Master's Thesis

The dark side of lobbying: evaluating the undermined values by astroturf lobbying against the underpinnings of virtue ethics

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THE DARK SIDE OF LOBBYING: EVALUATING THE UNDERMINED VALUES BY ASTROTURF LOBBYING AGAINST THE UNDERPINNINGS OF VIRTUE ETHICS

The dark side of lobbying: evaluating astroturf lobbying, as performed by Airbnb,

against the underpinnings of virtue ethics

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Preface

Proudly, I present to you my Master thesis: The dark side of lobbying: evaluating the undermined values by astroturf lobbying against the underpinnings of virtue ethics. This thesis completes the Master of Business Administration with a specialisation in Organisational Design and Development at the Radboud University in Nijmegen. Through hbo Human Resource Management, a pre-Master Business Administration, and two Master's Business Administration, my time as a student has come to an end by finalising this thesis. In the period from January 2022 to June 2022, I have been working on the proposal, data collection, analysis, and data processing.

Back in January, when I heard that I had been assigned to the thesis group on the gig economy, which was my first choice, I was particularly excited to learn about this growing form of economy. Also, the concept of astroturfing was unknown to me until then. Looking back on the whole process, I learned about the gig economy and what astroturfing is all about.

At the end, I am very satisfied with the choice of this subject. It was interesting to be able to further explore this rather unknown subject in a fairly new way of organising. This research enabled me to talk to journalists who have had the subject on their radar for several years, people who have been able to take me into the world of ethics, and people who are committed to the host community in Amsterdam. I would like to thank each of the respondents for their contribution, openness, and involvement.

Furthermore, I would like to thank my first supervisor, Dr Claudia Gross, for the support, excellent feedback, thinking along with me about how I could advance the content of this thesis, and especially for the fun thesis meetings which were interspersed with serious conversations and space for laughter. I would also like to thank my second reviewer, Dr Dirk Vriens, for his feedback on the submitted documents. Also, a thank you to Sofie, Stijn, and Yvette of the same thesis group who were always ready to give feedback. Finally, I would like to thank friends and family for their unconditional support during the entire process.

Enjoy reading this thesis.

Thijs Veldhuis
Nijmegen, June 2022

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Abstract

Organisations are continuously searching for new ways to influence regulations and legislation in such a way that it becomes as beneficial as possible to their business model. An example of this is Airbnb using the lobbying strategy of astroturfing in which seemingly citizen initiatives are set up and supported.

The purpose of this research is to find out how ethical underpinnings are undermined by astroturf practices performed by Airbnb. This is explored through the following research question: *How are values undermined by astroturfing from a virtue ethics point of view?* The three contexts of virtue ethics create the opportunity to better understand why and how astroturfing is unethical.

To answer this research question, various research methods were applied. A document analysis, mainly of newspaper articles, and additional interviews with experts, journalists, watchdogs, and members of the communities were conducted. Data suggests that astroturfing is ethically problematic, given the divergence in goals that Airbnb and the hosts pursue in performing astroturfing, with the result that no virtuous structure can emerge.

Based on these results, it seems important to be transparent about which groups are supported by an organisation in achieving its goals. Recognizing these tactics allows outsiders to counter astroturf practices and not fall for them. Follow-up research could further explore on these recommendations to sharpen the viability of the concept of astroturfing.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Back in 1985, US Texas Senator Lloyd Bentsen came up with the term astroturfing used to describe the "mountain of letters and cards" he received as a promotion of the interests of insurance companies sent by citizens (Lits, 2020). He named this campaign after a company that produces artificial grass called Astroturf. This grass seems real but is synthetic (Cho, Martens, Kim, & Rodrigue, 2011; Lock & Seele, 2017; Zhang, Carpenter, & Ko, 2013). Lyon and Maxwell (2004) expound on astroturfing as a form of lobbying in which a firm subsidizes a citizen group with parallel interests. Additionally, Lock and Seele (2017) add to this classification as they define astroturfing as faking support from the bottom-up, undermining transparency and democratic participation. Astroturf lobbying is complementary to and framed in such a way that it seems to be a citizens' grassroot initiative (Cho et al., 2011). However, several academics point out that these grassroot initiatives are instrumentalised by organisations to propagate their own goals (van den Berg & Band, 2019; Yates, 2021). Seyfang and Smith (2007) defined grassroot initiatives as *"innovative networks of activists that lead to bottom-up solutions for sustainable development; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved."* (p.585). Often, these grassroot initiatives are seen as citizen initiatives (Walker, 2014). To illustrate, a commonly mentioned example of what appeared like a grassroot initiative but actually was an astroturf initiative was set-up by Exxonmobil, America's largest producer of gas and oil. The company secretly set up and sponsored so-called "think tanks". These think tanks seemed like they originated from concerned residents. However, Greenpeace (2007) found out that Exxonmobil designed these tanks to spread false information about the consequences of global warming and climate change in favour of the organisation.

The United States of America and the European Union attempt to counteract (c)overt astroturf practices by developing explicit laws making it compulsory for promoters and organisations to divulge their mutually financial relationship with initiatives (Malbon, 2013). Scott (2019) emphasises that these laws are made to protect investors and consumers by raising awareness about who is communicating a particular message for what purpose. Although these laws exist, organisations are easily circumventing them by not admitting their involvement in the initiatives, making astroturfing a covert tactic. By providing a lack of transparency about the initiatives they support, the organisation can continue to exploit grassroot initiatives. Organisations take this decision given the good results that are achieved with astroturfing compared to traditional lobbying strategies (Zhang et al., 2013). Next to

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this, organisations choose to provide a lack of transparency about which initiatives they support, as they want to take advantage of the good name that grassroots initiatives have and the additional credibility of the message if it seems that a message comes from a citizens' movement, rather than being sponsored by an organisation, being called astroturf practices (Scott, 2019; Yates, 2021). An example of a sector in which stricter legislation has been created to counteract astroturf practices is the tobacco sector. Here, influences of tobacco organisations are kept out until legislation and regulations are ready for implementation in society, due to the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO, 2004). Consequently, this limits the influence of tobacco producers on legislation and regulation (Bhatta, Bialous, Crosbie, & Glantz, 2020).

Thus, covert astroturfing is an illegal and ethically-dubious tactic that is problematic for many reasons (Dahan, Hadani, & Schuler, 2013; Lyon & Maxwell, 2004). Who is harmed by astroturf practices can be distinguished into three levels.

First, there are the individual citizens. Lock and Seele (2017) state that those are exploited and misguided for organisational purposes. Their individual autonomy to determine for themselves what to campaign against is dispelled. This can be seen as an ethical issue as citizens are made to believe that they are lobbying for their rights, while they are being used and abused by businesses' financial self-interest neglecting the ethical aspect of the outcome (Lock & Seele, 2017; Silver, 2012). Citizens are lured in with the idea of standing up for their rights but are used as a collective tool in informational warfare. Susser, Roessler, and Nissenbaum (2019) state that by misguiding and exploiting citizens, corporations are manipulating inhabitants' decision-making vulnerabilities and individual autonomy.

Second, fake grassroots initiatives create a distorted picture, creating harm for future grassroot initiatives. More precisely, this goes against the basic principles of a grassroots initiative, which is that citizens unite to express and raise their rights and concerns (Dupuits, Baud, Boelens, De Castro, & Hogenboom, 2020). It seems as if these citizens' movements try to raise a social problem, while in fact, they are indirectly championing the interests of an organisation (Cho et al., 2011). This can be seen as ethically irresponsible as the perceived legitimacy of genuine campaigns is threatened and misused (Lits, 2020; Lock & Seele, 2017). It is ethically problematic if corporations are aware of deceiving public representatives and the general public, eroding trust, and certainty of which grass movements are legitimate (Cho et al., 2011). An overarching problem of astroturf lobbying is that it is a covert lobbying

strategy characterised by opacity and little transparency (Durkee, 2017; Schultz & Seele, 2020).

Third, Cho et al. (2011) discuss the undermining of the democratic system as the idea of people representing their rights and wishes is being misused by corporations, harming the society as a whole. Citizens are used as ventriloquists who do not represent their own opinions, but those of others (Kohler-Koch, 2010). This harms democratic societies as it goes against the ethical basis of democracy, in which people can openly express and defend their opinions (Fitzpatrick & Palenchar, 2006; Hoekstra, 2020). Due to this undermining, the democratic system is being harmed on integrity as legislators and constituents are being deceived (Kohler-Koch, 2010; Lits, 2020). Furthermore, the values of democratic systems are damaged as astroturfing lobbying delays the establishment of needed legislation due to the precedence of the wishes and requirements of fake grassroot initiatives over the needs of society (Floridi, 2021).

Despite the ethical problems mentioned above, astroturfing is a form of lobbying that is increasingly being used by organisations to defend their interests (Hanegraaff & Poletti, 2021). Lobbying in general is a widespread and legally accepted phenomenon used by several organisations (Fraussen, 2019; Hanegraaff & Poletti, 2021). For example, the 612 technology companies that try to influence EU policies spend at least €97 million yearly on lobbying in the EU (Bank, Duffy, Leyendecker, & Silva, 2021). Within this, ten technology organisations take the lead by spending a total of 32 million annually. Examples of these ten companies are Apple, Google, Facebook, and Intel (Bank et al., 2021). Lobbying is an accepted means of pressure that can even be seen as an essential part of our democracy (Fraussen, 2019). Fraussen (2019) mentions that lobbying brings social or organisational interests to the attention of policymakers. Within existing lobbying practices, grassroot initiatives and astroturf initiatives are seen as contemporary types. The newest lobbyist is the citizen himself using social media to set politics in motion (Boersema, 2021).

We already know that astroturfing undermines certain values such as individuals' autonomy, deceiving public trust, and democracy (Cho et al., 2011; Fitzpatrick & Palenchar, 2006; Lock & Seele, 2017). However, the tactics for how this harm is performed are less known. Virtue ethics is an appropriate approach to learn more about this aspect as this theory regards how values are realized or not (Savulescu, Persson, & Wilkinson, 2020; Stocker, 1967; van Staveren, 2007). Next to this, virtue ethics process the question of 'how to live?' to

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create a virtuous character (Athanassoulis, 2013). In other words, doing what is right will lead to the right actions (van Hooft, 2014).

To apply the theory of virtue ethics, which is mainly about the individual, to a grouping, the individuals within the grouping must collectively create a virtuous corporate character (Bontemps-Hommen, Baart, & Vosman, 2019). Vriens, Achterbergh, and Gulpers (2018) define this as a "virtuous structure" that consists of three requirements, namely the teleological context, the deliberative context, and the social context.

In order to deepen the knowledge of the (non-)virtuous character of astroturf lobbying, Airbnb is utilised as a case study. This platform company is an appropriate case for studying astroturfing as it has been proven that Airbnb uses and misuses so-called Home Sharing Clubs to lobby in favour of them (van den Berg & Band, 2019; Yates, 2021). These home-sharing clubs exist of local landlords, supported by Airbnb, who lobby against local laws and regulations that impede their legitimate personal rental (Airbnb, 2021). With these ethical and problematic supporting activities, Airbnb tries to counteract local attempts at regulation by founding and supporting fake grassroot lobbying in which independent social movements act on their behalf (Yates, 2021). To analyse astroturfing as performed by Airbnb, virtue ethics is discussed and linked to astroturf practices. Virtue ethics is a suitable ethical movement for this, as this theory allows to evaluate the organisation or person that performs the act and what the motives are for doing so (Savulescu et al., 2020; Stocker, 1967; van Staveren, 2007). This enables virtue ethics to place astroturf lobbying against an ethical framework in order to assess how values are undermined by these practices.

Overall, this study analyses the approach of Airbnb regarding astroturfing. The underlying ethical reasoning related to astroturfing will be defined utilising the virtue ethical approach to deeper understand how values are undermined by astroturfing. In order to research this, the following research question will be answered:

How are values undermined by astroturfing from a virtue ethics point of view?

The case of Airbnb contributes to understanding the ethical underpinnings and values harmed by performing astroturfing. Next to this, it is known that astroturfing undermines certain values. However, what not yet has been researched are how these values are undermined by astroturfing. This could be relevant, as this exposes the covert astroturf lobbying practices that organisations are increasingly using. This research provides insights into the different tactics contributing to the harming of these underpinnings and values. As astroturf lobbying is still a growing phenomenon and more and more organisations are

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starting to realise its effectiveness, it is important to map out the ethical underpinnings of astroturfing (CBS, 2020; Lits, 2020). Last, on a practical note, this study could inform governments when drafting up policies on how to limit the use of astroturf practices.

The subsequent chapters address the following. The theoretical framework discusses prior research related to the concepts used, which are grassroot initiatives, astroturf lobbying, and virtue ethics. Eventually, a conceptual model visualises the relationship between the concepts used. The methodology chapter describes how data is gathered and analysed. The results chapter provides a factual account of the data collected. The discussion and conclusion chapters bring nuance and interpretation to the collected data to answer the research question. Also, practical and theoretical implications and recommendations for future research are provided. Lastly, this research is concluded with limitations and a personal reflection.

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Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

This chapter defines and delineates the concepts used in this research. First, it is explained why grassroot initiatives have grown considerably in recent years, where they focus on, and what the drawbacks are of these initiatives. The subsection that follows explains the difference between astroturf lobbying and grassroot initiatives. This paragraph also explains the ethical debates surrounding the conduct of astroturfing. In order to examine how values are undermined by astroturfing, it is necessary to delineate what ethics are, what ethical problems are, and what the underpinnings of virtue ethics are. Hereafter, the link of virtue ethics to astroturf lobbying is elaborated. The final subsection presents the conceptual model, in which the concepts mentioned above and their interrelationships are explained in a visual presentation.

