

The power of visual representations and the growing aestheticization of food. An interdisciplinary analysis of Airbnb visual content in Siena

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at exploring the role played by visual content in the processes of place touristification and commodification that are initiated and accelerated by online platforms. The analysis addresses the photographs through which Airbnb hosts illustrate and promote their accommodations, focusing on food images as the most fertile terrain for the inquiry, by virtue of the density of its aesthetic, social, geographical, and cultural meanings, constantly evoked by the photos. The analysis is based on a corpus of 250 listings located in the Municipality of Siena (Tuscany, Italy) present on Airbnb between November 2020 and February 2022, and 3960 photographs of the interiors uploaded by hosts. To this end, the authors develop an interdisciplinary method of investigation that synergistically integrates the geographical approach with interpretative models applied in the fields of semiotics and visual studies. The city of Siena is itself an excellent case study. Thanks to its small size, it was possible to map the entire set of accommodations present in the territory during the indicated period, which makes the corpus homogeneous and exhaustive; as a major tourist attraction in Tuscany and nationwide, the link between food, tourism and local identity is particularly strong and therefore worthy of study. Based on the outcomes, the conclusions show the effects and dynamics of a process of image normalization that differs profoundly from the promise of authentic and unique tourist experiences summed up in the platform's slogan "living like a local".

1. Introduction

The rapid spread of tech platforms and their penetration into many areas of social, economic and cultural life (Srnicek, 2017) have led many academics to focus on their power and their impact on the life of communities, through the processes of platformization of society (Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2018; Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018) and culture (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Generally taken to be a kind of infrastructure that allows two or more groups to interact, a sort of architecture designed to orchestrate interactions between different users and services (Libert, Wind, & Fenley, 2014; Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018; Van Dijck et al., 2018), platforms are characterized above all as intermediaries that connect different subjects: users, advertisers, providers of services, producers, and even physical objects (the Internet of things). These companies do not confine themselves to replacing the traditional intermediaries and middlemen, but act as an interface between what Manuel Castells called the space of flows and the space of places: "cities are being transformed by the interface between electronic communication and physical interaction, by the combination of

networks and places" (Castells, 2015, p. 233).

Among the large number of short-term rental platforms available on the digital market, Airbnb is by far the most significant case for investigating the role of platforms in shaping places and accelerating their touristification.

Besides being the leading multinational in the sector, Airbnb has based its branding discourse precisely on the value of places, involving a rhetoric of authenticity and uniqueness similar to those used by experiential tourism and active tourism more generally (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Smith, 2006). It is precisely this idea of travel, summed up in the well-known catchphrase "live like a local", that lies at the foundation of Airbnb's philosophy and economy. From its origins as a San Francisco start-up founded in 2008 by Brian Chesky, Joe Gebbia and Nathan Blecharczyk, the platform progressively modeled its business identity on the idea of authenticity of the tourist experience that its services allow users to enjoy.

While in 2013 the platform described itself as a "trusted community marketplace for people to list, discover, and book unique accommodations around the world" (Airbnb, 2013), in 2020 it claimed that "Our

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diverse global community makes Airbnb possible. Building an inclusive platform for all hosts and guests is our greatest goal [...]”). The communitarian values emphasized by the company set out a specific economy of feeling, implying the dual “soft task” for hosts and guests of sociability and peer-to-peer communication.

More explicitly, the Airbnb platform configures itself as the interface not only in the economic transactions but also in the social interactions (between hosts and guests) and in the production and sharing of information disclosed by the platform but relating to the specific place where the accommodation is located. Information is offered in the form of photos, texts and rankings produced by the platform users (i.e. hosts and guests). As such, the information system is not at all neutral: it influences decisions, affects prices, provides signals to the platforms’ matching and search algorithms, creates value, and distributes this value in a non-uniform way, with consequences both for the participants and the places (Celata, 2018; Celata, Capineri, & Romano, 2020). Indeed, this open, free and decentralized business model is paradoxically able to concentrate and maintain considerable power, capturing socially produced economic value (Rossi, 2019) and transferring it to locations.¹

Thus, the mechanism of information production and circulation induced by the Airbnb platform encourages us to investigate how the representations of place through the photos, along with a wide range of other layerings and discourses, are implicated in the creation of tourism imaginaries which are transmitted by the platform among the global community.

Photos play a crucial role, both when choosing accommodation, since it is through these that the guest’s expectations are formed, and at the moment of reviewing, when the user assesses if and to what extent these expectations were met, disappointed, or even exceeded. To summarize, photos create a visual-based trust whose influence is as strong as – if not stronger than – the reputation created by reviews and rankings (Ert, Fleischer, & Magen, 2016). Recent studies have investigated the role of personal photos which are revealed to be fundamental for trust and reputation building (Ert et al., 2016; Ert & Fleischer, 2020) but scarce attention has been given to the images of the accommodations in the formation of place imaginaries fuelled by the platform. Indeed, the photographs of the listings are dense and layered narratives both about the tourist destination and the forthcoming experience.

In order to fill this research gap, this article addresses the visual content that hosts create and share through the platform as a consequence of this more or less explicit injunction to communicate, focusing on the representations of food offered by the images accompanying the listings in the Municipality of Siena (Tuscany, Italy). Among the assets that appear in the photographic descriptions of the properties, we decided to concentrate on food images. Both a resource and an emblem of nourishment and conviviality, as well as an essential part of the construction of individual and collective identity, food is the lens through which we examine the relationships between the space of the platform and the place in which that food is displayed and consumed. Overall, food plays a multifaceted role in tourist practices, encompassing cultural exploration and exchange, authentic experiences, destination differentiation and uniqueness (Rabbiosi, 2019; Sims, 2009); moreover, the growing aestheticization of food and the appeal of geographical imagery to promote tourist destinations and experiences strengthen our analytical perspective (Rabbiosi, 2018, p.72, Sassatelli & Arfini, 2017). To this end, food images were extracted from a large dataset created for the purpose by the authors which includes all the 3960 photos uploaded by hosts of the 250 listings in Siena and the surrounding area in a period of nearly two years. The article draws from the research carried out within a transdisciplinary project on short-term rental platforms which aims – among other objectives – at exploring the representations of places (cities, neighborhoods, homes) channeled

through the platform and how these appeal to authenticity and the experiential dimension of tourism.²

