The tourism industry’s support of the Israeli illegal settlements in the West Bank

A discourse analysis on Airbnb’s explanations on their responsibility to respect human rights as well as their involvement in the occupied West Bank

Key words: human rights, tourism, postcolonialism, discourse analysis

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Abstract:

The purpose of this bachelor’s thesis is to analyze and deepen the understanding of how the tourist company “Airbnb” explains their responsibility to respect human rights as well as how they explain their involvement in the illegal settlements in the West Bank. These two aspects are the focus of the two research questions that the study aims to answer. Accordingly, this study aims to explore concepts such as ethics and human rights as well as their impact on businesses’ behavior. To achieve the purpose of the study, seven statements on Airbnb’s explanation to respect human rights, as well as four statements on their involvement in the occupied West Bank are analyzed through a discourse analysis. More specifically, analytical tools conducted by Jørgensen and Phillips are used in the analysis to reveal underlying themes and patterns. The study is conducted through postcolonialism as a theoretical prism, more specifically orientalism. A short background on the connection between colonialism and tourism, the Israeli occupation’s impact on tourism in the West Bank as well as Airbnb’s specific role in the illegal settlements is presented in the study. Thereafter the statements are analyzed with the help of the discursive analytical tools to answer the research questions.

A fundamental finding of the study is Airbnb’s inconsistency in their statements contra their behaviour since they, in the statements, emphasize respecting human rights and combating discrimination while they on the other hand justify operating in the illegally occupied West Bank, knowingly contributing to legitimizing and upholding human suffering and human rights violations. Another essential finding is the importance of human rights activists and their criticism’s ability to influence businesses in fear of harming their brand and reputation.
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Introduction

1.1. Introduction

The Israeli occupation of Palestine has been a controversial topic of discussion for decades, frequently being discussed from the perspective of a religious or historic problem. Although the human rights aspect of the occupation is widely recognized, it is also in many cases overlooked and disregarded, partly because of the “historical complexity” of the issue as well as of the misconception of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict as two equal parties instead of an occupying power oppressing the other (El-Haj, 31, 2010; Spangler, 5, 2015).

Nonetheless, United Nations Security Council resolution 2334 of 2016 states that the Israeli settlements established in 1967 have “no legal validity” and “constitutes a flagrant violation under international law” (United Nations, S/RES/2334). The settlements were first established in violation of Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention concerning deportations, transfers and evacuations. The settlements also breaches the Rome Statute of International Criminal court as well as the 1907 Hague Relations as it is a war crime for an occupying power to move its civilian population to the occupied territories (Human Rights, Watch, 2018; Kelly, 2020, 2).

In resolution 31/36 from 2016, the Human Rights Council further condemns the continued settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territories (OPT). The resolution show concern regarding the settler violence against Palestinian civilians and their properties. They also note that the settlements fragment the West Bank into isolated units, seriously limiting the possibility of the West Bank being a contiguous territory, violating Palestinians human right to self-determination (A/HRC/RES/31/36). As one third of the Palestinians in the Gaza strip have family in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Israel, families have been torn apart since family visit permits are rarely granted (Qandeel, 2018, 164). Additionally, the resolution urges all states to assure that they don’t recognize or assist the expansion of the Israeli settlements and calls upon business enterprises to comply with the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, as well as other relevant international law, in the Israeli settlements (A/HRC/RES/31/36).

In recent years, more influential international NGOs like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have condemned the Israeli State’s violations of international law and Palestinians’ human rights (Amnesty, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2018). In their lengthy reports, they label Israel as an Apartheid state and calls for the global community to start putting pressure on the Israeli government to stop the illegal occupation (Amnesty, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2018).

The international criticism has increased among human rights organizations but has not been widely supported among nation-states. As in South Africa, Israel evidently applies an apartheid system in the OPT which raises questions on not only the absence of the international community’s criticism, but also the on-going support of the illegal occupation from the international community (Dugard, xiii, 2020).
Apart from states, multinational corporations (MNCs) are significant international actors, many of which are supporting as well as profiting from the illegal occupation. In February 2020, UNHCHR issued a report presenting 112 business enterprises involved in activities violating political, social, civil, economic and cultural rights of Palestinians in the OPT. (A/HRC/43/71). In the report, there are ten different types of business activities in the territories listed from (a) to (j). Six out of the 112 business enterprises are non-Israeli tourist companies, which were all listed involved with activity (e):

“The provision of services and utilities supporting the maintenance and existence of settlements, including transport”.

MNCs such as Airbnb, Booking.com, Expedia and Tripadvisor are huge, dominant actors of the online-tourism industry and are all involved in maintaining as well as expanding the existence of the illegal settlements (Vanden Boer, 2020, 228). The activities of the tourist companies have received widespread criticism from resistance groups such as the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement, Al Haq and the Jewish Voice for Peace, but also from larger NGOs such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch.

In 2018, Airbnb responded to international criticism of their involvement in the OPT and announced that they would remove their 200 listings in the West Bank. However, they retracted their decision five months later after pressure from pro-Israel organisations, and declared to keep on allowing listings throughout the illegal settlements in the West Bank (Shukla, 2019).

1.2 Purpose and research question

The purpose of this study is to get a deeper understanding of how the online tourist-company “Airbnb Inc.” explain their responsibility to respect human rights as well as how they explain their involvement in the Israeli illegal settlements in the West Bank.

On a greater scale, by analyzing this specific case, the study intends to contribute a deeper understanding of how respecting human rights may or may not impact the behavior of businesses. As it is impossible to with certainty understand a company’s intentions, let alone make absolute, general assumptions based on one company’s actions and statements, the study intends to contribute greater comprehension on the aspects of ethics and human rights issues behind tourism in the Occupied Palestinian territories.

The two research questions designed to fulfill the purpose of the study are therefore “How does Airbnb explain their responsibility to respect human rights?” and “How does Airbnb explain their involvement in the illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories in the West Bank?”
1.3 Theory

Postcolonialism is the theoretical prism through which I conduct this study. Postcolonialism is a critical theory highlighting the impact and effects that European colonialism has had and still has on today's society. As history is primarily shaped and taught in the perspective of the settler, the history of colonized countries is predominantly told through the colonizers perspective (Young, 2004, 159). Many using postcolonial approaches have therefore contributed new perspectives of international relations, shifting focus from the Western great power states by interpreting relations between post-colonial powers and post-colonized states from the colonized perspective (Sylvester, 158). The Postcolonial theory is therefore exceedingly relevant when it comes to analyzing explanations of “Western” tourist companies' involvement in an illegal occupation of an “Eastern” country. The considerable history of the connection between military occupation and tourism in Israel is also of relevance in regards to the theory (Stein, 545).

In addition to the use of general postcolonial ontological assumptions about for example the imperialistic, exploitative elements of tourism, Edward Said's book "Orientalism" from 1978 is further used as a theoretical framework. Orientalism refers to the study of the "Orient", translated to "East" in Latin as opposed to the “Occident” translated to “West” (Xypolia, 2016, 4). Said describes the terms "Orient" and "oriental" as Eurocentric concepts aiming to depict the Middle East and India among other parts of the “Eastern world”, especially its population, as foreign, exotic and thus constitute "the other" in contrast to the Western world (Said, 1978, 53, 57 , 58). Orientalism is therefore a framework meant to separate the “foreign, threatening East” from the West (Xypolia, 2016, 4, 5). Edward Said was met with a great deal of criticism after the book. On the other hand, studies of the Middle East were revolutionized and a larger academic debate on orientalism was created as a result of the uproar around the book (Xypolia, 2016, 4). The book is also believed to be the starting point of postcolonial theory, which has become increasingly prominent in social science subjects (Xypolia, 2016, 4).

When analyzing Airbnb’s statements on their stance on human rights as well as the Israeli occupation and violation of Palestinians’ human rights, orientalism is a relevant perspective. For example in terms of the post-colonial narrative that western tourism is benefitting and fostering “Eastern” communities, while the tourism industry maintains imperialistic practices by exploiting and profiting from them and their land (Korstanje, 2018, 27, 29). The theory is further relevant in the case of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, as tourism historically has been used as a tool to dominate the land as well as the people (Isaac, 2018, 214). These aspects will further be explored in the background.

On the other hand, applying a postcolonial perspective on the study may be perceived as siding with the Palestinians on the issue and being biased. However, as the theory itself states, the perspective of the colonized is historically severely underrepresented, which is why this study consciously aims to contribute to the debate on the Israeli occupation as well as the impact of human rights from a postcolonial perspective.
In regards to the aspect of analyzing businesses’ exploitation and approach to respecting human rights, market theories such as marxist theory of exploitation would also be of interest to the study. However, orientalism is chosen as the theoretical framework due to the relevance of the colonial history of tourism, the Israeli occupation of Palestine as well as the concept “the other” in the study.

1.4 Previous research

To be able to understand and put into context the activity of Airbnb in the West Bank as well as their explanations of their activities, it is important to understand the general background of the subject. The history of Palestinian tourism, Airbnb’s impact on the illegal occupation as well as the human rights violations being carried out in the territories are examples of crucial aspects of the topic. Therefore, a lot of the previous research consists of articles, books and reports on these issues, which will further be discussed in the background chapter.

Mila Kelly’s work is one example of the previous research used for the study that covers the legal aspects of the involvement of global businesses in the illegally occupied Palestinian territories. For instance, it touches on the direct expansion that the tourism industry has had on the settlements in the West Bank, as well as the activity of Airbnb more specifically (Kelly, 2020, 12). Naomi Klein’s work is another important example of the previous research about the history of tourism in Palestine. It also brings up the rise and influence of online tourism (Klein, 2007, 430, 432).

Another recurring aspect in the previous research is the concept “alternative tourism”. An example of the previous research regarding alternative tourism is the work of Rami Khalil Isaac that discusses the emergence of alternative tourism, the ethical aspects of the concept as well as different types of alternative tourism such as justice tourism and dark tourism (Isaac, 2009, 26). Furthermore, the previous research of Isaac is relevant as it touches upon the Israeli occupation’s impact on Palestinian tourism.

The work of Eve Spangler is relevant for this study since it for example presents relevant background on human rights of Palestinians as well as how postcolonial aspects such as orientalism affect the human rights of non-western people. The work of Mais A.M. Qandeel is another example of previous research that focuses mainly on enforcing Palestinians’ human rights in the OPT.

As presented, relevant previous research exists on the Israeli occupation, on alternative tourism as well as on tourism in Palestine. There is also research to be found on tourist companies' activity in the illegally occupied territories. However, there is a lack of research on these factors with the focus of human rights. Therefore this study can contribute to the study of the tourism industry in the West Bank with the ethics and human rights perspective.

