

# The social construction of anti-tourism protest in tourist cities: a case study of Barcelona

Francesc González-Reverté and Anna Soliguer Guix

Francesc González-Reverté is based at the Department of Economy and Business, Open University of Catalonia (UOC), Barcelona, Spain. Anna Soliguer Guix has a PhD in tourism at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), Barcelona, Spain.

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Focusing on critical discourse analysis, this paper aims to propose a framework for analysing the way activist anti-tourism groups construct their social action of protest. The authors argue that activist groups use different narrative strategies to construct and legitimise their discourse of protest to convey social meanings for social action practices. This study represents an attempt to explain how anti-tourism activist groups have the agency to build different paradigms of protest rooted in particular views of tourism.

**Design/methodology/approach** – As a result of the lack of research in this area, this study used a comparative case study methodology drawn on four case studies in the field of anti-tourism protest. Case study is deemed adequate to explore a complex social phenomenon, how activist groups differ from each other, in a specific socio-economic context. A critical discourse analysis method is used to study primary (interviews) and secondary sources (reports, websites and online campaigns documents) of information, which express the activist group motivations and objectives to protest against tourism.

**Findings** – This study's findings provide evidence in how discourse differs among the protest groups. Three narrative paradigms of protest are identified, which guide their agency: scepticism, based on a global and ecological approach; non-interventionist transformation, rooted in local community issues; and direct transformation, based on a sectoral problem-solving approach. These differences are interpreted as the consequences of the emergence and the development of different paths of protest according to specific social contexts and power relations in which anti-tourism groups are embedded.

**Originality/value** – This paper provides a contemporary approach to anti-tourism activism within the context of social movements. This case study may be of interest to practitioners and international destination managers interested in gaining a better understanding of anti-tourism protest strategies, new anti-tourism narratives following COVID-19 and the opportunities and challenges for opening a dialogue with those involved in activism and social urban movements as part of sustainable tourism governance. Our results can also help activists to rethink how they integrate differences and particular strategic positions to avoid hindering collective action. This knowledge is especially useful for managers and authorities seeking to develop more accurate collaborative governance practices with local activists, and especially those interested in fostering participative action without marginalising the diverse range of local community perspectives.

**Keywords** Urban tourism, Anti-tourism protests, Critical discourse analysis, Social urban movements, Barcelona

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The anti-tourist social protest has gained prominence in cities such as Barcelona, characterised by sustained tourism growth over recent decades (González & Soliguer, 2022). This protest's emergence is interpreted as a consequence of touristification and the social and economic inequalities generated within the local community by tourism (Hughes, 2018). Despite numerous studies on tourist protest, there has been limited exploration of

how this protest differs among its various instigators (Novy & Colomb, 2019). This research delves into the disparities in motivation and organisation among different contemporary protest groups. It questions whether, in the contemporary city, protest is a global reaction to tourism that tends to homogenise its format with similar propositions or if it varies based on each group's intentions and the context of each city. Drawing on Foucault's reality–power relationship, our hypothesis suggests tourist protest adheres to a social construction (Foucault, 1972), influenced by specific historical moments, socio-economic conditions (Pirillo & Mundet, 2021; Willems & Jegers, 2012), global ideologies and local power relations (Foucault, 1983; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Considering these factors, the main objective of this study is to determine how the social construction of the anti-tourist protest influences the emergence of a diversity of motivations and legitimisation strategies used by the different activism groups to obtain agency. The analysis compares four case studies of protest groups operating in the city of Barcelona, considered as social institutions developing socially constructed discourses in response to tourism. We structure the analysis about the social construction of anti-tourism protest discourse around three research questions:

- RQ1.* The social context of discourse formation. Why and how do protest discourses emerge? It is of interest to observe how protest group discourses are constructed based on the context and specific social and pre-existing power conditions that define the range of actions available to these actors.
- RQ2.* The discourse practice context. What motivations guide the anti-tourist protest discourse? In other words, what are the discourse elements motivating and guiding the agency and social action of protest groups?
- RQ3.* Text analysis of anti-tourist protest discourse. How is the anti-tourist protest discourse constructed and communicated? Through the analysis of textual and semiotic elements, we inquire about the discursive arguments and narratives through which protest is conveyed and socially legitimised.

This perspective is of interest for different reasons. Firstly, despite the recognition that a transformation of the current tourism model is necessary, it proves challenging to present a collective proposal without considering the diverse starting positions and discourses surrounding the protest. The analysis of discourse allows for the identification of distinct and individual interpretations of the protest, which, if taken into account, can pave the way for dialogue and understanding, ultimately fostering participation in processes of collective governance and identifying barriers therein. Secondly, although some previous studies have touched upon this topic (Colomb & Novy, 2017), there is a need for new empirical contributions and interpretative frameworks that go beyond mere typological descriptions. Finally, to achieve consensus in tourism governance, it is useful to critically approach the discourse of protest in terms of the interests of the various social actors involved. Urban governance may benefit from detecting affinities and oppositions, opportunities and challenges for collaboration between the social actors engaged in tourism protest.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 conducts a literature review, shaping the conceptual model for the social construction of anti-tourist protest discourse. Section 3 elucidates the research design and data collection procedures used to compare the case studies. In Section 4, discourse analysis results are presented, unveiling three proposed narratives. Section 5, dedicated to conclusions, articulates the primary findings and discusses the key theoretical and practical contributions of the research.

