A comparative analysis of Airbnb in London and Barcelona: The ethnographic research process and its discontents

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Abstract. Peer to peer (P2P) accommodation platforms like Airbnb or HomeAway have transformed not only the hospitality industry but they have also created wider economic change in other adjacent industries and in society in general. Because of this, many stakeholders are now trying to proactively shape the evolution of these platforms, as reflected by numerous actions by policymakers, industry representatives, media outlets and the public across the world. This paper reports on the authors' experience conducting a comparative study over a period of one-year and a half researching issues surrounding the sharing economy, by using Airbnb as a case study. The city-based case study (London and Barcelona) examines the experiences and views of relevant stakeholders in the Airbnb sphere: hosts, guests, Airbnb public policy managers, rental apartment companies, council representatives and other local authorities. The barriers and opportunities for ethical practice were also identified and reported according to the views of these stakeholders. Our main contribution is the identification of the challenges derived from conducting research of complex nature, as in the case of comparative studies in two international settings, focusing on a controversial phenomenon, in this case the sharing economy platform Airbnb. We also reflect on some of the strategies that we used to overcome some of these challenges with the aim of supporting other researchers working

in a similar context. By using participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus groups, this study gathers different perspectives on the complex topic of the operation of Airbnb in two European cities, London and Barcelona, that are also major tourist destinations.

Keywords: Airbnb, auto-ethnography, focus groups, elite interviews, sharing economy

1 Introduction

This paper explores the methodological journey of conducting an ethnographic comparative case study that examines the workings, (perceived) impact and regulation of Airbnb in London and Barcelona. We chose Airbnb original business model (peer-to-peer accommodation marketplace) as the platform is often used as an example of the success and risks associated to the sharing economy. The phenomenon of the "sharing economy" has gained momentum and interest not only from academics, but also from industry practitioners and policy makers. The Sharing economy is a concept that is closely related to terms such as peer-to-peer (P2P) sharing, on-demand consumption, collaborative economy, as well as collaborative consumption (Selloni, 2017). The Airbnb platform has been the subject of study by researchers looking at the sharing economy and its related terms. Founded in 2008 in San Francisco, US, Airbnb is a for-profit "commission-based web-platform for room sharers and travellers" (Oskam and Boswijk, 2016, p. 23). Although originally designed as a P2P accommodation service, in the last years the activity has been professionalised and extended to advertise traditional hospitality services (e.g., hostels, bed and breakfast or boutique hotels). As Gyódi (2019, p. 536) found out in his research project on Airbnb in Paris, Barcelona, Berlin, and Warsaw: "only a minority of Airbnb listings can be classified as sharing economy services".

The city based case study (London and Barcelona) approach seeks to compare and analyse different stakeholders' perspectives on the workings, impact, and regulation of Airbnb in these two popular touristic cities. We used qualitative methods (participant observation, interviews and focus groups) to identify the different ways that diverse stakeholders perceive and understand Airbnb and its impact on the economy and society. All the researchers are/ have been either Airbnb hosts, guests or both. Therefore, our own experiences and knowledge about the platform were used as auto-ethnography. These insights were particularly useful in the first stages of the project in order to contextualise the phenomenon and design

the interviews and focus groups questions. A total of four focus groups were run (a focus group with guest and another focus group with hosts in each city) plus two pilot focus group: one with hosts and one with guests. Ten interviews (six in Barcelona and four in London) were conducted with relevant stakeholders (people from the industry and policy makers) to provide richer qualitative insights. The fieldwork in Barcelona took place between January and May 2018, and the fieldwork in London took place between July 2018 and May 2019. The next section covers more in depth the process of sampling. Later the process of conducting both focus groups and interviews is analysed.

2   Recruiting participants

The participants in the focus groups and the interviews were selected based on purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is a sampling technique were participants are selected based on pre-selected criteria that takes into consideration the qualities of the participants (Eitkan et al., 2016). Purpose sampling allows the researchers to choose information-rich participants who can and are willing to provide the information needed by virtue of knowledge or experience   (Patton, 2005). Because our research aimed to compare the views of different stakeholders in two locations, using this type of sampling allowed us to choose stakeholders in each location, but also to try to choose participants from equivalent organisations in both London and Barcelona.

