

Returning to the gaybourhood: Expectations of resilience and recovery of Chueca (Madrid) after the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Chueca, in Madrid, is Spain's most well-known gaybourhood, a significant space for both local and national LGBTQ individuals and activist movements, as well as for the Spanish and European LGBTQ tourist circuits. The COVID-19 pandemic hit hard in a neighbourhood already heavily disputed among arguments of touristification and tourist accommodation, as tourist-oriented businesses began closing and other, more resident-oriented ones transformed themselves to survive the year 2020. Drawing from ethnographic research undertaken from 2019 to early 2021, this article analyses different experiences and expectations of recovery among local professionals, mostly business-owners from Chueca itself. The opposition between a return to business-as-usual and a revolution towards a more humane or sustainable tourism, on the one hand, and an already conflicted debate over the nature of the neighbourhood, on the other one, interacts with the wider situation of urban tourist destinations in Western Europe and with the practices of discourses unveiled in Chueca. The article argues for the pandemic's role as a catalyst for pre-existing conflicts, as local and global processes intertwine.

Keywords: LGBTQ tourism; gaybourhoods; gentrification; resilience; post-pandemic recovery

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1. Introduction

A lonely shopper wandered, apparently aimlessly, through the empty galleries and emptier market stalls. At the same time, a single worker, with an apron and a uniform from one of the few wineries that were still open on the first floor, tried to greet her and welcome her with the promise of local wines and craft beer. Glancing over a glass and steel balustrade, another lone worker sanitized and cleaned a table that leaned on the glass wall separating the second-floor food and drink stalls from the space that is the heart of the public market, as well as the main source of light for the first-floor grocery, fish conserves, and other produce stalls. As the equally empty escalators ascended from one floor to another — as the descent is limited to old-time staircases, to avoid agglomerations, the only sounds were those of the electric light and sound systems, a faint music, the cutting and packing of cold cuts and other meat products, and some almost inaudible voices from the building's attic, whose terraced bar was the only corner that could be found teeming with customers and bustling with a simulacrum of pre-pandemic life.

The masks were not the only key feature that signalled the COVID-19 pandemic's presence and effects throughout the public market. The late-December experience of a week-day evening in the San Antón market of Chueca, Madrid, was that of a formerly full and overflowing tourist attraction surviving or enduring the second wave of the pandemic in Spain, with heavy restrictions on both domestic and international travel (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, 2020). The previously central role of the *puentes* or extended weekends from mid-October to mid-May as Madrid's peak season (Oviedo-García *et al.*, 2016) had given way to eerily empty streets and tourist attractions, among which the aforementioned market is a particularly significant one. The new "Mercado de San Antón", inaugurated in 2011 in a renovated building after demolishing the old traditional market in 2007, is a public and modern market that combines a parking space, a supermarket, a series of groceries, food, and product tasting stalls, a restaurant, bars with a terrace, and an international cultural foundation. It is a must-see attraction in Chueca, Madrid's most well-known gaybourhood or queer space, famous for its past and present social and cultural movements of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people.

Once the main tourist attraction during Madrid's LGBTQ Pride event during late June and early July, Chueca was part of a grim context for tourism worldwide. In Spain, as in other countries, the global pandemic has heavily affected several industries, including the restaurant and hospitality ones (Dube *et al.*, 2020), but also the tourists' plans and intentions of travelling (Peluso & Pichierri, 2021; Sánchez-Cañizares *et al.*, 2021), their face-to-face and media practices (Bhati *et al.*, 2021; Gallego & Font, 2021), as well as the current notions of resilience and recovery (Hall *et al.*, 2020; Shao *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, regions, cities, and neighbourhoods particularly dependent on high tourist season experienced dramatic reductions in revenue, expectations, and the possibility to survive. In a gaybourhood such as Chueca, so dependent on Madrid's LGBTQ Pride, the cancellation of the event as a face-to-face one for two years entailed hotel cancellations, fewer trips, and grim expectations. This new situation, caused by an unforeseen external force, deeply impacted a tourist sub-destination already contested by critiques of touristification, gentrification, and so forth.

In what follows, this article draws from an ethnographic research project in Chueca that had to adapt to the unexpected nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects. While researching the seasonal flow of tourists and transformations in Chueca, the research team found itself temporarily unable to travel to Chueca both inside and outside Madrid, and had to adapt its scope, focus, and methodology. As such, the relevance of concepts such as *resilience* and *post-pandemic recovery* arose in public debates and throughout interviews with local professionals and tourists, while simultaneously intersecting with already present debates around the touristification and gentrification of the gaybourhood, and the effects of the Airbnb-style tourism in Madrid and other Western European cities. This article responds

to the specific effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in a specific tourist destination, and as such contributes to the growing literature of destination resilience. Going beyond descriptions and analyses of the direct consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, this article explores how this disruptive event intertwines with pre-existing dynamics, such as those of touristification and gentrification. This article provides an in-depth study of how local and global processes and dynamics mix and evolve, with profound effects on tourist destinations. After introducing LGBTQ tourism and gaybourhoods as a starting point, this article briefly presents its methodology and data production sources, from which discourses of recovery and resilience were both unveiled and connected to the role of touristification and uncertainty.

