

Is there life beyond Airbnb? Dynamics of Peer-to-Peer accommodation platforms in Spain

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Goal and objectives of the dissertation

Goal

The main goal of this thesis is to analyse the peer-to-peer accommodation platform ecosystem beyond Airbnb, focusing on the dynamics of non-profit platforms, user value co-creation, factors influencing the user experiences, and their sustainability communication strategies, in order to highlight the diversity of the sector and demonstrate the existence of viable alternatives to dominant commercial platforms.

Objectives

RO1. To review the existing literature on peer-to-peer accommodation platforms beyond Airbnb, providing a broader understanding of collaborative accommodation research outside the dominant platform.

RO2. To analyse how guests and hosts co-create value on non-profit accommodation platforms and how this process influences participants' overall wellbeing.

RO3. To identify the attributes shaping guest experiences across for-profit and non-profit accommodation platforms and assess whether business models influence user experience.

RO4. To examine how both for-profit and non-profit peer-to-peer accommodation platforms communicate sustainability on social media and how such communication fosters user engagement.

Methodology

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach (Hands, 2022) combining qualitative and quantitative analyses to examine value co-creation, user experiences, and communication dynamics across for-profit and non-profit peer-to-peer accommodation platforms. Data were drawn from user-generated online content, specifically more than 772,000 online travel reviews from Couchsurfing, HomeExchange, and Airbnb, as well as Instagram posts published between 2021 and 2022 by these platforms. Reviews and posts were collected through web scraping and purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research objectives (Schuckert, Liu & Law 2015).

Results

The findings of this thesis provide a broader understanding of peer-to-peer accommodation platforms beyond Airbnb, highlighting important differences between for-profit and non-profit models. The literature review confirmed the dominance of Airbnb-focused research while identifying underexplored alternative platforms. Results also show that value co-creation on non-profit platforms is primarily driven by social interaction, cultural exchange, and trust, fostering the development of long-term meaningful relationships among users that positively contribute to their overall wellbeing. On the other hand, differences in guest experiences reflect these distinct business models: non-profit platforms are typically associated with authenticity, emotional connection, and community belonging, whereas for-profit platforms tend to emphasize convenience, comfort, and economic transactions. Furthermore, communication analysis revealed that non-profit platforms highlight community and sustainability values, generating more authentic user engagement, while for-profit platforms (Airbnb) rely more on promotional and lifestyle-oriented content.

