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Disability, hospitality and the new sharing economy

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SPECIAL ISSUE: The Sharing Economy: Implications for the Future of
Hospitality and Tourism

Disability, hospitality and the new sharing economy

ABSTRACT

Purpose

This paper aims to explore the place of disabled guests in the new world of hotel and holiday accommodation shaped by the sharing economy.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper uses Levitas's (2013) Utopia as Method as a methodological tool to develop hypothetical future scenarios which are used to explore the place of disabled guests in peer-to-peer holiday accommodation.

Findings

Analysis of hypothetical scenarios suggests that, without state intervention, the place of disabled guests in both traditional hotels and peer-to-peer holiday accommodation is far from secure.

Research limitations/implications

This is a new area and our discussion is therefore tentative in its intent.

Practical implications

Planners and policymakers should consult with, and take account of, the needs of disabled people and other socially excluded groups when regulating shared economy enterprises. It

may be helpful to put in place broader legislation for social inclusion rather than regulate peer-to-peer platforms. Any recourse to markets as a means of resolving access issues needs also to acknowledge the limited power of socially excluded groups within both traditional and sharing economy markets.

Social implications

The hypothetical scenarios discussed within this paper offer planners, policymakers and tourism stakeholders opportunities to think through the access and inclusion needs of disabled guests in the shared economy sector.

Originality/value

The paper extends discussion of hospitality and disability access to include shared economy approaches and the place of disabled guests in the new world of holiday accommodation shaped by the sharing economy.

Introduction

This paper considers the opportunities and challenges posed to disability access and inclusion by the development of peer-to-peer holiday accommodation platforms such as Airbnb. The paper takes its inspiration from an earlier study which investigated disability access and tourism in the Margaret River area of Western Australia in 2015. During the course of our earlier study, it became apparent that the incursion of the new sharing economy – in particular Airbnb – into the local hospitality arena had created a new holiday accommodation landscape, much of which was effectively liberated from disability access legislation. The current paper employs Levitas's Utopia as Method to develop possible future scenarios as a means of exploring potential implications – for disabled guests – of the recent rapid development of peer-to-peer holiday accommodation.

There is no doubt that the holiday accommodation sector is undergoing huge change due to the development and take up of peer-to-peer networks (Zervas et al., 2015). Airbnb, founded in 2008, is an online platform which enables individuals (who may have no previous experience of working in the hospitality or bed and breakfast industry) to share spare rooms or other accommodation with holidaymakers. The rate of growth of enterprises that make up the sharing economy is unprecedented and they have potential to change the holidaying landscape as we know it (Guttentag, 2015). Unlike the traditional hotel industry, Airbnb owns

no real estate, no rooms and is generally unregulated (Zervas et al., 2015). This is confronting information to both hoteliers and potential guests. But the pertinent question to ask is whether everyone who wants a room for the night will be able to rent one; a question which is of particular relevance to disabled people¹.

In recent decades, social inclusion has been fostered through legislation aimed at supporting the right of disabled people to access mainstream facilities and activities. As a result, hotels are required to have a proportion of rooms which are accessible to disabled guests but many of the rooms offered through online platforms such as Airbnb are in people's own homes, which are exempt from disability access legislation. This raises a broader question of whether or not there will be a place for disabled guests in the new world of holiday accommodation shaped by the sharing economy: a question which, at first sight, it would appear difficult to answer in the affirmative. However, Levitas (2013, p149) argues that a better world 'may be accessible only through an act of imagination' and advocates the development of utopian scenarios to think thorough the implications of future social and economic policies.

Levitas's (2013, p153) Utopia as Method has three modes or facets. Firstly, identifying elements of 'the good society' that are evident in existing social and economic policies (*the archaeological mode*); secondly identifying the kinds of people who are advantaged or disadvantaged in these social arrangements (*the ontological mode*); and thirdly, imagining alternative possible futures whilst considering the consequences of these imagined futures for the people who might live in them (*the architectural mode – or Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*). Although it is possible to separate the three modes analytically, Levitas argues that in practice all three are intertwined and, together, they can be used to identify preferred futures which may help avoid the 'catastrophe of predicted trends' (Levitas, 2013, p218).

In this paper, our utopian inquiry employs Levitas's first two modes of analysis using literature related to disability policy, accessible tourism, place attachment and place identity. We also include some discussion of our earlier study in Margaret River which prompted our interest in this area and emerging literature about shared economy approaches. Building on this analysis, we then employ Levitas's third mode, the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society, to develop potential future scenarios which explore the place of disabled guests in the new world of holiday accommodation shaped by the sharing economy.

The paper begins by discussing disability and accessible tourism, raising concerns about the 'clinical' nature of some accessible facilities in hotels. Using discussions of place attachment

and place identity, hotel accommodation is then contrasted with the *home-away-from-home* experience offered by some Airbnb hosts. We then go on to consider social inclusion and the role of the state in regulating disability access and inclusion in hospitality settings, and briefly discuss findings from our earlier study. The paper then moves to discussion of the future of online peer-to-peer platforms such as Airbnb, positing three hypothetical scenarios for the year 2026 and their implications for disabled guests. Finally, we affirm the importance of the ongoing role of the state in regulating disability access and inclusion, which was revealed through the development of the three scenarios.