2.1. Grassroot initiatives

To put astroturfing in perspective, it is useful to explain the concept of grassroot initiatives first as this is seen as the origin of astroturfing (Lock, Seele, & Health, 2016). Martiskainen (2017) remarks that grassroot initiatives are citizens' initiatives that are set up with mostly sustainability and social motives, often in high social value sectors, such as the energy transition, food waste, and climate change (Feola & Nunes, 2014; Nivrakech, Kwan, Dobernig, Wilhem-Rechmann, & Langen, 2020; Smith, Hargreaves, Hielscher, Martiskainen, & Seyfang, 2016). Seyfang and Smith (2007) define grassroot initiatives as *"innovative networks of activists that lead bottom-up solutions for sustainable development; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved."* (p.585). Additionally, Grabs, Langen, Maschkowski, and Schäpke (2016) frame grassroot initiatives as a form of social activism developing collaborative social understanding at the community level. Van Oers, Boon, and Moors (2018) and Vandevoordt and Fleischmann (2021) build on this social activism by mentioning that grassroot initiatives promote socio-technical changes addressing social and environmental complications.

Oteman, Kooij, and Wiering (2017) describe that grassroot initiatives exists since the 1950s. In the last ten years, the term has taken off due to the great influence of social media, which has made the threshold for participating low (Oteman et al., 2017). Data suggests that the number of grassroots initiatives is increasing. For instance, in the Netherlands, the number of initiatives aimed at renewable energy sources increased from 40 to 360 initiatives between 2009 and 2016 (Oteman et al., 2017). These initiatives mainly draw their strength from the association of local people who do not agree with the current policies. The more

powerful actors join the initiative, the more influence over resources and the dominant coalition can be exercised (Blanchet, 2015). Hence, the growing social responsibility and political interest of citizens are partly accountable for the growth in initiatives (Smith et al., 2016). Another mentioned reason for the increase is that politicians are more eager to listen to constituents rather than to regular lobbyists, increasing the chances of success (Lock & Seele, 2017).

Besides the fact that the number of initiatives is increasing, the influence and impact of the initiatives are also growing, due to the benefits of knowing the local context, having many interpersonal networks, and representing cohesion in the community (Feola & Nunes, 2014). As a result, they know what occurs locally and can propose specific solutions (Feola & Nunes, 2014; Martiskainen, 2017).

Despite the lauded benefits of these initiatives, grassroot initiatives often contain some shortcomings. For example, long-term survival is often a point of discussion due to the lack of direction once a certain goal is achieved. Other drawbacks are the frequent absence of a leader, dilemmas concerning the possible commercialisation of the initiative, problems with acquiring volunteers, maintaining emotional stamina, and the most frequently mentioned downside: financing in the long run (Hargreaves, Hielscher, Seyfang, & Smith, 2013; Magnani & Osti, 2016; Martiskainen, 2017; Seyfang & Smith, 2007). In addition to personal capacity in the form of resources and skills, organisational capacity must also be present in the form of funding and structuring (Middlemiss & Parrish, 2010). However, despite the drawbacks, grassroot lobbying remains an effective tactic, as the strategy exploits the "herd instinct" of outsiders to adopt the opinion of the majority (Lyon & Maxwell, 2004).

Organisations also observe the effectiveness of grassroot initiatives over traditional lobbying practices and want to exploit this "herd instinct" for their gain (Zhang et al., 2013). With their financial and organisational resources, organisations are better placed to make the drawbacks of real grassroot initiatives disappear (Lyon & Maxwell, 2004). By supporting existing initiatives in setting up organisational capacity, helping with funding, or setting up a fake grassroots initiative itself, organisations hope to hitch a ride from the positive name of grassroots initiatives (Zhang et al., 2013). However, organisational help is controversial as it goes against the origin and definition of a grassroots initiative, being named astroturfing (Yates, 2021). In the next section, this concept is elaborated on.

2.2. Astroturfing

Organisations recognise the rising popularity and effectiveness of grassroots initiatives compared to their old way of lobbying and therefore try to capitalise on them (Lits, 2020; Lock et al., 2016). When organisations interfere with grassroots initiatives, literature refers to this as astroturfing (Cho et al., 2011; Lock & Seele, 2017). Lyon and Maxwell (2004) outline astroturfing as a form of lobbying in which a firm subsidises a group with similar interests. Additionally, Hoggan and Littlemore (2009) focus more on the manipulation aspect as they define it as: *"fake grassroots organisations animated by a clever public relations campaign and a huge budget"* (p.36). Lock and Seele (2017) add to this definition as they define astroturfing as faking support from the bottom-up, undermining transparency and democratic participation. In the further course of this research, the definition of Lock and Seele (2017) is central as this undermining argument is important in the ethical discussion this research tries to answer.

Astroturf and grassroot initiatives differ from each other in the goal they try to achieve. To illustrate, grassroot initiatives are designed to improve social and environmental situations for society and themselves whereas astroturf initiatives are set up for organisational purposes (Lock & Seele, 2017; van Oers et al., 2018). In other words, astroturf organisations are corporate versions of a grassroot initiative supporting ideas and claims that are affirmative to the company and deny ideas and claims against them (Cho et al., 2011). People take part in astroturf initiatives because they are given the idea that they are defending their own interests and the survival of the organisation in which these front group members exploit their business model. For these front group members, it seems like they are taking part in a grassroot initiative. In the meantime, the focus is mainly on defending the personal preferences of an organisation through citizen initiatives, meaning that these front group members are actively involved in astroturfing (Cho et al., 2011; Lock & Seele, 2017; Yates, 2021). Hence, for front group members and outsiders, it becomes hard to distinguish these two lobbying practices as they differ only in the interests that are defended (McNutt & Boland, 2007).

In practice, two forms of astroturfing can be distinguished as corporations fund existing or set up front groups themselves (Fitzpatrick & Palenchar, 2006; Yates, 2021). Organisations provide these services to achieve their ultimate goal, which is the realisation of their favourite political consequence (Lyon & Maxwell, 2004). Organisations fund or set up these groups, as it is more fruitful than the traditional way of lobbying (Lits, 2020). Cho et al.

(2011) discuss the overall effectiveness of astroturfing in comparison to grassroot initiatives. The results of their study show that astroturfing is more effective due to the greater amount of drive, strength, and resources donated from within the business community. Additionally, Zerback, Toepfl, and Knoepfle (2021) discuss the human side of astroturfing and the efficacy behind it. They argue that the efficacy of astroturfing arises from the fact that the astroturf lobbyist makes it appear to be a personalised opinion by individuals instead of an organisation. These personalised opinions seem more confidential and trustworthy from an equal person than when a politician claims something since people are more likely to accept something from an equivalent person with whom they can identify (Zerback et al., 2021).

As astroturf practices are intentionally and manipulatively concealing, debates are arising about the ethical aspect of the concept (Lock et al., 2016). Yates (2021) identifies four areas in which the debate surrounding the use of astroturfing is growing louder. These debates have to do with transparency, the circulation of benefits and power, the democratic institutions and corporate power, and the empowerment of citizens to participate in grassroot initiatives. The various debates are explained in more detail below.

First is the debate concerning transparency. Ball (2009) defines transparency as a process of open decision-making for good governance in policies and programs. Practices of astroturfing are not documented in the media, society, and by the government (Yates, 2021). A key element of astroturfing is the formation of false imprints that an idea has extensive support (Zhang et al., 2013). For society, involved parties, and the government, it is often difficult to discover whether the initiative is citizen-led or organisation-led. Walker (2016) emphasises that astroturfing only comes to light if it has failed to seem like a grassroot initiative. Overall, astroturfing is a covert lobbying strategy characterised by opacity and little transparency (Durkee, 2017; Schultz & Seele, 2020). Astroturf lobbying is seen as *"an unethical practice pursued in the shadows"* (Lock & Seele, 2017, p.35) threatening the authenticity, legitimacy, and trustworthiness of partaking organisations (Heath, Waymer, & Palenchar, 2013).

Second, a debate is being held about the circulation of benefits and power as the mobilisation of citizens is used mainly to support constituency-building business strategies (Cho et al., 2011; Yates, 2021). Astroturfing is discussed as a contentious approach to misusing citizens in order to win public validity, shape public policy, and shape guidelines (Yates, 2021). Here, citizens are convinced that they are lobbying for their own interests and the survival of the organisation to whom these front group members owe their business

model. In practice, it turns out that the interests of the citizens are not paramount, but that the organisation's goals are the main interest (Lock & Seele, 2017; Silver, 2012). Corporations are thus encroaching on the individual autonomy of people to lobby for problems in society favourably to the interest of organisations.

The third area of debate is about the democratic institutions and corporate power as astroturf lobbying expels the organic grassroot initiatives and consequently undermines public trust in the legitimacy of democratic creativities. Legitimacy is defined by Suchman (1995) as actions that are appropriate, desirable, and proper within socially constructed values, beliefs, and norms. Cho et al. (2011) discuss the ethical conduct of astroturf lobbying by stating that astroturfing is debatable and a major concern as organisations influence people's perceptions and beliefs. McNutt and Boland (2007) elaborate on this (un-)ethical conduct by mentioning that astroturf lobbying violates the trust of normal citizens. These citizens are being deceived as it appears that front group members are standing up for their opinions. This deception relates closely to the debate on the legitimacy of astroturf lobbying (Lits, 2020). Additionally, Fitzpatrick and Palenchar (2006) claim that astroturf lobbying undermines democracy as grassroot initiatives are falsified. The democratic system gets harmed by organisations that put their interests and wishes over the wishes and needs of society (Floridi, 2021).

As a fourth area, Yates (2021) mentions the debate on the empowerment of citizens to participate in grassroot initiatives. When legitimacy and transparency do not increase concerning grassroot initiatives and astroturf lobbying, why would a citizen participate in a grassroot initiative risking public scrutiny (Yates, 2021)?

While several authors regard astroturfing as effective in achieving organisation-driven goals (Lock et al., 2016; van Oers et al., 2018), others argue that it does not pay off in the long term for both the organisation and society (Cho et al., 2011; McNutt & Boland, 2007; Sweetser, 2010). By venturing into unethical and unlawful conduct, the mutual trust relationship between corporations, society, and the government may suffer excessive damage. As a result, permanent distrust between the different stakeholders can occur which may not be bridgeable in the future (Sweetser, 2010). To prevent this, Fitzpatrick and Palenchar (2006) call for a tightening of the ethical rules and guidelines preventing astroturfing.

To summarise, astroturfing is a form of lobbying that increases in popularity extensively (Lits, 2020). It is a covert lobbying tactic that seems to serve organisations and, in some cases, also citizens in grassroot initiatives (Dahan et al, 2013; Lyon & Maxwell, 2004).

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However, next to being illegal in the US and EU, astroturfing also raises various ethical concerns as it misguides and exploits citizens, the democratic system is undermined, and a distorted picture is created due to the low transparency and legitimacy (Yates, 2021). The underlying ethical reasoning related to astroturfing will be defined by utilising the virtue ethical approach to deeper understand how values are undermined by performing astroturf practices (Savulescu et al., 2020; Stocker, 1967; van Staveren, 2007). Virtue ethics is further explained in the next paragraph.

2.3. Ethics and virtue ethics

To create an informed view of virtue ethics, it is first required to explain what ethics and ethical issues are. The origin of the word ethics originates from the Greek word ethos, which means character or custom (Dewey, 2016). In his book, Dewey (2016) explains that ethics is the teaching of what is seen as ethical or moral. Ethics and moral are seen as interchangeable, as they both discuss what is seen as "wrong or right" or "bad and good". In other words, ethics and moral are interested in what is considered good or bad performances, judgments, and means (Dewey, 2016). The norms and values that a person adopts are the way a person behaves and how others can expect him to act. All these norms and values together are called morality (van Staveren, 2007). To make ethics more concrete, core ethical values such as respect, fairness, and trustworthiness have been established (Dewey, 2016). Dewey (2016) mentions that in the case that the core values are not in line with what is happening in practice, we talk about ethical issues. In the Airbnb case, this happens, for example, with the value of transparency. Ryen (2004) mentions that an ethical issue is a scenario in which moral standards are discussed. These issues occur when an activity, setting, or practise conflicts with the applicable moral principles (Ryen, 2004). Which moral principles apply depends on the perspective from which a situation is attended. Historically, three major normative perspectives can be identified, namely utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics (van Staveren, 2007). For this research, the choice was made to apply virtue ethics as the ethical framework, as virtue ethics takes into account the conditions in which a person or organisation is placed. Furthermore, virtue ethics is a theory that is person-specific looking at the morality of an action (van Hooft, 2014). As mentioned earlier, traditional lobbying through paid lobbyists is a generally accepted way of applying pressure (Hanegraaff & Poletti, 2021). However, astroturfing has more ethical concerns, due to the undermining of core values such as individuals' autonomy, deceiving public trust, and democracy (Heath et

al., 2013). Virtue ethics helps us better understand how values are undermined by astroturf practices.

To attain a more in-depth view of virtue ethics, a further explanation of this concept is given. Virtue ethics focuses on questions surrounding morality. This ethical theory is interested in the person-based virtues and character that perform a specific act (Annas, 2006). Virtue ethics states that actions are morally good if that action is something a virtuous being would do (van Staveren, 2007). These moral actions are determined by the character of the person accomplishing the action (Annas, 2006). Generally, virtue ethics exists of two questions: how should I live and how should I decide how to live (Annas, 2006; Athanassoulis, 2013; van Hooft, 2014; van Staveren, 2007)?