## **2. Conceptual framework. The social construction of the anti-tourist protest**

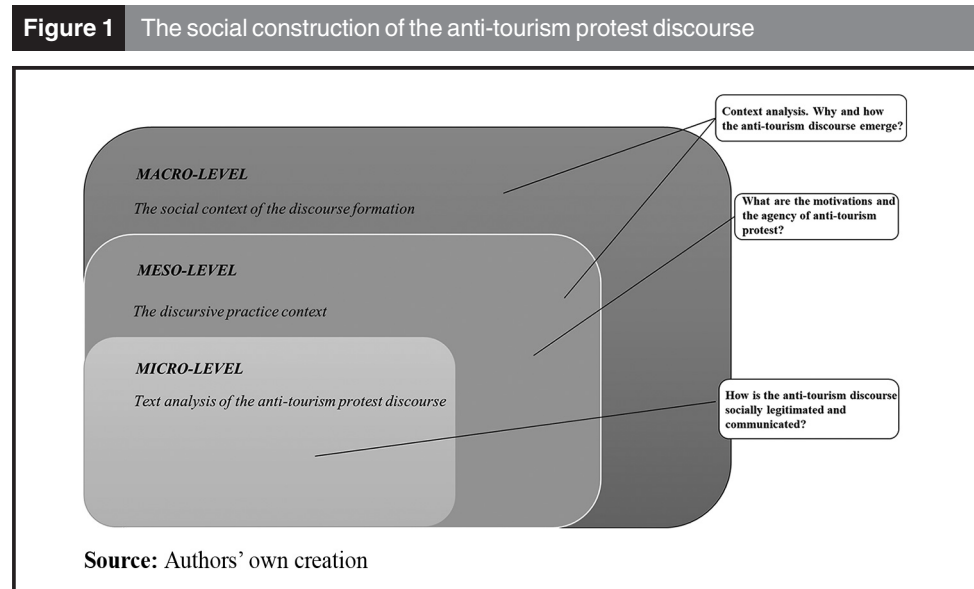
Discourse involves how individuals use language, reflecting their worldview and societal reality. It is considered a result of a culturally interconnected process within a broader social context. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) deeply explores language in a specific context,

unveiling not just what people say but why they say it (Qian, Wei & Law, 2018). Scholars emphasise CDA for interpreting social phenomena, linking linguistic structure analysis with power in textual production (Fairclough, 2003). Given its focus on power, ideology, change and contextuality, CDA aligns well with tourism protest research, allowing micro- and macro-level analyses. CDA also provides a good fit with tourism protest research. The nature of discursive functions explains how discourse legitimises or normalises embedded ideologies, aiding in understanding societal phenomena (van Dijk, 1993). Within this interpretative framework, we use CDA to trace the evolution of anti-tourism protest discourse narratives in Barcelona and dissect their socially constructed nature. To accomplish this, a literature review informed the creation of a conceptual framework on the social construction of protest, guiding the research (see Figure 1). This framework adopts the three levels of analysis from the CDA model proposed by Merkl-Davies and Koller (2012) and adapts it to the analysis of anti-tourist protest discourse. According to this model, three levels of discourse analysis are considered: macro-, meso- and micro-level. The following provides an explanation of each of the levels/components of the conceptual framework.

### 2.1 The social context of the anti-tourism protest

At the macro-level, the social context of discourse formation focuses on understanding why the anti-tourist protest discourse emerges. According to Merkl-Davies and Koller (2012), the social context is defined as the existing conditions, in a broad social sense, from which the discourse is constructed. It pertains to the combination of social, economic, political and cultural factors that give rise to the protest discourse, as well as how it is transformed when these initial conditions change.

Three structural elements have been influential in the emergence of a critical discourse on tourism. On the one hand, the tourism protest emerged in a broader context of urban activism where activism has gained weight in response to the neoliberal urbanisation model. This model is based on capital regulation, increased instability, uneven development and the promotion of legitimising regulatory strategies (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). From the 1990s onwards, cities were characterised by the impetus given to market and privatisation mechanisms, in which the tourism sector takes a preponderant role. Consequently, new voices of protest include tourism in the agenda, in a phenomenon that



has been coined as the repolitisation of tourism (Novy, 2016) and in parallel to the emergence of the so-called new social urban movements (Buechler, 1995). On the other hand, specific conditions of the local context have a clear impact on the emergence of anti-tourism protests as people associate tourism with a decrease in well-being and quality of life standards. For example, in Barcelona, the touristification process developed in parallel with rising housing costs, gentrification issues (Cocola & López, 2020), overtourism (Milano, Novelli & Cheer, 2019) and resident displacement (Cocola-Gant & Pardo, 2017). A third structural element influencing the formation of protest discourse is adaptation to change. Previous existent discourses may be modified because of sudden changes in the environment. As the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates, this transformative role is considered a pivotal moment in tourist protest, as new discursive elements are proposed to face the increasing complexity into local systems (Bui, Chen & Wickens, 2020) and new strategies are included to redirect their social action (Pinckney & Rivers, 2020; Rohlinger & Meyer, 2022).

## *2.2 Anti-tourist discourse as a social practice*

The meso-level analysis examines, through discourse analysis, how the different motivations that each group initially constructs from the social context become a practice of protest (Merkl-Davies & Koller, 2012). That is, how groups actually propose and express their agency through discourse. For the purpose of our research, the concept of agency is defined as the capacity of individuals to have the power and resources to fulfil their potential, the ability to act as one's will and their capacity to shape the circumstances in which they live (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Weber's Theory of Social Action (TSA) constitutes a suitable framework for the analysis of motivations that guide the protest practice. In this theory, Weber emphasises how human action can impact others and how it can modify others' actions with negative consequences (Runciman, 1991). In essence, the theory examines how individuals carry out actions that are meaningful to them and how these actions ultimately affect society and its norms. It seeks to understand what motivates a particular action and the implications of the interactions resulting from that action with other individuals and society as a whole (Westwood, 2002).

In our research, we define social action as collective actions where a group of individuals come together and organise for a social cause that concerns them. It is adopted here in the Weberian sense, that is, as the actions that individuals or social groups take to exercise agency. According to Weber, people who are not conformed with the prevailing social structure make conscious choices based on their motivations and interests while being influenced by contemporary cultural, social and historical contexts (Haralambos & Holborn, 2014). TSA challenges the structuralist idea that societies are organised from top to bottom and proposes that they result from the everyday interactions among the people who live within them. In other words, people do not merely conform to and accept what society dictates; they have agency in shaping their lives through social action. To the extent that individuals are not passive beings but make decisions to create their own history, it is essential to understand the motivations behind their actions (Tuomela, 1991).