Understanding disability

By placing theoretical understandings of disability as central to discussion of holiday accommodation and shared economy approaches, this paper responds to Shelton and Tucker's (2005, p.11) concern that the 'academic study of tourism has so far largely failed to address the implications for the industry of social theories of disability'. Understandings of disability have varied over time and across cultures. Referring to the period around the industrial revolution in the United Kingdom, Oliver and Barnes (2012) argue that disability can be understood as a product of the economic and social forces of capitalism. As the focus of work shifted away from the home, the institution developed as a means of excluding from mainstream society those people who could not keep up with the work practices of the factory. In Australia, following colonisation, disabled people were incarcerated alongside convicts in the penal colonies (Rosen, 2006). State governments later developed asylums for people with mental illness and intellectual disabilities and institutions for those with physical impairments were established by charitable organisations (Chenoweth, 2000). People confined in these institutions were effectively removed from mainstream Australian society and excluded from many of the customs and practices of everyday life. Over time, the institutions developed a focus on training and links with local communities; and for some residents there were rare outings and holidays in the outside world (Traustadóttir and Johnson, 2000).

From the 1960s, deinstitutionalisation policies were developed in many Western countries, including Australia, though being discharged from the institutions brought few improvements for those residents who were downsized into (slightly smaller) institutions, or transferred to housing with minimal support (Chenoweth, 2000; Wiesel and Bigby, 2015). There is however some evidence to suggest that people moved to small group homes with 24 hour staff support had opportunities to participate in the customs and practices of community life, including travelling and taking holidays (Cummins et al., 1990). Disabled people also began self-organising and developing their own ideas about disability. In the 1970s, the Union of

the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (in the UK) developed an understanding of disability which was located in disabling barriers, rather than in individual disabled people. This pointed out that impairment (functional limitation) and disability (socially imposed restriction) were not the same thing and became known as the 'social model of disability', an approach to disability which has influenced research, policy and practice internationally (Oliver and Barnes, 2012).

People with mobility impairments may be unable to walk but the use of a wheelchair can enable them to move around freely – unless there are barriers (for example, steps or stairs) which get in the way. From a social model perspective, it is these barriers that *disable* people who use wheelchairs; when ramped access and lifts are in place, wheelchair users are able to move around and are therefore *less disabled*. The social model enables us to recognise that, even though people's impairments may be permanent, socially imposed restrictions are amenable to change (Oliver and Barnes, 2012). Relating these discussions to hospitality, it is possible to see that by making hotel entrances, communal spaces, bedrooms and bathrooms accessible to wheelchair users, the hospitality industry can play a part in reducing the levels of disability experienced by guests with mobility impairments. Conversely, by failing to take account of the access needs of disabled guests, the industry may play a part in *exacerbating* disability (socially imposed restriction).

The social model of disability does not differentiate between different types of impairment (Oliver and Barnes, 2012). People with sensory and cognitive impairments and those with mental health difficulties are also viewed as disabled people because, like wheelchair users, they too experience socially imposed restriction (disability). Hospitality staff may therefore need training to apply social model ideas to specific instances and to locate disability in social barriers. This includes acknowledging that their own attitudes and behaviours (for example, talking to a computer screen rather than looking directly at a guest who has a hearing impairment) can also act as a barrier to disabled people's inclusion in hospitality settings. Conversely, if hotel staff look directly at guests when communicating with them and speak clearly, without covering their mouths, individual staff can play a part in reducing the levels of disability that guests with hearing impairment experience within the hotel. These examples enable us to see that disability (socially imposed restriction) can be exacerbated or ameliorated by individual hospitality staff. But disability also needs to be addressed at a societal level; for example, by passing legislation which requires hotels to provide a certain number of wheelchair accessible bedrooms.

The social model of disability has however been criticised for failing to account for some disabled people's experiences and for conflating difference amongst the wide range of disabled people; despite these critiques, social model ideas continue to inform understandings of disability and are evident within current disability policy (Goodley, 2016). The definitions of disability that are used to allocate support to disabled people are closely tied to the legal and social support systems of individual states and countries and arrangements for access and inclusion are supported and enforced only to the level the state can afford. Decisions about affordability are of course also influenced ideologically by the state's level of commitment to including disabled people in the mainstream (Oliver and Barnes, 2012). Recently published statistics indicate that in 2015, 4.3 million disabled people were living in Australia with the likelihood of living with an impairment increasing with age (ABS, 2016). People are now living longer than previous generations and policies of 'ageing in place' mean that, rather than being institutionalised, older people with impairments are more likely to remain in the community in mainstream housing which has been adapted to meet their needs (Kendig et al., 2017).

As the new sharing economy emerges in early-twenty-first century Australia and its impacts start to be felt, this raises questions about access and inclusion and the place of disabled people in a rapidly changing world. Disabled people represent a sizeable (18.3%) proportion of the Australian population (ABS, 2016) and the question we wish to raise in this paper is: how many of those disabled people would be able to access an Airbnb room? Before discussing Airbnb and shared economy approaches, we turn first to literature on accessible tourism.

Accessible Tourism

The economic contribution of disabled people to tourism dollars is significant (O'Neill and Ali Knight, 2000; Burnett and Baker, 2001), but it is a market that is often ignored. In Australia, Dwyer and Darcy (2011) employed a rigorous system of economic modelling, using secondary data sources to reliably model the economic contribution of disabled tourists. They estimated that in 2003-2004 disabled tourists spent between \$8034.68 million and \$11,980.272 million in Australia and argue that these upper and lower estimates demonstrate 'that there is a latent demand, with the market having the potential to grow to meet the demand if the barriers to participation are removed' (Dwyer and Darcy, 2011, p235).

Taking a holiday is now recognised as an essential part of life for many people but research indicates that disabled guests would like to take more holidays (Kastenholz et al., 2015).

