of Destinations**

Another of the main results of this study is that much of the image projected of these tourist destinations reproduces stereotyped forms of tourism, which homogenizes the cities, which tend to have the same stores and establishments in the center.

Likewise, one of the results that most surprised the researchers is that Airbnb has not included a single direct reference to safety in its guides or descriptions. **On the contrary, especially during the pandemic, the platform's strategy was to emphasize the reputation of neighborhoods and remind users of the universe of consumption they can access.**

More than a complaint, say the authors of this work, the results of the research should challenge users and hosts, but also the platforms to reflect on the role they can play as instigators of tourist awareness. "Platforms could contribute to making the traveler more aware of the impacts they generate in the destination," Garay points out.

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