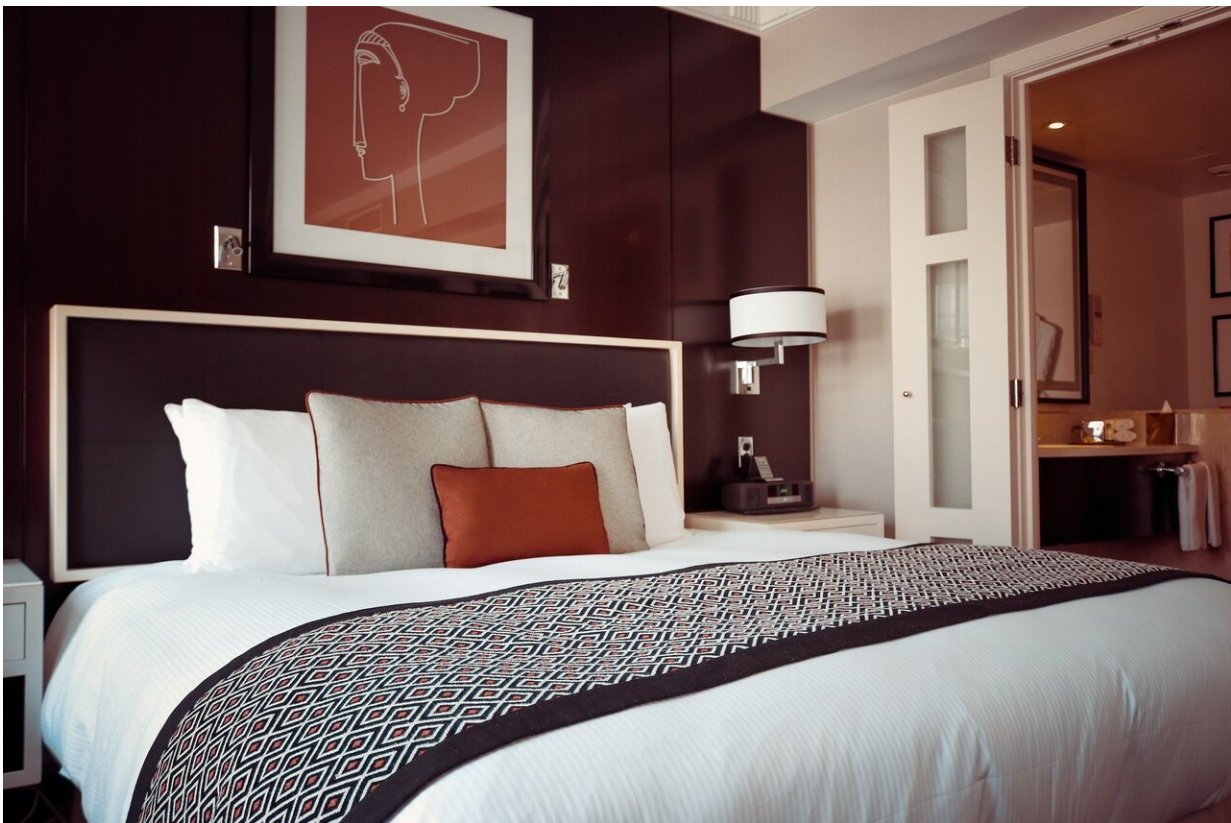


Upscale hotels do not consider tourism platforms like Airbnb a threat, says study

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The increase in tourism and the proliferation of holiday rental platforms offering apartments, houses and rooms have completely changed the tourism landscape, particularly in large urban destinations. Taken

together, these circumstances have become a major challenge for local government in cities like Barcelona. This is primarily because of the conflicts that they can create among the city's residents, and because of the issue of how the various types of tourist accommodation are regulated.

A team of researchers from the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) interviewed managers and directors representing upscale hotels to find out their perceptions of this situation. In the words of Francesc González Reverté, lead author of the study, researcher in the UOC's NOUTUR group and a member of the university's Faculty of Economics and Business, "the study uses an emic approach and a qualitative methodology to determine the opinions and attitudes of upmarket hoteliers in Barcelona towards the competition from Airbnb."

