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Impacts of P2P Accommodation: Neighbourhood Perspectives

Peer-to-peer (P2P) accommodation has grown exponentially, yielding significant economic, social and environmental impacts. Unsurprisingly, calls for strengthening regulatory controls regarding P2P accommodation have intensified in recent years. Although research on the associated impacts of the growth of P2P accommodation has started to proliferate, minimal attention has been placed on the perceptions of residents. This study examines the impacts of P2P accommodation at the neighbourhood and residential levels by drawing from the perceptions of residents of Koukaki, a southeast neighbourhood of the Municipality of Athens, Greece which in recent years has witnessed a dramatic increase in P2P accommodation listings. The study identifies the perceived benefits and problems brought about on neighbourhoods as a result of the rapid growth of P2P accommodation in residential areas. Overall, findings are informative of the implications of the rise of P2P accommodation in residential areas and are, thus, useful to tourism planners, developers and policymakers.

Key words: P2P accommodation; impacts; neighbourhoods; resident perceptions

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Introduction

The growth of P2P accommodation around the world has been phenomenal, transforming the accommodation sector by offering an alternative, more authentic accommodation experience to visitors. The rapid growth of P2P accommodation networks has unsurprisingly attracted considerable academic attention. Equally, concerns have been raised regarding the potential impacts of the growth of P2P accommodation at the economic, social and environmental levels. As a result, calls for strengthening regulatory controls on P2P accommodation have intensified in recent years. Although research on the impacts of P2P accommodation is growing, the voice of residents regarding the associated impacts of P2P accommodation at the neighbourhood level remains largely muted. This study aims to examine the perceptions of the residents of the Koukaki area in Athens, Greece with regard to the growth of P2P accommodation listings in their neighbourhood. As such, significant insights are gained in terms of the benefits and problems that the P2P accommodation growth may yield at the micro level; thus, imparting important knowledge that may strengthen policies surrounding P2P accommodation.

Background

Considering the numerous benefits P2P accommodation offers to both hosts and guests, its growth is not surprising. On the one hand, P2P accommodation allows owners of properties to gain additional income by renting out unused rooms, apartments and/or houses (Fang et al, 2016), thus improving their standard of living. On the other hand, it extends the range of accommodation options for travellers whilst offering convenience and efficiency (McNichol, 2015) as well as the opportunity for personal relationship development between hosts and guests (Tussyadiah and Zach, 2017). Indeed, a burgeoning body of scholarly work

focusing on Airbnb – the world’s most prominent P2P accommodation network – confirms the win-win situation advocated by the P2P accommodation philosophy.

Nonetheless, the growing popularity of P2P accommodation has raised concerns over their potential impacts on local economies and societies, with calls for greater pressures to strengthen regulation being placed forward (Edelman and Geradin, 2015). For instance, it has been argued that the hotel sector, and particularly lower-end hotels, are negatively impacted by the increase in P2P accommodation (Zervas et al, 2017). Likewise, concerns have been voiced over the associated impacts on host communities. For example, the illegal activity of many Airbnb rentals and the ‘free rider’ attitude encouraged by Airbnb’s absence of accommodation taxes (Guttendag, 2015) are primary concerns for policymakers. Impacts on local housing markets have been recognised (Guttendag, 2015) as the economic benefits of P2P accommodation have encouraged unscrupulous behaviour, with landlords evicting tenants in order to vacate units for use as short-term rentals (Jefferson-Jones, 2014). Additionally, spatial implications have been identified (Gutierrez et al, 2017) as P2P accommodation listings tend to expand to historic centres due to the availability of supply in apartment buildings (Gutierrez et al, 2017). As such, tourist overcrowding in residential areas and, consequently, negative impacts on residents’ wellbeing have been acknowledged as potential problems emanating from the growth of P2P accommodation (Sans and Quagliari, 2016).

Indeed, as Said (2012) reported, residents who live near Airbnb accommodations complain of noise issues, voicing security concerns and having conflicts with both Airbnb hosts and guests. Gottlieb (2013) argued that a transient stream of tourists in a residential building or neighbourhood can be unpleasant for other tenants or neighbours and can generally detract from the community fabric. Indeed, the growth in P2P accommodation has

had a profound effect on local communities and particularly on the lives of residents in neighbourhoods where there is a large supply of P2P accommodation listings. Nonetheless, research on the perceptions of residents of P2P accommodation and the potential effects of its rapid growth on neighbourhoods remains an under-explored area of research. An evaluation of the perceptions of residents of the impacts of P2P accommodation at the micro level is important as significant insights may be drawn that will, in turn, inform policymakers of the implications of the growing phenomenon of P2P accommodation. This study aims to address the existing gap in the literature by examining the perceptions of residents of the impacts of P2P accommodation growth. To this end, we focus on the residents of Koukaki, a southeast neighbourhood of the Municipality of Athens, Greece. Situated at the foot of the Acropolis, Koukaki has recently been characterised by the Guardian as ‘Airbnb’s city booming neighbourhood’, witnessing an 800% growth of inbound guests staying in listings on P2P accommodation networks such as Airbnb (Coldwell, 2016). This dramatic rise of P2P accommodation in the area has been both welcomed and condemned by Greek national press, paralleling press in other European cities, and indicating the imperative need to examine residents’ perceptions in areas experiencing rapid growth in Airbnb listings.