In the paper, we attempt to reconstruct an interdisciplinary approach, developed by the authors over nearly three years, drawing mainly from semiotics, visual studies and geography in order to fully address the meaning expressed by visual items, read and analyze images from images, by shifting the focus of the question from *what an image means*, or *how an individual reacts to an image*, to *how the scopic regime*³ works, that is, the perceptive and theoretical device that links together the subject and the object of the vision and regulates their relationship in the production of destination imaginaries. The term *imaginary* refers both to the iconographic archive shared by a community or culture, i.e. the images that individuals hold in common and form the shared visual memory, and the outcome of the effects of these images on the imaginative activity of the subjects exposed to them (cfr. among others Cray, 1992, Baudrillard, 1994, Zimmermann, Didi-Huberman, et al., 2006 Eds, Mitchell & Hansen, 2010, Salazar, 2012). Imaginaries may be built through varied media and tools, including literature and narratives embodied in different contents; but for the purpose of this analysis, we focus photographic images. Along this line of enquiry, our analysis aims to answer the following questions: which are the tourist imaginaries enacted by the food photos, addressed as user-generated advertisement narratives aimed at promoting properties? How do these imaginaries link to the place?

The paper is structured in five parts. After the introduction which sets the context of the analysis (platform society), the following section (§2) illustrates the theoretical framework as a novel transdisciplinary approach involving semiotics and geography; the methodology used for the data collection and analysis is described in §3. The findings, reported in §4, highlight the strategies for the tourist valorization of accommodation expressed by photographs, focusing on two main points: the representation of places depicted in the photographs and the tourist imaginaries shown or implied by the visual contents and related narratives. Conclusions are summarized in §5.

2. Theoretical framework

The power of the visual representation of places in the construction of tourism destination images has been widely explored. Most of the literature agree that the marketing of tourist destinations requires that essential features of the place be represented and shaped into imaginaries that will be attractive to tourists (Jenkins, 1999; Morgan & Pritchard, 1998). Moreover, scientific evidence highlights that the destination image needs to match closely the real characteristics of the place otherwise tourists will be disappointed and will not recommend the destination to others. At the same time, tourism images should also raise or suggest emotional and experiential qualities from exoticism to dream fulfillment (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998; Urry & Larsen, 2011). This kind of approach moves beyond the passive gaze of the visual to explore the process of production and consumption of tourist destinations and experiences (Bærenholdt, Haldrup, & Urry, 2017; Urry & Larsen, 2011). In the context of Airbnb, the exploration needs to take into account the intermediary role of the platform and the underlying mechanism of information production. Indeed, information flows and data are at the core of the digital platform ecosystem (Van Dijk p.9,

¹ For the debate on Airbnb, see the comprehensive studies by Guttentag 2017 and 2019.

² Short-Term City is a research project of national relevance funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research. To find out more see <https://www.stcity.it/>

³ The concept of the *scopic regime* addresses the “ensemble of practices and discourses that establish the truth claims, typicality and credibility of visual acts and objects and politically correct modes of seeing” (Feldman: 29–30), i.e. the regimes that prescribe modes of seeing and object visibility and that prescribe or render untenable other modes and objects of perception. Cfr. Mitchell, 2005, Mitchell & Hansen, 2010).

p.33). The information flows fueled by and through the platform consist in exchanges of user-generated contents which are variegated (texts, photos, videos, reviews and rankings) and highly strategic for the platform mechanism: the economic action of Airbnb platform is consumed entirely via the exchange and appraisal of information through which each one of the actors involved – users, providers, the platform itself – forms an image of the others and calibrates its own as a result.

We decided to concentrate on photos since the interest in images finds a renewed vigor today due to their exponential proliferation and pervasiveness within practically every domain of public and private existence thanks to digitally mediated communication means, from social media to digital platforms. The numerous visual turns, more or less recent or explicit, experienced by the social sciences in general require the development of theories and methods of description and analysis of the sense of images that overcome the auxiliary role that had long been assigned to photography: a photographic collection has in itself the necessary strength to rise to the rank of discourse in images (Guarrasi, 2006, p.715); photography is not limited to expressing a vision of the world, but forges and propagates it (Bal, 2006; Bignante, 2011; Mitchell, 2005; Rose, 2003). In the context of tourism, the image “by virtue of the evocative power which it commands in the global market, is quite influential in shaping the destinies of tourist localities” (Minca, 2000, p.2). With reference to digital platforms, recent literature on the information flows vehiculated by the Airbnb platform has concentrated on reviews and their uneven distributions and value creation in urban areas (Celata et al., 2020, Bridges & Vásquez, 2018, Capineri & Romano, 2021, Zervas, Proserpio, & Byers, 2021). As regards visual content, most of the studies have addressed hosts’ photos (Banerjee, Lens, & Pal, 2022; Ert et al., 2016; Ert & Fleischer, 2020) but very little attention has been given to the images of the interiors as strategic tools to support the narrative of “living like a local”. In spite of this undisputed centrality, to date there is no shared methodology of analysis that would allow their full meaning to be analyzed and interpreted.

The main limitation of the literature on the visual items concerns actually the absence of a method to account for the specificity and complexity of their meaning. As visual studies (Mitchell, 2005; Mitchell & Hansen, 2010) and media studies (Casetti, 2015) have repeatedly pointed out, the vast majority of image meaning depends on elements other than mere content, elements that cannot be directly lexicalised and are very often implicit (*idem*). This specificity of images divides the approaches to visual data between an exclusively quantitative approach, unable to capture their aesthetic, cultural and biopolitical density, and an exclusively qualitative approach, the results of which are difficult to compare and often poor in offering empirical evidence.

The paper attempts to contribute by means of an interdisciplinary approach that draws from models developed in the fields of semiotics and visual studies in order to convincingly link the geographical mapping of the listings and the full interpretation of the visual narratives of place they provide.

