DISPLACED WITHOUT MOVING: RESIDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF AIRBNB, TOURISM AND SYMBOLIC DISPOSSESSION IN UTRECHT

by

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Preface

Before you lies my master thesis "Displaced without Moving: Residents' Experiences of Airbnb, Tourism and Symbolic Dispossession in Utrecht". It has been written in fulfilment of the requirements of the Cultural Geography chair group at Wageningen University & Research. The process of researching and writing took place from September 2025 to February 2026.

One goal I set for myself at the start of the process was not to overcomplicate the task, but to step outside of my comfort zone at certain times in the research period. After selecting the topic and scope, I decided, with encouragement from my supervisor Eva Erdmenger, to use focus groups as my method to gather data. This method was familiar to me and often discussed in Methodology courses, however I had never applied it in practice. I decided to take the leap and challenge myself to find participants in Utrecht who would be willing to join for one and a half hour. This was not easy, and on several occasions in December I admit I regretted my decision. Would people register? Will they show up? What if only one person, or no one, shows up? However, after many (many) efforts to get residents to join, I successfully hosted two evenings, in which enthusiastic residents shared their views and stories with me and with their neighbours. This thesis has taught me that there are lovely people that are willing to help with research, without gaining anything in return. I'm very grateful to all residents of Binnenstad and Lombok that registered, and especially those who were able to participate in the focus groups.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Eva Erdmenger, for the guidance and reassurance she gave me during the past semester. I had my worries at times, but you helped me stay realistic and optimistic. In September, we discussed our difference in working styles, I shared that I am slightly chaotic when it comes to time planning, organising sources, etc., to which Eva, being very structured and neat, responded with tips and tricks to smooth the process for myself. Evidently, I had much less stress when following a planning and having my sources mapped out neatly. I would also like to thank my second examiner, Edward Huijbens, for taking the time and effort to read and assess my thesis.

Finally, I want to thank my family and friends for being my mental support. Six months is a long time to work on one project, but you helped me through it. Especially thank you to Thomas, for helping me distribute many flyers across the city and for coming with me to the focus groups to take notes, but mostly for moral support. To the person reading this, thank you, and I hope you enjoy reading.

Anna de Moor

Abstract

This thesis examines how residents in Utrecht experience impacts of Airbnb and tourism through the lens of symbolic dispossession, a perceived loss of symbolic ownership, recognition, and belonging in one's neighbourhood without physically moving. It responds to uncertainty in Utrecht, where short-term rentals are regulated, yet residents may experience uneven, place-specific impacts and shifts in how their neighbourhood space is used and understood. By showing how symbolic dispossession can take form in a regulated, mid-sized city, the study extends a literature that is largely based on high intensity touristification contexts. Drawing on two focus groups with residents in the Binnenstad and Lombok, the findings show that dispossession-like experiences are rarely described as a general, everyday loss of belonging.

Instead, the difference is mainly one of form and clarity. Binnenstad accounts emphasise normalised visitor presence and micro-spatial frictions, while Lombok residents highlight seasonal hotspots and future spillover concerns. Across both neighbourhoods, social cohesion is described as light but functional, and Airbnb is perceived primarily as a future risk: often low visibility now, yet symbolically important as something that could undermine neighbourhood stability. This thesis argues that symbolic dispossession in Utrecht is best understood as situated, spatially concentrated, and shaped by how residents read changes in public space and residential continuity, rather than as a uniform outcome of short-term rentals across the city.

Keywords: Symbolic dispossession, Short-term rentals, Airbnb, Touristification, Sense of place, Utrecht

1. Introduction

Since the late 2000s, the sharing economy has developed from groundbreaking innovations to a part of our daily lives (World Economic Forum, 2019). As described by Gold (2019, p. 1579), people are now able to book a pet sitter, order dinner and book a bike repair, "all from the backseat of an Uber". In a similar fashion, the sharing economy, the umbrella term for these services, has reshaped how people book accommodations. Short-term rental platforms enable temporary stays in residential housing, allowing private individuals to rent out rooms or entire homes to visitors. While often framed as sharing, these platforms increasingly operate as profit-driven intermediaries that reshape housing and tourism markets

In a matter of years, short-term rentals have integrated the holiday planning process and transformed the global tourism industry, especially through Airbnb (formerly Airbed & Breakfast) (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2019). Airbnb was founded in 2008 by two hosts in San Francisco and has since grown to millions of hosts globally (Help Center Airbnb, n.d.). The platform has played an important role in changing the traditional tourism accommodation sector, which is now more flexible and customisable for both tourists and residents (Guttentag, 2013). Among other platforms, Airbnb has become the dominant global actor and the primary driver of short-term rental activity in most cities. While other services such as Booking.com, Expedia, and Vrbo also facilitate similar forms of short-term stays, their market share is comparatively small, Airbnb accounting for sixty to eighty percent of online short-term rentals (AirDNA, 2024). Airbnb's dominant position, extensive brand recognition, and scale of listings make it the most influential platform shaping both housing availability and neighbourhood dynamics. For this reason, this study focuses exclusively on Airbnb as a case of short-term rental impacts, while acknowledging that similar dynamics may also involve other platforms.

Figure 1.1: Location of Utrecht province within the Netherlands (adapted from van Aalst, 2007)

In many cities, Barcelona and Amsterdam being common examples, the growth of Airbnb has become controversial because it links tourism demand directly to residential housing and neighbourhood life. This has intensified debates about how tourism, Airbnb, and urban liveability intersect, and how cities can regulate these pressures without undermining valid forms of home-sharing (Guttentag, 2013). These tensions can be addressed in Utrecht, the Netherlands, where Airbnb rentals have been regulated but remain socially contested (Ioannides et al., 2018). Utrecht is a mid-sized city in the centre of the Netherlands (Figure 1.1) with a historic centre and a strong tourism and leisure economy, while also facing broader housing pressures typical of major urban regions in the Netherlands (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024).
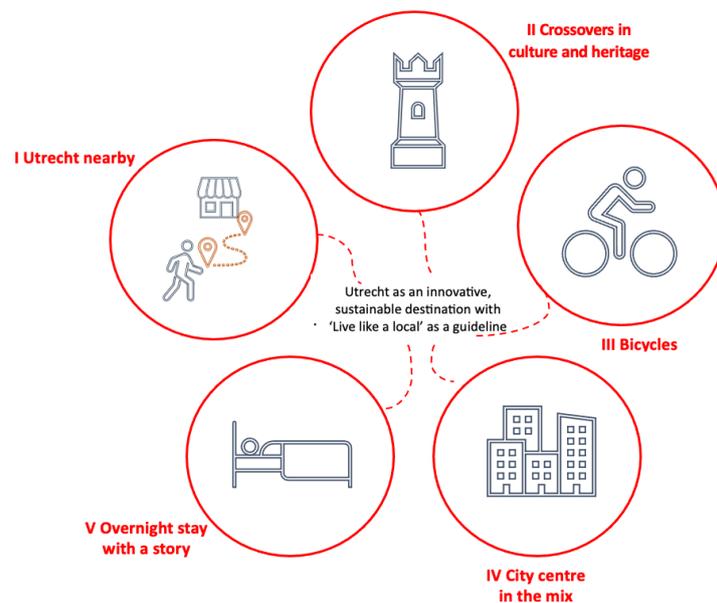
Figure 1.2: Five strategic choices in Utrecht's place marketing strategy
(adapted from Utrecht Marketing, 2021)

Utrecht has long balanced an image of liveability with ambitions to develop as a cultural and economic hub. In recent years, municipal and destination marketing strategies have increasingly focused on shaping visitor flows and increasing overnight stays, partly in response to capacity constraints and perceived imbalances in visitor patterns (Utrecht Marketing, 2021). As shown in Figure 1.2, Utrecht Marketing has refined its approach around five themes, including a strategic focus on improving the visitor mix through campaigns that encourage longer stays and deeper engagement with cultural offerings (Utrecht Marketing, 2021; Utrecht Marketing, 2025). This shift is relevant to this study because it signals continued efforts to grow and manage tourism in ways that may concentrate pressures. Utrecht receives approximately 2.7 million day visitors compared to around 680,000 overnight stays annually, a gap larger than in comparable Dutch cities (Utrecht Monitor, n.d.). While framed as sustainable and economically beneficial, such strategies may also intensify perceived pressures on

neighbourhood liveability, particularly in and around the city centre. Against this backdrop, this thesis investigates how residents in Utrecht perceive and make sense of Airbnb- and tourism-related neighbourhood change in their everyday lives, setting the stage for the problem this study addresses.

1.1 Problem statement

Airbnb is often promoted as a way of offering visitors a more local experience and providing residents with an additional opportunity for income (Meleo et al., 2016). At the same time, research across European cities highlights that Airbnb can contribute to a range of negative outcomes, including pressure on housing availability and affordability, disturbances associated with transient use (noise, anonymity, crowding), and changes in neighbourhood commercial landscapes as visitor-oriented consumption expands (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2019). For residents, the presence of Airbnb does not only raise concerns about affordability and crowding, but also about belonging, identity, and liveability (Sequera & Nofre, 2018). They may experience a decline in social cohesion due to a lack of long-term neighbourly interactions, increased feelings of anonymity, and disturbances such as noise pollution and crowding.

Utrecht has responded to concerns about liveability and the withdrawal of housing by introducing measures in 2021 such as a registration system, and a sixty-night annual rental cap (Gemeente Utrecht, 2022). In addition, hosts must obtain an official permit, costing €1,278.50 (NOS Nieuws, 2020), and comply with safety regulations, as unauthorized subletting can result in fines. These measures aim to prevent housing from being permanently removed from the housing market, protect liveability in neighbourhoods, and reduce disturbances such as noise, crowding, and anonymity caused by a constant flow of temporary visitors. Yet substantial uncertainty remains about what these measures mean in practice. The actual scale and visibility of Airbnb activity is difficult to determine: estimates suggest a peak around 2017 followed by decline (AirDNA, 2024), but both platform and municipal datasets have blind spots, listings may be inactive or duplicated, while registration figures can undercount due to non-compliance or under-registration. As a result, apparent decline may reflect reduced visible supply rather than a clear reduction in overall activity. Moreover, even if listings have decreased, this does not necessarily imply that lived impacts have faded; frictions can persist in specific hotspots, take different forms, or be articulated as concerns about what Airbnb could do to neighbourhood stability in the future rather than what it is currently doing.

Public debate reflects this mixed picture. Local reporting suggests that pressure may have eased compared to peak years, while critics argue that core issues remain unresolved (De Moor, 2024). Monitoring data likewise indicates that inner-city residents are still more likely than residents elsewhere to report nuisance related to visitors and tourism (Utrecht Monitor, n.d.). Taken together, Utrecht forms

a case where regulation exists and apparent indicators have shifted, yet the lived experience of neighbourhood change remains contested.

This leads to the central problem this thesis addresses. Even under relatively strong regulatory conditions, it remains unclear how residents interpret the impacts of Airbnb and tourism in their everyday neighbourhood lives, and how these experiences potentially differ between neighbourhoods. Much research measures short-term rental impacts through indicators such as listings or prices, but this can miss how residents themselves connect (or do not connect) changes to Airbnb and tourism, and how they experience subtle changes in social relations, space use, and place meanings. The next section sets out a qualitative approach to examining these questions.

1.2 Relevance and contributions

This study contributes to academic debates on Airbnb and touristification by showing why residents' perceptions are not just 'nice to have', but necessary evidence for governance and social sustainability. Platform counts, registration figures, and market indicators can indicate scale and correlation, but they cannot reveal how tourism pressure is actually encountered, where it concentrates, which changes are experienced as legitimate or disruptive, and when neighbourhood change becomes meaningful. As a result, policies that rely primarily on quantitative indicators risk missing the mechanisms through which Airbnb's affect liveability, such as building-level turnover, micro-spatial crowding, or shifting norms of residential space, even when overall numbers appear stable (Nieuwland & van Melik, 2020; Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018). Understanding residents' perceptions matters because it informs who benefits and who bears costs in the reconfiguration of urban neighbourhoods. Residents' accounts make visible the distribution of impacts across streets, buildings, and everyday routines, helping to identify when Airbnb functions less as a measurable housing market variable and more as a symbolic and social stressor linked to neighbourhood stability (Gold, 2019; Gurran & Phibbs, 2017). This knowledge is relevant to municipalities seeking to design proportionate and targeted interventions (e.g., enforcement priorities, hotspot management, building-level safeguards), and to broader debates on socially sustainable tourism that require attention to liveability rather than visitor volumes alone (Albuquerque et al., 2024; Mitas et al., 2023). By comparing the neighbourhoods Binnenstad (city centre) and Lombok (see Figure 1.3), the study further shows how similar processes can be perceived differently across neighbourhood contexts, supporting more context-sensitive policy and contributing qualitative insight to a literature still dominated by macro-level measurement.
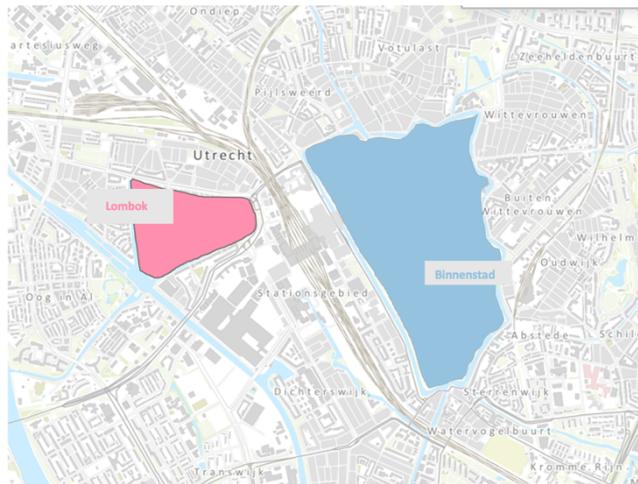
Figure 1.3: Location of districts Lombok and Binnenstad

Conceptually, the thesis advances the use of symbolic dispossession to capture dispossession-like experiences that operate through place meanings, belonging, and legitimacy rather than direct physical eviction (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2019). Empirically, it offers a comparative analysis within one city across two neighbourhood contexts, helping clarify how symbolic and social impacts may vary by place. This within-city comparison strengthens the analysis by holding the broader policy and housing-market context relatively constant, while revealing how effects are shaped by neighbourhood-specific spatial conditions and everyday rhythms. Such differentiation is practically relevant for urban governance, as it supports more targeted and context-sensitive responses rather than one-size-fits-all regulation. Finally, the study explicitly incorporates a temporal dimension by examining how residents relate both present conditions and future-oriented concerns to neighbourhood stability, showing how expectations about Airbnb's potential growth can shape how current changes are understood. This matters for destinations and municipalities because policy is made under uncertainty and conflict often emerges before it is visible in statistics. Future-oriented concerns signal where trust, perceived control, and social acceptance of tourism are weakening, therefore providing early warning for emerging hotspots and potential crises. By showing how expected Airbnb growth shapes how current changes are understood, the study helps practitioners act proactively rather than waiting until pressures translate into entrenched conflict and costly reactive measures.

1.3 Research questions and aim

This thesis examines how residents in Utrecht experience neighbourhood change in relation to Airbnb and tourism, with particular attention to both present impacts and anticipated future trajectories. The concept of **symbolic dispossession** will serve as an interpretive lens to capture forms of displacement that may occur even when residents remain physically in place. In this study, symbolic dispossession refers to residents' perceived loss of symbolic ownership of the neighbourhood, as their meanings,

identities, and everyday practices are increasingly out of place amid visitor-oriented change. This concept, along with concepts in the secondary research questions, is developed further in Chapter 2. The following research questions guide the study and structure the empirical analysis.