2. A starting point towards Chueca: LGBTQ tourism and gaybourhoods

Recent literature reviews have focused on the commonalities and divergences within the diverse field of gay or LGBTQ tourism and travel research. Researchers have focused on ‘a (niche travel market that is primarily designed to cater to the consumer needs of LGBT [...] people’ with an approach from the late 1980s to the early 2000s that heavily privileged ‘the level of earnings, expenditure and travel arrangements of gay travellers’ (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2015, p. 409). The centrality of gay men as the key reference for most studies draws from their greater visibility and from professional and researcher biases that have been subsequently analysed and revised: it may be argued, as Waitt and Markwell (2006, p. 6) did, that the ‘homogeneous, same-sex tourist categorized as “gay” is not an empirical reality’, while its centrality is both a tenet and a consequence of the industry’s practices of promotion and distribution.

Most academic analyses of LGBTQ tourism make similar claims and reproduce stereotypical generalizations as those made from consumer research (see Ginder & Byun, 2015): some realities and experiences of gay men are extrapolated to the wider range of LGBTQ people tourist experiences, particularly regarding purchasing power, cultural capital, tourist and travel habits, and expectations. Recent, more nuanced studies have focused on specific issues such as the limitations and specific motivations of transgender people when travelling (Monterrubio *et al.*, 2020a, 2020b) or their perspective from the notion of human mobilities (March, 2021). Even the study of the gay tourist market, focused on comparatively wealthy and at least apparently homogeneous tourist practices and expectations, has received a more detailed recent academic attention beyond the gay tourist as a rhetoric and professional discursive figure (Murray, 2007) with publications that focus, for instance, on neo-tribal and subcultural perspectives (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2021), the role of hetero- and homonormativities within tourist experiences (Usai *et al.*, 2022), and the geopolitical implications of pinkwashing within tourist practices (Hartal, 2022).

Approach-wise, most LGBTQ tourism research may be understood as either *demand-led* or *supply-led*; according to Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy’s (2015) review, a significant majority has focused on the former, as studies of the tourists themselves and their motivations (see Prat Forga, 2015; Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018), whereas the latter approach has zoomed in the different spaces and destinations, as well as in the role of the professionals involved in the sector (see Otero Paradela *et al.*, 2014; Domínguez Ruiz, 2020). Throughout these approaches and exercises of mostly qualitative research, a systemic view of the LGBTQ tourist market may be seen, from which both supply and demand co-construct each other. A key example of this view is Gabriel Giorgi’s (2002) analysis of ‘how Madrid is constructed as a sight for the gay tourist or, better, how the figure of the gay tourist and Madrid meet and mirror each other’ (p. 58).

Throughout these examples, another aspect may be highlighted: that of the difference between the gay or LGBTQ tourism as either an *exclusive* or rather as an *inclusive* perspective. Just as explicit

gaybourhoods can be distinguished from queer-friendly neighbourhoods (Brown, 2014; Gorman-Murray & Waite, 2009), gay or LGBTQ destinations and tourist practices — again, both a demand-led and a supply-led perspective — may be seen as either specifically conceived for LGBTQ tourists, with a self-isolated aim, or as an inclusive approach that implicitly or explicitly includes this form of diversity but without barring other tourists or practices. For instance, Jasbir Puar (2002b) highlighted the ‘crucial distinction [...] between being a gay traveler and traveling as gay’ (p. 108–109), despite changing and unstable limits between both stances. From the perspective of destinations, the public and private promotion of the attributes and attractions may be more easily seen as a LGBTQ-friendly effort with which ‘[s]elling cities as “gay-friendly” destinations is a lucrative marketing strategy that [also] appeals to some “straight” tourists’ (Waite & Markwell, 2006, p. 192). The specific example of Tel Aviv, as a global LGBTQ destination with no distinct gaybourhood, has been analysed by Ram *et al.* (2019) as evidence of the role of inclusiveness and diversity, broadly understood, as a positive factor for the destination’s general value and resilience.

A significant element in tourist discourses and scholarly research involves the role of gaybourhoods, understood as the main material and symbolic effect of LGBTQ lives and tourism. Gaybourhoods, at least from a ghetto-perspective, may be understood as the combination of features such as ‘institutional concentration, a locally dominant subculture, social isolation from the surrounding city, and residential segregation typically created by compulsion’ (Ghaziani, 2014, p. 49). Gaybourhoods are thus spatial concentrations of symbolically and materially relevant activities, residents, businesses, organisations, and so on, as perceived and experienced by LGBTQ individuals. From a historical perspective, they can be understood in the light of rural flight or from the idea that dense cities and metro areas have offered safer havens for minorities, away from the grips of kinship (Boyd, 1997; Stulberg, 2018; Weston, 1995). Consequently, these neighbourhoods have been understood, mostly from a celebratory perspective, as manifestations of queer or gay Meccas, with similar experiences throughout cases as varied as Castro in San Francisco, Le Marais in Paris, or Chueca in Madrid.

