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## **Welcoming strangers**

A study about digitalized hospitality visuals of Airbnb and  
Couchsurfing dwellings

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## **Abstract**

We live in a digitalized world where visuals are as essential to us as they have never been. Tourism and hospitality are not an exception here but rather examples of huge dependence on visual culture. Due to the fast spread of digital technologies, new forms of virtual mobilities have been intensified including services for choosing accommodation on digitalized platforms. Airbnb.com and Couchsurfing.com represent such services of renting out a place from a local person for a short-term period. It has created a phenomenon of strangers being welcomed in other people's dwellings.

The thesis focuses on the role visuals, uploaded to Airbnb and Couchsurfing websites, play in depicting culture of hospitality, mode of address and imagination. The thesis pursues dual aims. Primary aim is centered on the empirical results and focuses on understanding digitalized hospitality visuals and the range of meanings these visuals connote. Empirical results are derived from digital images of apartments uploaded by hosts to Airbnb and Couchsurfing platforms. Secondary aim contributes to the method development by testing an existing visual method and developing a new more detailed visual framework applicable to images with objects in the area of hospitality and tourist mobilities.

The findings show that the images turned out to be more than just apartments for rent. They evolve as places meaning that their identity is affected by the sense of personal possession and belongings. Nevertheless, there are some meanings which are hidden from a viewer if not looking closely. Data derived from visual analysis revealed the presence of the metaphor 'bed and breakfast'. This metaphor confirmed the identity of accepting guests depicted on the images. Findings also revealed that the interior and decoration say a lot about the way the rooms 'gaze' at a viewer and 'stream' viewer's imagination. The position of objects in the images attracts viewer's attention to the things hosts want to reveal publicly as well as to the items hosts prefer to remain hidden. Decoration contributes to creating a certain feeling and atmosphere of the rooms leading to the mind travelling of a viewer. Although these images are publicly visible and available for accepting strangers, there is still a limitation to such hospitality when the privacy is depicted not only in the images but also in the way of accessing these images as one has to sign in the website and leave some personal information before being able to see them.

**Keywords:** tourism; hospitality; Airbnb; Couchsurfing; digital media; visual analysis; visual culture of hospitality; privacy; metaphors; viewer's gaze; work of imagination; aestheticization

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## 1. Introduction

*'Seeing comes before words. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled'.*

*- John Berger 1972:7*

In our modern society there is no need for people to pursue face-to-face interactions all the time to be able to communicate. Digital communication has become an essential part of humans' lives and is intensively present in every aspect of it. When relying on digital services more and more often, more trustworthy they might seem and more vital to social life they eventually become. People actively engage online, they share, monitor and capture data, allowing data flows penetrate their everyday lives and reshape familiar practices. Human mobilities and hospitality are just a few examples of such practices that have been impacted by the rise of digital media. Although mobilities seem to be a 'chaotic' thing in the way people experience them, there is always a meaning attached to those mobilities (Cresswell 2006: 6).

In such digital world visual culture plays a crucial role. Images are becoming an essential part of digital media, more common source of knowledge embracing us with a variety of meanings which we sometimes take for granted. Visual images surround us in everyday life, and they all have something to say whether they are informal as family pictures of a house or imposing such as art gallery exhibits (Howells and Negreiros 2019: 4). It is extremely important to learn how to read and interpret those visuals and their meanings otherwise there is a risk of remaining 'visually illiterate' (ibid) which is something we cannot afford in the modern world.

The rise of Internet technologies has significantly changed tourist and hospitality practices making them dependent on the digital media. Such dependence implies providing thorough and constantly updated knowledge about tourist services, various destinations and, among others, affecting tourists' decisions about choosing accommodation (Liu et al. 2019: 2). Digital media facilitated the popularity of the new tourism styles (Polson 2016: 30). It has become more and more common for a tourist to choose an alternative type of dwelling such as rent an apartment through a local person found online rather than staying for a night at a hotel. The phenomenon of local people renting out their dwellings to tourists has been there for centuries, however digital media and visual culture have changed such practices dramatically (Guttentag et al. 2018: 342). The rise of short-term vacation rental and exchange websites such as Airbnb.com and Couchsurfing.com serve as examples of hospitality industry and tourist mobilities being intersected with digital media and visual culture. On these platforms apartment rental service

is entirely digital and supported by a range of attractive pictures to showcase apartments and destinations. Both websites are peer-to-peer exchange platforms and parts of the so-called 'sharing economy' triggered by technology innovations (Zervas, Proserpio and Byers 2017: 687). Airbnb.com has claimed its place to be a leading provider of various types of accommodations available to book without even leaving a sofa (Cocola-Gant and Gago 2019: 2). By 2020 Airbnb.com has hosted 400 million guests since it was launched in 2008 (Much needed 2020). In its turn, Couchsurfing.com has been unfolded around building a community with million participants around the world offering free of charge accommodation to its members (Rosen et al. 2011: 982). It is a non-profit organization with a strong focus on community values meaning that its main goal is to involve travelers in an international network and raise 'collective consciousness' (ibid) which makes it an alternative to mass tourism which is mainly profit-oriented.

In order to understand digital hospitality and its visual aspect around tourist mobilities, one should turn to the examples which are best represent such phenomena. Airbnb.com and Couchsurfing.com, leaders in the hospitality industry, might contribute to gathering knowledge about digitalized accommodation practices offered through the images of dwellings. Hospitality practices, assembled around digital media, constitute one part of the modern society and, as society itself, are constantly changing. It is within the boundaries of social sciences to carry out analyses and interpretations of society's values and interests aimed at social action (Flyvbjerg 2001: 60, 61). In this thesis such phenomena will be looked at from the perspective of social sciences and qualitative paradigm.

The predominant amount of research around tourist mobilities and hospitality on the accommodation rental platforms has been mostly dedicated to studying tourists' behaviour. These studies lack precise understanding of the visual component in interaction between tourists and the agencies which is, as mentioned above, an essential part of digital media. Social subjects and methods deployed must be seen as continually reproducing and they interact, not in abstract principles, but in concrete practices and contexts (Bruhn Jensen 2002: 1). Thus, what the mentioned problem neglects is to be approached through a phronetic case study with a focus on visual method.

'While photographs form a major part of media communication, there has been a relative lack of attention to developing a strict methodology for their analysis' (Hansen and Machin 2013: 174).

In order to generate valid knowledge, a strong visual framework should be in place. Following that, an existing approach on analyzing visuals should be tested and, if necessary, a new context dependent model should be developed.

### **1.1 Aims and research questions**

There are two aims that this thesis project pursues. Primary aim is to gain an understanding about digitalized hospitality visuals and investigate the range of meanings these visuals carry. Secondary aim is to test and evaluate an existing visual approach towards images with objects within the area of hospitality and tourist mobilities and, if necessary, develop a new more nuanced visual framework applicable to such images. In order to reach these aims, digital images of apartments for short-term rentals will serve as a case study. They will be exemplified by Airbnb.com and Couchsurfing.com<sup>1</sup> as non-conventional tourist agencies which gained popularity due to digital media. The following research questions, which are anchored in the previous studies, will be asked:

1. How is the culture of hospitality shown to a viewer via Airbnb and Couchsurfing digital images of dwellings?
2. In what ways do the digital images of Airbnb and Couchsurfing dwellings address a viewer?
3. What do the images offer to people's work of imagination?

### **1.2 Thesis structure**

Overall, the thesis contains five chapters. After introducing the context of digital hospitality practices, the thesis will delve into the literature review discussing previous studies and outlining theoretical framework. In this part several approaches are discussed starting from Erika Polson's perspective on tourism as part of humans' mobilities then moving on to the representation of tourism in traditional and in digital media. Furthermore, works around hospitality as part of tourist activities are discussed with special focus on its Jansson's angle on non-traditional forms of tourism and Molz's opinion on digitalization of hospitality. Following this, the works of Crouch and Coats, among others, on visual experiences in hospitality and Urry and Larsen on tourist gaze are reviewed. The chapter ends when bringing to light studies on Airbnb and Couchsurfing and the approaches that has been previously applied towards the data. Third part gives insights about the applied methodological approach, explains the importance of a phonetic research in the form of a case study as well as outlines

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<sup>1</sup> Later in the thesis called 'Airbnb' and 'Couchsurfing' for simplicity

visual analysis as a primary method to collect data. Following that, the empirical results will be analysed through the lens of network hospitality, tourist gaze and work of imagination to answer the above research questions. Finally, the conclusion part will discuss the results of this study and connect the generated knowledge with the future research possibilities.

## **2. Literature review: Contextualizing tourist mobilities, hospitality and their digitalization**

### **2.1 Introducing previous studies**

It has become common to associate media with tourism and tourism with media due to their interdependence (Coats 2011). People are bounded through connections when moving from one place to another. Mobility is fundamental to both the world around us and our understanding of it than ever before (Cresswell 2006:2). Tourism practices are connected to people's mobilities and lead to even more connections to be acquired via such movements. Tourism practices, arranged and communicated to tourists by agencies, contribute to creating and maintaining these connections. Such arrangement and communication might happen via different channels including commercials and glossy magazine covers in traditional media and virtual images in digital media. Due to the fast spread and development of Internet technologies new forms of virtual mobilities have been intensified where the role of visuals is as great as it has never been. Digital media allow a traveler to find oneself in any place around the world without even leaving a sofa. Visuals can not only affect traveler's destination choice but also make one feel welcomed in other people's apartments. It is digital media that have transformed the notions of being a guest and a host causing digitalization of hospitality. The relationship between individuals and larger communities by means of digital media and online networks has opened new forms of information and resource exchange (Rosen et al. 2011: 981-982). Nowadays hospitality is not only about spending a night somewhere but more about experiencing its non-conventional forms when staying with locals or at a local's place. Besides, networking websites and other Web 2.0 applications have facilitated the access to digital resources and have come up with innovative ways of reaching them (ibid). The rise of Airbnb and Couchsurfing as apps for short-term rentals represents an innovation within the industry of tourist accommodation (Guttentag et al. 2018: 342) and exemplifies the digitalization of hospitality. These services define part of the 'sharing economy' (Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018) which is associated with Internet and mobile technologies and contributes greatly to giving access to accommodation as a service. Digitalized hospitality is enriched by digital images of dwellings and cannot be separated from them. Digital images, due to its content specifics, capture a viewer's gaze, interact with a viewer, and even have the power to add a component of imagination to the relationship with a viewer on digital platforms that offer hospitality as a service. These newly appeared but already essential to tourism and hospitality images prove that they originate from the human mobilities and are closely linked to the digital

media. In order to understand digitalized visuals of hospitality and their nature, I should investigate existing studies on the hospitality and its process of digitalization as well as refer to the 'roots' and explore works on tourism as part of human mobilities and its role in the media.

In order to have a look at the accomplished studies, the current chapter will start by introducing the discussions about tourism as part of human mobilities followed by the representations of tourism in the traditional and digital media. After that, this chapter will lead to the hospitality and its non-traditional forms in relation to modern tourist practices. Finally, this review will highlight the role of digitalization and visual culture in the hospitality industry.

## **2.2 Tourism as part of human mobilities**

Many agree that nowadays we are witnessing the transformations of our vision of space and place. Patterns of people, culture and information movements have been restructured (Morley and Robins 1995). They are not restrained by physical boundaries or geographical distances anymore (ibid). These boundaries have become symbolic and are now defined by communications and information flows (ibid). One of the ideas to explore these global transformations is look closely at different 'scapes' that form them (Appadurai 1996). Scapes represent fluid and volatile nature of multiple 'imagined' worlds (ibid) which people are able to question. There are several categories of scape outlined by Appadurai (1996), however, I think that it is important to understand specifically the mediascape category because movements of people relate to communication flows and interactions with media.

Mediascapes refer to various media that are capable to produce and distribute information, in particular, images and narratives. By their nature images contain various meanings depending on the purpose, medium that shows them, interests of audience and producers. When the images are exposed to many audiences across the world the lines between the realistic and the imagined are blurred and the further away are the audiences from the direct experiences the more likely these viewing experiences would seem to be fictional and imagined (Appadurai 1996). In this light, mediascapes are image- and narrative-centered parts of real lives, however once viewed by the audiences, some of their elements can be transformed into imagined lives (ibid). Nevertheless, when talking about mediascapes, Appadurai mentions only offline media which calls for reconsideration of mediascapes within the modern realities of Internet technologies.

Travelling has always been present in the humans' activities. Originated through trade it was perceived as a precious asset accessible to bourgeois only but, as time passed, turned into

mobilities available to middle-class (Polson 2018). As such, travelling has become a discursive area for research.

As individuals and groups are now travelling around the world at escalating speed, distances and scales, the contemporary global condition can be best comprehended through the metaphors of flow and mobility (Appadurai 1996; Castells 2010; Bauman 2000; Urry 2000; Molz and Gibson 2007). People and places across the globe are bounded through complex connections emerging around the transnational flows of images and information, ethnicity and culture (Molz and Gibson 2007). New patterns of international labour and migration as well as the growing popularity of business travel now stand for international mobility (ibid). Local and transnational tourist experiences turned into alternative forms of tourism which are becoming more common (Mostafanezhad and Norum 2018). Current tourist practices are various and embrace activities that could seem strange few decades ago. For example, travelling to close and faraway countries or exploring the world with just a backpack behind the back and looking for free accommodation offered by locals, eager to meet strangers. The popularity and commonness of these practices showcase new forms of tourist activities (ibid).