As for the semiotic methodology adopted, it is based specifically on the post-structuralist approach to the study of meaning and signification processes (Foucault, 1972, Greimas, 1989, Greimas & Courtés, 1982, Marrone, 2022), and on its application in the field of visual arts and practices (Calabrese, 2017; Casetti, 1999; Greimas, 1984), advertising (Floch, 2000a, 2000b, Floch, 2001, Codeluppi, 2022), and tourism (Pezzini & Virgolin, 2020).

This study has focused on food and related items (e.g. cookware, tableware, utensils) while other features will be dealt with in future research work.

3. Data and methodology

The analysis is grounded in user-generated information, namely the photos published by Airbnb hosts on the platform about the interiors of the properties.

The analysis is based on a corpus of 250 properties (available on the

platform in the timeframe 1 November 2020–1 February 2022) and 3960 photographs of the accommodations’ interiors. All the photographs for each of the 250 listings were collected manually from the platform and arranged in a searchable multimedia dataset created for that purpose by the authors. The dataset records several attributes for each listing which serve for the analysis: name of the property, location, type of property (entire home, shared room), number of rooms, number of reviews. Each photograph of the listings’ gallery has been tagged with labels related to the type of room (bedroom, kitchen, dining room, etc.) or exterior area (balcony, garden, etc.); furthermore other features related to the cultural and artistic assets have been labelled for each photo; these features include food, artistic landmarks (monuments, paintings), events (festivals, sport tournaments), building materials (bricks, stone, colours). It is worth mentioning that the information included in the dataset forms part of the big family of user-generated content: data provided voluntarily by platform users (here hosts). Since reputation is a fundamental value in the platform’s economy, giving accurate information is an integral part of the process of building customer loyalty that is accelerated by the system of reviews, and subject to the application of sanctions by the company and above all its users (Zervas et al., 2021). The platform offers technical advice on how to produce high quality photos (e.g. daylight, resolution, etc.); it also suggests including “show off amenities” like a barbecue, a fireplace or artwork but no mention is given about food. Thus, we chose food and related items (e.g. cookware, tableware, utensils) as an asset voluntarily chosen by the host to qualify and give distinctiveness to the accommodation.

Adopting a mixed method approach, the analysis proceeded through the following steps:

1. Mapping of the photos in the listings: creation of the database and general statistics on the photo gallery (average number of photos per listing, typology of rooms, etc.);
2. Content analysis of each photo aimed to identify presence/absence of territorial and cultural assets (*what*) such as food, art heritage, landscape, events (e.g. The Palio). For the purpose of the study, only images containing food and related items were selected in the database;
3. Food photos were extracted, occurrences calculated (*how many*) and labelled with typology of food (fruit, meat, cheese, etc.); location and framing of food photos (*where*) in the accommodation (e.g. kitchen, balcony, bedroom, etc.) were identified.
4. Analysis of semiotic functions of food within the photo-gallery narratives was developed.

The analysis in the last step employs the so-called “Generative Trajectory of Meaning” (GTM) (Greimas & Courtés, 1982, Greimas, 1989, Marrone, 2022), which offers us the methodological path for the interpretation. The *square of consumer values* set up by JM Floch (2000a, 2000b, 2001) in the field of marketing and advertising communication, in particular, has been exploited in order to highlight the role of food in the strategies for the valorization of tourist accommodations.⁴

In fact, what Airbnb host listings, and in particular the photo-gallery and advertising discourse have in common is the function of promoting a good or service, in this case an accommodation. Like advertising, the photo-gallery’s function is to create added value to the ‘accommodation’ product, that is, to draw attention to it, to inform the addressee about its existence and characteristics, and the reasons that distinguish it and make it desirable among all the other accommodations that the guest could potentially choose.

The model allows us to describe the values that underlie the *reason why*, i.e. the reasons the brand offers the consumer for choosing a particular product. Floch’s hypothesis is that for an advertisement to be

⁴ See also Bianchi, 2011, Marrone, 2007, Semprini, 2003.

effective, it is not enough that it asserts positive qualities or values with respect to its object, but that the person who watches or reads it must identify with those values. What advertisers define as the *promise*, i.e. the narration and representation of a pleasure or need satisfied by the product, and the *reason why*, the reasons that the advertisement gives consumers to persuade them to buy, is redefined in terms of the relationship between the *Object* (in our case the accommodation) associated to Value/s and the (both scopic and epistemic) *perspective* on the Object designed for the *Subject* who is going to listen or watch the advertisement's narrative.

Just as advertising proposes identity models in which the consumer can recognize himself, so photo galleries set up a narrative aimed at showing and promoting the home and involving the observer in the prefiguration of the experience of occupying and inhabiting it.

Floch identifies four ways in which the Object is valorized by the Subject Fig. 1:

- **Practical valorization:** the Object is considered as an instrument, with the emphasis on ease-of-handling or level of comfort.
- **Playful (or ludic) valorization:** the Object is considered in terms of its formal and physical qualities, the pleasure it gives and its general beauty; in this case, value is attributed to the Object not insofar as it is a means of satisfying practical needs but simply for the pleasure of possessing or using it.
- **Critical valorization:** the economical nature of the Object is stressed; it is in contrast to playful but complementary to practical valorization.
- **Utopian valorization:** the advertising story does not focus on the Object as such but on the Subject, who will achieve deep inner fulfillment through union with his or her Object of Value; it is contrary to the practical and complementary to the playful.

The methodological path traced by the GTM guided the comparative analysis of the 234 photo galleries including at least 1 image that shows at least 1 figure of food, addressed as a user-generated advertising of the accommodation. As they are based on observation, the semiotic categories used in the analysis in order to make this valorization process explicit were progressively adjusted during the analysis itself, whenever the addition of other elements forced a change in the whole. The categories were stabilized after no more relevant differences were found.

4. The application of the models and findings

The Airbnb platform functions as an engine of geographical writing. The distribution of reviews, which are indications that an economic transaction has taken place, of the 250 listings included in this analysis are mainly concentrated in the historical centre of Siena, in particular

inside the medieval walls, which confirms the concentrated and uneven distribution trend of short-term rental market. This distribution sets the geographical context of the following analysis (See Fig. 2.)