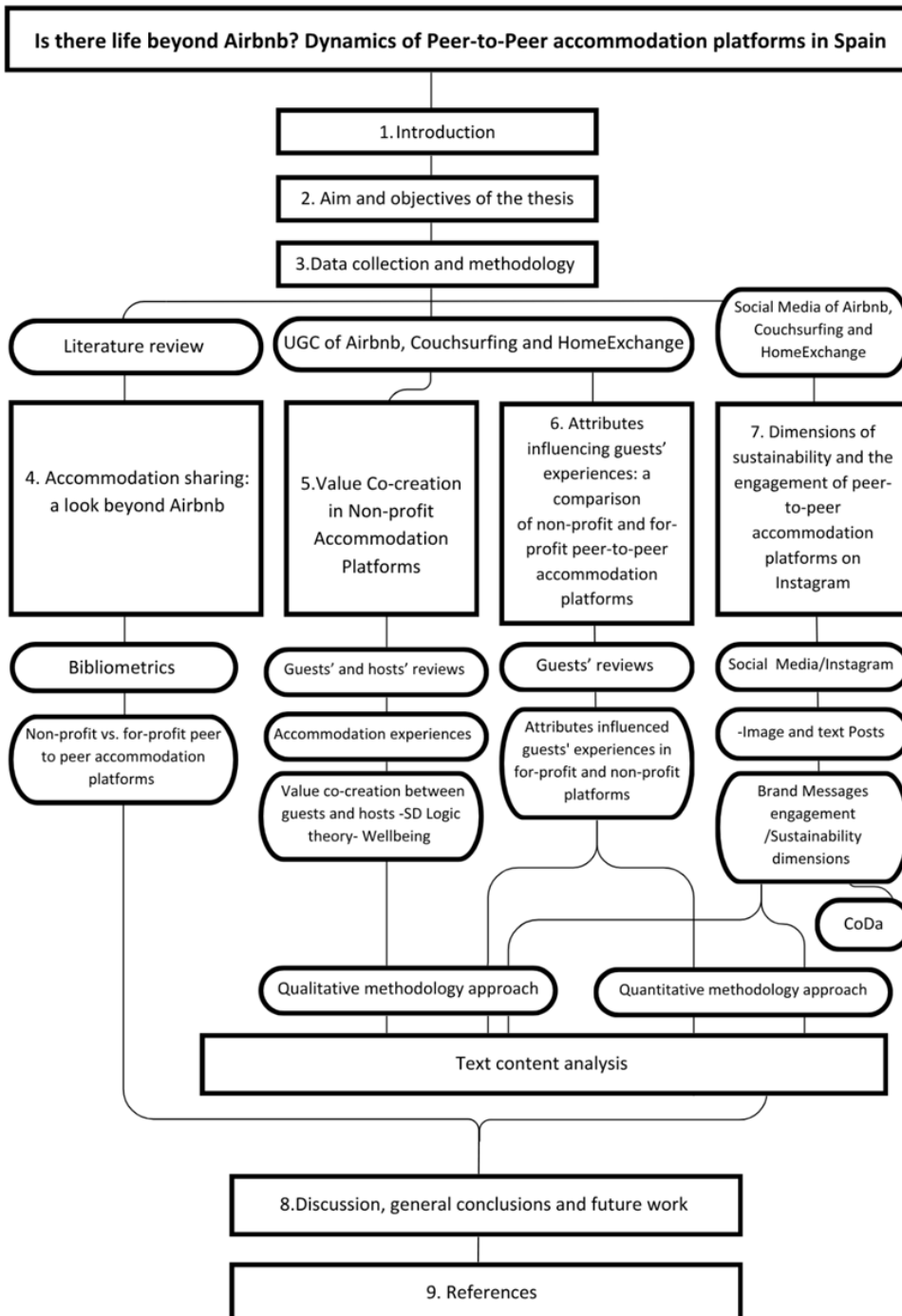


Figure 1. Structure and outline of the doctoral thesis.

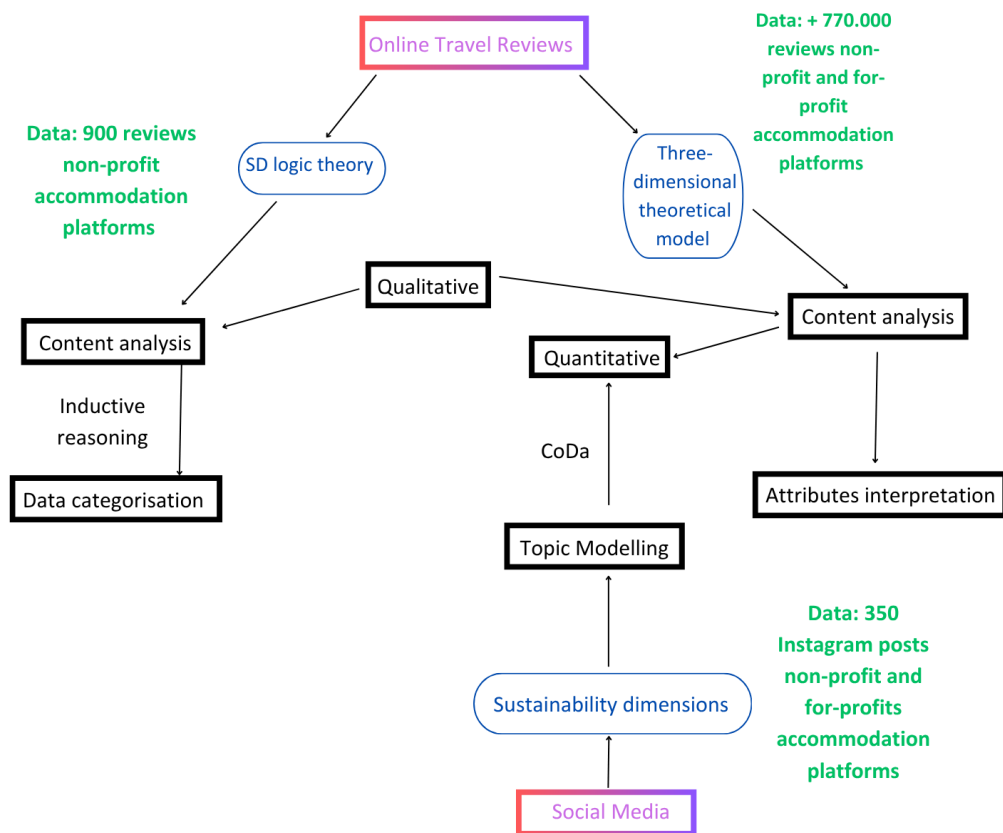


Figure 2. Methodology used in chapters 2, 3, and 4.