Methodology

An exploratory, qualitative research framework was adopted to collect and analyse empirical data. Qualitative research was deemed appropriate as it allows the in-depth exploration of the factors underpinning host-guest relations and, by extent, determine residents’ perceptions. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were performed with residents in the area of Koukaki, Athens. The interviews were conducted by an experienced member of the research team on a one-to-one basis and face-to-face. The interviews lasted from November 2017 to March 2018 and took place either in informants’ homes or in a public

place (e.g. cafeteria). The interviewees were purposively selected considering the backgrounds, age and gender of the informants to ensure enough diversity in the sample (Ritchie et al, 2014). Purposive sampling enables researchers to use their judgement to select people that will best enable them to answer their research questions and meet their objectives (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007). Thus, for the purposes of this study residents of both genders and of various age groups living on a permanent basis in Koukaki were included in the sample. Overall, 31 informants agreed to participate in the study. Each interview lasted approximately 35 to 90 minutes, with questions being framed according to the research objectives. For instance, questions on the awareness and perceptions of informants of P2P accommodation and its associated impacts to the informant's neighbourhood were asked. Each participant was further probed if necessary and notes were taken before, during and after the interviews to capture the verbal and non-verbal aspects of the interviews. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse data whereby emerging topics were grouped into interrelated themes, following a coding scheme. For example, the transcripts and notes from the interviews were read several times in order to identify key themes based on research questions. Additionally, blocks of verbatim text were copied, re-organised and cross-referenced to allow the identification of thematic categories. Sub-categories also emerged, which were combined with pre-identified themes to allow for deeper elaboration on key issues that encourage evidence-based understanding (Hennink et al, 2010).

Discussion

Although data analysis is still ongoing, preliminary findings reveal some interesting insights. First and foremost, the majority of the impacts identified were negative. Almost all of the informants highlighted a range of negative impacts emerging from the rise in P2P accommodation in their residential area, with the impacts revolving around social, environmental and economic dimensions. In particular, concerns were expressed over the

social negative effects of the increasing number of tourists in the area of Koukaki. For example, ‘crowding’ and ‘excessive noise’ from groups of Airbnb guests were identified as key problems emerging from the proliferation of P2P accommodation. Informants complained about the buzzer ringing at different times of the day when guests arrive in the blocks of flats as well as guests’ irresponsible behaviour in the flats as many are shouting, running around in halls and listen to loud music. P2P accommodation guests were acknowledged as transient guests with no interest in the well-being of their neighbours. Additionally, ‘lack of privacy’ and ‘safety’ in the neighbourhood were acknowledged as problems emanating from the growing numbers of tourist staying in Airbnb properties. Many informants expressed fear of confronting guests, with several becoming irritated over the constant state of anxiety they are experiencing that is undoubtedly impacting their physical as well as mental health. Although some informants claimed that they confronted guests in the past, the lack of support from the local police has been disheartening, a reminder of residents’ inability in controlling the situation. Of particular interest, was informants’ concern of the ‘loss of the sense of community’ shared among residents in the area. As informants argued, the transformation of the area as a result of the growth of P2P accommodation has changed the bond shared among residents, particularly those of an older age who can’t speak English and who feel they have no neighbours to rely on anymore. This brings us to the second key finding.

The popularity of P2P accommodation has led many property owners in Koukaki to list their properties on popular platforms such as Airbnb with the hope of earning an additional income. In recent years, however, in Koukaki entire blocks of flats have been listed on P2P accommodation networks; thus, gradually transforming the residential space into a commercial one while increasing property rent and evictions of local tenants.

Interestingly, several residents expressed an interest in moving out of the area but are financially unable to. Within this context, the ‘increase in council taxes’ was highlighted as a negative economic impact that residents have to bear. Several informants commented on the ‘irresponsible behaviour of property owners’ in terms of tax avoidance. Informants argued that these property owners are benefiting economically yet do not have to endure the negative social aspects of the growth of P2P accommodation. In this respect, most of the informants emphasised that guests staying in P2P accommodation are of low quality who typically do not spend money in the neighbourhood’s shops. Thus, the economic contribution of guests is restricted to property owners. Lastly, informants commented on the environmental impacts of the growth of P2P accommodation in the area. ‘Damages in common facilities’ such as lifts, rubbish and litter as well as the ‘constant construction’ going on as part of flat refurbishments were identified as daily issues residents have to face.

Although the majority of the informants had negative perceptions of P2P accommodation and its impacts in the neighbourhood, some expressed more optimistic views. Specifically, informants emphasised the potential problems that may arise between permanent neighbours, commenting that not all guests are irresponsible; contrary, as temporary neighbours there is no risk in long-lasting complaints and/or ongoing problems. Interestingly, the informants with more positive views of P2P accommodation were relatives of hosts indicating that a difference in opinion between residents with direct or indirect economic benefit from P2P accommodation and those who do not have any economic benefits. Evidently, residents’ opinions are being largely influenced by the (in)direct involvement in P2P accommodation hosting, the potential benefit gained by short-term rentals and their interaction with guests.

Conclusion

There are social, economic and environmental implications emerging from the growing phenomenon of P2P accommodation in residential areas, which yields a number of potential impacts, primarily negative such as safety and privacy concerns, pollution and loss of community feeling amongst others. This study carries both theoretical and practical implications that contribute to the knowledge on the impacts of the growth of P2P accommodation on residential areas and open up directions for future research. First, findings reveal that the host-guest relationship emerging – often involuntarily – from the growth of P2P accommodation in residential areas needs to be further investigated. In particular, the conditions under which the balance of power between the host community and guests within such settings develops need to be examined if understanding on the potential impacts of the growth of P2P accommodation on residential areas and visitors' satisfaction is to be advanced. Second, findings offer insights to tourism planners, developers and policy-makers on the conditions under which the growth of P2P accommodation listings in a residential area might yield positive and/or negative impacts. Consequently, appropriate regulation might be adopted in order to manage potential negative effects more effectively and sustainably. Future research might also consider a wider sample of the population to maximise the generalizability of the findings.

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