ADDRESSING THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUE OF WORKING CONDITIONS IN TOURISM THROUGH TECHNOLOGY TOOLS: THE LAS KELLYS INITIATIVE

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Character count: 85.335

2022

Abstract

In the past two decades, numerous travel technology tools have emerged to aid both tourists and industry stakeholders in better planning. These tools have formed new interrelations between technology, tourism, and society. The present study explores the interrelations between a travel technology tool initiated by a Spanish organization of housekeeping workers, Las Kellys, and socio-political issues of working conditions in the travel sector. To achieve this, it employs exploratory research with a mixed methods design.

Findings from the interview with the Spanish association and survey responses collected from hotel employees in management positions reveal complex layers of the investigated matter. The Las Kellys booking platform is set to list hotels only if they meet criteria in relation to labour regulations. Criteria proposed touch upon the most important challenges identified in working conditions of hotel staff. Additionally, the association has a high union presence within hotels, which is considered by Las Kellys among the key factors for the potential success of the initiative. Nonetheless, the analysis indicates that factors regarding the approach taken toward hoteliers and potential inequity risks for non-listed hotel businesses must be taken into careful consideration.

It is important to note, however, that the booking site at the time of conducting this research is still under development, therefore, only a partial understanding of the investigated issue may have been achieved. Nonetheless, the study provides a new academic angle within digital tourism studies and calls for further research on the matter.

Contents

Introduction

Within the past two decades, digitalization and the development and use of technology tools have become increasingly important factors with large effects on the tourism industry (Nilashi, et al., 2018; Mariani & Matarazzo, 2020; van Nuenen & Scarles, 2021). From the traveller's perspective, these tools are agents, which greatly influence the decision-making process when planning a trip. Tourists have become heavily dependent on online information and infrastructure in the form of booking and rating platforms, which can make travel product purchases easier (Fang, et al., 2016; Nilashi, et al., 2018). Additionally, from a business perspective, technology solutions offer a new distribution channel for sales and communication, and increased visibility of brands and services (Mariani & Matarazzo, 2020), enhancing reputation, performance, and customer loyalty (Mariani & Predvoditeleva, 2019).

Numerous interactive digital platforms have been developed over the past few decades, which cater to these needs and goals directly, such as online travel agencies (OTAs) like Booking.com or Expedia, or review platforms such as TripAdvisor with an incorporated booking function (Bigné, et al., 2020; Figini, et al., 2020). Such platforms play a great role in the development of tourism infrastructure and communication on various scales (van Nuenen & Scarles, 2021). However, they also have great implications on cognitive and psychological aspects and social relations by facilitating an open space where tourists and other industry stakeholders interact and interrelate, (re)shaping each other's and their own values and behaviours (Munar & Gyimóthy, 2013; Mariani & Matarazzo, 2020).

Building on the potential of online platforms to construct new social relations and realities, the present study explores how technology tools may have the prospect to address social issues within the travel sector. Specifically, it investigates a booking platform under development by a trade union in Spain, which aims to list only hotels that provide adequate working conditions and respect labour rights (Gregory, 2021; WION, 2021). The objective of this study is to provide insight on an initiative, which to the best of the author's knowledge has not been investigated by previous research yet due to its novelty, and to provide a general understanding of how technology tools in tourism can contribute to

raising awareness and addressing complex issues such as labour rights. As such, the study aims to answer the following research question:

How can travel technology tools address the socio-political issue of working conditions in tourism?

The study is structured as follows. First, a background of the research is outlined, providing a brief description of the current climate surrounding the tourism workforce and presenting the association Las Kellys. This is important as it provides the reader with a better understanding of the context in which the investigated issue is constructed. This is followed by a review of the relevant body of literature on digital tourism and online interactive travel platforms. The third section outlines the methodological considerations in conducting this research. The results of the semi-structured interview and survey are then presented in the findings. Furthermore, findings are critically discussed and an analysis of the investigated technology tool's role in addressing workforce issues in tourism is presented in the subsequent section. Lastly, the paper concludes with the aim to answer the research problem and highlight further grounds for research on the matter investigated.

Research background

The following section outlines the main grounds for conducting this research on the Las Kellys initiative to launch a booking platform that addresses the working conditions of hotel staff in Spain. Firstly, as Las Kellys is an association with a mission to ensure decent working conditions for hotel housekeepers, a brief description of current issues surrounding this group of tourism workforce is presented. This presentation is key for understanding why the Las Kellys initiative exists. Furthermore, the subsequent subsection is an introduction of the Las Kellys association. Detailing the association's background, mission, and work is imperative in understanding the context in which the investigated research problem is set.

An overview of hotel housekeepers' working conditions

Tourism is an important generator of employment as recognized also by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2010), however, a global phenomenon of exploitation in the sector has been identified and reprehended, as it stands in direct opposition with the Sustainable Development Goal 8

set by the UN regarding decent work (Robinson, et al., 2019; Baum & Hai, 2019; Ioannides, et al., 2021). Regarding hotel housekeeping, these departments have a high level of workforce turnover, with a heavy workload and physically demanding tasks in more than often poor conditions with regards to the work environment, equipment, and remuneration (Ollus, 2016; Markey et al., 2014; Janta et al., 2011; Onsøyen et al., 2009). Additionally, while there can be great flexibility for both employers and employees, housekeeping employment is characterized by increased insecurity for workers due to a high ratio of part-time and temporary contracts, resulting in income instability (Ollus, 2016; Markey et al., 2014; Janta et al., 2011; Onsøyen et al., 2009). It is important to note that these conditions and realities may vary from country to country due to national labour regulations, while hotels specifically also have differing strategies, such as hiring in-house or outsourced, which may influence contract type, remuneration, and benefits (Markey et al., 2014; Onsøyen et al., 2009).

To conclude, depending on national work regulations and/or employment strategies within hotels, employment in housekeeping often can be characterized as financially insecure and physically demanding with a high work volume.

Las Kellys – the association

In the previous subsection of this paper, several characteristics of housekeeping employment that result in work precarity have been presented. In this subsection, the Las Kellys association is introduced, presenting its history, challenges, and current status.

In 2012, hit by the economic crisis, the Spanish government at the time passed a labour reform, which severely impacted the working conditions of hotel housekeepers in the country. The reform allowed hotels to outsource their employees, meaning housekeepers were made redundant and rehired via subcontractors, which resulted in a decrease in salary and an increase in workload and work hours (Badcock, 2017).

The idea of forming the Las Kellys association began when a group of Spanish housekeepers started connecting and sharing their work experiences via social media. The digital platforms initially served as a space for these individuals to tell their stories and receive advice from those who shared similar experiences, however, the group soon started to organize meetups, which eventually grew outside of

Barcelona (Rebollo, 2018; Molina, 2021). Later, the group decided to self-organize within an official association, which would give their discourse more public attention. This step was also necessary since the preexisting trade unions the group members have been previously members of failed to address their concerns regarding inadequate working conditions (Molina, 2021).

Consequently, motivated to tackle work precarity, the Las Kellys association was officially founded in 2016 in Barcelona. The name originates from the expression 'las que limpian' in Spanish, meaning the 'one who cleans' (Badcock, 2017; Molina, 2021). The association's main concern from the early stages was related to outsourcing, legally enabled since 2012. According to the spokeswoman of the association's Barcelona branch, Vania Arana, when housekeepers are employed via outsourcing companies, remuneration falls by 40% from the usual hourly rate, while the workload is increased by 30% and further rises in high season (Molina, 2021).

After several months of organizing demonstrations and public speeches, Las Kellys was given the opportunity to speak at the Chamber of Congress in Spain and also at the European Parliament to propose a legal framework, which prohibits subcontracting of staff, and implement inspections to ensure conditions and workload comply with the regulations (RTVE, 2017; Molina, 2021). The demonstrations were not received positively by employers, larger trade unions, and right-wing political parties (Rebollo, 2018), however, the new legal framework under Article 42 was set to be officially approved in 2018 in Spain (Molina, 2021; elDiaro.es, u.d.)