The listings are illustrated by an average of 30 photos and among the different rooms, exteriors (balconies, terraces, roads) and bedrooms are the most represented (respectively 28% and 25%). Rooms more related to food such as kitchens and dining rooms account for 9% and 5% respectively of the photos. Food images appear in 22% of the listings and include 73 different items which can be grouped as follows (>1%): fruit, wine, coffee, seasonings, vegetables, bread, fruit juice, bread and cakes, biscuits, water, cured meat (salami, ham), pasta, milk cheese and dried fruit.

4.1. The photo-gallery narratives

The actual images of food are very repetitive and comprise a limited number of very common ingredients: fresh fruit (29%) is seen almost everywhere; then comes wine (18%) and coffee (11%), olive oil and other condiments (10%) and manufactured baked goods (6%).

In general, every one of these items fulfills varied or different semiotic functions, indicating that they play a central part in the more or less conscious advertising strategy expressed by the photos.

Firstly, the images of food and associated equipment serve to illustrate the services included in the offer. In this case the photos have a mainly *referential function* (i.e. aimed at showing what is actually in the house). They show us the food we will find in the apartment, the equipment provided for preparing and eating food, the size and location of the places where we can store fresh food, cook meals, wash the dishes and pans we have used. The food that is shown is itself a *tool*, since it is a condiment or basis for the preparation of meals and drinks (Figs. 3-4, 5-6).

This apparently simple visual information is in fact already highly complex, and it implicates or evokes a myriad of actions: seasoning, cutting, squeezing, toasting, boiling, mixing, pouring into different containers according to consistency and temperature (plates and bowls, glasses and cups), according to varying paradigms ranging from minimal options to splendid dinner services and fancy machines.

We discover, therefore, or immediately remember an initial similarity between "home" and "holiday home", which differentiates the latter from what is offered by hotels, for example: at home we do the cooking, or we get someone to do it for us, and so however heavenly the location, however intense the pleasure of staying there, some part at least of our activity will be "work", that is, it will be dedicated to satisfying basic needs such as eating and keeping the place and its contents clean. Kitchens and dining rooms, whether they are separate rooms or just an area in a single living space, like ingredients,

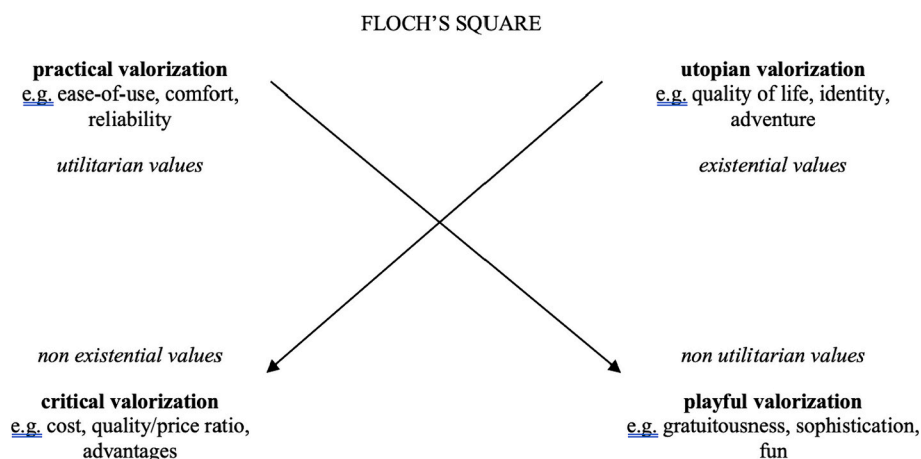


Fig. 1. Square of consumer values (adaption after Floch, 2001).

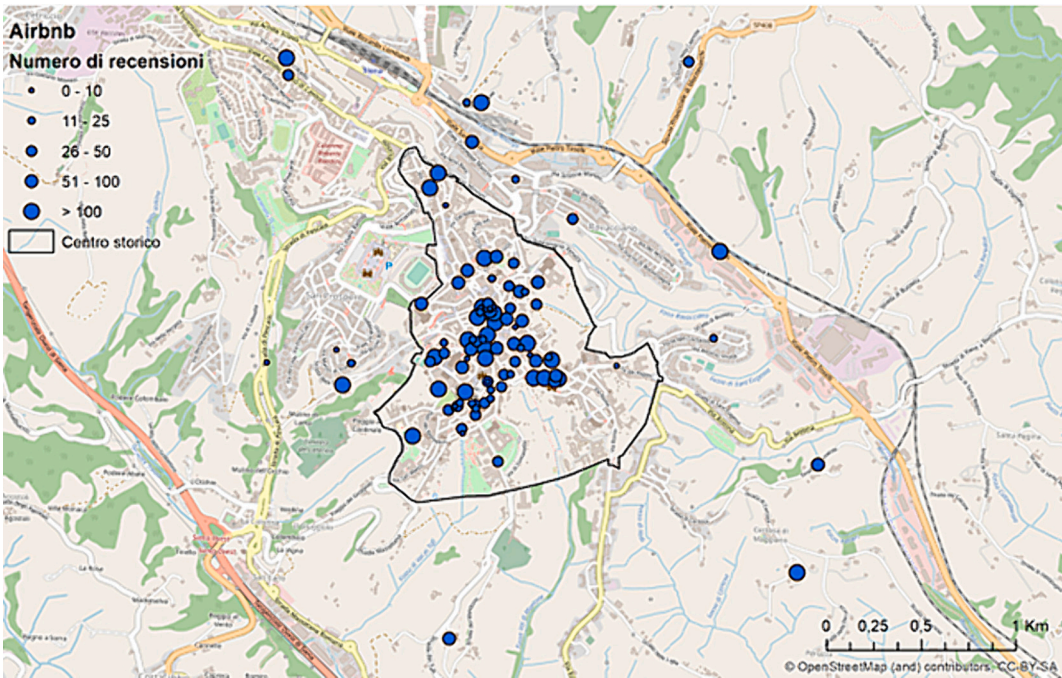
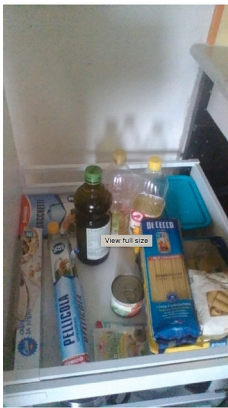


Fig. 2. The distribution of reviews in the Municipality of Siena (November 2020–February 2022).