Tomlinson argues (1999) that the relations between places occupied by people and their cultural practices, identities and experiences have been transformed by the processes of globalization. He establishes that the globalized cultural experience does not deal with increased physical mobility and literal travelling but rather felt when staying at home (ibid). As noted by Tomlinson, most people can ‘travel’ (ibid) when reading travel magazines, watching tv or surfing the Internet.

Nowadays the world of travelling is as accessible as ever with low-cost airlines, affordable accommodation and various travelling apps. The traveling industry is so close to a consumer that the travel genre has been introduced into the domestic space and connected tourists with routine situations such as cooking, making friends and being at home – all done through networked travelling apps (Polson 2018).

### **2.3 Tourism in traditional media**

As widely pointed out in tourism literature such as works of Stewart and Vogt (1999), tourists’ decision-making is a sequencing process based on a series of well-defined stages. This process can be influenced by tourists’ psychological or internal factors such as attitude and motivation as well as non-psychological or external variables including destination marketing (Sirakaya and Woodside 2005: 815-816). Studies of Um and Crompton (1990) have indicated that

potential tourists have quite limited knowledge regarding the destination where they want to travel to. Due to this claim, the destination attributes such as its images and attitude assigned to a place of travelling play a significant role here. They are claimed to be critical elements in the process of a destination choice even if they are not true representations of the place's reality (Um and Crompton 1990: 433). Speaking of the travelling and travel narratives, the study of Emilia Ljungberg (2012) has shed light on the glossy travel magazines capturing this phenomenon. She analyzes travel writing as narrative stories around various destinations which, in parallel, present these destinations as products of tourism industry (Ljungberg 2012: 11). Text and images in the travel magazines emphasized the idea of travel as a fantasy (ibid: 16-17). Various tourist destinations are pictured as part of an imagined lifestyle accessible to the elites. This paper has added to the understanding of the concept of travelling reflected in the glossy travel magazines capturing the ideas of travelling as a lifestyle, a 'template', that impacts our ways to view and understand the world, and opened a discourse on power and privilege (ibid: 17-18).

Not only travel posters in the glossy magazines provide viewers with attractive images and narratives. The gaze of a camera has become significant in some tv programs. The scope of the programs for tourists is diverse and one of the popular tv viewing practices among travelers are the culinary programs. Taken into consideration the importance of testing traditional food for any tourist, culinary programs have brought the food to a tv viewer who does not even have to leave the sofa. Cookery shows, using someone's kitchen space, 'juicy' images and appealing narratives are able to deliver various culinary experiences, tell the stories of food heritage and search for authentic local products (Dunn 2010).

Despite the importance to throwback to the role of touristic images in the traditional media, one should not neglect the role digital media play in the travel narratives. In order to understand the modern travel images and narratives, researcher's interest should be focused on digital media.

## **2.4 Tourism and digital media**

*'Today's travelers are not just on the road, but also on the phone and on screen'.*

*- Molz and Paris 2015:175*

Before proceeding with the representation of tourism in digital media a few words should be said about the references used in this section. Some of the works had been written before the Internet technologies were developed (McLuhan 1964; Meyrowitz 1985; Gibson 1986;

Giddens 1991; Norman 1999; Tomlinson 1999). Although the media landscape was different back then and excluded digital media's contribution, those thoughts are still relevant to the current research as the observations added about the media's nature can be well applied to the modern digitalized society.

When describing co-produced places in the context of tourism, some scholars have turned to Gibson's concept of affordances (1986) (Edensor 2006, Germann Molz and Paris 2015). They argue that theory of affordances has meaningful impact on tourism studies as it offers new perspective of thinking about dimensions of tourist performances when some performances are enabled or, in other words, afforded, and others are disabled. When studying affordances of place and space, Edensor (2006) have argued that those qualities enable humans to follow a range of actions due to certain selection of temperatures, atmospheres, smells, sounds and contours of places. Other scholars have specified the affordances by connecting them to various tourist places and performances there: sandy beaches afford various activities by the sea such as building a sandcastle (Baerenholdt et al. 2004) while forest setting affords the activities of camping and hiking (Rantala 2010). However, a context of digital photography suggested by Larsen (2008) reveals a new concept of 'perceived affordances' (Norman 1999) which, compared to Gibson's affordances, depends upon several factors including the specifics of digital cameras themselves as well as cultural awareness, intentions and past experiences of people taking the pictures and looking at them (Larsen 2008). According to Larsen (2008), digital cameras capture the moment 'right now and right here' thus making this moment immediately available to viewers, a moment that can be viewed and shared anywhere and anytime. Besides, due to the option of deleting images on digital cameras, more 'casual' way of photographing is afforded.

Although it is important to point the scholars mentioned above who have studied affordances in tourism, the current research looks closely at the interaction between humans and media affordances in particular.

Giddens discusses (1991) that although humans are embedded in their 'local' lives, they witness transformations of place and break-in of distance into their activities happening on the local level. These transformations are combined with 'mediated experience' which impacts the notion of local activities themselves. Tomlinson agrees upon the concept of mediated experience crafted by Giddens and assumes that this theme can be understood through the category of 'mediated proximity' (Tomlinson 1999). Tomlinson (1999) discusses mediated

proximity from the point of view of intimacy and the levels of ‘innerness’ using home as an example. From the entrance hall as the least intimate place to the bedroom and the bathroom as the most private areas. Bearing this example in mind, Tomlinson argues that the media technologies impact greatly intimacy by disturbing and creating it at the same time. The media and communication technologies open the private spaces to the outside world and demand the users who do so, be always available. McLuhan (1964) suggests the example of the telephone as a demanding medium urging people to answer it when it rings. However, Tomlinson in his study also deconstructs the media impact by claiming that media technologies enhance the intimacy and create new media’s own forms of it. This topic has also been supported by Meyrowitz (1985). Namely, he captures the point of the media impact when suggesting the ‘naturalness’ of media presence. Following the example given by Meyrowitz (1985), people get deeply involved in their phone conversation that they almost forget about the ‘intervening medium’. They also say to ‘I spoke to’ when referring to the phone conversation without realizing the physical absence during this interaction. While Meyrowitz contributes with his example of phone conversation, it seems relevant to consider the newer realities and reveal an example of digital media in the same context. The argument of disturbing the intimacy can be well applied to the current case study when digital media platforms require the hosts, who rent out their private accommodations, to post the images of their dwellings to be seen by strangers. However, digital media are capable of enhancing the privacy just as the traditional media do. When glancing through the numerous images of rent out accommodations, people tend to forget about the ‘intervening medium’ of desktop or mobile device and refer to this interaction as ‘I saw an apartment, I look at it’ as it is the user who has been there physically and looked at the dwelling with own eyes.

The mobile lifestyles, that are now considered normal for many, entail not just physical mobilities but at the same time, they entail digital and virtual mobilities (Germann Molz and Paris 2015). As put by Germann Molz and Paris, such confluence between travel and communication tends to be a key feature of a ‘mobile society’.

Following discussions of Polson (2016) and Germann Molz and Paris (2015), some attention is dedicated to the new styles of tourism intensified due to the spread of digital media. On the one hand, some argue that ‘privileged mobilities’ have increased in the digital era (Polson 2016). On the other hand, others argue that backpacker tourism has become popular in the light of digital media spread. Neither of these arguments, however, considers the alternative view that both tourist styles can be consequences of the digital society. This thesis investigates the

argument and claims that both types of mobilities might be connected to vacation rental websites such as Airbnb and Couchsurfing.

In recent discussions of Polson (2016), 'privileged mobilities' tend to be mobilities of the global middle-class who have the opportunities to travel for working purposes offered by corporations and educational institutions. Polson investigates the experience of privileged mobilities who work and seek a genuine interaction with local culture. Such work-travel balance has become available due to the deep penetration of digital media into the public and personal spheres of human lives. By combining travelling and career, these mobile elites create a lifestyle turning physical movement into a 'permanent state of mind' (Favell 2008). With all the respect to shedding light on the privileged mobilities, this book has not fully explored other styles of tourism such as backpack tourism that has become widespread because of digital media boom. Nevertheless, Germann Molz and Paris investigate this phenomenon. Taking into consideration growing network of the digital technologies – smartphones, laptops, social media sites and so on – the backpacker identity has been altered. From being young travelers with a tight budget to older, more financially stable tourists abundantly using digital media technologies (Germann Molz and Paris 2015). In their article, Germann Molz and Paris use 'flashpacker' term (2015) to highlight the modified version of a backpacker tourist, however they refer to this as a continuation of traditional backpacking practices. In this sense, the current paper will keep the 'backpacker' term further on.

Other consequences of the digitalization include the 'nomads' and their movements. Erika Polson (2019) investigates the concept of 'digital nomads', so called mobile workers, who are not tied to the offices and can afford working remotely. Digital nomads of today build itinerant lifestyles which intercross together with the travelling activities and the work-life balance. In order to make digital nomadism possible, a portable device, usually, cell phone or laptop, and a good Internet connection are needed. These various audiences coming from different parts of the globe are embraced by these mobilities and avoid being settled in one place.

Polson argues that modern digital technologies have developed the capacity to connect users to people and services around the globe. The concept of tourism has been revised and now changed from a being distant service to a lifestyle integrated with the local people and opportunities. It has resulted to the growth in the section of short-term rentals on the tourism market. Tourism grew into one of the biggest industries in the world and has changed from being an indicate of the status to a part of cultural capital (ibid). Travelers do not put any

distinction between lifestyle and travelling, like digital nomads, for whom travelling has actually become a part of the lifestyle. Polson (2019) argues that nomads and their aspirations are gaining popularity now when they advocate for a lifestyle of permanent travelling and take advantage of the possibilities of technologies and globalization. Travel trendsetters were against the standard all-inclusive resorts, theme parks and tours of the masses seeking more adventurous, unique, and 'authentic' travel experiences (Polson 2019).

In her 'The aspirational class 'mobility' of digital nomads' Erika Polson discussed that digital media impact how travelling highlights the status of a traveler through circulating images online. Considering travel content one of the most viewed on social media (Polson 2019), it serves as an indicator to how the notion of status has shifted from respecting material goods to appreciating experiences. The more unique or meaningful they are, the higher is the status of someone who posted them.

While Polson contributes to the problem of privileged mobilities, empirical research of studying social media practices is also an important factor in digitalized tourism. Liu et al. (2019) argue that digital media have emerged as an influential information and communication channel that changed completely the practice of experiencing tourism. These researchers have empirically studied the role of social media as part of digital media in the tourists' decision-making when going on a trip using face-to-face interviews. Following the issue of choosing accommodation and sharing picturesque images via digital media, Magnus Andersson (2018) investigates the presentations of home made by real estate agents using digital media tools. These presentations are claimed by Andersson to represent the idea of home, or 'homeliness', as an essential and aestheticized part of life. While these researchers contribute to the role of digital media in the process of choosing accommodation, sharing images and representing real estate properties, the way digital images are used in depicting places is also an important factor which is thoroughly analysed in the current research.

## **2.5 Digitalization of hospitality**

### **2.5.1 Introducing hospitality and sense of place**

Some scholars have examined hospitality in close connection to mobility by studying relations between hosts and guests and hospitality and hostility (Molz and Gibson 2007). Molz and Gibson claim that when studying mobilities, it is crucial to study hospitality as well. Hospitality is seen as a structure which marks and regulates the social relations between private and public, home and away, self and the other (Still 2006). Other academics think of hospitality as an

absolutely open and welcoming activity neglecting privacy and innerness (Derrida and Düttmann 1997). According to Derrida, when someone is hospitable, he or she welcomes everyone regardless of who the other is and of the potential risks and challenges one might be subject of. One can conclude that hospitality means opening your doors to everyone and prioritizing someone's interests above own ones (Derrida 1999).

Although hospitality has been examined within the paradigm of social relations between hosts and guests in the context of different types of mobilities, it seems that the interrelation between places of hospitality and mobile populations in the digital media context has not been fully explored.

Some scholars (Bork-Hüffer 2016), however, have looked upon the way the sense of place is created by the digital media and the mobility. Empirical research conducted by Bork-Hüffer (2016) reveals that the first impression of a place seen by a tourist on digital media captures the general sense of the place and affects the 'offline experiences' of it in the future. As a result, it makes the digital images of places derive more valuable implications about a place than a place itself. The current study analyses these implications in relation to the photos of apartments uploaded to the travelling websites.

Sense of place has been seen by many as complex and vague notion derived from a wide range of disciplines. It has been comprised of people's feelings about the place, their belonging and attachment (Augé 1995; Liu 2014; Qian and Zhu 2014), the role of place's identity (Buttimer & Seamon 2015) and the influence of place on identity (Liu 2014) and also the impact of the sense impressions and the imagery experiences on the perception of place (Rodaway 1994). Bork-Hüffer (2016), however, regards the sense of place more as the embracing process including the intermingling of the personal perception with the place identity. The experience of place and the meanings people derive from it can be common or individual depending on the community belonging or the personal imagination.

Digital media are a 'frame' reflecting how humans see the world and interact with it (Miller and Horst 2013). The content of digital media can create feelings of attachment or belonging to a place or a desire to visit it meaning that it may alter humans' behavior in the offline environment. The digital vision of the sense of place is never totally isolated from physical mobilities and, as a result, physical places. One of the aspects to be discussed is how the content of digital media affects offline destinations and shapes the sense of place there and how certain types of offline places such as short-term accommodations affect the digital media settings.