Las Kellys started receiving more attention and in 2019, the association received the "TO DO Award for Human Rights in Tourism" at the ITB trade fair in Berlin (Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung, 2019). However, as the pandemic's first wave hit the travel industry in 2020, several housekeepers were made redundant or placed on ERTE, a Spanish furlough scheme covering a certain percentage of the workers' salaries (Molina, 2021; TheLocal.es, 2022). Moreover, during the pandemic, hotels did not comply with regulations, and workers under part-time ERTE were paid an amount equivalent to approximately 12 hours per week of work, while in reality, they were working overtime with no remuneration for the extra hours. Therefore, payable work hours were reduced, while the workload remained the same as before the part-time contracts (Labarca, 2021).

As such, Las Kellys' mission for social justice and decent working conditions continues. Their latest initiative is to launch a booking platform, which lists hotels that comply with labour regulations (Gregory, 2021; WION, 2021), an initiative that constitutes the research topic of this study. Since the initiative relies on technology tools, as highlighted in the introduction, this research aims to answer the question: *How can travel technology tools address the socio-political issue of working conditions in tourism?*

Literature review

As previously stated, the present study investigates travel technology tools as a potential contributory means to mitigate issues surrounding working conditions in tourism. To attain a deeper understanding of the matter, in this segment of the paper existing body of literature is reviewed.

To the best of the author's knowledge, research on the Las Kellys platform has not yet been done since at the time of conducting this research it is still under development. As such, the two relevant bodies of literature reviewed concern digital tourism and online interactive travel platforms such as booking and rating sites, which are often merged (e.g., Booking.com). Both topics are relevant to this paper since such studies provide important knowledge about the impact digital tools have on tourism. Additionally, these studies also give an apprehension of how travel stakeholders, such as tourists or companies, interact with and utilize these tools, and develop certain behaviour patterns and values. This is especially important since the booking platform investigated in this research is developed for travellers and industry professionals and addresses a matter with a strong nuance of morality and ethics (decent work and human rights).

Digital tourism

The development of new technology tools and their intersection with tourism has received considerable academic attention, especially within the past two decades. Technology has reshaped not only the way tourism is being practiced, but it has also created an emerging body of literature identified as digital tourism studies (Munar & Gyimóthy, 2013; van Nuenen & Scarles, 2021). During the review of existing literature on digital tourism, two main topics have emerged, which will be presented in the

below subsections: 1) The concepts of digital tourism and digital-free tourism, and 2) Conceptualizations of society, tourism, and technology relations.

The concepts of digital tourism and digital-free tourism

Some definitions of digital tourism refer to the user experience of tourists before, during, and after their travels. For example, Benyon, et al. (2013) define digital tourism as an area "concerned with the use of digital technologies to enhance the tourist experience" (p. 521), which also facilitates "mixed reality interactions" (p. 522). Wright identifies a similar feature of digital tourism and defines it as an element that "intersects past and present, time and space and mediates between real and false" (Wright, 2015, p. 86).

In practice, these mixed reality interactions may occur in the form of virtual traveling in augmented realities, on social media (Akhtar, et al., 2021), booking platforms, review and rating websites (Benyon, et al., 2013), or even when visiting a tourism attraction, such as a museum (Navarrete, 2019; Guo, et al., 2021). Several studies highlight that digital tools within tourism are not only used to ease purchase procedures or decision-making during trip planning, but also to escape routines and enhance experience, relaxation, and enjoyment (Benyon, et al., 2013; Wright, 2015; Navarrete, 2019; Guo, et al., 2021). For example, Guo, et al (2021) find that by applying multisensory cues (e.g., audio, and visual cues) within museums, the visitor experience is even more enhanced, since these cues generate emotions, while they also provide a sense of being more present within the experience. Additionally, Navarrete (2019) find that digital tools allowed for the development of a more diverse collection of exhibitions and experiences in museums, which were made available for virtual visitors as well, generating further revenue and resources for such attractions.

Furthermore, several studies have investigated how digital tourism has affected the marketing of places and experiences to travellers (Caraivan, 2017; Chamboko-Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2021; Ketter & Avraham, 2021). The way destinations and services are portrayed within the digital realm has employed deeper associations with emotions and personal values (Ketter & Avraham, 2021), with interactions happening in real-time irrelevant of time and space (Chamboko-Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2021). Additionally, Caraivan (2017) highlights that within the "virtual landscape of tourism" (p. 159), digital

tools completely mediate business-tourists interactions, and if implemented with the adequate strategy, these technology tools can provide the necessary means to grow and maintain a good reputation of a travel business, even in times of great crisis (Ketter & Avraham, 2021).

Nevertheless, as studies highlighting the benefits of digital tourism grew, the new concept of digital-free tourism emerged, presenting a more critical angle on the use of technology tools in travel (Jing Li & Pearce, 2018; Egger, et al., 2020; Liu & Hu, 2021; Cai & McKenna, 2021). For example, Egger, et al. (2020) argue that increased use of technology interferes with levels of anxiety and stress, thus having serious implications on overall mental health. However, studies exploring the concept of digital-free tourism mainly refer to technology tools that interfere with our day-to-day lives, and less to digital tools which enhance travel experience, such as the case presented by Guo, et al. (2021). As such, most studies investigating the concept of digital-free tourism, refer to the practice that "limits tourists' access to information and communication technologies during vacation" (Liu & Hu, 2021, p. 3271), since there is a common practice of travellers actively engaging with social media and review platforms during their holidays (Egger, et al., 2020), decreasing the sense of presence and connectedness to the experience and/or destination. Consequently, although digital tools have allowed travellers to remain connected with friends and family, digital detoxing has become more and more sought after in travel (Jing Li & Pearce, 2018), due to what Liu & Hu (2021) identify as techno exhaustion or technostress as a result of overexposure.

The above-reviewed literature has provided a preliminary understanding of the concepts of digital tourism and digital-free tourism, offering a quick glimpse of the various relations between digital tools and tourism stakeholders (e.g., tourists, and businesses). In the subsequent section, three conceptual frameworks of these relations are presented.

Conceptual frameworks on society, tourism, and technology relations

As previously highlighted, digital tourism enables interactions, which are free of spatial and temporal constraints, and thus complex relations are developed. Therefore, conceptualizing these relations is essential to map how technology has been identified to interact with society and the travel sector. From

this perspective, Munar & Gyimóthy (2013) and Baggio & Del Chiappa (2013) provide important contributions.

Firstly, Munar & Gyimóthy (2013) identify three main conceptual frameworks describing relations between society and technology as part of their analysis of digital tourism studies. The first concept the authors describe is determinism. Determinism employs a straightforward view of socio-technologic relations, perceiving "technology as a main agent of change that act as transformative forces in society with individuals having little control over them" (Munar & Gyimóthy, 2013, p. 253). The concept of determinism, therefore, depicts individuals and groups to some degree as victims of technological developments. On the other hand, the social construction of technology framework argues the opposite, highlighting that the power of change is owned by individuals and groups, and they are the agents that facilitate change, not technology (Munar & Gyimóthy, 2013). As Munar & Gyimóthy argue, according to the social construction of technology framework, "technologies are seen as transformative tools providing collective action and meaning" (p. 255), thus from this perspective technology is used by actors of society as a change-making tool. However, the third framework describes the relationship between technology and society as mutually influencing, meaning individuals and groups impact technology and vice versa. Finally, a key element of this relationship is that while both agents influence social change to a certain degree, neither possesses the mandate over the prospects of such change (Munar & Gyimóthy, 2013).

While acknowledging that technology has considerably reshaped society and tourism, Baggio & Del Chiappa (2013) approach a more close-up view of socio-technology relations, investigating these within digital business ecosystems in tourism. The authors describe digital business ecosystems as a network of various tourism stakeholders, which can interact both physically and virtually in a large variety of forms (e.g., exchange of information, purchases, etc.) on various scales (local, global, etc.). For their study, Baggio & Del Chiappa (2013) examine a large network of tourism actors within three Italian destinations and findings show that the virtual and physical components within this ecosystem are so intertwined, it would be nearly impossible to investigate them separately. Meaning, the relationships between and among tourism stakeholders and digital tools in the three destinations are so interlaced that interactions within the digital realm and the digital realm in itself can no longer be considered

separate from that of the physical world (Baggio & Del Chiappa, 2013). These findings are important as they highlight how within the travel sector technology tools can no longer be viewed as external factors, but as integrated parts of tourism structures and relationships.