In order to assess whether an action is morally right, the virtuous character is considered. But what exactly is a virtuous character and how can we make virtue tangible? According to Aristotle, everything we do as human beings is aimed at achieving a fixed goal (*telos*). Linked to this predetermined goal is the decisive goal, which is seen as the highest good (*eudaimonia*) (Athanassoulis, 2013). This highest good is what we humans should always strive for. Eudaimonia is explained as living a valuable, satisfied, and meaningful life (Knippenberg, de Groot van den Born, Knights, & Muraca, 2018). Within reaching this eudaimonia, three concepts are important: virtues, reason, and desire.

Van Staveren (2007) discusses that virtue ethics is expressed in relationships as virtue is achieved in social interactions rather than in absolute rules. Additionally, the groundings of virtue ethics cannot be found in desire or reason but try to balance emotions and morality in being a good 'virtue' (van Staveren, 2007). The focus of virtue ethics is on the good or self-sufficient virtues. Hence, the good in virtue ethics is about both good reasons and good motivation (Annas, 2006). Subsequently, humans possess the capability of reasoning. Reasoning means having a deep-rooted ability to be able to think through and find out the truth (van Staveren, 2007). Lastly, the ability to desire goals and targets that are seen as the right thing to achieve for its own sake (Athanassoulis, 2013).

Critics object to virtue ethics as they state that the theory is too vague. In their opinion, virtue ethics does not forecast cut-out actions in order to be virtuous (Das, 2015). In counteract, this argument is refuted as possessing a virtuous character has a different meaning for each person that every individual has to find out for himself. Next to this, critics see virtue ethics as too relativistic as absolute rules that could be applied in different time perspectives

and cultures are absent. Rebuttals to these critics point to the resilience and adaptability of the theory to be relevant nowadays (Das. 2015).

How can virtue ethics be applied to the case of Airbnb? The application of virtue ethics to the business perspective is more difficult, but not resolvable. First of all, virtue ethics is an ethical theory that focuses on individuals and the development of their ethical character in living a fulfilled life, and 'doing good' (Knippenberg et al., 2018). In other words, virtue ethics is a person-driven theory that focuses on the individual. Van Staveren (2007) discusses that organisations do not own such a similar individual character. However, virtue ethics can still be applied to an organisational structure. Bontemps-Hommen et al. (2019) mention that in order to apply virtue ethics to an organisation, individual virtues have to be translated into the economical and material elements of an organisation, the structure, the culture, the power relations, and having organisational individuals to create a virtuous corporate character. In order to perform the right actions in terms of virtue ethics, an individual should do the right thing for the right reason (Annas, 2006). When this is translated into virtue ethics in the context of organisations, they must also do the right thing for the right reasons. An organisation's member needs to consider that an organisation's output, whether negative or positive, influences how society is composed and that the individual working in the organisation is himself also a member of this society that his organisation influences (Knippenberg et al., 2018).

Vriens et al. (2018) define this virtuous corporate character as "virtuous structures", consisting of three structural requirements. The first requirement is a (1) teleological context, which consists of employees being able to reflect on organisational output and goals proportionate to the societal contribution the corporation wishes to create. Additionally, it enables employees to become aware of how their personal tasks that contribute to the organisational output. Therefore, it is important that employees can identify with and feel connected to the organisation's goals and contribute to the greater whole. Practically, the organisational structure should enable the employee to reflect on their own tasks and the impact of the corporation on society so that the community receives added value for living a fulfilled life (Holland, 2010; Vriens et al., 2018).

Next to this, (2) structures should be foreseen in a deliberative context, meaning that employees are enabled to be virtuous. This context concerns the actions people perform within an organisation, the consequences these actions cause, and adjustment through deliberation if the consequences are not desired. In order to create and exercise a moral

character, an employee should be able to oversee, reflect on, and adjust their actions through deliberation, in order to make a proper contribution to society. In this way, an employee can steer their contribution towards living a fulfilled life (Vriens et al., 2018).

Lastly, (3) a social context is needed for discussions on reaching societal contribution in order for employees to think, become aware, and reflect on their moral consequences (Vriens et al., 2018). Bernacchio (2018) underlines the importance of interacting with others, as it makes an employee realise the consequences that certain actions bring and the impact on society. In order to perform a moral character, the organisational structure must provide for reflective discussions on reaching societal contribution and for discussions between employees inside and outside the organisation about the actual actions that are carried out in order to contribute to society in achieving living a fulfilled life (Vriens et al., 2018). This research will use the insights of these three contexts to explore astroturf practices accomplished by Airbnb.

2.4. Conceptual model

Lobbying in general is a widespread and legally accepted phenomenon used by several organisations (Fraussen, 2019; Hanegraaff & Poletti, 2021). Increasingly, it is citizens who are pulling the cart during lobbying practices, called grassroot initiatives (Boersema, 2021). If an organisation interferes with these citizens' initiatives, literature refers to this as astroturfing (Lock & Seele, 2017). This research investigates how values are undermined, from a virtue ethics point of view, when organisations try to defend their interests through this lobbying strategy. If an organisational structure wants to implement and develop a moral character, it must meet three structural context criteria, namely teleological, deliberative, and social context. The conceptual model, as shown in Figure 1, illustrates how this research is designed. In the methodology chapter, the method of how this linkage is investigated is explained.
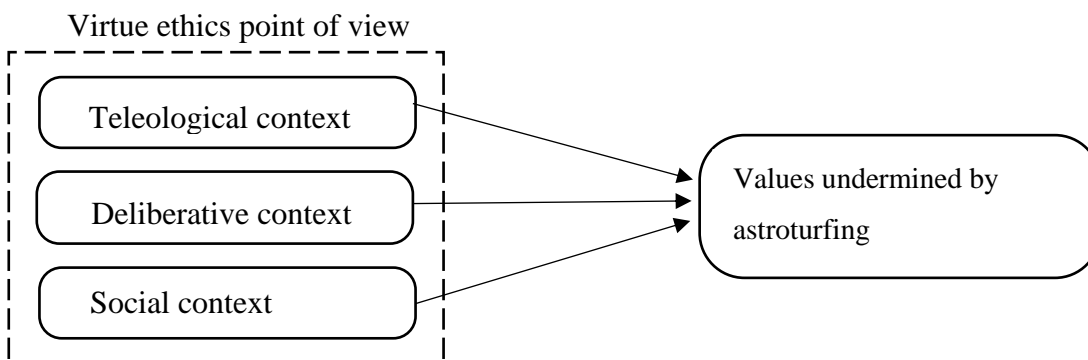
Virtue ethics point of view

Figure 1. Conceptual model.

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Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes how the conceptual model, as shown in Figure 1, was researched. The research design explains the choices made in the selected research method. After that, the Airbnb case is clarified in more detail so that the reader has an idea of the researched organisation and why this is a relevant case. The data collection paragraph consists of two subparagraphs, namely document analysis and interviews. These subparagraphs describe how data was collected to examine astroturfing. Additionally, the data analysis narrates how the data was processed. The research quality tells something about how the quality of sources and analysis was monitored. Lastly, research ethics describes how the researcher attempted to conduct research ethically.

3.1. Research design

This research answers the research question: *How are values undermined by astroturfing from a virtue ethics point of view?*

To answer this question, a qualitative research approach was chosen. Qualitative research collects and analyses people's thoughts, expectations, and motivations of a phenomenon (Myers, 2019). Moreover, it focuses on collecting and analysing linguistic material to make statements from the collected data. Additionally, this form of research is often used if one wished to understand a phenomenon, such as astroturfing (Vennix, 2019). Through previous literature, some things have already been brought to light, such as (1) the definition of astroturfing and (2) what is ethically irresponsible about performing astroturfing. In order to understand the lack of ethical underpinnings of how values are harmed and undermined by astroturfing, a primarily inductive research method was chosen.

This research contains two types of data collection methods namely document analysis and interviews. A further explanation of how these two data sources were combined in this study is described in section 3.3.

Furthermore, template analysis helped with analysing the collected data in order to draw conclusions from it. This means that pre-determined codes are complemented by emerging codes resulting from the analysis (King & Brooks, 2016). A further explanation of the coding process is given in subsection 3.4.1.

3.2. Airbnb Case

Airbnb is a platform organisation allowing people to rent and let accommodations. This can be an entire house or a part of a house such as a room (Guttentag, 2019). As the

company operates in 192 countries and 33,000 cities worldwide, tenants can rent a variety of accommodations. The offer ranges from a single bedroom in someone's home to luxury flats or even quirky accommodations such as treehouses or houseboats. Airbnb's business model is linked to the rental of these spaces. For each rental, Airbnb earns a set percentage (Guttentag, 2019). Airbnb was chosen as the case study for this research, as it has been proven in several European countries that Airbnb applies astroturfing on a large scale with the help of the Home Sharing Clubs, without Airbnb openly communicating about it (van den Berg & Band, 2019; Yates, 2021).

How did Airbnb become one of the largest organisations in the world for renting and letting accommodations? In September 2007, San Francisco was the venue for a designer conference. At the same time, freshly graduated roommates Joe Gebbia and Brian Chesky were unable to pay their rent (Oskam & Boswijk, 2016). As a solution, they decided to create a website called airbedandbreakfast.com on which they offered overnight stays on air mattresses. Two men and a woman decided to pay 80 dollars each to stay overnight at Joe and Brian's house. Consequently, a new business model was born (Gallagher, 2017). Nowadays, in the third quarter of 2021, Airbnb registered 79.7 million bookings worldwide, with a revenue of 2.2 billion dollars and a net income of 834 million dollars (Airbnb, 2021, p. 2).

Due to the variety of accommodations and the great popularity, it is hard to imagine that the organisation has only been in existence for 15 years. More precisely, Airbnb has developed an innovative and disruptive business model that differs from the existing norm in the tourism industry. With its lower costs, wide selection, and the chance to "live like a local" Airbnb has radically changed the tourism industry (Guttentag, 2019; Paulauskaite, Powell, Coca-Stefaniak, & Morrison, 2017).

3.3. Data collection

This research contains two types of data collection methods namely document analysis and interviews. Since the focus was on understanding how astroturfing is performed and how values are undermined, the choice was made to take a more critical approach, mainly analysing newspaper articles and interviewing journalists.

3.3.1. Source selection

Document analysis requires considerable time from the researcher. Nonetheless, the sources are often available for free on the internet. In order to be able to apply the ethical

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currents to astroturfing, it is important to determine how the terms are used (Symon & Cassell, 2012). For example, for virtue ethics, it is important to understand what exactly is seen as a virtuous character.

The documents used were mainly found with the help of Nexis Uni. This database is made available from Radboud University facilitating students to access documents using delimiters. Within the search for relevant sources, the researcher determined that only qualitative sources should be included (Boukes & Vliegenthart, 2020). Using mainly the keywords "astroturfing", "grassroot initiatives", "lobby", and "citizen lobby", newspaper articles were found. As sources, articles originating from the quality newspapers such as FD, de Volkskrant, NRC, Het Parool, The Times, and Financial Times were included (Boukes & Vliegenthart, 2020). These newspapers were chosen because they are considered to be of high quality, indicating that the articles they publish can be identified as factual and accurate.

In addition, the Airbnb website was reviewed for any relevant resources. This includes documents in which Airbnb explains the communities they have set up, in order to make new landlords aware of the existence and so-called benefits of local communities. Also, a YouTube video was found by searching for "astroturfing explained" on this platform. In addition, it was possible to review mails that Airbnb sent to their new landlords, as these mails were made available through one of the journalists interviewed who was renting out a room on Airbnb at the time of his research. Table 1 provides a short overview of the documents collected. A full overview can be found in Appendix I.

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Table 1: Overview documents.

Kind of source	Source	Number of documents	#Pages	Time span
Newspaper	NRC	11	42	November 2014 – March 2022
Newspaper	The Guardian	5	17	March 2016 – April 2022
Newspaper	The Times	4	9	February 2017 – February 2019
Newspaper	Trouw	3	11	December 2016 – August 2021
Newspaper	Het Parool	2	4	June 2020 – April 2021
Newspaper	Brandpunt+	1	4	December 2019
Newspaper	Daily News	1	2	July 2017
Newspaper	De Volkskrant	1	5	January 2018
Newspaper	Financial Times	1	2	March 2021
YouTube video	TedTalk	1	4	February 2015
Communication Airbnb to landlords	Amsterdam Gastvrij	3	3	January 2018 – April 2018
Website Airbnb	Airbnb	1	2	No date
Total		**34**	**#102**	**November 2014 – April 2022**

3.3.2. Document analysis

Document analysis enabled the researcher to understand, add meaning, and develop
knowledge of a phenomenon by evaluating and reviewing documents. In other words,
document analysis enables the researcher to analyse existing sources for data that contributes
to answering the research question (Bowen, 2009). The starting point for the document
analysis was to research a time span of five years in five newspapers. Though, during the
document analysis, it became apparent that there were also interesting and relevant sources
published before 2017, containing valuable information for this research. Therefore, the
choice was made to broaden the time span to ten years. The number of sources has also been
broadened compared to the original five, as only newspaper articles gave a one-sided view of
astroturfing. By broadening the number of sources to ten, YouTube videos from journalistic
channels and the official Airbnb website could also be included in the analysis. The sources
used are described in subparagraph 3.3.1.

3.3.3. Interviews

Next to the document analysis, interviews were held with seven respondents to attain
a better understanding of their views concerning how values are undermined by astroturf

practices. Interviews are intensive conversations with a particular person or persons on a specific subject, in which the interviewee(s) expresses their view and opinion on the subject under discussion (Symon & Cassell, 2012). These interviews provided additional, personal views on the data that emerged from the document analysis. Since the aim was to learn more about how astroturfing is done in practice and what is unethical about it, the choice was made to invite mainly people who look at astroturfing from a critical angle. This way, the respondents who were approached have a link to astroturfing or knowledge of lobbying methods in various ways. In order not to speak only to critics, it was also decided to speak to an ethicist, who could give a better picture of ethical conduct in business. Lastly, as the social context is relevant for virtue ethics, information from a member of a Home Sharing Club was included. An overview of the interviewees is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Overview interviews.