Disabled guests also expect the same experiences as non-disabled guests (Yau et al., 2004), and taking holidays has been found to contribute positively to their quality of life (Small et al., 2012; Yau et al., 2004). It has been suggested that 'the situation in the United States and Canada for travelers with disabilities can be considered one of the best in the world' – a situation which, it has been argued, has been driven primarily through legal rather than economic motives (Flores, 2006, p59, Grady and Ohlin, 2009). Cottingham et al.'s (2016) discussion of the historical development and implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) supports the view that progress has been such that for some American wheelchair users, physical access is no longer an issue. However, in Kim et al.'s (2012) research (also in the US) disabled guests raised concerns about hospitality providers' attitudes and a need for better staff sensitivity training. Other research has indicated that disabled people continue to experience both physical and attitudinal barriers when staying in hotels (Darcy, 2002; Eichhorn and Buhalis, 2011). And even where hotel rooms have been made accessible, they may not be attractive to either disabled or non-disabled guests. For example, Darcy and Pegg's (2011, p473) research with hotel managers found that:

'What many nondisabled guests expect is missing in accessible rooms. Further, the design of many accessible bathrooms is of a rudimentary and 'clinical' nature with managers reporting that nondisabled guests commented that the 'disabled room' had an aesthetically unpleasant look. ... The nondisabled subconsciously associated the use of an accessible room as being inferior in nature or with a belief that it was below their status as nondisabled people.'

Darcy and Pegg (2011) link this discussion of accessible hotel rooms to stigma and aversion literature. This is a worrying association and raises questions about why these rooms were designed in this way in the first place. It is interesting to reflect that Wolfensberger's (1975, p20) research into historical asylums and institutions for disabled people found 'ill-designed, ill-constructed buildings and building complexes [that] bespeak an utter disregard to the prospective resident'. It could similarly be argued that accessible hotel accommodation which has a 'clinical' feel has comparable disregard for guests' expectations of luxury and aesthetics today. There is a critical need for the hospitality industry to understand disabled people as *guests* who may have specific access requirements. Management of these access requirements may create complexity for hospitality providers, but as Darcy (2010) argues, the solution for hospitality management systems is to treat guests as individuals with individual needs.

In Australia, the Department of Resources, Energy and Tourism commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC, 2013) to explore the demand for, and supply of, accessible accommodation. The PwC (2013) report suggests that, in the short term, the supply of accessible rooms is likely to outpace demand by disabled guests. However, it also argues that in the medium to longer term 'demand for accessible rooms by people with accessibility needs will increase moderately faster than supply of accessible accommodation' (PwC, 2013, p. 6). In addition, the report notes that accessible rooms are likely to be utilised by non-disabled guests and suggests that they need therefore to be aesthetically appealing to all guests, whether or not they are disabled.

We turn now to discussion of the theoretical frameworks of place attachment and place identity in order to explore the intrinsic feelings that may be at play when guests stay in hotels and holiday accommodation.

Place attachment

Place attachment is a multifaceted concept that links individuals to different aspects of their environments. Place attachment is concerned with the emotional bond an individual may hold to a physical place, where that place evokes special feelings of security and satisfaction (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001). This emotional bond may produce reactions of feeling 'at home' (Yuksel et al., 2010, p275). Benefits of place attachment include improved satisfaction with physical environment and surroundings, better physical and psychological health, and improved quality of life (Anton and Lawrence, 2014; Scannell and Gifford, 2017). Much of the tourism and hospitality research on place focuses on the role of place attachment from a social environmental perspective. Place attachment research in tourism literature has predominately looked at open recreational spaces (e.g. Ramkissoon and Mavondo, 2015), pro-environmental behaviour and community environments (Ramkissoon et al., 2013). We found it difficult to locate tourism related research that has applied this concept to the physical spaces of hospitality and holiday accommodation.

Place identity

For Proshansky et al. (1983, p60), place identity is 'a potpourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas and related feelings about specific physical settings, as well as types of settings'. With regard to disabled guests, place identity can be applied to indicate the amplified sense of self that may emanate from a change in holiday accommodation from traditional accessible rooms in hotels to rooms booked via peer-to-peer shared economy platforms. The nature of holiday accommodation extends the notion that such spaces can equate to a *home-away-from-home*. Personal comfort and satisfaction is critical to disabled

people when on holiday (Burnett and Baker, 2001). Following Proshansky et al. (1983) the place identity of a disabled guest is informed and enhanced by the physical spaces that are allocated to him or her within the hotel. It would appear however that hospitality providers often approach the needs of disabled guests as an afterthought, disregarding the logistical and emotional needs of these guests and leaving their interaction with the hotel environment wanting (Kim and Lehto, 2012).

In many hotels, accessible hotel rooms are situated in less favourable locations (Darcy and Taylor, 2009; Navarro et al., 2014) and are often inadequate in design in relation to the needs of disabled guests (Darcy and Pegg, 2011; Kim and Lehto, 2012). Conversely, settings which have a 'homely' feel may evoke feelings of belonging and attachment and enhance a person's self-image and identity; homely settings may also facilitate place attachment, since such settings can provide a sense of security and connectedness (Cristoforetti et al., 2011). Homelike ambiances may be more desirable to disabled guests than those environments perceived as 'clinical', such as accessible hotel rooms (Darcy and Pegg, 2011). But from the perspective of the hotel, the aim in offering a product to the disabled guest appears to begin and end with providing accessible rooms that meet compliance: accessible rooms in hotels are built with the comfort of neither the disabled guest, nor the non-disabled guest in mind.