TSA delves into the motivations behind specific actions, positing that a social action exists only when backed by a meaningful motive. Weber categorises social actions into four types based on their meaning and impelling motive. Firstly, rationally purposeful actions are goal-oriented, involving a calculated analysis of costs and benefits. They seek to prevent undesirable outcomes or enhance societal aspects. Secondly, value-rational actions stem from personal commitment to values, ideals or moral obligations. Thirdly, affective actions arise from spontaneous emotional responses. Finally, traditional actions follow established customs, norms and rituals, contributing to internal group dynamics and social cohesion, and promoting a shared way of life. In essence, TSA explores the multifaceted nature of

actions, emphasising the importance of motives in shaping individual and collective behaviours within society.

In anti-tourism protest groups, motivations exhibit a transformative nature, establishing an intimate link between narratives and action. Analysing discourse through the lens of social action provides insight into the specific motivations that drive the discourse about the tourism model pursued by each activist group.

### ***2.3 The social legitimization of the anti-tourist discourse***

The anti-tourist activist groups can be considered as representative actors of the local community, capable of influencing social opinion and generating relevant knowledge through their discourse, and consequently exercising social influences. Thus, from a discourse analysis perspective, they can be viewed as power groups, akin to the role played by the media, seeking social influence and representation through discourse. Micro-level text analysis focuses on linguistic features crucial for discourse and its targeted audience (Merkl-Davies & Koller, 2012). In anti-tourist protest discourse, both written and spoken documents incorporate cognitive elements (informing and explaining based on data or events) and conative elements (emphasising connection and persuading audiences), using rational and emotional arguments to legitimise their protest (Altamirano, 2022). These strategies aim not only to position messages as socially accepted truths but also to perpetuate collective protest (Millward & Takhar, 2019). Consequently, strategies to legitimate discourse are used as a means of naturalising specific social actions, through which each institution seeks to present responses and proposals with maximum social acceptance (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). According to van Leeuwen, four different dimensions are central to the discourse analysis method for critically analysing the way discourses construct legitimization for social practices:

1. authorisation (legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law and by persons in whom institutional authority is vested);
2. moral evaluation (legitimation by reference to discourses of value);
3. rationalisation (legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalised social action, and to the social knowledges that endow them with cognitive validity); and
4. mythopoesis (legitimation conveyed through stories whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions) (van Leeuwen, 2007; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999).

In summary, examining how discourse is justified facilitates the interpretation of ideological differences and the way in which anti-tourism protest groups act, according to the way they see the world. Therefore, identifying strategies of discourse legitimisation proves highly valuable in gaining a better understanding of the motivation and agency behind their protest actions.

## **3. Research method**

### ***3.1 Design and research setting***

We selected Barcelona as our focal point for analysing anti-tourism protests because of its status as a pioneer city in this domain, with a continuous and active protest movement currently underway, making it an excellent observatory for our study (see Table 1). As a result, different actors converge currently within this city with different approaches to social action and very contrasting positions: radical and anti-system groups, community-based groups, non-governmental organisations, professional tourism associations that exercise moderate criticism, etc. (see Table 1). A case study research approach fits well in this context, as this method allows for a detailed analysis of each position and a comparison of them in a specific context (Yin, 1994). Questions about a contemporary situation over which the researcher has

**Table 1** Most relevant actions in anti-tourism activism in Barcelona, 2004–2021

<i>Year</i>	<i>Relevant action</i>	<i>Reason for the protest</i>
2004	Resident dissatisfaction due to the celebration of the Fòrum de les Cultures [Cultures' Forum]	Residents displaced due to an urban-regeneration project
2008	Start of the debate on "tourismphobia"	Dependence on the tourism model
2013	Campaign "Fem Plaça" ["Square making"]	Privatisation of public space and noise at night
2014	Resident demonstrations in la Barceloneta	Intrusion of tourism in daily life
2015	Foundation of l'Assemblea de Barris per al Desenvolupament Sostenible (Currently ABDT) [Neighbourhoods' Assembly for Tourism Degrowth]	The predatory nature of the tourism model
2016/ 2018	Organisation of neighbourhood forums on city tourism	Social awareness regarding tourism problems
2016	Consell de Turisme de la Ciutat ["Advisory Council on Tourism and the City"]	Change in tourism governance
2016	Foundation of Las Kellys Association	Precarious work conditions
2017	Protest against the opening of Casa Vicens	Excessive offer and over-tourism
2017	Symbolic occupation of the SOHO hotel (property of vulture funds)	Residential displacement
2017	Attack on the city Bus Turístic	Negative impact of tourism on residents' quality of life
2017	Protests against the arrival of the Symphony of the Seas cruise and against the expansion of the port	Over-tourism, capacity and environmental pollution
2017	Anti-tourism graffiti at Parc Güell	Rejection of the excessive presence of tourists
2018	#Unfairbcn# campaign	Expansion of the sharing's economy accommodation markets
2018	Conferences and workshops on the relationship between residents and tourism "Tourist tours can we share the same space?" and "Port-city: towards what model are we adopting?"	Co-existence with tourism and dependence on tourism in the urban development plan
2018	News conference for the network SET (Citizens of Southern Europe against touristification)	Globalisation and tourism
2019	"Barcelona no està en venda" ["Barcelona is not for sale"] campaign	Privatisation and precarious labour
2021	Zeroport Manifest	Negative impacts of expanding Barcelona Airport
2021	Neighbourhood protest "Less tourism more life"	Health risks associated with tourism mobility
2021	Unified "Stop Creuers" protests in various Catalan cities	Health risks associated with tourism mobility

Source: Authors' own creation

little control, such as anti-tourism protest goals and motivations, are likely to support the use of case studies (Yin, 1994). Furthermore, the case study method allows contextualised research, collecting data from different sources and permitting cross-case comparisons (Yin, 1994) integrating stakeholder opinions, from the inside, with more "neutral" secondary sources of information.