Interview	Date of interview	Function	Duration interview	Reference number
Online	May 2, 2022	Journalist Brandpunt+ & NRC	54:23	#1
Online	May 3, 2022	Research Director	42:09	#2
Online	May 4, 2022	Business ethicist	1:03:03	#3
Online	May 4, 2022	Journalist SFGate	32:11	#4
Online	May 6, 2022	Watchdog corporate Europe observatory	43:49	#5
Online	May 9, 2022	Journalist NRC & The Investigate desk	52:14	#6
Online	May 9, 2022	Member Facebook Group	57:23	#7

The sampling method used was non-probability. This means that the researcher decided who was interviewed, meaning that not every person has been given the chance to participate as the researcher determined who to approach for an interview (Vennix, 2019).

Almost all respondents were approached via LinkedIn or a work email if available online. One respondent, a member of the Facebook Group, had responded to a call from the researcher in this Facebook Group and indicated that he wanted to participate in the study. This message can be found in Appendix H.

Before conducting the interviews, it was decided to conduct a pilot interview with a person from the interviewer's immediate circle. This person had read up on the subject and was, therefore, able to answer the questions. This version of the interview guide is presented in Appendix A. After the completion of the pilot interview, some questions were modified, which led to the final version presented in Appendices B and C.

The design of the interview guide was done using the three contexts linked to being a virtuous structure. By way of introduction, some general questions about astroturfing were formulated to get the conversation going. After this, the three contexts: teleological, deliberative, and social context were questioned with subsequent questions.

3.4. Data analysis

3.4.1. Template analysis

To analyse the large pile of incoming data, template analysis was used. Template analysis balances the demands and needs of a study but also brings along a high degree of analysing structure (Myers, 2019). The researcher chose this method of analysis as it is a broad research method that provides room for assumptions from literature and additions from the data itself (Vennix, 2019). King and Brooks (2016) outline the procedure of template analysis. According to King and Brooks (2016), the researcher first has to become familiar with the data that is analysed. After this stage, preliminary coding is done as the researcher notes down anything that might be useful. Besides, during the coding phase, emerging codes came to existence from the research data. Subsequently, the prior tentative themes and the emerging themes are clustered together. In other words, template analysis supports both deductive and inductive coding. By iteratively doing this, a final coding template was established (King & Brooks, 2016).

A coding template provided an overview of the topics that are important according to the researcher. It lists and structures the important themes, based on a subdivision of data. A starting point of the coding template was prior codes derived from existing literature (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley, & King, 2015). However, these tentative codes can be adjusted or dispensed if they do not match the data. In that case, emerging codes are added to increase the fit with the data (Brooks et al., 2015). An overview of these prior codes is given in Table 3.

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Table 3: Topic list.

Concept	Prior codes
Teleological context	- Rights Airbnb served - Rights Citizens served - Rights municipalities served - Citizens astroturf for their own goals - Citizens astroturf for Airbnb goals - Citizens aware of organisational goals - Counteracting rules municipality - Citizens are 'in touch' with Airbnb' goals and output - Contribution to organisational desired outcomes - Actions contributing to others and society - Actions harming others and society - Counteracting law-making by the municipality
Deliberative context	- Seeing moral consequences of astroturf lobbying - Thinking along between Airbnb and citizens - Interaction Airbnb and citizens - Individual reflection of actions - Airbnb providing opportunities to reach the desired outcomes - Oversee the consequences of astroturf lobbying - Citizens having voice over actions - Performing actions against legislation - Speaking out against legislation made
Social context	- Reflective discussions about contribution Airbnb with Airbnb - Reflective discussions about contribution Airbnb with other citizens - Socially connected to the organisation - Socially connected to other citizens - Socially connected to the environment - Cooperation citizens and Airbnb - Consultation with the municipality on law-making - Talking to municipalities

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Coding was performed using the Atlas.ti system. It soon became clear that the priority themes were a good starting point, but that the data was much more extensive. Therefore, emerging codes were added throughout. Since the coding template was modified during the process, a last-minute revision took place, during which the earlier files that had already been coded were checked for completeness and fit with the adjusted coding template. Appendix E shows the final coding template.

The results and outcomes of this analysis form the basis for the structure of the results chapter. First, the different forms and ambivalent synergy are explained. Then, the analysis revealed some tactics Airbnb uses to develop ambivalent synergy. Finally, the different groups harmed by astroturfing are discussed. A further explanation is given in Chapter 4.

3.5. Research Quality

3.5.1. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were implemented to reach high-quality research standards. First of all, high credibility means that the research results are believable. In other words, value is given to the constructed realities that can be seen as credible (Symon & Cassell, 2012). By applying peer debriefing and member checking, credibility was taken into account. Additionally, by storing the interview records, progressive subjectivity was taken into consideration (Symon & Cassell, 2012). Moreover, transferability was defined by the readers of this research as this involves to what extent this research can be transferred to their specific context. By means of a thick case description in the introduction and openness about the interview protocol, the transferability should be high (Vennix, 2019). Subsequently, dependability was touched by providing full disclosure of the method of research. This helped to ensure that the research is consistent and can be repeated by anyone else (Symon & Cassell, 2012). Lastly, confirmability concerns how the data supports the research outcomes. The researcher enhanced this by showing the coding template, as provided in Appendix E (Symon & Cassell, 2012).

3.6. Research Ethics

Research ethics consists of five general principles, namely (1) beneficence and nonmaleficence, (2) fidelity and responsibility, (3) integrity, (4) justice, and (5) respect for people's rights and dignity (American Psychological Association, 2016). This means that the researcher should be aware of the multiple roles, should follow the rules regarding informed

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consent, and should guarantee privacy and confidentially (Smith, 2003). To achieve this, the

researcher developed an informed consent form. This explicitly states that personal data will

be treated confidentially. The informed consent is attached in Appendix D. Additionally, the

interviewees were informed about the research question, the terms used, and the research goal

in advance of the interview. In this way, the interviewees knew which topics would be

discussed. In addition, interviewees were informed that they could terminate the interview at

any time if they felt uncomfortable. Safeguarding anonymity and confidentiality was of

paramount importance to the researcher as this contributes to the fact that people dare to

speak out fully, contributing to the quality of their responses. Subsequently, no organisation

or person-related data can be found in the transcripts meaning that statements cannot be

linked to a specific person. The only personal information included in the research is the

function someone performs. This information is needed by readers of the study for possible

transferability to their context. When transcribing the interview was completed, the

interviewee was put in the position to read the transcript to see if it matched the conversation.

After completion of the research, each interviewee was allowed to receive the complete

research. If an interviewee expressed interest, a copy of the research was sent to that person.

Furthermore, the research was uploaded to the repository of Radboud University. Here, the

research is openly accessible to anyone interested.

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Chapter 4: Results

This chapter clarifies the analysis of the data and presentation of the results. First, to answer the question how values are undermined by astroturfing from a virtue ethics point of view, it is relevant to explicate the different forms of astroturfing that exist. Then the similarities and differences in goals for applying astroturfing for Airbnb and hosts are discussed, which has a direct impact on the teleological context. This is followed by a discussion of five tactics, stemming from the analysis, that Airbnb uses to exploit astroturfing, impacting the deliberative and social context. Finally, the various groups that suffer from the astroturf campaigns and in what way are discussed, which leads to a final conclusion and some points for discussion.

4.1. The goal of astroturfing

According to the literature explained above, astroturfing is talked about when an organisation makes it look as if a movement is being carried by the public when in reality it is being promoted from inside an organisation (Lyon & Maxwell, 2004). Literature mentions the existence of two forms of astroturfing namely, setting up and sponsoring existing initiatives (Fitzpatrick & Palenchar, 2006; Yates, 2021). From the analysis of this study, it becomes clear that there is also a third form. This became clear during the interviews with various journalists who have been investigating astroturfing for several years in different industries. The first form is characterised by respondent 6 as the classical form in which an astroturf organisation is completely set up by Airbnb. Here, workers from the PR and marketing department of Airbnb sit on the board of the astroturf organisation to provide guidance. *All the money comes from the industry. All the initiatives and ideas come from the industry, but it pretends to be a citizens' movement* (Journalist NRC & The Investigative Desk, Interview #6). That Airbnb utilises this form is underlined by a member of a Home Sharing Club, as she indicated that she had been asked by Airbnb to become active in setting up a community within Amsterdam.

Subsequently, many respondents confirmed the literature by indicating the existence of a second form of astroturfing whereby Airbnb sponsors existing grassroots initiatives with resources, such as money or materials, to make an impact. This is best represented in the following quote: *In addition to traditional lobbying, these digital platforms have been cultivating corporate "grassroots lobbying" initiatives in which they resource and mobilise their users to lobby for deregulation or to block proposals or sanctions from the government* (The Guardian, Document #21).

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The last form was clearly described by respondent 6, in which an organisation set up an umbrella organisation to house existing, small grassroot initiatives. Some documents underline that Airbnb has dealt with this in Amsterdam by setting up Amsterdam Gastvrij, which acts as an umbrella organisation for all hosts in Amsterdam wanting to contribute to the local Airbnb community.

Once the form is determined, implementation of the form is needed. Basically, two parties are involved in astroturfing. On the one hand, these are the hosts, who unite in communities. The other group is the organisation Airbnb, which sets up or supports the aforementioned forms. As all respondents emphasised, these groups communicate with each other, which is also a core idea of virtue ethics as it is about the deliberative and social context within which groups realize values. What stands out in the data is that these parties find common ground with each other in the goal that they are both trying to achieve. This goal (t*elos*) involves discussing and taking action against laws and regulations that restrict or prevent the rental of flats and homes through the Airbnb platform, as discussed in the following quote: *If you have people in the room who have a massive number of apartments for rent, then there is a full overlap of interests. They have a common interest in defeating this or that legislation or this or that proposal at the city level* (Watchdog CEO, Interview #5). These parties have found similarities in the goal they try to achieve, namely little rules and legislation that restrict the rental of a room, flat, or house. As the watchdog emphasises, this common ground is the building block on which astroturfing is built in the case of Airbnb, as emphasised by one of the respondents: *I would say that the majority of Airbnb hosts would not be against the limiting the number of days that you can rent out your apartment or house. They will not be against restricting the number of total flats that you can rent out in particular neighbourhoods* (Watchdog CEO, Interview #5). However, in addition to these similarities, most data indicate that there is a difference in the ultimate goal (*eudaimonia*) that both parties are trying to achieve with astroturf organisation in terms of societal contribution. Whereas the hosts want to change the rules and legislation to be able to continue to run their business, within the limits that it remains viable for the city to receive guests, Airbnb has deviated goals. All respondents indicated that Airbnb's main concern is their self-interest by influencing regulations and legislation so that Airbnb's business model can grow and flourish within a city: *Nothing motivates them more than money. At the end of the day, that is why Airbnb is doing this. They serve themselves and their own mission by performing this* (Journalist SFGate, Interview #4) and *for Airbnb, the goal of astroturfing is much more*

straightforward, as it only concerns its own interests (Watchdog CEO, Interview #5). This apparent similarity and difference between the two parties is further referred to in this study as ambivalent synergy.

According to various sources, Airbnb deliberately chooses not to be transparent about what goals they are trying to pursue with astroturfing, an example of this view is given in the following quote: *The company had claimed that the emails were not sent by Airbnb but "by individual hosts"* (The Times, Document #23). Even when the journalist of NRC dug into the money flows and found out that Airbnb had indeed put money into setting up a Home Sharing Club in Amsterdam, Airbnb continued to deny any involvement with this party. The Airbnb spokesperson had the following to say about this: *"The establishment and activities of Amsterdam Gastvrij are independent of Airbnb"* (Brandpunt+, Document #1).

The data shows that the deliberative and social context become skewed and embraced due to the different ultimate goals both parties are trying to achieve. In other words, due to the lack of transparency that Airbnb gives about the exact reason why they set up and support astroturf campaigns, hosts and outsiders cannot have an equal deliberative and social context. To illustrate, the deliberative context implies that managers and hosts understand their own impact. Individuals ought to be capable of seeing the moral consequences of their actions in name of the organisation. The member of the Home Sharing Group indicated that there is two-way communication between the Home Sharing Clubs and Airbnb regarding the campaigns and actions to be performed. Additionally, the support that Airbnb provides is often seen as professionalising and scaling up the ideas resulting from the meetings of the Home Sharing Clubs. According to the data analysed, by providing resources, Airbnb seeks to ensure that a campaign strikes a chord with the general public: *Airbnb also provided refreshments for host meetings, placards for protests, and transport, said former staffers* (Financial Times, Document #4). However, a concern that several critical respondents utter is that the deliberative is thereby hampered, as Airbnb is only showing this commitment in order to provide guidance and direction so that their self-interest is respected, as evidenced by the following quote: *By far the majority of the initiatives and ideas result from the industry, but it pretends to be a citizens' movement* (Journalist NRC & The Investigative Desk, Interview #6). Resulting of the data, it remains difficult for hosts participating in Home Sharing Clubs to fully understand the moral consequences of their actions on behalf of Airbnb as Airbnb does not communicate this openly with them either. The data shows that the hosts are aware of the fact that they are campaigning, in a group with other hosts, against

the municipality to change rules and legislation so that they can rent out their room or house in the most favourable way possible. As various data sources indicate, Airbnb chooses not to be transparent. With this behaviour, they do not support a context where deliberation is possible. Instead, as several respondents argue, homeowners are used as a means of pressure to amend regulations and legislation that allow Airbnb's business model to flourish.