Most gaybourhoods have been studied and understood from a phase-based perspective, akin to that of products’ life cycles (Martel, 2018; Collins, 2004; Collins & Drinkwater, 2017; Ghaziani, 2017). According to said models, gaybourhoods develop from individual residential and business decisions affected by real estate and economic factors, and they evolve into Meccas or attraction poles. The role of businessowners in the formation of gaybourhoods is not given the same relevance by all authors (see Lin, 2021; Stulberg, 2018), as other views may focus on residents’ choices and agency (see Ferrando & Córdoba Pérez, 2014). From an evolution-like or life cycle-like perspective, the most complete model is that developed by Alan Collins (2004), updated by the same author with Stephen Drinkwater (2017). According to this model, most gaybourhoods comply with these steps:

1. Preconditions: a specific area needs abundant commercial and residential space, as well as a criminalised or marginalised image. At least some previous queer business presence is needed.
2. Emergence: growing concentration of leisure business, particularly nightlife, attracts gay or queer population and makes pre-existing businesses to adapt.
3. Expansion and diversification: new businesses appear beyond nightlife, and the neighbourhood has greater queer residential density and a visible symbolic link to the queer community.
4. Integration: growing presence of straight residents, visitors, and customers make businesses to reorient to a mainstream demand. The gaybourhood’s pioneers are expelled by gentrification.

5. Fragmentation: queer individuals and businesses expelled by gentrification move to cheaper areas. New technologies and social media, as well as political and social changes, may sever the link between the gaybourhood and the city's queer social and political life.
6. Dispersal: residential and commercial dispersal throughout the city or the metro area limits the extent of clear-cut queer or LGBTQ spaces.

This model, and the recent evolution of several gaybourhoods, may be seen under the light of gentrification and touristification, related concepts that link contemporary capitalism with spatial evolution. Gentrification, for the purposes of this article, will be understood as a complex process of displacement that may involve not only physical expulsion of a population from a place, but also social, economic, and cultural ones, as well as previous disinvestment processes (Phillips *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, we understand gentrification as more than a material process, as it also entails the displacement of symbols, values, and images from a specific space (Franquesa, 2013; Herzfeld, 2010). Finally, it must be understood from the perspective of rights and usages, as it may be thought of as 'the ongoing, inter and intra-generational struggle over the rules of human competition in urban space' (Wyly, 2019, p. 21). Under this light, touristification is also a contested concept with deep links to gentrification (Ojeda & Kieffer, 2020). However, it may be argued that it merits its own analysis and the decoupling from gentrification studies, as it may provide sufficiently unique features. For instance, Sequera and Nofre (2018) argue that these two concepts are different enough as they involve different displaced populations, class relations, retail changes, demographic change, urban conflict, and housing roles.

Chueca's history may be easily linked to these two concepts, and it may also be understood from the perspective of Collins' model, as it mirrors most of these phases, according to scholarly and media reports. This neighbourhood's origins as a queer space may be understood mostly in relation to the role of bars, saunas, hotels, and other private businesses (Guasch, 1991). Chueca's history can also be linked to that of the Madrilenian and Spanish LGBTQ social movements: as the most reform-oriented movements fought for their legalization, for civil unions or common-law couples, and for equal marriage (Herrero Brasas, 2007; Martínez, 2017), the neighbourhood became a symbol of Spain's most modern façade and of urban renovation akin to gentrification processes (Boivin, 2013; Domínguez Ruiz, 2018; Giorgi, 2002). Chueca's modern history is that of urban decay and renewal, deeply connected to a public image of LGBTQ — mostly gay men and lesbian women — renovators (Ferrando & Córdoba Pérez, 2014; García Escalona, 2000).

As in other geographical contexts, Chueca's role as a haven for LGBTQ people has been contested by critiques and more ambiguous analyses. On the one hand, activists and academics have lauded the neighbourhood's role as the Mecca of Spanish and Madrilenian queer people (Martinez & Dodge, 2010; Ortega Román, 2007), drawing from imageries that are connected to the 1969 Stonewall Riots and other public space demonstrations, as well as from the historical role of cities as welcoming havens or, at least, anonymous agglomerations (Boyd, 1997; Howe, 2001; Stulberg, 2018; Weston, 1995). On the other one, however, other activists and scholars have questioned the unequivocally or univocally positive effect of Chueca as a social space, as it has reproduced both widespread and specific forms of oppression (Lily, 2016; Vidarte, 2010; Villaamil, 2004). In turn, these activist and academic analyses have drawn from critiques of negative effects of gaybourhoods as homonormative, oppressive, or dubious spaces (Mattson, 2014; Valentine & Skelton, 2003).