The above considerations may be irrelevant if disabled people cannot afford to pay for hotel or holiday accommodation. In 2015, the weekly median income of disabled people in Australia was less than half of that of non-disabled people (ABS, 2016), which may leave little funds for holidays. Developments in individualised funding for social care for disabled people, which we explore below, may offer those disabled people who qualify more possibilities for holidays.

Social inclusion

As explained earlier, the latter part of the twentieth century saw many disabled people discharged from long stay institutions, to live in mainstream communities but in recent years, throughout the Western world, concerns have been raised about the rising costs of supporting disabled citizens in community settings. These concerns centre primarily on the increased longevity and needs of ageing populations who have developed age-related impairments, but also pertain to younger disabled people (Carr, 2011). Many governments have responded to these concerns by moving to cash allowance schemes which provide individualised funding or *cash-for-care* for disabled people of all ages. Disabled people can then make their own decisions about how to spend this money to meet their care and

support needs. Although most of these schemes are motivated by a desire to control or reduce costs for the state (Carr, 2011), the funding received by individual disabled people has the potential to vastly increase the control they have over their everyday lives, including decisions about taking holidays.

One such scheme – *The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)* – has been developed in Australia (Bonyhady, 2016). The NDIS provides individualised funding for eligible people with permanent and significant disability, which can be used to purchase specialised equipment, adaptations and support for daily living. Funding from the NDIS can also be used for holidays (NDIS, 2015). Although the NDIS can support disabled people's independence through the provision of funding, their inclusion and participation in the mainstream is dependent on receptive communities, including the tourism and hospitality industries. When people were moved out of the long stay institutions, there was a role for government in encouraging community receptiveness. This included the development of legislation to support disabled people's access and inclusion in the mainstream of society.

The following section outlines state regulation of disability access and inclusion in Western Australia.

Disability legislation and standards

Western Australia has its own State government tourism agency and local governments also provide tourism-related services. The Western Australian Disability Services Act 1993, (amended 2004) requires public authorities (including State government and local government provided tourism services) to develop and implement a Disability Access and Inclusion Plan that supports the right of disabled people to participate fully, without discrimination, in the services and facilities they provide.

The Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) makes it unlawful to discriminate against a person with disability or their carer in a wide range of areas including access to premises and the provision of goods, services and facilities. The Act also incorporates a series of standards that are legally binding regulations set by the Attorney General for Australia. Building specifications in Australia are regulated by the Commonwealth Government through implementation of the Building Code of Australia (BCA). In recent years the BCA and the DDA have been aligned in order to provide consistency with regard to access to premises for disabled people. This collaboration has resulted in the development of the Disability (Access to Premises – Buildings) Standards 2010 – otherwise known as the Disability Standards. These Standards require hotels,

motels and hostels to make a specified number of bedrooms accessible. For example, a hotel with 100 rooms is required to make five accessible rooms available whereas a hotel with 300 rooms is required to have 13 accessible rooms (Australian Government, 2015, p15).

In this paper, we are also interested in holiday accommodation, where the Standards apply only where there are four or more single dwellings, on the same allotment, that are used for short-term holiday accommodation. It is important to note that the Disability Standards **do not** apply to private residential dwellings (Class 1a buildings), which is where much peer-to-peer accommodation, such as Airbnb, is situated.

We turn now to discussion of our earlier study which explored tourism and disability in the Margaret River area of Western Australia.

Earlier study

The Margaret River area receives over one million tourists annually (Tourism WA, 2016) and is a key tourist destination in the southwest region of Western Australia, three hours' drive south of the capital city, Perth. The aim of our earlier study, which was supported by the disabled people's organisation People with Disabilities (WA), was to investigate awareness of disability access requirements by interviewing people working in tourism-related services and businesses at state (Western Australia) or local (Margaret River) level. Because we did not want the interviews to feel like a 'test', the interviewer began by asking what respondents felt were the important issues for disability and tourism in the Margaret River area. It was this 'loosely structured' approach which uncovered unanticipated areas in the interviews – one such area being the rapid expansion of Airbnb in the Margaret River area. At the time the interviews were undertaken (October to December 2015), we were not alert to the scale of Airbnb in Margaret River.

Overall, our earlier study found wide variation in levels of awareness of disability access, with some people working in the tourism and hospitality industries at both state and local levels showing lack of awareness of disability access requirements. What was more concerning however was the way in which disabled tourists (and the Standards which had been put in place to support them) were perceived by hospitality providers as being 'the problem' getting in the way of the hospitality industry. 'Accessible rooms' were also viewed as undesirable to non-disabled guests. One respondent referred to an accessible room as 'stuffing up the whole floor' because it made it difficult to use the rest of the floor space on that level in the same way as it was used on other levels. Several respondents also

suggested that niche markets (separate from mainstream hospitality provision) would be better placed to provide all-inclusive segregated holidays for disabled people, leaving the rest of the industry free of the requirement to accommodate disabled guests. Although these findings were disappointing in that they appear to indicate (for our small sample at least) that the Disability Standards and their intent appear not to be working well in Margaret River, they were not unexpected as other research raises similar concerns (Darcy and Pegg, 2011; O'Neill and Ali Knight, 2000). A key unanticipated finding however was the perception of some respondents that Airbnb was undermining disability access because, unlike mainstream hospitality venues, most Airbnb rooms are **not** required to comply with the Disability Standards. A tourism stakeholder with state-wide responsibility commented:

Holiday letting is a huge part of Margaret River. [...] Now that's increasing with things like Airbnb, and the amount of product that's now selected through Airbnb.