Figs. 3-4. Food images with referential function © Airbnb 2021.



Figs. 5-6. Kitchen representations with referential function © Airbnb 2021.

condiments and cleaning products and tools on the one hand and plates, glasses and cups on the other, therefore place in opposition places and actions related to work and those related to consumption.

In its turn, this opposition shows a further polarization between the “backstage” and the “stage” of the accommodation. Houses too have a private face and a social face, a domestic aspect and a worldly one: the same rooms and objects can be “at rest” – clean, tidy, arranged in an orderly way – or “in action”, caught in the process of carrying out some

activity, or at least bearing its traces. Even at this level, the image establishes whether we are to be involved in it as *residents* (for example, by showing unmade beds, washing up in the sink, sponges and kitchen roll on display), or as *guests*, those for whom the best face of the house is maintained, displaying itself as untouched, tidy, clean and “at rest”.

Even the blandest images, therefore, reveal a prefiguration of an experience relative, in the broadest and most general sense, to the actions and points of view of action shown in the photo.

These “infinite” actions are shown in the present tense and in the first person, thanks to a process of scene setting and direction that progressively integrates the scene into a story.

First, the arrangement of the rooms and equipment evokes in the image the moment of consumption, inevitably telling us how many people there are, what their positions are relative to one another as they eat and drink, what time of day it is (indicated by the light or the type of meal), what type of meal it is and what it consists of. The locations for consumption (kitchen, dining room, terrace, garden, bedroom) show both the time of day and the social character of the event, from the greatest intimacy (breakfast or a drink in bed for two) to the greatest degree of sociability (a table laid for an outdoor feast), by way of a family meal or the opposite, a quick breakfast alone.

As stated in §2, the photogalleries are not just a collection of single items, but express a unitary discourse aimed at promoting the property. The photographic set and its sub-sections (recently introduced by Airbnb with these labels: dining room, living room/terrace, garden, bedroom/bedroom, closet/laundry room, bathroom, exterior, others) are organized as true multimedia narratives. We identified in particular three major sequence types:

1. *isometric sequence*: series of two or more shots taken from opposite points of view in order to give a 360° view of the space (See Fig. 7)
2. *walking sequence*: series of two or more images simulating the physical crossing of space (See Fig. 8)
3. *immersion sequence*: series of three or more images showing paths of approach to / distancing from what is contained in the environment (See Figs. 9 and 10)

From a semantic point of view, the same function of engaging the viewer into the narrative is fulfilled by glasses of wine, saucepans or coffee pots on the stove, freshly squeezed fruit juice, showing us the start or the course of the stay Figs. 11-12.

4.2. The role of food in the strategies for the valorization of the accommodation

Based on Floch's square of consumer values, as far as the cases we are examining are concerned, the construction of the lodging's identity occurs mainly in the tension between “playful” and “utopian” values. The purely functional dimension of the food and the meal hardly appears at all, and in any case is relegated to the working areas in the “back-stage”. The narrative, in contrast, takes place almost exclusively on the “stage”.

The *playful accommodation* places at the centre of its discourse the aesthetic value of resources, of equipment, and of practical actions: food and the equipment associated with its preparation are shown not as resources or tools required to carry out practical activities, but rather are

endowed with their own value, not just to be touched with the hands when carrying out certain actions, but caressed with the gaze, in order to appreciate their curves, their volumes, their colours. The lodging is in itself a source of aesthetic pleasure and a tool in the “game of living”. This is particularly the case for luxury accommodations: the tableware and table linen, dinner services, glassware and cutlery, antique furniture and designer objects shift the practical function of utensils and meals into the background, transforming the former into a source of pleasure and the latter into a luxurious ritual.

The *utopian accommodation* rests on a local identity, which in our case is based around a few clichéd ideas associated with tourism in Siena – the historical and artistic heritage, the landscape, tradition – which in their turn consist entirely of a few repeated stock images: Piazza del Campo or sometimes the cathedral for the historical and artistic heritage, the Sienese hills for the landscape, the Palio for tradition. The accommodation is an integral part of and mediator between them and the place, with its mix of historical-cultural and natural treasures, and special atmosphere that combine to make Siena unique among world cities.

The co-presence of utopian and playful values (with variable dominance) cuts across the type of accommodation, host, number and ranking of reviews. The practical valorization, while not central, is nevertheless present.

The craft through which photography constructs the rooms' visual identity is dominated both in number and complexity of function by two items: red wine and fresh fruit.

4.3. Aesthetization narratives

Within the promotional strategies expressed by the analyzed photo galleries, red wine and fresh fruit found imaginaries of tourism and place quite different.

4.3.1. Red wine: Place and pleasure

In Fig. 13, the gaze is both captured by the projecting composition, which seems to extend itself ideally into the space in which the viewer is located, and free to fly beyond the window, the fence, the fields, and disappear towards the horizon.

The open window places us in an interior, from which the gaze “breaks through” the wall, the gate and the more distant thresholds formed by the rows of trees, to take in the view in its entirety.

At the same time, the framing places us “at the table”, with a bottle of wine and two glasses in front of us. Indeed, just as in still lifes, the tabletop functions as the setting for a composition that is orderly, symmetrical, balanced and homogeneous, which turns those items into an object of contemplation “in close-up”: we can follow with our gaze the outlines and curves of the glasses, the shape formed by the tray and candle holder, the grain of the wood.

The “house space” is thus revealed as a *space of mediation* between us and the landscape, a space in which the *products of the rural economy* are



Fig. 7. Isometric sequence © Airbnb 2021.



Fig. 8. Walking sequence © Airbnb 2021.



Fig. 9. Immersion sequence © Airbnb 2021.



Fig. 10. Immersion sequence © Airbnb 2021.