### **2.5.2 Non-conventional forms of hospitality**

Speaking of places for short-term travelling, it is of great importance to mention places where a tourist can stay during the trip including hotels and other alternative accommodations. Veijola and Molz (Veijola and Molz et al 2014) researched alternative tourism, such as camping, which provides a traveler with new ways of living in that place that hotel room and all-inclusive resorts cannot give. Interior and design in a hotel room are created in a way that every need of a tourist is predicted, and a tourist has everything he or she needs (ibid). In this case, the features of a hotel room anticipate tourist's behavior and assume that there is a limited number of ways to live in this place. On the other hand, unconventional tourist dwellings provide alternative ways of living in those places. Molz (2014) argues that camping does not offer the same number of amenities as the hotels do, however, camping sites do offer 'just enough' amenities to a tourist and serve as a special configuration rather than an opposite to a hotel. The features that camping offers contribute to the serendipity, creative and non-standard ways of habituating these places. While studying alternative travelling sites, Molz neglects the digital component and its impact on the sense of place. In contrast, this thesis deconstructs digital media in relation to non-conventional accommodation types and yields new insights that private apartments can be adapted for accepting guests which alters their sense of place but still some privacy features remain.

Jansson's work on the digital apps related to the alternative tourism (2019) reveals the popularity that these apps have been gaining together with the interests of middle-class people who are more and more into this kind of specialized tourism. Alternative tourism apps serve as a driving force to get to know the local way of life, to discover an opposite to the beaten touristic routes when travelling. Jansson has also studied these tourist apps from the perspective of the tourist who want to enjoy the 'local' life and stay aside from mainstream tourism practices. Tourism apps not only target this group of travelers but also reflect the trend of the 'alternativeness' which corresponds to the will of delivering authentic material rather than mainstream tourist routes (Jansson 2019). On the example of 'Spotted by Locals' app, Jansson claims that the content of these tourist apps is represented by the 'Instagramified' images of quadratic shape and the filters added, which are capable to aestheticize the way tourist gazes at the places (ibid).

As seen above, scholars have studied the sense of place of the extreme categories of tourist accommodations, namely hotels and camping sites, and the digital apps covering alternative tourism, however the analysis of intersection between the less extreme tourist dwellings and

their representation on digital media has not been fully developed. This paper aims to investigate private accommodations from Airbnb and Couchsurfing websites and argues that digital media is a medium that just ‘intervenes’, and it is the visuals that provide meanings to a viewer rather than digital media in general.

### **2.5.3 Network hospitality and digitalized hospitality**

In our world digital technologies meet social interaction and create new forms of communication and intimacy. They redefine who counts as a ‘friend’ or as a ‘stranger’ (Molz 2014). These new forms of communication start with online encounter via hosting websites and then extend to offline social networks where the hosting activities are performed. Molz (2014) argues that such practices represent a ‘network hospitality’, a relatively new term although deeply rooted in traditions of welcoming strangers.

When talking about a network hospitality, it is worth mentioning Andreas Wittel and his ‘network sociality’ (Wittel 2001). Due to the presence of Internet technologies in human lives, there has been a shift in the everyday interactions from communities to networks (Wittel 2001). Networks are characterized by more short-lasting and accidental acquaintances (ibid), rather than communities, however these acquaintances can be intense and beneficial. In Wittel’s ‘network sociality’ technology plays a central role, of particular importance, communication and travel technologies produce the ‘technogenic closeness’ (ibid).

What differs network hospitality from network sociality is the factor of extensive communication occurring via digital and social media. Such communication contributes to developing a range of features among which are closeness, sociality and digitalization of hospitality as activity. Closeness means close peer-to-peer exchanges of hospitality resources. Sociality includes sharing tangible assets such as accommodation, transport and food, and non-tangible ones such as guidance, conviviality and welcome in a new place (Molz 2014). While digitalization means the growing popularity of online hospitable exchange platforms such as Couchsurfing and Airbnb. These online services embrace the features like ‘sharing with strangers’, ‘feeling like a guest’ and balance between ‘like-mindedness’ and ‘randomness’ (Molz 2014). Although Jennie Molz outlined Couchsurfing and Airbnb as types of the network hospitality, she primarily focuses on studying Couchsurfing platform in an empirical context using interviews as a method. In this case, Airbnb as a digital hospitality service is neglected along with other qualitative methods that could possibly be used, for example, the visual

analysis. The current thesis illustrates that when applying visual analysis as a method both platforms can derive some interesting findings about the hospitality.

## **2.6 Visual culture of hospitality**

### **2.6.1 Tourist imagination**

Crouch, Jackson and Thompson (2005: 17) proposed and investigated the concept of tourist imagination. This concept captures the imaginative investment of media content with the physical process of tourism (ibid). Crouch et al. argue that the media's key role consists in being deeply involved in bringing out emotions and creativity thus converting the imagination into the tourist activities. The importance of the tourist imagination consists of adding a creative component to the everyday life as well as promoting virtual mobility which, in its turn, contributes to the physical one (ibid).

The ideas of Crouch regarding tourist imagination are reflected in the work of Coats (2011) who suggests understanding relations between media and tourism in the form of a narrative. One can observe that nowadays tourist activities are abundant with images to showcase different destinations. It is of key importance to think of this content not just as a selection of images but consider how these images are embedded in the narrative and what meanings they connote to a viewer. According to Coats (2011), conversations about media and tourism in narrative form not only give context of how these visuals are produced but also explain the conditions in which this digital content is viewed and evaluated by potential tourists. At the same time, Deborah Chambers (2016) dedicates attention to the concept of 'media imaginary' addressing the popular discourses and meanings around the spread of new technologies. She gives the media imaginaries the form of media fantasies recognized at the early stages of technological development as well as during and after the introduction of a medium (Chambers: 2016). However, in her analysis Chambers focuses on the processes of traditional media technologies in the home, especially the role of tv in its social acceptance in a family and domestic life. The analysis of digital technologies and their imaginaries has been neglected.

In the work about the new media Jansson (2007) studies the 'sense of tourism' where touristic experience depends on the mutual processes of 'site sacralization' and 'ritual attitudes' among tourists. At the intersection of these two areas, there is a 'communicative fabric' of travelling space. Travelling space is represented as socio-material, symbolic and imaginative. These 'communicative fabrics' define the border between the typical conditions of travelling: between the material and symbolical, leisure and work, unique and ordinary (ibid). They are

produced to capture such boundary state of travelling. Moreover, modern media can provide resources for intensification of touristic experiences. Jansson (2007) called such intensification an ‘encapsulation’ process. On the contrary, media have the power to weaken those experiences which leads to ‘decapsulation’. In Jansson’s opinion, relationships between encapsulation and decapsulation define the balance between which part of tourist experiences is connected to the imagination and which one to the everyday life.

In his other work about alternative tourism apps Jansson (2019) discusses that digital media are gradually replacing traditional media because they offer new advantages to its users. These new media are always available for those on the move, they circulate information between users at a fast speed, capable of recognizing users’ location and mix different media technologies, institutions and genres thus offering more places of interaction with users. Due to its fast development and constant change, digital media are important for a researcher to study and understand. The current thesis illustrates the need to research and understand the phenomenon of digital media as subject of study embracing visuals as one of the tools.

### **2.6.2 Gazing like a tourist**

In their book John Urry and Jonas Larsen investigate the concept of the ‘tourist gaze’ (2011). They compare the gaze of a tourist with Foucault’s ‘medical gaze’ by saying that when people go travelling, they observe the environment with interest and curiosity and this gaze is as socially organized and systematized as the gaze of a doctor except for the last one being ‘supported and justified by an institution’. The way people gaze at the things they encounter can be constructed and developed by professional experts (Urry and Larsen 2011). Gazing at sightseeing spots is impacted by personal experiences, memories and certain rules as well as specifics of circulation of images and texts of travelling destinations supported by professional experts. Urry and Larsen study tourist gaze in the form of a frame or a lens serving as a cultural vision to a tourist when one sees a physical object. Because of the lenses applied, a tourist assigns certain qualities to this or that object, for example, ‘beautiful’, ‘sophisticated’, ‘gorgeous’. The ‘gaze’ concept signifies that looking is a learned ability and that the ‘pure and innocent eye’ is a myth (ibid).

Speaking of the tourist gaze in the current thesis, this concept is closely linked to the viewer’s gaze. Viewer’s gaze as a concept is developed around media experiences and media engagement. Media engagement is an extensive term for researching how people experience media content and for exploring the dispersed connections within different contexts and

cultural forms (Hill 2019). Annette Hill (2019) examines the concept of a spectrum of engagement which is integral to digital media production and audience experiences. According to Hill, the spectrum of engagement can also be applied to various contexts including digital spaces and the ‘spaces of everyday life’ (ibid). Although this research contributed to generating knowledge around audience experiences based on face-to-face interviews, the current thesis grasped the concept of media engagement to develop insights about viewer’s gaze around hospitality visuals based on the visual analysis.

## **2.7 Airbnb.com and Couchsurfing.com as examples of digitalized hospitality**

There is a range of technological accommodation rental companies that promote ‘feel like a local’ slogan, however, one of the most successful ones to make a profit out of the local life is Airbnb – online home rental service (Polson 2018). Airbnb has become the leading provider of short-term rentals, and its rapid growth is one of the most discussed topics around the world (Cocola-Gant and Gago 2019).

Several researchers have investigated Airbnb practices and the motivations of tourists for using this service. Some scholars (Guttentag et al. 2018) have mainly focused on tourists’ behaviour on the Airbnb website. After conducting an online survey, Guttentag’s study has revealed that tourists were more attracted to Airbnb’s practical attributes rather than its experiential features. Whilst other scholars (van Doorn 2019) have studied Airbnb as an institution which transforms the relations between various players in the hospitality industry. Van Doorn (2019) considers Airbnb users as ‘Airbnb citizens’ who are looking to raise their income. In all cases, despite the multiplied knowledge about Airbnb features and its connection to tourists, academics missed to pay attention to the essential part of Airbnb – its apartments and the way they are represented on the website.

Couchsurfing is a website to facilitate the exchange of hospitality between travelers and hosts around the world (Chen 2018). Several researchers have previously studied online and offline practices of the Couchsurfing website (O’Regan 2013, Chen 2011, Molz 2007). Chen (2018) investigates online and offline performances between the Couchsurfing members through the ethnographical methods such as face-face interviews. Chen’s main area of interest is to show that Couchsurfing is more than the hospitality exchange service. Proved by voices of Couchsurfing community, it also represents a travel lifestyle with its own values, practices, and norms (ibid). However, by studying performances of couchsurfers, Chen disregards the website as a medium which can also be an area of analysis.

In other attempts to understand networking resources of Couchsurfing platform, other researchers have sought to explore the notions of trust, engagement and sense of belonging to Couchsurfing community (Rosen et al. 2011). That study was followed by a participant survey within a quantitative data collection method. The results reveal that face-to-face encounters and participation in some engaging activities facilitate bonding and sense of belonging to the community. Although the research results added up to the understanding of Couchsurfing practices, they were mainly gathered around the quantitative tools and ignored the contribution of the qualitative methods.

## **2.8 Thesis positioning in the field**

The discussed above academic works have contributed greatly to multiplying knowledge within digitalized hospitality, sense of place and tourists' experiences around it. Some researchers have given attention to the issues of mobility and tourism within traditional and new digital media while others have covered non-conventional hospitality networks and tourist imagination. Mentioned studies have shown that non-traditional forms of accommodation and digital media combined formed digitalized hospitality which has been intensified with the spreading popularity of online accommodation rental websites. These websites illustrate digitalized hospitality using images which represent digital media in the form of a narrative and 'play' with user's imagination. In such digital society, one should not neglect the visual component when studying tourism and hospitality and thus it is important to learn how to read a story told by visuals.

Although digital hospitality and media experiences have been widely discussed in academia, the focus has mainly been on the behaviour of tourists using accommodation services backed up by the ethnographic method and the quantitative data. Researchers' attention has been dedicated to studying tourist practices using face-to-face interviews and online surveys for mathematical calculations. As a result, the role of visuals in relation to the hospitality and tourism studies has been neglected. Nevertheless, the current chapter has provided a context for going forward with the analysis of hospitality visuals and outlined the relevance of conducting such analysis. Therefore, the present thesis feeds with a valuable contribution to this area of enquiry by focusing on qualitative paradigm and specifically on visual analysis of Airbnb and Couchsurfing images. As the visual analysis assumes, the samples will be represented by the digital images of dwellings taken from these accommodation rental websites. In parallel to working on this literature review, I have been writing my analysis which helped me to use previous studies as a background for developing my own approach to visual

analysis. The theory of the network hospitality, tourist gaze and work of imagination among others will be applied to critically analyze the digitalized visual culture of hospitality.