The unit of analysis were currently active groups of anti-tourism protest located in Barcelona. A broad view of activism was taken when selecting the four groups. The aim was to overcome the ambiguities that using this category implies as a social movement (Pickvance, 2003), but expressly giving a voice to groups which, while not activists, may play a relevant role in protest (Colomb & Novy, 2017). In this regard, we embraced a "broad" view of activism, rather than a "restricted" one (Castells, 1977), referring to a system of participatory and protest practices that are applied to the structural transformation of the urban system, although remaining only at the level of social awareness and sensitisation. Cases were selected based on criteria such as social prominence and the relevance of their protest activity in the city (representativeness, membership size or media coverage), resulting in a sample of four cases that allow for comparison.

In qualitative research, trustworthiness of the data should be established to fulfil quality standards (Robson & McCartan, 2016). This study has supported credibility (internal



validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability) and reflexivity through the use of some of the methods suggested in the literature (Malterud, 2001; Petty, Thomson & Stew, 2012). The study ensures credibility through two methods: peer debriefing and triangulation. Peer debriefing involves regular discussions among researchers and interactions with external research group members. Triangulation combines interview data with information from external sources, such as documents on research group websites and social media. Besides, interviews with tourism and social movement experts validate findings from multiple perspectives. Purposeful sampling is used for transferability, limiting interviewees to anti-tourism protest group members with expertise and first-hand knowledge. To assess the researchers' impact on each phase of the process, the data were examined through an ongoing dialogue where, as thematic elements emerged, each researcher expressed their individual judgements. The authors have extensive experience in the analysis of urban tourism development, believing that anti-tourism protest is inherent to this process. Nevertheless, the authors do not hold preconceived notions about the primary motives and reasons that drive each group to engage in their protest actions, all of which are considered to be of legitimate nature.

### 3.2 Data sources

To analyse the anti-tourism protest discourse, we used qualitative primary sources (in-depth interviews) and secondary sources, including documents and content taken from the activist groups' websites, press releases and reported anti-tourism campaigns. The in-depth interviews allow us to gather qualitative data on the groups' particular ways they use speech and language to legitimate their discourse. The use of multiple sources provided multiple measures of the same phenomenon, and permits to contrast participants' opinions (see Table 2). Multiple data collection methods were adopted to gain a better understanding of the approaches to anti-tourism protests, aimed at increasing the sources of information and diversifying data to reduce bias (Patton, 2002). To substantiate the participants' views on tourism-related protest actions and social transformation and check

**Table 2** Complementary sources of information

Case study	Source of information	Data obtained	Examples
ABDT	<a href="https://assembleabarris.wordpress.com/">https://assembleabarris.wordpress.com/</a>	Reports, published from 2015 to the present day, that present the activist group viewpoint on the city's tourism model and explain the reasons behind their protest actions and campaigns	Rec Comtal hotel campaign (2015) "Stop mass tourism" campaign (2016) #UNFairbnb campaign (2017) Opposition to the Hermitage museum campaign (2017) "Occupying Las Ramblas" campaign (2017) Internal document: statement explaining their shift towards degrowth (2019) "Stop cruises" video (2023) Neighbourhood Barcelona Forums (2016 and 2018).
FAVB	<a href="http://www.favb.cat/tags/turisme">www.favb.cat/tags/turisme</a>	Documentation from their website on the tourism commission and announcements that express their position on different topics related to the city's tourism model and tourist urbanism	Terraces statements Barcelona Tourism plans Tourism and housing Newsletter "Carrer" [Street]
Las Kellys	<a href="https://laskellys.wordpress.com/">https://laskellys.wordpress.com/</a> <i>Hotel explotación: Las Kellys</i> (2018) documentary directed by Georgina Cisquella	Statements, manifestos and current news where they publish their actions and opinion articles	Reasons behind the formation of this association Labour issues and gender reindications
AGUICAT	<a href="http://www.aguicat.cat/mitjans/premsa/">www.aguicat.cat/mitjans/premsa/</a>	News articles about tourism in Barcelona, where the opinion of this collective is sought	Tour groups street limits Free guide tours

Source: Authors' own creation

for potential biases, secondary sources and social media content were used and triangulated. With triangulation, the potential problems of construct validity can be addressed. Further retrospective analysis and discussions among the researchers about the results sought to corroborate findings from the data and develop converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 1994).

### 3.3 Data collection and data analysis

To gain insight into the groups' different approaches to the anti-tourism protest and to mitigate informant bias, we designed a semi-structured interview script with 21 questions, divided into eight blocks:

1. historical background and particular mission and objectives;
2. perceived importance of activism;
3. real capacity for mobilisation;
4. representativeness and social scope of activism;
5. strategic positioning;
6. transformation capacity;
7. type of actions taken; and
8. state of activism in times of pandemic.

The in-depth interviews provided relevant information on the vision and mission of the protest.

The fieldwork (including interviews and multisource data collection) was carried out between January 2021 and February 2022. A total of 14 interviews were conducted to members, managers or board members of the four activist groups (see Table 3). The interviews were conducted online, for health and safety reasons. The interviews ranged from 40 min to 1 h in

**Table 3** Interview participants

<i>Participant membership</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>
<i>ABDT</i>		
P1. Member	Man	36
P2. Association governing board	Man	42
<i>FAVB</i>		
P3. Member representative La Salut-Parc Güell neighbourhood association	Woman	48
P4. Member representative Vila Olímpica neighbourhood association	Man	35
P5. Member representative El Gòtic neighbourhood association	Woman	53
P6. Member representative La Barceloneta neighbourhood association	Man	44
P7. Member representative Dreta de l'Eixample neighbourhood association	Man	62
P8. Member representative El Raval neighbourhood association	Man	61
P9. Member representative La Sagrada Família neighbourhood association	Woman	55
P10. Association governing board (Tourism)	Man	53
<i>Las Kellys</i>		
P11. Member	Woman	48
P12. Association governing board	Woman	36
<i>AGUICAT</i>		
P13. Member	Woman	50
P14. Association governing board	Women	39

Source: Authors' own creation



length and were conducted in Spanish or Catalan. They were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded according to discourse analysis methods to identify legitimisation strategies (van Leeuwen, 1995). A member and a manager or board representative were interviewed for each case study. As for Federació d'Associacions Veïnals de Barcelona (FAVB) [Federation of Barcelona Neighborhood Associations], apart from the president, seven members were selected to represent the different microcosmos of neighbourhood associations represented in this association. The reason for this overrepresentation is that FAVB includes a lot of autonomous neighbourhood associations, which may have particular visions of specific areas of the city with different socioeconomic and demographic patterns.