Figs. 11-12. Images with the function of presentifying the represented actions and practices © Airbnb 2021.

artfully “curated”, detached from the continuity of practices, habits and customs from which they derive, and refined to the point where they become an *object of aesthetic consumption*, and at the same time positioned in relation to the place, so that the *pleasure of consuming* them is

made more intense by the view and the atmosphere created by the sunset.

Finally, that “interior” is also a place for enjoying the company of someone and in particular the intimacy – as suggested by the number of



Fig. 13. Example of red wine representation © Airbnb 2021.

glasses – enjoyed by a couple.

Each of these values is connected and linked together by the red wine, which at the physical level crosses all the spaces and at the semantic level aggregates their values.

As an agricultural product, wine belongs at the same time to the world of the rural economy, as to practices that are an art in themselves, a delicate process of refinement of the fruits of the earth on which its more or less unique flavour depends.

Wine, especially red wine, is considered both a food (indeed, in the rural economy it constitutes a source of nourishment on a par with solid food) and an instrument of pleasure. In this case, the fact that it is not being consumed with a meal, as well as the romantic connotations of the scene, shift its value as a foodstuff towards the latter. Placed between the two glasses it evokes the social and affective cohesion created by the (more or less!) slight aesthetic and sensory alteration caused by wine, making the pleasure of the company and the exposure to the local atmosphere even more intense.

Wine is therefore a mediating element between nature and art, between people, between the experience of the place and the experience of pleasure: sampling of the wine (*playful value*) is ennobled and intensified by the view of the landscape (*utopian value*), to which the colours of the sunset impart the atmospheric value of the place (*utopian value*), repeated by the light of the candle (*playful value*).

The anchoring of the room in the place is further reinforced by the harmony of the colours inside the house and outside in the landscape, which fall into the range of yellows and browns from Sienna to Burnt Sienna that are characteristic of Sienese buildings and indeed are the iconic colours of the city.

This is in effect a “self-portrait” by the host, who is also the “tour operator”: the “house” is the place where the products of the land have been arranged to give pleasure and from which the place is “viewed”.

Synthesized here in one of the most curated and staged photos, which not accidentally displays a degree of “economic power” and investment

more typical of a holiday company than an ordinary citizen who just happens to have a spare room or small flat available for rent, we find the syntax of what we have called the process of “touristification” of images of the place.

This photo also brings together a series of features that are regularly repeated throughout the entire corpus. Firstly, the bottle of red wine is a *constant element in the visual and semantic structuring of the photo*, in its function of introducing the element of pleasure in the tasting of it and possibly in the company: on the dining table it is a focus of conviviality and social cohesion and a means to exalt the senses; on a side table it represents the pleasure of taste together with that of artistic contemplation; in bed it cements the companionship of the couple Figs. 14-15-16.

Second, the analyzed images repeatedly show wine in relation to a window, in its dual function of architectural opening that connects the room to the place and frame that converts what is outside the house into a view for the benefit of the guest Figs. 17-18-19-20-21-22.

In this case, wine systematically occupies the pole of pleasure, while the window’s function of place is sometimes replaced, but more often repeated, by pictures, photos, prints and TV screens which, as we have seen, all dwell on the city’s iconic tourist locations: Piazza del Campo (with or without the Duomo), the Palio, the Sienese hills.

It is not simply a question of anchoring the room to the place, but of reproducing inside the room (as the experience we will have in there) and through photos (as the experience we have looking at it) the constant invitation to contemplation and aesthetic experience, of the place as well as of the room or the house, what enhances the utopian valorization of the property.

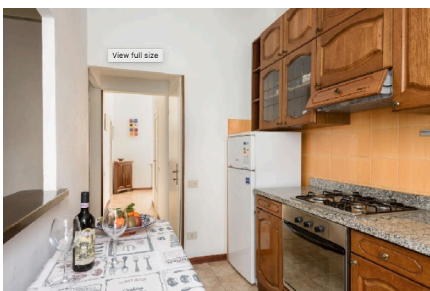
Still on this point, the function of the window is very often extended and expanded by terraces, balconies, patios and gardens that unite a position of reflective contemplation of urban or rural landscapes and the location of a gustatory, affective and social experience, which will be stimulated by the wine. Of course, the landscape is also initially experienced through the senses, especially sight.

4.3.2. Fresh fruit: Global wellness

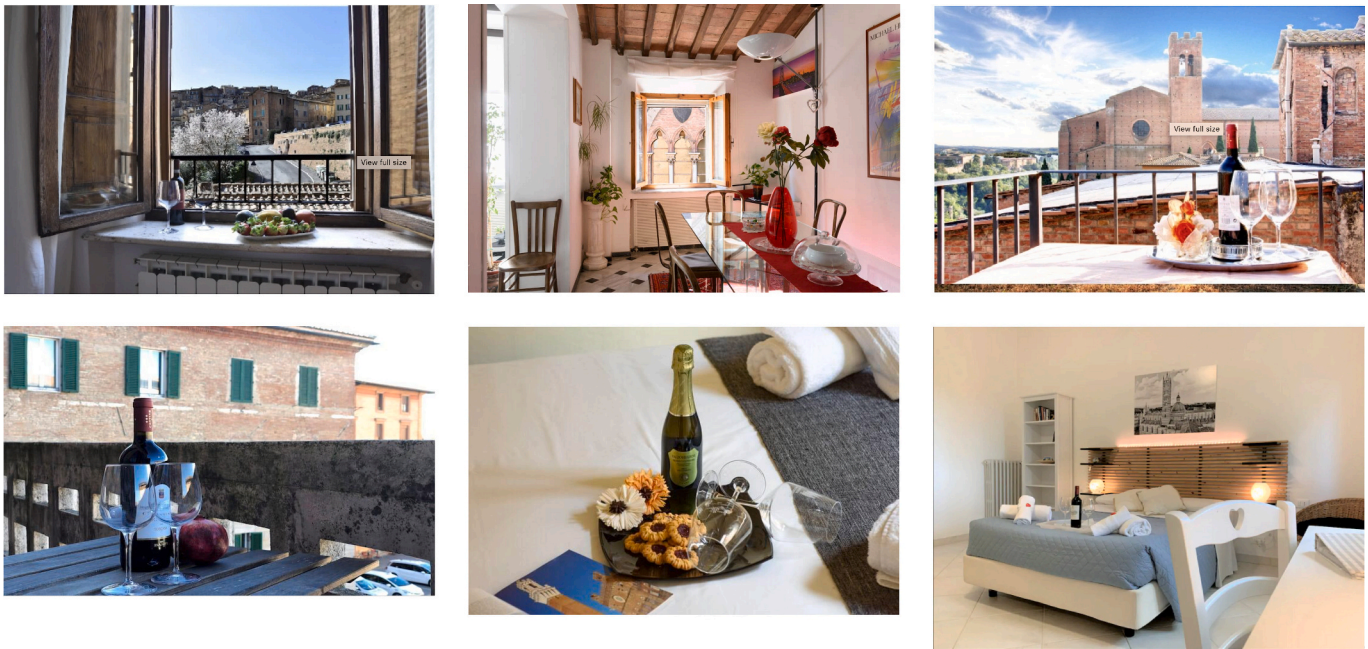
Turning to the rare appearances of actual food, a further opposition that immediately becomes apparent is that between fresh and packaged foodstuffs. While the latter appear rarely and only in the guise of a resource/tool, or sublimated in brand identity (as in the case of Nespresso), fresh food, and fresh fruit in particular, is the object of more or less intense aesthetic treatment and endowed with mediating functions similar to those performed by red wine. Above all, it is the only type of food that, like wine and coffee, moves from one setting to another and is found in all the different types of framing: we see it both in the centre of the room in frontal shots as well as on the lower edge of the image, just like the wine that often accompanies it.