1.5 Method

For this study, discourse analysis is the chosen method. In this qualitative method used to answer interpretivist questions, language is considered to be structured in different discourses and patterns. Furthermore, discourse analysis as a method has an evident constructivist ontological assumption.
(Bryman, 2012, 531). More specifically, Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory will be used as a foundation for the thesis' application of the method. This originally poststructuralist theory and method does not entail very specific methodological guidelines. For this reason, the empirical material is analyzed on the basis of Jørgensen & Phillips' (2002) analytical tools that are designed according to Laclaus and Mouffe's central concepts (Jørgensen, & Phillips, 2002, 49). Therefore, the study particularly uses the methodological aspects of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, omitting the theoretical aspects. The study's postcolonial theory is certainly compatible with this method, not least in terms of the corresponding ontological assumptions of the theory and method. The methodological tools of Jørgensen & Phillips is chosen for this thesis as it is a helpful method to concretely reveal underlying concepts behind key terms. This for example helps us understand how identity is created through Airbnb’s discourse and language used in their statements.

It is essential to understand four of the concepts used in discourse theory to understand how the analysis of Airbnb’s statements is performed. These concepts are nodes, chains of equivalence, identity and collective identity. Other central concepts concretized by Jørgensen and Phillips include myths, master signifiers and hegemony, which, for delimiting purposes, are excluded from this study.

In the creation of discourses, nodes are seen as one of the central key signifiers (Jørgensen, & Phillips, 2002, 50). A node is explained as the core of a discourse, where all other concepts within the discourse are fixed on the basis of this node (Bergström & Boréus, 2012, 367; Jørgensen, & Phillips, 2002, 26). In other words, a node is a central concept that shapes other concepts around it (Jørgensen, & Phillips, 2002, 26). For example, the term “belonging” is a node in Airbnb’s statements analyzed in this study. As will be further presented in the analysis, the concept of “belonging” shapes Airbnb's discourse on their responsibility to respect human rights but is also used as a justification of their involvement in the occupied West Bank by pushing their narrative of contributing to a world “belonging”. Without being put in relation to anything else, all concepts are essentially meaningless. Discourses and all concepts within them, including nodes, can in fact only be constructed in relation to other concepts (Jørgensen, & Phillips, 2002, 26). “Belonging” therefore only gains its significance in relation to opposite concepts such as exclusion, but also in combination with other similar concepts such as inclusion and respect (Jørgensen, & Phillips, 2002, 50). These “links” are called chains of equivalence.

Another concept that is evidently created in relation to other concepts is identity. There is not much that separates individual identity and collective identity. However, with the construction of collective identities in relation to “the Other”, collective identity becomes political (Jørgensen, & Phillips, 2002, 44). Jørgensen & Phillips describe the politicization of the term by using the collective identity "Black" in the UK as an example. In Britain during the decades after World War II, the term "Black" was used as a term to describe anyone who was not White. In this example, "Black" and "White" are identities that contrast with each other. Through chains of equivalence, the collective identities are created by being associated and combined with contrasting concepts, such as rich or poor (Jørgensen, & Phillips, 2002, 44, 45).
By analyzing Airbnb’s statements, it is still impossible to explicitly understand how the company perceives their responsibility to respect human rights or to reveal their true intentions behind their involvement in the West Bank. This aspect could be seen as a weakness of this chosen method, since the purpose of the study is to get a deeper understanding of how Airbnb explains these issues. On the other hand, language is not perceived as a reflection of an existing reality, but instead it shapes and constructs our perception of the world (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, 7). One of the fundamental purposes of the method is to discover and reveal underlying assumptions in linguistic discourses (Bacchi, 2009, 9). In other words, analyzing Airbnb’s language in their statements can only reveal patterns and recurrent themes to get a better understanding of their actions as well as their explanations on the issues. For this reason, discourse analysis fulfills an important function for the study's ability to answer the research questions.

1.6 Material

The main part of the empirical material analyzed in the study consists of eleven statements published and circulated by Airbnb. Seven statements regarding ethics and human rights as well as four statements on their activities in the Occupied territories in the West Bank. The statements are chosen for this study since they are the only statements regarding human rights and regarding the West Bank relevant to this study. Therefore, there have not been statements left out or ignored for a particular reason other than the lack of available material on Airbnb's website. While there are only four statements regarding the latter research question, it is reasonable that a company has more general statements on their responsibility to protect human rights than on a specific case such as their involvement in the West Bank. Additionally, Airbnb’s lack of statements on the latter subject could also imply a lack of effort to address the specific issue and therefore be of interest to the study.

The first statement analyzed in the study is the blogpost “Fighting Discrimination and Creating a World Where Anyone Can Belong Anywhere”, published on Airbnb’s blog on September 8th, 2016. It is one of the company's first statements on their work against non-discrimination. “Airbnb’s Work to Fight Discrimination and Build Inclusion” is the second statement analyzed, and is a report published on Airbnb’s website on September 8th, 2016. This report was submitted by Laura W Murphy who was approached by Airbnb to lead Airbnb’s process to fight discrimination. Even though the report is written by Laura W Murphy who is not directly apart of the Airbnb Company, this is still a primary source due to the fact that Murphy was approached by Airbnb to write this report as well as it being referred to by Airbnb as one of their most important documents on their non-discrimination policy.

The third statement, “The Airbnb Community Commitment" was posted on Airbnb’s blog on October 27, 2016. The community Commitment is a commitment that every Airbnb host and guest has to agree to to be able to create an account on their website. This short statement is a fundamental policy of Airbnb’s work to protect human rights. Airbnb’s “Nondiscrimination Policy” is the fourth statement, which was published in 2016 (last updated on February 10, 2022) on Airbnb’s website. This is another fundamental policy for the company’s nondiscriminatory work. The fifth statement is a 130 page long annual report from 2020, consisting of four different parts.
However, only the relevant parts of the report regarding human rights and ethics will be presented and analyzed in the study. Although the annual report touches on a lot of different topics not relevant for the analysis such as financial conditions and impacts of COVID 19, there are themes regarding human rights in this report, mainly in the first part of the report.

“Code of Ethics” is the sixth statement analyzed and was published from December 2020. The statement starts off with a letter to the Airbnb team from the company’s CEO’s, Brian Chesky, Joe Gebbia and Nate Blecharczyk, clarifying that the code is aimed at the company. As with the annual report, all parts of the code are not as relevant to the study as other parts. “Airbnb’s Work on Human Rights” is the seventh and last statement analyzed on Airbnb’s responsibility to respect human rights. It is a short statement posted on Airbnb’s newsroom on December 10, 2021 and presents the company’s key takeaways from their work on human rights.

The first statement on Airbnb’s involvement in the West Bank is a short statement taken from an email from Airbnb which was published in an article in the San Francisco Chronicle from 2016. Although this is a short statement, it is very relevant for the study. The second statement analyzed is “Listings in Disputed Regions” which was published on Airbnb’s newsroom on November 19, 2018. In the post, Airbnb responds to the international criticism regarding their listings in the OPT and announces that they have decided to remove their 200 listings in Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank.

The third statement is “Framework for Evaluating Listings in Disputed Areas” published on January 17, 2019 on Airbnbs newsroom. Airbnb clarifies the framework for evaluating their listings in “disputed areas” by answering frequently asked questions regarding their decision to remove listings in disputed areas. “Update on Listings in Disputed Regions” is the fourth and final statement analyzed, which was published in their newsroom on April, 9, 2019. This is an update where they retract their previous decision to remove listings from the West Bank.

Apart from Airbnb's statements, United Nations resolutions and reports regarding the Israeli occupation as well as Airbnb's involvement in the settlements, lay a foundation for the study. An example of the material is resolution 31/36 adopted by the Human Rights Council on 24 March 2016 that presents a lot of relevant information on the illegality of the Israeli settlements as well as the human rights violations carried out. The report 43/71 of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights from 28 February 2020 presents all business enterprises involved in activities in the Israeli settlements where Airbnb is one of the businesses mentioned. This report is fundamental for the study since it clarifies the severity of Airbnb’s activities in the Israeli illegal settlements. Another important report is the Human Rights Council report 37/39 from 26 January 2018, presenting how businesses contribute as well as benefit from the establishment and maintenance of the occupation.

The last type of material used for the thesis is reports from NGOs, such as Amnesty’s “Destination Occupation” from 2019, Human Rights Watch’s “Bed and Breakfast on Stolen Land” from 2018 and Who Profits’ “Touring Israeli Settlements Business And Pleasure For The Economy Of Occupation” from 2017. The reports comprise a crucial part of the material since they provide
elaborate information on the specific human rights crimes that Airbnb support and profit from in the OPT, as well as Airbnb’s impact on the occupation.

1.7 Limitations

A limitation made in this study is to only analyze Airbnb’s activity in the Occupied territories in the West Bank instead of Airbnb’s activity in all Occupied Palestinian Territories. This is due both to the time limit of the essay but also since the West Bank is the main territory that Airbnb operates in. Gaza is for example excluded because of the lack of tourism in the territory as a result of the Israeli illegal blockade and military attacks (Who Profits, 2017, 2). Furthermore, Airbnb’s statements on their involvement in the Israeli illegal settlements is strictly about their activity in the West Bank, which is another main reason for why the study is limited to Airbnb’s involvement in the West Bank.

Another limitation of the study is to only analyze the company “Airbnb”. The other five non-Israeli tourism companies mentioned in UNHCHR’s report; Booking.com, Tripadvisor Inc., Expedia Group Inc., Opodo Ltd. and eDreams ODIGEO S.A. are excluded from the study both because of the time limit of this thesis, but also because of lack of statements regarding the issue from the other companies.

1.8 List of concepts

**Alternative tourism** - As opposed to mass tourism, an umbrella term for all other forms of travels (Triarchi & Karamanis, 2016, 3).

**Apartheid** - Racial segregation and more specifically a former policy in the Republic of South Africa that through political, social and economic policies discriminated against the nonwhite majority (Merriam-webster, 2022).

**Dark tourism** - The popularization of conflict sites, linking ideas of death and tourism (Butler, 2019, 13; Biran & Hyde, 2019, 196).

**Discourse** - Linguistic structure that organizes knowledge, experience and ideas among other things (Merriam-webster, 2022).

**Ethics** - Closely linked with moral, also called moral philosophy regarding what is morally right and wrong (Singer, 2021).

**Human Rights** - Inherent to all human beings regardless of sex, race, nationality or other status. For example, the right to life, education, liberty etc (United Nations).

**Illegal settlements** - Settlements in an occupied territory where civilians of the occupying power live and whose presence has, or is, being facilitated by the occupying power (Law Insider).
International Humanitarian Law - Regulates the conduct of parties in cases of conflict (Qandeel, 2018, 67).

International Human Rights Law - Covers essential and additional human rights to protect all individuals that must be respected by states (Qandeel, 2018, 69).

International Law - Body of legal rules, norms and standards that apply to sovereign states as well as other legally recognized international actors (Shaw, 2019,).

Orientalism - Refers to the study of “The Orient” (Xypolia, 2016, 4).

Postcolonial theory - Fields of research concerning for example the political, economic and social impact of European colonialism. The world is impossible to understand except in relation to colonial rule and imperialism (Elam, 2019).

1.9 List of abbreviations

BDS movement - Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement (bdsmovement).