### **3. Methodology and methods**

#### **3.1 Methodological approach in theory**

The current thesis is positioned within the qualitative research. Qualitative research focuses on the qualities of data rather than quantities and relies primarily on human understanding and perception (Bazeley 2013: 3; Stake 2010: 11). Researchers engaged in a qualitative study tend to observe, describe, interpret and then analyse the data (Bazeley 2013: 4). Miles and Huberman (1994: 1) call qualitative data a source of rich and well-grounded descriptions and interpretations of various contexts. Qualitative data navigates a researcher to build an analysis around it and then derive some fruitful explanations out of it (ibid). Qualitative research has been criticized for being too far from having a universal set of data collection procedures and the lack of commonly accepted terms (Prasad 2017: 2), but also qualitative methods have been claimed to bring uncertainty to a study and be less scientific. However, qualitative research with its concepts attempts to embrace the larger realm of human activities and showcases a variety of meanings which help to understand that reality is a socially constructed phenomenon (Brennen 2017: 4). In the current study the value of qualitative research lies in connecting empirical findings to theoretical approaches and generating knowledge which could be further applied to other case studies and thus be a departure point for other researchers.

##### **3.1.1 Case study as a methodological tradition**

When it comes to a methodological tradition, this thesis applies a case study. Researchers who apply a qualitative case study argue that cases should be seen as context-dependent entities (Blatter & Haverland 2012: 68). The importance of a concrete context-dependent example lies in moving forward in the learning process and creating a link between the case study and real-life situations (Flyvbjerg 2001: 71, 72). Case-based knowledge helps to develop the nuanced view on reality with an attempt to understand human behavior which is not susceptible to rule-governed actions (ibid: 72). What is more, cases contribute to creating and maintaining researcher's own skills to conduct a meaningful study. Case studies have a strong advantage in respecting the 'depth' of the analysis where they provide an 'empirical completeness' and theoretical richness (Blatter & Haverland 2012: 69).

Flyvbjerg argues (2001: 57) that an individual having a 'practical wisdom' possesses knowledge – 'phronesis' – about specific circumstance that can never be reduced to general truths. Phronetic research, which embraces social sciences, is marked by the interaction between the general and the concrete with the focus on its changing aspects that cannot be

covered by universal rules (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 57). In light of rationally explained natural sciences and concrete technological knowledge, it is the phronetic study that needs to be adopted when understanding socially constructed and constantly changing in time and place activities such as hosting experiences offered to travelers. With the moral competence applied, it is possible to solve existing social problems around this topic and make society better eventually.

Some argue that a case study represents one concrete example and it can only generate knowledge about this particular example which can be impossible to generalize. However, a case study assists a researcher in crafting a unique and authentic knowledge and attempts to give a nuanced view about certain aspects of human relationships.

### **3.1.2 Visual analysis as a method**

New technological advances and theoretical developments have multiplied the use of qualitative approaches to understand human actions. Methodological approach to studying the mass media has now been shifted to fit the studies of the mass media themselves and thus a different method is required to answer the questions that have been asked of the media data (Altheide and Schneider 2013: 1). In the modern digital world visual culture plays a crucial role not simply because visual images are becoming more common source of knowledge but because people interact more and more with totally constructed visual experiences (Mirzoeff 1998: 8). Rose (2016: xxii) claims that there is a need for an explicit methodology to understand how visual images are embedded in the social world. In this light, visual analysis is a tool aimed at getting meanings which are usually embedded in the surrounding contexts (Mortensen and Trenz 2016: 348). Besides, such analysis is usually built around a checklist containing several relevant to the understanding of an image parameters. The points in the checklist are compiled by a researcher to match the aims and research questions of the study.

In the field of qualitative research there should be a dialogue between the used mixed methods (Bazeley 2013: 24) and a researcher should be aware of that. Using only one research method can affect research outcomes and result in method bias (Burton-Jones 2009: 445) as it neglects other sources of data. In the current thesis visual analysis has been used as a core method. However, due to using this method, a new model of visual framework in relation to digital media and tourist mobilities has been assembled deriving from different sources used as points of departure. The priority given to visual method provides good conditions for grasping complexity and depth of the data in a similar way as mixed methods do. I, as a researcher, have

thought about applying a text analysis as well but, as it will be explained later in the chapter, the information derived from text captions did not bring any fruitful outcomes. As a result, I fully immersed into the visual analysis and emphasized the knowledge that this method has offered.

## **3.2 Methodological approach on practice**

### **3.2.1 Sampling and conducting research**

Before proceeding with an analysis itself, few words should be said about the analysis checklist.<sup>2</sup> This checklist was created with the focus on the aims of this thesis project. One of the aims assumes testing and evaluating current visual approach to the images with objects which exist in the intersection of digital media and tourism.

I must admit that during the checklist compilation process I faced some difficulties. The major one was that most of the method literature is dedicated to the visuals with humans on them and therefore lacks some criteria on how to study the pictures with objects. As a result, it motivated me to modify the criteria for the images with humans and design new way of applying those criteria towards the pictures with objects.

In order to obtain rich descriptions and build a strong analysis, a checklist should be thorough and detailed. Following the checklist points, one should highlight denotation (Barthes 1977) – what an image literally depicts or so-called first level of meaning (Panofsky 1939) and connotation (Barthes 1977; Hansen and Machin 2013) – which ideas or ‘myths’ (Barthes 1973) are represented. Another dimension in studying images includes connotation and its categories. The notion of connotation introduced by various scholars served as an inspiration for me before designing checklist points and order of the connotation categories during analysis. As a result, four main categories were generated with each of them focusing on the specific aspect of an image. First category includes carries of connotation inspired by Rose (2016) and Howells and Negreiros (2019). It is the category which introduces an image to a viewer, describes the way objects look at a viewer and assists in reading both tangible and emotional aspects of images without humans. Second category, inspired by van Leeuwen (2005) and Machin (2007a) embraces the most important elements in an image, namely salient objects. Although these scholars offer a range of ways of how to identify salience, they remain the general guidelines which I followed to develop my own way of identifying salient objects in images with objects. Such identification helped me notice a pattern about metaphors fully described in the analysis

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1

chapter. The two remaining categories deal with the position of a viewer in relation to an image and participants depicted in images introduced by Hansen and Machin (2013). In the checklist viewer's position includes how viewer's angle, physical proximity and look affect images with objects. The final category indicates whether human participants are depicted in an image or not. At the beginning, it was challenging to decide whether to include the category about describing humans in the non-human images. However, I made a choice to focus on the non-representation phenomenon which brought some interesting findings covered in the analysis chapter. The order of the categories in the checklist was designed by me in a way that facilitates the observation process starting from easier questions and ending with more complex ones.

In case study research choosing samples is a not an easy matter. Numerous strategies on how to select samples exist nowadays in the qualitative research field. Researchers have come to an agreement that the aims of a study should guide the selection process of cases (Fletcher and Plakoyiannaki 2010: 837). As described above, for the current thesis, a case study with two examples has been selected.

Sampling took place via accommodation websites Airbnb.com and Couchsurfing.com. To collect samples, I turned to the official websites as they are publicly available and represent reliable and official information. Another alternative would be gathering data from social media and, in particular, from Instagram pages. Although I could easily access Airbnb images, Couchsurfing photos were not available via that channel. As a result, my data samples were all taken from the official websites of Airbnb and Couchsurfing. Even though Couchsurfing images were accessible from the website, the system required to login using personal details in order to see the images of apartments. I should say that the aim of using samples was to juxtapose them rather than compare with each other. Nevertheless, when mentioning empirical results from the data later in the thesis I cannot but refer to the images of Airbnb and Couchsurfing to illustrate the findings.

The chosen samples represented the images of apartments for short-term rent uploaded to the official websites of Airbnb and Couchsurfing. These were the photos of four living rooms and two bedrooms. At the beginning, it was problematic for me to decide on how to select the samples. However, later it was decided to base the image search on the types of destinations such as 'sea', 'mountains' and 'urban'. It helped greatly to select the samples. Finally, six images were chosen in total with three examples from Airbnb and three examples from Couchsurfing. Having a large sample means that the use of the visual method would need to

be more standardized. However, choosing less samples indicates to the possibility of conducting an in-depth analysis which results in the method development. Instead of adding more samples and focusing on quantity, I decided to immerse myself into the chosen samples and so to say ‘have a close look’ on the images while paying a lot of attention to developing a new visual analytical strategy. During the analysis, a lot of interesting findings appeared from the gathered samples. Due to the detailed and nuanced checklist, it was possible to gather fruitful meanings from six samples that were at my disposal. Besides generated knowledge on the empirical results, I, as a researcher, can contribute to unfolding visual method from another perspective and prove that it can also be of great fit to the non-human images.

After the first analysed image, many interesting conclusions appeared, and the researcher decided to include that analysis in one of the samples and not consider it as a pilot. Later on, findings derived from other images confirmed the theories outlined after the very first one image. As a result, a decision of not having a pilot image enriched the analysis and thus benefited the research.

### **3.2.2 Working with the data**

Before conducting visual analysis, I prepared a table separating denotation from connotation and made a separate column for the keywords that might pop up from the observations. Then the coding started. Coding is a means to access the evidence, query data and test assumptions (Bazeley 2013: 125). At the beginning the table was only filled with denotative comments. I decided to finish the denotation part first and then proceed with a ‘fresh eye’ with connotative meanings. That approach contributed to deriving more fruitful findings from the images. The notes in the table became the data to work with.<sup>3</sup> When the coding of an image was finished, the data was transmitted into a new table. The more images I coded, the more tables appeared. After the last sample was coded, the data with all the codes was put into a bigger table and colour-coded.<sup>4</sup> In such format it was easy to compare the results and make interpretations. Colour-coded notes became categories and later evolved into four major themes which are covered in depth in the analysis chapter.<sup>5</sup>

Before collecting the data, I was considering applying textual analysis through studying the users’ comments under the photos. In the current research images from the official websites have been sampled. However, in this case, comments from the users regarding room images

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 2

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 3

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 4

are absent. In both Airbnb and Couchsurfing examples, text captions are made by hosts who describe the amenities in the apartment. These are short captions which do not seem to enrich the analysis somehow as most of those captions are one-word responses to the website questionnaire. In this case, the content of the captions is autogenerated by the computer system of Airbnb and Couchsurfing and thus can negatively impact the outcomes' quality of the analysis.

### **3.2.3 Ethical issues**

A researcher has to take into consideration ethical concerns when accessing the data. When dealing with digital data acquired through the Internet, the division between what is public and what is private has been blurred (Quinton & Reynolds 2018: 193). This uncertainty poses a significant challenge to a researcher and requires a careful handling of such data. Although the topic of this thesis does not relate to any sensitive matters, the data retrieved from websites might be a subject of an additional ethic consideration. The pictures were uploaded to be viewed publicly, however these were the pictures of apartments which means that some private areas are shown. It is essential for a researcher to think through the underlying ethical principle of 'doing no harm' (Toy-Cronin 2018: 458) and to treat data extremely careful. That is why, in order to guard the privacy, I have anonymized the locations, where the apartments can be found. Besides, the hosts' real names are not mentioned.

### **3.3 Methodology & method reflections**

According to Hansen and Machin (2013:13), the research means to be planned, careful and systematic investigation, free from preconceived assumptions or prejudices. However, researchers cannot separate themselves from the study they conduct as they bring along their personal bias (Jackson 2016). In this thesis chosen samples are affected by the researcher's bias. Nevertheless, one of the strong features of social sciences is that they can turn their weaknesses into strengths. Hence, researcher's bias can also refer to researcher's own intuition and experience to make sure the case study is interesting and can be reasonably justified as a choice. As a result, chosen samples have contributed to enriching the visual method and generated new knowledge about online hospitality practices around tourist mobilities.

In addition, more samples could have been gathered for the analysis. However, as described above, the samples that were at my disposal confirmed the aims: they produced enough rich meanings that became strong pillars for the themes' building process, tested the applied method and generated new knowledge leading to the method development.

Qualitative approach contributed greatly to the research pattern and outcomes of this thesis. The choice of research methodology impacts research aims and tools to generate evidence for its answers (Rose 2016: 1). Methodology guidelines indicate that the case study needs to be carefully chosen to be able to multiply the knowledge and solve societal problems. As a result, case study impacted the sample collection and the way to interpret data which is crucial in getting answers to research questions. Whereas visual analysis turned to be the right tool to formulate and achieve research aims.

## **4. Analysis: Deconstructing digital images of Airbnb and Couchsurfing dwellings and investigating meanings behind them**

*'Pictures are as essential part of human lives as words: they are deeply puzzling and endlessly interesting'.*

*- Gibson 2014: 255*

In the times of global mobilities and digital media widespread, tourist accommodation can be more than just a place to spend a night at. It is a more complex concept which is multilayered and socially constructed. Visual analysis has revealed that the digital images from online vacation rental platforms Airbnb and Couchsurfing have a lot to say about the hosting activities, the viewing experiences and the imagination. Analysis of the empirical data generated four main themes, each of them leads to one to three categories developed in the form of a narrative with some examples from the data. These themes will be examined through the theoretical lens of network hospitality, tourist gaze and work of imagination. The first theme emphasizes on the ways the images show hospitality and how the rooms evolve as places for welcoming strangers. The second theme focuses on the ways those images 'look' at a viewer and how the privacy depicted in the images impacts the viewing experience. The third theme highlights what the images offer to the viewer's work of imagination. Finally, last but not least theme describes how the images represent the non-depiction.