To conclude, there is consensus within literature that technology and digitalization within tourism have completely reshaped infrastructures, relationships, and dynamics. Technology tools are no longer perceived as separate entities, but rather as an already intrinsic part of society and the travel sector.

Online interactive travel platforms

An additional important segment within digital tourism and relevant studies are online interactive travel platforms, specifically booking and review/rating platforms. This section of the literature review will present the concepts of user-generated content (hereby UGC), electronic word-of-mouth, and digital storytelling. Additionally, it will also present the cognitive and/or psychological aspects identified by studies discussing the interferences between online interactive travel platforms and personal values and emotions. Finally, the chapter concludes by presenting some of the critical views within academia on digital tourism studies focusing on online interactive travel platforms.

The concepts of user-generated content, electronic word-of-mouth, and digital storytelling

Travel products and services, unlike tangible products, carry a higher risk in terms of end quality, as they are quite experiential and each travel experience is different (Mariani & Predvoditeleva, 2019; Mariani & Matarazzo, 2020; Figini, et al., 2020). Therefore, several studies highlight tourists' reliance on UGC in the decision-making process while planning a trip (Fang, et al., 2016; Nilashi, et al., 2018; Mariani & Matarazzo, 2020; van Nuenen & Scarles, 2021). Cheung, et al. (2022) define UGC as "any form of publicly available content created by internet users which are not controlled by marketers" (p. 154). UGC can take the form of texts and/or audio and visual content (e.g., videos, photos, recordings) (Mariani & Matarazzo, 2020), and are more often present on social media, community-based sites, such as TripAdvisor (Figini, et al., 2020), and transaction-based sites, such as Booking.com (Xiang, et al., 2017).

Travel-related UGC identified to influence tourists' decision-making has been also defined by literature as electronic word of mouth, shortly eWOM (Mariani & Borghi, 2018; Mariani & Predvoditeleva, 2019;

Bigné, et al., 2020). EWOM in the form of reviews and ratings has become an important source of information for travellers, and on these platforms, a tourist is the travel products' "greatest salesperson" (Benyon, et al., 2013, p. 523). As eWOM is a type of content less controlled by marketers (Cheung, et al., 2022), it takes a similar form to traditional word-of-mouth, dominated by personal opinions and experiences and a strong desire to share these with other consumers of the same brand, service, and/or product (Mariani & Matarazzo, 2020).

Lastly, Alcantud-Diaz, et al. (2014) discuss UGC as digital storytelling and define it as "a new form of narrative that shares characteristics with more traditional means of storytelling and with novel types of self-expression narratives" (p. 187). Similarly to other definitions of UGC, the authors refer not only to written texts but also to video or photo content, often shared by travellers during or after their trip. This type of content is perceived by the authors to have the ability to connect people and places, bridging past and present (Alcantud-Diaz, et al., 2014), a strong characteristic of digital tourism (Munar & Gyimóthy, 2013; Wright, 2015).

The interrelations between online interactive travel platforms and personal values and emotions

Several studies have argued the growing importance of UGC and eWOM as sources of information to tourists, however, less attention has been given by academia to how this less controlled online content interrelate with the personal values and emotions of users (Cheung, et al., 2022). This is especially important since reviews often contain expressions of identity, fueled by personal opinions and emotions, that have been identified to evoke behavioural responses (Munar & Gyimóthy, 2013; Cheung, et al., 2022). In the context of this paper, studies investigating these aspects of online platforms and UGC are relevant as the research problem proposes a topic with a moral and ethical nuance – labour rights and decent working conditions in connection with digital tools.

Firstly, the fast widespread use and success of interactive online travel platforms can be explained not only through their ability to assist tourists in decision-making, but also through their gamified features. For example, TripAdvisor rewards users who actively post reviews by awarding them points. The more points a reviewer has, the more trustworthy they are considered by other users (Fang, et al., 2016; van Nuenen & Scarles, 2021). Additionally, the platform also provides a badge based on the number of

destinations a user has registered to have visited. Studies find that these 'rewards' act as stimuli to users and evoke the response to publish even more reviews (van Nuenen & Scarles, 2021). To be provided with the ability to direct the narrative (post and edit a description of a travel experience on a review site) and be empowered and rewarded to share it with individuals have reshaped tourists' behaviours (Cheung, et al., 2022).

Furthermore, in their study about how emotional and rational UGC have a great impact on travellers' values and behavioural responses, Cheung, et al. (2022) approach consumer value theory, which argues that consumers make purchase decisions based on various consumption values, and the authors exemplify four of these. Firstly, the functional value corresponds to consumers' practical needs and rational considerations. In the case of online platforms, functional value can be provided through information and reservation/transaction functions (Cheung, et al., 2022). Secondly, consumers perceive value based on emotions. For instance, reading positive reviews of a place or having a positive travel experience to share may evoke corresponding emotions, thus tourists find value in the travel product. Since experience constitutes the core element of travelling, the emotional value for tourists is among the most elemental (Cheung, et al., 2022). Third, consumers find value in relationships developed with brands or like-minded individuals (Cheung, et al., 2022). Lastly, a sense of belonging or connectivity on a digital platform creates entitativity value. These two values are most present in community-based review platforms, such as TripAdvisor where users can score and comment on each other's content. Additionally, studies find individuals share reviews to support others' decision-making (Mariani & Matarazzo, 2020), and choices are often made based on what other consumers perceive of the reviewed travel product (Figini, et al., 2020).

Furthermore, besides the role of reviewer, individuals sharing content on interactive travel platforms often take up the roles of "online activist, troll, social critic, information seeker and socialite" (Xiang, et al., 2017, p. 52). On this note, contrary to the relational and entitativity value of interactive travel platforms, Munar & Gyimóthy (2013) argue that online communities have no real commitment and review platforms often include false information, which may be challenging since much of the UGC on these platforms stimulate purchase decisions and behavioural responses (Cheung, et al., 2022).

To conclude, studies investigating online interactive travel platforms acknowledge a strong interference between these and values, emotions, and responses. Content on review platforms often evokes emotions and serves as an expression of identity that manifests in relation to a travel experience. This type of content also greatly influences other reviewers' responses and behaviour, stimulating future purchase actions and (re)shaping consumer values.

Critical approaches to digital tourism studies investigating online interactive travel platforms

The development of a plethora of new booking and review sites has generated a growing number of studies investigating these platforms (Fang, et al., 2016; Xiang, et al., 2017; Mariani & Borghi, 2018; Nilashi, et al., 2018; Mariani & Predvoditeleva, 2019; Mariani & Matarazzo, 2020; Bigné, et al., 2020). However, there is consensus that while these studies offer new insights into the travel sector, they often employ online reviews as a single data source, which may prove to be problematic since this type of data is considered to be anecdotal, volatile, and often inaccurate, resulting in methodological challenges (Xiang, et al., 2017; Figini, et al., 2020; Bigné, et al., 2020). For example, platforms often use different scoring systems in ratings, therefore, there is a high risk of statistical inaccuracy when using online travel platform data (Mariani & Borghi, 2018).

In addition, review sites may not always require users to have completed a transaction to post a review. For example, on Booking.com reviews are verified by requiring a transaction completed before posting feedback and are considered an appropriate data source (Mariani & Matarazzo, 2020). Meanwhile, users on TripAdvisor can post a review without such verification (Figini, et al., 2020; Bigné, et al., 2020), therefore, similarly to social media data, review data is often broken and exaggerated, (Pink, et al., 2018).

Lastly, while reviews are publicly accessible, ethical dilemmas arise in terms of acquiring consent from tourists to process data for research purposes. Studies extracting UGC should be more reflexive in assessing whether it is appropriate to use such data without informed consent (Munar & Gyimóthy, 2013), while more ethical and transparent ways to produce data need to be developed (Pink, et al., 2018).

To conclude, digital tourism studies on online interactive travel platforms should aim to approach different sampling methods and employ multiple data sources. Extracting and interpreting review data exclusively can lead to inaccuracies and validity issues, "which substantially limits their generalizability and contribution to knowledge" (Xiang, et al., 2017, p. 52).