The overarching research question guiding this thesis is:

How do residents in Utrecht Binnenstad and Lombok experience the impacts of Airbnb-related tourism pressures as symbolic dispossession?

To address this question, the thesis is guided by secondary research questions that move from broader neighbourhood-level transformations to residents' social and emotional experiences. This structure enables a comparative analysis between the Binnenstad, an area dealing with long-standing tourism pressure, and Lombok, a residential neighbourhood undergoing more gradual change in terms of tourism.

The secondary research questions are as follows:

1. *How do residents experience neighbourhood changes, and to what extent do they attribute these changes to Airbnb and tourism?*
2. *How do residents experience changes in the use, accessibility, and meaning of neighbourhood spaces (housing, streets, shops, public areas) in relation to Airbnb and tourism?*
3. *How do Airbnb- and tourism-related developments affect residents' perceptions of social cohesion, familiarity, and anonymity?*
4. *How do residents experience changes in the identity and atmosphere of their neighbourhood, and how do these changes affect their sense of place and belonging?*
5. *Under what conditions do these spatial, social, and symbolic changes become experienced as symbolic dispossession, and how does this differ between the Binnenstad and Lombok?*
6. *How do residents imagine the future of their neighbourhood to develop in relation to Airbnb, tourism, and residential liveability?*

Together, these research questions allow for an analysis that links broader neighbourhood transformations to everyday lived experience, while also capturing the role of the future threat of Airbnb as part of how residents evaluate neighbourhood change. This study is conducted in Utrecht, which is a suitable case because it combines active Airbnb regulation with ongoing debate about the extent and neighbourhood effects of Airbnb, while also offering contrasting neighbourhood contexts (Binnenstad and Lombok) for comparison. A fuller rationale for the case selection is provided in section 3.1.

To guide the reader through how this argument is developed, the remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature and introduces key concepts used in this thesis.

Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodology, including the comparative case-study approach, focus group procedures, and analytical strategy. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings organised around the secondary research questions, comparing patterns across the Binnenstad and Lombok. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and broader debates on touristification and dispossession. Chapter 6 concludes by summarising the main contributions, reflecting on limitations, and outlining implications for research and urban governance.

2. Literature review

This chapter reviews the literature that is most relevant for answering the research questions and for building the conceptual framework used in the analysis. Due to the scope of this MSc thesis, the review is selective rather than exhaustive. Literature was therefore chosen based on conceptual relevance to the central mechanisms examined in this study, empirical relevance to urban European contexts where short-term rentals intersect with housing pressure and liveability debates, and suitability for analysing residents' experiences in Utrecht specifically. The review prioritises peer-reviewed academic work that has shaped key debates, complemented where needed by foundational theoretical texts and closely related empirical studies. Rather than aiming to summarise all strands of Airbnb research, the chapter concentrates on the bodies of work that help explain how Airbnb and tourism can reorient neighbourhood space and social life, and how residents may experience these changes. The chapter concludes by synthesising these strands into a conceptual framework that guides the empirical analysis.

2.1 Platform urbanism and the transformation of cities

The rise of Airbnb can best be understood as part of a wider phenomenon of **platform urbanism**, which refers to the increasing role of digital platforms in facilitating access to urban resources such as housing, mobility, and services. (Barns, 2020). In the platform economy, platforms do more than connect users, they also define participation rules, shape transactions, and capture value through fees, data and network effects (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). Early narratives framed Airbnb as part of a sharing economy that would make use of underused space and generate local benefits. By standardising listings and using pricing tools and platform rules, Airbnb turns homes into bookable assets that can be marketed and used much like tourist accommodation. This makes short-term rentals easier to scale across neighbourhoods and links them to urban concerns about housing availability, liveability, and how everyday space is used.

Critics have shown how short-term rental markets can professionalise and become oriented toward profit-maximisation, with a growing role for commercial operators and investment strategies (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2019; Srnicek, 2017). A key mechanism is that short-term renting can increase the revenue potential of housing relative to long-term renting, thereby creating incentives for conversion in tight urban housing markets. Consequently, this can lead to increased circulation, reduced residential stability, and increased competition for housing, even if only a minority of houses are used for Airbnb (Aalbers, 2016; Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018). For residents, these processes may not be immediately visible. Short-term rentals may be scattered and intermittently occupied, while platform data and compliance are often unclear. As a result, Airbnb can be experienced as a low-visibility threshold risk, which is something that may feel manageable or marginal in the present, yet feared for its potential to tip neighbourhood stability and everyday liveability if short-stay activity expands.

Because these impacts play out in everyday neighbourhood life, municipalities have sought to manage Airbnb through regulation. Municipalities attempt to regulate Airbnb through caps, registration and permitting, but governance is complicated by enforcement capacity and by the platform's control over key information flows (Gurran & Phibbs, 2017; Nieuwland & van Melik, 2020). This study builds on this platform urbanism framing to examine how residents in Utrecht experience both current and anticipated Airbnb- and tourism-related neighbourhood change.

2.2 Touristification and reorientation of urban space

Building on the platform urbanism dynamics discussed above, an important question is how these macro-level forces appear in neighbourhood space. In the context of Airbnb, short-term rentals can extend visitor-oriented uses into residential areas and bring tourism into everyday places (Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018). These transformations are often discussed through the concept of **touristification**, understood as a process in which urban environments become increasingly organised around visitors and consumption rather than residents' routines and needs (Sequera & Nofre, 2018). For this thesis, touristification therefore provides a bridge between housing dynamics and residents' lived experiences of change.

Touristification is not simply a synonym for tourism growth. Sequera and Nofre (2018) describe it as a rapid reconfiguration of central urban areas in which tourism becomes a dominant driver of socio-spatial change, involving factors such as intensified visitor flows, short-term temporalities, and business models (including Airbnb) that transform homes and neighbourhoods into consumption-oriented landscapes. Their argument is not that gentrification is irrelevant, but that touristification involves a distinct set of mechanisms. In other words, touristification describes a shift where the *use* of space becomes increasingly oriented towards tourist practices, such as staying, strolling, consuming, and photographing, rather than the social reproduction of everyday neighbourhood life.

The overlap with gentrification can be clarified through **tourism gentrification**. Cocola-Gant (2018) argues that this is a form of gentrification in which tourism becomes a driver of dispossession, commercial restructuring, and socio-cultural change. Tourism demand can create incentives for reinvestment, rising rents, and new consumption circuits that prioritise outsiders (tourists and investors) over residents. Gravari-Barbas and Guinand (2017) similarly emphasise diverse pathways through which tourism contributes to exclusion and neighbourhood upgrading. The impact of Airbnb can be seen as a slightly different form of touristification. Contrary to other forms of physical touristification, Airbnb and similar providers impact neighbourhoods throughout the city, leading to a "displacement of people rather than services" (Koens et al., 2018, p. 6).

Touristification is not only visible through the numbers of tourists but also through the transformation of the spaces within the neighbourhoods in terms of what these spaces are being used for. The expansion of tourism-oriented activities means that residential streets and neighbourhood amenities are increasingly being used as part of the tourism economy. This is visible through changes in the type of commercial activities that take place within these spaces. There is an increased presence of activities that are oriented towards tourists, especially in terms of short-term consumptions and related activities (Gravari-Barbas & Guinand, 2017; Koens et al., 2018; Romera et al., 2025). The touristification is also visible through the intensification of public spaces. This is especially true in terms of crowding, queuing, pressures related to nightlife, and peak demands that affect the comfort of these spaces (Colomb & Novy, 2016). Finally, the touristification is visible through the materiality of short-term stays that make the occupation of these spaces more visible. This is especially true in terms of key boxes, the frequent movement of luggage, and the related cleaning activities that take place (Ioannides et al., 2018).

Recent work on the commercial environment shows how touristification reorders neighbourhood functions. The touristification of city centres can also be linked to the transformation in retail, as this shifts from local services to fun shopping and food consumption (Koens et al., 2018). The research by Romera et al. (2025) also indicates how this can work to the detriment of residents, promoting homogenization and the loss of local resources. While their empirical case is Sevilla, the underlying mechanism can be generalised to other locations. If visitor demand becomes structurally important for local profitability, businesses eventually align their offer with tourists' preferences and purchasing power, potentially undermining the practical infrastructure that sustains residents' daily lives. This is relevant to this study, as retail is not merely economic, it is part of neighbourhood identity, habit, and social interaction.

Touristification rarely affects the city equally, as it concentrates in the centre and other attractive areas, and then often spills over into bordering neighbourhoods as tourism expands (Ioannides et al., 2018). The **tourism bubble** concept (Judd & Fainstein, 2001), helps explain pattern. Tourism initially clusters in the historic core and then spreads outward as new accommodations and attractions develop. Ioannides et al. (2018) show how Airbnb can contribute to tourism bubble expansion in Utrecht's Lombok neighbourhood, an area close to the centre yet historically more residential and socially distinctive. Their argument is not simply that Lombok became more touristic, but that Airbnb enabled a spatial leap. Visitors could now *stay* outside the conventional tourist centre, generating new visitor flows and normalising tourist presence in spaces that were not previously oriented toward visitor stays. This supports the comparative design of this study: the Binnenstad can be treated as an established tourism zone, while Lombok illustrates touristification as spatial diffusion into a predominantly residential area.

For this study, touristification functions as the bridge between Airbnb's platform logic (Section 2.1) and the lived experiences explored empirically. The Binnenstad is typically the first area where visitor-oriented streetscapes, retail, and routines become normalised, whereas Lombok is analytically useful for understanding touristification as expansion rather than a static condition. This supports a stages interpretation: in one neighbourhood touristification may be experienced as mature, in the other it may be experienced as emergent, and therefore more strongly tied to anticipation and future-oriented concern. The next section zooms in on what these transformations mean for everyday social life, including liveability, social cohesion, and residents' sense of belonging.

2.3 Social impacts of Airbnb on neighbourhood life

While Section 2.1 showed how Airbnb is involved in platform-based housing commodification, and Section 2.2 discussed touristification as a spatial reorientation toward visitors, this section reviews what the literature identifies as Airbnb's key social impacts at neighbourhood scale. These impacts are often discussed as externalities because they affect people who are not directly participating in the transaction (not hosts or guests). Cities have increasingly justified regulation on the basis of such neighbourhood-level effects, especially where Airbnb's cluster and begin to function like a distributed accommodation sector rather than occasional home-sharing (Nieuwland, 2018).

A consistent theme in the literature is that Airbnb can produce liveability pressures in residential areas such as noise, litter, density, and parking or traffic congestion. Gurran and Phibbs (2017) state that short-term rental activity can produce neighbourhood impacts and can lower the supply of long-term rental housing. They emphasize that it is necessary to differentiate between types of listings because of the impacts. Resident complaints include noise, waste management issues, and safety concerns linked to frequent circulation of unfamiliar visitors in shared buildings and streets (Gurran & Phibbs, 2017; Nieuwland, 2018). Again, these effects tend to occur in concentrated spaces. An example is the study on Amsterdam, which examined the effects of Airbnb on the quality of life, indicating that the effects manifest in strong spatial clustering and a centre-periphery structure (Mitas et al., 2023).

Beyond nuisance, it can be argued that Airbnb can impact social cohesion because of its effects on the erosion of neighbourly relations. Gold (2019) argues that the growth of Airbnb is connected the decline of social cohesion in the neighbourhoods, in addition to the impacts on the housing market, and that there can be negative effects on the community even though there are benefits for the hosts and the guests individually. The issue is not only poor visitor behaviour, but the instability and unpredictability of the neighbourhood. Residents encounter more unfamiliar faces, have fewer repeated interactions, and may invest less in neighbourly trust and informal care. This can invoke a general sense of insecurity among residents, as they can not be sure who exactly lives in the homes surrounding them (Koens et

al., 2018). Relatedly, research connects Airbnb pressure to residential stability, a key condition for maintaining social cohesion. In their analysis of Amsterdam and Barcelona, Valente et al. (2023) use average duration of residence as an indicator of residential stability, and they find that areas with more Airbnb pressure tend to have shorter residence durations. Even where causality is complex, such work supports the claim that Airbnb is socially consequential because it normalises more fleeting modes of neighbourhood use.

In addition, the literature stresses that the social impacts of Airbnb's are not only material but interpretive. What matters is how changes are perceived and how those perceptions translate into acceptance, conflict, or feelings of exclusion. A recurring finding is the perspective gap between tourists and residents. In Porto, Albuquerque et al. (2024) found that tourists tend to perceive the development of Airbnb in a positive manner, while residents are likely to react to the negative consequences. This perspective gap also helps explain why conflict around Airbnb often escalates even when the absolute number of visitors is not extreme. Residents may view the growing presence of visitors and services as a signal that the neighbourhood is being moved away from everyday community life and toward external consumption, a phenomenon that is central to this study.

Besides the gap between residents and tourist, Airbnb's self-presentation starkly contrasts with the social impacts. The platform promotes the idea that staying in local homes allows travellers to form authentic connections with communities (Airbnb, n.d.). However, as Törnberg (2022) argues, this idea of authentic connection is often more figurative than real. In practice, Airbnb's can transform residential spaces into temporary consumption zones rather than sites of everyday social interaction. Guests' stays in the neighbourhood are often short, therefore limiting opportunities for real engagement with local residents. Also, the transition of housing into tourist accommodation impacts the very community life that Airbnb claims to embrace.

2.4 Space, belonging, and the right to the city

In order to understand residents' experience of Airbnb and touristification beyond impacts and externalities, this thesis will rely on the urban theory that understands space as being produced, political, and contested. Lefebvre is an important thinker in this regard. Lefebvre, in his book The Production of Space (1991), argues that space is not just produced but is produced through social relations and institutions, and therefore, any change in housing, tourism, and retail is, in fact, the change in the social production of space itself.

The most important aspect of Lefebvre's work is the understanding that urban change is not just about the physical transformation of the city; it is also about the change in the way space is conceived,

managed, and lived. In touristifying neighbourhoods, housing and public space can increasingly be organised around efficiency, profitability, and circulation, logics that tend to prioritise outsiders' consumption over residents' long-term inhabitation. Zieleniec (2018) emphasises Lefebvre's concern with how capitalist urbanisation prioritises exchange value over the qualitative richness of lived urban life.

Lefebvre's Right to the City (1996) extends this argument into a normative and political claim: residents should be able to participate and co-produce urban space. On the other hand, Purcell (2014) argues that 'Right to the city' is radical because it demands democratic control over urbanisation and challenges the dominance of state and capitalist power in making the city. For this study, it offers language for residents' claims that neighbourhoods are being remade around visitor demand and investment structures they did not choose and cannot easily influence. A study by Aalbers and Gibb (2014) connects these rights-based debates directly to housing pressures. They position housing as a key point for right-to-the-city struggles, especially where market structures undermine residents' ability to remain, belong, and shape local life. This line of work fits the Airbnb context because it is positioned at the intersection of housing distribution and urban consumption. Homes become the tourism infrastructure, and private housing choices become collective spatial transformations.

Lefebvre's Production of Space and Right to the City provide the theoretical grounding to interpret Airbnb-driven touristification as more than an economic or regulatory issue, and allow asking how neighbourhood change relates to agency, belonging, and control over everyday space. If space is socially produced, touristification can be interpreted as a shift in who the neighbourhood is produced for, and whether residents experience themselves as legitimate inhabitants or as increasingly insignificant users. Urban theory emphasises that these struggles involve both material resources and urban meanings (Brenner et al., 2012), which builds a bridge to the next sections.