### **4.1 Transformed hospitality**

#### **4.1.1 Imperfections as marks of ownership and identity**

It is important to identify the notion of hospitality and clarify its assumptions before going to the core analysis. Veijola and Molz argue that when identifying hospitality, one should pay attention to the appropriation. According to these scholars, hospitality means transforming someone's property into accessible to the public while appropriation is to take something public and make it private (Veijola & Molz 2014: 1). It is obvious that hospitality is the opposite of appropriation. Veijola and Molz make the two notions mutually exclusive by saying that when making the space dirty, one makes it personal, while by cleaning it one welcomes others. The author of the current research disagrees with this statement and claims that even by leaving signs of personal possession it is possible to make the space available to others.

Dirt is the mark of ownership (Veijola & Molz 2014: 1). If one's space is dirty, it means the owner is attached to it and makes it more accessible to oneself rather than to others (ibid). Dirt exists in the eye of the beholder (Douglas 2002: 2). Dirt can mean not only the dust, mud, and

litter but also the things found where they are not supposed to be found. For example, personal items left in the public place.

If personal space within the public area is taken seriously, then it should have inevitable spill-over effects for the activities that supposed to be in the common area (Willcocks, Peace, Kellaher 1987: 116). In the analysed images of Airbnb and Couchsurfing dwellings uploaded for public, the researcher notices that sometimes personal belongings are found in the rooms. The way of displaying those items differed from picture to picture. They were scattered all over the room or gathered in a pile. Although no dust or mud were noticed on the photos, those personal items added up to the imperfections of the room in total. All because the viewer was not supposed to see them there.

From the one hand, imperfections contributed to destructing the order. As Mary Douglas claims (2002: 2), a person can feel unrelaxed in a room with dirt. In the taken case study, a guest might indeed feel uncomfortable when being surrounded by the personal belongings of the host, especially when a host is not present in a room. From the other hand, imperfections signify not only the sense of belonging and ownership but also confirm the identity of the place where they are found. Rooms with depicted personal items showcased host's private life and made that room look unique among many other rooms. The images for the case study are published to Airbnb and Couchsurfing websites which makes them available to public. Those who uploaded them was aware of the content depicted on the images thus confirming this identity.

After the visual analysis conducted it became obvious that imperfections were present in Airbnb rooms as well as in Couchsurfing ones, but these flaws contributed to different identities of those rooms.

In front of the sofa with two pillows, there is a coffee table in the middle of a room with an open laptop and a fruit bowl on it.

- Airbnb image (urban location)<sup>6</sup>

Behind the coffee table there is a computer table with some objects on it: a black table lamp, a rugby ball, a sheet of white paper, a pair of headphones, a water bottle and an unrecognizable object.

- Couchsurfing image (urban location)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix 5.1

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix 5.4

The visual analysis showed that the Airbnb images contained just a couple of personal elements not hidden from the viewer. At the same time, the Couchsurfing images were abundant with the items owned by the hosts.

However, personal items serve different purposes in both examples. Personal things from Airbnb pictures seem to be present there on purpose in order to highlight and capture the atmosphere of the image, make it more personal while remaining neutral and professional and imitating hotel rooms. In contrast, personal belongings from the Couchsurfing photos were left by hosts accidentally meaning that they decided to leave things as they were before taking the photo. In this case the host still welcomes the guests by showing the true depiction of the apartment. In both examples there are a few personal details on the images that show that those apartments belong to someone and thus can be referred to as places.

To the contrast, a space without any personal touch and traces of possession is counted as a 'non-place' (Augé 1995: 77-78). Place and non-place tend to be opposed polarities: place is never completely erased and non-place is never completed (ibid: 79). One of the examples of a non-place is a hotel room. In the hotel room every guest's need is predicted and everything is carefully prepared for the stay. Depending on the room type there can be more or less amenities available to the guest, however these amenities are repetitive. Elements that are found in a hotel room are standard and typical, for example, towels, waste basket, curtains, tv, air conditioner, room service menu (Veijola & Molz 2014: 35). Apart from places, non-places have the quantifiable form and can be measured in numbers, for example hotel chains. However, by offering the standard space for its guests, hotel rooms offer limited opportunities to explore this space. There is only one ideal way to stay at a hotel (ibid) – be a guest. For this reason, the hotel rooms carry functional purposes and connote functionality which will be analysed later. In this case it means that everything is arranged for a guest to spend a night there and thus no repelling personal details are observed.

#### **4.1.2 Place for guests**

While the non-places demonstrate a well-known example of hospitality, places tend to be accessible to guests as well. Visual analysis drew attention to two alternatives of places existing for guests. These types, however, can be arranged in a different manner. First one includes the type of place whose main purpose is to accept guests and thus it is clearly adapted to be a guest room. Second one is a place which is supposed to be occupied by a host rather than by a guest but, if needed, can be transformed into an accommodation.

As suggested by Marc Augé (1995: 77, 82), the major feature that differs a place from a non-place is the symbolized site invested with meaning. In the previous section it was suggested that a space with some personal belongings is a place. Private items carry the meaning of occupied area and thus of possession which contributes to the place's identity. Augé suggests that modernity produces mainly non-places, sites deprived of any meaning (ibid: 78). However, we are viewing the images of places – private accommodations which have been uploaded to the Internet. A viewer is actually given an access to those places publicly available due to the digital media. In other words, we are witnessing that the modernity produces places as well.

It seems relevant to apply the concept of places and non-places to the hospitality industry. These days it is not only the social media that shape the expectations people have from various places but also a range of location-based services such as Airbnb.com and Couchsurfing.com (Jansson 2019: 167). These 'alternative tourism apps', as Jansson (ibid) calls them, are aimed at travelers interested in non-traditional tourism including alternative forms of accommodation. Using these alternative tourism apps, tourists can find a place to stay via the locals and other travelers. In the apartment rentals, the place is represented by an apartment or a room which belongs to someone and, at the same time, is for rent. It is embraced by numerous experiences that people have there, including a host and guests.

When finding an accommodation in any country around the world, a tourist refers to surf the Internet at the beginning. At this stage, the relationships between hosts and guests tend to be just online practices. However, later they might develop into offline encounters. These online-to-offline encounters happen between strangers who learn to live temporarily with each other under the conditions of the 'network hospitality' (Molz 2014: 7). Being one of the features of the late modernity, network hospitality poses a challenge to distinguishing a stranger from a friend as well as a host from a guest (ibid). As stranger who becomes friend can later become a stranger again while a host can be a guest and vice versa.

Hospitality is an infinite and absolutely open activity; it can tell us to invite and welcome anyone (Derrida and Düttmann 1997: 8). One can notice that hosts have transformed the apartments they own or turned the places where they live into habitable areas for guests. At the same time, Gibson argues (2003: 374-375) that absolute hospitality is impossible. In order to get the better deals or even access the images of the rooms one should log in the online platform and be a member of Airbnb and Couchsurfing communities. To get in touch with a potential host and to be able to stay at a host's apartment, a guest should leave some personal information

about oneself including a phone number and an email as well as a current address. In other words, to access the hospitality, guest's personal information should be verified.

The relationship between host and guest is defined by the mobility. In particular, the asymmetry of the mobility constitutes the core in this relationship (Bell 2007: 29). The host is static and rooted which makes him or her attached to one's apartment while the guest is on the move and rootless (ibid) and has some experiences which might transform the place of a host.

Analysed images of Airbnb short-term rental show that those places were arranged specifically for guests. In their majority pictures of Airbnb rooms show some elements which have been left for guests such as towels, new bed linen and even a small welcome gift.

The image shows that there is a bed in the middle with white sheet and a white pillow on it. There are two objects lying on top of the bed: a rolled white towel and another object, probably a tea bag or a soap. The bed is done nicely as it waits for guests.

- Airbnb image (sea location)<sup>8</sup>

The rooms are slightly furnished and have a few details or do not have them at all. In a couple of rooms, the shelves are empty meaning that guests might use them for their own purposes. There is no sign of a host in those rooms and it was clear that no one lives permanently there.

The place on Couchsurfing images was organized a bit differently. It was adapted for guests while keeping the initial purpose of the place – a host's apartment. Couchsurfing images depicted a living room or a bedroom with a lot of small objects that might belong to an owner. These personal things include, for example, clothes left on the chair among many others.

Next to the drawer there are two chairs with some clothes on it and a shoulder bag. There is a candle attached to one of the pillars, but it is not lit, it is holding a photograph of two people.

- Couchsurfing image (mountain location)<sup>9</sup>

From the visual analysis it is obvious that the host lives in this room. The room contains a lot of personal elements which make the presence of the host more obvious. Since the images of dwellings are published on the online platform, guests can freely access this place to use as an accommodation. It means that Couchsurfing rooms serve double purpose: they are a permanent home for the hosts and a temporary one for the guests.

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix 5.2

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix 5.6

In both cases despite the differences in the room preparation, that one is more specialized in welcoming strangers than the other, the purpose of those apartments is the same and that is to meet and welcome guests.

#### **4.1.3 Metaphor: a symbol of place's identity**

*'The way we think, what we experience and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor'.*

*- Lakoff and Johnson 2003:19*

Nowadays media content is not just a collection of images that generate varieties of meanings but rather a 'symbolic inventory' – an inventory of symbols embedded into narratives (Hoover 2006: 56; Coats 2011: 200). Through those narrative structures meanings and destinations emerge. A bed and a dining table are well-known symbols of hosting and welcoming guests. Hosting strangers in a private home is a deep-rooted phenomenon and the first bed and breakfasts in Europe date back to the nineteenth century (Gyimóthy 2017: 100). Bed has been associated with rest and sleep and dining table is linked to sharing meal. Being able to rest and to have a meal are fundamental and, probably, one of most basic features of an accommodation. Sleep means having some private time with oneself while eating allows to spend time with a host or other guests, talk, share stories, and exchange experiences. Recently peer-to-peer rentals have expanded greatly due to the spread of mobile technologies (Rifkin, 2000; Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Dredge and Gyimóthy, 2015; Felländer et al., 2015).

When compiling the checklist for the visual analysis some of the guidelines (Hansen and Machin 2013) recommended including the bullet point about a salient element and how to identify it. Saliency means the most important element on a picture and can be identified based on certain criteria: if it is the closest to a viewer (foregrounding) or the biggest (size) or the brightest (colour), if it overlaps other objects or even if it is a 'potent cultural symbol' (Hansen and Machin 2013: 188). The primary way to find the salient element is to identify potent cultural symbols which are key in telling a viewer how to read an image (ibid). This symbol usually connotes some meanings and helps to grasp the general 'feel' of an image. Salient element can be based on the potent cultural symbol but also it might be linked to other criteria of saliency.

During the visual analysis of the Airbnb and Couchsurfing rooms, it was interesting to look at the depiction of 'bed and breakfast' there. Most of the images were bedrooms and one of the findings was that a bed turned out to be a salient element on those photos. At the same time, regarding the images of living rooms, a table was identified salient once.

The bed takes some space and it is the center of this room. In this room it is an object everything else is built around.

- Airbnb image (mountain location)<sup>10</sup>

The round table is the closest to the viewer and it can also be a potent cultural symbol...Table is a place where people share meal, talk and it is indeed, an important object in the room.

- Couchsurfing image (urban location)<sup>11</sup>

One of the findings after this salient identification was that the bed can actually be a symbol of the place where it seems possible to take a rest and relax. In this case the bed indicates that this room is suitable for accepting guests and thus served the purpose it was claimed – to be an accommodation and welcome visitors. As far as the table is concerned, on the photo it is depicted as a dining table meaning that guests can use it to have a meal on their own or share with others including a host. Such social dining offers some features which are not available when dining in commercial places such as restaurants. Social dining suggests an opportunity to develop relationship with a host or other guests immersing themselves in personal stories before and during the dinner takes place (Gyimóthy 2017: 103).

As potential tourists, people see objects which can be constituted as signs and ‘tourist clichés’ and thus stand for something, something that can function as a metaphor (Urry and Larsen 2011: 11). After the coding was completed, two major pillars of hospitality were revealed. They are, namely, a bed and a dining table or saying metaphorically, ‘bed and breakfast’. As mentioned above, the bed and the table are essential parts of hospitality which makes the researcher paying special attention to the findings. It seems relevant to analyse the bed and the table from the perspective of a metaphor use.

A metaphor is a linguistic image that creates certain meanings by ‘interpreting one thing through another’ (Lehtonen 2000: 25). Metaphor is a representative connection between language and thought and it is crucial to understand and explain the world (ibid). The metaphors are capable of transforming unfamiliar scenes into more familiar scenarios and carry a great influence over people’s thoughts and actions (Jaworska 2017: 161). In this light interpreting the bed and the table through the ‘bed and breakfast’ metaphor contributes to better understanding of the hospitality depicted on Airbnb and Couchsurfing images.

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 5.3

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 5.4

Although some dwellings were more adapted for guests than other, most of them carried very important elements of hospitality which are explained through the metaphors.

## **4.2 Mode of address**

### **4.2.1 Viewer's gaze**

The viewer's gaze in the current research means the viewer's eye and the way the researcher looks at the image and its content. The relationship between what is seen and what this means is quite complex. As potential travelers gaze at the tourist photos, they do not just 'see' things but attach certain meanings to them (Urry and Larsen 2011: 11). For the researcher who conducts visual analysis, gazing signifies looking beyond the image, interpreting, and drawing mental connections between the objects and their meanings (ibid: 11-12). To say more, gazing involves 'cultural skills of daydreaming and mind travelling' (Löfgren 1999: 17).