Methodology

The subsequent section presents the methodological considerations applied in this study. First, the research design is introduced, followed by a description of data collection and analysis. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the limitations and ethical considerations encountered while conducting the research.

Research design

As previously highlighted, the present study seeks to explore how digital tools can address the socio-political issue of working conditions in tourism and investigates the Las Kellys initiative to launch a booking platform focused on hotels' compliance with labour rights.

To achieve this, the study employs exploratory research with a mixed method design. Firstly, exploratory research is an effective approach when the study focuses on generating new knowledge on the investigated matter, rather than providing a conclusive answer to the research question. Additionally, this methodology allows for the emergence of new angles approaching the explored subject, which can result in the formulation of previously overlooked interpretations and explanations of a research problem (Reiter, 2017; Business Research Methodology, u.d.). Therefore, the present study does not seek to provide an explicit answer to the research question, but to generate further knowledge on how the intersection between travel technologies and tourism can potentially tackle issues such as the working conditions of hotel staff.

Furthermore, as highlighted under the subsequent section on data collection, in this study both qualitative and quantitative data are subject to analysis. Therefore, this paper applies a mixed method design, which allows for the convergence of both types of data to complement each other (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). For instance, during the interview with the Las Kellys association, there was a brief exchange regarding the travel industry's reaction and hotel managers' approach to

their booking platform initiative. Knowledge gathered from this exchange was further enriched by responses collected from the survey tailored for hotel managers. A question of this survey specifically enquired about respondents' willingness to list their hotel business on a booking platform, which would require that the business itself provides decent working conditions. As such, complex layers of the investigated matter have emerged from multiple angles and types of data.

Data collection

As previously outlined, the present study applies a multimethod research design and, therefore, the data collection methods used are both qualitative and quantitative. Additionally, both primary and secondary data were gathered to produce a more nuanced understanding of the researched issue.

Firstly, primary data emerged from a semi-structured interview with a representative of the Las Kellys association and a 9-question survey tailored and addressed to hotel managers or individuals in similar positions within a tourism accommodation business.

Semi-structured interview

A semi-structured interview was chosen as one of the methods for gathering primary data, as it allows for the researcher to adapt the order, list, and type of questions based on the flow of the conversation with interviewees, but also based on what information is provided when answering questions. Additionally, since the interview was conducted in Spanish with the presence of a non-professional translator, a semi-structured interview made it easier to reformulate questions and answers to clarify any misunderstandings. In addition, due to its open and adaptable nature, semi-structured interviews also allow for the data to be grounded in participants' narratives and experiences, with the researcher carefully directing the process to ensure the gathering of relevant data (Galletta, 2013).

The interview process with Las Kellys

The interview was conducted with a representative from the Las Kellys' Barcelona branch (hereby referred to as LKB) on 13 April 2022 online via Zoom. The number of semi-structured interviews was limited to one, firstly, because the research focuses on the Las Kellys booking platform, and secondly, because of the novelty of the initiative. Further reflections on sampling limitations are elaborated under the subsection on research limitations.

To arrange the online meeting with the association, the researcher reached out via email on 02 April 2022 to the addresses provided on the Las Kellys website for the Barcelona and Madrid branches respectively in English. On 03 April 2022, LKB responded in Spanish to express interest in answering a few questions for the research and to inform a translator would be needed from the researcher's side, since according to LKB, none of the Las Kellys members are fluent in English. Thereafter, a native Spanish-speaking individual was approached from the researcher's private network, who accepted to assist in live translation. On 06 April 2022, the final date for the interview was set, with LKB receiving a preliminary list of questions in English. Questions for this interview were drafted after online browsing of the Las Kellys website (laskellys.wordpress.com), news articles, and consulting a segment of the articles presented in the literature review section of this paper.

Moreover, all questions and an overview of the project goals were sent to the non-professional translator in advance as well via Facebook. This helped the translator prepare the questions in Spanish, but also to know what questions to ask in case answers revealed information that required follow-up questions, or in case the conversation went off track. Additionally, it was settled between the researcher and translator that based on project objectives, only relevant information would need to be translated and summarized during or after the interview. The decision to discuss answers also after the interview proved to be efficient, since the interviewee, as later explained, spoke in length about certain details, and translating all information on the spot would have been time-consuming for all parties.

Nonetheless, the list of questions proposed to LKB was sent as below:

1. A brief presentation about you (the interviewee) and Las Kellys
2. What is the motivation behind the booking platform and reservation center? How was the idea born?
3. How did the industry in Spain receive the news that you are launching this platform?
4. How will the booking platform function?
5. Who helps you build it? Are there already software developers working on it?
6. Do hotels participate voluntarily to be on the platform? Do you invite them to participate or how is the selection of hotels made?

7. How does the rating of a hotel work on a platform? What criteria are considered to be a 'good' hotel on your platform?

8. Who does the rating? Is it Las Kellys who sets the criteria and monitors if the hotels respect and follow them?

9. How do you involve the hotel staff in this process?

10. Will there be an audit scheme through which you inspect the hotels on your platform each year? Or how do you make sure they respect your criteria?

11. What happens if the housekeeping employees are employed by an outsourcing company and not directly by the hotel? Who received the rating then?

The reason for addressing these questions was to gain as much understanding as possible about the initiative and to unwrap the 'behind the scenes' complexities.

On 13 April at the set time of the interview, LKB has not joined the online meeting for the first 30 minutes, therefore the translator called them at the phone number provided in the email. LKB explained the delay was due to a long working day and that they had forgotten about the scheduled interview but would join shortly. It is important to mention that LKB's partner joined the meeting first to help them with the audio and digital set up and the partner informed the researcher and translator that LKB would need 5 minutes to prepare themselves for the meeting. Already this initial interaction, as expressed by the translator as well, was informal and friendly. This indicated that LKB felt comfortable within the setting, which later proved to be true based on their natural reactions to certain questions addressed.

During the ample presentation of the Las Kellys association and the motivation behind developing the booking platform, when mentioning political challenges in the process, LKB would often smirk sarcastically. These reactions indicated to both the researcher and translator sentiments of frustration and disapproval of political parties, trade unions, and overall tourism stakeholders.

Additionally, to each question, LKB answered in length and detail, while not revealing too many specifics. For example, when asked about the industry's reaction to the proposed launch of the booking platform, LKB explained in detail what the general public's stance in Spain has been in comparison to political parties and industry stakeholders, such as hospitality trade unions. However, during the entire

conversation, LKB avoided mentioning the names of any hotels or talking about hotels in general. This awareness and alert to avoid questions and details surrounding hotels led the researcher to reflect on the sensibility of the investigated topic. The platform at the time of conducting this research has not been launched yet, and it stands amid a strongly political narrative – issues surrounding labour regulations and working conditions within the hotel sector in Spain. Additionally, this part of the interview made the researcher question whether LKB intended to protect hotels that are supportive of the initiative or aimed to not place the spotlight on hotels too much and damage potential relations with them.

Lastly, in the final stages of the interview, LKB expressed they would be open to providing further details should they be requested after the interview. However, when asked if it would be possible to arrange an interview with other representatives of the association or developers working on the booking platform, LKB argued there would be no probability of that since the tool has not been finalized and launched, therefore, they cannot provide contacts.

Nonetheless, despite limitations which will be elaborated in the according subsection, the interview has provided valuable insights and LKB has expressed openness to further assistance via email should questions arise at a later point in time.

The questionnaire for hotel managers

In addition to the online interview with a Las Kellys representative, a 9-question survey was created through SurveyXact, a tool developed by Ramboll engineering company, available to students from Aalborg University Denmark, where the author of this study is enrolled at the time of writing the paper. The purpose of employing a survey was to complement the qualitative primary data. Additionally, it has provided a preliminary understanding of how hotel managers or individuals in similar positions within a tourism accommodation business would perceive a booking platform that lists only businesses that provide decent working conditions.