The selection criteria to identify participants for the focus groups was twofold. First for the focus group with guests, the selection criteria was any individual either resident in Barcelona or London, who had used at least once the Airbnb platform to book accommodation. Second for the focus groups with hosts, the selection criteria were individuals who had used Airbnb platform to either rent a room or an entire property either in Barcelona or London. Despite the fact that we were aiming to attract different types of hosts that rented either their whole property or only a room, we were not successful in attracting hosts that rented their whole property. All the participants, both in Barcelona and London, rented rooms in their properties, with the exception of one participant in London who only hosted when he was on holiday since his apartment had only one bedroom. Another type of host that we were not able to recruit was participants managing different properties on Airbnb as a business. Therefore, the more professional activity of using Airbnb platform, which is the majority of the listings in many cities in Europe (Gyódi, 2019) is not present in this study.

To recruit participants, we relied on several online communities. Different platforms hosting these communities were used to publish the call for participants for the focus groups with hosts and guests, including Facebook (Airbnb hosts groups and paid advertisement), Airbnb (community groups), CouchSurfing (city groups and specific events were created), and MeetUp (specific groups and events were created). In addition, researchers used their personal Facebook and Twitter accounts to distribute the call for participants among their personal contacts as well as word of mouth. This proved to be a very hard task. We scheduled a focus groups with guests with no participants attending in London, also we had a focus group with hosts in Barcelona with only 3 participants. Therefore, we decided to use the first non-successful focus group with hosts as a pilot and run another pilot with guests. Originally, we had some drinks and nibbles as a reward to participate in the study. Bearing in mind the lack of success in recruiting participants, we had to introduce a £10 reward for participating in the focus groups. The use of incentives is a common practice in academic research, and it usually takes form of financial and non-financial incentives (Kirk, 2012). For this particular case, having a £10 reward was sufficient to attract guest and some types of host. However, it was clear that if we wanted to attract other types of hosts (e.g. those who rent whole properties or more than one property) the incentive needed to be greater. Therefore, a learning from this process was that greater financial incentives are needed especially if high earning hosts are expected to turn out for the focus groups.

Another challenge when recruiting participants in two different national settings was to identify the relevant stakeholders to interview. We aimed to interview participants in organisations where Airbnb had an impact (e.g., hotel association representatives to represent the hotel sector; short-term accommodation association to represent the short-term rental sector). We were also interested in interviewing those in charge of policy (e.g., housing/environment city councils' representatives to investigate the position of the local governments; competitions and markets authority representatives, etc.). However, not all the time equivalent organisations were present in both settings, and some research was needed in order to understand the type of organisations that would be similar in both places.

At the end of our project, the interviewees included six types of participants:

1. Airbnb's heads of public policy and campaign managers (Spain & Portugal and UK & Ireland).

2. City councils' representatives: Director of the Inspection Services (Urban

Ecology Management- Barcelona City Council), and Housing Policy Officer from the Greater London Authority. Interestingly, in the interview with the city council representative in Barcelona, the responsible to monitor short-term accommodations platforms was also present in the interview and answered some of the questions.

3. Professional bodies that represent the whole Sharing Economy market in the countries object of study: Sharing Spain and Sharing UK's managers.

4. Short-term rentals associations: Director of APARTUR (touristic apartments association in Spain), Chair of STAA (Short Term Accommodation Association in the UK).

5. Competition legislators: Director of the Catalan Authority of the Competition. In addition, a freedom of information act was sent to the Competition and Markets Authority in the UK since it was not possible to schedule an interview.

6. Hotel associations: Innovation and Ecommerce Manager from a Catalan Hotel Association, and a public policy manager of a hospitality association in the UK. This last interview could not be used since the interviewee did not want to sing the consent form. It seems they were concerned about how the answers they gave could be too positive for the position they were supposed to hold within their organisation.