Media engagement (Hill 2019) is an essential parameter when describing the viewer's experience with the digital and everyday life space. A spectrum of engagement includes emotional and cognitive modes switching between positive and negative engagement to disengagement (Hill 2019: 7). Positive engagement includes emotional identification, sympathy and even leaving encouraging comments whilst negative engagement involves emotional detachment and 'trash talking'; disengagement, in its turn, is a sudden or gradual disconnect (ibid).

During the process of visual analysis of selected images, one of the points taken from the checklist was to identify the carriers of the photos' meanings using the parameter called 'gaze'. Regarding the images, gaze is a crucial feature identifying whether the depicted is looking directly at a viewer or somewhere else (Hansen and Machin 2013: 181). Hansen and Machin (2013) apply 'gaze' to describe people in the images and their look. In portraits, people can 'look' at a viewer thus maintaining a 'symbolic contact' and 'interaction'. However, people might not 'look' at a viewer so that there is no visual contact made. At the same time, in this paper 'gaze' as a concept can be well applied to the objects. As all the images selected for this research are images of rooms, the 'gaze' will be referred to the objects found there including various types of furniture and room décor. One could think of working with the objects' gaze in two ways: 'offer' and 'demand' (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 129). Kress and van Leeuwen (ibid) call certain pictures 'demand' pictures if people depicted 'make contact' with a viewer, establish a relation with a viewer and symbolically demand something from a viewer. Whereas certain pictures are called 'offer' pictures if the participants are observed in a detached

way and an 'offer of information' is made (ibid). In relation to the viewer's gaze, offer denotes that the objects are turned away from the viewer and thus no contact is made. When there is an offer the viewer is just an observer who is offered some information about the room. Whilst demand signifies that the objects are located towards the viewer and the viewer is well-acknowledged. In this case the contact is made and the image itself 'demands' something from the one who looks at it.

By gazing at the pictures of apartments, the researcher found out that all Couchsurfing images connote offer rather than demand. It means they offer information about the room and what one can see there. In this case there is no interaction between the viewer and the picture, and the first is just an observer. One can say it just by looking at the furniture's position: it is turned away from the viewer. The relations between the viewer and the image can be characterized as observation. In this case the viewer's gaze is denied with further contact.

After the analysis it became clear that Airbnb images are more complex as most of them have both offer and demand. It means that on the photos some elements, for example a sofa and a chair, are turned towards the viewer. At the same time other elements on the photo, for instance, windows and an armchair, are seen from the angle, in other words, are turned against the viewer. In the case of Airbnb photos, a contact is made with the gazer as the rooms 'interact' with the one who look at them. Such relations are regarded as an invitation to participate and to engage with the room's settings. Those rooms are open for the researcher to look at and thus the viewer's gaze is welcome. At the same time, the spectrum of engagement is also applicable here. One can say that the rooms that have both 'offer' and 'demand' engage with the viewer in a positive way. A photographer has tried to make a potential tourist emotionally connected to the room and proceed to further actions such as add to favorites, save the link and book it eventually. One can also see that those rooms are usually on the top search results in their destinations meaning that they are quite popular with the travelers.

Each photo embodies a certain way of looking at it, including researcher's personal interpretation and the one of a photographer. The photographer has own way of seeing by choosing a specific sight from an endless variety of any other sights (Berger 1972: 10). Due to the fact the furniture was turned towards the viewer, Airbnb images look more professional. It seems as if they were made by a professional photographer who knows how to get the viewer involved and to interact with the image. It is also clear that Couchsurfing images are taken by hosts and the message these images connote is 'here is what we have, you have to accept this

room as it is'. The way Airbnb and Couchsurfing images were taken defines the purpose they serve whether it is more aesthetical as in Airbnb case or more functional as in the case with Couchsurfing. Aesthetical and functional aspects of the two examples will be scrutinized later in this chapter.

#### **4.2.2 Privacy issues**

After the coding was completed one important outcome popped up. It seemed interesting to observe how Airbnb and Couchsurfing images are depicting host's personal items if found. Some details such as cropped bag or curtained off window turned out to be more than just a personal touch. By describing the interiors, the researcher identified that the privacy was a crucial parameter. While the viewer's gaze describes the look itself, the privacy signifies the things this look is aimed at.

The performance refers to the activity of an individual occurring during the individual's continuous presence in front of the observers which has some impact on these observers (Goffman 1956: 13). This kind of performance is counted as 'front' (ibid) and mainly was described in relation to humans as performers. There is a parameter named 'setting' which involves furniture, physical layout, décor, and some other background items 'which supply the stage' (ibid). Altogether, the performance in front of others together with the settings generate frontstage. However, with all respect to Erving Goffman's text, some of the features described about the front performance might also be applied to the objects. The digital images of apartments, furnished and decorated, can play the frontstage here. These apartments, once uploaded to the Internet, are constantly present in front of the potential tourists. Moreover, these pictures are supposed to influence the viewers and make them book the apartments thus turning them into the tourists. Now what has been considered as a stage for the performer turned into the performer itself. The digital image itself, presented in front of the Internet users, serves the example of the frontstage.

However, along with the frontstage there is also so-called 'backstage' (Goffman 1956: 69). This place is relative to the given performance with the impression being contradicted to the one occurred during the frontstage (ibid). Goffman referred the backstage performance to the special type of conduct related to the intimacy (Goffman 1956: 78-79). 'The backstage character of certain places is built into them in a material way' (Goffman 1956: 75). According to Goffman, the backstage language 'consists of first-naming', informal ways to address and

loose behaviour. On the example of digital images of dwellings, personal items covered by hosts might be a good example of the backstage behaviour.

Findings from the visual analysis revealed that Airbnb pictures explicitly depict what is found in the room. The items are not hidden or covered. Every corner is available for the viewer's look. In the example below even though the window takes very little space in the room, the window view is visible and open for the public to have a look.

To the left of the room there is a balcony: the door to the balcony is closed but one can see through it as it is not curtained off. On the balcony there is a table with a plant on it and two chairs. The window view is not hidden, it is open to the public.

- Airbnb image (sea location)<sup>12</sup>

To the contrast, photos of Couchsurfing dwellings are abundant with unknown items and disguised objects. A host did not want those objects to be seen, as they are, probably, part of host's private life. At the same time host did not erase them from a photo and let the items stay in the room. On Couchsurfing photos from different locations there are various methods to hide the private belongings. One of them is to curtain them off, just as the host from the sea location did.

By the wall with the router shelf there is a window covered with a white curtain. One cannot see what is behind the curtain, only a part of a bike's wheel. The view from the room is not wanted to be seen that is why it was covered with a curtain.

- Couchsurfing image (sea location)<sup>13</sup>

The researcher found out that on this photo the window view and the things on the balcony are covered because they are not wanted to be seen by potential guests. It is interesting to spot that although the privacy was kept on, the room picture was still uploaded for the public eye.

Another way to disguise what is personal is to put a piece of fabric on top or crop the unnecessary item from the picture.

In front of the bunk bed close to the viewer there is a white drawer and two chairs, but one cannot see all of them completely as they are partly cropped. Behind the bedside table there is another unknown object covered with dark red tablecloth: there is nothing on it but a green bag which is also cropped.

- Airbnb image (mountain location)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 5.2

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix 5.5

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix 5.3

All in all, examples from Airbnb depict perfect or almost perfect rooms ready to accept the guests. There are no signs of a host there and thus all secrets are revealed. If there are some items that might belong to an owner, they are openly shown to the public. In the case of Couchsurfing apartments, the public is also invited to have a look inside, however, the sense of belonging and intimacy are strongly present there. These rooms might have some interior or lighting flaws and the privacy is respected but the guests are still welcome. Overall, it makes the room look more realistic and trustworthy to a potential tourist.

### **4.3 Work of imagination**

#### **4.3.1 Functionality & aesthetics**

According to Gillian Rose, the number of pictures published on various online platforms is huge and it is often used as a valuable evidence to demonstrate how our everyday life is saturated with images (Rose 2016: 290). For many scholars, digital technologies are more than just the amount of digital materials created. Social scientists are the ones who study these materials not only from the perspective of their production and circulation but also from their impact on social life (ibid). The technology goes through a process of ‘enculturation’ where users learn its content and assimilate the practices and values (Chambers 2016: 124). It happens when the audience gets excited about the media features and ‘sparks with a desire’ to learn more about it (ibid). At this stage audience’s excitement about the media possibilities resonates with what the media can actually offer to its users. At this point, social imagination is closely linked to the media imagination.

Digital images might be the new resources putting together the creative component and the elements of everyday life. Electronic media transform the mass media by offering new resources for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds (Appadurai 1996: 3). As there is always a distance between viewers and events depicted (ibid), digital images bring into existence the everyday life to shorten this distance. At the same time by aiming at specific group of people, digital media manage to eliminate the distance and get even closer to a viewer.

Media have become closely linked to tourism. Media might contribute to structuring tourist space, shape the encounter with a tourist and provoke a tourist desire (Coats 2011: 200). In the examined case study, pictures of Airbnb and Couchsurfing apartments perform this work of imagination and invite the viewer to travel without leaving hold of a mobile device. Such concept of tourist imagination featured in the media has been suggested by Crouch, Jackson and Thompson (2005: 17). This concept captures the imaginative investment of media content

with the physical process of tourism (ibid). The importance of the tourist imagination consists of adding a creative component to everyday life as well as promoting virtual mobility which, in its turn, contributes to physical one (ibid). Virtual mobility is made up of images of holiday destinations that are attractive enough to make people browse for more pictures and then be inspired enough to 'escape' from a virtual reality and mind travel into a real one.

Today the idea of home and homeliness has certain affective and aestheticized dimensions which have never been witnessed before (Andersson 2018: 30). After the visual analysis of Airbnb and Couchsurfing digital images, it became clear that the findings might be separated into two main categories: the functional qualities of a room and its aesthetics. While the functionality refers to the room's interior, spatial organization and lighting, the aesthetics deals with expressive content such as atmosphere and the feelings as well as colour scheme. Visual analysis revealed that it was equally important to pay attention to not only the tangible things like the decoration but also to the mood the images connote.

In their majority Airbnb pictures do not have so many details as Couchsurfing images do. The main purpose behind details on Airbnb images is to fill the room with nice elements and make the design look professionally arranged. Colour coordination creates links between the displayed elements and adds to the attractive look of the picture (Hansen and Machin 2013: 187). If there is a harmony between the colours, the image is enriched with a feeling of simplicity, order, and cleanness (ibid). In all Airbnb images the colours match each other, there is a harmonious combination between them. In one of the photos the colour palette is beige and white with a bit of green. It is very warm and natural colours. These are the same colours as the nature elements such as sand, stone, and grass. Another parameter of an image to study is the value. The image can be of high value if it is bright and close to near white colours and of low value if it is dark and close to near black colours. Airbnb images are all of high value which means they are all close to white colour which is considered to be clean and tidy.

Natural colours add to the soft and clean look of an apartment and make it visually pleasing for a viewer. In most Airbnb images there are only details to decorate the room with. Airbnb rooms depict a few decorative items which connote some meanings. These items are part of interior and might be as well chosen by a host thus reflecting the personal taste of an owner. In contrast, hotel rooms contain some neutral decorative items which should not provoke and repel guests. There, decorations are not important and might even be chosen due to their sustainability meaning that they should never look outdated and old fashioned. Most part of analysed Airbnb

samples express the feeling of a cosy home. There is an example of a room which has a very sophisticated interior which adds to the feeling of a catalogue image.

A sofa with a couple of cushions, an armchair, covered with a fluffy fabric. In between there is a coffee table with an open laptop and a vase on it. Behind the table there is a green potted plant. On the shelf above the plant one can see more small potted plants and aroma sticks.

- Airbnb image (urban location)<sup>15</sup>

By imagining such description one can see a well-designed room which can even be a magazine cover. At the same time, small details such as potted plants make this room unique and habitable which differs it from a standard hotel room. One might doubt that there any live plants in a hotel room because it requires a constant human presence to look after them. This room has an owner who goes extra mile to make the room look and smell good.

When it goes to Couchsurfing images, their dwellings are filled with many objects. These objects are part of the room interior. Apart from the personal items described earlier in this chapter, some of these objects are used for a purpose different from what they are supposed to be for. For example, tv stand is used as a bookshelf and one of the levels of a bunk bed is used as a storage. In all Couchsurfing images the colours are mixed which creates hectic rather than harmonious combination. If Airbnb photos are represented by their high value because of the near white colours, Couchsurfing images are of low value because of the near black colours present. It might be explained through the poor, mainly electric, lighting. In one of those examples, the photo was taken in the evening hours due to the darkness behind the window, however, electric lamp light was used which was aimed at the wall thus illuminating it instead of the whole room. The picture was taken in the evening hours meaning that the photographer, who can be the host, was available after school or work. In another example lamp as a source of light was used although it was daytime, and the photographer could have used natural light as well. However, the curtain prevented the light from coming thus limiting the number of light sources. This curtain separates the room from the balcony and 'guards' host's privacy area from the public eye. In this case, the host, who can be a photographer, prioritized own privacy over the picture quality.

Despite the abundance with details and colour mixing, it does not feel like an actual chaos in those rooms. These elements add a personal and unique touch making the apartments look really charming on the photos. One does not feel loneliness as host's presence is clearly visible.