The recent historical evolution and role of Chueca and its specific attractions as a cornerstone of the Madrilenian tourist destination is also directly linked to wider phenomena, such as the commodification of gender and sexual diversity as tourist elements and modernity tenets (Bell & Binnie,

2004; Waitt & Markwell, 2006), without being able to avoid critiques and analyses of the geopolitical nature of these destinations (Puar, 2002a, 2002b; March, 2021). Likewise, the phenomenon experienced in Chueca is not alien to the urban management policies developed in Europe since the 1980s, which have come to be called city-marketing, urban-branding, or neoliberal urbanism, whose objective was to position the city in the international context by strengthening its uniqueness. This uniqueness has been based both on the construction of mega-buildings and on the organization of events with impact on the global media. The success of events such as Madrid's LGBTQ Pride¹ will be the indicator of the success of the city's election as the host of the 2017 World Pride. The neoliberal urban policy experienced by the city of Madrid has played an important role in shaping the image of Chueca as a global gay tourist destination. But at the same time, the effects of this policy, in terms of the commodification and thematization of urban space and the phenomenon of airbnbization (see Morales-Pérez *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b) are the root of the new processes of recovery of urban space by the residents and the revitalization of their LGBTQ identity. This aporia, similar to the contradictions with which both queer events and spaces are ridden (see Ammaturo, 2015; Browne & Bakshi, 2011), poses a particularly fruitful locale for critical ethnographic research, to which we now turn.

3. Methods and materials

Our successive visits to Chueca, as well as a series of interviews with stakeholders, took place within a wider research project that aimed to study different gay or LGBTQ tourist destinations in Spain². This multi-sited ethnographic project has focused on the evolution of significantly different gay or queer tourist destinations, such as urban Chueca, Mediterranean Sitges, Andalusian Torremolinos and Maspalomas, in the Canary Islands. This project has brought into light the specific ways in which local dynamics, actors, and histories intertwine with global processes and expectations, as notions of international queer or LGBTQ tourism interact and mix with local settings. It has also shown how LGBTQ histories and lives are absent throughout the official discourses and processes of heritagisation in these destinations (see Valcuende del Río *et al.*, 2023).

The fragments of the multi-sited project from which we draw the data for this article is thus based on ethnographic fieldwork during several visits in 2019, 2020, and 2021, focusing on two key tourist moments in Madrid: the extended weekends or *puentes* until and including Christmastime, and the Pride week in late June or early July 2019. During the visits, our research focused, on the one hand, on participant observation that included a systematic observation and register of visible practices. The non-participant observation involved the register or estimation of the number of people agglomerated in a specific space, as part of a comparison between pre- and post-COVID-19 tourist seasons. This part of the research also included photographs and maps of tourist-oriented businesses throughout Chueca. As for the participant observation, we understood it as an involvement of 'the ethnographer *in situ* and *in vivo* with the people she is studying', in which 'the activity of the body [acts] as a medium to the meaningful representations' (Daynes & Williams, 2018, pp. 59, 91-92). As such, we mingled among tourists in attractions, shops, and public spaces; we chatted with tourists and residents as part of spontaneous conversations mediated by the research goal; we discussed the state of their business with shopkeepers, along with others. During the LGBTQ Pride events in 2019 and 2021, on the other hand, we participated as demonstrators and visitors to Chueca, as we mingled with other attendees, registered ambiances, and spoke with both locals and tourists.

The embodied dimension of this practice made particularly useful for our goals the fact that the two researchers in Chueca came from slightly diverging subfields and fields of expertise within Social Anthropology and even within the study of tourism — namely, development and cooperation processes and rural development, on the one hand, and queer events and LGBTQ-phobia, on the other. Different degrees of acquaintance with current Chueca, for instance, determined the complementarity of our

perspectives when doing fieldwork both together and separately. Similarly, we had different links to social movements in Chueca and Madrid: whereas one of the researchers had been a member of Madrid- and Spain-based LGBTQ movements, and had experience as a tour guide in Chueca and in Madrid, the other main researcher had little to no direct activist or professional experience in Chueca. As such, we consider that we complemented each other, as each perspective helped to gather a more in-depth, native-like knowledge of Chueca or to keep in mind the research goal and the intersection of different movements and actors' interests, respectively. The research team did share, however, a critical perspective on touristification that did permeate the final phases of research and analysis, as the COVID-19 pandemic led the project towards issues of resilience and recovery.

During the successive visits we also undertook several interviews with tourists that we could encounter and approach, with local business-owners, with residents, or with other tourism-related professionals such as tour guides and promotion experts with hands-on knowledge and expertise about Chueca. Most short interactions were not recorded, and followed a fast-paced and open conversational logic (see Devillard *et al.*, 2012) rather than a clear-cut interview. This type of conversation-like interview, in which our academic status and research goals were also enunciated, was particularly useful when encountering tourists in some spaces in Chueca, such as the public market, or when browsing goods in some shops. On the other hand, with several other participants we conducted explicit interviews, for which we asked for permission to record and transcribe. These were interviews that were always planned, ranging from a few minutes to days earlier, to find the most suitable moment for the participants. This was particularly so with the business-owners in Chueca, such as the booksellers in bookshops Nakama and Berkana. The interviews were sometimes slowed or paused due to the arrival of a customer, a call from someone having some issue with the online shop, or even our interest in some books. All participants stated that they wanted their names and businesses to be named, and as such they gave their consent.