GDP - Gross domestic product (OECD, 2022).

GNP - Gross national product (Britannica, 2021).

ILO - International Labour Organization (ILO, 2010).

MNCs - Multinational corporations (Britannica, 2012).

NGOs - Non-governmental organization (Karns, 2020).

OPT - Occupied Palestinian territories (Amnesty, 2019, 6).


1.10 Disposition

In chapter one, the thesis’ research question, purpose, theory, previous research, method and material, which forms the basis for the study, is presented. Additionally, limitations and concepts are also presented in this chapter.

In chapter two, relevant background is presented to give a deeper understanding of the situation before the analysis. Firstly, the connection between colonialism and tourism is presented, thereafter a short background on the Israeli occupation’s impact on tourism of the West Bank is presented. Lastly, Airbnb’s role in the illegal settlements is demonstrated.
In chapter three, a discourse analysis is performed on Airbnb’s statements in chronological order. The main themes of the statements are identified and analyzed. Furthermore, the analytical tools from Laclau and Mouffe are used to identify nodes, chains of equivalence, identities, and collective identities.

In chapter four, the results of the analysis are discussed and summarized and the research questions are answered in this chapter.

**Background**

2.1 Colonialism, tourism and alternative tourism

The question of whether tourism has a positive or negative impact on society is well-debated among scholars. While tourism can contribute massively to a society’s economy, it also has a postcolonial history that is very much prevalent in the industry today (Vanden Boer, 227). As a result of the extensive impact that European colonialism and imperialism has had and still has on essentially every aspect of today’s society, the assumption that Europe or the “West” is the most civilized society in comparison to the “Eastern” societies, is greatly present today (Korstanje, 2018, 26).

A central postcolonial aspect of tourism is the power relations between tourists and natives which take form in many different ways. For example in questions of the social distance between guests and hosts, cultural appropriation as well as tourism’s role in nation-making (Kelly, 2016, 726). Furthermore, the expansion of tourism taking place in the twentieth century was rooted in an ethnocentric paternalism where the inferior, non-Western “Other” needed assistance from the civilized “West” (Korstanje, 2018, 27, 29). This narrative of Europeans as “educators” or “protectors” of the Eastern “savages” was therefore historically used as a tool to legitimize expansion, for instance through tourism (Tzanelli and Korstanje, 2019, 76). Accordingly, in the case of Israel’s colonisation of Palestine, tourism became a political tool to dominate the Palestinian land and people as well as hinder the positive gains that tourism provides (Isaac, 2018, 214).

Ever since the early waves of Zionist settlement in Palestine, tourism has played a key role in the Zionist colonialism. For example, investements in hotels were emphasised by Zionist organizations and archeology became an important tool to legitimize their claim to the land (Ahmad, 2020; Shiff & Mizrachi, 2019). The post-colonial narrative of Zionists as superior in terms of intellectuality, infrastructure and productivity over Palestinians was heavily enhanced since Israel’s creation in 1948 and is still maintained by Israel's current ministry of Tourism (Ahmad, 2020).

According to professor Ewa Mazierska, it is fundamental to consider the role of travelers and their connection to the “Other” (the natives) when judging tourism’s either positive or negative impact (Korstanje, 2018, 26). As a reaction to the negative impacts of mass tourism, the concept “alternative tourism” was developed (Isaac, 2009, 23). Alternative tourism includes several features enhancing for instance ecological, community-based, sustainable aspects (Isaac, 2009, 24).
Eco-tourism, sustainable tourism and justice tourism are three examples of prominent features of alternative tourism (Isaac, 2009, 24, 25, 26).

Justice tourism is described by Regina Sceyvens as ethical and equitable as well as contributes to promoting understanding and relationships based on respect and sharing (Isaac, 2009, 26). Forms of justice tourism includes tourists learning about poverty, natives educating tourists about their past or current oppression as well as voluntary development work. However, there are also other types of alternative tourism such as dark tourism, which differ from justice tourism in a lot of ways. Dark tourism is the presentation and consumption as well as the popularization of tourism to real and commodified disaster or conflict sites (Butler, 2019, 13; Foley & Lennon, 198, 2007). While dark tourism is a complex concept and it is difficult to concretely categorize how much of a certain tourism is dark tourism, a clear element of the concept is a fascination with horror and suffering (Butler, 19, 2019). Dark tourism also raises ethical issues such as the experience of the victims and their relatives as well as local residents (Foley & Lennon, 198, 2007).

A well-supported hypothesis of many scholars suggests that a destination with political instability and violence is viewed as an unsafe destination and therefore replaced with a safer one, assuming that tourists are rational consumers (Isaac, 2009, 22). Hall and O'Sullivan, on the other hand, claim that even current political conflicts attract tourists (Isaac, 2009, 23). Some examples of destinations that tourists deliberately visit because of its ongoing conflicts are Iraq, Afghanistan and one of the world's most popular dark/heritage tourist destinations is in fact the Palestine/Israel region (Butler, 2019, 16; Tzanelli and Korstanje, 2019, 73). For example, terror camps have been established in the West Bank and throughout Israel where tourists, both adults and children can shoot cut-out-pieces depicting Palestinians, training to shoot terrorists (Tzanelli and Korstanje, 2019, 71).

Racial distinctions are socially constructed and have a history of almost always being discriminatory and ultimately concerns questions of power (Spangler, 58, 2015). The maintained depiction of Arabs as the “Other” is an example of this phenomena. According to Eve Spangler, Islamophobia and orientalism is one of the four main obstacles hindering Americans from acknowledging the reality of Israel’s oppression of Palestinians (Spangler, 5, 2015). Muslims and Arabs, and therefore Palestinians, are often depicted as a threat to society through simplistic stereotypes. These stereotypes disregard the fact that most Muslims are not Arabs and large Christian Arab communities that exist for example in Palestine (Spangler, 5, 2015). As mentioned, orientalist depictions of Palestinians are used in Israeli military tourism sites to profit from as well as to hinder Palestinian tourism (Isaac, 2009, 29; Tzanelli and Korstanje, 2019, 71).

2.2 The Israeli occupation’s impact on the West Bank’s tourism

Palestine is a fundamental place to the three major religions and considered the birthplace of civilization (Isaac, 2009, 26). As a result of being occupied for decades, Palestine’s tourism has been severely affected. Notably in the holy cities of East Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jericho and Nablus (Isaac, 2018, 213). For instance, the Israeli authorities have been in control of Jerusalem’s international tourism since 1967 and heavily restricts tourism in Bethlehem (Isaac, 2009, 27). In 1966, around 13% of the GDP of the West Bank came from tourism and related
services (Who Profits, 2017, 3). In 2010, tourism only contributed to around 0.6% of the GDP and is now one of the smallest sectors of the Palestinian economy (Who Profits, 2017, 3).

In 1993, the borders to the Palestinian territories, including the West Bank, were abruptly closed, resulting in devastating economic consequences for Palestine’s already damaged economy (Klein, 2007, 433). Moreover, Israel controls everything from flights, visa issuing, lodging, guides and tours (that are Israeli) in the Palestinian territories (Isaac, 2009, 27). The GNP per capita decreased by almost 30 percent in 1993. By 1996, around 66% of the workforce was either unemployed or critically under-employed. Additionally, Israel has systematically targeted Palestine’s tourism industry since the second Intifada in 2000 where the city of Bethlehem is a clear example (Isaac, 2009, 28).

Located in the West Bank, Bethlehem is one of the three most sacred cities in Christianity and relies heavily on tourism (Isaac, 2009, 27; A/ES-10/292-S/2004/1029). Tourist groups are not allowed by the Israeli authorities to stay in Bethlehem for more than one hour, where 45 minutes are for seeing the Nativity Church and 15 minutes are for shopping. Most of the generated earnings from tourism therefore go to Israel instead of the local population (Isaac, 2009, 27). Since 2000, 50 restaurants, 28 hotels and 240 olive wood and mother-of-pearl workshops have closed. Furthermore, the city’s average number of monthly visitors decreased from approximately 91,726 in 2000, to an average of 7,249 in 2004 (A/ES-10/292-S/2004/1029). Between 2000 and 2004 alone, around 9.3 percent of Bethlehem’s Christian population migrated from the once thriving city, due to the abrupt economic decline and lack of jobs. This has undoubtedly damaged the diverse religious, ethnic and cultural demographic of the city (A/ES-10/292-S/2004/1029).

While there is hardly any available data on the number of tourists visiting Palestinian territories, it is evident that not enough tourists are visiting, largely due to the closure of the territories and Israel’s strong control of the international tourism (Isaac, 2009, 27). In 2016, Israel approved 20 million dollars in settlement funding, and tourism sites as well as construction of hotels in the West Bank settlements were emphasized by Prime Minister Netanyahu (Ahmad, 2019). Israel also continues restricting the movement of tourists, tourism vehicles and Palestinian tourism professionals, consequently actively preventing Palestinian economic development in their tourism sector (Ahmad, 2019).

In the plan “Peace to Prosperity " drafted by the Trump administration, tourism was proposed at the expense of Palestinians’ sovereignty, their “worlds” as well as their capability to produce their own spaces (Vanden Boer, 2020, 226). This is a visible example of the continued dehumanization of Palestinians contributing to a different attitude towards the Palestinian geographies contrasted to the “Western” zionist geographies (Vanden Boer, 2020, 226). Besides, Israel’s constant demonization of Palestinians and attempts of convincing tourists that Palestine is unsafe is also a huge factor contributing to the lack of tourism (Isaac, 2009, 29).

Evidently, Israel’s structural destruction as well as exploitation of Palestinian cities and towns are not only damaging historically and religiously fundamental places such as Bethlehem, but especially harming the Palestinian local population (Ahmad, 2020).
2.3 Airbnb’s role in the illegal settlements

The Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories violates international law as well as Palestinians human rights in numerous different ways. Currently there are approximately 413,000 Israeli citizens living in the West Bank in 132 different settlement locations (Kelly, 2020, 3). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the sixth main area of corporate social responsibility use is human rights, where indigenous people’s rights are included (ILO, 2010). However, by supporting infrastructure as well as constructing and financing settlement homes, businesses play a key role in maintaining and expanding the Israeli settlements (para 42, A/HRC/37/39). They are involved in exploiting Palestine’s natural resources as well as transferring the Israeli population into the OPT (para 42, A/HRC/37/39). Different businesses certainly contribute to the establishment and maintenance of the settlements in different ways, where the tourism industry helps make the settlements sustainable and profitable (para 47, A/HRC/37/39).