2.5 Symbolic dispossession

Symbolic dispossession originates in urban and tourism geography work on displacement and touristification, where scholars argue that forms of exclusion and loss can occur even when residents are not physically evicted. It is commonly used to describe situations in which residents remain in place but experience a decline in symbolic ownership and social recognition, as neighbourhood meanings, representations, and everyday norms are reoriented toward visitors and tourism-led consumption (Janoschka & Sequera, 2016; Sequera & Nofre, 2018). Following Janoschka and Sequera (2016), symbolic dispossession is significant because it can precede or accompany material displacement by weakening residents' legitimacy and influence in and over place. In this thesis, symbolic dispossession refers to residents' perceived loss of belonging and entitlement as their neighbourhood becomes

organised for visitors rather than everyday life. It is operationalised through residents' accounts of shifting neighbourhood norms and representations that make them feel less at home or less entitled to space, for example, feeling pushed aside in how the area is used, governed, or imagined, and perceiving their everyday practices as increasingly out of place.

Symbolic dispossession does not replace material explanations, but rather draws attention to the way symbolic and emotional forms of harm can frequently develop alongside, or even before, housing market pressures. In the case of Lisbon, Cocola-Gant and Gago (2019) study the way in which Airbnb can enable investment in housing while simultaneously unsettling local communities. Symbolic dispossession is therefore treated as an experiential dimension of displacement that complements, rather than substitutes for, material accounts.

The literature highlights a set of recurring ways in which touristification and Airbnb can feed into symbolic dispossession. First, neighbourhoods may be reframed as destinations for visitors, so that local spaces become legible primarily through a tourism lens; this can dilute residents' everyday meanings of place and subtly shift whose presence and practices are treated as normal or prioritised (Sequera & Nofre, 2018). Second, frequent turnover and short-stay rhythms can disrupt ordinary routines and expectations, weakening shared residential norms and raising anonymity. The symbolic weight of these disruptions lies in what they communicate about who the neighbourhood is increasingly organised for. Third, housing and related local infrastructures can be redirected toward tourism use, especially where short-term rentals become professionalised and residential space functions more like visitor accommodation, reinforcing perceptions that neighbourhood resources are being diverted away from long-term community life (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2019; Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018). Even where regulation constrains full conversion, similar dynamics may persist through partial, informal, or intermittent practices, sustaining the sense that residential space is being repurposed.

Cocola-Gant (2023) develops the concept of place-based dispossession, arguing that touristification can disintegrate the places people belong to, dispossession should therefore be understood as a broader process of place transformation, not only a housing-market outcome. This is consistent with symbolic dispossession because both highlight how belonging and everyday practices are interrupted by tourism and Airbnb. Watt & Morris (2024) emphasise that dispossession is often a complex process with social, political, and cultural dimensions that may not appear as immediate residential moves.

Symbolic dispossession is useful for this study's comparative design because it helps interpret different stages of touristification. Ioannides et al. (2018) show how Airbnb can contribute to tourism's spatial expansion beyond the historic core into Lombok by enabling visitors to stay in neighbourhoods previously less tourist oriented. This suggests dispossession may be experienced differently: in the Binnenstad as entrenched loss or resignation; in Lombok as early warning signs, contestation, and

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anticipatory concerns about future change. Symbolic dispossession provides the conceptual lens to connect Airbnb-driven touristification to residents' lived experiences of belonging, neighbourhood identity, and the sense that everyday space is increasingly organised for outsiders. The next sections can then specify the emotional and relational pathways through which symbolic dispossession is felt, most notably through sense of place, and social cohesion.

2.6 Sense of place and social cohesion

Symbolic dispossession becomes analytically meaningful when it is connected to how residents experience place and how they relate to others in that place. This section focuses on sense of place and social cohesion as key concepts through which residents may come to experience symbolic dispossession. Together, these concepts translate neighbourhood transformation into lived outcomes such as alienation, loss of belonging, and weakened community life.

Sense of place refers to the meaning attached to a spatial setting by a person or a group (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). It's a multidimensional attitude that combines beliefs and emotions with behavioural orientations toward place. This is a relevant concept because it treats place meaning as socially produced and therefore makes it vulnerable to touristification-related change. This is emphasised by the fact that sense of place is structured by layered place meanings and operates across multiple scales (street, neighbourhood, city), and that these meanings shift as the social and physical environment changes (Rajala et al., 2020). In touristifying neighbourhoods, residents may experience changes in retail, housing use, and street rhythms as signals that the neighbourhood is being redefined in ways that no longer reflect everyday local life. The neighbourhood remains geographically the same, but its meaning changes.

Relph's (1976) concept of **placelessness** remains useful as foundational language for residents' experiences of diluted distinctiveness and increased genericness in visitor-oriented environments. In this thesis, placelessness is used to describe perceived loss of familiarity and local character, rather than claiming places become literally identical. Work on overtourism in cities also highlights that tourism impacts should be understood as lived and relational, as it can impact identity, belonging, and everyday comfort (Koens et al., 2018).

Alongside sense of place, symbolic dispossession can be mediated through changes in **social cohesion**, which refers to the degree to which a neighbourhood is characterised by trust, shared belonging, inclusion, and willingness to cooperate. Fonseca et al. (2019) define social cohesion as multidimensional, combining relational, participatory, and identity/belonging. A recent synthesis by Moustakas (2023) reviews cohesion definitions, emphasising that cohesion is best understood as a

combination of social relations, belonging/identification, and orientation toward a common good, while noting the need to distinguish cohesion from its causes and outcomes.

These frameworks resonate with one of the key mechanisms employed by Airbnb: transience. Repeated interactions and familiarity can be diminished with this mechanism, which can further hinder the establishment of trust and neighbourly support. In this thesis, reduced cohesion is therefore not only a potential outcome but part of the process through which residents may experience dispossession. When neighbours are replaced by rotating short-term visitors, everyday recognition and neighbourly care become harder to sustain. In this thesis, sense of place and social cohesion are used as practical lenses for interpreting residents' accounts of neighbourhood change. Sense of place informs the analysis of perceived changes in neighbourhood atmosphere and belonging (SRQ4) and in the use and meaning of local spaces (SRQ2). Social cohesion guides the analysis of perceived shifts in anonymity, neighbour contact, and building- or street-level stability (SRQ3), including future-oriented concerns about neighbourhood continuity (SRQ6). Together, these lenses help connect spatial and social changes to the broader interpretive outcome examined through symbolic dispossession.

2.7 Research gap

Quantitative research on Airbnb and short-term rentals in general often captures impacts through factors such as housing prices, density, or concentration (e.g., Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018; Nieuwland & van Melik, 2020). What is, however, not taken into consideration with this approach is the way in which people experience the effects of such phenomena in their everyday lives. Gold (2019) points to this gap and argues that a steady circulation of visitors can cause a decline in neighbourhood cohesion, weaken trust, and unsettle local identity. Gurran and Phibbs (2017) also note that municipalities still struggle to limit the social pressures associated with Airbnb's and that these pressures are not researched as thoroughly as economic effects. Recent studies suggest this imbalance remains. Albuquerque et al. (2024) call for closer attention to resident perspectives, highlighting that locals and tourists evaluate Airbnb's in markedly different ways, Valente et al. (2023) find that in cities such as Amsterdam and Barcelona Airbnb can accelerate residential turnover and reduce social investment in neighbourhood life, and Mitas et al. (2023) likewise observe that impacts on quality of life and community cohesion remain comparatively underexplored.

With this context in mind, this thesis builds on three connected gaps in the literature. First, much Airbnb literature remains oriented toward economic and spatial patterns, which are important but provide limited insight into how residents make sense of neighbourhood change and how this affects belonging, recognition, and everyday comfort. Secondly, the body of research on residents is less developed for mid-sized Northern/Western European cities where the level of tourism pressure may be more

moderate, and regulatory regimes differ from the more commonly studied Southern European hotspots. Utrecht is relevant here, as it is not typically framed as an overtourism city, yet visitor spillovers and housing pressures can still become locally debated (Ioannides et al., 2018). Thirdly, even as the uneven nature of touristification across urban space is well noted, few studies have sought to compare areas within the same city to assess the ways in which the experience of symbolic dispossession is felt differently across tourism geographies. This is because symbolic dispossession may be felt as a loss that is already actualized in one place, whereas in another place it is felt as a future concern or threat related to the ways in which the future is being imagined or anticipated (Sequera & Nofre, 2018).

This thesis addresses these gaps by using qualitative focus group discussions (which will be elaborated in the next chapter) to examine how residents experience Airbnb and tourism as symbolic dispossession, and how these experiences differ between Utrecht's Binnenstad and Lombok. By connecting residents' narratives to a structured conceptual framework, the study aims to contribute empirically to symbolic dispossession debates and conceptually to understanding how platform-mediated tourism pressure translates into lived neighbourhood change in a Dutch/Western European context.

2.8 Conceptual framework

The literature reviewed in Sections 2.1–2.6 show general agreement that Airbnb is not only an extra tourism option, but a system that can change housing and neighbourhood life, especially when listings cluster and become professionalised (Barns, 2020; Srnicek, 2017; Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018). These dynamics are most clearly expressed through touristification, where neighbourhoods are reorganised toward visitor use and consumption (Sequera & Nofre, 2018; Gravari-Barbas & Guinand, 2017). At the same time, the review also indicates that the most meaningful consequences for residents are often not fully captured by market indicators alone. Residents can experience dispossession through shifts in neighbourhood identity, social relations, and belonging even when they remain physically in place. This is precisely what the concept of symbolic dispossession seeks to capture (Sequera & Nofre, 2018; Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2019; Cocola-Gant, 2023).

Building on the literature reviewed above, this thesis uses a conceptual framework that links platform-mediated short-term renting to neighbourhood change and, ultimately, to symbolic dispossession. This framework informs the coding/themes in Chapter 4. First, Airbnb can be understood as part of platform urbanism and platform capitalism: it standardises and mediates access to housing as a short-stay commodity, making residential space easier to market and monetise for tourism purposes (Barns, 2020; Srnicek, 2017). In contexts of housing pressure, this monetisation can incentivise shifting dwellings from long-term residence to temporary accommodation, contributing to turnover and reduced residential stability (Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018). Importantly, short-term rental activity is not always

easily visible at street or building level. In such settings, residents may recognise Airbnb's only indirectly through signs of turnover, unfamiliarity, or changes in the use of shared space. Second, these platform dynamics become meaningful at neighbourhood scale through touristification, understood here as the reorientation of local rhythms, functions, and place meanings toward visitors and consumption (Sequera & Nofre, 2018; Romera et al., 2025). Airbnb can contribute to this reorientation by enabling visitor presence beyond established tourist cores and by making residential areas clearer and more usable as visitor spaces (Ioannides et al., 2018). Third, touristification and short-term rental intensity may translate into everyday social pressures, such as disturbances, liveability concerns, and weaker neighbour relations, particularly where circulation becomes normalised (Gurran & Phibbs, 2017; Gold, 2019; Valente et al., 2023). These pressures matter because they can reshape sense of place (how residents recognise and interpret neighbourhood identity and meaning) (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Rajala et al., 2020) and social cohesion (trust, belonging, and relational stability at neighbourhood level) (Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Fonseca et al., 2019). Finally, symbolic dispossession is conceptualised as the outcome of these connected processes. Residents remain physically in place, yet experience a decline in belonging, recognition, and perceived legitimacy as neighbourhood space and meanings become increasingly oriented toward outsiders and visitor consumption (Sequera & Nofre, 2018; Cocola-Gant, 2023).

This framework also assumes that these pathways are context-dependent, shaped by neighbourhood position in the city and by governance arrangements (e.g., regulation, enforcement, and local housing pressures) (Nieuwland & van Melik, 2020). This is relevant to the comparative design of this thesis, as the Binnenstad can be read as a matured visitor space, while Lombok provides leverage for analysing touristification as expansion and early-stage pressure (Ioannides et al., 2018).

Figure 2.1 visualises the conceptual framework that guides this thesis and shows how the key concepts reviewed in this chapter relate to one another. It links Airbnb and broader urban change (platform urbanism, housing commodification and touristification) to neighbourhood-level transformations, and then to how residents experience and make sense of these changes in everyday life. In the framework, Airbnb and touristification contribute to everyday neighbourhood pressures (crowding, noise, circulation) and to shifts in neighbourhood meanings and representations (how areas are framed, used, and valued). These neighbourhood-level changes are interpreted through residents' accounts of social cohesion (familiarity, anonymity, continuity) and sense of place (identity, atmosphere, belonging), which together can shape whether residents experience wider changes as a loss of control and legitimacy in their neighbourhood. Municipal regulation and enforcement are included as a contextual factor that can amplify or dampen these pathways by influencing the visibility, intensity, and perceived manageability of impacts. Finally, the framework is used analytically rather than deterministically, as it supports the organisation of the results around the secondary research questions, including residents'

attribution of change to Airbnb and tourism (SRQ1) and their future-oriented concerns about neighbourhood trajectories (SRQ6). Solid lines indicate the primary conceptual pathways that structure the analysis. Dashed lines indicate indirect or contextual influences that condition these pathways, most notably the municipal regulation and enforcement context, which can amplify or mitigate how strongly impacts are felt and how visible they are.
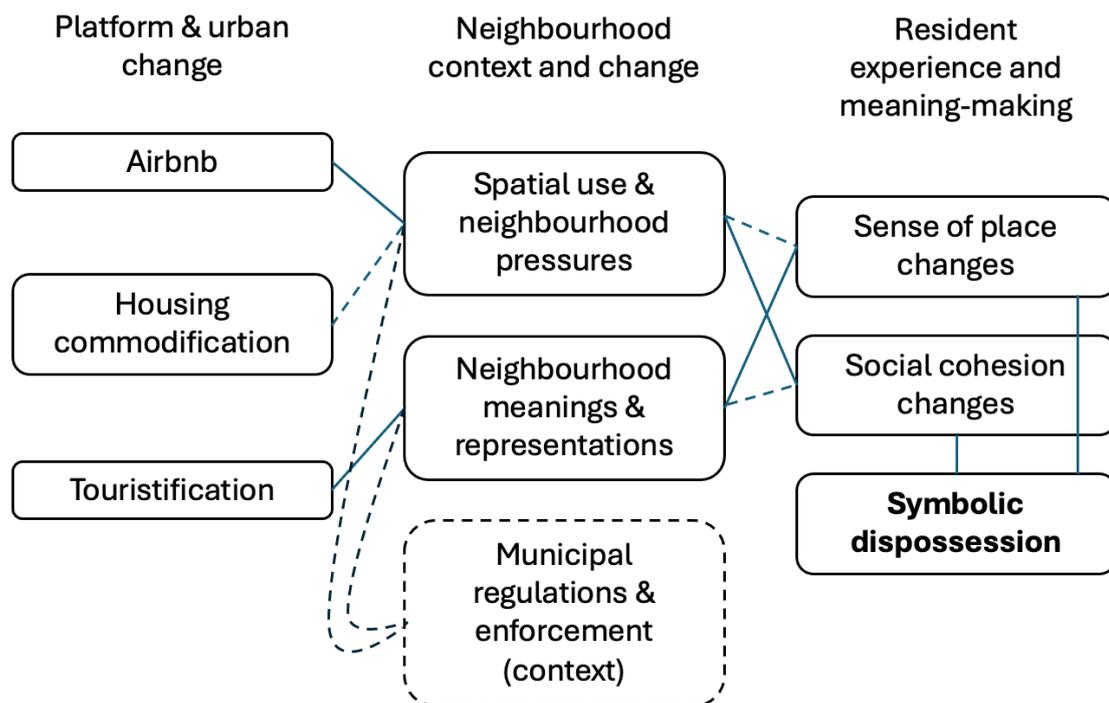
Figure 2.1 *Conceptual framework linking platform-driven urban change to neighbourhood pressures and meanings, and to residents' sense of place and social cohesion, culminating in symbolic dispossession. Solid arrows indicate primary pathways; dashed arrows indicate indirect or contextual (own design)*

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative case-study design using focus group discussions to explore residents' lived experiences of symbolic dispossession. As explained by Morgan (1997), focus groups can be more suitable than separate interviews with residents, as participants can build on other's ideas, and therefore reveal shared norms, tensions, and differences that may otherwise be missed (Morgan, 1997). The outcome is not only what individuals have said, but also how people talk together about a topic and how collective meanings are constructed. According to Swartling (2007), focus groups are especially suitable when exploring complex issues, such as neighbourhood change and liveability, where local knowledge and experiences values play a key role. Compared to individual interviews, focus groups allow participants to respond and reflect on others' experiences, therefore stimulate social learning. Both consensus and disagreement can emerge from this process, providing a deeper understanding of how symbolic dispossession and belonging are experienced collectively and how they differ per resident.