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<sup>15</sup> See Appendix 5.1

As described in the sections above, these signs of imperfections confirm the identity of belonging and ownership and make a room's story unique. One of the Couchsurfing room photos revealed some board games and speakers which would make a viewer feel like it is a fun place to stay at and a viewer might even compare it to the friend's place as it looks so similar. Even though all Couchsurfing images were made by amateur photographers, they managed to express the homeliness of their own apartments.

#### **4.4 Non-depiction**

One of the questions in the checklist was about participants in the image. In particular, it is worth to analyse whether participants are represented as individuals or as a group and what kinds of participants are depicted (Hansen and Machin 2013: 194-195). Besides, it is important to consider if no participants at all are involved (ibid). In the current case study, no humans are depicted on the images. However, the researcher still included this parameter in the checklist to see if there are any interesting findings derived from it.

Analysis revealed both Airbnb and Couchsurfing images depict no humans as participants. At the same time, it is worth highlighting the example of Couchsurfing photos. As discussed earlier in the chapter, images from Couchsurfing made by amateur photographers who can also be hosts or owners of the apartments. These photos depict no humans, but the human presence is visible. In one example, a viewer cannot see the photographer in the image but the photographer's reflection in the window. It is not clear enough to say if it is a man or a woman, however, it is apparent that this reflection belongs to a human who is holding a camera. The fact that this photo was taken in the nighttime when electric lamps are used as a light source, only highlights the reflections in the window and thus makes that figure visible to a viewer. In another example, humans are depicted implicitly. It turns out that humans both were and were not depicted in the image. This image shows a room where attached to the candle holder on the bunk bed there is a photo of two people. It is quite hard to see all details on the photo as it is quite far from a viewer but looking closely at it, one can notice a couple sitting in a car. Other details are unclear. As far as Airbnb images are concerned, despite being made by more professional photographers, which was discussed earlier, no traces of humans are found.

In the example of Couchsurfing, one of the possible explanations about the non-depiction might be that those rooms are actual dwelling areas. In other words, people are living there and it is a home for someone. A sense of belonging to a specific place forms the sense of home and is an essential emotional area (Feng and Breitung 2018: 1). This statement, confirmed by the

findings, deals with privacy issues as well. By being such an emotional property, home represents one of the strongest connections between people and places (ibid). As mentioned above, that photo is part of host's private life and was decided by the host not to be erased or disguised. Although one can see the photo, it seems hard to have a closer look and observe all details as the picture is quite far from the gazer. It proves that the owner did not want to give up the sense of belonging and intimacy and to break up the connection between oneself and the place.

## **5. Conclusion**

The current thesis has examined the mediatized accommodation sharing practices and the role of digital images in depicting phenomena such as hospitality, tourist gaze and work of imagination. The case study was built around the digital visuals of apartments taken from the most famous accommodation-sharing platforms Airbnb and Couchsurfing. Visuals are becoming more and more common source of knowledge. It is complex, sophisticated and less straightforward way of communication (Howells and Negreiros 2019). In order to understand how the meaning is made and what it transmits, one should emphasize the importance of visual analysis. In this research the visual analysis was applied to study the digital images. Although being the only method applied, visual analysis turned out to be of great fit to the research aims and helped develop a unique visual framework which originates from different theoretical sources and embraces complexity and sophistication of the visual data.

Primary research aim was to understand the digitalized hospitality visuals and investigate the potential meanings these visuals carry. Despite being photos with no humans, these digital pictures managed to show evolvement from being someone's apartment to a place ready to welcome guests. Data gathered from the visual analysis passed on a message that the images 'look' at a viewer and 'play' with the privacy thus affecting the contact between a viewer and an image. Besides, the character of the images as raw material develops user's imagination by combining the creativity with the everyday life through the functional and aestheticized characteristics of a room. Secondary research aim was to test an existing visual approach and based on such evaluation develop a more thorough visual framework which could be applied to photos of the objects in the area of hospitality and tourist mobilities. Guidelines for the visual analysis introduced by scholars (Barthes 1977; van Leeuwen 2005; Machin 2007a; Rose 2016; Howells and Negreiros 2019) have been used in the checklist. To say more, these guidelines were applied towards the images without humans on them. As a result, a lot of fruitful and fascinating outcomes have been derived which will be addressed later. One can say that method literature has become a point of departure before developing a new way to describe pictures with objects related to the hospitality and tourist mobilities.

### **5.1 Recap of findings**

Overall, research results have provided answers to the research questions asked in the beginning of the study. Images captured the culture of hospitality and the data revealed that the apartments uploaded to Airbnb and Couchsurfing websites can be more than just someone's

place. They can evolve as places which are ready to accept and welcome strangers. However, in some examples it was obvious that the sense of ownership was firmly present. Rooms depicted a number of personal items which were found in this 'claimed to be public place'. These items have been called 'imperfections' meaning not literal but figurative dirt. The purpose of the imperfections was to not only destruct the order but also to confirm the identity of a place and add to the sense of belonging. When welcoming guests one usually removes or hides the marks of personal possession to make a space available for guests (Veijola & Molz 2014: 1). Nevertheless, in the chosen examples personal items were visible although the apartments were supposed to be rent out by guests. Airbnb apartments showed 'just enough' elements which were left by the hosts for the decoration purposes. These elements were subjects of the recent fashion trends rather than the typical classic neutrality of hotel rooms, and thus added a bit of hosts' personal taste to a place. In its turn, Couchsurfing images have been identified with the abundance of personal objects which were left there by the hosts to claim the ownership of a place. As a result, both Airbnb and Couchsurfing illustrate a paradox in depicting the hospitality through the sense of belonging and ownership.

Images revealed that the analysed rooms contain some personal belongings which add up to the personal touch and the traces of possession. According to Augé (1995), such description refers to the places which are symbolized sites with invested meaning. That is one of the differences from hotel rooms which are non-places. Moreover, as places, Airbnb and Couchsurfing serve double purpose. Not only they are accepting guests but also are homes for the hosts. Augé (1995) claims that modernity mostly produces non-places, sites deprived of any meaning. Nevertheless, the analysis claimed that the places are also a product of the modernity as nowadays we see more and more pictures of the private areas that are being uploaded for the public eye.

Although these accommodations welcome strangers, one should keep in mind that the identity of a guest should be confirmed. It means leaving some personal details to log in in order to see more information about an apartment and be trusted by a host before claiming it. It mostly concerns Couchsurfing images where one must leave email and phone number to join the community and being able to see the photos of other people's apartments. In this case there are clear limitations to the hospitality before accessing it. As mentioned above, it confirms that the sense of ownership has been highly prioritized.

Furthermore, one unexpected but important finding that popped up during the visual analysis was the essentiality of the salient elements on the photos. Saliency can be identified through the cultural symbols found in an image which are key to reading it and help to grab the 'feel' of a picture (Hansen and Machin 2013). Urry and Larsen (2011) argue that the objects people as potential tourists see might have some hidden meanings. In most of the analysed images, the salient elements turned out to be a bed and a dining table. In this case they connote a metaphor of 'bed and breakfast'. The bed means that it is a place where one can relax and take a rest, while the dining table connotes the meaning of having meal and sharing food with others. In this light, pictures verify the purpose claimed by those places – be an accommodation and accept guests. It is a very valuable insight into depicting the hospitality as currently little is known about the use of metaphors in the tourism discourse (Jaworska 2017).

As the analysed photos are the images without humans depicted, one should think of a way to approach them. It has been decided to include the criterion about describing participants in an image in the checklist. During the data interpretation the finding has revealed an interesting observation about Couchsurfing images. There, no humans are depicted, yet the human presence is obvious. In one example there is a photographer's reflection in the window, in another one a photocard with humans in it is visible. Poor lighting and absence of a natural daylight highlight the human presence even more. One may conclude that Couchsurfing photos were taken by amateur photographers who might be hosts themselves. It means that the hosts cannot be separated from their rooms which are their actual homes. In this case the connection between the owners and their places is strong.

Digital images have had a lot to say not only about the hospitality but also about the way they address a viewer. Data revealed that digital images of Airbnb and Couchsurfing dwellings create a couple of ways to 'look' at a viewer which impacts the viewer's gaze. Introduced by Hansen and Machin (2013), 'gaze' was used to describe humans and their look in the images including interaction and symbolic contact. In this thesis it is claimed that 'gaze' is well applicable to delineate objects including furniture and décor. Viewer's gaze intersects with the object's gaze through the presence or absence of contact or, in other words, through 'offer' and 'demand' (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). In the case of Couchsurfing images, a viewer cannot find any contact with the objects in a room because they are positioned inside the room and thus turned away from a viewer. Such position of furniture offers information about a room and shows that a viewer and viewer's gaze are not recognized. At the same time furniture and décor elements from Airbnb images are positioned towards a viewer making rooms open and

exposed to viewer's gaze. In this case Airbnb rooms invite to participate in the rooms' settings and 'interact' with a viewer.

As mentioned above, Airbnb and Couchsurfing rooms have been identified with the personal elements integrated in the interior. However, the way of depicting those items on the images is different. The things that viewer's gaze is aimed at deal with privacy and intimacy. Airbnb photos depict no hidden items and the personal belongings that are present are revealed and exposed to viewer's eye. Items from Couchsurfing images have been covered up or disguised from a viewer thus emphasizing the backstage of an image. Previously referred to the special intimate conduct, the backstage was mainly related to an individual (Goffman 1956). Nevertheless, this type of conduct is displayed on the digital images which, as was mentioned earlier, depict no humans. In this regard, it seems possible to apply the backstage as a characteristic of images with objects. In Couchsurfing images one can observe items that might belong to a host but the items themselves are disguised which is why observing such rooms felt like a 'look inside'. To say more, Goffman's frontstage can also be applied to the pictures with objects. In this case the frontstage is an image of a room with its settings and decorations presented in front of the Internet audience and capable of impacting this audience. Designed and nicely decorated rooms attempt to catch an eye of a potential traveler and provoke one into booking them. Such reveal brings awareness of how what has been previously considered as just a stage for performers turned into the performer itself.

Moreover, digital images let a viewer travel without even leaving a mobile device from one's hands. Visuals are like a painter's canvas and serve as a material to depict creativity and everyday life (Crouch, Jackson and Thompson 2005). As Appadurai (1996) claims, they contribute to creating the imagined selves around these imagined worlds. Such combination not only captures user's eye but also develops user's own imagination. Visual analysis revealed that when describing an image, it is equally important to pay attention to not only the tangible things such as decorations but also to the mood and the aesthetics of the rooms. Design and aesthetics might inspire a viewer to 'escape' from this virtual reality and daydream about being in a real apartment. Some samples depicted that more effort has been put into aesthetics, colour match and harmony in the interior and, as was mentioned above, in the room decorations. Decorative elements are not only part of the interior but also reflect the personal taste of an owner. For examples, some Airbnb rooms managed to deliver the cosy home feeling and a very clean and sophisticated look 'spiced' with a personal touch. By imagining the interior where the aesthetic component is prioritized over the functionality, one thinks of a trendy catalogue

image where the decoration is given a higher value than the actual living and where a viewer dreams to escape. However, other samples, which have shown the abundance of functional characteristics of a room, still passed on a message about 'homely home' (Andersson 2018), cosiness and authenticity thus inviting a viewer to have a look at the everyday life of other people. Although the privacy and the sense of belonging is clearly given a priority in this interior, in the example of some Couchsurfing images a viewer does not feel loneliness as host's presence is clearly visible. It is reflected in the private belongings, which have been covered or hidden just as when someone awaits friends, and also in the host's reflection in the window.

All in all, one specific case study with two different examples can provide valuable insights into the modern mediatized practices of hospitality, understand the interplay between the privacy and the publicity and highlight the importance of the aesthetics in welcoming guests. On a more general level, the images contain evidence about the new highly mediatized society constructed of the endless number of images offering such online experiences. As emphasized by Howells and Negreiros (2019), in our digital society it is crucial to have the knowledge of reading the visuals to avoid remaining visually illiterate. In this light, a newly created visual approach to the images with objects is just one step into studying the wonderful world of the visual communication.

In this thesis visuals from two online accommodation sharing websites have been critically analysed. Visual framework applicable to the images with objects in the field of hospitality and tourism can be further used in relation to other examples of touristic websites promoting various kinds of tourist activities and experiences. The emerging dynamics of the visual culture renegotiates the relations between tourists and places and outlines the new ways of communication (Scarles 2009: 465). Nowadays when the physical mobilities are limited due to the pandemic situation, online travelling agencies find new digitalized ways to communicate to tourists which includes even more new visuals to read and study. In this scenario it is crucial to know how to read digital images and get the right meanings from them especially in the times when the physical contact is restricted. To conclude, this thesis, by studying the digital images of Airbnb and Couchsurfing dwellings, contributes to gaining knowledge about the visual culture of hospitality which is part of the socially constructed and constantly changing digitalized reality we live in.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Checklist for visual analysis (for images with objects in the area of hospitality and tourism)

#### I. Denotation - First level of meaning:

- What do we see on an image?:
  - what
  - where
  - how
  - when

#### II. Connotation - Second and Third levels of meaning:

- Genre/Category/Type (What kind of image is it: landscape, portrait, scene from everyday life)
- What ideas/values/myths are communicated through what is depicted on an image:

##### 1. Carriers of connotation

- Gaze (where are the people depicted looking: at a viewer/not (*But I think it can be applied to the objects here*)):
  - Offer (*do not look at a viewer & no contact made, a viewer is offered the images with information*)
  - Demand (*look at a viewer, a viewer is acknowledged & the contact with the viewer is made, the image 'asks' a demand from a viewer*)

##### ❖ Colour:

- ❖ Hue (Actual colour scheme)
- ❖ Saturation (purity of a color, saturated/muted colours)
- ❖ Value (brightness/darkness ->near white form - high value, ->near black form - low value)
- ❖ Color coordination (harmonious/not, natural/superficial; if harmonious and natural ->cleanness, order, simplicity)

##### ☐ Settings:

- ☐ Interior
- ☐ Space & spacial organisation (where is the eye level? Are there one or two eye levels? Is an image seen from above or below? How close or far the objects are to a spectator)
- ☐ Light (candlelight, daylight, electric light)
  - ☐ Which elements are highlighted on an image?