Theoretical conclusions

The core theoretical contribution of this thesis is to broaden academic understanding of peer-to-peer accommodation by moving beyond the dominant Airbnb-centric perspective and incorporating non-profit and niche platforms into scholarly analysis. The findings demonstrate that value co-creation differs across business models: while non-profit platforms are driven by social interaction, trust, and cultural exchange, for-profit platforms are more strongly associated with economic transactions, amenities, and short-term rental logic. This distinction questions their alignment with the original principles of the sharing economy. The thesis also shows that platform business models shape how sustainability (social, environmental, and economic) is communicated on social media. The thesis also theoretically contributes by proposing a three-dimensional model of guest experience (cognitive, affective, and authenticity), emphasising authenticity as a key experiential component in non-profit accommodation platforms. The research highlights the diversity of the P2P accommodation ecosystem and underscores the academic relevance of examining non-profit platforms that remain largely underexplored.

Practical Applications of the Dissertation

This thesis provides practical insights for peer-to-peer accommodation platform managers, destination marketing organizations (DMOs), policymakers, and local communities. Findings suggest that

encouraging authentic host–guest interactions, community engagement, and cultural exchange can enhance user satisfaction and wellbeing, particularly on non-profit platforms. For-profit platforms such as Airbnb could benefit from incorporating elements typical of non-profit models, such as stronger community orientation and sustainability communication. DMOs and policymakers may use these insights to promote P2P accommodation as a tool for more sustainable tourism development, as users of these platforms tend to stay longer, engage more in everyday local activities, and support neighbourhood businesses. This can strengthen local economies, foster community integration, and contribute to more balanced and socially responsible tourism development.

Content of the dissertation

Abstract of Chapter 1

Airbnb is the peer-to-peer (P2P) accommodation platform that has attracted researchers' attention during the past decade. The paper analyses the academic focus on peer-to-peer (P2P) accommodation platforms and reveals that most research has centered on Airbnb (Dolnicar, 2019). Through a literature review and a quantitative comparison of studies indexed in Web of Science, the findings show a significant lack of research on other P2P accommodation platforms. The study highlights the need to move beyond an Airbnb-centric perspective, exploring both for-profit and non-profit, as well as niche, P2P platforms to better understand their role and impact within the collaborative tourism ecosystem.

Abstract of Chapter 2

Value co-creation in peer-to-peer accommodation has been widely examined, predominantly from a guest perspective and with Airbnb as the primary reference. This study investigates how guests and hosts jointly co-create value on non-profit accommodation platforms, specifically Couchsurfing and HomeExchange, and how these processes differ from those observed on for-profit platforms. Using 900 online travel reviews as data, the findings show that both tangible resources (e.g., home and amenities) and intangible elements (e.g., social interaction, trust, and cultural exchange) shape value co-creation. Results indicate that reciprocal social practices on non-profit platforms foster stronger social connections and contribute positively to users' wellbeing, while for-profit platforms tend to emphasise transactional aspects. Differences between non-profit platforms also emerge: Couchsurfing value creation is mainly socially driven, whereas HomeExchange combines social interaction with resource-based exchanges.

Abstract of Chapter 3

Peer-to-peer accommodation platforms operate under diverse business models that shape guest experiences differently. Based on text-mining analysis of 772,768 online travel reviews from Airbnb, Couchsurfing, and HomeExchange across Spain's four most-visited cities, this study identifies key attributes influencing guest experiences using a three-dimensional experience framework. Findings show that experiences on non-profit platforms are strongly associated with authenticity, existential values, and travel philosophy, with guest–host interaction emerging as a central experiential element. In contrast, experiences on for-profit platforms such as Airbnb are primarily linked to tangible amenities, comfort, and physical accommodation attributes, resembling traditional hospitality expectations. These results highlight how platform business models influence experiential value and authenticity perceptions (Marine-Roig & Anton Clave, 2015), offering insights for destination managers and accommodation providers seeking to design more meaningful, differentiated, and context-sensitive accommodation experiences.

Abstract of Chapter 4

Social media has become a key channel through which peer-to-peer accommodation platforms communicate their values and engage users. Analysing 700 Instagram posts published between 2022 to 2025 from both for-profit and non-profit platforms through compositional data analysis, this study examines how sustainability is framed across social, environmental, and economic dimensions. Results indicate clear differences linked to business models: non-profit platforms emphasise social connection and environmental responsibility, whereas for-profit platforms focus more strongly on economic and promotional messages. Posts highlighting social benefits generate higher engagement levels, suggesting that community-oriented communication resonates more strongly with audiences. These findings show how platform business models shape sustainability communication and audience interaction (Bonilla *et al.* 2021), contributing to a better understanding of digital branding strategies within the sharing accommodation ecosystem.

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