Additionally, the social context implies that the organisational structure ensures that individuals are part of a social structure, which would lead to a virtuous structure. The social context ensures that there are reflective discussions about the organisation's social contribution. Several data sources specify that the lack of transparency does not support a social context. All respondents indicated that discussions do take place between Airbnb and hosts about what actions should be taken to achieve the telos of the campaign. This is also evident from the following quotation: *Then it will be discussed at the meeting of Amsterdam Gastvrij. The lawyers will then see whether it is feasible to do something about it* (Member Facebook Group, Interview #7). Nevertheless, data suggests that there is no support for the social context as these discussions are mainly framed so that the hosts feel that they have a say in the actions that are taken, while Airbnb ultimately makes the big decisions about which campaigns to run, aiming for Airbnb's eudaimonia.

4.2. Tactics Airbnb

As retrieved from the data, ambivalent synergy ensures that there is a difference between the hosts and Airbnb about the goal both parties hope to achieve with astroturfing. Emerging from the dataset, it seems as if Airbnb using various tactics to make the hosts believe that they are lobbying for their own gain, when in fact they are also being used as a means of pressure to achieve Airbnb's ultimate goal. These five tactics, drawn from the data analysis, show how Airbnb creates the feeling among hosts that they are chasing the same telos.

4.2.1 Fostering a sense of community

The main tactic, that recurs across all data sources, is Airbnb fostering a sense of community. A clear example of this is shown in the following file taken directly from the Airbnb website: *Airbnb supported the creation of Home Sharing Clubs in order to bring hosts together in order to advocate for fair home sharing laws in their communities and highlight the benefits that home sharing brings to neighbourhoods around the world* (Airbnb, Document #33). Several respondents indicated that Airbnb tries to create the feeling that the

organisation and the hosts are "one big family" and should come together to exchange information and discuss the latest trends. A spokesman of Airbnb said the following about this: *They are independent, host-led local organisations that drive initiatives to better their neighbourhoods. Clubs advocate for fair and clear home-sharing regulations in their city, share best practices around hosting and hospitality, organise community service activities, and can serve as a forum to connect those who share a passion for home-sharing* (The Times, Document #26). In line with this, the members of the communities indicate experiencing this closeness. As an example, a member of the Facebook group specifies that she has gained a lot of support, information, and solidarity from participation: *It is also that people post a message of help my cleaner has fallen ill. Who can help me? Then usually within two hours, there is someone who says: well, call him or my maid still has time. In that sense, help is provided. It's not just the regulations, but also practical help or someone who is looking for help. From Amsterdam Gastvrij, we have regular meetings where we talk about certain legal or tax matters. This is then explained to the hosts* (Member Facebook Group, Interview #7). Besides trying to recruit people with this community story, the data shows that the community part remains a central theme once someone is a member of a Home Sharing Club. For example, key members of the Home Sharing Clubs are invited to Airbnb conferences: *I think Airbnb is the only one that really does work on that community thing. They had an annual conference in the early days. It started in San Francisco. The next year, it was in Paris. I was there. Those were also times when you could meet as hosts worldwide and talk to people about their experiences. We didn't have to pay the entrance fee, because we already did so much for the host groups* (Member Facebook Group, Interview #7). This way, Airbnb seeks to ensure that people continue to engage and participate in communities.

From the journalists interviewed, a more critical point of view comes regarding the creation of the communities. These journalists emphasise that in recruiting these hosts, Airbnb has built their marketing narrative about building a strong community and giving hosts the feeling that Airbnb is helping them to stand up for their best interests. A common saying here is: together we can achieve more and we are stronger than alone. This misrepresentation of the image is pointed out in one of the interviews: *It is just that Airbnb really puts up that sonny image of we are just your buddy and do no one wrong* (Journalist SFGate, Interview #4). This sounds like a noble goal to strengthen interconnectedness. However, as several critical respondents utter, the only thing that makes for a lack of transparency is Airbnb's underlying reason for setting up these communities, which is, to

create a citizen lobby practice for local authorities. This is underlined in the following quote: *The company has advertised for people who have "experience in organising grassroots campaigns" to fight the threat of regulatory action. In Ireland, it contacted a select group of experienced apartment hosts last year and said that a Home Sharing Club was being established* (The Times, Document #26).

4.2.2. Providing infrastructure and expertise

Another tactic that is widely used, as evidenced by various data sources, is that Airbnb makes infrastructure accessible so that the communities can optimally engage in campaigns: *They have internal communication. They use letters and fora online. They set up seminars. They have full infrastructure. All that they need is the names of people that are prepared to put their faces on the campaign* (Watchdog CEO, Interview #5). This tactic is closely related to the second form of astroturfing, as explained in section 4.1, explaining that Airbnb supports existing grassroot campaigns with money or other needed resources. The data shows that Airbnb provides resources in a variety of ways. This can be in practical terms, such as money or equipment: *Airbnb also provided refreshments for host meetings, placards for protests, and transport* (Financial Times, Document #4). Additionally, knowledge, expertise, and lawyers were also offered by Airbnb to 'professionalise' and 'empower' the initiatives. The member of the Facebook group mentions that they find this help from Airbnb very useful because it allows them to be more targeted: *That goes through their (Airbnb) hands so that their email form is forwarded. There's always a line about this event or this meeting not being organised by Airbnb or Airbnb not being responsible, but we (Airbnb) are just passing it on to you. That might be interesting. Then there's a link to Amsterdam Gastvrij where they can sign up for such a meeting. That in itself is very nice because it is difficult for us to reach the B&B or holiday rental hosts other than our Facebook page* (Member Facebook Group, Interview #7). The journalist who researched Amsterdam Gastvrij takes a more critical view of Airbnb's help: *So that was just making their email lists available. They simply made it possible for Amsterdam Gastvrij to write to all the landlords, which really did wonders for their membership. That just allowed them to reach ten thousand people in one go* (Journalist Brandpunt+ & NRC, Interview #1).

A concern that respondent 6 utters is that Airbnb offers these resources and expertise so that small initiatives can increase their visibility by making them noticeable to a wider audience. Moreover, critical respondents argue that Airbnb puts all this knowledge and money into the initiatives to professionalise them, with the ultimate goal of profiting from the

fact that it still looks like a grassroots initiative: *Look, companies always act from a commercial interest, so if you, as a citizen initiative, accept money from a company, know that the company has a goal with that funding and that is that you apparently say or do something that is in line with the commercial interest of the company* (Journalist NRC & The Investigative Desk, Interview #6).

4.2.3. Alienating

Another strategy that emerges from the data is alienating. According to several critical respondents, Airbnb utilises the sense of "being one big family" and by doing so, exploits the sense of honesty of unsuspecting hosts, for their own gain. Respondent 5 took it a step further an compared this community formation to brainwashing and creating a cult, wherein people who are not members of the cult can be seen as enemies. In the case of the Home Sharing Clubs, these opponents are the municipalities and Airbnb seeks to frame these official institutions as opponents: *Which means trying to appeal precisely to people who are different in the world from others. Who feel a bit alienated from the world and try to harness that alienation for your commercial purpose. Those people themselves, from that alienation, are so behind your commercial goal that they will even take on a hostile attitude towards competitors* (Research Director, Interview #2). The data suggests that Airbnb tries to build on the message of "normal hosts have to suffer" to create a sense of unity and cohesion among hosts that they should join Airbnb's collective: *The members of the Scottish parliament will soon be voting on an amendment to the Planning Bill that could impact the way you host on Airbnb* (The Times, Document #23). According to the documents analysed, Airbnb discourages people from campaigning independently. Instead, Airbnb unites them and seeks to achieve oversight and control over what can be astroturfed.

4.2.4. Magnifying resistance

The data also shows another tactic used by Airbnb, namely magnifying resistance. Many respondents indicated that Airbnb tries to make resistance to upcoming or existing rules and legislation appear greater than it is. An example of this was given in the interview with a member of the Amsterdam Hosts Facebook Group, where eight people had been fined for not complying properly with the rules regarding renting in Amsterdam: *Administrative error. Why not a warning first. No 8500 euro fine. Those kinds of things. Then we talk to the municipality. We speak up at housing committee meetings when those things are dealt with. We go to the ombudsman. ... These actions we take are discussed within the meeting of*

Amsterdam Gastvrij (Member Facebook Group, Interview #7). While such a fine might indeed be out of proportion, it serves as an example of the tactic of "magnifying resistance" as eight fines have been issued out of a total of 4.128 rentals in 2021 for Amsterdam (RTLnieuws, 2021).

Several critical respondents indicate that Airbnb is hoping to stir up a feeling among policymakers that certain problems are widespread in society and therefore need to be adopted within the framework of the law. Once this feeling is created, Airbnb's lobbyists come and sit at the policy table to amend laws and regulations to match Airbnb's business model, as denoted by the following quote: *Sure. Airbnb is a big company. When they talk about seats at the table when they make decisions, you can bet that Airbnb is working face-to-face with the government* (Journalist SFGate, Interview #4).

4.2.5. Marketing strategy

A final strategy revealed by the data is the marketing strategy. Most data sources show that Airbnb tries to take advantage of being a seemingly civil movement, as this can count for more sympathy. Respondent 6, who has been investigating astroturfing within the tobacco industry for several years, states the following: *If you talk to the smokers themselves, I think, as a politician, that's only right to do that. Of course, that's a different conversation than when you see the shiny bins of pinstripe from Philip Morris stepping into your office* (Journalist NRC & The Investigative Desk, Interview #6). Several respondents indicated that Airbnb understands well that citizens are a better PR tool than using experts, in connection with the legitimacy and trustworthiness of citizens. An interviewed journalist provides an example of this view. According to this respondent: *she was deliberately put forward first at the public consultation round because it makes the most impression, of course, but I also think that there is an extremely dirty side to using a cancer patient as a PR tool* (Journalist Brandpunt+ & NRC, Interview #1). The data shows that it is not only the hosts who do not know that Airbnb is present in the background, it is also the speakers at meetings, for example. This becomes further clear in the conversation with the same journalist: *I asked him (a speaker) if he got paid. No more than a bottle of wine. In fact, some of those people have said if I had known that Airbnb was behind this I would have never participated* (Journalist Brandpunt+ & NRC, Interview #1). Drawn from the critical view of the analysed data, hosts and speakers are being misused and their honesty is abused since they do not know that they stretched for Airbnb's wagon. A business ethicist that was interviewed explained why such behaviour undermines the deliberative context as it is important to give people a fair chance

and make them aware of what they are lobbying for: *You have to be able to fight with an open mind because then the other person also has as many chances and insights to make a balanced choice. Otherwise of course one person will always have the advantage. It is not ethical either, because if the interests of a certain sender, company, or authority are served or given priority, other people or a very large group of people may suffer as a result* (Business ethicist, Interview #3).

4.3. Who suffers from astroturf practices?

Due to the similarities in telos, but the differences in eudaimonia that Airbnb seems to not communicate, the data provides input to discuss who suffers from the fact that Airbnb performs astroturfing, namely individual hosts, policymakers, existing grassroot initiatives, and society.

To start with, most data concerns that the hosts who join the home-sharing clubs and thus become part of the community suffer from the astroturf campaign. As mentioned before, the hosts are drawn into the communities based on the idea that Airbnb and the hosts both have the same goal. However, all critical respondents mention that this end goal of Airbnb's community formation and grouping is not the same for both groupings, resulting in ambivalent synergy. These respondents indicate that the hosts can suffer from this, as they lack the information to see through: *The company has advertised for people who have "experience in organising grassroots campaigns" to fight the threat of regulatory action. In Ireland, it contacted a select group of experienced apartment hosts last year and said that a Home Sharing Club was being established* (The Times, Document #26). Here, there is a power relationship of which the participants themselves are not made aware, which can be seen as an abuse of honesty and people in general.

Second, data shows that policymakers are harmed by the use of astroturfing. In their function, it is necessary to look at what rules and legislation are required from society to contribute to a fulfilling life. Based on these signals, they develop laws and regulations that keep a municipality liveable. However, data suggests that the magnifying resistance tactic is set up to ensure that there is interference on the line when it comes to these supplies. The policymakers are tricked and influenced that a certain opinion is supported by a large part of society, while this opinion mainly comes from the PR and marketing department of Airbnb. Some respondents indicate that this makes it more difficult for policymakers to distinguish which opinion is widely held within society or is sponsored by Airbnb: *The whole point of*

astroturf is to try to get the impression there is widespread support for or against an agenda when there is not (TedTalks, Document #34).

Third, what most data sources indicated and what respondent 6 utters is the concern that genuine grassroots initiatives suffer from the existence of astroturf campaigns. As mentioned in the literature on this debate, astroturfing creates mistrust among citizens (Heath et al., 2013). In addition, the credibility of subsequent initiatives might also suffer from this mistrust, as citizens and policymakers no longer know what the underlying message of an initiative is. This concern is underlined in the following quote: *What is the intention of the person sitting opposite you. What the real interests of the person sitting across from you are. Distrust in the functioning of the system itself can also happen very quickly* (Journalist NRC & The Investigative Desk, Interview #6). The concern that Airbnb misuses the good name of grassroot initiatives can create mistrust and deception towards citizens who come together to unite against certain rules and legislation, serving only their own interests: *You get a kind of trench warfare, that if you are in favour of the points made by an organisation you are very quickly suspected of receiving industry money. If you're against it, you're seen as one of those global conservatives who won't give smokers an alternative to the traditional cigarette, the one that has been said for so long to be addictive and carcinogenic, which of course it is. So, from policy-makers who know that this is going on, the suspicion is almost immediately raised that you must be colluding with the industry. That is actually what makes this astroturfing so harmful to this democratic process* (Journalist NRC & The Investigative Desk, Interview #6).

Finally, most respondents and the data analysed here argue that society at large suffers from astroturf campaigns. The risk for society is twofold.