Descriptive statements expressed by the participants were analysed using a discourse analysis method. Critical discourse analysis is one of the most widely used methodologies for studying and interpreting discourses (Hannan & Knox, 2005). This method adopts an interdisciplinary perspective to assess, based on a set of statements, the arguments that expose or justify how a particular topic is perceived and considered by a social actor or institution. Discourse analysis is commonly used to examine and interpret the structure of language in discourse and how its oral or textual expression is socially determined. This method is useful for exploring the discursive practices that allow for decoding the relationships between language, ideology and power (Reyes, 2011).

Some information was excluded for the analysis, mainly those sentences referring to routine activity and descriptions of day-to-day procedure and other purely informative in nature text. Instead, efforts were focused on the personal opinions, feelings and reactions expressed regarding tourism, the justification of protest actions and the argumentation for alternative tourism models. Therefore, the analysis focused on how activist groups provide a recontextualised version of the anti-tourist protest and which arguments, following a particular use of language, are used to legitimate discourse. Statements that subtly or explicitly answered the questions "Why do we protest?" "Why is protest necessary?" or "Why do we protest in the way we do?" were included.

The identification of categories of discourse legitimisation is based on previous works that apply discourse analysis as a methodological approach. According to van Leeuwen (2007), authorisation involves addressing questions about why and how individuals engage in a topic. Typical responses to these questions often involve the consideration of some form of authority or status that justifies the manner in which things are done. Unlike legitimacy, which relies on imposed authority, moral evaluation is grounded in universal moral values inherent to human nature. This evaluation encompasses three elements: naturalising actions in line with moral principles, imbuing practices with abstract moral significance, and associating actions with positive or negative values for comparison. Rationalisation, closely linked to moral evaluation, is more explicit and uses moral justifications. Two types of rational legitimacy exist: instrumental rationalisation focuses on goals, uses and effects and the means necessary to achieve something, whereas theoretical rationalisation is based on how things should be done, irrespective of moral justifications or its utility to achieve a morally justified goal. Despite the proximity between moral evaluation and rationalisation, the latter is distinguishable by its utilitarian, strategic and explicit nature, contrasting with the abstract and subtle perspective of moral evaluation (van Leeuwen, 2007). This nuanced exploration of authorisation and rationalisation sheds light on the complex interplay of moral values and justifications in shaping protest behaviours.

#### 4. Results: a comparative analysis of four case studies

The following section delves into each case study, examining the social construction of discourses through CDA. Firstly, we provide a brief characterisation of the four activist groups to establish the relationship between their protest topics within the broader social context. Secondly, we provide a detailed description of how anti-tourism protest groups exercise agency through narratives of social action and how they are legitimised using narrative strategies.

#### **4.1 Four case studies**

The Assembla de Barris per al Decreixement Turístic (ABDT) [Neighbourhoods Assembly for Tourism Degrowth] emerged in the mid-2010s as a response to the perceived unsustainable nature of tourism in Barcelona. Inspired by the 15-M movement, ABDT opposes the prevailing growth model in tourism management and advocates for limits on tourist expansion. Their protest actions, from hotel occupations to campaigns against Airbnb and the defence of public spaces, reflect a commitment to an alternative economic and social development model for the city. In 2018, ABDT expanded its impact by contributing to the creation of the network of Mediterranean cities against touristification (SET). The FAVB, established in 1972, integrates tourism into its mission of enhancing residents' quality of life. FAVB serves as a unifying force for diverse neighbourhood associations, exercising historical leadership through protest actions and fostering collective debate. Territorial identity and the local scale in which they operate are two fundamental features. FAVB's main reason to exist is to collect in a single organism the different neighbourhood pre-occupations. In this sense, they understand tourist protest as a "service" to the residents.

Las Kellys, a workers' association, emerged in 2016 as a response to gender segregation in the hotel sector, highlighting poorly paid jobs and limited opportunities for promotion. Despite operating independently from traditional trade unions, Las Kellys identifies itself as a workers' association. The movement's spontaneous nature and resistance practices stem from internal factors, including shared concerns revealed through social media conversations.

The Associació de Guies de Catalunya (AGUICAT) [Catalonia Tourist Guides Association], established in 2016, represents the interests of official tour guides in Catalonia. With nearly 400 members, AGUICAT protests against unfair competition from free tour guides and professional intrusion in the sector, responding to the disappearance of official tour guide certification. The association plays a crucial role in defending the professional standards and integrity of the tourist guide sector in Catalonia.

#### **4.2 The influence of the social formation on anti-tourism discourse construction**

All groups agree in highlighting that their protest responds to the previously dominant model of continuous tourism growth, arguing the negative impacts on the local community. Recent changes in the social context justify the emergence of new voices questioning tourism since the mid-2000s (in Spain, 2008 marked the peak of the global financial crisis). Despite commencing from this reactive foundation, pronounced differentiations manifest in the politicisation of tourism and its incorporation into respective agendas.