The questionnaire was distributed on LinkedIn as a public post and was sent via direct message on the same platform to hotel managers primarily based in Denmark, but also in other Northern-European countries, and to one connection in Thailand. Additionally, it was shared within the professional

network of the researcher, specifically colleagues within a tour operator with an office based in Copenhagen, Denmark. Responses were collected between 25 April – 13 May 2022 from a total of 30 participants. In total 14 out of the 30 responses were partially complete, meaning respondents did not provide answers to all questions.

Moreover, the survey questions and their purpose within the context of this research were:

1. *Are you currently employed by a tourism accommodation provider (e.g., a hotel)?*

The purpose of this question was to filter responses in case someone outside the target group participated. However, after collecting the answers, the conclusion was drawn that the question is ambiguous and the only options to answer were 'Yes' or 'No'. For example, it would have been more efficient to add an option that would indicate 'not currently, but previously employed within such a business' or similar to ensure the efficient filtering of respondents.

2. *What is your role within the company?*

The purpose of this open question was to ensure the relevant responses are from individuals in the management departments of a hotel who have decision-making power within the company.

3. *Is the accommodation provider you are employed by listed on external booking platforms (e.g., Booking.com)?*

Answers to this question could be either 'Yes' or 'No' and they indicate whether the business and the respondent are familiar with external booking platforms and procedures, which is relevant to this paper since it explores such a platform.

4. *Do you consider external booking platforms like Booking.com to be useful for hotels and other accommodation providers? Please elaborate on your answer.*

The purpose of this open question was to examine respondents' positionality towards external booking platforms, and the answers were complex and divided.

5. *Do you consider booking platforms influence the image tourists have of s travel accommodation? Please elaborate on your answer.*

As the present research explores a booking platform that may influence listed hotels' image (e.g., the potential image of a good employer and decent workplace), it was considered important to see how industry stakeholders themselves assess booking platforms to influence their image and reputation. Although, it must be noted that in the case of Booking.com or TripAdvisor, the reviews and ratings are the main factors building image, not the platform on its own, therefore, from this perspective this question may be irrelevant. Nonetheless, responses proved to be nuanced and touched upon interesting points.

6. *Does your hotel have any sustainability practices implemented in its operations (e.g., recycling, plastic-free, etc.)?*

This polar question does not necessarily serve the purpose of collecting relevant data contributing to the study, but it was added to lead the respondents toward the investigated issue. From the researcher's experience, having previously examined the subject of working conditions in hotels from different angles, hospitality employers are more reluctant to participate in interviews/surveys which exclusively address labour regulations. Therefore, having a survey question that subtly leads respondents into the research problem may loosen their hesitance to express a positionality towards the topic, although here this was experimental.

7. *Do you promote your sustainability practices to guests and stakeholders?*

This closed survey question serves a similar purpose as question 6. Nonetheless, responses may also indicate whether travel accommodation businesses are open to promoting practices such as plastic-free operations that point towards much-debated challenges of tourism, for instance, the negative impacts on the environment. This can reflect their willingness to be listed on an accommodation booking platform that focuses on a topic within social sustainability.

8. *Would you consider listing your hotel business on a booking platform, which requires proving that your staff is ensured decent working conditions? Example: you hire directly/in-house, and do not outsource any of your staff.*

The question directly relates to the research problem as it investigates respondents' positionality towards initiatives such as the booking platform proposed by Las Kellys. It was formulated as an affirmative-negative question and respondents were required to supply an answer to finalize the survey. The reason why it was addressed as a closed question is that these types of questions are easier for respondents to answer since they do not need to formulate their own answers (SmartSurvey, u.d.).

9. *Please elaborate on your previous answer. Why would you/not prefer to have your hotel listed on such a booking platform?*

Finally, an open question as a follow-up to question 8 was added, however, it was marked as non-mandatory. This allowed respondents to skip this question if they did not wish to answer, and it also encouraged them to submit the survey even if partially completed, rather than not put forward any answers at all. The decision behind this criteria relates to the reflections elaborated under question 6. Nonetheless, 9 out of 30 respondents answered this question and provided the researcher with valuable insights into how respondents perceive a booking platform focused on hotel staff's working conditions. The complete overview of responses can be found in Appendix 1.

Secondary data

To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem, secondary data in the forms of academic articles, online news articles, and web content from booking platforms and certification organization websites were collected. The latter group of secondary data was considered relevant, as booking platforms within the past few years have started to implement sustainability badges and seals into their listings (Booking.com, 2021). As decent working conditions relate to sustainability goals proposed by the UN (Robinson, et al., 2019; Baum & Hai, 2019; Ioannides, et al., 2021), discourses surrounding tourism sustainability seals of approval, badges, and certifications are considered relevant.

Data analysis

The following section presents how the primary data gathered was analyzed and interpreted.

Firstly, although the interview with LKB was recorded, the conversation was not transcribed. The interview was completely in Spanish and the assisting translator was not a professional in the field.

Therefore, most of the relevant information was summarized in English by the translator and written down by the researcher after the interview had taken place.

Thereafter, the translated and summarized information were analyzed together with the survey responses and were categorized within themes. The procedure is called thematic analysis and is used to identify themes and patterns within the gathered data (Nowell, et al., 2017). Thematic analysis is primarily used in qualitative research (Nowell, et al., 2017), and while the survey employed in this study contains quantitative data derived from closed-ended questions, responses to the open-ended questions qualify as qualitative data since "participants are free to respond in their own words, and these responses tend to be more complex" (Mack, et al., 2005, p. 4).

Limitations and reflections

There are several limitations to be considered in the process of this research. Firstly, the booking platform proposed by the Las Kellys association is at the time of conducting this study still under development, therefore, various aspects such as platform design and other practical features of the digital tool could not be discussed during the online interview with LKB. Moreover, as the platform has not been launched yet, a few potentially sensitive topics could not be elaborated on by LKB, such as hotels that have expressed interest in the booking tool. The novelty of this digital tool also means that literature and available information about it are considerably limited.

Additionally, the sample size for the semi-structured interview is notably small, specifically one. This is first because, as previously mentioned, the platform has not been launched yet, therefore even if requested, LKB could not provide contacts of other individuals involved in the development of this digital tool. Furthermore, since the purpose of this platform is specific and revolves less around the general functionality of an online interactive travel platform, interviews with developers of such sites were deemed irrelevant, although this may have been a premature and unfounded decision from the researcher's side.

Language barrier poses also as an important limitation concerning the interview. As LKB did not speak English and the translator assisting in the process was not a professional, nor experienced in such settings, important details may have been lost in translation. Interviewee bias may have also occurred

due to the sensitivity of the topic – an unlaunched travel product in a highly politicized context. Consequently, while the insights provided by LKB are considered valuable, only a partial understanding has been achieved of the investigated issue.

Lastly, questions in the survey distributed to hotel managers may have been ambiguously formulated, as previously highlighted in the section elaborating on the survey (e.g., the question on employment status within a travel accommodation business). Clearer formulations with multiple choices to answer may have reduced confusion both for the respondents and the researcher.

Ethical considerations

During the data collection process, ethical considerations were also taken into account. Firstly, LKB was informed in advance that the online interview would be recorded and was sent a consent form in Spanish to ensure the language barrier in understanding this factor would not be an issue. Permission to record was also requested within the first few seconds of the interview.

Additionally, in the form, it was explained how the data would be stored and options were also given to the participant on whether both audio and video content could be recorded, and whether they wanted their names to be anonymized or not. Although LKB signed the form and confirmed that all types of content could be recorded and that their names could be used, the researcher decided to anonymize their name, nonetheless. The consent form was filled out hastily since LKB had to rush home to participate in the interview after a long day of work and may not have paid full attention to what the form stated.

Lastly, respondents of the survey were informed on the opening page that no personal information such as private or company names needs to be disclosed. Consequently, during both data collection methods, all personal information was either kept confidential or not required at all.

Findings

The subsequent section of this study presents findings from the interview with Las Kellys and responses collected from the survey distributed to hotel managers. As highlighted within methodological considerations, primary data were subject to thematic analysis, which resulted in the emergence of

three main themes, namely: 1) The role of booking platforms in tourism and in the Las Kellys mission; 2) Booking platform impact on tourist perception; 3) The Las Kellys booking platform features and conditions.