First, according to this research, society at large becomes sceptical about what the underlying message is regarding seemingly grassroots initiatives. Since Airbnb chooses to be opaque about its link to the initiatives, it creates distrust and deception about what is set up by whom and whether the purpose is decisive: *No, it is a deceitful strategy. It is an attempt to lure the public into believing that a particular message has broad active citizens-based support when in reality it is often backed by very big money and pr companies* (Watchdog CEO, Interview #5).

Second, multiple critical respondents indicate that society at large continues to suffer from this strategy as this tactic puts corporate interests above municipal interests. To illustrate, Airbnb invents ways of altering generally applicable rules that increase the

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liveability of a city, to adjust these rules purely out of self-interest. In doing so, data suggests that Airbnb disregards general interest and the liveability of the general society and places the survival of their business model above keeping a city liveable, neglecting the normal democratic process. The following quote emphasises this: *Do they care about the common good? Regardless of the good or bad, have you thought of how this is going to impact your community? All we have is each other* (Journalist SFGate, Interview #4).

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Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter describes the most important results, the link with previous studies, and what the results mean for the research question. The theoretical discussion explains how the findings of this study contradict, add to, or confirm former studies. The following section will discuss what this research has not investigated and what might therefore be relevant to investigate in the future. It then discusses the practical implications of the research findings and what they contribute to the practice. After this, the shortcomings of this research and how to limit them as much as possible are explained. Lastly, this chapter concludes with the reflexivity in which the personal influence of the researcher and the link between the researcher and the subject is explained in more detail.

5.1. Theoretical discussion

This research set out to explore how values are undermined by astroturfing lobbying, from a virtue ethics perspective. In order to answer the research question, the case of Airbnb was investigated.

A core outcome of this study relates to the creation of ambivalent synergy. The existing literature mentions the purpose of an organisation and the members of the initiatives to participate. Existing literature indicates that there is a difference in the purpose for which both parties participate, namely to campaign for their own interests (Cho et al., 2011; Lock & Seele, 2017; van Oers et al, 2018). This research has shown that this is true for eudaimonia, the ultimate goal. However, for the telos, there are many similarities between Airbnb and the hosts that participate. Both parties aim to campaign against regulations and legislation to make it easier for hosts to rent out their flat, room, or house. This corresponding telos, but differing eudaimonia is denoted by the term ambivalent synergy, which can be seen as an addition to existing literature.

A second core outcome of this research is a better understanding of how this 'ambivalent synergy' is created. What steps do they take to resemble a grassroots initiative, but ultimately defend the message driven by an organisation? To this end, data suggest five different tactics. These five tactics, drawn from the data analysis, show how Airbnb creates the feeling among hosts that they are chasing the same telos. Existing literature does write about Airbnb trying to create a sense of community, but does not identify this as a tactic Airbnb uses to persuade people to join a community (Grabs et al., 2016). These tactics (fostering a sense of community, providing infrastructure and expertise, alienating,

magnifying resistance, and marketing strategy) are therefore an addition to the existing literature on how astroturfing is done in practice.

Besides, this research adds to the literature about how values are harmed by astroturfing, as performed by Airbnb, from a virtue ethics point of view. Existing literature mainly discusses what is ethically irresponsible about astroturfing, but has not yet linked to an ethical movement, as this study did. This study suggests a deepening of the existing literature on the ethical issues and question marks surrounding astroturfing, such as the four previous debates (Yates, 2021). In this research, virtue ethics is linked to astroturfing through the framework designed by Vriens et al. (2018) on virtuous structures, consisting of three contexts.

The existing literature regarding the teleological context mentions that workers should be able to reflect on the organisational output and goals proportionate to the societal contribution the corporation wishes to create (Holland, 2010; Vriens et al., 2018). However, resulting from this study, there are some discrepancies in this context given the ambivalent synergy in telos and eudaimonia. With various tactics, such as fostering a sense of community and alienating, Airbnb tries to suppress these discrepancies by making people believe that they should cluster to build a stronger fist. However, this ambivalent synergy therefore also creates distortions in the other two contexts, the deliberative and social contexts. The deliberative context, in which hosts be able to oversee, reflect on, and adjust their actions through deliberation, to make a proper contribution to society is harmed as hosts are not allowed to create an overview of why they perform certain actions. For the social context, which should hosts foresee in reflective discussions about their societal contribution, problems arise as these discussions are mainly framed so that Airbnb keeps control of the astroturf campaign and can steer it to achieve Airbnb's eudaimonia.

Next to this, existing literature already described the different ways in which organisations try to exploit the good name of grassroot initiatives for their own benefits (Zhang et al., 2013). Zhang et al. (2013) describe how organisations set up new initiatives or fund existing initiatives. The results indicate that there is another way in which organisations set up initiatives, namely the establishment of an umbrella organisation that would bring together various small initiatives and would thus be able to exert influence.

Furthermore, the existing literature describes the impact of astroturfing on various groups. For example, Yates (2021) describes the impact on hosts to participate in an initiative regardless of whether they know about astroturfing. Furthermore, McNutt and Boland (2007)

describe the violation of the trust of normal citizens. Floridi (2021) and Fitzpatrick and Palenchar (2006) discuss the impact on policymakers as astroturfing undermines democracy. Finally, McNutt and Boland (2007) also deal with the front groups as a whole, as they are harmed by being used for a different purpose than the goal they originally had in mind. The data from this research also underlines and confirms these findings. Although, this research has an addition to the last group. The data suggests that the legitimacy of all real grassroots initiatives suffers from astroturfing as it is no longer clear to ordinary citizens, policymakers, and society as a whole whether a message is sponsored or not, due to the lack of transparency that organisations give about whether or not they sponsor certain groups. It is difficult for outsiders to judge whether a grassroots initiative is defending its own interests or whether it is an organisational message that is being proclaimed.

Also, Yates (2021) identified four areas in which the debate surrounding the use of astroturfing is growing louder. This study has additions and confirmations per debate. The first debate is about (1) transparency. As in the existing literature, it is also Airbnb that denies any involvement in the initiatives as it is beneficial to keep the entangled interests covert for optimal credibility. Astroturf practices only come to light if it has failed to seem like a grassroot initiative (Walker, 2014). This study adds to this, as the data suggests, that Airbnb continues to deny, as this allows them to use and abuse the good name that a grassroots initiative has in the public eye. Therefore, Airbnb remains denying, even if it has leaked out that they are sponsoring so-called Home Sharing Groups. If Airbnb chooses to become transparent, the good image that they use and abuse falls away and it becomes clear that a message that seems to be led by citizens is led by the money of an organisation, thus losing credibility.

The second debate is on (2) the circulation of benefits and power. Existing literature mentions that the mobilisation of citizens is used mainly to support constituency-building business strategies for citizens in order to win public validity, shape public policy, and shape guidelines (Cho et al., 2011; Yates, 2021). In practice, it turns out that the interests of the citizens are not paramount, but that the organisation's goals are the main interest (Lock & Seele, 2017; Silver, 2012). This research confirms that astroturfing is indeed utilised by organisations to achieve organisational goals. Furthermore, this research also has additions to this debate. In the Airbnb case, the results indicate that there is ambivalent synergy whereby in addition to the self-interest of Airbnb, there are also similarities in goals to be achieved with astroturfing. Whereas the existing theory mainly describes the self-interest of

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organisations, Airbnb also concerns the achievement of goals for the participants of the astroturf campaign, which is a nice by-catch in achieving the eudaimonia.

Subsequently, a debate is held on (3) the democratic institutions and corporate power as astroturf lobbying expels the organic grassroot initiatives and consequently undermines public trust in the legitimacy of democratic creativities. Additionally, existing literature mentions that if organisations use astroturf lobbying, it means that they believe that corporate interests are more vital that the interests of society as a whole (Fitzpatrick & Palenchar, 2006; Floridi, 2021). This research confirms the undermining of democracy if an organisation uses astroturf lobbying by placing its own interests before the public interest. This fits well with the statement made earlier, which is that organisations apply astroturfing mainly out of self-interest.

The last area is a debate on (4) the empowerment of citizens to participate in grassroot initiatives, whereas the question mainly is why a citizen would want to participate in an astroturf campaign (Yates, 2021). The current research indicates that hosts take part due to the ambivalent synergy in goals to achieve. Next to this, due to the lack of transparency given by Airbnb, the hosts do not know that they are participating in an astroturf campaign. Often, it is not a conscious decision to participate in an astroturf campaign.

Last, this research contributes to the general literature on astroturf practices. Several sources have been used to explain astroturfing in general (Cho et al., 2011; Hoggan & Littlemore, 2009; Lits, 2020; Lock et al., 2016; Lock & Seele, 2017; Lyon & Maxwell, 2004). These theories describe how astroturfing is applied in practice, what values are harmed by astroturf practices, and why organisations perform astroturfing (Cho et al., 2011; Lyon & Maxwell, 2004). There is also an addition to the literature as previous literature discusses astroturfing in more established economies such as the energy transition, food waste, and climate change (Feola & Nunes, 2014; Nivrakech et al., 2020; Smith et al. 2016). This research was conducted within a relatively new form of economy, namely the gig economy and sharing platforms. Astroturfing within the gig economy is still a relatively underexposed subject, which also flows from the fact that the gig economy is still a fairly new form of economy. So, where the other literature focuses on astroturfing in established economies, this research focuses on astroturfing within an economy that is still undergoing significant change given its novelty.

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5.2. Future research

First of all, a central limitation of this research is the critical respondent group chosen for this study. Data comes mainly from a critical angle, such as journalists. In addition, newspaper articles were used, which were also written by journalists. Future research could be complementary, creating an even more complete draw of reality by including the members of the Home Sharing Clubs, who practise astroturfing, how they experience astroturfing, what they experience from the Home Sharing Clubs, and how they view astroturfing in general.

This study examined how values are harmed by astroturfing from a virtue ethics point of view. In future research, astroturfing could also be examined from different ethical frameworks. Examples of other major ethical movements are deontology and utilitarianism. In particular deontology and Kant´s Categorical Imperative could help to further assess how astroturfing is an unethical way to instrumentalise people. For example, this could help in understanding how people can be treated as a means only instead of also as an end (van Staveren, 2007). It would be interesting to see how astroturfing scores within the ethical frameworks of these theories.

Furthermore, astroturfing is still a relatively underexposed concept. The scale on which it is applied is often unknown, as it only becomes clear that an organisation is using astroturfing if it is leaked. These insights help us to better understand how organisations practice astroturfing, so that government and citizens and genuine grassroots initiatives can better recognise and counter astroturfing practices in the future. For example, in this research, data suggests the usage of five different tactics used by Airbnb. It could be interesting to investigate whether other companies use the same or additional tactics. In particular, the tobacco industry could be investigated since the data analysis and the interviews made it clear that astroturfing is a lobbying strategy that is also used in this sector. If more knowledge about astroturfing is gained, it may also become easier for outsiders to recognise astroturfing in practice.

5.3. Practical implications

Astroturfing is seen as a lobbying strategy that takes place in the dark as an organisation assumes a different identity. Astroturfing would be a more legitimate and less dark way of lobbying when Airbnb decides to provide transparency on who they support. In other words, the dividing line for the ethical use of astroturfing lies in providing information about which groups Airbnb supports in the fight against regulation and legislation. To clarify, this transparency should be given from both sides. On the one hand, there is Airbnb, which

could state on its website which groups it supports and in what way. On the other hand, it is the initiatives that can shed light on Airbnb's influence on resources and how that affects its mission and vision. This transparency provides clarity to the outside world about the underlying interests that apply to the use of citizens' initiatives. However, the turning point would be that it would no longer be astroturfing in this case, as it no longer takes place in the dark. Nevertheless, it would be fair for the hosts, who do not have information on what they are used for, to know the exact purpose of the astroturf practices.

For many people, recognising astroturf practices is difficult, given the lack of transparency provided by the companies on their applications. The five tactics mentioned earlier could be a start in recognising astroturf practices in practice. If an outsider recognises that certain tactics are used in practice, this could indicate astroturf practices. Especially for the government and policymakers who try to recognise and prohibit astroturfing, these tactics may come in handy. If people are better able to recognise astroturf practices, it will also be easier to identify the underlying message and to not fall for these practices.

Furthermore, astroturfing is utilised by organisations such as Airbnb to influence policymakers, through magnifying resistance, during the drafting process of new regulations and legislation affecting the organisation. A practical implication could be that the use of astroturfing should be more regulated, as Fitzpatrick and Palenchar (2006) already asked for the tightening of rules and guidelines. In the introduction, it was already mentioned that Malbon (2013) discussed the legal requirement for promoters and organisations to divulge their mutually financial relationship. However, astroturfing is still performed in practice. An example of an industry with stricter rules battling astroturfing is the tobacco industry. That industry introduced the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which states that a policymaker should keep the door closed to the tobacco industry until the policy is finalised (WHO, 2004). After that, talks can be started with organisations about the implementation of the newly designed regulations. Such stricter restrictions than the ones already existing should also be applied in the formation of rules and regulations for the sharing platforms and gig economy so that the interests of Airbnb do not take precedence over the general social interest of society as a whole.

As a final practical implication, Airbnb should openly debate whether using astroturfing and putting one's own interests ahead of the general interest of a population is a legitimate way to run a business model. Airbnb's business model causes a lot of nuisances in the inner cities of tourist towns like Amsterdam. To curb this nuisance, the municipality is

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developing laws and regulations to combat it. Airbnb should ask itself whether it is ethically responsible to use astroturfing to influence rules and regulations that benefit Airbnb and adversely affect the daily lives of residents of that same city.

5.4. Limitations

As for every study, there are limitations to this research as well. In the context of transparency and research ethics, it is good to inform the reader of this.

First, no to very little empirical data from the hosts' side of the view is gathered, as mainly the critical side in the form of journalists and articles written by journalists were included. Also, with the focus on virtue ethics, other ethical theories are excluded. This choice was made as a precaution to limit the width of the study. In addition, one ethical theory allows for a more in-depth investigation.