An integral component of the social context contributing to nuanced protest dynamics is the advent of contemporary urban social movements in Spain, epitomised by the 15-M "indignados" [outraged] movement. Groups, such as ABDT, inspired by this movement, discern tourism not merely as an isolated agent but as a systemic element perpetuating socio-economic inequalities inherent in the capitalist model and exacerbating global environmental degradation. The subjective and emotional components of the protest, the use of social networks as alternative means of transmission and the interest in capturing media attention are influences drawn from the new urban social movements (Scott, 1990; Buechler, 1995). The protests of Las Kellys and AGUICAT also incorporate elements from new social movements. Both are characterised by a problem-posing nature (addressing lesser-recognised issues, questioning the existing order or dealing with fundamental issues from a transformative perspective) rather than a problem-solving one (addressing widely recognised and defined problems from a compromising or reformist perspective), and by focusing on a single problem (working conditions). In the case of FAVB, in addition to the aforementioned elements, its own historical evolution must be considered. Its protest style is

influenced by the legacy of years of neighbourhood claims and anti-Francoism that neighbourhood associations have historically carried out. Taking this background into account, in the early 2000s, FAVB created a section dedicated to tourist protest addressed to defend the well-being of residents in touristified neighbourhoods.

A final aspect of the social context explaining differences relates to structural changes in tourism because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hall, Scott & Gössling, 2020) and the need to adapt the protest to the new context. The four case study analysis carried out shows that protest groups adapt to the pandemic in two different ways. Firstly, there is a tactical adaptation to the new circumstances. Most groups acknowledge that they had to adjust its pattern of protest, resulting in a reduction in the intensity of protest compared with the previous months, similar as suggested in other studies (Rohlinger & Meyer, 2022). ABDT and FAVB agree that digital protest has disadvantages in consolidating their social action. It affects the psychological inclination to participate in protest due to the perception of contagion risk, reduces face-to-face interaction, making it difficult for social contact to generate spontaneous and social contact effects, and can hinder activists' long-term commitment to protest due to social isolation, except for individuals with higher self-motivation. A second tactical adaptation strategy detected is related to a temporal shift in the focus of the mission of anti-tourism protest groups. This is the case with Las Kellys, who during the pandemics redirect their efforts towards assisting their members, or with FAVB, where protest activities were reoriented towards neighbourhood solidarity and emergency tasks.

#### ***4.3 The transformative purpose of activist anti-tourism groups: discursive practice and discourse legitimisation***

This study delves into the discourse transmission for social legitimation, assigning value and meaning to protest actions. Legitimation coherence and agency are achieved through the construction of protest narratives. Linguistic and semiotic text analysis of anti-tourism discourse results in the identification of different narratives and discursive strategies that highlight their main features. Aimed to align legitimation with protest goals, each narrative comprises three elements. Firstly, anti-tourism protests are justified based on arguments of rationalisation. Secondly, moral evaluation criteria express the direction and purpose of the desired tourism transformation. Finally, a semiotic or symbolic structure is constructed using elements of mythopoesis, assimilating the protest logic into a recognisable cultural myth or metaphor for enhanced audience identification.

In accordance with the CDA, three protest narrative paradigms have been identified corresponding to three logics of protest:

1. scepticism;
2. non-interventionist transformation; and
3. direct transformation (see [Tables 4](#) and [5](#)).

The discourse of the ABDT aligns well with the scepticism narrative and value-rational actions. The protest rationalisation holds tourism accountable for global environmental deterioration, particularly global warming and increased tourists' ecological footprint. From this rationalisation stems a moral evaluation advocating for limiting tourist activity and proposing degrowth as a social and economic model favouring ecological transition (Valdivieso & Moranta, 2019), and sharing similarities with the environmental justice movement discourse (Camacho, 1998). This narrative elucidates the complexity of power relations in the field of the anti-tourism protest (Russo & Scarnato, 2018). Advocating for anti-tourism within the local ecosystem involves direct confrontation with the tourism sector and sometimes, with local administration, especially concerning ecological transition and degrowth issues. Finally, the narrative suggests a myth where tourism is portrayed as the Armageddon of evil forces leading to an environmental collapse, aligning with environmentalist perspectives of "save the

**Table 4** Strategies for legitimising narrative discourses

Narratives	Strategy/meaning	Example
<i>Scepticism</i>	Rationalisation/inability of local administration and institutions to solve global problems	<p><i>Dealing with the housing problem and making it social and affordable would require a bold solution from the authorities and administrations against international investors. Not just the city council, which has limited capacity. [ABDT P2]</i></p> <p><i>"For example, the Advisory Council on Tourism of the City, is a rather useless space, but where we have to be . . . I'm not sure if the objective was to get us off the street, but we are still there . . . We get involved in the case of tourism so the same ones as always don't, but we know that decisions are made on another level, in another place". [FAVB P7]</i></p>
	Rationalisation/distrust towards local administration	<p><i>"In the City Tourism Council (CTC) there are representatives of neighbourhood movements, but it is very unbalanced because residents don't have the capacity to influence and we are less represented". [FAVB P7]</i></p> <p><i>"There is a certain distrust towards the administration that does not exclude collaboration . . .but we are aware that the administration only collaborates when it is interested, to justify a broad participation". [ABDT P1]</i></p>
	Rationalisation/COVID-19 pandemics and Business as usual	<p><i>"It has been a very big warning, which we already predicted, but I am not at all clear that really significant changes will emerge". [FAVB P 10]</i></p>
	Moral evaluation/limits to tourism are necessary to avoid global environmental collapse	<p><i>"Tourism and tourists should be residual in the city". [ABDT P2]</i></p> <p><i>"The tourism business is not profitable but deficitary. All the money it generates is lost in the internationalisation of health expenses, public investment, and urban maintenance costs . . . Degrowth is the better strategy as it will demonstrate that the city was making a bad deal and losing money with tourism". [ABDT P1]</i></p>
	Mythopoesis/tourism as an Armageddon	<p><i>"If we don't change the model, the whole planet is going to hell". [ABDT P1]</i></p>
<i>Non-interventionist transformation</i>	Rationalisation/opposition residents/visitors-tourism industry	<p><i>"Tourism and capitalism are becoming mediaeval". [ABDT P1]</i></p> <p><i>"The tourism business sector is very tough. I don't know why, but I think it's because it has a more multinational than local character. The big operators don't care about local issues, they don't pay taxes, they extract the money and leave us with the problems and misery". [FAVB P8]</i></p>
	Moral evaluation/right to the city	<p><i>"Tourists consume more water than residents". [FAVB P10]</i></p>
	Moral evaluation/tourism as complementary activity Mythopoesis/neocolonialism	<p><i>"Residents should come before tourists". [FAVB P10]</i></p> <p><i>"The principle of leisure being compatible with the residents should prevail. We want a city for the residents". [FAVB P5]</i></p> <p><i>"They [the tourism sector] treat us like the colonists treated the indigenous people". [FAVB P10]</i></p>
<i>Direct transformation</i>	Rationalisation/working conditions: gender	<p><i>"Tourists should be more empathetic . . .all people deserve respect, but here everything is allowed for tourists". [Las Kellys P11]</i></p>
	Rationalisation: working conditions: exploitation	<p><i>"Tourism brings wealth, but to us, it brings diseases, poverty, and lack of rights". [Las Kellys P11]</i></p> <p><i>"We demand that our rights be respected . . .Most of us, the housekeepers, are immigrants, racialised, with three or four kids, and they force us to work like mules, both in hotels and at home. And they all operate the same way, everything is outsourced". [Las Kellys P11]</i></p> <p><i>"We request for a more organised and regulated tourism because hotels, with the eagerness to make money, accept all kinds of tourists and the room attendants take the worst part because we have to clean many rooms, and they are very dirty". [Las Kellys P12]</i></p>