3.1 Case selection

Utrecht provides a relevant case for examining Airbnb-related neighbourhood change because it combines a growing visitor economy and active municipal regulation of Airbnb. Within Utrecht, the dynamics of Airbnb are most visible in the Binnenstad (city centre) and Lombok districts (see Figure 1.1). The Binnenstad is Utrecht's historic and commercial centre, where visitor presence is routine and tourism-related functions (hospitality, retail, short stays) are highly visible. Lombok, located west of the central station, has historically been a working-class and culturally diverse residential neighbourhood (Werter, 2020). Over the past decade, however, it has experienced change linked to its proximity to the city centre, including commercial shifts and gentrification pressures that may intersect with the rise of Airbnb (Ioannides et al., 2018). Lombok and the Binnenstad were therefore selected to enable an analytical comparison between neighbourhoods at different stages of touristification. The Binnenstad represents an area in which tourism and short-term rental activity have been established and visible for a longer period, whereas Lombok is a predominantly residential neighbourhood that has more recently been undergoing processes of change. This contrast allowed for the exploration of how experiences of symbolic dispossession may differ between a highly touristified context and one where such dynamics are emerging.

Separate focus groups were conducted for each neighbourhood. This decision was made to ensure that participants could speak freely about place-specific experiences without the need to explain local context to residents from other areas or to compare their neighbourhood defensively. Having separate groups also reduced the risk that differences in neighbourhood identity, status, or familiarity with tourism would shape the discussion. Instead, this method allowed shared meanings and tensions to

emerge organically within each neighbourhood context. Treating Lombok and the Binnenstad as separate cases enabled both within-case analysis and cross-case comparison. Within each focus group, attention was paid to how residents collectively articulated belonging, change, and (symbolic) dispossession in relation to tourism and Airbnb. Across cases, similarities and differences were compared to assess how symbolic dispossession is experienced in a context of established touristification versus one where such dynamics are emerging. This comparative logic strengthened the analytical depth of the study by situating narratives within their specific spatial and socio-cultural contexts, while also allowing broader processes of touristification and neighbourhood change to be examined.

3.2 Focus groups

This study used purposive sampling, meaning focus group participants were selected based on their suitability for the research objective, instead of aiming for statistical representativeness. To ensure that the aim of having at least one focus group per neighbourhood with enough respondents is achieved, a large number of respondents were targeted. Taking no-shows into account, the threshold for the focus group was five to eight participants, to finally ensure around four to seven participants. A larger group would be more difficult to moderate, time-consuming, and/or limit the chance for other participants to speak. Smaller groups may put more pressure on participants to talk. A balanced group size encourages a dynamic and inclusive conversation (Morgan, 1998; Swartling, 2007). To reach higher saturation, more focus groups should be conducted. However, this project allowed only two, due to the time and resource constraints.

The focus groups were heterogeneous in terms of socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and length of residency, while neighbourhood of residence was treated as a separate sampling dimension. Lombok and the inner city were therefore addressed in distinct focus groups rather than being combined. This approach still allowed for the identification of shared and contrasting experiences across groups, not with the intention of creating conflict, but to frame parallel experiences. In addition to variation by neighbourhood, the sampling process was aimed at achieving socio-demographic and ideological diversity among participants. This variety increased the likelihood that multiple perspectives and lived experiences were represented in the discussions, and consequently, in the results of this study. However, as Swartling (2007) noted, heterogeneous groups require careful moderation to ensure that all participants felt heard. Given the limited number of participants per focus group, it was not possible to include all types of actors. As a result, certain social groups may have been represented, while others were not. Where feasible within the timeframe, a second focus group was conducted to capture a broader range of perspectives and opinions.

Recruitment was done through online channels, mainly neighbourhood Facebook groups and platforms (see Appendix III.C). Offline recruitment was done through hanging posters in social hubs, such as supermarkets, churches, universities and neighbourhood centres (see Appendix III.A). In addition, approximately 600 flyers were distributed to houses across Lombok and Binnenstad (see Appendix III.B), which were selected on basis of convenience, while aiming to cover all parts of the neighbourhood. All letters and messages briefly explained the context of the focus group and topics. In addition, they mentioned that the focus group would be in a nearby location, and participants would receive coffee, tea and snacks during the conversation. All messages, online and offline, contained a QR code containing more elaborate information on the study and the option to participate. This pre-survey (see Appendix III.D) further consisted of demographic questions (age, gender, and duration of living in the neighbourhood), meeting availability and contact information, and a question regarding previous ownership of Airbnb rentals. Two dates were proposed for each neighbourhood, including a third option: *I would like to participate, but I am not available on the dates above*. In this manner, potential participants were not lost. Inclusion criteria for participants were that they were currently living in either Lombok or Binnenstad, above the age of 18, and available to participate on one of the proposed dates in the pre-survey.

After submission of the survey, suitable participants received an e-mail or SMS as confirmation, and were updated with the final date of their focus group through the same channel. If the participant did not meet the requirements or was unavailable on the proposed dates, they would receive a message that they would not need to participate or could wait for an update for a new date. After confirming participation and communicating the final logistics, attention shifted to the content and structure of the focus group discussions. Prompts were designed in advance and informed by relevant literature on neighbourhood change, tourism, and symbolic dispossession. Examples of these prompts are included in the moderator guide (Appendix I). Each focus group began with an ice-breaker question to initiate the conversation in a light and accessible manner. As most demographic information was collected through the pre-survey, this was not revisited in great detail during the sessions. After a brief introduction in which I explained the aims and ground rules, I took on a primarily facilitative role to encourage natural interaction among the participants. Rather than relying on direct questioning, the discussion was guided through short prompts or triggers, such as questions, statements, or statistics. Topics were allocated a rough time frame, and I intervened only when necessary to keep the discussion on track or to encourage participation from quieter group members. This approach ensured that the session functioned as a focus group discussion rather than a structured group interview, allowing participants to shape the conversation themselves. The moderator guide (appendix I) was used to structure the conversation and ensure certain topics did not take up too much time, as well as providing prompts for participants if the conversation hit a wall.

Each focus group lasted between 75 and 90 minutes, including the welcome and warm-up. The discussion was conducted in a semi-structured way, which enabled flexibility to pursue new themes emerging from the discussion while still ensuring that the core themes of neighbourhood character, tourism and Airbnb, symbolic dispossession, and responses of residents were covered. Consistent with the recommendations of Swartling (2007) and Krueger (1998), I aimed to create a friendly and respectful environment, which conveyed neutrality and interest while also ensuring that no individual participant dominated the discussion. The final stage of the discussion was an open moment to allow for final reflections and initial thoughts.

Figure 3.4: Focus group at community centre in Binnenstad.

Figure 3.5: Focus group at cultural centre in Lombok.

Both focus groups were conducted in Dutch to ensure that participants could comfortably voice experiences and meanings. Sessions were hosted in private and familiar settings, to create a comfortable environment. In the case of Binnenstad, the session was hosted at the community centre at Oudegracht (see Figure 3.4), and in Lombok the session was hosted at a cultural centre (see Figure 3.5). Refreshments were provided to help participants feel at ease. With participants' consent, discussions were audio- and video-recorded, and observational notes were taken on group dynamics, tone, and further interactions. These notes were taken to support the interpretation of the discussion by capturing how ideas were expressed, negotiated, and responded to within the group.

3.3 Data analysis

Both focus group discussions were transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis, by combining deductive and inductive coding. Deductive codes followed the conceptual framework, particularly the themes of (neighbourhood and atmosphere) change, symbolic dispossession, and liveability. Inductive

codes were used to uncover emerging themes that may have been generated by the data itself (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This ensured that the research was grounded in existing theory while remaining open to new findings (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The recordings were then subjected to reflexive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This was not to claim reliability metrics, but to refine code boundaries and theme coherence. The transcripts were coded and organised using ATLAS.ti software, which supported the systematic management of codes, memos, and thematic relationships across the dataset (see example in appendix II). The analysis was conducted with a primarily inductive and semantic focus, with some latent selection where appropriate to illuminate underlying processes such as touristification and symbolic dispossession. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), themes were considered as constructs of interpretation rather than objective classification, emerging through the research process of interaction between researcher, data, and theory. The process of analysis consisted of six steps:

1. Familiarization through repeated reading/listening and analytic memoing.
2. Initial coding of the full data set.
3. Searching for themes through coding to potential themes,
4. Reviewing themes in relation to coded extracts and the full data set,
5. Defining and naming themes,
6. Producing the final report by integrating the analysis into a coherent narrative with supporting empirical evidence.

The findings were presented with contextual explanations and illustrated by quotes of both shared and contrasting experiences. Comparisons were made within and across the focus groups to find differences between Lombok and Binnenstad.

To make sure the analysis was trustworthy, several strategies were used during the coding process. First, I kept an audit trail throughout the process, noting down all the key decisions I made, such as developing the initial codes, choosing to merge or split codes, and highlighting certain excerpts as examples of bigger patterns. Second, I wrote reflexive memos throughout the coding process to capture my interpretations, uncertainties, and possible alternative readings. I also reflected on how my own assumptions and position might influence how themes were constructed (Nowell et al., 2017). Third, to ensure the coding scheme was clear and consistent, I conducted double-coding checks on a sample of transcripts. Instead of focusing on agreement between coders, these checks were used as a dialogue tool to identify ambiguous code boundaries, overlaps, and to consider whether developing themes were both coherent and distinct from one another. This process led to targeted improvements of the codebook and theme definitions (Nowell et al., 2017). Because group interaction is important when understanding focus group data (Morgan, 1997; Swartling, 2007;), I paid close attention to cues like agreement, hesitation, laughter, interruption, or reinforcement. These cues helped me see how consensus and

disagreement formed within the groups, and to notice when certain perspectives became dominant, either reinforced by others or shaped by the facilitation dynamic. When relevant, these interaction patterns informed how confidently these themes could be characterised (for instance, as strongly shared, negotiated, or limited) and how I interpreted differences between the Binnenstad and Lombok discussions. Due to confidentiality and file-management constraints, fully coded transcripts are not included in this document. Instead, to ensure transparency, the codebook, the theme map, and audit trail are provided in Appendix II.

3.4 Ethical considerations and reflexivity

Ethical approval for this study was obtained in line with the guidelines of Wageningen University. All participants received an information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, and the voluntary nature of participation. Prior to the focus groups, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without providing a reason and without any negative consequences. To protect participants' privacy, all data were anonymised during transcription and analysis. Personal identifiers such as names, specific addresses, or recognisable references were replaced with pseudonyms. Audio and video recordings, transcripts, and analytical files were stored on a password-protected laptop and storage systems, accessible only to me.

Due to the qualitative and interactive nature of focus group research, particular attention should be given to group confidentiality. Participants were asked to respect the privacy of others by not sharing personal stories discussed during the sessions outside the group setting. While full confidentiality among participants could not be guaranteed, this limitation was communicated clearly before the focus groups.

This thesis takes an interpretivist approach. Ontologically, it treats neighbourhood change and symbolic dispossession as socially produced realities through everyday meanings and practices. One participant's experience of something within that reality can therefore be perceived entirely different by another participant, because the experience is subjective. Epistemologically, it assumes that such realities can best be known by attempting to understand how residents interpret and communicate these experiences, including in interaction with others. This implies that focus group data are not treated as a direct window onto what the neighbourhood is, but as situated accounts shaped by context, group dynamics, and the researcher's background (Ormond, 2024). Reflexivity is therefore central to ethical and methodological validity in this study. Especially as I live in Utrecht, therefore I have perceptions, experiences and knowledge of the city's neighbourhood dynamics, which might influence the interpretation of data. Writing reflexive memos supported transparency and helped distinguish participants' perspectives from my own interpretations, thereby strengthening the credibility and integrity of the analysis.

4. Results

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the focus group discussions conducted in the Binnenstad and Lombok. The results address how residents experience tourism-related neighbourhood change, with a particular focus on the role of Airbnb. Following the study's comparative design, findings from both neighbourhoods are presented thematically, allowing for within-case analysis as well as cross-neighbourhood comparison.

Excluding the demographic section, the structure of this chapter mirrors the secondary research questions. It moves from residents' perceptions of tourism and visitor presence, through changes in the use and meaning of neighbourhood spaces, to social relations, emotional attachment, and experiences of symbolic dispossession. The chapter concludes with residents' reflections on the future of their neighbourhoods. While the concept of symbolic dispossession guides the analysis, this chapter remains descriptive and empirical in nature; theoretical analysis and conceptual integration are addressed in the discussion chapter

4.1 Participant demographics

As a result of recruitment efforts, 24 residents filled in the pre-survey. A demographic overview of all respondents is shown below in figure 4.1.

Table 4.1 Demographic characteristics of pre-survey respondents by neighbourhood (Binnenstad n = 15; Lombok n = 9; total N = 24)

Characteristic	Binnenstad (n=)	Lombok (n=)	Total (N=)
Total	15	9	24
Gender			
Male	5	3	8
Female	10	6	16
Age			
18-29	3	3	6
30-49	4	2	6
50-64	1	3	4
65+	7	1	8
Length of residence			
Less than 1 year	2	1	3
1-5 years	4	4	8
6-10 years	0	1	1
More than 10 years	9	3	12

Although a larger number of residents completed the recruitment survey, not all respondents were able to attend the focus group on the proposed dates, or the response was too low for one of the proposed dates. The final focus groups consisted of nine participants in total: four from Binnenstad and five from Lombok. Demographic information of the focus group participants is shown in Table 4.2 below. Table 4.1 shows the recruitment reach; Table 4.2 describes the sample used for analysis

Table 4.2 Demographic characteristics of focus group participants by neighbourhood (Binnenstad n = 4; Lombok n = 5; total N = 9)

Characteristic	Binnenstad (n=)	Lombok (n=)	Total (N=)
Total	4	5	9
Gender			
Male	2	1	3
Female	2	4	6
Age			
18-29	2	2	4
30-49	0	0	0
50-64	1	2	3
65+	1	1	2
Length of residence			
Less than 1 year	1	1	2
1-5 years	1	1	2
6-10 years	0	0	0
More than 10 years	2	3	5

In this chapter, results will be presented alongside illustrative quotes from participants. To ensure anonymity, participants were labelled, as can be seen in tables 4.3 and 4.4 below. Quotes are followed by location in the transcript and the participant who made the statement. Full focus group transcripts are available upon request.