Table 1. *List of interviewees*

Code	Interviewee	Description	Date
1	Sandro	Tourist in Chueca. Interview via WhatsApp chat	December 22, 2020
2	Maribel	Souvenir and memorabilia shop owner. Face-to-face interview	December 26, 2020
3	Rafa	Bookshop owner. Face-to-face interview with email-based follow-up.	December 28, 2020
4	Miren	Bookshop owner. Face-to-face interview with email-based follow-up.	December 28, 2020
5	Carlos	Bookshop employee. Face-to-face interview.	January 4, 2021
6	Javier and Francisco	University professors, experts on Chueca and Spanish gay identities in cultural products. Skype interview.	January 7, 2021
7	Txipi	LGBTQ social movement member. Skype interview.	January 13, 2021

Just as the people with whom we have researched, we too have had to adjust to a world, and even a country, in which travelling has been and sometimes is simply not possible, and this has had a personal emotional impact (see Irimiás & Mitev, 2021) as well as a key limitation for our face-to-face ethnographic fieldwork. One of the two researchers lives in another Spanish city, and for several months between March-May and September-December 2020 the domestic three-hour railway trip was not a possibility. The other researcher, despite living in Madrid, also experienced travel restrictions as some health administrative areas in the Community of Madrid experienced temporary lockdowns, making the intra-city trip also illegal. As such, and even during our face-to-face fieldwork visits to Chueca, the presence of the pandemic loomed over us in both 2020 and early 2021. For instance, we found it increasingly difficult to identify tourists due to the bankruptcy or restructuring of tourist-related business in Chueca. During our 2019 visits to the neighbourhood, we identified several businesses with which to more clearly

ascertain whether someone was visiting Madrid, such as hotels, hostels, some restaurants and bars — with “typical Spanish” food, souvenir shops, and lockers for luggage. The decreases in visitors made some of these businesses redundant, and, for instance, the three locker businesses in Chueca in 2019 were reduced to just one in late 2020.

4. The effects of a global pandemic

Starting in mid-March 2020, the Spanish lockdown, similar to that of other European countries, shut down most industries besides those deemed essential. Museums, restaurants, art galleries, public parks, and the rest of the singular spaces, shops, and venues that can be found in Madrid’s most recent official tourist guide (Madrid Destino, 2020), besides government and other functional official buildings, were closed as the population had to stay home with few exceptions. As the transition towards a ‘new normality’, as defined by the Spanish government (El País, 2020), started in May, the tourism industry hoped for a limited recovery during a summer in which foreign tourist arrivals fell 75% in July as compared to 2019 (Hurst, 2020), or a 71.7%, considering the first semester (Aranda & Salvatierra, 2020). The fall in tourist arrivals was unequal, a consequence of the distinct destinations under the wider Spain brand (see Herrero *et al.*, 2017). Compared to the Balearic Islands’ 92.2% fall during the year’s first semester, or Catalonia’s 74%, the Community of Madrid — the region of which Madrid is not only the capital city but also half of the population — experienced a slightly less dramatic 63.8% (Aranda & Salvatierra, 2020). The specificities of Madrid’s tourist destination, as both a cultural and administrative hub (Kolotouchkina & Seisdodos, 2016), and the fact that its peak season depends on *puentes* or extended weekends from mid-October to mid-May (Oviedo-García *et al.*, 2016) might have slightly mitigated the pandemic’s effects, tourism-wise. However, a COVID-19 second wave and a series of conflicts between governments within Spain on the matter of lockdowns and safety measures fully coincided with the onset of the traditional Madrilenian tourist peak season (De Benito, 2020; Jones, 2020), particularly with a Christmastime that has usually benefited from Spanish domestic tourism.

It is in this context that our ethnographic research provides a comparison between the expectations or experiences of tourists, residents and business-owners in Chueca, Madrid. The contrast between Christmastime 2019, June-July 2020, and Christmastime 2020, as well as data from a longitudinal study of Chueca since 2016, shines light, for instance, on the evolution of expectations about tourism, measured as visitors, or attendants to events, or as sales from local businesses. Throughout the conversations and interviews we had with business-owners, activists, and tourism professionals, a wide range of variables were employed by them when asked about the current state of their businesses.

For instance, bookseller Mili³ from Berkana — the first LGBTQ bookshop in Spain, frequently mentioned in historical accounts of the gaybourhood (see Ferrando & Córdoba, 2014; Martínez, 2017), assessed her business’s welfare with their online and face-to-face sales, and she had a very positive evaluation in late-December 2020, as compared to the previous year and to the expectation of a year particularly difficult for businesses. Online sales during the several lockdowns and confinements, an aggressive online campaign, and the publication of several bestsellers among Spanish LGBTQ readers — including those related to the *Veneno* series, broadcasted by HBO Max outside of Spain (see Haynes, 2020), made their 2020 business year a booming one in contrast to their tendency after several difficult years that even led to a crowdfunding campaign that avoided the bookshop’s bankruptcy (elDiario.es, 2017). Similarly, booksellers Rafa and Miren from Nakama, a generalist bookshop also in Chueca, were considering a not-so-future closure before having to open their online store and starting to sell more books than they expected⁴. These two businesses’ experiences must be framed within a flourishing context for Spanish bookshops, as a thriving sector during the pandemic thanks to public help and regulations, as well as their customers’ loyalty and expenditure.