Like wine, fresh fruit is at once a figure of pleasure anchored in the location by windows, pictures, prints and views, and a figure of “nature” connected with the green that we see outside through the windows.

When it is in continuity with plants and organic motifs (not by



Figs. 14-15-16. © Airbnb 2021.



Figs. 17-18-19-20-21-22. © Airbnb 2021.

chance equally frequent in the decor, in pictures, and in the images of kitchen and dining room), fresh fruit is a mediating element between the room and the location (Fig. 23).

From this last point of view, authentication and seduction, the promise and proof of service and the setting for its effects, the fruit emerges from a composition that is always a little fake, in which there is always – or almost always – something that is not quite right.

We see, for example, a luxurious table set for two, which suggests a romantic dinner (Fig. 24). Despite the number, type and quality of the plates, glasses, cutlery and table linen, all we ever see of the actual meal is the two ends, the appetizers and the fruit, both incongruous in their way.

In the case of the former, the quantity of china and tableware is decidedly contradicted by their contents: processed snacks and a dish of sauce of indeterminate nature; while in the case of the latter, while the text reads “enjoy Tuscan foods and wines”, neither the snacks nor the fruit seem to be from Tuscany.

Pineapple is particularly emblematic in this respect, both because it is a tropical fruit and because, like wine and sometimes the patisserie, it moves from one room to another, taking on different meanings according to how it is being used.

While it is certainly possible to end a “typically Tuscan” dinner with tropical fruit, it is highly unlikely that it will be consumed in bed or indeed in the bedroom: its function, as revealed by the fact that it moves “along with the camera”, is to introduce an element of life, recalling a diet that is generically natural and healthy, while at the same time



Fig. 24. © Airbnb 2021.

introducing an aspectual element of “in medias res”: where “freshness” is by definition a fleeting value, fresh fruit brings life into the room while signifying good hygiene and constant care of the accommodation (Fig. 25).

Like wine, the pineapple is a figure of a euphoric experience, but in this case the geography that is evoked visually overturns the ideology of authenticity, revealing its innate contradictions and paradoxes.

In general, typical local fruit, such as pomegranate, has a decorative value, while fruit that is intended for consumption is much more generic: berries, strawberries, bananas, oranges, all of which can be

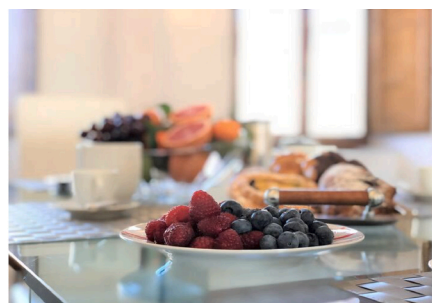
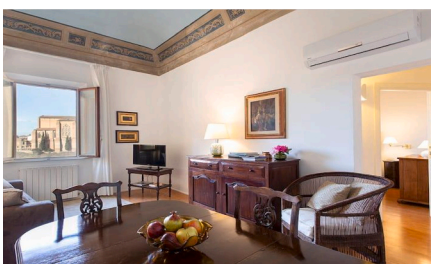


Fig. 23. © Airbnb 2021.

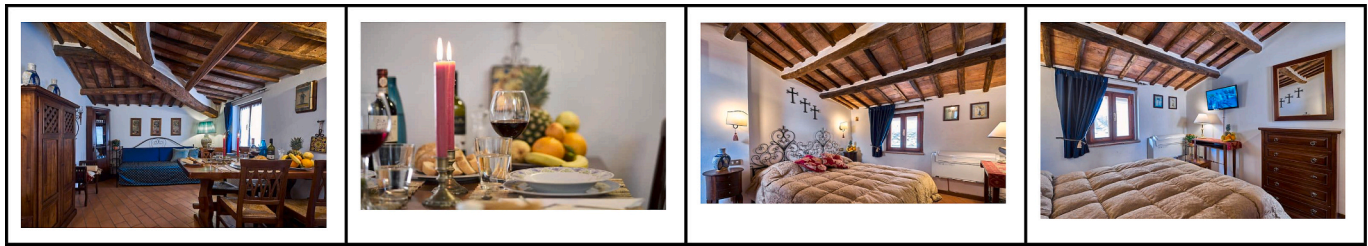


Fig. 25. Sequence showing the pineapple appearing in different rooms and corners of the house © Airbnb 2021.

found in practically every hotel buffet on the face of the earth.

What emerges is a somewhat parodic reflection of the big multinational hotel chains, alongside a sketch of the tension between global and local that overdetermines the entire discourse around food.