(continued)

**Table 4**

Narratives	Strategy/meaning	Example
		<p>"A strategy exists to liberalise tourist guides through minimal regulation. Travel agency lobbies want to set prices and do not want to have an organised group that opposes them. They want more profit margin by not having to pay an official guide". [AGUCAT P13]</p>
	Rationalisation/social invisibility and distrust toward politicians	<p>We knock on the doors of all parties, but in itself, we are not supported by any political party . . . We have always dealt with trade-union men . . . he was not even polite, he did not even want to recognise. In a meeting the first thing he said was: "who are you?" . . . we left in five minutes". [Las Kellys P11]</p> <p>We don't want to be invisible women. We don't want to be the last thing in a hotel. We are worth a lot. When a customer arrives, the first thing they want is a clean room. We are the main engine of the hotel. We are the essential ones. [Las Kellys P12]</p>
	Moral evaluation/dignity	<p>When you're outsourced, the most important thing is no longer fighting for a labour agreement . . . I was in bad shape, knees, bones, this job affects your entire body, but they [employers] don't care if you get sick. I don't understand why they want to get richer at the cost of losing humanity. [Las Kellys P 12]</p>
	Mythopoesis/slavery and human rights	<p>When I see so much injustice, it gets to me because I can't stand seeing harm done to a person. Injustice is the worst thing in the world. It's not fair for people [employers and guests] to come and trample on me, because we are all equal. [Las Kellys P 12]</p> <p>Employers see us as if we were witches, as if we were casting a spell on them . . . We like tourism and our job, but a worker who suffers doesn't produce. Like slaves, we've been losing decent working conditions and, along with them, our rights. [Las Kellys P 11]</p>

Source: Authors' own creation

**Table 5** Synthesis of the anti-tourism protest narratives

Anti-tourism narratives	Dominant legitimization strategies and main meanings
Scepticism	<p>Rationalisation. Tourism as a global environmental worsening cause</p> <p>Moral evaluation. Limits to tourism and degrowth to avoid planet collapse</p> <p>Mythopoesis. "Save the planet" and environmental Neo Malthusianism</p>
Non-interventionist transformation	<p>Rationalisation. Tourism as a neighbourhoods disruptor and residents stressor</p> <p>Moral evaluation. Right to the city vs right to visitors' leisure</p> <p>Mythopoesis. Neocolonialism and "us" vs "them" dichotomy</p>
Direct transformation	<p>Rationalisation. Lack of social visibility and labour exploitation</p> <p>Moral evaluation. Workers dignity and improvement of working conditions</p> <p>Mythopoesis. Workers (victims) vs employers (exploiters) and human rights</p>

Source: Author's own creation

planet" and echoing neo-Malthusian point of view (i.e. a pessimistic view of the process of human development, based on Thomas Malthus' work, who states that high demographic growth ends up in scarcity of resources and global environmental collapse) widely used by the environmentalist movements. There is also a resemblance with a Hobbesian character (i.e. a philosophical point of view derived from the work of Thomas Hobbes stemming from pessimism about the human predatory nature, and highlighting the negative consideration of social interactions).

The discourse of the FAVB aligns with the narrative of non-interventionism transformation and rationally purposeful action. The protest is rationalised by denouncing tourism as responsible

for the deterioration of neighbourhoods and the loss of residents' well-being and quality of life. Their moral assessment of the negative externalities of tourism, including housing scarcity, residential displacement, nighttime noise, dirtiness and mobility issues, leads them to propose measures to ensure that the residents' right to the city takes precedence over the leisure rights of visitors (Mayer, 2009). In comparison with the ABDT, tourism is not automatically excluded in their proposals for social transformation, and the FAVB's stance is more reformist and collaborative with local authorities. The group achieves coherence in their discourse through storytelling, often likening tourism to neocolonialism, using implicit or explicit references. The neocolonial narrative includes linguistic oppositions and dialectical dualities such as references to "us" (members of the local community whose resources are exploited) and "them", the tourist industry and tourists (seen as exploiters and resource predators).