A sharp contrast can be seen between different types of businesses and their relation not only to tourism-as-visitors, but also to sheer agglomerations due to Pride events. Another business-owner, from a souvenir and LGBTQ-memorabilia shop across the street and a few meters south from Berkana, explained how her summer 2020 had seen a 90 percent decrease in sales due to the cancellation of the Spain-wide Pride march and Pride event week in Madrid. Similarly, during the 2020 Christmastime her shop had an 80 percent decrease in sales, with fewer people buying from her wide range of LGBTQ flags-themed memorabilia and practical objects, including a series of facemasks displaying the diverse colours of the bisexual, LGBTQ, or trans flags.

The difference between these two types of shops was made explicit by Carlos, a worker from Berkana, who runs the bookshop when the two owners go on holiday or have a break. On the one hand, he distinguished two types of shops depending on their relation to the neighbourhood and to the visitors: on the one hand, shops such as the souvenir and memorabilia one, who 'lives more off the people who pass by, hey, I want to buy a bracelet, hey, I am going to buy myself a flag', or shoe shops that depend on people browsing without making a specific trip to them; on the other one, shops such as the bookshops with a loyal customer base (interviewee #5). According to Carlos,

Berkana has a very, very loyal public. We said it during this year [2020]... we haven't lived off people passing by, we've lived off people who knew Berkana, who came every single year to Berkana, who may live here [in Madrid], or, who knows, Fuengirola, Murcia, the United States, and who visit every summer for a month, and hoard [books] for the rest of the year. (Interviewee #5)

This distinction, as such, makes references to key issues for tourist destinations such as customer loyalty, brand image, brand equity, and consumer-brand identification (see Berry, 2000; Stockburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). On the other hand, however, he also explained the great lengths they had gone to make the most or even survive the year 2020: book signings with many authors, gifts such as t-shirts when reaching a minimum expenditure, books sent to any address with the author's signature and dedication, and an aggressive online campaign. As such, we may identify two series of deeply related factors for this bookshop's experience of 2020 not simply as a year of survival, but as one of thriving business. On the one hand, a series of brand-related attributes that have been invested in during the two-decade-long business experience — for which, as the worker explained, recurring visits and a tailored service of book recommendation and search were key, and on the other one a conscious adaptation to the lack or reduction of face-to-face interactions.

Beyond these issues, the interviewed business-owners were quick to argue for a significant role of touristification that, up to the COVID-19 pandemic, determined the evolution of Chueca. The role of gentrification in Chueca has already been analysed (García Pérez, 2014), as well as the environmental and sustainability dimensions of the Madrilenian tourism industry (Hervella Baturone, 2018), whereas the specific effects of Airbnb and similar house-sharing platforms have also been reported for the specific case of Madrid on the local and Spanish media (Casado, 2020; Peinado, 2020; Sánchez & Ordaz, 2018), just as it has received academic attention due to its geographical distribution and social effects (see Adamiak, 2022; Morales-Pérez *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b; Yeager *et al.*, 2023). The presence of Airbnb and other forms of touristification up to the COVID-19 pandemic was made implicit or explicit throughout the discourses of interviewees such as Rafa from the Nakama bookshop. On the one hand, touristification is an abstract process by which the neighbourhood loses some character, soul, or flavour, with widespread changes in Chueca's commercial and residential layout:

The truth is that with all this... low-cost tourism, so to speak, Airbnb and so on, the latest tourism that was visiting was horrible, in other words, people who get inside a flat, has parties, or only visit to party,

they stay for just two days, and it's only for partying and then leaving... In other words, a tourism that's really good for the night leisure industry and the clubs and so on, and I'm happy for them, but for the neighbourhood it means nothing, because they eat everything out from Glovo [food delivery], so that they don't even go to this place or that one for a burger, but they get a Glovo instead, from any place in town, and they have it sent over. It's a little bit like this. (Interviewee #3)

On the other, touristification is a concrete process measured or lived through specific changes, such as the presence of an Airbnb tourist flat right across the narrow Pelayo street, facing Nakama. During their five-year experience from the shopfront, they faced the entrance to an ordinarily looking building with at least an Airbnb flat. During their first two or three years since opening, Rafa and Miren saw mostly 'Latin-American people with quite high purchasing power, quite some culture, who bought books, and who were thrilled [with the bookshop and the neighbourhood]' (Interviewee #4). These culture-tasting tourists, as described by both booksellers, could also come from the United States, from Australia, or from other corners of the European Union, but in the end, 'it has all become a tourist of a lower quality', according to Rafa (Interviewee #3), to a tourist public who may stare at the store's display, without buying anything, or without interacting with the rest of the street or of the neighbourhood, besides some specific Pride events such as the high-heeled race that usually takes place every Pride Thursday on Pelayo street, right in front of the bookshop.