Airbnb is the world’s largest online property rental platform, founded in 2008 in San Francisco and valued at more than 30 billion US dollars (Amnesty, 2019, 37). The company’s users can sign up as guests or hosts (Amnesty, 2019, 37). Compared to the tourist companies Booking.com, Expedia and Tripadvisor, Airbnb is the least accurate with its information about the properties’ locations in the West Bank (Amnesty, 2019, 16). Airbnb’s users can therefore book and rent properties in the illegal settlements in the OPTs mislabeled as located “in Israel”. Moreover, as a result of the strict Israeli limitations on who can access the settlements, Palestinians living in or outside the West Bank are essentially excluded from being able to rent or book the properties (Kelly, 2020, 11). This aspect deepen the discrimination on Airbnb’s platform where Palestinians are being discriminated against and unable to rent housings purely based on their national origin (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

There are plenty of examples demonstrating how the activities of Airbnb in the settlements are closely linked to human rights violations. In the Susya settlement in the south of the West Bank, Airbnb listed one property. The indigenous people of Khirbet Susiya were forcibly evicted to make way for a tourist attraction and lost their access to farmland due to the construction of the settlements (Amnesty, 2019). Their right to water, sanitation, privacy, physical integrity as well as decent standard of living and food are only some examples of the human rights that have been violated (Amnesty, 2019). Another example is the company’s listings of tourist attractions built on the land of the Bedouin community of Khan al-Ahmar which directly violates several of the community’s rights as Indigenous people (Amnesty, 2019).

Since online tourism relies on its reputation and is a heavily consumer-based industry, the principal “ethical travel” becomes essential (Who Profits, 2017, 8). In addition, another potential risk of operating in the area is legal liability for involvement in supposed human rights violations (Kelly, 2020, 1). Nonetheless, tourism companies’ continue operating in the region despite the international criticism and the negative impact it can have on businesses’ reputations (Kelly, 2020, 1). Businesses have a responsibility, as expressed in the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, to not contribute to the violations of human rights. However, the tourism industry undoubtedly has a direct impact on the expansion as well as the maintenance of the Israeli illegal
settlements by attracting tourists to the settlements (Kelly, 2020, 12). Consequently, tourist companies such as Airbnb are normalizing as well as legitimizing the settler colonial presence and the illegal occupation (Vanden Boer, 2020, 228).

Analysis

In this chapter, Airbnb’s seven statements on their responsibility to respect human rights are analyzed. Thereafter, Airbnb’s four statements on their involvement in the illegally occupied West Bank are analyzed. Throughout the analysis, central themes as well as key concepts are identified by the help of the analytical tools presented in the method-chapter. Quotes from the statements are presented and key terms are marked in bold letters.

3.1 Airbnb’s statements on their responsibility to respect human rights

In this subchapter, a discourse analysis is performed in chronological order on seven statements by Airbnb regarding their stance on ethics and human rights. Furthermore, parallels are drawn and analyzed between Airbnb’s actions in the West Bank and their statements.

3.1.1 Fighting Discrimination and Creating a World Where Anyone Can Belong Anywhere

This statement was published on Airbnb’s website on the same date as a report on Airbnb’s work on fighting discrimination written by Laura Murphy, which is the second statement analyzed in the study. This statement mostly consists of a copy of an email that the company’s CEO and co-founder Brian Chesky sent out to Airbnb guests and hosts. Although this is a shorter statement, at least three themes are identified in the email from Brian Chesky. The first theme is the emphasis on Airbnb’s “mission” which Chesky explains is that “every community is a place where you can belong”.

At the heart of our mission is the idea that people are fundamentally good and every community is a place where you can belong.

This introductory sentence of the email highlights the importance of belonging and describes it as the company’s mission. Airbnb's emphasis on contributing to a world of belonging is recurring throughout this statement as well as the rest of the statements. The use of the term “mission”, which is also frequently emphasized throughout the statements, constructs a view that creating a place of belonging is one of the company’s most crucial goals. In the two following quotes, Chesky goes on stressing the company’s mission.

Discrimination is the opposite of belonging, and its existence on our platform jeopardizes this core mission.

Bias and discrimination have no place on Airbnb, and we have zero tolerance for them.
In the first sentence, Chesky constructs two important nodes, “discrimination” and “belonging”, that throughout all of Airbnb’s seven statements shape their discourse on human rights. As belonging is Airbnb’s core mission, the concept becomes heavily linked with Airbnb. At the same time, the term “discrimination” becomes disassociated with Airbnb as it is both described as the opposite of belonging, as well as explained as having no place on Airbnb.

Every time you make someone else feel like they belong, that person feels accepted and safe to be themselves. While this may sound like a small act of kindness, we are a community of millions of people strong. Imagine what we can do together.

This statement once again emphasizes the importance of “belonging”. The node is further constructed when it is linked to other concepts such as feeling “accepted” and “safe”. Airbnb is here mentioned as a responsible, including community of millions of people. However, when looking at Airbnb’s actual activities in the West Bank and how they evidently contribute to the opposite of feeling safe, and a place of belonging, it appears that the company’s actions contradicts their proclaimed values that they present here.

The second theme of the statement is Airbnb’s emphasis on their new, improved policies. Chesky goes on to highlight four impactful changes that are also further discussed in the report by Laura Murphy. These changes were Airbnb Community Commitment, Open Doors, Instant Book and Anti-bias training. The Airbnb Community Commitment is analyzed separately as it is a separate statement. Open doors is a policy where if a Guest feels discriminated against in violation of Airbnb’s policy, Airbnb will find them an alternative accommodation elsewhere. Instant Book allows hosts to offer their homes to be booked without their prior approval of a specific guest and anti-bias training is available to their community. These improved policies show Airbnb’s improved work on non-discrimination and largely contributes to the perception of Airbnb as an inclusive and responsible company. However, these policies are strictly addressing discrimination on an individual level in contrast to on a structural level. Therefore, Airbnb is not addressing their responsibility as a company to contribute to non-discrimination on a larger scale, for example in the West Bank where Airbnb has listings.

The third theme is the emphasis on that this is only the beginning of Airbnb’s process to fight discrimination. This theme is highlighted in several parts of the statement. Firstly, Brian Chesky makes sure to apologize as well as express his awareness of the company’s silence on the issue until now. The company’s silence on questions regarding human rights and discrimination resulted in backlash and ultimately led to this statement.

These steps are just the beginning, not the end, of our efforts to combat bias and discrimination.

Fighting discrimination is once again heavily emphasized and described as something that Airbnb takes seriously and will invest time and effort on.
While we as a company have been slow on this issue, I am now asking you the community to help us lead the way forward.

In this part of the statement, Chesky is admitting the company’s mistakes and taking responsibility, which creates a trust in the company to do better. This further pushes Airbnb’s narrative of them being a responsible and trustworthy company when it comes to fighting discrimination. Furthermore, when addressing the users of Airbnb as a community, he creates a perception of a deeper bond between Airbnb’s users and the company, maintaining this trust. On the other hand, the fact that this statement is reactive, in response to criticism of Airbnb’s silence on fighting discrimination could implicate that Airbnb lacks effort on addressing issues such as human rights and simply felt the need to respond to the criticism to avoid backlash.

3.1.2 Airbnb’s Work to Fight Discrimination and Build Inclusion

This report was published on Airbnb’s website on September 8th, 2016 and is submitted by Laura W Murphy who was approached by Airbnb to lead Airbnb’s process to fight discrimination. The report starts off with a message from Laura Murphy where she explains her initial skepticism of being approached by Airbnb, partly because of her experience of companies usually not addressing issues like discrimination and racism. However, she goes on to present statements from Brian Chesky and clarifies how his level of determination and commitment in his “mission” convinced her of the company’s good intentions to work against any type of discrimination. Murphy’s message takes up around one third of the report, including a summary of Airbnb’s work, such as new policies and procedures to enable a more inclusive, non-discriminatory community. The report then consists of three chapters.

In chapter one, “Airbnb’s Nondiscrimination Review”, Murphy describes that Airbnb’s nondiscrimination policies and procedures were closely examined as a result of complaints and outcry from the community. Thereafter they discovered deficiencies that had to be improved and were worked on by a team. The ten findings were later presented in the second chapter “Key Findings and Lessons Learned”. For example, they discovered that there is no single solution to eliminate discrimination and that the company’s nondiscrimination policy must be stronger. In chapter three, “Policy Changes” the new policy changes after the evaluation of the company’s challenges are presented. The changes were generally assigned to eight categories, where the “Airbnb Community Commitment” was the first category.

Similarly to the previous statement, the two clear nodes constructing the discourse are “belonging” and “discrimination”. The first theme of this statements is once again Airbnb’s mission to bring people together and fight discrimination.

**Fighting discrimination is fundamental to the company’s mission.**

Discrimination flies in the face of the company’s mission to build a world where anyone can belong anywhere.
The importance of combating discrimination in regards to fulfilling their mission is once again highlighted and the node “discrimination” is further constructed in contrast to Airbnb’s values.

*Airbnb was founded to bring people together. Fighting discrimination is fundamental to the company’s mission, and I am confident that our work as advocates in concert with the company itself will help create a community that welcomes everyone.*

Airbnb is here described as being founded on bringing people together, frequently promoting the importance of “belonging”. “Bringing people together” is a key concept, once again linked with their mission to contribute to the world of belonging. The theme is important to keep in mind when analyzing Airbnb’s statements on their involvement in the West Bank. Although “bringing people together” and creating a community that welcomes everyone is heavily emphasized, when looking at concrete examples of how Palestinians are treated in the occupied territories, it is clear that operating in that area does not result in “bringing people together”. For example, Palestinians are essentially not able to rent properties in the occupied territories, contradicting Airbnb’s statement that it is a community welcoming everyone. When applying this description of Airbnb’s work in the case of the occupied territories in the West Bank where local communities are evicted to give room for tourist attractions, the emphasis on bringing people together is exceedingly contradictory. Moreover, the mention that the Airbnb community should welcome everyone brings us to the second theme of the report, which is uplifting different communities and backgrounds.

*As a company whose mission is to create a world where anyone can belong anywhere, Airbnb is committed to both fighting bias and encouraging people to open their homes to guests from different communities and cultures.*

*Airbnb is a company that has made home sharing easier and more popular, and it has shown how home sharing can both facilitate travel and bring people from disparate backgrounds together.*

Here the company pushes the narrative further of bringing people together by clarifying that everyone from different communities and cultures have a right to belong everywhere. This constructs the discourse forward of Airbnb as an inclusive company for everyone, not excluding anyone. However, as presented earlier in the study, this is proven to not be the case in regards to the exclusion of Palestinians both on their website and in the West Bank. This contradicts Airbnb’s statements on including everyone. The company is continuing to operate in the illegally occupied territories and consciously contributing to human rights violations even after making these statements emphasizing concepts such as inclusion and belonging, which could imply that they either knowingly breach their own guidelines or that Palestinians were never included in these statements. This strengthens the postcolonial, orientalist narrative of “Eastern” people as the “Other”, where their human rights are legitimately being violated against and disregarded. Another quote regarding including “everyone” in the Airbnb community that will later be relevant regarding the second research question is presented below.

*Airbnb believes everyone in the Airbnb community should be held to a standard that goes above and beyond what is required by law.*
This sentence is exceedingly relevant in regards to Airbnb’s statements regarding their involvement in the occupied territories in the West Bank which will be analyzed later on. It is contradictory to state that they hold everyone to a higher standard than what is required by law, when in the case of their involvement in the West Bank, they operate in illegal settlements, contributing to human rights crimes. This once again raises the questions on whether Palestinians are included in Airbnb’s definition of “everyone in the Airbnb community”. Furthermore the report stresses that fighting discrimination requires ongoing, constant work.