The role of booking platforms in tourism and in the Las Kellys mission

Among the first themes that have emerged in the process of primary data analysis was the role of booking platforms in tourism and within the Las Kellys mission to fight for decent working conditions for hotel staff.

Firstly, during the interview when asked about the motivation to develop a specialized booking platform, LKB responded that the initiative has roots in their initial idea to introduce a Seal of Fair and Quality Work in hotels in Catalonia. The idea was presented to the Catalonian parliament, where it was debated and approved by the majority in November 2018. However, following changes within the Catalonian government in 2020 and 2021, the new political parties expressed that they would not go through with the initiative. Additionally, general trade unions that negotiate with political entities regarding the minimum wages and working conditions among other factors, were not keen on the Las Kellys initiative either. In fact, they were objecting to it, arguing they had an app in development since 2017, which would include a similar feature.

Nonetheless, LKB revealed that Las Kellys did not trust this was the case and at the time of conducting the interview, they are not aware that any app of this sort was launched. Therefore, after several debates and demonstrations, the association concluded that they need to approach more innovative solutions to spread their message, which would not include political stakeholders directly but would engage the industry more actively. They assessed that a booking platform would preliminarily have a better outreach to businesses and guests. Because the development of this platform would require considerable financial resources, Las Kellys started a fund and set the goal of 60.000 euros, but to their surprise, 90.000 euros were raised, and this amount came from the general public. As such, according to LKB, the association believes that the public is aware of the issue addressed, and they see the potential of the new booking platform tackling it and raising further awareness.

From the survey completed by hotel employees in management positions, regarding the role and usefulness of external booking platforms for tourism businesses, responses reflected an important feature of these. Booking platforms are perceived to create increased visibility and awareness of travel accommodations and services. Nonetheless, respondents have also noted that with this greater exposure come considerable expenses.

For example, Respondents 2, 3, and 30, all hotel managers, provided the following answers:

> *"Many travelers use platforms like booking.com, so it gives your hotel great visibility... so yes, one could say they are helpful to businesses" (Respondent 2)*

> *"The OTA's are hard to get around because they sit heavy on the market. (…) However, hotels are dependent on these platforms to get bookings as most hotel guests will use them to compare hotels and prices in the area they want to stay in. The only guests that will book direct, are the ones who already know the hotel. Without especially Booking.com and Expedia, we would not have the same occupancy levels as now - so yes, they are useful and (unfortunately) necessary" (Respondent 3)*

> *"Useful yes, and expensive. Ecohotels have 8% fee and booking.com have 20% I believe, this is why we are expanding to a lot of hotels (…)" (Respondent 30)*

Therefore, from hoteliers' perspective, booking platforms have become a key element within sales distribution channels and in creating better visibility of the product, however, there are also downsides to them, such as high commission rates.

Overall, from both the interview and survey responses, it was concluded that booking platforms have great potential in increasing visibility, exposure, and raising awareness.

Booking platform impact on tourist perception

The second theme that emerged during the data analysis is how booking platforms interact with tourists' perceptions and both interview and survey responses showed nuanced views on the matter.

First, during the interview, LKB expressed that Las Kellys does not wish for its platform to be a 'giant profit-generating business idea like Booking.com' (LKB's words translated by the assisting Spanish native speaker). What the association aims for, according to LKB, is that the booking site shows travellers which hotels respect the labour rights of their staff. This would not only help the organization

in achieving its mission, but it would also form a good image of the hotels that voluntarily apply to list their properties on the platform and go through a criteria compliance assessment. Additionally, according to LKB, the booking site's purpose is to raise awareness of the issue at stake to the industry and travellers, and for these actors to rethink their choices and consider the well-being of workers of the property when booking a stay. As such, based on LKB's responses, a booking platform influences travellers' image of a tourism accommodation, and it can also tap into moral considerations within the decision-making process when planning a holiday.

On the other hand, responses from the survey revealed more diverse views on whether booking platforms interact with tourists' perceptions. Firstly, 11 out of 17 responses to the question reflected a consensus that booking sites do influence perceptions to a certain degree. For example, Respondent 18 (Hotel Manager) and Respondent 26 (Assistant Manager) argued that overall presence on booking platforms and hotel ratings offer reassurance and set expectations of service standards to guests:

> *"Yes, with the review system, like TripAdvisor, the help to inform the customers of what the service and standard is like from a guest perspective."* (Respondent 18)

> *I think a lot of guests use it as certification. If hotel is displayed there it must be OK (…)"* (Respondent 26)

Nonetheless, Respondent 3 (Manager), Respondent 8 (Product Coordinator), and Respondent 29 (President) elaborated on a different take on whether platforms influence tourist perceptions:

> *"Not necessarily. The hotels can design their page on the booking platform very easily and in lot of details. We decide all information shown and all pictures added as well. The only place where they can influence the image of the hotel is in the reviews as the rating shown for the hotel will have a great impact in bookings and search placements. (…)"* (Respondent 3)

> *"No - they are just part of the industry. A player just like any other partner in making a trip for the customer."* (Respondent 8)

> *"Not really. I've seen even the highest end places on booking platforms."* (Respondent 29)

As such, there is consensus within most responses that presence and ratings on booking sites affect tourists' perceptions and image of a travel accommodation. However, there are also opinions among

surveyed hoteliers that booking sites do not necessarily shape an image but act as just another sales agent for travellers.

Overall, from the combined interview and survey responses it can be concluded that majority of participants perceive that booking sites influence tourist perceptions of travel accommodations.

The Las Kellys booking platform features and conditions

The final theme that emerged following data analysis is regarding the features and conditions of the Las Kellys booking site.

During the interview, LKB was addressed questions in relation to the functions of the platform. As previously highlighted by the interviewee, the site would not be developed for the purpose of generating profit and would not collect fees from hotels to list their properties. Las Kellys believes that at present anyone can buy a sustainability certificate, therefore, their seal of approval on the platform would not require any financial implications from hotels. Business' willingness to join the platform must come from the inside. The concept is to invite as many hotel businesses in Spain as possible to voluntarily join the platform. Additionally, to further demonstrate their dedication to their mission, in the initial stages of the project, Las Kellys ended the collaboration with the engineering company originally contacted. As told by LKB, the company wanted to outsource the developers that would create the platform, which stood in direct opposition to the association's values. Thereafter, Las Kellys started cooperating with a team of Spanish software engineers in Barcelona that shared similar values with them.

In addition, among the criteria for a hotel to be listed on the platform are that hiring is in-house, and all staff have their contracts directly with the hotel business, not an outsourcing company. Additionally, the pay must be in accordance with local standards of living and economic climate, and job descriptions must clearly and transparently state accurate roles within the hotel. For example, LKB revealed that in some housekeeper contracts some positions were stipulated only as Floor cleaners, meaning concentrated on one area of the hotel with less pay than a room attendant, but these workers would be responsible of cleaning and ensuring hygiene of several areas of the hotel.

Additionally, regarding monitoring and reporting compliance with the booking site's criteria, LKB revealed that several employees in hotels the organization plans to collaborate with are associated with Las Kellys. Their union presence within hotels is considered by the association one of the key elements to ensure the success of this project, although they acknowledge risks exist. Lastly, the platform would not feature any rating. Once a hotel submits an application and is approved to be listed, the presence on the site attests that the hotel provides decent working conditions and respects labour rights.