Table 4.3. Characteristics of individual focus group participants in Binnenstad (N = 4)

Label	Gender	Age	Length of residence
Binnenstad1	Male	18-29	1-5 years
Binnenstad2	Female	65+	10+ years
Binnenstad3	Female	18-29	Less than 1 year
Binnenstad4	Male	50-64	More than 10 years

Table 4.4. Characteristics of individual focus group participants in Lombok (N=5)

Label	Gender	Age	Length of residence
Lombok1	Male	65+	More than 10 years
Lombok2	Female	50-64	More than 10 years
Lombok3	Female	18-29	1-5 years
Lombok4	Female	50-64	More than 10 years
Lombok5	Female	18-29	Less than 1 year

4.2 Perceptions of tourism, Airbnb and visitor presence

This section reports how participants described tourism-related change in their neighbourhoods, focusing on how they recognised, categorised, and evaluated visitors and short-term stays in everyday life. Rather than measuring objective tourism intensity, the analysis highlights residents' understandings of who is present, what they are doing, and whether this is experienced as disruption or as a normal feature of urban life. Across both focus groups, participants expressed a clear awareness of visitor presence, but differed in how visible, meaningful, and spatially concentrated this presence was. Overall, current levels of tourism and short-term visitor activity were generally described as manageable and rarely framed as a major source of everyday disruption.

In the Binnenstad, visitor presence was described as highly visible but largely normalised and even appreciated. Participants frequently referred to tourists as a constant, expected feature of everyday life that contributes to a pleasant buzz. Tourists were recognised through cues such as rolling suitcases, cameras, and foreign languages. One participant observed: "*There I always see lots of people with suitcases*." (p. 4, Binnenstad1) Another noted a shift in visitor composition: "*It struck me that last summer there were many Asian tourists*." (p. 6, Binnenstad3). Although visitors were described as constant, residents located peak density in specific micro-spaces rather than across the whole neighbourhood, particularly around the Dom, the Oudegracht, and busy shopping streets. Crowding was therefore narrated as situational and often framed as a brief inconvenience rather than a loss of access. For example, one participant pointed to a congested crossing: "*That traffic light by the Bijenkorf where there are always hordes of people*." (p. 15, Binnenstad3) Even then, participants stressed that this felt manageable and rarely translated into a broader sense of nuisance: "*I experience absolutely no nuisance*." (p. 7, Binnenstad2) Next to this, Binnenstad residents emphasized that they did not feel overtaken by tourism; the visible presence of visitors remains unproblematic to their daily routines.

A key feature of the Binnenstad discussion was normalisation. Several participants suggested that a certain level of visitor activity is part of what it means to live in the city centre, sometimes even

contributing to atmosphere. Visitor presence was thus not described as something that fundamentally undermines liveability, but as a predictable component of daily rhythms that can be navigated by avoiding specific hotspots at busy times.

Lombok residents described a minimal impact of tourism in their neighbourhood. Participants emphasised that 'classic' tourist behaviour (sightseeing groups, frequent suitcases) is largely absent from inner residential streets. A participant summarised: "*In terms of tourism in Lombok you don't really have that much.*" (p. 47, Lombok1) Non-resident presence was instead described mainly as functional visitation tied to Kanaalstraat (shopping and religious facilities), and as recreational use of specific waterside spaces. In other words, visitors were often framed less as tourists and more as people from elsewhere in Utrecht or the wider region who come for particular purposes, such as grocery shopping, eating, or spending time outdoors.

Instead, residents acknowledged that visitors from outside do frequent the Kanaalstraat and local markets, specifically coming to shop at the multicultural grocery stores, bakeries, and eateries. This brings extra foot traffic and occasional parking pressure, but it is perceived as ordinary commerce, rather than tourism per se. Participants also noted that Lombok contains a small number of sites that could attract outsiders (e.g., a hotel on the neighbourhood edge and the windmill), but these were generally not described as reconfiguring the neighbourhood's everyday tempo in the way inner-city tourism does. This reinforces a broader distinction made by Lombok residents: while the neighbourhood is used by non-residents, it is not yet experienced as a destination dominated by sightseeing tourism. Residents doubted that tourists staying on the edge of the neighbourhood spend much time there, guessing that most go straight to the city centre. Consequently, large tour groups are absent, and one resident predicted that tourism will not be a big topic in the coming period.

Awareness and experiences of Airbnb

In the Binnenstad, Airbnb was often mentioned as a known but abstract phenomenon. Participants reported limited direct visibility of Airbnb in their immediate surroundings, but most were familiar with the platform and with municipal regulation. However, one elderly participant described was largely unaware of the concept: "*I never see them… I don't even know what it is.*" (p. 7, Binnenstad2) Others explicitly referenced Utrecht's restrictions: "*In Utrecht there are quite strict rules… 60 days per year.*" (p. 8, Binnenstad4) This comment led to a consensus that Airbnb is currently kept in check. Concerns in the Binnenstad were expressed mainly as conditional scenarios about turnover and neighbourhood continuity, rather than as current disturbance (see section 5.7).

In Lombok, participants similarly reported very little direct experience with Airbnb, though the topic featured in discussions about neighbourhood change. Long-time residents often struggled to identify specific Airbnb's on their streets. Asked directly about noticing tourists staying in Airbnb's, one resident replied: "*You basically don't see that.*" (p. 48, Lombok2) While some residents noted they might occasionally encounter tell-tale signs like a key safe on a door, another countered that this was rare in Lombok, noting that this is more common in larger cities such as Amsterdam. Where Airbnb was discussed, it was often located in particular settings (e.g., houseboats or a small number of B&Bs) or inferred indirectly (e.g., furnished flats, or signs of higher turnover). A few participants mentioned knowing of a couple of B&Bs along the Leidsekade waterfront. Overall, while Airbnb is occasionally associated with broader narratives of neighbourhood transformation in Lombok, current rental activity is generally perceived as flying under the radar.

4.3 Changing uses and meanings of neighbourhood space

This section addresses how residents experience changes in the use and meaning of everyday neighbourhood spaces, including housing, streets, shops, and public areas. Across both focus groups, participants described transformations that they did not frame exclusively as tourism impacts. Instead, they described broader urban transformations (redevelopment, densification, changing retail and leisure uses) that nonetheless intersect with visitor presence. Importantly, these transformations shaped the everyday meanings of space (whether streets feel primarily residential, commercial, or recreational), which is relevant for understanding how residents evaluate whose needs are prioritised in neighbourhood life.

Binnenstad residents did not describe widespread visible Airbnb's in their immediate environment, yet they did articulate a clear understanding of what housing becomes when it shifts toward temporary occupancy. This appeared most strongly in hypothetical reasoning about turnover and the erosion of neighbourhood meaning: "*If there is someone else living above you all the time… the neighbourhood falls apart.*" (p. 25, Binnenstad1) Housing change was therefore discussed less as a present observation and more as a threshold condition that would alter everyday stability if it scaled up. Such accounts show that residents linked the meaning of housing to continuity and recognition, even when Airbnb was not experienced as an immediate neighbour-level disruption.

In Lombok, housing was discussed in relation to densification and small-unit development, and especially the spillover of private-space constraints into public space. A remark that connected to tourism in the area was on pressure in shared outdoor areas. As housing gets smaller and visitor counts may increase: "*Those people will all want to go outside… where will they go?*" (p. 46, Lombok2) Here, the neighbourhood is implicitly positioned as a substitute living room: the smaller and less private the

dwelling, the more streets, squares, and green space become sites of everyday living, increasing competition over shared space. Overall, housing-related change was framed less as current displacement and more as a process that can reconfigure neighbourhood space indirectly, either through imagined short-stay circulation (Binnenstad) or through densification and limited private outdoor space (Lombok).

Streets and public space

Binnenstad residents described a city centre with strong contrasts between quiet pockets and busy corridors. Visitor-related pressure was located in narrow streets and around major attractions, but it was usually presented as brief congestion rather than exclusion from everyday space. The busier routes, around the Oudegracht and major walking corridors, were recognised as spaces where people move in greater numbers, sometimes with visible markers of travel such as luggage. One participant described a street segment where pedestrian flow becomes difficult: "*That one street is just too small; people keep standing there*." (p. 15, Binnenstad3) Yet even when discussing these more touristic flows, residents did not frame them as a loss of access; rather, they described them as a typical feature of inner-city life.

In Lombok, participants spoke more strongly about the reconfiguration of movement, accessibility, and pressure in the street network, partly linked to the redesign of commercial streets and changes in traffic flows. One resident explained that street changes have made some routes substantially busier, describing how the removal of a traffic light and altered access routes created a new concentration of cars. Lombok residents emphasised that this increased pressure is not necessarily linked to international tourism but to increased attractiveness and regional draw of the shopping streets, which brings more visitors from outside Utrecht, often by car. Next to this, participants discussed public space pressure in more intense, place-specific terms, centring on the Muntsluis as a summer hotspot used by visitors from outside the neighbourhood. Residents described the space as physically overcrowded and poorly equipped: "*They are packed like sardines… without toilets, without water, without safety*." (p. 46, Lombok2) This was not narrated as tourism in the classic sightseeing sense, but as a form of external recreational use by residents and visitors both. It was agreed upon that such developments change how nearby residents can live with, and sleep near, the space. The subsequent installation of fences was framed as an act of reclaiming control over public space. Importantly, Lombok residents linked this pressure not only to the presence of outsiders but also to material arrangements and management of facilities and enforcement. The issue was therefore framed as a change in what the space is for in summer: from a local waterside area into a wider city-regional gathering site. This shift became consequential for residents when it interfered with rest, safety perceptions, and the ability to use the space on residential terms.

Retail and everyday amenities

Commercial change was a central point of discussion in both neighbourhoods, but with different meanings attached. Binnenstad residents acknowledged a gradual trend toward more hospitality and leisure-oriented businesses, particularly cafés and new food concepts. As one participant stated, there are "*More coffee places and cafés than before.*" (p. 9, Binnenstad3) They also noted specific popular concepts that draw crowds: "*Dubai Chocolate and Apple Crumble attract many people.*" (p. 9, Binnenstad1) At the same time, Binnenstad residents emphasised that everyday functionality remains intact, especially on shopping streets such as the Twijnstraat. In response to concerns about a shift toward hospitality, residents listed practical services that still anchor daily life: "*There is a real fish shop… and vegetables across the street… and that cheese shop across the street is also wonderful.*" (p. 18, Binnenstad2) When asked whether the Binnenstad might be developing toward souvenir-shop dominance like Venice, residents argued that this has not occurred and framed changes as market-driven rather than tourist-driven: "*I think it's just market forces… those sandwich places do well.*" (p. 18, Binnenstad1) This suggests that for Binnenstad residents, retail change does not necessarily equal exclusion; rather, it is interpreted as adaptation within a still-liveable centre.

Lombok residents discussed retail transformation more historically and with a stronger emphasis on loss of diversity. One participant reflected: "*Because at a certain point the diversity decreased enormously.*" (p. 44, Lombok2) Participants nostalgically listed former shops and services, describing earlier retail landscapes that included household shops, haberdasheries, and hardware stores. The retail mix was described as narrowing toward food outlets. At the same time, residents also described recent street upgrades producing a more polished commercial landscape, which was interpreted as both improvement and potential signal of shifting clientele. Participants appreciate improved public space while also worrying about losing Lombok's informal character and affordability. Some participants discussed attempts to reintroduce variety (e.g., trying to attract an ice cream shop or organic shop), while recognising that new concepts do not always last.

In sum, retail and amenities reveal a clear difference in perceived direction. Binnenstad residents described an evolving but still functional mix of amenities, interpreting change largely as market dynamics while emphasising continuity of everyday services. Lombok residents described more profound commercial turnover: a shift from diverse local services toward food-dominant streets, followed by recent modernisation and selective new concepts that sometimes signal changing clientele and neighbourhood identity.

4.4 Social cohesion, familiarity, and neighbourhood stability

Participants in both neighbourhoods stressed that social cohesion is not a single condition but varies by street type, housing form, and routine encounters. Tourism and Airbnb formed the broader topic of the study, yet residents generally located cohesion and anonymity spatial arrangements (shared entrances, courtyards, street design) and everyday practices (greeting, accepting parcels) rather than in visitor presence. The comparison therefore highlights that visitor dynamics are interpreted through existing social geographies. Binnenstad residents described a mix of strong and weak cohesion within the city centre depending on the immediacy of shared space, whereas Lombok residents highlighted a culture of living alongside others in a diverse neighbourhood, where friendliness is common but deeper mixing is uneven.

Binnenstad residents described their neighbourhood as liveable and socially pleasant, while noting that 'gezellig' does not imply dense friendship networks. One participant explained: "*It's not a neighbourhood where people visit each other and sit outside in the evenings drinking beers together. It's not that.*" (p. 11, Binnenstad2) Yet this light form of cohesion was described as meaningful: neighbours greet each other, keep an eye out, and participate in practical mutual support. Participants also referred to micro-settings where shared entrances, stairwells, or courtyards enable repeated encounters and practical mutual support (e.g., greeting, checking in, or small acts such as accepting deliveries).

Some residents noted that community is actively produced through local initiatives, for example neighbourhood meals or gatherings. At the same time, other parts of the Binnenstad were described as more individualised, with fewer neighbourhood activities and less organised social life: "*It's more individualistic; there are few neighbourhood activities.*" (p. 10, Binnenstad1)

Lombok residents described a baseline form of cohesion grounded in coexistence rather than intensive mixing across groups, including residents and visitors. A recurring phrase was living alongside each other: "*It really is live and let live… you do say hello to each other on the street, yes.*" (p. 37, Lombok3) Another participant clarified that this is friendliness without necessarily deep affinity: "*Not in the sense that we find each other especially likeable, but live and let live and… generally friendly.*" (p. 36, Lombok1) Participants also highlighted that continuity can be actively produced at street level through personal investment. One resident framed this pragmatically: "*In the end it comes down to what you yourself do about it.*" (p. 38, Lombok2) In this sense, cohesion was described less as an inherent neighbourhood attribute and more as something sustained through repeated practices: greeting, learning names, and participating in activities. This was mentioned to count especially in a diverse setting where deeper social mixing may not occur automatically.

Overall, both neighbourhoods show that residents experience cohesion as layered: a baseline of friendliness and liveability is common, while deeper forms of connection depend on spatial proximity, shared routines, and, particularly in Lombok, opportunities to connect across differences.

Anonymity and social distance

Binnenstad residents described feeling safe and comfortable even where neighbour ties are limited. One participant explicitly challenged the idea that the city centre is unsafe: "*Maybe you feel less safe if you live right in the city centre… but I really haven't noticed that at all… in terms of atmosphere it's very safe. Cosy, but indeed with somewhat less contact with each other.*" (p. 11, Binnenstad1) Residents described a stable, pleasant environment where reduced interaction does not necessarily translate into insecurity or alienation. Another participant explained this as all residents having their own individual words. In other words, anonymity in the Binnenstad often appeared as a feature of urban living that coexists with comfort and routine.

In Lombok, anonymity was discussed less as an inevitable feature of city living and more as something uneven across social groups and institutions. A participant described the neighbourhood centre as a place where mixing is difficult: "*In the community centre it is very difficult to mix people.*" (p. 36, Lombok2) Participants illustrated this more broadly through everyday institutional contexts (e.g., schools and children's social life), where social worlds can run in parallel despite shared streets and public spaces. At the same time, Lombok residents were careful not to portray this as complete separation or conflict. The same participants acknowledged exceptions and moments where mixing does occur, and they highlighted community events that enable interaction across differences.

Taken together, the data show that Binnenstad residents experience a stable and safe urban environment where weaker social ties are not necessarily perceived as a problem, whereas Lombok residents describe a neighbourhood where friendliness is common but deeper cross-cultural familiarity is uneven and often requires specific settings or efforts to emerge. Importantly, neither group strongly attributed these social dynamics to tourism or Airbnb. Instead, participants located cohesion and anonymity primarily within neighbourhood composition, street-level interaction patterns, and the practical conditions under which repeated encounters become possible.