Furthermore, this study was conducted using a qualitative research methodology. This methodology has some limitations of its own, such as interpretation biases which affect the research credibility (Vennix, 2019). This bias means that the researcher interprets a statement differently from how the interviewee or writer of a document intended it (Vennix, 2019). Since the interviews were conducted online, it was even more difficult to pick up on non-verbal signals. However, by increasing the credibility, an attempt was made to avoid the biases. Credibility in this study was increased through peer debriefing and member checking. This ensured that the respondents were able to review the transcripts and make any nuance distinctions, if necessary. Furthermore, the research has an interpretation bias, as mainly critical people who can be seen as experts were interviewed. However, by also adding a business ethicist, a watchdog, and a member of the Facebook Group to the respondents, an attempt was made to strike a balance.

Additionally, transferability is limited in qualitative research, as there are seven people and 34 documents included in this study. To determine the transferability to another setting where astroturfing is used, the reader of this study should form their own judgment as to whether it is possible. By means of a thick case description in the introduction and openness about the interview protocol, transferability was considered. Furthermore, the study also has multiple data collection methods, such as interviews and document analysis, which also increases the transferability and credibility of this study. Future research could include data triangulation or using several cases to make sure that the research question is approached from different directions.

Another limitation of this study is the non-probability sampling method used in determining who to interview. Non-probability sampling means that the researcher decided who was interviewed, meaning that not every other person has been given the chance to participate (Vennix, 2019). This was a deliberate choice, as astroturfing asks for specific knowledge. Hence, the researcher influenced this by determining who to interview for the study. To apply a more inclusive method of research including probability sampling, it might be interesting to research what the general opinion on astroturfing is. In doing so, the focus will be less on astroturfing from a corporate perspective and more on astroturfing in general.

5.5. Reflexivity

This research has provided me with new knowledge and insights in several areas. First of all, I chose the gig economy since this fast-growing form of economy, with companies such as Flink and Deliveroo, was still relatively unknown to me. Secondly, I chose to do a case study on Airbnb, as I have been booking holiday addresses via the site for several years and am therefore familiar with the "fun" side of the organisation. It was therefore interesting and broadening to see this seemingly positive company in a different light. Furthermore, the research method was also relatively new to me. In my previous two theses, I had only used interviews. To now add a document analysis to the method was first of all exciting for me. I remember a question to my first supervisor: "Will I get enough data with a document analysis?" The answer that in the end I even had to choose which sources to use, because there was so much data, came true. The challenge of using a research method that was new to me was initially quite exciting, but in the end, it turned out very well.

Furthermore, this research has made me realise that not everything is what it seems. In the future, I will place a question mark over citizens' movements in particular and ask myself to what extent they are set up by citizens or whether there is an organisation behind the initiative. The fact that not everything is what it seems is also a lesson I take with me into the work field as an aspiring HR professional. In addition, a lot of reading and conversations about ethics have helped with a bit of awareness about how you can and should act ethically as a person. If I enter the work field this summer, I can take these lessons about creating this most utility and "being" an ethical person with me and apply them. Ethics is a subject that, before I started this thesis, I had not been very involved with. By being intensely involved with it over the past six months, I have come to realize that acting ethically ensures that you are hopefully perceived as having integrity and trustworthiness, two core traits that are of great importance in an HR department. Virtue ethics helped me to come to these insights

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because this theory is about developing good character traits and wanting to do "good", such

as being honest and credible.

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Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study answers the following research question: *How are values undermined by astroturfing from a virtue ethics point of view?* To this end, qualitative research was conducted through document analysis and interviews.

Looking at the three different contexts that virtuous structures should meet to be seen as ethical from a virtue ethical point of view, it can be concluded that astroturfing cannot be experienced as an ethical way of lobbying. What hinders the creation of an ethical, teleological structure is the difference in the ultimate goal that the hosts and Airbnb are trying to achieve and the lack of transparency that Airbnb provides to hosts and the outside world regarding what goal they are trying to achieve in supporting and setting up "grassroot initiatives". From the results, it can therefore be concluded that these different ultimate goals also mean that the deliberative and social contexts are not fully realised.

In the results of how Airbnb applies astroturfing in practice, five tactics are recognised, which are complementary to the existing theory. Airbnb is heavily involved in creating a sense of community, providing necessary resources and expertise, magnifying problems that are at play in society for their gain, share the feeling that Airbnb is helping hosts in fighting unfavourable laws and regulations, and they are busy making people believe that Airbnb has no involvement whatsoever with the Home Sharing Groups.

The introduction introduces the host, policymakers, and society as different groups who are harmed by astroturfing. This research shows that apart from the hosts, policymakers and the society, the existing genuine grassroot initiatives are also emboldened by astroturf practices, due to the loss of credibility in such groups through the lack of transparency from organisations.

This is where the main room for improvement lies. First of all, regulation needs to be stricter, using the tobacco industry as an example, ensuring that groups are kept out of policy-making rooms until rules and legislation are in place and thereby reducing the influence of organisations on policy. Furthermore, organisations, such as Airbnb, that practice astroturfing should ask themselves whether they want to be associated with unethical practices such as astroturfing. A first step would be to provide transparency about which groups Airbnb supports or has founded. Future research could focus more on the application of astroturfing in practice and investigate how lobbying can be properly implemented by organisations.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview guide pilot

<u>Introduction</u>

First of all, I would like to thank you again for participating in this research. In the communication before this interview, I explained the structure and topics involved. If there are any questions about this, please let me know. If not, I would like to continue. The purpose of this research is to investigate the ethical underpinnings of why Airbnb uses astroturfing as a lobbying strategy from the point of view of the ethical current named virtue ethics. I would like to know what your experiences are with this. This interview has two different parts. First, I will ask some questions about astroturfing and how you experience this phenomenon. Then I will ask questions that illuminate astroturfing from the ethical standpoint and how this alters your view. The interview will be recorded with the dictaphone on my phone. The interview will ultimately only be viewed by myself and my two supervisors of the thesis and will therefore not be in the hands of third parties. I will also send you the written interview so that you can review it and make any comments. The written interview will be completely anonymised so that the statements are not linked to you as a person. No personal data will be included in the study. If you indicate this, there is always the possibility to stop early. At that moment the interview will be terminated immediately. Are there any further questions?

<u>Astroturfing</u>

1. Experts: how would you define astroturfing?
    o Non-experts: explain the term OR talk about lobbying practice.
2. What do you think of astroturfing?
3. Is astroturfing ethical and why?
4. Can astroturfing ever be ethical and why?
5. What goal is astroturfing trying to achieve?
6. Why is the use of astroturf practices legit/not legit in your opinion?
7. How transparent do you think astroturfing is?
8. How do you see the role of citizens in astroturfing?
9. To what extent do you think astroturf practices influence people's perceptions and beliefs?
10. Why do citizens voluntarily participate in an astroturf practice?

<u>Teleological context</u>

11. What is the benefit of implementing astroturf practices?

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12. What is the disadvantage of implementing astroturf practices?

13. Under what conditions is astroturfing ok?

14. To what extent do you think that a morally sound organisation carries out astroturf

practices?

Teleological context

15. Who does the company serve when performing astroturfing?

16. What are (un-)intended effects of this and why is this problematic?

17. Whom do the citizen initiatives serve?

18. Which values and goals does an organisation pursue when applying astroturfing?

   o   What are the effects of this on others?

Social context

19. To what extent is there room for deliberation in the foreseen outcome?

20. To what extent do you think the performers of the astroturf practices have a say?

Completion

This means that we have reached the end of the interview. Do you have any
comments that might be important in the research that we have not discussed so far? As a
result, I will start writing out the interviews. For now, I would like to thank you for your time
and wish you a pleasant day.

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Appendix B: Interview guide English final

Introduction

First of all, I would like to thank you again for participating in this research. In the communication before this interview, I explained the structure and topics involved. If there are any questions about this, please let me know. If not, I would like to continue. The purpose of this research is to investigate the ethical underpinnings of why Airbnb uses astroturfing as a lobbying strategy from the point of view of the ethical current named virtue ethics. I would like to know what your experiences are with this. This interview has two different parts. First, I will ask some questions about astroturfing and how you experience this phenomenon. Then I will ask questions that illuminate astroturfing from the ethical standpoint and how this alters your view. The interview will be recorded with the dictaphone on my phone. The interview will ultimately only be viewed by myself and my two supervisors of the thesis and will therefore not be in the hands of third parties. I will also send you the written interview so that you can review it and make any comments. The written interview will be completely anonymised so that the statements are not linked to you as a person. No personal data will be included in the study. If you indicate this, there is always the possibility to stop early. At that moment the interview will be terminated immediately. Are there any further questions?

Astroturfing

1. Experts: how would you define astroturfing?
    a. Non-experts: explain the term and talk about the lobbying practice.
2. What do you think of astroturfing?
3. What goal is astroturfing trying to achieve?
4. What are the (dis)advantages for Airbnb in applying astroturfing
5. Why is the use of astroturf practices legit/not legit in your opinion?
6. Is astroturfing ethical and why?
7. Can astroturfing ever be ethical and why?
8. What would make Airbnb a good citizen for lobbying practices?
9. What values are and are not violated by astroturf lobbying?

Teleological context

10. Who does the company serve when performing astroturfing?
11. What are (un-)intended effects of astroturfing and why is this problematic?
12. Whom do the citizen initiatives serve?
13. Which values and goals does Airbnb pursue when applying astroturfing?

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a. What are the effects of this on others?

Deliberative context

14. To what extent does Airbnb offer any kind of help, to citizen initiatives?

a. Is this ethical to do?

15. To what extent do citizens have a say in what is being lobbied for?

a. And do they have the ability to adjust it?

16. What kind of actions do citizens take against the new rules and legislation?

Social context

17. How does Airbnb communicate with citizens?

18. To what extent is there deliberation between Airbnb and citizens?

19. To what extent is there deliberation with the municipalities on the laws?

20. How do citizens decide what actions to take to oppose rule and law?

a. How do they determine what is a good counter-strategy to make it clear that they do not agree with certain rules and legislation?

Completion

This means that we have reached the end of the interview. Do you have any comments that might be important in the research that we have not discussed so far? As a result, I will start writing out the interviews. For now, I would like to thank you for your time and wish you a pleasant day.

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Appendix C: Interview guide Dutch final

Introductie

Allereerst wil ik u nogmaals bedanken voor uw deelname aan dit onderzoek. In de communicatie voorafgaand aan dit interview heb ik de opzet en de onderwerpen uitgelegd. Mochten hier vragen over zijn, dan hoor ik dat graag. Zo niet, dan ga ik graag verder. Het doel van dit onderzoek is om te onderzoeken wat de ethische onderbouwing is waarom Airbnb astroturfing als lobbystrategie gebruikt vanuit het oogpunt van de ethische stroming genaamd deugdethiek. Ik zou graag willen weten wat uw ervaringen hiermee zijn. Dit interview bestaat uit twee verschillende delen. Eerst zal ik enkele vragen stellen over astroturfing en hoe u dit fenomeen ervaart. Daarna zal ik vragen stellen die astroturfing belichten vanuit het ethische standpunt en hoe dit uw visie verandert. Het interview zal worden opgenomen met de dictafoon van mijn telefoon. Het interview zal uiteindelijk alleen bekeken worden door mijzelf en mijn twee begeleiders van de scriptie en zal dus niet in handen komen van derden. Ik zal u ook het schriftelijke interview toesturen, zodat u het kunt nalezen en eventueel opmerkingen kunt maken. Het schriftelijke interview zal volledig geanonimiseerd zijn, zodat de uitspraken niet aan u als persoon gekoppeld zijn. Er zullen geen persoonlijke gegevens in het onderzoek worden opgenomen. Indien u dit aangeeft, is er altijd de mogelijkheid om voortijdig te stoppen. Op dat moment zal het interview onmiddellijk worden beëindigd. Zijn er nog vragen?

Astroturfing

1. Deskundigen: hoe zou u astroturfing omschrijven?
   a. Niet-deskundigen: leg astroturfen nader uit.
2. Wat is uw mening over astroturfing?
3. Welk doel probeert men met astroturfing te bereiken?
4. Wat zijn de voor- en nadelen voor Airbnb bij het toepassen van astroturfing?
5. Waarom is het gebruik van astroturf praktijken volgens u wel/niet legitiem?
6. Is astroturfing ethisch verantwoord en waarom?
7. Kan astroturfing ooit ethisch zijn en waarom?
8. Wat voor lobby praktijken zijn wel legitiem voor Airbnb om in te zetten?
9. Welke waarden worden wel en niet geschonden door astroturf lobbyen?

Teleological context

10. Voor wie bedrijft een organisatie astroturfing?
11. Wat zijn (on-)bedoelde effecten van astroturfing en waarom is dit problematisch?

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12. Wie dienen de burgerinitiatieven?

13. Welke waarden en doelen streeft Airbnb na bij het toepassen van astroturfing?

    a. Wat zijn de effecten hiervan op anderen?

Deliberative context

14. In hoeverre biedt Airbnb enige vorm van hulp aan burgerinitiatieven?

    a. Is dit ethisch verantwoord om te doen?

15. In hoeverre hebben burgers inspraak in waarvoor er gelobbyd wordt?

    a. En hebben zij de mogelijkheid om dit aan te passen?

16. Wat voor acties ondernemen burgers tegen de nieuwe regels en wetgeving?

Social context

17. Hoe communiceert Airbnb met burgers?

18. In hoeverre is er sprake van overleg tussen Airbnb en burgers?

19. In hoeverre is er overleg met de gemeenten over de wetten?

20. Hoe bepalen burgers welke acties ze moeten ondernemen om zich tegen regel en wetgeving te verzetten?

    a. Hoe bepalen zij wat een goede tegenstrategie is om duidelijk te maken dat zij het niet eens zijn met bepaalde regel en wetgeving?