Meanwhile, through the survey, hotel managers were asked if they would be interested in listing their travel accommodations on a booking platform that focuses on workforce well-being and labour regulations. Several responses showed that such a decision would be made with consideration to conditions in place to join the platform. Additionally, while most did not object to the idea, some respondents also argued that it may not become popular among guests:

> *"I would not mind being posted on a such page if the terms of the contract was reasonable, and the commission rates the same or lower as the major platforms. However, I do not think it would generate a lot of bookings, because unfortunately this is not something a lot of guests care about. We all know how Ryan Air treats their employees, yet most people would fly with them anyway. I would, myself, probably not use this platform to book my hotel - but I could be interested in being able to look up the hotel to check if the staff has good working conditions."* (Respondent 3)

> *"NO - Because that is not what is at the forefront of our guests when they are making a choice of where to stay"* (Respondent 18)

> *"Depending on how this platform would work, but we can't always guarantee the best working conditions when in the service business, even though we try, so instead i spend a lot of time on practice with my staff how to handle the "not so great" situations."* (Respondent 16)

Other respondents, however, answered that the booking platform could serve as a motivator and indicator of good practice:

> *"Because great storytelling while protecting our employees sustain our workplace and its much more pleasant to work in such an environment."* (Respondent 6)

"Guests of today are aware of their planet and its surroundings. It would aid them in travel plans to use such a platform/certification." (Respondent 26)

As such, survey responses show differing views on the matter. A segment of respondents consider that tourists would not resonate much with the platform, since they do not search for travel products based on criteria such as compliance with workforce rights. Nonetheless, there is a group of respondents, which identify a shift in travellers' thinking and argue that at present tourists have grown more concerned about sustainability related issues, while the platform would also serve as a great storytelling tool for a good purpose.

Discussion

The present study explores the intersection between travel technology tools and socio-political issues in tourism. Specifically, it investigates how a technology tool can address issues surrounding working conditions and labour rights of tourism workforce in hotels and draws upon a booking site developed by the Las Kellys association in Spain.

To achieve this, the following section of the study discusses findings of the research challenged by relevant body of literature, news articles, and other web content applicable to the matter. Topics discussed are in relation to visibility on an overflooded online travel market, approach taken towards hotel businesses, potential inequity for businesses not listed on the platform, and criteria and monitoring structures and strategies.

Visibility on an overflooded online travel market

Within the past decades, a plethora of online interactive travel platforms have emerged. While they pose as useful tools in travel planning, these platforms are also characterized by an overload of information (Fang, et al., 2016; Figini, et al., 2020). According to studies, tourists may visit as much as 14 different tourism sites when planning a holiday and are exposed to a massive selection of sources of information (Bigné, et al., 2020).

Since the current study investigates how a travel technology tool may be able to address the socio-political issue of working conditions in the tourism sector, it is important to consider what role could

the Las Kellys booking site play overall on the travel market. Due to the existence of a plethora of online travel sites, it must be questioned whether the launch of another platform would have the potential to address working conditions-related issues in the sector, or whether it would be lost next to giant sites, such as Booking.com, which is among the largest platforms of its kind in the world (Walker, u.d.).

A solution Las Kellys has previously proposed in 2018 was to implement a seal of approval on TripAdvisor, however, the initiative never came through with the review site (Burgen, 2018; Gonzalez Romero, 2018). This seal could have worked similarly to the "Eco-Certified" icon implemented by Google on accommodation searches (Eskins, 2021), or the "Travel Sustainable Badge" displayed on Booking.com listings (Booking.com, 2021). These icons and badges were developed to ease tourists' purchasing decisions when searching for more sustainable alternatives on the market (Eskins, 2021; Booking.com, 2021).

Moreover, as findings from the interview and survey responses show, booking platforms are a good tool to increase visibility of a travel product and raise awareness. However, this ability may be challenged when it comes to the overall mission of the Las Kellys site, and not to a specific product or service. As two survey respondents of this study argue, tourists do not concern themselves with moral issues such as hotel staff's working conditions and they consult booking sites only to search for a stay for their trip. From this perspective, the Las Kellys booking platform may not resonate with either tourists or businesses.

On the other hand, a similar proportion of survey respondents highlighted that tourists in current times may be concerned for issues such as well-being of tourism workforce, as travellers have become more aware of sustainability issues within the sector. Similar assessments have been reflected in industry reports. For example, Booking.com released a sustainability report in 2021, which showed that 76% of the 29.000 survey participants from all over the world seek sustainable accommodation options when planning a trip (Booking.com, 2021).

As such, to be able to achieve its mission with the site and differentiate itself from other platforms, the Las Kellys association would need to invest considerable efforts into targeting its booking platform to the right audience, both among industry stakeholders and tourist groups. Means of certification of good

travel business practices, in this case the booking site, "can not have an impact in the travel industry without travelers getting aware of it" (Sanchez, 2021).

Approaching hotel businesses

Another important element in investigating the intersection between the travel technology tool developed by Las Kellys and the socio-political issue of working conditions of hotel staff, is how hoteliers are approached with the initiative.

Firstly, travel booking platforms have various conditions for accommodation providers to list their properties. For example, depending on the product, Expedia may charge between 15-20% commission from hosts (dos Santos, 2021). Additionally, survey respondents of this study argue that platform conditions, such as commission, would greatly influence their decision to list their properties on the Las Kellys booking site. If Las Kellys were to charge matching commission rates to that of Expedia for each booking, hotels would be less likely to join the platform, especially since several respondents believe it would not attract guests and OTA commissions are known to hurt travel businesses (WiT, 2019).

Nonetheless, Las Kellys revealed during the interview that they would not charge any fees from hotels and that the platform would not focus on generating profit. Similar initiatives in the travel sector exist. For instance, Bidroom is an online booking and community platform, launched in 2014, where hoteliers pay a membership fee instead of being charged a commission of around 20% for each booking (WiT, 2019; Bidroom, u.d.). Since its foundation, the platform grew steadily and by 2019, it listed around 125.000 travel accommodations across 128 countries in Europe and North America, and thereafter expanded to Asia Pacific (WiT, 2019; Phuketify, 2019). The success of the platform lays in its equitable and fair business model, where hotels do not lose revenue over commissions and, therefore, tourists also benefit from better deals (Phuketify, 2019). As such, based on a 0%-commission business model, the Las Kellys platform could prove attractive to both hoteliers and tourists, while conveying an important message.

Another important element in the approach taken by Las Kellys towards hoteliers is regarding competitors. Before developing the platform, the association approached hoteliers to develop a compendium of hotels in Spain that comply with labour regulations (Gonzalez Romero, 2018). However,

companies themselves refused the idea, since they did not want to enter into competition with their fellow hoteliers within the same union (Gonzalez Romero, 2018). This stance taken can be reflected to the observation made with regards to LKB's efforts to avoid mentioning any information related to hotels during the interview with the researcher of this study. Most hotels in Spain are part of a collective agreement developed by employer and trade unions that set minimum wages and working conditions among others (De Miguel, 2012). Meaning, if one hotel from an employers' union joins the Las Kellys platform, it can be questioned why other hotels from the same union are not listed on the site that requires a business to adhere to labour regulations.

Existing studies have highlighted how travel sites have impact on tourists' values, perceptions, and behavioural responses, and therefore purchase decisions (Munar & Gyimóthy, 2013; Cheung, et al., 2022). As such, the Las Kellys platform can only work if hotel businesses are not compelled to not list their properties in the fear of affecting both fellow hoteliers' and employer unions' image for potential misinterpretations of their practices in relation to labour regulations. This argument leads to the third topic of the discussion of this paper, which is potential inequity for businesses not listed on the Las Kellys platform.

Potential inequity for businesses not listed on the Las Kellys booking platform

According to findings of this study, many tourists approach booking sites as a form of accreditation. As Respondent 26 argues "If hotel is displayed there it must be ok". Therefore, the Las Kellys booking site could function as a certification for guests, which would present listed properties as employers that adhere to labour rights. Nonetheless, the initiative may cause potential inequity for hotels not listed on the site.

On this note, a comparison can be drawn with sustainable tourism certifications. The cost of these forms of recognition are often high and require additional expenses for audit procedures (Tippett, et al., 2020). Small enterprises, therefore, may not have equal access to obtaining sustainability certifications due to limited resources and thus may lose value and credibility on the travel market, which has increasingly started setting focus on such forms of recognition (Dunk, et al., 2016; Curtis & Slocum, 2016). Although the Las Kellys booking site as initially planned would not require fees from

hoteliers, such businesses may still decide not to list their properties on the platform to not enter into competition with fellow hoteliers (Gonzalez Romero, 2018).

This decision may also derive from what survey respondents have pointed towards regarding guest profiles. As outlined in the findings section, matters such as workforce rights do not stand at the forefront for certain guests when selecting an accommodation for their holidays. Nonetheless, a hotel not listed on the Las Kellys booking site may not indicate that it is non-compliant with labour regulations. Similarly, a small tourism enterprise not being certified may not indicate its business model and/or practices are not sustainable (Dunk, et al., 2016). Therefore, the travel technology tool in development by Las Kellys may only be able to address the socio-political issue of working conditions in tourism partially.