4.5 Sense of place and neighbourhood identification

Across both focus groups, participants articulated strong feelings of belonging, pride, and comfort rooted in long-term residence, everyday routines, and symbolic meanings attached to place. Tourism and Airbnb were rarely narrated as undermining these emotional bonds; instead, attachment was

described as resilient, even where participants acknowledged broader neighbourhood change. Binnenstad residents expressed attachment through aesthetic appreciation and a strong identification with Utrecht as a whole. One participant stated: "*I feel at home everywhere… I love this city.*" (p. 18, Binnenstad2) Residents also described moments of appreciation and comfort in everyday routines: "*When I walk out the door and look around, it's always so beautiful.*" (p. 20, Binnenstad3) The Dom Tower was repeatedly mentioned as a symbolic anchor. Importantly, Binnenstad residents did not describe these feelings as threatened by tourists. Instead, some participants suggested that visitor appreciation can even reinforce a sense of pride and recognition, positioning the city centre's attractiveness as a symbolic asset rather than a symbolic loss under current conditions.

Lombok residents also expressed strong attachment, but grounded it more in social history, diversity, and everyday neighbourhood life. A long-term resident stated: "*I'm quite proud of Lombok. I think Lombok is a really nice neighbourhood.*" (p. 59, Lombok2) Diversity was described as normalised: "*For me it's just normal.*" (p. 36, Lombok3) Participants also drew on collective memory to describe Lombok as a place with a meaningful civic history and a reputation for community initiatives, which supported identification beyond immediate streetscapes. One participant recalled how Lombok had once been showcased nationally as a model neighbourhood, describing visits from policymakers who came to learn from Lombok's community initiatives. This memory was recounted with pride and framed Lombok as a place with a meaningful and respected history. In this sense, emotional attachment was linked not only to day-to-day experiences but also to a shared narrative of resilience and recognition.

When discussing neighbourhood change, residents in both areas expressed ambivalence rather than a sense of loss. Binnenstad residents acknowledged change in visitor intensity and commercial offerings, but framed transformation as an expected feature of city-centre living. One participant summarised this orientation: "*You don't live here for the silence.*" (p. 27, Binnenstad1) Even when describing busier streets or popular new venues, participants did not report feeling alienated or less entitled to the neighbourhood. Instead, emotional responses tended to centre on acceptance and adaptation. In Lombok, emotional responses were more layered and often linked to changes in retail and public space rather than to tourism as such. Residents expressed nostalgia for earlier commercial diversity while also recognising longer-term trajectories of renewal and demographic change. Where new cafés or specialty shops were discussed, the emotional tone was typically one of curiosity and mild concern about whom new spaces feel for, rather than resentment or withdrawal from the neighbourhood.

Across both neighbourhoods, a key finding is that emotional attachment has not eroded in response to tourism or Airbnb. Residents continue to feel at home, recognised, and emotionally invested in their neighbourhoods. However, strong attachment coexisted with concerns about specific spaces and future trajectories. Change was acknowledged, sometimes critically, but does not translate into a loss of

belonging or identification. Instead, emotional attachment appears to be maintained through continuity of daily routines, shared histories, and the ongoing ability to recognise oneself and one's values in the neighbourhood environment.

4.6 Experiences of symbolic dispossession and loss of ownership

This section reports whether and how residents described experiences that resemble feeling displaced, for example, feeling less at home, less able to claim neighbourhood spaces as theirs, or experiencing neighbourhood space as increasingly organised around non-residents. Across both focus groups, participants generally did not describe ongoing, everyday feelings of being out of place in their neighbourhood. Instead, two patterns were most prominent: residents emphasised continued comfort and belonging in their neighbourhoods; and residents described specific situations (rather than overall neighbourhood trajectories) in which public space became difficult to use or live near, particularly in Lombok.

Binnenstad participants consistently described feeling at home and did not frame tourists as undermining residential belonging. Asked about nuisance, one participant stated: "*I experience absolutely no nuisance from anything or anyone.*" (p. 7, Binnenstad2) Another described visitor presence as atmosphere-enhancing: "*I do think it's cosy. It's lively, there's a bit of bustle.*" (p. 6, Binnenstad3) Residents also affirmed their legitimacy as residents of the city centre, emphasising long-term familiarity and routine use of the area. In these accounts, the presence of visitors was compatible with a stable sense of being in place.

Lombok residents likewise did not describe a neighbourhood-wide sense of not belonging, and tourism was largely described as limited. A participant explained that people mostly come purposefully: "*People who come really come specifically for the shops.*" (p. 47, Lombok1) Thus, even where non-residents are present, Lombok residents did not report a generalised loss of residential entitlement in day-to-day life.

The clearest account of space no longer functioning for residential liveability emerged in Lombok around the Muntsluis. Residents described the area as intensely used in summer by visitors from outside the neighbourhood and as lacking basic infrastructure: "*They are packed like sardines… without toilets, without water, without safety.*" (p. 46, Lombok2) Residents described this as having direct impacts on daily life and nighttime rest: "*No, I didn't sleep for an entire summer.*" (p. 47, Lombok2) In this part of the discussion, participants explicitly clarified that the disturbance was not attributed only to "tourists," but also to visitors from outside Utrecht. Residents described collective action and engagement with authorities as a way to restore control over the space.

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Although Binnenstad participants generally did not report current experiences of feeling displaced in place, they discussed how neighbourhood atmosphere and neighbour relations could change if temporary occupancy became common. In a scenario prompted by the moderator, where residents above/beside them would change every few days, participants described this as potentially affecting the atmosphere if it occurred at scale. One participant noted that if only one or two homes on a street changed frequently, it might not stand out, but: *"If the whole street keeps rotating, that would be annoying."* (p.25, Binnenstad1). Another participant described the social consequences of frequent circulation in terms of reduced connection and inability to build neighbour relations.

In Lombok, the group also discussed Airbnb and the possibility that repeated short stays can create a more anonymous feeling, though this was discussed as a general mechanism rather than as something participants said they currently experience in their streets. One participant, reflecting on temporary stays, noted that longer stays can still lead to interaction in the street (e.g., doing groceries locally), whereas very frequent short visits were framed as more likely to create an anonymous feeling.

4.7 Neighbourhood futures and anticipatory experiences

Participants in both neighbourhoods engaged in future-oriented reasoning, drawing on wider urban narratives (e.g., comparisons with Amsterdam or highly touristic cities) and on anticipated changes in Utrecht. These imaginaries were not constant feelings of loss, but they shaped what residents considered plausible risks and desirable boundaries for neighbourhood change. Future talk was therefore characterised by conditional expectations rather than certainty. Binnenstad residents most often discussed the future through the lens of city-centre affordability, possible growth in overnight tourism, and what this could mean for housing and neighbourhood composition. Lombok residents more often spoke about the neighbourhood becoming an overflow area, and about scenarios in which increased tourism or short-stay use could change atmosphere and anonymity.

In the Binnenstad focus group, future-oriented discussion became most concrete when participants responded to the municipality or marketing ambition to attract more overnight visitors. After the moderator introduced Utrecht Marketing's plan (see Chapter 1) to stimulate more stays, residents speculated about potential changes in accommodation supply and pressure on the centre. One participant suggested that prices of living will increase only further in that case. At the same time, future-oriented talk was not only negative. Some participants articulated that longer-stay visitors could also be beneficial in principle (e.g., enabling visitors to engage more meaningfully with Utrecht), suggesting that concerns were directed more toward limits of scale and housing impacts than toward the presence of visitors.

In Lombok, future expectations were strongly linked to planned and ongoing area development and to the idea that visitor flows may spill over from the city centre. Anticipated drivers included changes to walking and leisure routes (e.g., canal tours being extended towards Lombok), alongside the possibility that Utrecht could attract more visitors as pressure increases in Amsterdam. Future scenarios around tourism were discussed less in relation to formal marketing, and more in terms of how quickly visitor attention could shift to the neighbourhood. One resident described a scenario in which Lombok could be discovered through media exposure, referencing travel media and social media dynamics.

Binnenstad residents repeatedly linked future concerns to housing affordability and demographic change, rather than to current tourist pressure. In the discussion, future concerns were described as focusing on price increases and the possibility of demographic developments, including temporary residents and expats. This was expressed in concern as expats would contribute less to the community. In Lombok, concerns were more often articulated through the idea that external use could intensify in specific spaces, with the Muntsluis functioning as a concrete reference point for what too much can look like when facilities and management are inadequate. The sighting of a 'beer bike' in the centre was used as an example of a development the residents do not want in Lombok. Lombok5 remarked that if Utrecht becomes the back-up city to Amsterdam, they might expect similar types of visitors.

Future talk in the Binnenstad also included statements about what residents would not want Utrecht to become. This was captured as: *"It shouldn't become like Amsterdam, it will become a nuisance."* (p. 28, Binnenstad1) Residents also discussed governance preferences in relation to this future. In the Binnenstad, Binnenstad2 expressed a preference for limited intervention and more organic development, stating she does not believe in overly organising, but rather leaving changes to develop organically. Lombok residents also tied future expectations to spatial capacity and accessibility, noting that Lombok has limited room to absorb large growth, and that it is not particularly accessible by car, something one resident explicitly welcomed.

Overall, residents in both neighbourhoods imagined the future through possible scenarios rather than lived current impacts: Binnenstad residents focused on price and accommodation growth linked to strategies for longer stays, while Lombok residents described potential discovery and overflow dynamics, including a possible rise in anonymity if Airbnb presence became more common.

4.8 Comparative analysis

As summarised in Table 4.5, symbolic dispossession across both focus groups was articulated less as an everyday sense of being displaced and more as situational and conditional. In the Binnenstad, participants largely normalised visitor presence as part of city-centre living, describing pressure as

manageable and concentrated in micro-spaces rather than undermining legitimacy or belonging. In Lombok, classic sightseeing tourism was also seen as limited, but accounts more often centred on contested space and 'who the neighbourhood is for', with the clearest dispossession-like experiences emerging in specific public spaces, where intensity affected rest and liveability and triggered calls for governance action. A second difference concerns the social meaning of commercial change (Table 4.5). Binnenstad residents acknowledged growth in cafés and popular concepts but framed this as market adaptation within a still functional everyday centre. In Lombok, retail change was narrated more historically and sometimes evaluated through social distinction, making it feel more identity-relevant even when not explicitly labelled as tourism. Finally, Airbnb functioned in both groups mainly as a threshold risk: currently low-visibility or manageable, but symbolically important as something that could tip neighbourhood continuity if short stays expand (Table 4.5). This future-oriented reasoning differed in emphasis: Binnenstad accounts linked risk to churn and cohesion, while Lombok accounts more strongly foregrounded spillover dynamics and anticipated growth in visitor flows.

Table 4.5: Comparative overview of resident experiences in Binnenstad and Lombok across key dimensions (in keywords)

Dimension	Binnenstad	Lombok
Visitor pressure	Routine visibility, micro-hotspots, manageable, quiet pockets	Limited in streets, non-residents mainly functional, seasonal hotspot crowding, disturbance
Spatial change	City-centre normalisation, café/food growth, amenities remain	Densification, contested flows, car-based visitors, retail turnover
Social cohesion	Light ties, greetings/support, micro-variation, individualised	Co-existence, diverse settings, friendly-not-intimate, uneven mixing
Sense of place	Heritage/monumentality, aesthetic city image, tourist backdrop as normal, distinct micro-ambiences	Grounded in social history, multicultural everydayness, neighbourhood identity, change negotiated/ambivalent
Symbolic dispossession	Low dispossession, legitimacy intact, low reported nuisance	Episodic, place-specific, public-space friction, governance measures, subtle social status distinction
Future outlook	Thresholds, affordability, demographic change, Amsterdammification, Airbnb conditional risk	Spillover, overflow, redirected flows, emerging tourist-style signals, anticipated anonymity

Chapter 5. Discussion

This section analyses the findings through the thesis' conceptual framework. Rather than appearing as a continuous, everyday erosion of belonging, symbolic dispossession in this study is most visible as conditional and anticipatory: it emerges through place-specific frictions in micro-spaces and through future-oriented boundary setting around housing turnover and neighbourhood change in a regulated, moderate-pressure context. This framing highlight not only what residents currently experience, but also how they evaluate certain tipping points and trajectories.

In the literature, symbolic dispossession refers to residents losing social ownership, recognition, and belonging even when they remain physically in place, and it is often theorised as developing alongside, sometimes prior to, material displacement pressures. Much of this work is grounded in high-intensity touristification contexts, where residents more frequently describe an everyday erosion of belonging and legitimacy as neighbourhoods become oriented toward visitors and external consumption (Sequera & Nofre, 2018; Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2019). What stands out in this study is that this process appears less as a continuous, lived condition and more as a future risk. Participants rarely described ongoing alienation or persistent nuisance, but they repeatedly articulated when neighbourhood life would change in ways that would undermine residential continuity and being at home. This contrast suggests that symbolic dispossession can operate not only through direct, present-day disruption, but also through boundary setting. Even where Airbnb was not widely visible in residents' immediate surroundings, it carried symbolic weight as a mechanism that could tip everyday stability if short stays and turnover were to scale up, shifting residential space from use and continuity toward flexible monetisation and circulation (Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018; Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2019). These findings therefore suggest that dispossession-like meanings can be prospective as well as experiential, and residents map imagined tipping points onto present signals and evaluate whether future trajectories would still allow them to recognise the neighbourhood as for residents, even in a regulated setting where current disturbance is limited.

This anticipatory dynamic also refines how Airbnb becomes meaningful in contexts where direct visibility is limited. In many STR studies, Airbnb-related impacts are linked to observable disturbances, neighbourhood disruption, and conversions of housing into short-stay use (Nieuwland & van Melik, 2018; Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018). In this study, however, Airbnb often functioned less as a daily encounter and more as a symbolic mechanism. Binnenstad residents in particular did not report widespread, visible Airbnb in their immediate environment, yet they demonstrated a clear conceptual understanding of what short-stay circulation would do to everyday stability. This aligns with the idea that symbolic dispossession can operate through anticipated loss, as Airbnb becomes meaningful not

because it is always directly observed, but because it signifies a housing transformation in which residential space shifts from use value toward exchange value (Aalbers, 2016).

When discussing the future, both groups used Airbnb and tourism as a way to reason about tipping points. In other words, dispossession-like meanings were often produced prospectively: residents mapped possible futures onto present-day signs (marketing strategies, spillover, new visitor formats) and evaluated whether these futures would still allow them to recognise the neighbourhood as for residents. This extends the literature by showing how symbolic dispossession research is grounded in high-intensity touristification contexts; the Utrecht case suggests that symbolic dispossession can emerge as a form of anticipatory meaning-making and boundary setting in a regulated setting where direct Airbnb disturbance is limited or uneven.

Lefebvre's production of space (1991) provides the bridge from individual complaints to an interpretation of whose practices are prioritised in everyday urban life. Space is not a neutral container; it is produced through power, institutions, and routines, and capitalist urbanisation tends to prioritise exchange value and circulation. Within this lens, touristification becomes meaningful when neighbourhood functions, rhythms, and meanings are reorganised around visitor use and consumption. This framing aligns with SRQ2 and SRQ4 by linking residents' accounts of changing space use and accessibility (e.g., streets, corridors, hotspots) to perceived shifts in neighbourhood identity and atmosphere, to whether the neighbourhood still feels organised on residential terms. Empirically, the clearest evidence of this reorientation was not a generalised exclusion from the city centre, but micro-spatial pressure: Binnenstad residents described contrasts between quiet pockets and busy corridors, with congestion located in narrow streets and attraction routes but often framed as episodic and manageable. This pattern matters because it suggests that even in a mature visitor landscape, residents may not interpret visitor presence as dispossessing if they can still appropriate everyday space through routinised navigation and if pressure remains concentrated in specific corridors rather than diffusing across residential life. This nuance is important in relation to prior touristification research. Much of the literature on city-centre touristification emphasises that visitor-oriented spatial production can generate everyday disruption and symbolic dispossession, as daily rhythms and local uses are increasingly subordinated to visitor circulation and consumption (Edensor, 2010; Sheller & Urry, 2006). From that perspective, city centres are expected to be prime sites where residents feel that space is no longer for them. However, Binnenstad residents more often described a practical capacity to navigate and compartmentalise visitor pressure, so that visitor presence did not translate into a broader sense of dispossession. This suggests a refinement, namely dispossession is not an automatic outcome of visitor density alone, but depends on whether pressure becomes spatially diffused into residential routines, or remains concentrated in identifiable corridors that residents can routinise around and still appropriate for everyday life (Knibbe & Horstman, 2019).