*In order to help create a world where anyone can belong anywhere, Airbnb will offer new training to help people learn how to fight bias.*

*Fighting discrimination will require constant and ongoing work.*

The internal working group that produced this report will continue working to both implement these initiatives and evaluate additional steps Airbnb can take to ensure the Airbnb community is truly fair for all.

These quotes strengthen the already discussed prevalent themes of the report. Airbnb’s determination to fight discrimination to achieve their mission of contributing to a world of belonging for anyone. The conclusion of the report recounts how the operational changes (which will be further analyzed in the next two subchapters) are a strong step in the right direction. Murphy also stresses the difficulty of and the constant work that is required to fight discrimination.

### 3.1.3 The Airbnb Community Commitment

This community commitment was posted as a short blog-post on the Airbnb website, but also mentioned in the two already analyzed statements. The post refers to the report by Laura Murphy as well as presents the meaning and importance of the Airbnb Community Commitment. Every host and guest has to agree to the Airbnb Community Commitment to be able to create an account which states:

*I agree to treat everyone in the Airbnb community – regardless of their race, religion, national origin, ethnicity, disability, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, or age – with respect, and without judgment or bias.*

This commitment is a fundamental feature of Airbnb’s work to fight discrimination and facilitate the company’s mission of a world of belonging. It very plainly and distinctly explains that everyone in the Airbnb community is to be met with respect, without judgment and bias regardless of their race, national origin and so on. The Airbnb community is once again mentioned and further constructed as an identity founded on respect and inclusion. However, as previously demonstrated, Airbnb themselves breaches this commitment when allowing listings in the West Bank since Palestinians consequently are discriminated against purely because of their national origin. This aspect raises questions on how serious this commitment is taken by the company, since they
themselves have problems following it. It also becomes unclear once again if Palestinians are included in the community, in regards to Airbnb’s contrasting actions to these statements.

3.1.4 Nondiscrimination Policy

The fourth statement analyzed is Airbnb’s “nondiscrimination policy” which was published on Airbnb’s website in 2016 but last updated on February 10, 2022. The first of the three prevalent themes identified in this statement is the emphasis on the Airbnb community as an inclusive and open community.

*Airbnb is, at its core, an open community dedicated to bringing the world closer together by fostering meaningful, shared experiences among people from all parts of the world.*

As presented above, the “Airbnb community” is portrayed as an open community founded on the diversity of people from all over the world. While it sounds good that Airbnb is fostering shared experiences among people from all over the world, this exclusively positive depiction of tourism disregards the postcolonial aspect of tourism where local communities are exploited. This is still a very widespread aspect of the tourism industry today, not least in Airbnb’s own activities in the West Bank. This simplified description of an “open community” fostering meaningful, shared experiences ignores the tourism industry’s as well as Airbnb’s negative impact on already marginalized communities. The theme continues to be ongoing in the statement.

*Our community includes millions of people from virtually every country on the globe. It is an incredibly diverse community, drawing together individuals of different cultures, values, and norms.*

*We are all committed to doing everything we can to help eliminate all forms of unlawful bias, discrimination, and intolerance from our platform.*

This construction of the “Airbnb identity” in turn shapes Airbnb as an inclusive, diverse and open company. These quotes also continue to highlight the importance that different cultures, values and norms play in their diverse community. The second quote also stresses and uphold the view of Airbnb’s commitment to fight against discrimination. The quote below further strengthens the Airbnb community as an open and welcoming identity.

*The Airbnb community is committed to building a world where people from every background feel welcome and respected, no matter how far they have traveled from home. This commitment rests on two foundational principles that apply both to Airbnb’s hosts and guests: inclusion and respect.*

This quote doesn’t only continue constructing and maintaining their “Airbnb” identity, creating a fellowship and trust between the Airbnb users and the company. This quote also leads us to the second theme of the statement which is the emphasis on “inclusion” and “respect”. These are two key concepts in this statement, interconnected through chains of equivalence both to the node
“belonging” as well as to the identity the “Airbnb community”. Inclusion and respect are presented as the two foundational principles that lays foundation for Airbnb’s commitment to build a world of belonging.

**Inclusion** - (...) Joining Airbnb, as a host or guest, means becoming part of a community of inclusion. Bias, prejudice, racism, and hatred have no place on our platform or in our community. While hosts are required to follow all applicable laws that prohibit discrimination based on such factors as race, religion, national origin, and others listed below, we commit to do more than comply with the minimum requirements established by law.

The quote above presents what Airbnb expects from their hosts and guests when it comes to inclusion. The company’s emphasis on the term as well as their definition of inclusion, further maintains the constructed image of Airbnb as inclusive and open. However, this also raises the question of if Airbnb as a company holds itself to the same standard as its hosts and guests when abiding its own policies and values. As they claim, hosts are required to follow all applicable laws that prohibit discrimination. As established earlier in the study, the United Nations and other international actors have condemned as well as pleaded Airbnb to pull out their listings in the illegally occupied West Bank where widespread discrimination based on factors such as race and national origin is taking place. While Airbnb has not necessarily broken any law operating in the West Bank, the quote also states that Airbnb is committed to do more than comply with the minimum requirements established by law. Once again, their clear stance on fighting discrimination anywhere, is not consistent with their actions in the West Bank. What Airbnb expects of their users when it comes to their second foundational principle, respect, is presented below.

**Respect** - (...) Airbnb appreciates that local laws and cultural norms vary around the world and expects hosts and guests to abide by local laws, and to engage with each other respectfully, even when views may not reflect their beliefs or upbringings. (...) By connecting people from different backgrounds, Airbnb fosters greater understanding and appreciation for the common characteristics shared by all human beings and undermines prejudice rooted in misconception, misinformation, or misunderstanding.

As with the previous foundational principle, the unethical acts of Airbnb in the West Bank, contradicts their prompts that their users are expected to follow. In the quote, Airbnb calls for their users to abide by cultural and local laws as well as engage respectfully with each other. While respect is emphasized as a key principle and therefore linked to the identity of Airbnb, the company is very inconsistent in following their own “foundational principles” when it is evident that Palestinians are not respected and not included in the Airbnb community.

Furthermore the depiction of connecting people from different backgrounds once again can be linked to the imperialist narrative where exploiting vulnerable, non-Western communities is legitimizied by the narrative of “connecting” with people from different backgrounds. While it is possible for tourism to create bridges between people around the world as well as have positive impacts on the local communities, the post-colonial aspect and history of tourism should not be
ignored or overlooked. Especially since colonialism and tourism have historically been interconnected, not least in the case of the Israeli colonization of Palestine.

Airbnb goes on to highlight, on multiple occasions, how all members of the Airbnb community should feel welcome no matter where they come from, who they love and so on because of their “shared commitment”. The coherent theme of the previous statements, belonging vs discrimination, is evidently a consistent theme in this statement as well. Therefore it is interesting that the next theme of the statement contradict their previous clear stance against any type of discrimination

"Airbnb recognizes that some jurisdictions permit, or require, distinctions among individuals based on factors such as national origin, gender, marital status or sexual orientation, and it does not require hosts to violate local laws or take actions that may subject them to legal liability."

In this sentence, Airbnb recognizes that there are local laws that discriminate against individuals based on factors such as gender and national origin for example, the same factors that Airbnb stated before that they would go above and beyond to protect. Instead, Airbnb acknowledges that hosts are not required to breach discriminatory laws that could subject them to legal liability. It is reasonable that the Airbnb hosts should not bear the sole responsibility to protect individuals’ and communities’ basic human rights. However, because of the amount of emphasis that Airbnb has put on their commitment to combat any type of discrimination anywhere, it could be expected that the company would not operate at all in areas where discrimination is widespread and basic human rights are violated. With this sentence, their message loses its coherence and credibility to a certain degree as it goes against their foundational principles. The company’s emphasis on ethical tourism becomes heavily compromised as they recognize people are being discriminated against and still actively choose to operate in these areas. Airbnb proceeds to explain how this will be made possible in regards to their nondiscrimination policy:

"Airbnb will provide additional guidance and adjust this nondiscrimination policy to reflect such permissions and requirements in the jurisdictions where they exist."

This quote shows that Airbnb makes an effort trying to contribute to non-discrimination even in complicated situations, but they don’t offer any clearer explanation in the statement on how they will make these adjustments. It is, however, still contradictory to knowingly operate in areas where human rights could be violated on their website, especially with the previous emphasis on the importance of respecting and including everyone.

"While we do not believe that one company can mandate harmony among all people, we do believe that the Airbnb community can promote empathy and understanding across all cultures."

When Airbnb states that they do not believe that one company can achieve harmony among all people, it is easily interpreted as a way of shifting focus from the company's own responsibility to fight discrimination. Airbnb however states that the Airbnb community can promote empathy and understanding. The Airbnb community as an identity is frequently used when addressing Airbnb’s
responsibility in the statements. While the company is built on people signing up as hosts and guests, the constant use of the term “Airbnb community” continues shifting focus from the responsibility of the company itself and puts the responsibility on the members of the “community”.

3.1.5 2020 Annual Report

As mentioned in the material chapter, the annual report touches on a lot of different topics not relevant for the analysis. Therefore, only the relevant parts of the report regarding human rights and ethics will be presented and analyzed in the study where at least two key themes are identified. Apart from the length of the report, this statement differs from the other statements as it is not aimed at Airbnb users and external actors to read. It is on the contrary directed to the company itself. The prevalent concepts in the report also differ from the other statements. The nodes, nondiscrimination and belonging, are mostly absent in this report. Instead, one of the most prevalent themes in this report regarding ethics and human rights is the emphasis on how the company’s brand and reputation may be affected by negative publicity. This theme is recurring throughout the report.

*Maintaining and enhancing our brand and reputation is critical to our growth, and negative publicity could damage our brand and thereby harm our ability to compete effectively, and could materially adversely affect our business, results of operations, and financial condition.*

As presented above, the brand and reputation is stressed as being critical to their growth, their business and so on. Therefore negative publicity is to be avoided since it could damage the brand. This is relevant to the question of the company’s actions, both on how they address their general ethical values and their responsibility to respect human rights as well as how they act when being called out in specific cases, such as their involvement in the West Bank. Airbnb’s statements regarding human rights have mostly been made in response to criticism, implying that the statements are to a large extent made to protect the company’s brand and reputation. Below is another sentence from the report where the importance of their brand is explained in more detail.