Reaching some of the interviewees was challenging. We contacted most of them through professional social networking sites (e.g., LinkedIn) and then continued the conversation through email. Building a relationship with the participants since the first contact was important. In some occasions, the person in the organisation we wanted to interview changed (e.g. Airbnb's public policy manager in Spain) and we had to start all over again with the new contact. Both interviews with Airbnb Spain and Barcelona city council took 4-5 months in order to be scheduled. Follow up phone call and emails were used to arrange all the interviews. Our learning from this process was that as more participants agreed to take part of the study, a snowball effect facilitated the process of further recruitment. Once participants heard that other organisations were already taking part, it became evident that they also wanted to have a say in the discussion. In the initial contacts, mentioning that researchers were participating in the COST Action - From Sharing to Caring: Examining Socio-Technical Aspects of the Collaborative Economy, which is an EU-funded research network, proved helpful.

3 Participant observation

Participant observation refers to when the researcher engages in everyday activities and records and analyses those activities. Most of the times, researchers record their observation through the use of field notes. Hine (2015) points out that field notes allow researchers to record what happens, but also help to develop further insights by reflecting on the thoughts, doubts and issues that arise during fieldwork. All researchers who took part in this study had used Airbnb either as hosts, guests or both. In particular, one of the researchers is a long-term host in Barcelona (since 2011). She started renting rooms in her apartment back in April 2011, when Airbnb was not very popular yet. In 2012, when she moved to live abroad she decided to rent the whole apartment through the platform. Also, since 2014 she has used Airbnb as a guest. One of the other researchers hosted a couple of times when he lived in Dubai when he was away on holiday and used the platform as a guest in several occasions. Therefore, their experiences and knowledge about the platform were useful in the first stages of the project in order to contextualise the phenomenon and design the interviews and focus groups questions. In this sense, we are both very familiar with the workings of the platform and the pros and cons from using the platform. This is a positive starting point, since we already have insight knowledge about the topic (Watts, 2006). Nevertheless, we cannot avoid observing the potential for bias from our insider perspective. As Hine (2015, p. 58) pointed out, being an insider may presents some issues in "retaining the ability to question the taken-for-granted". For this reason, it is important to make the exercise of making the familiar strange again (Hine, 2015). In order to do this, we questioned the motivations users had to participate on Airbnb and critically analysed how professional practices were increasingly developed through the platform.

4 Focus groups

Focus groups are a qualitative research method: a 'group interview'. Focus groups usually include 6-10 participants in a group with common characteristics relating to a discussion topic (Curran et al., 2014). A focus group is carefully planned discussion to obtain perceptions of a defined interest area and it addresses research questions that require depth of understanding (Goss and Leinbach, 1996). Focus groups are a helpful instrument because they offer distinctive information as authentic interactions are introduced and the researcher is able to appreciate the

participant's opinions, beliefs, attitudes and perceptions (Mann and Stewart, 2000). As Goss and Leinbach (1996, p. 115) explained, the group interaction generates a kind of knowledge that is not possible to gather through individual interviews: "the stories produced by collaborative performance better reflect the social nature of knowledge than a summation of individual narratives extracted in interviews".

We ran four focus groups: two with hosts and two with guests, one of each type in both Barcelona and London cities. Two pilots (one with hosts and one with guests) were conducted by each of the authors. The focus groups included between four to nine participants and they lasted between one hour to more than two hours. Focus groups are guided by a facilitator (Goss and Leinbach, 1996). In this case, both authors of this paper acted as facilitators, and in particular, we were both present in the focus groups with hosts in London. This exercise helped to create consistency in the way of running the focus groups. In both cities there was a rich discussion in the focus groups.