Afronding

Dit betekent dat we het einde van het interview hebben bereikt. Heeft u nog opmerkingen die van belang kunnen zijn voor het onderzoek en die we tot nu toe niet hebben besproken? Dan zal ik beginnen met het uitschrijven van de interviews. Voor nu wil ik u bedanken voor uw tijd en wens ik u een prettige dag.

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Appendix D: Informed consent

Thijs Veldhuis +31628021662

Radboud Universiteit

My name is Thijs Veldhuis. I am a master student of Business Administration, specialising in Organisational Design and Development at the Radboud University in Nijmegen. In order to complete my master's degree, I am performing a thesis on the research question: *How are values undermined by astroturfing from a virtue ethics point of view?* During the execution I am supervised and guided by first supervisor Dr. C. Gross and second examiner Dr. D.J. Vriens. The duration of this interview is around one hour. For further processing and analysis of this interview, I would like to record the interview with recording material on my phone. Furthermore, in order to guarantee your anonymity, no personal information is included in the written interviews. This means that names and suchlike are crossed out. Besides, I would like to inform you that you can receive the transcript of the interview in order to indicate any misinterpretations. The completed thesis will be shared only with Radboud University and will not be made available to third parties. The topics discussed in this interview will be astroturfing and your view on astroturfing from the orientation of the ethical current virtue ethics. I am interested in hearing your personal opinions and views related to these topics. If you feel uncomfortable with the questions asked or want to stop the interview early, there is a possibility to do so. If you indicate that you wish to stop, the interview will stop immediately.

1	I have read the informed consent and agree to the above	Yes	No
2	I consent to being questioned on the above-named subjects	Yes	No
3	I understand that I am participating in the study voluntarily and that I may stop participating at any time	Yes	No
4	I am willing to participate in the interview	Yes	No

Participant:_____Date: ___-___-_____ Signature: _____

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Appendix E: Coding template

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Example quote
Ambivalent synergy	Matching goals hosts and Airbnb	Hosts astroturf for their own goals	Ze verzet zich tegen "paternalistische wetgeving", zoals belastingen op frisdranken en e-sigaretten, die de vrijheid van de consument zou beperken.
		Cooperation hosts and Airbnb	De organisatie kiest eveneens voor een algemeen statement. Daarin zegt het "partnerschappen" aan te gaan met organisaties, die onze visies onderschrijven wat betreft onderwerpen die belangrijk zijn voor ons bedrijf".
		Campaign for outcome for the hosts	Dat omwonenden het woord van de overheid niet voor zoete koek slikken, is niet nieuw. Vroeger kwamen deze geluiden vooral aan bod via politieke partijen, vakbonden of lokale actiegroepen. Tegenwoordig vormen burgers hun eigen collectief om gaten te schieten in rapporten en beleidskeuzes.
		Interests hosts and Airbnb match	In the case of Airbnb, protecting the interests of the company can be done in part by mobilising their hosts who would have often have the same interests.
		Rights hosts served	Wie wij daarmee dienen is natuurlijk ook onszelf, omdat wij als hosten willen doorgaan waar wij mee bezig zijn.
	Not-compliant goals hosts and Airbnb	Achieving a positive result for Airbnb	Door z'n astroturf actie lukt het Airbnb bepaalde regels in hun voordeel te krijgen. Dan houdt de overlast van toerisme ook niet op.
		Hosts astroturf for Airbnb's' goals	Het inzetten van, zeg ik dat goed, van een ethische lobby voor een bedrijfsdoelstelling.
		Hosts used for corporate goals	Dus je doet hem voor als democratische beweging die hun eigen belangen behartigd, maar het is eigenlijk een

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			commerciële beweging die jouw belangen behartigd.
		Airbnb's interests are only important	First and foremost, they set up these groups to serve their own purposes.
		Rights Airbnb served	Het doel van een platform zoals Airbnb is altijd, in eerste plaats marktaandeel veroveren, omdat ze een tweezijdige markt zijn.
		Self-interest	Serving themselves, because they are invested with their business.

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Appendix F: Email interviewees English

Dear Sir / Madam,

Thank you for accepting my invitation on LinkedIn / answering my mail to get into conversation regarding astroturfing. I am doing research on this topic for my Master Thesis, in order to complete the Master Business Administration with specialization in Organisational Design and Development at the Radboud University in Nijmegen. The central research question of my thesis is as follows: *" How are values undermined by astroturfing from a virtue ethics point of view?"*

The interview will last about one hour and roughly consists of four themes. First, there are a few general questions regarding astroturfing that I would like to ask you. Subsequently, from the application of literature to my research, I examine the ethical part of astroturfing using three different contexts.

- **Teleological context.** This context is about employees being able to reflect on the goals and outcome of an organisation in relation to what impact the organisation has on society.

- **Deliberative context.** This context serves to ensure that members of an organisation oversee the consequences of their actions and are thus able to make adjustments in order to achieve the desired result.

- **Social context.** This context is about enabling members of an organisation to have discussions in which they look at their actions and what could possibly be done better.

Also, attached to this email is an informed consent describing what happens with the interview and what happens with the results of the study. Questions about this are always welcome. In addition, I have enclosed a zoom link where we can meet on DATE AND TIME. I look forward to speaking with you then.

Kind Regards,
Thijs Veldhuis

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Appendix G: Email interviewees Dutch

Beste meneer/ mevrouw,

Bedankt voor het accepteren van mijn uitnodiging op LinkedIn/ het beantwoorden van mijn mail om in gesprek te komen wat betreft astroturfing. Ik doe hier een onderzoek naar voor mijn Master Thesis, om zodoende de Master Business Administration met specialisatie Organisational Design and Development aan de Radboud Universiteit in Nijmegen af te ronden. De centrale onderzoeksvraag van mijn thesis luidt als volgt: *"How are values undermined by astroturfing from a virtue ethics point of view?"*

Het interview zal ongeveer een uur uren en bestaat grofweg uit vier thema's. Allereerst zijn er een paar algemene vragen omtrent astroturfing die ik u graag zou willen stellen. Vanuit de toepassing van literatuur op mijn onderzoek, onderzoek ik het ethische gedeelte van astroturfing aan de hand van drie verschillende contexten.

- **Teleological context.** Deze context gaat erover dat werknemers kunnen reflecteren op de doelen en uitkomst van een organisatie in relatie tot wat de organisatie voor impact heeft op de maatschappij.
- **Deliberative context.** Deze context dient ervoor dat leden van een organisatie de consequenties van hun acties overzien en zodoende kunnen bijsturen om het gewenste resultaat te behalen.
- **Social context.** Deze context gaat erover dat leden van een organisatie in staat worden gesteld discussies te voeren waarin zij kijken naar hun daden en wat er eventueel beter gedaan kan worden.

Verder is er bijgevoegd bij deze mail een informed consent waarin beschreven staat wat er met het interview gebeurt en wat er met de uitkomsten van het onderzoek gebeurt. Vragen hierover is altijd welkom. Daarnaast heb ik een zoomlink meegestuurd waarop wij elkaar op DATUM EN TIJDSTIP kunnen ontmoeten. Ik kijk er naar uit om u dan te spreken.

Groet,

Thijs Veldhuis

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Appendix H: Message Facebook Group

Wie wilt mij helpen met mijn studie?

Beste allemaal,

Ter afronding van mijn studie bedrijfskunde doe ik momenteel onderzoek naar Airbnb
die hun verhuurders toejuicht om zich te verenigen in communities (zoals deze facebook
groep) om zo samen sterk te staan. Ik ben vooral benieuwd naar waarom mensen zich precies
zich aansluiten bij een facebook groep als deze, wat daar de winst voor u in is, hoe actief u
bezig bent met deze groep en hoe groot de sturing is vanuit Airbnb binnen deze groep.

Zijn er mensen in deze groep die hierover met mij in gesprek willen gaan om dit eens
verder te bespreken? Ik hoor graag uw verhalen over hoe lang u al lid bent van de groep en
wat deze groep u heeft opgeleverd! Het zou mij heel erg helpen als u mij verder wilt helpen.

Vriendelijke groet,

Thijs Veldhuis

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Appendix I: Overview documents

Document	Title Document	Source	Date of Publication	Number of pages	Reference number
Newspaper	Airbnb hielp Amsterdammers een handje zich te mobiliseren tegen hun gemeentebestuur.	Brandpunt+	December 11, 2019	4	#1
	Hotel group, Airbnb stoke lobby rumble	Daily News	July 17, 2017	2	#2
	Zij werkt bij Airbnb om met u en ons een relatie op te bouwen.	De Volkskrant	January 5, 2018	5	#3
	Airbnb using 'independent' host groups to lobby policymakers.	Financial Times	March 21, 2021	2	#4
	1500 Amsterdammers moeten hun woning voor 1 juli van Airbnb halen.	Het Parool	June 25, 2020	2	#5
	Amsterdam in beroep tegen schrappen verbod vakantieverhuur.	Het Parool	April 14, 2021	2	#6
	De laatste boerin vertrekt, maar Facebook komt niet; Hoe Facebook zich vastdraaide in de Hollandse polder; Facebook voerde een agressieve lobby voor een datacentrum in Zeewolde. Toch ging het mis.	NRC	March 31, 2022	7	#7
	Hoe Obama's zorgplan slim werd ondermijnd: Steun brokkelde af na interventie Sarah Palin Gezondheidszorg VS. President in problemen gebracht door Sarah Palin, Facebook en vijftig anonieme lobbyisten Gezonheidszorg VS. Obama wil concurrentie voor verzekeraars, maar Democraten beginnen terug te krabbelen.	NRC	September 8, 2014	4	#8
	Clowns nemen journalisten in het ootje.	NRC	June 8, 2013	2	#9
	Het leek zo'n goed idee: Maar tegen 75.000 lobbyisten kan Obama niet op.	NRC	September 20, 2014	4	#10

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	Handhaving Airbnb roept burgers op tot protest tegen gemeente.	NRC	May 24, 2017	1	#11
	Hoe Airbnb toch weeraan het langste eind trekt; Airbnb kan zijn gang blijven gaan; Het verhuurplatform blijkt nauw betrokken bij het opstellen van nieuwe regels voor vakantieverhuur.	NRC	December 7, 2019	7	#12
	Jokken op een blog; Bedrijven en overheid misbruiken webblogs voor pr-campagnes.	NRC	July 31, 2012	2	#13
	Laat burgers politici helpen: organiseer een burgerberaad; Democratie Doe als Macron; laat burgers grote politieke problemen oplossen.	NRC	July 4, 2020	4	#14
	Met torenhoge ambities gaat Airbnb de kritiek te lijf; Vakantieverhuur in Amsterdam.	NRC	September 27, 2018	3	#15
	Hoe de tabaksindustrie de consument voor haar karretje spant; Tabakslobby vermomd als burgerbeweging; als bezorgde 'consument' strijdt de tabakslobby tegen strenge wetgeving voor e-sigaretten.	NRC	November 4, 2021	6	#16
	Maatregelen voor Bed and Breakfast-houders verzacht, maar de loting blijft; Ook voor de vele Bed & Breakfasts komen nu strenge regels.	NRC	November 23, 2019	2	#17
	San Francisco voters reject proposition to restrict Airbnb rentals; in a result that was close than expected, 55% of voters rejected the proposal, which would have reduced the number of days owners can rent out properties.	The Guardian	April 27, 2022	2	#18
	Airbnb routinely deploys its 'astroturf army' to combat California short-term rental regulations, critics say.	The Guardian	March 28, 2022	3	#19
	Airbnb: from home sharing cool to commercial giant:	The Guardian	March 18, 2016	6	#20

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	Airbnb started in 2008 after the founders rented out an airbed in their spare room. Two million listings later, Guardian Travel investigates how high-profit landlords and third-party management companies are undermining its founding principles.				
	How Airbnb and Uber use tactics that disguise their corporate lobbying as grassroots campaigns.	The Guardian	April 15, 2021	3	#21
	Berlin and Barcelona use sleuths to root our illegal holiday lets; The cities blame Airbnb for making the housing market unaffordable for residents	The Guardian	May 21, 2018	3	#22
	Airbnb admits it helped hosts bombard MSPs with emails.	The Times	February 27, 2019	2	#23
	Airbnb drops "lovebombs" on MSPs to limit clampdown.	The Times	February 26, 2019	2	#24
	Airbnb faces curbs on letting by landlords.	The Times	November 3, 2019	2	#25
	Airbnb secretly lobbying against restrictions.	The Times	February 18, 2017	3	#26
	Amsterdam wil b&b's aanpakken met lotingsysteem. Verhuurders reageren geschokt.	Trouw	July 24, 2019	3	#27
	Burgers zijn een prima tegenmacht.	Trouw	August 3, 2021	2	#28
	De financiers van ultra-rechts Amerika	Trouw	December 20, 2016	6	#29
Communic ation Airbnb towards Hosts	Locatie bijeenkomst a.s. maandag 23 april: belastingen	Amsterdam Gastvrij	April 18, 2018	1	#30
	Uitnodiging - informatie avond belastingen en verkiezingen	Amsterdam Gastvrij	April 11, 2018	1	#31
	SAVE THE DATE: Nieuwjaarsborrel Airbnb Amsterdam	Amsterdam Gastvrij	January 8, 2018	1	#32
	Making the most of Home Sharing Groups as an Airbnb host.	Website Airbnb	N.D.	2	#33

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YouTube Video	Astroturf and manipulation of media messages; Sharyl Attkisson; TED x University of Nevada	TedTalk	February 6, 2015	4	#34
Page numbers				102	