Criteria and monitoring structures and strategies – impactful or just another label?

The final topic of discussion in this study is regarding criteria and monitoring structures and strategies for compliance with labour regulations implemented by Las Kellys in the context of its platform.

With the approach that the Las Kellys booking site could function as a certification method for good practice regarding working conditions, as argued also during the interview and in survey responses, the criteria proposed must be evaluated to assess whether the platform can address the issue at stake. Within the travel sector, several sustainability certifications were identified to fall short to offer a comprehensive set of criteria, which does not narrow the concept of sustainability down to environmentalism (Dunk, et al., 2016; Sasidharan & Križaj, 2018). Therefore, it is relevant to investigate criteria proposed to hoteliers by Las Kellys as well.

During the interview, LKB listed the following criteria but highlighted that the final list would not be limited to these: in-house hiring (contract directly with hotel and not via outsourcing company), pay adequate to local living standards and economic climate, and job descriptions reflecting transparently and correctly roles and tasks and do not stipulate these in a manner that would result in decrease in pay. These three core criteria would address the most often identified issues in existing literature with regards to labour regulations and workforce rights in tourism (Ollus, 2016; Markey et al., 2014; Janta et al., 2011; Onsøyen et al., 2009). As such, if monitored adequately within hotel businesses that will be

listed on the Las Kellys booking site, the platform would be able to tackle the issue at stake at the scale the association intends to implement the initiative (local, regional, national).

Nonetheless, studies on tourism workforce have also identified negative work environment in hotel housekeeping as a challenge, due to high level of workforce turnover in addition to the aforementioned three issues (Ollus, 2016; Markey et al., 2014; Janta et al., 2011; Onsøyen et al., 2009). Therefore, the Las Kellys association could also implement criteria on its platform, which address practices that ensure a socially and psychologically positive workplace, enhanced by cooperation and equity. These criteria could relate to employee involvement and personal health resources among others (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2013). Nonetheless, social factors are among the most difficult to assess within other tourism certification schemes, therefore, clear indicators and measures must be defined and outlined (Sasidharan & Križaj, 2018).

Lastly, monitoring structures and strategies are equally important to ensure criteria are complied with by employers. In various other industries, concerns and suspicions were raised with regards to certifications due to lack of adequate monitoring and reporting (Otto, 2015). Within sustainable tourism certifications, monitoring and reporting are carried out through on-site audit annually, or every second or every third year in the post-certification phase, depending on the accredited body (Tippett, et al., 2020; Green Destination, 2022; Bureau Veritas, u.d.). Additionally, spontaneous audits are also performed by certain companies, meaning surveillance is carried out without an initially set schedule (UCS, u.d.). Thus, due to rigorous audit and monitoring structures, certifications in sustainable tourism, are perceived impactful since they drive businesses to implement positive practices (Lesar, et al., 2020).

As told by LKB during the interview, union presence within hotels listed on the Las Kellys platform would be part of the core of the initiative's success. Association members, according to LKB, would report whether criteria set on the union's booking site is being complied with. Nonetheless, it is important that a clear and consistent monitoring and reporting structure and communication is developed to ensure active compliance with criteria and to avoid concerns and suspicions similar to that within other industries (Otto, 2015).

To conclude, core criteria set by the Las Kellys association for hoteliers to list their properties on its booking site addresses main concerns regarding the matter and could tackle the issue at stake with collaborating businesses. Nonetheless, the association must ensure that beyond union presence within hotel businesses, a clear and consistent monitoring and reporting structure is in place to ensure hoteliers' active compliance with criteria as employers.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the intersection between travel technology tools and the socio-political issue of working conditions within the tourism sector. Specifically, it aimed to investigate how a booking platform under development at the time of conducting this study, initiated by the Spanish associations Las Kellys, could address issues surrounding tourism workforce conditions.

Considering the novelty of the initiative and the ongoing discourses surrounding the topic of tourism workforce, this study proves to be timely and relevant. Moreover, research on the matter is limited and most digital tourism studies focus on user-generated content (Fang, et al., 2016; Nilashi, et al., 2018; Mariani & Matarazzo, 2020; van Nuenen & Scarles, 2021), and electronic word-of-mouth (Mariani & Borghi, 2018; Mariani & Predvoditeleva, 2019; Bigné, et al., 2020). Additionally, existing studies have also explored the intersections between travel technology tools and tourists' values, which are relevant to this research due to the topic's moral and ethical nuance. Nonetheless, these also approach user-generated content as the core element of research (Fang, et al., 2016; Cheung, et al., 2022). As such, the present study generates new knowledge regarding the intersection among travel technology tools and social issues by investigating an initiative that is to engage the travel sector, rather than exploring only travellers' interactions with the matter.

To gain new understanding and knowledge on the investigated problem, a semi-structured interview with a representative from the Las Kellys association was conducted, and findings from the interview were further complemented by data gathered through an online survey tailored and distributed to hotel employees in management positions. By employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, nuanced results emerged.

Firstly, the Las Kellys booking site would be a voluntary platform for hoteliers to join, which would attest to tourists that the listed travel accommodations adhere to labour regulations. While responses regarding willingness of hotel managers to join the Las Kellys booking site varied considerably, several participants of the survey argued that it may not attract important number of guests as major booking sites do (e.g., Booking.com), since the core mission may not resonate with them and the service. As such, the Las Kellys travel technology tool may only be able to address the issue of working conditions of hotel staff, if the platform gathers attention and awareness both among tourists and industry stakeholders.

In addition, the association must also develop an efficient approach with the initiative towards hoteliers. Several respondents of the survey have emphasized that conditions to join the Las Kellys site greatly influence their decision to list their properties on it (e.g., commission rate). However, since Las Kellys would not collect fees from hotels since it is not focused on profit, the booking site could attract more businesses, and thus tackle the issue at stake. Similar 0%-commission booking sites for travel accommodations exist and have experienced success due to the model (WiT, 2019; Phuketify, 2019).

Nonetheless, Las Kellys has previously aimed to develop a compendium of hotels in Spain that they knew adhered to labour regulations, but the same businesses refused the idea on the basis that it may place them in competition with fellow hoteliers within the same employers' union (Gonzalez Romero, 2018). As such, the Las Kellys site may fail to tackle issues surrounding working conditions of hotel staff if hoteliers feel discouraged to join the platform.

Moreover, potential inequity issues may also arise for hotels not listed on the association's booking site. For example, small tourism enterprises often have challenges acquiring sustainable tourism certifications due to financial challenges. However, from a market perspective, these enterprises may lose value and attractiveness for being perceived as unsustainable due to lack of certification (Dunk, et al., 2016). As such, hotels not listed on the site may be perceived as businesses non-compliant with labour regulations. Therefore, despite the site's aim to tackle precarious working conditions, it may hurt hoteliers' image.

Nonetheless, when assessing criteria to be set by Las Kellys for hotels to join its booking site, it was concluded that with the three core criteria related to in-house employment contract, pay, and job descriptions, the association's platform could tackle the main challenges identified for hotel workforce. Moreover, this could be further validated if a rigorous monitoring and reporting strategy is implemented by the association, in addition to their union presence within hotels through employees.

Taking into consideration all the above, the Las Kellys booking site may be successful in tackling issues surrounding working conditions for hotel staff through their selection of criteria and a robust monitoring and reporting strategy. Nonetheless, the association must consider factors related to visibility on the travel market, encouragement of hotels to join the platform, and risks related to damages to the image of hotels not listed on its site.

Finally, while the present study contributes to digital tourism studies with new knowledge, its limitations must also be considered. First, the interview with Las Kellys was conducted in Spanish in the presence of a non-professional translator. Thus, language barrier may have caused key information to be lost in translation. Additionally, since the platform has not been launched at the time of conducting this research, only a partial understanding of the investigated matter could be achieved. Nevertheless, due to the study's exploratory nature, it sets precedence for further research and provides a different academic angle approached towards travel technologies.

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