The discourse of Las Kellys and AGUICAT fits into the narrative of direct transformation and value-rational actions. While the central theme of the protest differs between the two groups (gender and ethnic labour inequality in Las Kellys and labour intrusion in the case of AGUICAT), they essentially rationalise the protest in the same way: tourism generates unacceptable situations of labour and social inequality. The arguments used for moral evaluation of the protest are the denunciation of unscrupulous employers, the demand for better working conditions and the local administration's recognition of their problems. Essentially, the protest aims to fight against their social invisibility and for their essential rights. Accordingly, they build a highly symbolic storytelling, invoking the idea of guaranteeing fundamental rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Therefore, the agency motivating their protest is not solely related to labour or union demands but to the need to be socially recognised for their work and, above all, to ensure their dignity as individuals. At this point, there is a strong connection with feminist protest movements, as they specifically address the situation of women workers and promote their dignification (Valenzuela, Gálvez & Alcalde, 2022).

## 5. Conclusions

To gain a deeper understanding of anti-tourist protests in touristified cities, this study aims to investigate how the discourse of protest is socially constructed. To address this objective, we have used a conceptual framework focused on the social construction of anti-tourism protest discourse, allowing exploration from three perspectives: the emergence in relation to the social context of reference (why and how does the discourse of protest arise), the proposed agency of activist groups derived from the discourse (what motivates the protest and to whose interests it is directed) and the legitimisation of the social action of protest (how is the discourse constructed to be socially accepted). This framework has been applied to four case studies of anti-tourist protest groups in Barcelona to compare existing differences.

As a primary conclusion, it is evident that, despite starting from the same basic idea of denouncing tourism, there are significant differences in motivation, agency and discursive styles. The identification of three narratives (scepticism, non-interventionist transformation and direct transformation) exemplifies how activist groups differ in the application of these three processes of social construction of protest. These findings suggest that there is no singular model of protest, highlighting the nuanced nature of anti-tourist activism within the Barcelona context.

The findings of this article yield several theoretical and practical contributions. A primary contribution is the establishment of a conceptual framework for the social construction of anti-tourist protests. This framework, which enables an understanding of how social reality is constructed through narrative and semiotic systems, aligns with perspectives from social constructivism that seek to elucidate the social construction of reality (Khan & McEachen, 2021). The framework facilitates the identification of how individuals produce and sustain social phenomena through social practices and conceptually aligns with the existence of



three elements in the process of the social construction of discourse: externalisation, objectification and internalisation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The discourse of anti-tourist protest is directed at externalising preconceived ideas and values that underscore the need to redirect the tourism model to mitigate its negative impacts. Denouncing tourism, a common protest topic observed among all the groups, is objectivised to form deliberate and rationalised constructs. For instance, this involves asserting that visitors' arrivals to the city by air transport or cruise ships contribute to global warming or contending that tourism-induced gentrification disrupts the well-being of the local community and causes residents' displacement. Ultimately, protest groups seek to socially internalise the discourse and raise awareness among the public to influence their future behaviour based on assumed truths transmitted from generation to generation. For instance, discussions on the viability of tourism as a valid development factor in the city, calls for limiting Airbnb accommodation units to avoid housing inequalities, or the need for the empowerment of female workers serve as awareness elements aimed at connecting with broader societal demands presented by environmentalism, anti-capitalism or feminism movements.

Regarding the analytical method used, the use of CDA as a methodological tool has proven to be instrumental in addressing the research objectives. Firstly, it enables the analysis of the tourism discourse in the public sphere and fosters social reflection on the type of tourism desired by specific sectors of the urban local community. It has also proven to be a valuable tool for examining the formation of counter-hegemonic discourses that aim to reform or transform reality, dematerialise language, and make explicit certain implicit languages. Finally, CDA allows for the visualisation of the purpose and meaning of the protest by embedding it within discursive narratives. These narratives reinforce the agency of the groups and subjectivise it through the identification of rhetorical devices, associations with myths, dichotomies and other symbolic connections (Qian, Wei & Law, 2018).

We highlight three practical contributions derived from the study's findings. The first aspect pertains to the observed heterogeneity among protest groups, differences that manifest in each component of the conceptual model. This variable geometry of anti-tourism protest must be taken into account to align these groups with the principles of good governance in the city. If social participation and dialogue among stakeholders are to guide local governance, it is essential to listen to the proposals of these groups based on their differences and specific interests. The second contribution relates precisely to the atomisation and fragmentation of anti-tourism protest based on existing power relations and the agency pursued by each group. Under the overarching goal of transforming the city's tourism, diverse interpretations, narratives, areas of interest, priorities and positions are concealed, which activism must consider in organising the social discourse on tourism and generating collective behaviours that better position them in negotiations with social actors and authorities. A good example of this diversity is the underlying and latent debate surrounding the prioritisation of housing and the right to the city vs workers' labour rights. In this debate, explicit positions are taken either in favour of limiting tourism or maintaining it as a model of urban development while improving working conditions for employees and redistributing benefits and burdens more equitably. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be an active agent in transforming social action of protest in three ways: partially altering the direction of the protest, increasing the prestige of activist groups and hindering street protests. However, it has not fostered the groups' political option to exert pressure on those in power or refocus the debate to gain agency on issues such as the relationship between tourism and employment or health. To our knowledge, no splits or the emergence of new protest groups that capitalise on the post-pandemic context have occurred.

The present study acknowledges several limitations that should be addressed. Firstly, to enhance the generalisability of the findings, it is necessary to replicate this study with additional case studies and diverse urban contexts. Replication studies can contribute empirically to either confirm or further discuss the proposed conceptual framework.

Conversely, future research could also explore the unique value of our own case study results. Furthermore, enriching the conceptual framework by incorporating new dimensions and concepts would be valuable in subsequent studies. Our investigation has shed light on power relations between social institutions involved in tourism and activism. However, the inclusion of alternative analytical perspectives, such as the poles of political action, the Foucauldian approach to power and discourse formation or narrative analysis, could contribute conceptually and methodologically to a deeper understanding of these dynamics.

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## Corresponding author

Francesc González-Reverté can be contacted at: [fgonzalezre@uoc.edu](mailto:fgonzalezre@uoc.edu)

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