During the study, which has been published in *Tourism Geographies*, the researchers examined the arguments, discourses and differences among the various types of hotels, according to the focus of their business, in interviews with the managers of the establishments.

According to González, "upscale hoteliers do not see Airbnb as a direct competitor. However, there are various nuances in their discourse, ranging from a position of having a superior product to greater concern about the effects of Airbnb on their business and its disruptive effects."

In particular, the researchers point out that there is a prevailing discourse on Airbnb, according to which it is not a cause for concern among high-class hotels. This discourse is based on their superior [hotel](#) product compared to what Airbnb has to offer, as well as the fact that they are aimed at very different customers.

According to a second discourse among the hotel managers, Airbnb is a source of concern, but also an opportunity for learning and innovation in

order to improve. Finally, the third discourse sees Airbnb as a complementary competitor and considers it a potential ally, with which new business models could be established.

The researchers also explain that upscale hotels have reacted with skepticism to platforms like Airbnb, and in a reactive rather than proactive manner, which suggests that they see it as somewhat of a threat to their sector. "Some hoteliers see Airbnb as a threat that requires a proactive and unified response from hotels, taking into account the urban environment and the neighborhood where they are located," said González.

He also added that "upscale hoteliers do not think platforms such as Airbnb pose a perceived risk, but budget hotels and boarding houses have clearly suffered as a result of Airbnb, according to the latest studies".

The city of Barcelona has more than 850 hotels, of which 183 are considered high-end, with nearly 34,000 rooms, according to figures from the Turisme de Barcelona tourist office. Furthermore, estimates suggest that there are currently around 19,000 listings on Airbnb for the Catalan capital.

Perceptions of Airbnb range widely in the hotel sector

The researchers identified various nuances in the discourse concerning Airbnb among upscale hoteliers. In general, large chains tend to see Airbnb as a non-existent competitor which does not affect their business model. However, holiday hotel chains emphasize that Airbnb can contribute to transforming less consolidated or less profitable hotels into tourist apartments. At the same time, the hotels stress the unfair competition which they receive from Airbnb, and the difficulty they have in competing with the platform as a result. Finally, urban hotels and

small urban chains see Airbnb as a stimulus for innovation and continuous improvement.

There are also some points of consensus. González said, "In all cases, the hoteliers place particular emphasis on Airbnb's aggressive impact on the [urban environment](#), as it fosters gentrification and touristification processes in the most heavily touristed districts, which makes it a factor in urban distortion and leads to discontent and tensions among the members of the local community."

In discourse analyses, the arguments and perceptions of stakeholders are extremely useful in identifying their attitudes and contradictions, in this case among those involved in tourism.

González said, "Among the upscale hoteliers, it is striking that some aspects of their discourse about platforms like Airbnb are the same as the arguments used by the [social movements](#) that are protesting against this type of tourism. In other words, they both see Airbnb as a business that creates urban externalities and which therefore needs to be limited and heavily regulated, but they have different objectives and a different strategic perspective."

Despite the regulations governing this type of platform in place in Barcelona, various residents' groups and social organizations have voiced the need to use methods to monitor and register apartment rentals and related trends over time, restrict the density of rental apartments in certain areas, establish tourism taxes for users and owners, and make a distinction between commercial apartments and those used for sharing.

"Of course, these measures are not designed to meet the needs of hotels but rather to reduce the urban impact of Airbnb, especially in the fight against residents having to move due to rising prices and housing shortages. However, the hotel sector may benefit indirectly from the

measures to regulate its competitor," González concluded.

This study is part of a broader research project on the effects of the collaborative economy on tourism entitled "The collaborative economy and tourist spaces: contributions, transformations and challenges."

More information: Francesc González-Reverté et al, Airbnb as a hotel competitor in touristified cities. Perceptions among upscale hoteliers in Barcelona, *Tourism Geographies* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/14616688.2022.2131898](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2022.2131898)

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