*In addition, our brand and reputation could be harmed if we fail to act responsibly or are perceived as not acting responsibly, or fail to comply with regulatory requirements as interpreted by certain governments or agencies thereof, in a number of other areas, such as safety and security, data security, privacy practices, provision of information about users and activities on our platform, sustainability, human rights, diversity, non-discrimination, and support for employees and local communities.*

Here, Airbnb expresses the negative impact on the company’s reputation and brand if they fail to act responsibly or fail to follow regulatory requirements, which specifically is the case in their involvement in the occupied West Bank. Human rights, non-discrimination and support for local communities are used as examples of areas that could jeopardize Airbnb’s brand if they don’t act responsibly. It is evident that the focus is put on the potential consequences that their actions could have on the company itself and their business and growth. There is no mention of the consequences of potentially affecting individuals and/or local communities if they act irresponsibly in regards to
human rights for example. This theme is very ongoing throughout the report, merely addressing the impacts that their potentially irresponsible actions have on themselves and their business.

*Any incident, whether actual or rumored to have occurred, involving the safety or security of listings, hosts, guests, or other members of the public, fraudulent transactions, or incidents that are mistakenly attributed to Airbnb, and any media coverage resulting therefrom, could create a negative public perception of our platform, which would adversely impact our ability to attract hosts and guests.*

*We have been the subject of media reports, social media posts, blogs, and other forums that contain allegations about our business or activity on our platform that create negative publicity.*

Once again, the negative public perception and media coverage is perceived as something that could harm the company. In the second sentence, Airbnb also shares that they’ve been the subject of media reports containing allegations against them. They go on to explain that this could, and has, resulted in hosts and guests refraining from listing with Airbnb, ultimately affecting their business and financial condition, which is repeatedly stressed throughout the report. Their use of the term “subject” in the sentence, creates the perception of the company seeing itself as a “victim” of media reports which in turn implies that Airbnb is not taking responsibility for their own actions.

*Social media compounds the potential scope of the negative publicity that could be generated and the speed with which such negative publicity may spread. Any resulting damage to our brand or reputation could materially adversely affect our business, results of operations, and financial condition.*

While the focus is put solely on the company’s brand, the company’s responsibility to comply with regulations regarding the safety of their users and other communities is ignored. It is rather only addressed as something negative for the business, resulting in a perception of Airbnb's actions as mainly being driven by their own-interests in contrast to a concern of issues such as human rights. On the other hand, the company and its financial condition is one of the focal points of this annual report, which to a degree explains their silence on the other aspects of being called out for acting irresponsibly as a company. However, the weight that is put on the brand and reputation is very relevant to their mostly reactive statements.

The second relevant theme in regards to ethics and human rights, is Airbnb’s explanation on their responsibility to control hosts, guests or third-parties. Airbnb describes how hosts, guests or third-party actions that are for example inappropriate, criminal or violent may undermine the safety of their platform as well as their ability to attract and maintain guests and hosts. They continue by explaining that this may in turn affect the company’s reputation, business and financial condition. Consequently, Airbnb goes on to discuss the company’s responsibility and way of tackling this issue.
We have no control over or ability to predict the actions of our users and other third parties, such as neighbors or invitees, either during the guest’s stay, experience, or otherwise, and therefore, we cannot guarantee the safety of our hosts, guests, and third parties.

Here Airbnb clarifies that the company has no control over the users’ and other third parties’ actions. While it is reasonable to not have absolute control over the actions of the hosts, guests or third-parties’, the lack of emphasis of the company’s responsibility in this statement is crucial to keep in mind when looking at their actions in the West Bank.

The actions of hosts, guests, and other third parties have resulted and can further result in fatalities, injuries, other bodily harm, fraud, invasion of privacy, property damage, discrimination, brand and reputational damage, which have created and could continue to create potential legal or other substantial liabilities for us.

The reputational damage of the company is highlighted as the potential result of this issue that should be avoided, further ignoring the other parties such as guests affected by these issues. It appears clear that when discussing their responsibility to protect their users in situations of potential damage, Airbnb mainly stresses the importance of their brand and reputation. Additionally, the company predominantly addresses human rights violations on an individual level, ignoring human rights potentially being violated by states or other larger actors that could affect their hosts, guests or local populations. They continue having difficulty providing concrete answers or solutions regarding these issues in the quote below.

We have not in the past and may not in the future undertake to independently verify the location, safety, or suitability of experiences for individual guests, the suitability, qualifications, or credentials of experiences hosts, or the qualifications of individual experiences guests.

Airbnb explains that they may not independently verify factors such as the location, safety or suitability of experiences. This continues raising questions on Airbnb’s ethical perspective on their actions. The inaccurate locations of illegal Israeli settlements in Palestine as “Israel” have been criticized by many NGOs for misleading tourists and causing potential obstacles. Airbnb also states that they may not independently verify the safety or suitability of experience for individual guests, which could be interpreted as contradictory to their previous statements emphasizing the safety of the Airbnb users in terms of non-discrimination. This also contradicts the previous statements constructing Airbnb as a responsible company, caring for its customers.

3.1.6 Code of Ethics

This statement begins with a letter from the company’s CEO’s, Brian Chesky, Joe Gebbia and Nate Blecharczyk, to the Airbnb team. In this statement, there are three main themes identified, many of which are similar to themes in previously analyzed statements, The first theme is the term “belonging” being further pushed and described as a fundamental value for the company.
**Belonging** is a concept that defines Airbnb and every employee in every country should experience and express it.

As already established, “belonging” is a node in Airbnb’s discourse on their responsibility to respect human rights. It is a fundamental concept that shapes the discourse, for example in regards to constructing the identity of Airbnb as a community and company. At the same time, concepts such as discrimination and exclusion are constructed in contrast to “belonging” and therefore in contrast to Airbnb too. Another frequent, related theme, mainly in the introductory letter, is Airbnb’s description of their “culture”.

*As we’ve grown, we’ve been incredibly intentional about our culture. At its most basic, culture is our collective behaviors.*

**Our culture** is shaped by things like our Core Values, shared behaviors and special traditions. *But one of the most important aspects of our culture is how we treat each other.*

As demonstrated above, Airbnb emphasizes the importance of their culture and describes it being shaped by their core values, shared behaviors etc. Culture further constructs the identity of the “Airbnb community” by linking it to their previously emphasized values such as belonging and inclusion. The use of terms such as culture and community creates a sort of belonging among their members. Another theme of the report is Airbnb’s outlook on acting ethically.

**Acting ethically is at the foundation of everything we do.** *This means having a Code of Ethics that is consistent with our vision and in line with our Stakeholder Principles.*

Here, the company stresses the importance of acting ethically, and that acting ethically is at the foundation of everything they do. This is a strong statement that comes with an increased responsibility of ethical tourism. It also constructs a perception of Airbnb’s actions as being driven by ethics. However, it also makes Airbnb’s unethical activities in the West Bank more contradictory to their own statements and proclaimed values. They continue emphasizing acting ethically throughout the report yet also connect the theme with the importance of protecting their reputation.

*The best way to safeguard our reputation and preserve our culture is to hold ourselves accountable.*

This shifts focus to another aspect of Airbnb’s intentions, where the company’s reputation and brand is the focus instead of the potential consequences of unethical actions. Acting ethically is not only emphasized to contribute to a world of belonging, but instead to improve and protect the brand of the company. However, in this quote Airbnb is here taking some sort of responsibility as a company to hold themselves accountable. They go on presenting examples of what acting ethically means to the company.

*We play by the rules. Airbnb complies with national, state and local laws and regulations that apply to our business.*
Here, Airbnb states that they follow laws and regulations that apply to their business. While Airbnb may not explicitly break any law, they support Israel’s breach of international law by operating in the illegally occupied territories. They have also not followed the demands of the Human Rights Council to retract their activities from the occupied West Bank. This raises questions on what Airbnb classifies as relevant regulations that apply to their business and to what extent they actually play by the rules.

3.1.7 Airbnb’s Work on Human Rights

In this blog post, Airbnb is presenting the company’s key takeaways from their work on human rights. One of the two main themes of the statement is Airbnb’s work to serve and support local communities which is repeated on multiple occasions.

*On International Human Rights Day, we are sharing some examples of our years-long work to serve and strengthen communities.*

*Empowering Local Communities:* We help create new sources of income for Hosts sharing their existing spaces and skills, making it possible to empower them financially while fostering connection with people from around the world and supporting local communities in the process.

While Airbnb is not presenting concrete examples of their work to support local communities in this post, they repeatedly emphasize their proclaimed support of local communities. From a postcolonial perspective, this statement can also be connected to the imperialist discourse on “empowering” and financially supporting local “Eastern” communities through tourism. Airbnb’s tourism in the West Bank is evidently not empowering the local communities economically but instead causing them to lose their homes and other basic human rights. This narrative once more, legitimizes profiting from exposed communities and draws focus from their unethical activity in the West Bank.

*Working with hundreds of governments around the world, we strive to enable responsible tourism that keeps more of the economic benefits in local communities. This includes, in certain jurisdictions, collecting and remitting local tourism and other taxes and collaborating with cities to develop tools that help them enforce local tourism regulations.*

Contributing to economic benefits in local communities are once again stressed here. These sentences enforce the narrative of Airbnb as a responsible company striving to enable responsible tourism. At the same time, when looking at the negative impacts on Airbnb’s involvement in the West Bank on the local population, this statement loses some of its credibility. The second theme of the statement is Airbnb’s continued emphasis on the company as an inclusive and open company. As presented below, they carry on repeating their ambitions to contribute to a world where all people’s human rights are respected.

*Airbnb is proud to be working to foster connection and to reach for a world where the human rights of all are respected.*
Promoting Diversity and Inclusion: We strive to create a workplace where anyone can belong, with a diverse and inclusive community of employees.

The repeated use of the terms “of all” as well as “anyone” clarifies their intention of respecting and protecting the human rights of all, regardless of national origin, sex or religion etc. The terms “diversity” and “inclusion” are through chains of equivalence linked to the identity, “Airbnb community” in the sentence, in turn linking the concepts with Airbnb as a company. Palestinians should therefore be included in this community, making Airbnb’s ongoing support and maintenance of the violations on their human rights exceedingly contradictory.

3.2 Airbnb’s statements on their involvement in the illegal settlements in the West Bank

In this subchapter, four statements by Airbnb regarding their involvement in the illegal settlements in the West Bank are analyzed in chronological order.

3.2.1 Email

Despite its conciseness, this statement from 2016 published in the newspaper San Francisco Chronicle provides relevant aspects of Airbnb’s stance on their responsibility to act according to their own ethical values in the OPT.

*We care deeply about the feedback we receive from our community and we take these issues incredibly seriously.*

They start off with explaining their understanding of the gravity of “these issues”. However, they fail to fully address the situation by avoiding calling it an occupation or mentioning Palestinian’s human rights. Instead they choose the term “issue” which will be used once more to describe the occupation.