Alcoholic drinks and fresh fruit are the only items that appear inside the “story”, apart from coffee, which in this case too functions as a mediator between “place” and “space”, local and global: one technical resource among many and ludic technology (Nespresso), a resource that is both local (an Italian tradition) and global (beans coming from South America).

As we have seen, the representation of the city, seen mainly through windows, is limited to three iconic sights: Piazza del Campo, alone or together with the city’s other great monument, the Duomo; the Palio; and the countryside.

We should not be surprised by the almost unanimous standardization of the images used to evoke the area: the purpose of the “photo-story” is not to illustrate the surrounding area, but to authenticate the offered accommodation as a manifestation of the place, and for this reason requiring iconic images that are immediately recognizable.

The same dynamic is seen in the local food, which in effect is never shown: only in two cases do the wine labels show Siennese producers, both of which are industrial concerns with a big export business nationally and internationally; only in one case do local products such as cantuccini biscuits with vin santo, salami and pecorino cheese break the general monotony. Elsewhere the geography evoked by the images of food and wine is highly generic and stereotypical: coffee, pasta, tomatoes, bread, and olive oil are typical features of the Mediterranean diet, the omnipresent red wine is an internationally recognized symbol of Italy and Tuscany, while Voiello, Nutella and especially Nespresso are among the best known and most exported Italian food brands all over the world. In this case it is a matter of anchoring the room in Tuscany, in Italy, in the Mediterranean, and to do so by relying on universally recognizable images.

The only meal that is shown in full, which is breakfast, can at most be recognized as being in the Italian or continental style, in that it is sweet and relatively simple, but it is distinguished mainly by its freshness (fresh bread and cakes, fruit, steaming coffee) and not by the origin of the foods.

5. Conclusion

This study was prompted by the digital platform environment – specifically Airbnb – which allowed us to explore the power of visual content vehiculated by the platform and the construction of narratives and imaginaries of the tourist experience in a local environment.

The results of the analysis have proved to be challenging from several points of view. First, the attempt to apply semiotic models to the interpretation of the visual contents has produced novel insights as regards the representation of the tourist experiences and locations. Second, the values highlighted by the analysis are particularly relevant because they have been distilled from user-generated content. From this point of view, the photos capitalize the informal knowledge of the producers and become collectors of multiple identities and perceptions which highlight the variegated relationships with a certain place

(Capineri, 2016 pp.23–24) by creating imaginaries. The narratives we have identified are engaged in knowledge production processes which are grounded in sets of values, and in turn, physical place (Hardy, Frew, & Goodchild, 2012 p.3; Lussault, 2007).

The main findings that have emerged after the analysis of the visual contents highlight three key issues in the:

- a) the dismissal of economic dimensions in favour of aesthetic and playful values;
- b) the globalization of food imaginaries (fruit and wellness);
- c) the stereotyping of place imaginaries (wine and pleasure).

As regards key issue (a), it is useful to point out that the “critical valorization,” i.e., the narrative focused on the affordability of the product, is entirely absent in the analyzed visual narratives. This finding is consistent with the evolution of the Airbnb brand identity mentioned in §2. In the current company’s mission statement, we can read an entire narrative based exclusively on political and ethical values, where the economic dimension of the exchange between guest and host is completely obscured. Unlike the classic middleman, the platform offers itself as a provider of de-mediation between travellers and the place they visit, manifested in the idea of a stay that comes as close as possible to the experience of those who live there, in the shape of access to the most intimate level of the place and the one that is least available to the ordinary traveller: domestic life inside a private home (Roelofsen, 2018).

As for key issue (b), food images tend to show the same ingredients every time, while using the same figures and compositional strategies. The fact that we are dealing with a large number of user-generated visual data makes these convergences even more marked and worthy of attention. The results lead us to observe in general a lack of the representation of local food and indeed food as a whole, weakly evoked through settings for a meal that is itself absent, where images of food, and of red wine and fresh fruit in particular, both fulfill the crucial function of connecting the sense of place and the pleasure of experience while at the same time showing how artificial this connection is.

In this respect, the incongruity lies not only in anomalous presences such as the pineapple by the bed, but above all in what is missing: the wealth of local and typical food. The images of typically Tuscan foods and the only ones that are internationally renowned – from cured meats to panforte – are completely absent, perhaps because they are considered divisive and in any case are much more difficult to display for the global community. The “void at the heart” of the representation of food and meals in the corpus defines the lowest common denominator of a tourist who is global, and whose nationality, politics, religion and customs are completely unknown to the seller: the practical valorization as “tourist service”, which is not dominant but widely present, witnesses the opening to the global tourist market of the platform.

The third issue concerns the stereotyping of the imaginaries of place. The *utopian valorization* mentioned above is grounded in the strict connection between the room/house and place. The change of scale expressed by the open windows, the portrayal of specific landmarks of the city and its surroundings (Piazza del Campo, Duomo, Crete Senesi, Palio) in paintings, screens, posters and in the montage strategies described in §4 serve the function of investing the positive values of the

place in the accommodation. Since the interior of a room or house is figuratively unassignable to a specific place, visual narratives systematically use immediately recognizable icons and stereotypes of place in order to locate and valorize the property.

Far from providing plural viewpoints and images of places and showing their lesser-known aspects, visual narratives are “forced” to reinforce the stereotyping and crystallization of place imaginaries where food acts as a vector to communicate pleasure or wellness. In this regard, the visual narratives reflect the same centralizing and homogenizing tendencies shown by the geography generated by the platform: most of the offers and reviews, which are indications that an economic transaction has taken place, are concentrated in urban areas and, even more precisely, in the “historic” centres of cities, producing accumulation and inequalities (Celata & Romano, 2020; Picascia, Romano, & Teobaldi, M, 2019).

These conclusions in our view raise some points for reflection that are useful in shedding light on the transformation of tourist phenomena brought about by the platforms, and in particular on its impact on images of place and the way in which the platform feeds them. If at one time Airbnb was a community of travellers, today the backpacker who shares a room or sofa belonging to a local resident has been superseded by the glocal tourist who finds on Airbnb an image and idea of accommodation that does not differ much from that offered by any number of hotel chains.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Addis Maria Cristina: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Capineri Cristina:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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