It is not only through the evolution of international tourists with which Rafa, Miren, or their colleagues from Berkana measure the transformation of Chueca. The inauguration in Chueca of *La Pollería*, a phallus-shaped waffle shop (Delgado & Sebastiani, 2020), also changed their perception of the neighbourhood. Since it opened, queues of mostly teenagers from the whole Madrilenian metropolitan area have crowded the corner of Pelayo with Gravina, close to Nakama, and to a lesser extent a central part of Chueca square since its sister store, *La Coñería*, opened with a different range of vulva-shaped waffles or *coñofres*. With this type of business, the aforementioned booksellers contrasted what they see as a high-value domestic visitor — who spends significantly on cultural goods and other items from local shops, such as the show shops from Augusto Figueroa, with what they see as lower-value domestic visitors, mostly teenagers from the hinterland of the city of Madrid.

5. The return to which 'new normality'?

Both the end of the first severe lockdown in Spain and the expectation of widespread vaccination campaigns in early 2021 have shaped short-term and long-term expectations and social norms (Mateos *et al.*, 2020). The tourism industry and the tourism studies academe have also ruminated about a post-COVID-19 world for which both already present underlying debates and crises, on the one hand, and new and threatening factors, on the other one, intertwine. The dichotomy between a return to a business-as-usual state or a radical transformation of the tourism industry (see Nepal, 2020) can be analysed not only as part of global professional and academic discourses, but also at the city or neighbourhood level. The case of Chueca, a neighbourhood deeply entrenched within global discourses and practices of LGBTQ tourism, provides the perfect setting for the interplay between expectations and other discourses. This is so because the COVID-19-led discussion about tourism's role interacted with pre-existing debates about the role of this activity in Chueca and in Madrid. This neighbourhood had already been considered a key example of gentrification and touristification in Madrid, when an external factor halted tourism and made local businessowners consider or reconsider their dependence on tourism. As such, the global pandemic should be seen as a catalyst for pre-existing local and global dynamics.

From the perspective of businesses such as souvenir shops, the local Mercado de San Antón, or the tour guides, the expectations of recovery draw from an idea of a return to business-as-usual. The souvenir

shop, for instance, depends on the sheer number of visitors or people casually passing by, as explained both by the owner and by other neighbouring business-owners. Similarly, the local market has quietly adapted to the reduced flux of tourists and visitors, and as such most of the food stalls and bar-like stalls were seen closed during successive visits in 2020 and 2021. Even the comparison of the market between a Monday afternoon and a Saturday noon and afternoon — the usual time for the *aperitivo* or starter in Spain, highlighted the fact that most stalls were empty as in permanently closed. The stalls that were open in late 2020 and early 2021, for instance, were those who aim more at residents, whereas those of gourmet products or high-end produce were closed.

A different horizon of possibilities is that of a post-pandemic tourist upheaval, either global or simply in some specific locales, from a more humane perspective (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). The looming global ecological crisis is the most frequent academic motive and reference (Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020; Prideaux *et al.*, 2020), even though social justice and the sheer transformation of the industry are also present in special issues such as that of *Tourism Geographies* (Benjamin *et al.*, 2020; Brouder, 2020; Brouder *et al.*, 2020; Romagosa, 2020). The most significant aspect of this possibility — or, rather, series of possibilities — in Chueca relates to the analysis of its state up to the onset of the pandemic. As we discussed, the discourses of the gentrification and touristification of the neighbourhood, resonating with those of other gaybourhoods with similar life cycles, focus on the role of Airbnb and similar tourist accommodation systems. The expectations of some business-owners about a post-pandemic recovery connect to discourses about what the neighbourhood ought to look like without not only Airbnb, but also Amazon and shopping mall-style consumerism.

Rafa and Miren from Nakama, or Mili and Carlos from Berkana, all made reference to a renovated or newfound centrality of local and proximity shopping, as a positive outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rafa explained that he did not see this practice or explicit discourse as a new one, as it has been present at least as the globalization became a buzzword, but in 2020 it has become a more widespread notion. Carlos, when asked about the possible endurance of this proximity focus beyond the pandemic, explained that

I think that it's sticking. I think that there's a lot of people who, well, beyond them being more aware, I think they have become aware once more and said, hey, we have to help a little bit those who live on my very own street. Instead of buying something from, I don't know, Amazon, I'll go check if they have it. I think that this thought is sticking. (Interviewee #5)

Despite this notion, shared among all booksellers, we found an explicit idea of how complex the tourism industry is. Rafa from Nakama, when asked about the possibility that the tourism that will follow the pandemic world can be more humane, or proximity-based, responded that he sees it 'possible, but the issue is that it depends on so many factors that we can't do anything about it' (Interviewee #3). He further elaborated, listing the role of 'from public policy to the image of the city that is being broadcasted on other countries' media'. For instance, he mentioned the role of what tourist promotion is made from or about Madrid, and how it may impact the type of visitors who attend Chueca's events, particularly those belonging to the wide range of Pride activities.