*This particular issue is complex: people have been debating this matter for 5,000 years, so a hospitality company from San Francisco isn't going to have all the answers but at the end of the day, we want to help open the world, not close it off.*

Firstly, when describing an occupation as complex, the factual evidence of Israel's unlawful treatment of the Palestinians are ignored. The fact that people have been debating “this matter” for 5000 years, referring to the historical debate on who the “Holy Land” belongs to, is not the subject that the criticism is referring to. The profiting from human rights crimes committed in the illegally occupied territories is not a question of religion or history or who the land belongs to. It is criticism regarding a company’s support and profit of an occupying power’s discrimination and violation of basic human rights. Airbnb’s way of describing the occupation is therefore constructing an image of the occupation as a much more complicated issue than what it actually is, drawing attention from the actual criticism.
Their description of their business as a “hospitality company from San Francisco” also indicates their lack of taking responsibility on issues that they play an impactful role in. They are one of the leading tourism and hospitality companies in the world, but in this specific issue they refer to themselves as just a hospitality company from San Francisco. Furthermore, they clarify that they don’t have all the answers on this “complicated issue”, which is not what activists are expecting them to have. Airbnb continues to stress that they want to help open the world in contrast to closing it off. This shows once again a justification of profiting from non-Western communities in the name of “opening and discovering the world”. Therefore, they are in this email not only refusing to take responsibility for their unethical actions (according to their own ethical code), but also defending their activities in the occupied territories.

3.2.2 Listings in Disputed Regions

This is Airbnb’s first official statement on their activity in the occupied territories of the West Bank from November 2019. In contrast to the previously analyzed statements, the main identities identified are the collective identities “Palestinians” and “Israelis”. However, Palestinians are not addressed as much as Israelis in the statements. Therefore, Israelis as a collective identity is constructed through chains of equivalence while Palestinians are essentially ignored.

The first theme of this statement is Airbnb’s emphasis on the complexity of the “situation”. They clarify several times how difficult this issue is, both for the company to understand as well as for the global community. This aspect is repeated multiple times throughout the post.

*There are conflicting views regarding whether companies should be doing business in the occupied territories that are the subject of historical disputes between Israelis and Palestinians.*

Referring to occupied territories as the subject of historical disputes between both groups, addressing both Israelis and Palestinians, heavily minimizes the gravity of the Israeli illegal occupation and the human rights and international laws violated because of it. While the human rights aspect of the occupation is not complicated, the complexity of the “historical disputes” draws attention from the grave human rights crimes committed in the occupied territories. In turn, this narrative justifies Airbnb’s activity in the territories and support of human rights violations.

*We are most certainly not the experts when it comes to the historical disputes in this region. Our team has wrestled with this issue and we have struggled to come up with the right approach.*

Once again, the gravity of the issue is disregarded when the company talks itself down as “not being experts” on the “historical disputes”. There are most certainly many experts that could inform them on the issue or consult them on how to act ethically as a business in the territories. However, Airbnb clarifies later in the statement that they will listen to experts and seek out their community moving forward. However, the remark that Airbnb are “not experts” is a way of withdrawing from their responsibility as a multinational corporation to act according to international law and their own expressed ethical values. Two other examples of this theme are presented below.
This is a controversial issue. There are many strong views as it relates to lands that have been the subject of historic and intense disputes between Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank.

Our hope is that someday sooner rather than later, a framework is put in place where the entire global community is aligned so there will be a resolution to this historic conflict and a clear path forward for everybody to follow. As of today, this is an aspirational hope. People of goodwill have been seeking this goal for decades but we continue to hope for a durable, lasting peace.

The terms chosen to describe the illegal occupation are once again minimizing and belittling. The terms “historical disputes” or “historic conflict” are very light terms to describe the illegal occupation, decreasing the severity of the situation as well as the Palestinian people and their basic human rights. Moreover, Palestinians are not addressed once in the statement, whose human rights are the subject-matter of the criticism resulting in Airbnb making this statement. One could think that Airbnb would voice their support for, or at least mention, the exposed group in question in the statement. Instead, a big part of the statement consists of Airbnb illustrating the complexity of the issue. The statements are not presenting any concrete solutions but essentially just empty words, for example emphasizing their aspirational hope for lasting peace. This is once again drawing attention from Airbnb’s role in the issue.

The next theme of the statement is Airbnb’s hesitance to remove their listings in the occupied territories in the West Bank. The company demonstrates that their decision to remove their 200 listings in the West Bank is based on their framework for evaluating treatment of listings in occupied territories. However, their hesitant stance on the issue is very much present throughout the statement.

In the past, we made clear that we would operate in this area as allowed by law. We did this because we believe that people-to-people travel has considerable value and we want to help bring people together in as many places as possible around the world.

Airbnb continues stressing the narrative of “people-to-people” travel as being fruitful as well as their desire to bring people together. This absolute take on tourism as something beneficial, especially in regards to tourism in occupied territories, is once again an example of the postcolonial aspect of tourism which through the narrative of “bringing people together” justifies profiting from already exposed non-Western communities. In this case, Palestinians and their land have been exploited by settler colonialism which in turn has been legitimized and normalized by companies like Airbnb.

Airbnb also clarifies that they’ve been operating in this area as allowed by law. Nevertheless, in their report “Airbnb’s Work to Fight Discrimination and Build Inclusion” Airbnb makes clear that they believe that everyone should be held to a standard “above and beyond” the law. Tise argument that Airbnb acts according to law is used on another occasion in this statement further creating confusion on the significance of their previous stance on holding everyone to a higher standard than the law. A question following this double standard is if Palestinians were ever included in those
previous statements or if Airbnb is simply completely disregarding their own ethical values? Airbnb goes on to clarify that there are conflicting views on how businesses should act in the occupied territories which resulted in the company’s evaluation of their involvement in the West Bank.

In the statement, Airbnb presents five factors they took into consideration when evaluating different situations. These factors were: recognizing that every situation is unique and requiring a case-by-case approach, consulting with experts and their community of stakeholders, assessing potential safety risk for their guests and hosts, evaluating if the existence of the listings contributes to human suffering as well as if the listings have a direct connection to the larger conflict in the region.

When we applied our decision-making framework, we concluded that we should remove listings in Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank that are at the core of the dispute between Israelis and Palestinians.

Based on this sentence about their decision to remove their listings, Airbnb clearly acknowledges that their involvement contributed to the factors used in their decision-making framework. They therefore understand that among other factors, their involvement contributes to human suffering as well as directly impacts the larger “dispute”. This is a clear stance against the occupation, implying that Airbnb understands their responsibility to respect and protect Palestinians human rights.

The third theme of this statement is Airbnb’s voiced appreciation of Israel. They clarify multiple times that their decision is not a boycott of Israel and that they are proudly continuing operating in Israel. The quotes below are examples that display this support of Israel, possibly emphasized in fear of upsetting Israeli activists.

We know that people will disagree with this decision and appreciate their perspective.

Airbnb is not boycotting Israel. Airbnb does not support the BDS movement, any boycott of Israel, or any boycott of Israeli companies.

Here they are revealing their hesitance to take a strong stance against the Israeli occupation. They are also making very clearly that they are not opposing or boycotting Israel. Airbnb is presumably scared of potential backlash from Zionists or other supporters of the Israeli occupation. The company has evidently been choosing their words cautiously throughout this statement regarding their stance on their involvement in the Israeli occupation to avoid criticism. Here they are making it certainly clear that they are not supporting the BDS movement, trying to stay as neutral as possible to avoid negative criticism.

There are more than 20,000 Airbnb hosts in places like Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and other parts of Israel, and Airbnb is very proud of our robust community of wonderful hosts throughout the region.

In the quote above, Airbnb is highlighting their businesses in Israel to clarify that this decision is not a stance against Israel as a state. The constructed collective identity of Israelis is described as a
“robust community of wonderful hosts”. The lack of emphasis on addressing Palestinians and appreciating their presence in the Airbnb community is strengthening the assumption of Airbnb excluding Palestinians from their community. Additionally, Airbnb’s support of Israel as a state, once again ignores the fact that Israel is the occupying power committing human rights crimes in the occupied Palestinian territories. Despite all the human rights and of international laws violated by Israel, Airbnb’s support of the state is evident and well emphasized in the statement.

We are excited that our Israeli hosts make it possible for more and more people to visit communities in Haifa and Tel Aviv; drive from one holy site to another; and achieve greater understanding about the remarkable history of the people in this incredible land.

This is another quote of the statement where Airbnb’s “mission” of belonging and contribution to “greater understanding” is brought up in this specific topic. Instead of addressing the actual criticism regarding their support and profiting of an illegal occupation where human rights crimes are committed on a large scale, they choose to highlight their support of the Israeli people and country. Moreover, Airbnb explains that they will only remove their 200 listings in the occupied territories in the West Bank, and not in other occupied Palestinian territories.

The platform continues to be available for bookings in settlements in East Jerusalem and Golan Heights.

This decision of not removing their listings from other occupied territories once again proves the inconsistency of their stance against the issue. Airbnb’s decision to remove their listings in the West Bank but their hesitancy to upset the Israeli state and community could implicate their fear of potential backlash. The announcement did indeed result in criticism from various Israeli advocacy organizations, including the lawyer and Israeli activist Nitsana Darshan-Leitner who claimed that Airbnb’s decision was “abject discrimination against Jewish users of the website” (Shukla, Independent, 2019). Israel’s tourism minister, Yariv Levin stated that the “racist” and “discriminatory decision against Israelis” would result in consequences such as high taxes on the activites of Airbnb in Israel (Lazaroff, 2018). Furthermore Israel’s strategic affairs minister, Gilad Erdan called the decision “appalling in its hypocrisy” observing that Airbnb operates in other disputed territories (Steinberg, The JC, 2019). Additionally, Airbnb was sued by 12 American-Israeli citizens, who had homes in the settlements, in Jerusalem District court as well as in the U.S federal courts in Delaware and California because of their decision to remove their listings (Williams & Pierson, 2019; Osbourne, 2019).

3.2.3 Framework for Evaluating Listings in Disputed Areas

In this statement published in January 2019, Airbnb clarifies the framework used for evaluating their listings in “disputed areas” by answering frequently asked questions regarding their decision to remove listings in disputed areas in this statement. These areas were South Ossetia, Abkhazia and the settlements in the West Bank. The two prominent themes in this short statement is that Airbnb takes their responsibility seriously as well as their hesitancy to explicitly answer the questions.
As a global platform operating in 191 countries and regions and more than 81,000 cities, we must consider the impact we have and act responsibly.

Here, Airbnb acknowledges their impact and responsibility as an impactful multinational business and thereafter implies that they need to carefully evaluate how they treat listings in occupied areas. As opposed to Airbnb’s attitude in many previous statements where they have refrained from their responsibility by for example implying that this issue is too complex, they are now stating that they acknowledge their impact. This contributes to a perception of Airbnb as a responsible company, acting according to their principles and ethical values. By showing awareness of their impact, the expectations of them proving that they take their responsibility also increases. When asked “Have you removed listings in these regions?” (referring to the three previously mentioned areas), their answer was:

*We are working with experts to develop and validate the means to implement our policy. For example, we must appropriately identify the precise boundaries of the areas subject to our policy and ensure that our technological solutions attend to the relevant details.*

This is another example of the company stressing their commitment to treat the issue responsibly with the help of experts. They present themselves as a hands-on company actually taking measures to combat discrimination. As their answer states, they have not yet started removing their listings as they are working with experts to appropriately implement their policy. They later present their community commitment when answering what their antidiscrimination policy is. When answering why they decided to remove their listings in the West Bank, they referred to their previous statement where they addressed the issue. While Airbnb answers the most frequently asked questions, their answers are very political, and don’t offer very clear explanations on their actions following their decision to remove listings.