I often talk about the experience, but the real reason is they're attracted to it on the basis of price. And why are they cheaper? Because they don't have all these regulatory burdens that the other sector has. You don't pay GST, you don't have to have a disabled accessible ramp, you don't have to have fire sprinkler systems, all that sort of stuff.

And I assure you that Airbnb and other shared couch surfing sites and whatever, has made this [disability access legislation] all an irrelevant discussion. It doesn't matter how much you try and regulate this, everyone else is going elsewhere.

You go on Airbnb and try and look for you know, disabled, do it as an experiment and see how you go.

Following transcription of this interview, the Airbnb website was searched in February 2016 for a room in Margaret River. This revealed 300+ rooms in the area but we could not find a way to search the Airbnb site for rooms which had disability access. A Google search for 'Airbnb Margaret River disability/disabilities/disabled' picked up only one Airbnb room in Margaret River; this had a note saying that due to steep access, the room was **not** suitable for disabled people.ⁱⁱ The proliferation of Airbnb holiday accommodation in Margaret River and its lack of disability access was not something we had anticipated prior to commencing our earlier study and it was this finding that prompted the current paper. We turn now to a discussion of holiday accommodation and recent developments in the new sharing economy.

The new sharing economy

Although empirical research on the economic, environmental and social impacts of enterprises that make up the sharing economy is still sparse, there is evidence to suggest that the growth of these enterprises is tremendously fast. The accommodation sector, in particular, has been radically changed by peer-to-peer networks such as Airbnb, which was founded in 2008 (Zervas et al., 2015). Five years later, over 140,000 people were staying in Airbnb rooms every night (Friedman, 2013). On December 31st 2015, over a million guests booked an Airbnb room and by July 2016 (the northern hemisphere's summer), that one million figure was being reached most nights of the week (Chafkin and Newcomer, 2016). In the traditional hospitality sector, hotels provide accommodation to guests for profit. In the sharing economy, reasons for offering accommodation are more complex. These include not only the attraction of making some money from a spare bedroom, but also social interactions and environmental responsibility (Tussyadiah, 2015). Trust between host and guest is established through online profiles and a publicly accessible feedback system in which host and guest assess each other. This creates a warm, 'home-spun' impression of Airbnb rooms; but assessed critically, Airbnb is effectively the largest 'hotel chain' in the world, even though it does not own any rooms. It has been valued at 430 billion, 30% more than Hilton and, internationally, lists 2.3 million rooms (Chafkin and Newcomer, 2016).

However, concerns have been raised about sharing economy platforms creating billionaires, exploiting labour, evading taxation, flouting ecological guidelines, and amplifying inequalities within the sharing economy itself, where it has been found that the already privileged middle classes are much more likely take up opportunities than people from lower socioeconomic groups (Schor, 2017). Concerns are also beginning to surface about discrimination within Airbnb's service. Using two sets of names, which sounded either 'distinctively African American' or 'distinctively White', Edelman et al. (2016) conducted a field experiment in which they created Airbnb guest profiles which differed by name only, but were otherwise identical. They used these names to enquire about the availability of 6,400 rooms across the United States. Edelman et al. (2016) found that guests who had names which sounded African American were approximately 16% less likely to be accepted by hosts than identical guests who had names that sounded White; a difference which they found persisted whether the host was White or African American. In 2017, Ameri et al. conducted a randomised field experiment where they submitted 3,847 requests for rooms to Airbnb using hypothetical profiles for disabled people. They found that the pre-approval rate for non-disabled guests was 75%; but for disabled guests it was lower. For those with dwarfism it was 61%, those

with blindness 50%, with cerebral palsy 43%, and for those with spinal cord injury 25% (Ameri et al., 2017, p24).

The potential for discrimination on the basis of disability is multi-faceted, as disabled guests are less likely to have access to the internet or smart devices than their non-disabled peers (Ameri et al., 2017; Nam and Park, 2017) and may also be dependent on accessible facilities (such as ground floor accommodation or lifts, and wheelchair accessible showers), which may simply be unavailable. Should they identify a potentially accessible room and get as far as making an inquiry, they may then face further discrimination on the grounds of their impairment and/or other factors. Slee (2016, p70) notes that:

‘In many cases, Sharing Economy companies have been arguing that municipal regulations are obsolete in the face of their new technologies and new business models. Disabled access rules are clearly not obsolete, so instead the companies argue that it's not their problem.’

The issue of discrimination is not being completely side-stepped by Airbnb, as Chief Executive Officer Brian Chesky has hired a former Union executive with a civil liberties background to review Airbnb's processes (Chafkin and Newcomer, 2016). It would however be impossible for Airbnb to monitor every host in every location. Local developments in the US have seen the cities of New York and San Francisco move towards registration of hosts with city regulators, with the Airbnb platform potentially being liable if hosts do not register (Chafkin and Newcomer, 2016). It will be interesting to see how this local registration policy plays out. In a separate development, specialist platforms – *Noirbnb* and *Accomable* - have developed to serve particular markets:

Noirbnb The Future of Black Travel! We're building a safe and welcoming platform that fully understands our experience <https://twitter.com/hashtag/noirbnb>

Accomable is a platform to find disabled accessible hotels, vacation rentals and apartments <https://accomable.com/> [as yet, there are no Accomable rooms in Margaret River]