In Lombok, however, one site (the Muntsluis) showed a stronger right-to-the-city dynamic: residents described overcrowding and inadequate facilities, and interpreted subsequent fencing as a way of reclaiming control over public space. This maps neatly onto Lefebvre's (1996) emphasis on appropriation and non-alienation: the issue was not simply that others were present, but that space near people's homes became difficult to use as residential space (rest, sleep, everyday liveability), and that residents felt management did not initially prioritise inhabitation. This confirms the relevance of production-of-space approaches for understanding when external use becomes meaningful as a liveability conflict: not as general tourism, but as a redefinition of what space is for and whose needs are prioritised.

The literature often links Airbnb to reduced social cohesion through weakened trust, increased anonymity, and disruption of repeated neighbourly interaction, especially where Airbnb normalises high residential turnover and blurs the boundary between neighbours and transient users (Nieuwland & van Melik, 2018; Valente et al., 2023). The findings in Utrecht complicate a direct application of this argument. Cohesion was generally described as light but present rather than collapsing, and most residents did not attribute current neighbour relations directly to Airbnb. This partly contrasts with findings from more intense short-term rental contexts. In Utrecht, the mechanism appears possible but conditional, becoming most relevant at the building/stairwell scale if circulation increases and repeated co-residence is replaced by frequent short stays (Nieuwland & van Melik, 2018). What this study adds is that cohesion effects are scale-dependent and largely future-oriented in this regulated setting. While Valente et al. (2023) do not measure cohesion directly, their findings on reduced residential stability support the idea that increased short-term rental pressure can undermine continuity, which residents in Utrecht anticipate at the building and street level. What this thesis adds is that in a regulated setting, cohesion impacts may be less visible as present-day breakdown and more visible as anticipatory concern linked to the potential increase of temporary guests. This points to a context-dependent mechanism, as cohesion concerns become prominent when Airbnb's enter shared residential settings (stairs, entrances, adjacent apartments) where repeated co-presence normally sustains recognition and informal mutuality. Where visitor presence is mainly encountered in public corridors or place-specific leisure nodes, residents can often maintain building- and street-level continuity, where turnover becomes routine within residential buildings, the conditions for familiarity and predictability are more directly disrupted. This matters for symbolic dispossession because it shows how dispossession-like experiences may develop in moderate contexts not through spectacular conflict, but through gradual erosion of recognition and expected co-residence.

Compared to prior studies in cities such as Amsterdam and Barcelona, where touristification and short-term rentals are more often described as pervasive pressures that spill across everyday neighbourhood life and are more clearly linked to symbolic dispossession, the pattern in Utrecht appears weaker and

more uneven (Sequera & Nofre, 2018; Valente et al., 2023). In this study, dispossession-like meanings were rarely articulated as an everyday condition. Instead, they emerged more selectively through micro-spatial pressure points and tipping points reasoning about turnover and spillover. The conceptual framework treats outcomes as context-dependent, shaped by neighbourhood position and governance. The comparison in this study supports this but in a specific way, as the difference is best read as form and clarity, not as a paired touristified versus not touristified. The Binnenstad functions as a concentrated visitor environment where tourism is normalised, pressure is described as micro-spatial. Lombok, by contrast, is narrated through spillover and discovery dynamics, external use is not mainly framed as classic sightseeing, but as intensified regional draw and as seasonal recreational pressure points that can become high-impact for nearby residents. This adds a sharper contribution to the touristification literature: in a mid-sized, regulated Dutch city, the impact of platform tourism might become relevant not in terms of permanent overtourism but in terms of discussions about future development and specific areas of reorientation in which the liveability of residents temporarily gives priority to external consumption. Put differently, these findings suggest how symbolic dispossession can emerge as early-stage warning and future-oriented boundary setting, rather than as permanent.

Governance implications

These findings suggest that policy responses should not rely solely on platform counts or city-wide indicators to assess whether tourism and short-term rentals are under control. Even where overall listing numbers appear stable or declining, residents' accounts show that impacts can be concentrated in specific hotspots and can be experienced most strongly as future-oriented concerns. This implies a need for more targeted governance that combines hotspot management in public space with building-level measures where guest circulation would be most disruptive. More generally, the results suggest that perceived liveability pressures are shaped not only by the volume of Airbnb's but by their spatial concentration, temporal intensity, and the visibility of enforcement. Monitoring strategies that integrate spatially signals of complaints and crowding reports alongside listing data would therefore better adjust governance to how residents actually encounter and anticipate neighbourhood change.

5.1 Limitations

This study has several limitations that affect how the findings should be interpreted. These limitations do not invalidate the results, but they do clarify the scope of the conclusions that can be drawn.

The empirical basis consists of two focus groups (Binnenstad n=4; Lombok n=5), each lasting approximately 90 minutes. With a total of nine participants, the study prioritises depth and interaction over breadth. As a result, the findings should be understood as contextual insights into residents' meaning-making, rather than as representative patterns for all residents of Utrecht, Lombok, or the

Binnenstad. This study offers in-depth, contextual insight, but future work could test these patterns with larger and more varied samples.

Recruitment relied on posters (approximately fifteen) and extensive leaflet distribution (roughly 500–600 per neighbourhood), complemented by posts on Facebook and neighbourhood platforms. Participation required signing up through a QR code or email, which may have excluded residents for whom this was inconvenient or unfamiliar. Moreover, the recruitment approach likely produced self-selection: residents with stronger opinions, higher digital literacy, or more interest in tourism/Airbnb-related debates may have been more inclined to participate. Also, as participation was voluntary and recruitment occurred through local platforms, the sample may overrepresent residents already engaged in neighbourhood debates. The sample also included somewhat more women than men, and many participants had lived in the neighbourhood for a long time, with the average age somewhat higher (while still covering multiple age ranges). These characteristics may have shaped the themes that became salient, for instance by foregrounding longer-term comparisons and certain normative expectations of neighbourhood stability.

A key analytical limitation concerns attribution. Airbnb was not introduced as a primary topic at the outset, but brought into the discussion once the conversation naturally moved in that direction. This approach reduced the risk of leading participants, but it also meant that Airbnb-related perceptions varied in specificity. In some cases, participants referred to concrete observations, while in others they relied on assumptions and broader sense-making about the city. As residents tend to bundle changes together, proving that specifically Airbnb is the cause of symbolic dispossession is difficult. Airbnb often functioned as a symbolic proxy in participants' discussions, as it condensed wider concerns about housing pressure, neighbourhood change, and urban transformation into one recognisable label. This limits the extent to which the findings can distinguish between platform-specific effects and wider processes of housing pressure, retail change, mobility patterns, and urban transformation that residents often experience as a bundled set of changes.

As with any focus group study, the findings were shaped by group interaction. In the Binnenstad group, one participant, an older resident, was relatively dominant in the discussion. This may have influenced which topics gained momentum, how strongly shared interpretations were expressed, and how comfortable others felt to diverge. Across both groups there was also substantial agreement, which can be informative but may suppress nuance or minority viewpoints in a group setting. Dominance of certain participants can cause conformity effects amongst the other participants. To reduce the risk that these dynamics skewed the thematic analysis, contributions were coded and reviewed at the participant level (Binnenstad1–4 and Lombok1–5), allowing themes to be assessed by breadth of endorsement rather than by the volume of discussion. Instances of disagreement, hesitation, or alternative framings were

coded explicitly and incorporated as deviant cases where relevant. Themes were only treated as robust when they appeared across multiple participants and/or in both neighbourhood focus groups, and quotation selection avoided over-representing any single participant. During the focus group moderation, prompts were used to invite input from quieter participants and to check for divergent views. A related limitation is that I have not previously organised or moderated a focus group. Although this does not undermine the value of the data, it may have affected strategies, time management, and balancing participation. With more experience and more time for iterative refinement, future sessions could be expected to generate a wider range of perspectives and a more consistent depth across themes.

Both focus groups were conducted in mid-December 2025, outside peak tourism season and during a busy period for many residents, due to Sinterklaas and/or Christmas celebrations. This timing may have influenced participation (fewer people available) and the salience of tourism-related pressures (reduced day-to-day exposure compared to spring/summer). Relying on residents' memories of summer nuisances while they are in the middle of a quiet winter may have led to the manageable and normalised tone of results. Had the focus groups taken place in July, symbolic dispossession might have appeared as a status quo rather than just an anticipatory fear.

All discussions were held in Dutch, and selected quotes were translated by me. While translating personally can help preserve meaning and context, it also introduces a risk that nuance, humour, or culturally specific phrasing is subtly altered. This is particularly relevant when analysing symbolic meanings where tone and wording can carry analytical weight.

Finally, practical constraints shaped the research process. Limited budget reduced the ability to offer meaningful incentives and made it harder to secure an ideal location. These factors probably influenced the success of recruitment and might have been a reason for the small group sizes. They also restricted the possibility of carrying out further sessions (e.g., for a demographic balance, follow-up groups, or a comparison during peak season), which would have improved the validity of the comparative statements.

6. Conclusion

This thesis examined how residents in Utrecht's Binnenstad and Lombok experience Airbnb- and tourism-related neighbourhood change through the lens of symbolic dispossession. Residents in both neighbourhoods do not describe symbolic dispossession as a constant, neighbourhood-wide condition. Visitor presence is mostly experienced as manageable, and a generalised loss of belonging in daily life is uncommon. Participants often distinguished between different kinds of non-resident presence and framed most current pressures as tolerable. Where neighbourhood change was discussed, it was usually bundled with broader shifts such as changing retail and new venues. Instead, symbolic dispossession appears situationally and conditionally, most clearly when specific public spaces become difficult to live near or use on residential terms, and when residents anticipate tipping points in neighbourhood continuity through increased turnover and spillover (with concerns regarding spillover from the centre expressed most strongly in Lombok). Airbnb's significance is therefore often less about immediate visibility and more about what it represents, an imagined boundary that could shift neighbourhood stability if Airbnb listings scale up.

The comparative aspect is best captured as a difference in form and clarity, rather than a simple divide. In Binnenstad, tourism is largely normalised as part of city-centre life, and pressure is described as micro-spatial and typically framed as seasonal and low. Airbnb is discussed mainly as a future risk linked to housing affordability, demographic change, and the possibility that constant circulation could weaken familiarity and predictability at building or street level. In Lombok, classic sightseeing tourism is described as limited, but residents more often narrate contested space through spillover and discovery dynamics and through seasonal recreational pressure points. The clearest dispossession-like experiences are place-specific and high-impact, as crowding affected rest and liveability and prompted calls for governance intervention. Across both neighbourhoods, social cohesion is generally described as surface-level yet functional, while the main related concern remains future-oriented: if short stays expand, continuity and recognition may weaken.

Conceptually, the thesis shows that symbolic dispossession can take an anticipatory form in regulated, moderate-pressure contexts, emerging through thresholds and micro-spatial frictions rather than as continuous alienation. Empirically, it highlights how within-city differences are shaped by spatial concentration and neighbourhood rhythms rather than by a simple touristified/not touristified divide.

Recommendations for municipal policy and governance

1. **Treat seasonal hotspots (such as Muntsluis) as a liveability issue first, not an Airbnb issue.**
   o Implement a summer hotspot plan for Muntsluis (and comparable waterside nodes): toilets, waste capacity, lighting, crowd routing, and clear enforcement moments.
   o Use seasonal monitoring (complaints, peak-time observations, short resident check-ins) and adjust measures yearly.
   o Keep the focus on residential terms of use not on generic tourism management language.

2. **Protect street/building stability by targeting circulation where it actually matters.**
   o Build a simple signal dashboard with repeated guest check-ins, key box signals, complaint clusters, and registration patterns.
   o Prioritise enforcement in shared residential buildings (stairs/entrances) where short stays most directly affect familiarity and predictability.
   o Use targeted conditions or caps in verified problem buildings or streets rather than only relying on citywide regulations.

3. **Link overnight-stay ambitions to hard limits on housing and liveability and communicate them transparently.**
   o Communicate clearly what will not be allowed (e.g., non-compliance, nuisance escalation).
   o Publish plain-language enforcement outcomes annually (checks, fines, removals).
   o Make explicit how Airbnb strategy will avoid or regulate spillover into Lombok as an overflow area.

Future research

Future research could strengthen these insights in two ways. First, comparing peak and off-peak seasons, or repeating the study longitudinally, would help assess whether the concerns identified here intensify into more tangible forms of symbolic dispossession over time. Second, pairing focus groups with methods such as walk-alongs, hotspot mapping, or photo-elicitation would make it possible to link symbolic meanings and cohesion dynamics more directly to specific sites and everyday routes. Third, triangulating resident accounts with fine-grained enforcement/complaints and listing data could clarify how perceived hotspots relate to measurable patterns.

Generative AI statement

Audio recordings from the focus groups were transcribed using Notta (AI-based speech-to-text transcription) to generate an initial draft transcript. The automated transcript was then manually checked and corrected by the researcher while listening back to the original recordings. Because automated transcription may contain errors (e.g., omissions, misattributions, or incorrect phrasing), the manually verified transcript was treated as the final dataset used for analysis. In addition, ChatGPT was used as a sparring partner during the research and writing process, mainly for brainstorm in the initial phase and refining the structure. All outputs were critically evaluated, and the author remains fully responsible for the final content. No findings, themes, or conclusions were generated by ChatGPT.

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Appendices

Appendix I. Moderator Guide (original translated by moderator)

Explanation:
- There are no wrong answers, most important are the experiences and opinions of people
- This is a safe space, please talk freely if you are comfortable doing so
- My role is to steer the conversation slightly at times, just to stick to the project and time schedule

5-10 quick introductions and icebreaker:
Name, age, how long have you lived there, occupation
Why do you live in Binnenstad/Lombok, what brought you here?
Or
What do you really like about living in Binnenstad/Lombok?

Minutes 10-30 observations and changes (tourism & visitors)

How do you experience Lombok's/Binnenstad's diversity in daily live?

Prompts:
- Do you notice tourists/temporary guests in your street?
  - What stands out (Airbnb/vacation rental?)
- Effects on facilities, shops, horeca?
  - Changing shops that change the vibe or atmosphere?
- Changes over time? (diversity)
- Are there changes in who visits the neighbourhood and how the neighbourhood is used?

Minutes 30-55 changes in neighbourhood liveability
How do visitors and changes impact your daily life/atmosphere in the neighbourhood?

Prompts:

- What is the general atmosphere like?
- Do you experience any nuisances or crowding?
  - Has this changed?
- Do you notice a lot of turnover in the neighbourhood?
- Different faces?
- Has the neighbourhood's identity changed?
  - Positive/negative?
- Places you use differently now/avoid/feel unwelcome
- Places that feel accustomed towards visitors?

Minutes 55-75 social and emotional experiences

Lombok/Binnenstad has a mix of permanent residents, temporary residents, students and tourists. How do you experience this dynamic?

Prompts:

- What is the effect on atmosphere?
- What contributes to your feeling of 'home'?
- What decreases your feeling of 'home'?
- Contact with neighbours: changed over the years?
- Moments that you felt the neighbourhood not offering to your needs?
- Do you get the feeling you have to share your neighbourhood with tourists?