5 Interviews

Elite in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 different stakeholders in Barcelona (6) and London (4). We refer to 'elite' as those members that hold a significant amount of power within a group (Harvey, 2011). Because of the role and power that elite members hold in society or in an organization, interviewing them poses several methodological challenges for social researchers in terms of access, expectations during the interviews, and the design of the data collection method (Ostrander, 1993). In order to address these challenges, we used several of the strategies recommended by Harvey (2011) that include building strong relationships with elite members over time, being transparent, and adapt the interview style to the style of the elite member. For us it was very important to interview elite members due to the nature of this research that aims to identify the perspective and perceived impact of sharing economy platform Airbnb. For this reason, semi-structured in-depth interviews with different elite members in London and Barcelona was useful to explore their opinions and understandings of the phenomena (Hine, 2015).

Interviews lasted between forty-five minutes to two hours. Half of the interviews were conducted face to face and the other half through Skype. Interviewees received information sheets and consent forms before interviews. Some

participants asked questions in relation to anonymity and they were explained that, except for when being specified otherwise, the information would be anonymised, and no real names or any information that could lead to identifying them should be disclosed in the publications. Despite this option of remaining anonymous we still encounter some resistance from some elite interviewees to take part in this research. For example, the interview with the representative from one hospitality association did not want to sign the consent form until he did the interview since he wanted to see the kind of questions he would have to answer. After answering several questions, he decided not to take part in the study. This also illustrates the degree of sensitivity that sharing economy platforms like Airbnb have in certain industrial circles.

6 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data gathered through focus groups and interviews. Thematic analysis is a method that aims to identify, analyse, and report patterns or themes within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We followed Braun and Clark's (2006) six phases approach for thematic analysis. First, we familiarised with the data, and this was particularly important since data collection and data transcription was not always conducted by the same researcher. For this reason, each of the researchers read the transcriptions several times to familiarise with the data. We also encounter the challenge of collecting data in two different languages. The interviews in Barcelona were conducted in Spanish and then translated into English before conducting the thematic analysis. A research assistant helped in this task. The second step involved coding the entire data set. Then codes were combined into broader patterns where the themes started to emerge. We used Nvivo for the coding and analysis processes. Two different people (one of the researchers and a research assistant) looked at two different focus groups dataset (the pilot with guests and one focus group with hosts) and coded them in order to ensure more consistency. Having two researches involved in the coding also helped with consistency and helped to refine the themes. Emerging themes included privacy and security issues, guests' expectations, guests' double standards (they consider that hosts contribute to gentrification in their own city but they do not consider that they contribute to the gentrification of the cities they visit when using Airbnb), and peer to peer accommodation vs professionals and foreign investors, among others.

Finally, the information collected from participant observation, focus groups and elite interviews was combined and compared. The primary purpose of using

triangulation in qualitative research is to reduce biases and increase the consistency and reliability of the analysis (Jonsen and Jehn, 2009). This, triangulation refers to "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon" (Denzin, 1978, pp. 294).

7 Conclusions

This paper concludes by identifying some of the main challenges when conducting ethnographic studies with multiple stakeholder that include participants that are difficult to reach (e.g. certain types of hosts, and elite participants) in international context where different languages and institutions exists. We also provide some recommendations learned from our experience on how to overcome those challenges. For example, finding participants for the focus groups was hard because we aimed to gather very specific type of participants based on their involvement with the platform. To overcome this challenge rewards had to be introduced to foster participation. In terms of interviews with high profile elite participants working at some of the main organisations that are affected or can impact the operation of sharing economy platforms posed its own challenges. Although 12 interviews were planned, the lack of response from two organisations in the UK did not allow the research conducted in Barcelona to be mirrored 100% in London. In addition, identifying the different bodies that were affected by Airbnb in the two different settings required some familiarisation of the local environment before an approach could be made. We also found that for interviews for elite members in both countries, having the first ones to accept to take part are usually the most challenging. After some elite members already take part in the study it become easier to recruit more within the same context. The fact that the data collected through two focus groups was analysed by two members of the research team by using thematic analysis proved helpful to refine the themes. When conducting thematic analysis, it is important that at least two different researchers look at the data, both for consistency and to refine the themes. Finally, triangulation of different methods, in our case participant observation, focus groups and interviews contributed to generate a more holistic approach to the study of Airbnb in London and Barcelona.

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