Our interest in this paper is not with specialist segregated provision but with ‘mainstream’ peer-to-peer networks such as Airbnb. The rapid expansion of Airbnb raises serious questions about equal access to accommodation for disabled guests. Our earlier study indicated that even in the traditional hospitality sector, where disability access is regulated,

the Australian Disability Standards are not working well. In the small scale holiday accommodation sector, which at present is unregulated, it would appear that opportunities for disabled guests are at best hard to find, or at worst non-existent. However, given concerns about accessible rooms in the traditional hospitality sector (Darcy and Pegg, 2011; O'Neill and Ali Knight, 2000), it is possible that Airbnb may be able to offer something better. It is not difficult to see that Airbnb could have a number of attractions for disabled people who are living on a limited income (ABS, 2016), including affordability and the possibility of offering a *home-away-from-home* experience (Guttentag, 2015). Indeed, the moderately priced homely surroundings of an Airbnb room present a stark contrast to a costly and 'clinical' accessible room situated in an unfavourable location within a hotel (Darcy and Taylor, 2009; Navarro et al., 2014).

Utopian inquiry summary

So far, our utopian inquiry has employed Levitas's first two modes of analysis identifying elements of 'the good society' that are evident in existing social and economic policies and the people who are advantaged or disadvantaged in these social arrangements. We used the social model of disability to explore how disability can be exacerbated or ameliorated by staff working within traditional hospitality settings and identified ways in which, at a structural level, the state can intervene through systems of social and financial support and legislation which may help reduce the disability (that is, the socially imposed restriction) experienced by people with impairments.

Drawing on previous research in accessible tourism, we pointed to problems with current arrangements for accessible rooms in traditional hospitality settings and suggested that the application of theories of place attachment and place identity may be helpful in overcoming the clinical aspects of hotel rooms. We also discussed data from an earlier study, which revealed concerns about the implications of the sharing economy for disabled guests. Overall, our analysis has found little in current arrangements for hospitality and holiday accommodation that advantages disabled guests. Rather than focus on the negativity of this situation, we now take up Levitas's (2013, p149) suggestion that a better world 'may be accessible only through an act of imagination'.

The imaginary reconstitution of society

There is no doubt that the sharing economy is impacting on the way in which our society is organised, though it is difficult to predict its impacts or potential. One possible way of doing this is by imagining alternative possible futures (Levitas, 2013). Below, we use three hypothetical scenarios, each set in the year 2026, to think through the place of disabled

guests in hotel and holiday accommodation shaped by the (now, not so new) sharing economy. Rising numbers of older people and policies of 'ageing in place' are already resulting in older people's existing accommodation being adapted to meet their access needs (Kendig et al., 2017), it is likely therefore that increased numbers of accessible rooms will be available on Airbnb by 2026; each of the scenarios below is based upon this assumption. Initially, we planned two hypothetical scenarios for the year 2026: *Scenario 1* which describes a future in which hospitality and peer-to-peer accommodation continue in the same vein as in 2016; and *Scenario 2* which outlines a vision for Airbnb, where disabled guests are included. However, in the process of writing *Scenario 2*, it became apparent that a more radical approach (*Scenario 3*) would be required to achieve a fully inclusive Airbnb vision.

Levitas (2013) argues that current concerns about economic and environmental sustainability are such that continuing as we are is not going to be possible. In view of this, she suggests that utopian thinking can enable us to imagine futures which are *more possible* than current arrangements. Rather than viewing Utopia as fantasy or the impossible, she suggests building a holistic utopian vision with which to explore and analyse the interconnections and interrelationships between social, economic and environmental processes. *Scenario 3* therefore responds to Levitas's (2013) assertion that the imaginary reconstitution of society should adopt a holistic approach and sets up the wider social conditions necessary to support our utopian vision.

Scenario 1

In 2026, regulation of the traditional hospitality sector has continued unchanged since 2016 with larger hotels having the required numbers of accessible rooms. However, due to their low incomes, most disabled people cannot afford to stay in hotels. Recent years have seen almost 20% of hotels go out of business, as more and more tourists have been defecting to Airbnb and other similar platforms. This means that, overall, there are fewer accessible hotel rooms available for disabled guests than there were in 2016. Those disabled guests who do stay in accessible hotel rooms are largely dissatisfied with their 'clinical' appearance. Airbnb has continued in much the same form as in 2016 and disabled guests continue to be excluded from Airbnb rooms due to lack of disability access.

There is no regulation of the peer-to-peer holiday accommodation market and no redress for disabled people who are excluded. Separate, segregated niche provision for disabled guests has been developed by platforms such as *Accomable* and this is

popular with some disability organisations. But many disabled people and their families would prefer a 'mainstream', rather than specialist segregated peer-to-peer platform for finding holiday accommodation. Overall, there are few disabled people taking holidays in Western Australia in 2026.

Scenario 2

In 2020, Airbnb researchers identified 'homely accommodation' as an essential feature of the international Airbnb brand and in 2021 Airbnb commenced regular promotion of their *Home-away-from-home* campaign, making unfavourable comparisons with the impersonal experience of staying in hotels. This resulted in an expanding market in 'homely' Airbnb rooms and the category of 'homeliness' being included in all guests' ratings of their stays. An Airbnb report in 2025 noted that almost all of the rooms with accessible features received poor 'homeliness' ratings. Website photographs of these rooms revealed that many appeared quite 'clinical' with 'unhomely' adaptations such as unsightly handrails and raised toilets on ugly concrete bases.