This week-long event was mentioned by all interviewed business-owners in Chueca, as to some larger or lesser extent, their business-as-usual depends on or benefits from a strong, visitor-attracting event. Whereas its organisers, LGBTQ NGOs COGAM and FELGTB and LGBTQ business association AEGAL had to cancel the 2020 event and limit themselves to an online demonstration in Madrid — described by Carlos from Berkana as a 'watered-down Pride' (Interviewee #5), the immediate future of the event in 2023 is an enigma, and faces dilemmas and transformations similar to those experienced by other

events and festivals during the COVID-19 world (see Borovcanin *et al.*, 2020; Cooper & Alderman, 2020; Mohanty *et al.*, 2020; Rowen, 2020; Seraphin, 2021). An event such as this one, as described by the local business-owners, may be a determining factor for Chueca's recovery as a tourist destination, as per analyses of the role of chain or recurrent tourism (Hassan & Soliman, 2021; Zavar *et al.*, 2020). According to one of the demonstration's organisers from NGO FELGTB, Txipi, as of January 2021, they did not know whether the event could have a reduced and heavily controlled face-to-face demonstration in a single space, a series of smaller simultaneous demonstrations throughout the city, or no tangible event at all (Interviewee #7).

As for the evolution of the role of Airbnb and other tourist lodging platforms, the interviewed business-owners had similar doubts as to what the future will entail. Rafa and Miren, reflecting on the tourist flat facing their bookshop, said that they thought that it would be either empty or 'rented normally'. The different lockdown strategies and the sudden halt to most international tourism defined an immediate shock to Airbnb and similar platforms (Boros *et al.*, 2020), that, according to the interviewees, may be seen as a temporary suspension of the postings, or as an either temporary or permanent conversion into non-tourist lodgings. Under this light, the responsibility of both Airbnb hosts and guests may be seen from the same perspective of local consumers, that of individual responsibility (see Farmaki *et al.*, 2022).

6. Concluding remarks

From the perspective of Chueca business-owners, the imminent future of the neighbourhood as a tourist and commercial destination is that of inevitable uncertainty. While the booksellers trust in an enduring newfound or renovated proximity-focused shopping, as a positive outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic, they have more doubts about the future state of tourist accommodation such as Airbnb flats. A significantly large set of variables and factors may determine this outcome, with no clear insights as of early 2023: what type and volume of demand will there be for tourist flats? Will their owners risk future pandemics or potential sudden halts to their business, or will they convert their properties into "normal"⁵ rents? What will the invested public administrations do — i.e., Madrid's City Council, the regional Madrilenian government, the Spanish national government, or the European institutions?

Both inside and outside Chueca or Madrid, the global tourism industry shares common yet varied dilemmas. A key aspect of the post-pandemic world that was highlighted by booksellers and other business-owners is that of the uncertainty and, particularly, the likely selective nature of the current situation's outcome. Hall *et al.* (2020) have underscored this feasible nature of the reorientation of the global tourism industry, whereas Piotr Niewiadomski's (2020) analysis has also accentuated the uncertainty of the intertwining of an apparent 'temporary de-globalisation' and a series of discourses and expectations about different understandings of tourism. This uncertainty affects many other perspectives that intersect with our analysis. This article has argued that the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than as a significantly unique phenomenon, must be understood as a catalyst that has affected pre-existing conditions, debates, and contradictions. As such, the global pandemic has made touristification's and gentrification's effects more visible for some actors, while arguments for destination resilience have also come to the forefront of public debates.

We have focused on the tourist dimension of gaybourhoods, and particularly of that of Chueca, as it is the central element whose experience of the COVID-19 pandemic we have analysed, but the pandemic's effects ripple through other industries and phenomena. For instance, the residential nature of Chueca as a haven for LGBTQ people, or the geographical distribution of queer residential and commercial spaces in a metropolitan area such as the Madrilenian one, are equally affected by the changing real estate and political climate, as well as by the switch to distance education and work. Gaybourhoods, as any other neighbourhood, face the inexorability of change, but the contested fact that remains

throughout the aforementioned sources, both in Chueca and elsewhere, is the exclusive and elective nature of these spaces (Ghaziani, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic, rather than creating an entirely new situation besides the months of lockdown, has provided ample opportunities for pre-existing contradictions and risks to be made more explicit. As such, the already present phenomenon of the reduction of the widespread level of discrimination, technological advances, assimilationist trends, and changes in tastes and customs, key factors in the evolution and apparent demise of gaybourhoods (Doan & Higgins, 2011; Ghaziani, 2017), intertwined with a sudden lockdown that greatly affected both tourist and social attractions, such as queer bars (Lin, 2021). Against a background of looming menaces of gentrification- and touristification-led expulsions, the COVID-19 pandemic in Chueca made already existing crises even more evident, just as discourses about destination and neighbourhood resilience mixed both clear values or goals for the future, with the uncertainty that tourism and gaybourhoods experience in the future to come.

Endnotes:

¹ See Enguix (2009, 2017, 2019) for a detailed analysis of Madrid's LGBTQ Pride demonstrations.

² *Destinos turísticos gays en España: identidad, globalización y mercado* (Gay Tourist Destinations in Spain: Identity, Globalisation, and Market), funded by the Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades.

³ The names have not been anonymised as per the interviewees' wishes.

⁴ Their bookshop, Nakama, ended up closing in early 2023 after having to close temporarily for some months due to severe water damage that had destroyed most of their books.

⁵ Conversations with local residents shed light into the difference between small owners of tourist apartments, who may have transferred their properties to the rental business, with lower prices, and those with entire buildings and several properties, who have kept their assets still within the halted tourist apartment business

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