Minutes 75-85 Future
- What direction would you like Binnenstad/Lombok to move towards in the future?
- What could be improved to create a pleasant residential area?
- Scenario -> if the amount of visitors or temporary residents would rise
  - Does Airbnb create more liveliness? Does this fit here?
  - What would change for the feeling of the neighbourhood?
  - Regulations
  - Lombok: would it become an extension of centre?

Minutes 85-90 Closing
- What else is important that we have not yet discussed?
- Thank you, interested in the final thesis?
- What was your motivation to join?

Appendix II. Coding overview

The following appendices serve to give the reader a glimpse into the coding process. For readability, most codes/themes have been translated.

A. Example: Colour-coded transcript (page 5, Binnenstad)

Below is an example of the coding approach, which was done in ATLAS.ti. Fully coded transcripts are available upon request.

Code legend:

Seasonal crowding / hotspot disruption

Social cohesion

Routine visitor pressure: Visitor presence framed as pleasant / adding liveliness.

Noise nuisance

VISITOR-COMPOSITION/SEASONALITY: Seasonality or changing visitor composition noticed.

Binnenstad1: En dat is wel grappig dat je dat kleine stukje wat je net vertelde dat je dus in dat kleine stukje het zo rustig hebt dat je dus al die dingetjes ook lekker kan doen. Dat je naar de hotspots gaat.

Binnenstad2: En die zwaaien even bij je… het is redelijk rustig, maar daarbinnen in het … [private location] is nog rustiger.

Moderator: En als u dus de straat op gaat: hoe ervaart u het als er toeristen of bezoekers lopen?

Binnenstad2: Dat vind ik juist heerlijk. Ik maak graag praatjes met alles en iedereen… dat vind ik eigenlijk heel leuk.

Moderator: Ja, ook als het mensen zijn die u dus niet kent.

Binnenstad2: Ja, ja, ja, dat is juist het vrijblijvende. Als je mensen kent, dan heb je banden en daar moet je rekening mee houden. Maar dit is er… dat is iets heel anders.

Binnenstad3: Ehm, nou dat is het stukje waar wij dan wonen is inderdaad echt heel rustig. Dus daar zie ik soms lopen er af en toe wat toeristen, maar eigenlijk niet zo veel. Maar als je dan naar de Oudegracht loopt of naar de Catherijnesingel, daar zie je wel vaak mensen lopen, inderdaad ook met grote koffers. En het viel me op dat er afgelopen zomer ook best wel veel Aziatische toeristen waren… daarvoor had ik het idee dat het meer Engelse/Amerikanen/Duitsers waren.

Binnenstad3: Maar ik vind het inderdaad ook wel gezellig. Wel levendig dat er gewoon een beetje reuring is en dat er mensen over straat lopen.

Moderator: Qua overlast: hebben jullie daar wel eens iets van, te veel geluid of dat soort dingen?

Binnenstad2: Geen last.

Binnenstad3: Nee.

1. Routine visitor pressure

- **Definition:** Mentions of tourists/visitors in daily life described as normal, expected, or manageable.
- **Include:** Normal crowd levels, habituation, acceptance.
- **Exclude:** Peak-event crowding that disrupts routines (code as *Seasonal crowding/hotspots*).

2. Seasonal crowding / hotspot disruption

- **Definition:** Place- and time-specific crowding that disturbs rest, access, or liveability.
- **Include:** Summer peaks, queues, noise at specific spots (e.g., canal/bridge areas), blocked sidewalks.
- **Exclude:** General talk about tourists

3. Spatial frictions

- **Definition:** Small-scale conflicts/annoyances in specific micro-spaces (doorways, bins, narrow streets, terraces).
- **Include:** "People stand in front of my door," litter next to entrance, bikes blocking passage.
- **Exclude:** Wider neighbourhood change narratives (code as *sense of place change* or *commercial change*).

4. Noise nuisance

- **Definition:** Reported disturbance from sound linked to visitors or short-stay guests.
- **Include:** Night noise, suitcases, parties, shouting, stairwell noise.
- **Exclude:** Non-tourism noise (traffic/construction) unless explicitly connected.

5. Safety / insecurity

- **Definition:** Feelings of insecurity or reduced perceived safety linked to unfamiliar people/turnover/tourism.
- **Include:** "You don't know who's in the building," discomfort with strangers in shared spaces.
- **Exclude:** General crime talk without link to visitors/short stays.

6. Short-stay visibility (seen vs unseen)

- **Definition:** Whether Airbnb/short stays are perceived as present/identifiable or largely invisible.
- **Include:** "I never notice it," key boxes, rolling suitcases, frequent arrivals, online suspicion.
- **Exclude:** Future worries without present indicators (code as *future threat*).

7. Housing turnover / loss of continuity

- **Definition:** Accounts of increased residential turnover or reduced long-term occupancy linked to short stays or investor logic.
- **Include:** Fewer permanent neighbours, changing faces,
- **Exclude:** Non-housing turnover (shops changing) (use *commercial change*).

8. Social cohesion

- **Definition:** Neighbour relations described as limited yet adequate (greetings, practical help, low-intensity ties).
- **Include:** "We say hello," occasional help, not close but okay.
- **Exclude:** Explicit decline narratives or conflict (use *erosion of cohesion*).

9. Erosion of cohesion

- **Definition:** Concern that cohesion/familiarity will weaken if short stays scale up.
- **Include:** "If it grows, we won't know each other," building-level continuity worries.
- **Exclude:** Present cohesion descriptions without decline (use *social cohesion*).

10. Sense of place change

- **Definition:** Perceived change in neighbourhood "feel," identity, or atmosphere toward visitor orientation.
- **Include:** "It feels less like ours," vibe changes, loss of calmness, "theme-park" feel (if used).
- **Exclude:** Material changes only (use *commercial change* or *public space pressure*).

11. Belonging

- **Definition:** Statements about feeling at home, belonging, or ownership of the neighbourhood's meanings.
- **Include:** Pride, attachment language, "our street," "my neighbourhood."
- **Exclude:** Purely practical issues without identity/belonging.

12. Symbolic dispossession

- **Definition:** Perceived loss of influence over what the neighbourhood is "for," and who it is oriented toward.
- **Include:** "It's being shaped for visitors," residents feel sidelined in defining place identity/usage.
- **Exclude:** Physical dispossession claims (if present) unless linked to meaning/control.

13. Commercial change / retail orientation

- **Definition:** Shifts in shops/services toward consumption for visitors rather than local needs.
- **Include:** Souvenir/food-drink dominance, loss of everyday shops, fun-shopping narratives.
- **Exclude:** Housing change without retail (use *Housing turnover*).

14. Governance / calls for regulation

- **Definition:** Demands for municipal action or comments on rules/enforcement (Airbnb caps, nuisance control).
- **Include:** "The municipality should…," permitting, enforcement, policing nuisance.
- **Exclude:** General complaining without action orientation.

15. Airbnb as future threat

- **Definition:** Airbnb framed as a mechanism that *could* shift stability/liveability even if not dominant now.
- **Include:** "Not a big issue yet, but…," tipping point logic, scalability concerns.
- **Exclude:** Present confirmed high prevalence (use *Short-stay visibility + Housing turnover +* nuisance codes).

1. Visitor pressure

- Routine visitor pressure (1)
- Seasonal crowding / hotspot disruption (2)
- Micro-spatial frictions (3)

2. Liveability impacts in everyday space

- Noise nuisance (4)
- Safety / insecurity (5)
- Spatial frictions (3)

3. Neighbourhood stability and cohesion

- Short-stay visibility (6)
- Housing turnover (7)
- Social cohesion (8)
- Erosion of cohesion (9)

4. Sense of place and symbolic dispossession

- Sense of place change (10)
- Belonging (11)
- Symbolic dispossession (12)
- Commercial change / retail orientation (13)

5. Governance of Airbnb/tourism

- Governance / calls for regulation (14)
- Airbnb as future threat (15)

D. Mini audit trail (translated)

1. Visitor pressure

Quote	Code(s)	Why
"I experience absolutely no nuisance." (p. 7, Binnenstad2)	1 Routine visitor pressure	The participant explicitly states tourism-related disturbance is absent/managed in everyday life.
"That traffic light by the Bijenkorf where there are always hordes of people." (p. 15, Binnenstad3)	2 Seasonal crowding / hotspot disruption	Crowd pressure is located in a specific micro-location (the traffic light area), described as persistently crowded.
"Those people will all want to go outside… where will they go?" (p. 46, Lombok2)	2 Seasonal crowding / hotspot disruption 15 Airbnb as future threat	The quote frames potential crowding as an outcome of increased short stays/people presence, expressed as a spatial capacity concern.

2. Liveability impacts

Quote	Code(s)	Why
"You don't live here for the silence." (p. 27, Binnenstad1)	4 Noise nuisance	Noise is presented as a normal characteristic of the area, implying adaptation to bustle rather than exceptional disruption.
"Maybe you feel less safe if you live right in the city centre… but I really haven't noticed that at all… in terms of atmosphere it's very safe. Cosy, but indeed with somewhat less contact with each other." (p. 11, Binnenstad1)	5 Safety / insecurity 8 Social cohesion	The participant recognises the idea of reduced safety but denies experiencing it, while noting limited neighbour contact.
"It shouldn't become like Amsterdam, it will become a nuisance." (p. 28, Binnenstad1)	15 Airbnb as future threat 14 Governance / calls for regulation	A threshold comparison signals fear of escalation into nuisance; it's a warning rather than a report of current harm.

3. Neighbourhood stability and cohesion

66

Quote	Code(s)	Why
"If there is someone else living above you all the time… the neighbourhood falls apart." (p. 25, Binnenstad1)	7 Housing turnover 9 Erosion of cohesion	The quote links frequent turnover in residents to breakdown in neighbourhood stability/cohesion.
"It's not a neighbourhood where people visit each other and sit outside in the evenings drinking beers together. It's not that." (p. 11, Binnenstad2)	8 Social cohesion	Describes low-intensity sociality and limited neighbourly bonding as the norm.
"In terms of tourism in Lombok you don't really have that much." (p. 47, Lombok1)	6 Short-stay visibility 1 Routine visitor pressure	The participant indicates low perceived tourism presence, suggesting limited direct experience of short stays/visitor pressure.

4. Sense of place and symbolic dispossession

Quote	Code(s)	Why
"I do think it's cosy. It's lively, there's a bit of bustle." (p. 6, Binnenstad3)	10 Sense of place change (positive); 11 Belonging	The quote evaluates the neighbourhood atmosphere positively and frames liveliness as part of place identity.
"I'm quite proud of Lombok. I think Lombok is a really nice neighbourhood." (p. 59, Lombok2)	11 Belonging	Expresses pride and positive identification with the neighbourhood.
"Because at a certain point the diversity decreased enormously." (p. 44, Lombok2)	13 Commercial change / retail orientation; 10 Sense of place change	Diversity decline typically signals homogenisation (shops/services/people), implying a shift in what the area offers/represents.

5. Governance of Airbnb/tourism

Quote	Code(s)	Why
"In Utrecht there are quite strict rules… 60 days per year." (p. 8, Binnenstad4)	14 Governance / calls for regulation 6 Short-stay visibility	Refers to regulation, showing awareness of governance

		structures around short-term renting.
"Those people will all want to go outside… where will they go?" (p. 46, Lombok2)	15 Airbnb as future threat 14 Governance	Anticipates a scale problem; the quote reads as a warning tied to spatial capacity, implying a need for management.
"It shouldn't become like Amsterdam, it will become a nuisance." (p. 28, Binnenstad1)	15 Airbnb as future threat	Uses Amsterdam as a future scenario of over-tourism/nuisance, indicating fear of escalation.

A. Poster

B. Door-to-door flyer

Beste bewoner(s) van Lombok,

Mijn naam is Anna en ik doe onderzoek naar hoe bewoners de sfeer in hun buurt ervaren, en wat voor invloeden toerisme daarop kan hebben.
Ik organiseer binnenkort een groepsgesprek met buurtbewoners uit Lombok. Zo'n gesprek duurt ongeveer 90 minuten, en ik zal voor koffie/thee en wat lekkers zorgen. Het is in een ontspannen sfeer en u hoeft niets voor te bereiden.

Ik ben op zoek naar verschillende soorten bewoners: jong, ouder, nieuwkomers, mensen die hier al lang wonen, of pas kort. Iedere ervaring is waardevol!

Wilt u meedoen of heeft u vragen?
Scan de QR-code voor meer informatie, of stuur een bericht naar:
anna.demoor@wur.nl.

Alvast heel erg bedankt!
Hartelijke groet,
Anna
Wageningen University

Hoi allemaal!

Ik ben Anna, masterstudent aan Wageningen University.

Voor een onderzoek ben ik op zoek naar verschillende bewoners van Utrecht die willen meedoen aan een klein groepsgesprek. Onder genot van een kop koffie of thee zullen we op een ontspannen manier hebben over leven en toerisme in jouw buurt.

Of je hier net woont of al 50 jaar: jouw ervaring telt!

Woon je in Lombok of de binnenstad en heb je zin om mee te doen? Scan de QR-code op de poster, of klik op de link voor meer informatie en meld je aan!

Bewoners van Utrecht Lombok: [link]

Bewoners van Utrecht Binnenstad: [link]

D. Pre-survey Form (Binnenstad applicants)

Ontzettend bedankt voor uw interesse! Mijn naam is Anna, masterstudent aan Universiteit Wageningen, en voor mijn scriptie doe ik onderzoek hoe het is om in Utrecht te wonen. Daarvoor organiseer ik een ontspannen groepsgesprek met bewoners uit verschillende buurten. Tijdens dit gesprek praten we in een kleine kring over het leven in de buurt, wat er misschien verandert, hoe u de sfeer ervaart, en welke rol bezoekers of toerisme daar soms in spelen. Ik zal zorgen voor een ruimte in de buurt, koffie/thee, en iets lekkers.

U hoeft niets voor te bereiden, het gaat om uw ervaringen en uw stem. Om ervoor te zorgen dat de groep mensen bevat met verschillende ervaringen, vraag ik u een paar korte vragen in te vullen. Deze antwoorden worden alleen voor dit onderzoek gebruikt, en worden na afloop verwijderd.

Bedankt voor uw medewerking, en hopelijk tot snel!

Mijn contactgegevens:

E-mailadres: [personal]

Woont u in Lombok en doet u graag mee? Klik dan op deze

link:

* Verplichte vraag

1. Ter controle; woont u in de binnenstad? *

Markeer slechts één ovaal.

Ja

70

Nee

2. Welke momenten passen voor u voor het groepsgesprek? Graag alle beschikbare data selecteren.

Vink alle toepasselijke opties aan.

Donderdag 4 december 19:30-21:00

Woensdag 10 december 19:30-21:00

Geen van beide, maar ik zou graag mee willen doen

3. Hoe kan ik u bereiken voor informatie over de uiteindelijke datum en locatie? (E-mailadres en/of telefoonnummer)

4. Hoe lang woont u in de binnenstad?*

Markeer slechts één ovaal.

0-1 jaar

1-5 jaar

Meer dan 10 jaar

5. Wat is uw leeftijd?*

Markeer slechts één ovaal.

18-29

30-49

50-64

65+

6. Wat is uw geslacht?

Markeer slechts één ovaal.

Man

Vrouw

Zeg ik liever niet

7. Heeft u weleens (een deel van) uw woning verhuurd aan bezoekers (bijv. via Airbnb)?

Markeer slechts één ovaal.

Ja

Nee

Zeg ik liever niet

71

8. Opmerkingen (bijv. mobiliteit, toegankelijkheid)

Hartelijk dank voor uw aanmelding!

U krijgt een bevestiging via e-mail of SMS, hierin zal de exacte locatie en tijd staan.