In 2026, Airbnb organised a Homely Accessible Rooms competition which invited disabled guests to rate accommodation on accessibility, homeliness and aesthetics. The competition also asked disabled guests to rate hosts based on their behaviour and attitudes towards disabled people, as perceived by the disabled guest. This competition received several thousand entries internationally, but given the low response rate compared to their earlier (general) Homely Rooms competition, it was clear to Airbnb that accessible tourism was not a mainstream aspect of their business. Overall, in 2026, there are less accessible hotel rooms (because the impact of Airbnb led to the closure of some hotels), but more accessible Airbnb rooms than in 2016.

Scenario 3

The decline of the hotel industry in all but the most expensive markets, and the ongoing lack of regulation of Airbnb meant that by 2021, there were few options for holiday accommodation for disabled people who required wheelchair accessible rooms. At the same time, there were concerns about increasing numbers of elderly disabled people living in Australian society. In 2022, the Australian Commonwealth government passed legislation which required every new build residential dwelling in

Australia to have at least one wheelchair accessible entrance to the property and at least one wheelchair accessible bedroom and bathroom. The same legislation also made it a requirement for the installation (where not already in place) of one accessible entrance (e.g. a ramp) and one accessible bathroom (e.g. accessible shower and toilet) *prior to the settlement date of the sale of all existing residential dwellings sold after 2023* (unless exempted by the local authority planning department).

This intervention by the Commonwealth government led to expansion of the building and plumbing industries with plumbing manufacturers vying for a greater share of the accessible bathroom market. In a competitive market, the aesthetic features of bathroom adaptations have become as important as safety considerations, with several magazines devoted to the aesthetics of accessible bathrooms and a prestigious Annual Accessible Bathroom Award. By 2026, the hotel industry is starting to take notice of this Award, and many hotels are upgrading their accessible bathrooms to the aesthetic standards most people now expect to see in their own homes. Photographs of accessible bedrooms and bathrooms are also starting to take pride of place on the Airbnb website, and *all* Airbnb guests are now asked to report on wheelchair accessibility and the aesthetics of any adaptations in their feedback to Airbnb. Wheelchair users are now more satisfied with accessible rooms provided both through Airbnb and in hotels; though there is still considerable work to do in relation access for people with other impairments.

When writing the above scenarios, we considered the responsibilities of large peer-to-peer platforms, such as Airbnb, to promote access and inclusion. A key feature of such platforms is their reliance on feedback from guests. Writing *Scenario 2* highlighted the small numbers of disabled guests within the Airbnb shared economy market and the limited influence of disabled guests' feedback when compared with overall guest numbers. However, by using social model understandings of disability, our attention was diverted away from individual disabled people towards the social, economic and political structures which serve to exacerbate or ameliorate disability (Oliver and Barnes, 2012); the very structures that Levitas (2013) encourages us to reimagine.

Our initial aim in *Scenario 3* was to imagine a role for the state in regulating disabled people's access to peer-to-peer holiday accommodation but the only way we could envisage this was through state regulation of disability access with which *all* residential property

owners would have to comply. This enabled us to see that the building industry and housing markets could potentially create market conditions that support accessibility and challenge the stigma associated with disability access. Although *Scenario 3* may be unrealistic in its reach, development of this utopian vision indicated that, in relation to the new sharing economy, it may be necessary to think differently about regulation and the role of the state. We found it impossible to imagine a utopian version of Airbnb, fully inclusive of disabled people, which exists within a society that does not itself endorse full social inclusion. We would argue therefore that the role of the state lies in creating the wider social and economic conditions for social inclusion, within which the sharing economy can operate.

Our vision for wheelchair access in *Scenario 3* has broad reach (into almost every residential dwelling in the land), though there could also be other impacts such as slowing the housing market or trapping homeowners in dwellings they cannot afford to renovate accessibly. Writing *Scenario 3* also revealed that the regulation of wheelchair access is much more tangible than the regulation of access for people with sensory or intellectual impairments, which we do not consider here. Additionally, there are many other dimensions of social exclusion which may play out within the sharing economy such as racial discrimination (Edelman et al., 2016), which we have not included in this scenario. It is also possible that the utopian vision we present for disabled guests could create or exacerbate difficulties for other groups. There are no easy solutions to these concerns, but we hope that our attempts at developing a utopian vision can provide a starting point for future debate about disability access within the sharing economy.

Discussion

The hospitality industry has the capacity to provide a holistic product to the disabled guest market but appears instead to be focused on minimum compliance with standards and legislation. Social model understandings locate disability (that is, socially imposed restriction) in barriers within hotels and holiday accommodation, as well as in wider society. Social model understandings can alert hotel staff and accommodation hosts to barriers within their hotel or holiday accommodation, including their own behaviours and attitudes; they can also alert planners and policymakers to possibilities for barrier removal at a societal level through policy and legislation (Oliver and Barnes, 2012). It is also important to understand the concept of place attachment in relation to hospitality and holiday accommodation settings, because this can highlight to hotel staff and holiday accommodation hosts the emotional bond that may be present, or can be created, between the physical settings and guests (Hildago and Hernandez, 2001; Yuksel et al., 2010). Attending to such understandings may

also encourage future visits by disabled guests (Cristoforetti et al., 2011; Scannell and Gifford, 2017).