Essentially, this statement re-enforces the perception of Airbnb as an inclusive, fair company committed to fight discrimination. They refer to their community commitment, marking the gravity of their codes and policies.

### 3.2.4 Update on Listings in Disputed Regions

The final statement on Airbnb’s involvement in the occupied West Bank is a short update from April 2019, five months after their previous announcement to remove listings from the West Bank. In this update, they retract their previous decision and announce that they will keep on allowing listings in the “disputed areas”. They seem to explain this decision in a similar way that they explained the previous decision to remove the listings, by calling it a complex issue.

*We understand the complexity of the issue that was addressed in our previous policy announcement, and we will continue to allow listings throughout all of the West Bank, but Airbnb will take no profits from this activity in the region.*

Here Airbnb explains their new decision to allow listings throughout the West Bank as a result of the situation being complicated. This once again, downplays the gravity of the occupation in regards to the human rights violations committed. The terms used in Airbnb’s statements are
maintaining the constructed narrative of the Israeli occupation as a historical and religious complex issue that justifies the occupation as well as Airbnb’s support of it. Airbnb also addresses that they have settled all lawsuits that were brought by hosts, potential hosts and guests objecting to the previous decision regarding their listings in disputed areas, which is most probably a key reason for this decision to allow listings. The company has emphasized that bad publicity and negative criticism could be detrimental to their business which could also imply that their argument of the occupation being too “complex” is used to try to stay as neutral as possible to avoid backlash.

*Any profits generated for Airbnb by any Airbnb host activity in the entire West Bank will be donated to non-profit organizations dedicated to humanitarian aid that serve people in different parts of the world.*

As demonstrated, Airbnb wants to avoid any type of negative criticism and could be an explanation for their decision to take no profits from the disputed areas, as a compromise to please both sides. However, this is exceedingly contradicting to their previous emphasis on combating discrimination anywhere. In other words, they justify their support and enforcement of human rights violations of Palestinians by strengthening other communities around the world, at the expense of Palestinians. This decision goes against their previous policies that everyone should be treated equally. The decision to donate the money they generate from the listings in the West Bank proves that they recognize that their business in the area is unethical. Palestinian resistance group Al Haq as well as 146 other members of the Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations Network (PNGO) called for a boycott of Airbnb’s “dirty money” (Jewish Voice for Peace, 2019).

Airbnb has in previous statements clarified that their presence in the West Bank has a direct connection with the larger conflict as well as contributes to human suffering. They acknowledged their impact and that they needed to act accordingly. Yet, they still choose to continue operating in the area despite these established factors. The company’s remark that they hold everyone to a higher standard than the law, is proved to not be adopted. Not only since they don’t hold Palestinian to a higher standard than the law, they even support the occupation’s numerous breaches of international laws and in their own word, contribute to human suffering.

*Airbnb has always opposed the BDS movement. Airbnb has never boycotted Israel, Israeli businesses, or the more than 20,000 Israeli hosts who are active on the Airbnb platform.*

Here Airbnb once again voice their support for Israel and clarify that they always opposed the BDS movement, revealing the lack of effort to support Palestinian human rights.

*We have always sought to bring people together and will continue to work with our community to achieve this goal.*

Their mission of bringing people together is here used as a justification of their activities. This is a clear example of how the postcolonial narrative of western tourism as a way of bringing people together is being used as a tool to justify settler colonialism. The statement also shifts focus from the problem of operating in occupied areas and supporting an apartheid state, which contributes to
the opposite of bringing people together. Below, Airbnb goes on to claim that the same approach will be taken in other similar areas.

*Airbnb recognizes that there are many other disputed territories around the world. The company will rely upon our previously identified framework to evaluate these areas.*

*If Airbnb determines homes — the core of our business — are central to ongoing tensions, we will adopt the same approach of allowing listings and donating Airbnb’s profits generated by Airbnb host activity in the region to non-profit organizations dedicated to humanitarian aid that serve people in different parts of the world.*

This remark of adopting the same approach to other disputed areas if their business is central to ongoing tension is proved to not be the case, mainly in regards to Airbnb’s strong stance against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The company was quick to announce their removal of all listings in Russia and Belarus to support the Ukrainian population and oppose the invasion (Airbnb, 2022). Moreover, their announcement to remove their listings in Russia and Belarus were proactive in contrast to their reactive announcement regarding the West Bank. This clearly shows the inconsistency of Airbnb’s approach to their business in occupied areas in different parts of the world, possibly depending on the potential backlash they would receive in the different, but similar situations.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to get a deeper understanding of how Airbnb explains their responsibility to respect human rights as well as their involvement in the occupied territories in the West Bank.

Conclusively, Airbnb’s statements on their responsibility to respect human rights demonstrated the company’s emphasis on concepts such as “belonging” and “inclusion”. These concepts are through the statements shaping Airbnb’s identity as an inclusive and open company and community. Simultaneously, the perception of the company taking a strong stance against discrimination is created and maintained. In addition, Airbnb introduces and presents policies and codes to promote human rights and non-discrimination. By analyzing their statements, Airbnb’s responsibility to respect human rights is to a certain degree perceived as a crucial mission of their business and a lot of effort seems to be taken to address these issues.

However, a lot of the guidelines presented in the statements are aimed specifically at hosts and guests and how they should act, which to a degree implicates that Airbnb is ignoring the huge responsibility that the company itself has to respect human rights on a larger scale. The company tends to use the term “Airbnb community” which is frequently constructed in relation to concepts such as “respect”, “inclusion” “diverse” and “tolerant” through chains of equivalence. Therefore, Airbnb as a company is also constructed in combination to the concepts that construct the “Airbnb community” while their own responsibility to respect human rights is largely ignored. For example, the company struggles to address how they mean to improve specific issues such as the safety of
their users, the continuation of mislabeled locations as well as operating in areas where human rights are widely violated.

Airbnb’s existing statements on human rights and ethics hardly provide clear explanations on how the company plans to respect and protect human rights. The lack of statements on human rights and concrete steps to combat discrimination is also telling of Airbnb’s commitment to achieve their mission of belonging. For example, in regards to local discriminatory laws, Airbnb lets their hosts abide by laws discriminating against factors such as national origin or sexual orientation instead of choosing to not operate in those areas to avoid contributing to human rights violations. Furthermore, the company’s first statements regarding human rights were essentially made in response to criticism of their silence on the subject. Additionally, the importance of protecting Airbnb’s reputation and brand is a recurring theme throughout the statements. A crucial finding of the result is therefore that Airbnb makes a lot of their statements in response to backlash and criticism, probably to protect their business. This conclusion is heavily strengthened by Airbnb’s involvement in the illegally occupied West Bank which brings us to the second research question. The analysis of Airbnb’s statements on their involvement in the West Bank has shown the company’s emphasis on protecting their reputation and brand as an “ethical tourism company”. Airbnb acknowledges that their business has an impact on the larger conflict, human suffering as well as the safety of their guests and hosts in the occupied West Bank. However, they actively choose to continue operating in the internationally recognized illegal occupation. The historical complexity of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is also a frequent argument used to disregard the human rights violations carried out in the occupied territories, justifying Airbnb’s presence there. The company has indeed proved to be sensitive to criticism, possibly indicating that the activism of Palestinian resistance groups and the BDS movement were not effective or loud enough to cause Airbnb from refraining from operating in the West Bank. While the Pro-Palestinian activism admittedly led to Airbnb responding to the backlash on their activity in the West Bank as well as momentarily deciding to remove the listings in the territories, in the end it did not lead to Airbnb ending their activities in the area. Demonstrably, Israeli activism was louder or at least more strenuous since it evidently resulted in Airbnb retracting their decision to remove the listings in the West Bank.

Ultimately Airbnb is, among other tourism companies, still operating in the illegally occupied territories in the West Bank, supporting and maintaining the illegal occupation. Israel’s proved impunity to commit grave human rights crimes, such as the daily unlawful killing of civilians, children, journalists and so on in the OPT without hardly any media coverage or international outrage, is deeply telling of the state of this issue. The postcolonial, orientalist dehumanization and constant depiction of Palestinians and Arabs as uncivilized or terrorists justifies the constant violation of their human rights. In Airbnb’s statements, this orientalist depiction of Palestinians was not necessarily strengthened, however, the absolute absence of addressing Palestinians in their statements, to some degree maintains the dehumanization of the collective identity of Palestinians. The collective identity “Israelis” was mentioned several times and described as a robust and wonderful community and the fact that Airbnb failed to address Palestinians in this context is in a way also telling of the company’s attitude towards the collective identity as well as the company’s lack of effort to combat the ongoing discrimination they endure.
The dehumanization as well as Airbnb’s lack of effort to protect the human rights of Palestinians imply that even though Palestinian activists are actively criticizing the presence of businesses such as Airbnb in the West Bank, they are simply not taken seriously by the international community as well as businesses such as Airbnb. As seen with the Russian invasion of Ukraine for example, Airbnb pulled out their listings immediately. This clearly contradicts Airbnb’s claim that they would not remove listings in other disputed areas and also clearly demonstrates the different approaches taken in two similar situations, but in different parts of the world. Perhaps the different approach was taken because of the potential backlash Airbnb would get for not pulling out their listings in Russia and Belarus. This is another example of the postcolonial imprints on today’s society where the human rights of “Western”, non-colonized people are taken seriously and almost unconditionally respected, as opposed to “Eastern”, colonized people where it is justifiable to make exceptions and disregard their human rights.

Even with the support of well established NGOs such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, the Palestinian cause is still extremely controversial. Demonstrably, businesses such as Airbnb deciding to pull out their listings in the West Bank did not come without consequences. Pro-Israelis’ criticism as well as several lawsuits was eventually too strong for Airbnb to fight against.

On a greater scale, this study has concluded that human rights activists can indeed influence international actors such as businesses to act in accordance to respecting human rights, whether it is due to protecting their brand or because of a real concern of respecting human rights. However, the findings of the study also implies that there is a contrasting attitude towards the constructed collective identities; “Easterners” and “Westerners”, and therefore a contrasting behavior in regards to respecting human rights depending on the collective identity. Palestinians have been marginalized and dehumanized for decades, which complicates their fight of having their human rights respected. As presented, companies such as Airbnb are met with harsh criticism simply for pulling out their listings in the illegally occupied territories in the West Bank, resulting in them retracting their decision. However, “Western” actors such as the United Nation and NGOs like Amnesty and Human Rights Watch are extremely important actors for the fight against the illegal occupation since they contribute to legitimizing Palestinians’ right to stand up against the illegal occupation. As more established and respected “Western” actors start taking a stand against the Israeli occupation, more businesses may start having to act differently in fear of damaging their brand.
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