##### ● Expressive content:

- Mood & Atmosphere, the 'feel' of an image

##### 2. Saliency (the most important element in an image)

- Ways to identify (may be one or several):

- Potent cultural symbols (elements that tell a viewer how to read an image)
- Foregrounding (the closest to a viewer element)
- Overlapping (an object can overlap other objects)
- Size (the biggest element)
- Colour (Saturated or vibrant element)
- Tone (the brightest element)
- Focus (where is a focus of an image?)

**3. Viewer's position** (in relation to an image)

- Angle of interaction (vertical, horizontal, oblique)
- Proximity (distance)
- The viewer looks from inside/outside

**4. Participants in the image** (who is represented and how the viewer is related to them):

- Representation/non-representation of participants in an image

**Appendix 2: Example of one visual analysis (for Airbnb and Couchsurfing images)**

Checklist Criteria		Denotation	Connotation	Keywords	
<i>What does an image depict</i>	<i>What</i>	A room with objects	Living room, habitable area	Living room, habitable	
	<i>Where</i>	Not clear	One of the rooms in an apartment	Apartment	
	<i>How (overall impression)</i>	Beige, green and grey colour scheme	Nude natural colors, green makes it more vivid	Nude, natural	
	<i>When</i>	Daytime	Sunny day	Day	
<i>Type of image</i>	<i>Genre</i>	A photo of a living room	Scene from everyday life	Everyday life	
<i>Carriers</i>	<i>Gaze</i>	Offer	The sofa and the other chair are positioned inside	Some other furniture is turned from the viewer showing the casualness of the interior - <b>offer</b>	Inside, furniture, casualness of interior
		Demand	One of the armchairs is turned to the viewer	Armchair is open to the viewer, invites the viewer to take a seat - <b>demand</b>	Open armchair, invitation
	<i>Colour</i>	Hue	Yellow	Part of a warm spectrum	Warm spectrum
		Saturation	Objects' colours look like in real life	Not saturated, natural colours	Real life colours, natural
		Value	More of a white colour here	High Value, tidiness	High Value, Tidiness
		Colour coordination	Beige, white, grey; green stands out a bit	Harmonious, natural, simplicity, order, cleanliness	Harmony, simplicity, order, cleanliness
	<i>Settings</i>	Interior	A sofa with cushions, two armchairs, one of them is covered with a fluffy fabric; there is a coffee table in the middle of the room with an open laptop and a vase on it; there is a carpet under the table; there is a green plant behind the table; behind the plant one can see two big white windows; there are stone walls; in between the two windows there is a shelf hanging; on the shelf one can see small potted plants and aroma sticks; to the left there is an electric fireplace; on	Cosy room, stylish, harmonic; looks like it has been designed by a professional, looks like a catalogue image but can also be someone's living room; Attention to small details to make the room unique and habitable and not just a standard hotel room; Seems like the owner cares about the room and makes sure it looks and smells good;	Cosy room, professional design, catalogue image, uniqueness, attention to small details, look and smell (aestheticization), take care of plants, open laptop, more than a magazine cover

			the top of the fireplace one can see small elements and a lamp; there is a mirror hanging above the fireplace;	A green palm plant is a bright accent among the beige palette; Plants show that there is someone to take care of them, one usually don't see any live plants in a hotel room; Laptop is open and seems like someone is going to use it now; the open laptop differs this room from being just a magazine cover	
		Space	One eye level; The eye level is on the windows' lower frame, most objects are located below that level; The image is seen a little bit from above, from human's height; All objects are quite close to a viewer, within reachable distance	Most objects are easy to observe, they are all gathered in one area (below the windows), easy for a human to spot the details. Seems like a professional took a picture knowing it's going to be looked at. Feels like a spectator can easily reach all of the objects. The image looks realistic, a viewer can imagine herself being in this apartment	Easy to observe, gathered in one area, professional took the picture, easy reach to objects, realistic look, imagine being in this apartment
		Light	Daylight; Windows are highlighted	Natural lighting; Big windows give more space to the room, they have been highlighted to visually extend the room's space	Natural lighting, big windows, space in the room, visual extension
	<i>Mood</i>	'The feel of an image'	-	It feels cosy and homelike; But at the same time it looks too neat to be the place of someone who lives there permanently; It looks as a place to work and relax at the same time, multipurpose;	Cosy, homelike room, too neat, place to work and relax, multipurpose



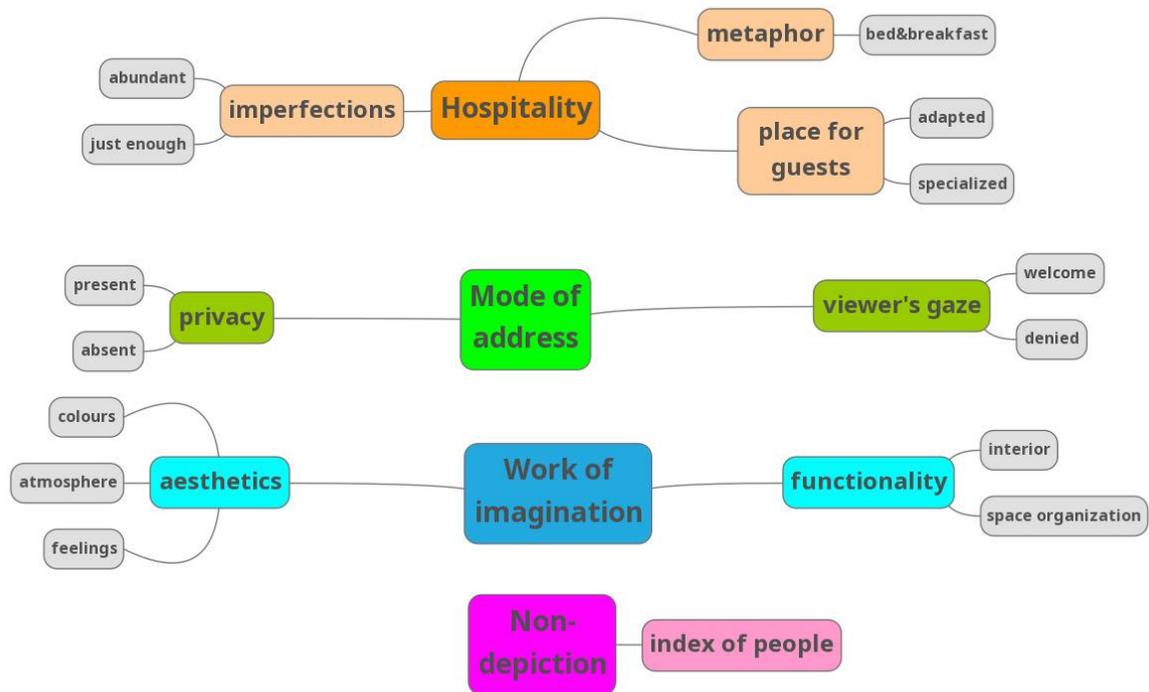
### Appendix 3: Example of the colour-coded table (for Airbnb and Couchsurfing images)

Airbnb			
keywords	category	keywords	category
Living room, habitable	habitable		
Nude, natural		Pure, natural colours	
Day		Daytime	
Everyday life		Everyday life	
Inside, furniture, casualty of interior	the feeling of home (Interior: casualty, professional)	For viewer to look at, no contact is requested	viewer's gaze
Open armchair, invitation	Viewer's gaze (welcome)	Invitation to relax, Look at the viewer, involvement	invitation, involvement, eng
Warm spectrum	Colour spectrum (warm)	Natural	feeling (natural, clean)
Cosy room, professional design, catalogue image, uniqueness, attention to small details, look and small (aestheticization), take care of	Aesthetics (Catalogue image, uniqueness, attention to small details, magazine cover)	Cleanness, transparency	Hospitality (Transparency, cleanness)
Easy to observe, gathered in one area, professional took the picture, easy reach to objects, realistic look, imagine being in this apartment	Work of imagination (Feeling: realistic, imagine being in the apartment, cosy, homelike, too neat)	Few major colours, simplicity, order	Organization (Order, simplicity)

Couchsurfing			
keywords	category	keywords	category
Partly harmonious, some hectic elements	Organization (partly harmonious, hectic)	Clean feel with some stains (metaphor)	organization
Small objects, unrecognizable objects, personal things, room belongs to someone, spends a lot of time, creased sofa, open laptop, open white box, left things on purpose, things to not to be seen by others, hidden things, black curtain hides things, amateur photographer, not professional lighting, shadow of photographer in the window, available after work or school, occasional objects on the photo, things are used not for their purpose, pet owner	belonging (small things, things not to be seen by others, pets)	Adjusted space, not supposed to be occupied by the host, sighs of human presence, no sign of the host, many imperfections visible, hurry, view not wanted to be seen, privacy is important to the host, no proper lighting, amateur photographer, show functionality, functionality is more important than aesthetics	feel of home (absent, supposed to be for guests, no sigh of host) Privacy (view not wanted to be seen) functionality
Hard to observe, scattered objects, all space is occupied	space (occupied, hard to observe)	Easy to observe, below eye level, contrast in space organization, too little space	space (too little, easy to observe)
Electric light, darkness despite having two sources of light, cover all imperfections	cover imperfections	Hidden daylight, electric light as the only source, superficial is above the natural	superficial

## Appendix 4: Mind map created after forming themes and categories

Created with <https://app.mindmup.com/map/new/1589536928470>



## Appendix 5: Complete list of samples used in this thesis

The following list comprises all the images used as empirical data in this thesis. Even though in the text there are some quotes taken from the same image, they highlight a different aspect of an image.

### 5.1 Airbnb Urban location



### 5.2 Airbnb Sea location



### 5.3 Airbnb Mountains location



### 5.4 Couchsurfing Urban location



### 5.5 Couchsurfing Sea location

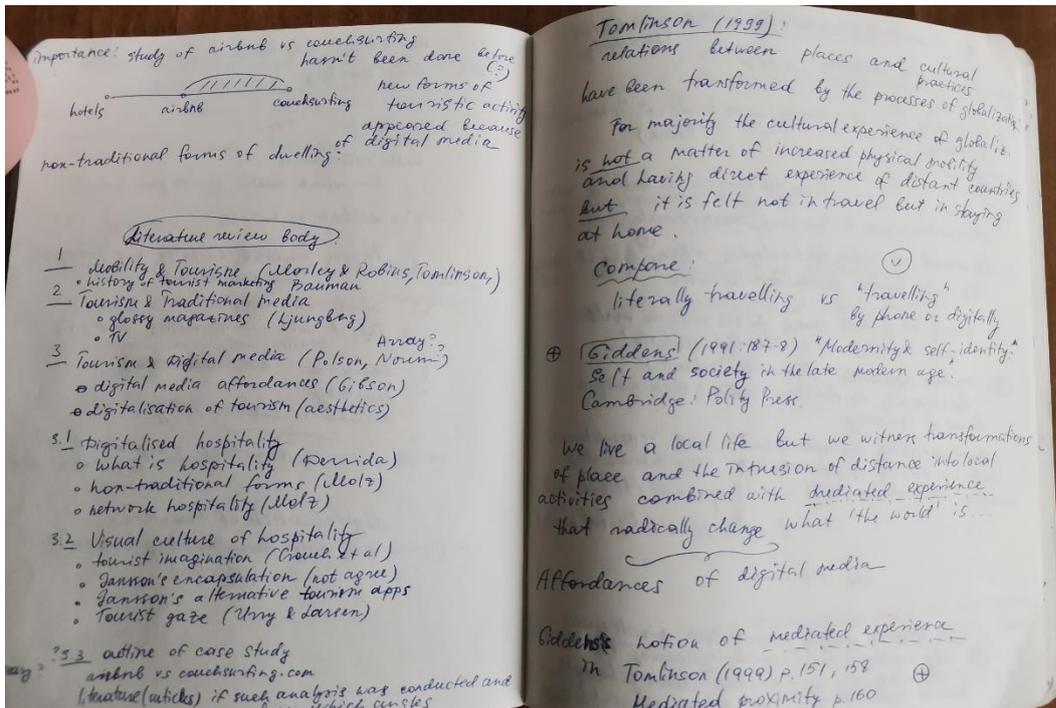


### 5.6 Couchsurfing Mountains location



## Appendix 6: Photos of my personal notes during the thesis writing process

### 6.1 Draft version of the literature review



### 6.2 Sketch of analysis mind map