It is possible that Airbnb will be able to provide homely accessible rooms, but they are unlikely to be available in large quantity without some sort of intervention by the state (Grady and Ohlin, 2009; Cottingham et al., 2016; Ameri et al., 2017). Ideas about recourse to markets to resolve issues of access or discrimination are of limited relevance here because they fail to take account of the relative lack of power of disabled people within either traditional markets (Oliver and Barnes, 2012), or the sharing economy (Slee, 2016). Although disabled people are no longer routinely institutionalised in Australia, many live on low incomes which leave little spare cash for holidays (ABS, 2016). As the National Disability Insurance Scheme is rolled out across Australia, eligible disabled people will have more control over the support funding they receive and may be able to use some of this funding to take holidays (NDIS, 2015). Research in the area of accessible tourism has however indicated that both disabled and non-disabled guests are dissatisfied with accessible hotel rooms (Darcy and Pegg, 2011; Kim and Lehto, 2012) and our own (albeit small-scale) study found that hospitality providers viewed requirements to provide accessible rooms as inhibiting the industry. We did not get a sense (from either the literature or respondents in our earlier study) that the hospitality industry welcomes disabled guests.

The hospitality industry's approach to disability access appears to be focussed on compliance at the expense of aesthetics, providing little opportunity for disabled guests to feel at home in hospitality settings. Peer-to-peer platforms such as Airbnb, on the other hand, often provide rooms in people's own homes and the homely nature of this accommodation may offer greater possibilities than accessible hotel rooms for disabled guests to develop a bond to physical place (Yuksel et al., 2010). If disabled guests feel more at home, it is likely that they will develop feelings of place identity and be inclined to take more holidays (Cristoforetti et al., 2011). So far, however, there is little to suggest that Airbnb or other similar peer-to-peer accommodation platforms have a good track record in identifying, or providing, accessible rooms. Possibilities for disabled guests to feel at home in either hotel or holiday accommodation are therefore currently limited.

Conclusions

At present, it would appear that the sharing economy has little to offer disabled guests other than specialist platforms such as *Accomable*. As Australia rolls out the National Disability Insurance Scheme with its focus on social inclusion, it will be important to ensure that holiday accommodation is provided in inclusive (rather than segregated) settings. When

disabled people were discharged from the long stay institutions, the state had to step in to regulate disability access and inclusion. In the new world of the sharing economy, large peer-to-peer platforms such as Airbnb also have a role in promoting inclusion and fair access but, without state intervention, the place of disabled guests in both traditional hotels and peer-to-peer holiday accommodation is far from secure. The role of the state in regulating the sharing economy is as yet unclear, but hypothetical future scenarios developed within this paper suggest that it may be helpful to put in place broader legislation for social inclusion, rather than try and regulate peer-to-peer platforms at the service delivery level.

Theoretical implications

When disability is understood as socially imposed restriction, it is amenable to change and improvement through the removal of barriers to disabled people's inclusion in the mainstream (Oliver and Barnes, 2012). Conversely, disability can be exacerbated by the development of new socially or societally imposed restrictions. Shared economy approaches are changing the ways in which our society is organised. Analysis within this paper suggests that, in relation to hotel and holiday accommodation, the new sharing economy has the potential to *further disable* people with impairments. In order to counter barriers created by shared economy approaches, it will be necessary to engage with the wider social, economic and political implications of the sharing economy. Levitas's (2013) imaginary reconstitution of society and the hypothetical scenarios discussed within this paper provide opportunities for planners, policymakers and tourism stakeholders to think through and theorise these wider implications at a societal level.

Practical implications

If disabled guests are to be better included in both traditional hotels and holiday accommodation, it will be important for tourism and hospitality stakeholders to work with disabled people and their organisations to promote understandings of disability, which do not locate problems in individual disabled people. These understandings should be cascaded to hotel staff and holiday accommodation hosts, as social model ideas can enable staff and hosts to facilitate disabled guests' access and inclusion. It will also be important for hospitality and holiday accommodation providers to give due consideration to place attachment and aesthetics when providing accessibility features for disabled guests; and to make every effort to avoid these features appearing 'clinical'.

In relation to the regulation of shared economy services, it would appear that the role of the state lies in creating the wider social and economic conditions for full social inclusion, within which the sharing economy can operate.

Limitations and future research

Exploration of the place of disabled guests in the new world of holiday accommodation shaped by the sharing economy is a new area and our analysis is necessarily tentative. The hypothetical scenarios developed in this paper hold no certainties for the future, but are offered as vehicle for thinking through possible implications of the sharing economy. As shared economy approaches develop further, it is likely that they will continue to reflect the needs and interests of the dominant majority. It is critically important therefore that future research in this area includes consideration of the needs and interests of guests from minority groups.

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ⁱ This paper uses the term ‘disabled people’ rather than ‘people with disabilities’. The social model of disability makes a clear distinction between impairment (functional limitation) and disability (socially imposed restriction). In using the term ‘disabled people’, we are signalling our commitment to social model understandings which view people with impairments as *disabled* by oppressive social structures rather than by individual impairments (Oliver and Barnes 2012). We acknowledge however that the use of disabled people terminology is not shared by all who subscribe to social model understandings of disability.

ⁱⁱ We recently discovered that Airbnb have added a ‘wheelchair accessible’ filter which can be used when searching their website; though, it appears they have not advertised this. When we searched Airbnb’s website using this filter, we found three ‘wheelchair accessible’ rooms available in Margaret River for a weekend in January 2017 but, from the photographs provided, the bathroom in one of the listings is clearly **not** wheelchair accessible and the second listing does not provide information about access or photographs of the bathroom. The third listing does include photographs of an accessible bathroom, complete with handrails for shower and toilet; though this listing is for a holiday chalet in a commercial holiday letting venue which is required to comply with the Disability Standards.