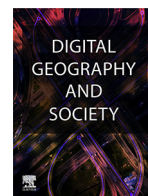




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The platformization of tourism: from accommodation to Experiences

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates platform-mediated tourism practices by focusing on the new recreational activities offered by Airbnb, namely “Experiences”. In recent years, the leading short-term rental platform has started an expansion strategy beyond accommodation towards services based on immersive activities led by local hosts. Drawing upon previous research on short-term accommodation platforms, we explore the platformization of such recreational activities by looking at their spatialities, the place-based resources engaged and emerging self-entrepreneurial practices. Our effort is experimental since most literature on Airbnb deals with accommodation listings while Experiences differ from accommodation since they combine different types of local resources, which are less spatially constrained, with the host's personal skills. This paper contributes to understanding the spatial and socio-economic implications of the Airbnb expansion strategy through Experiences. We develop a case study based on 385 Experiences collected in Florence (Italy) in 2019 and analyze their location and distribution patterns, the estimated revenue generated, the typology of resources which are commodified through such activities, and the professional profiles of the hosts. Results show that Experiences seem to erode the well-known spatial concentration of accommodation listings in city centres. This is explained by the different nature of the resources mobilized by the Experiences, which privilege the experiential character of these services (e.g. food tasting, cooking classes). Furthermore, Experiences become a self-employment opportunity for the hosts, reinforcing the unregulated and permeable environment of the digital platform.

1. Introduction: from accommodation to Experiences

Digital platforms such as Tripadvisor, Booking, HomeExchange and last but not least Airbnb have disrupted and are disrupting the tourism sector by impacting on demand and supply and more generally on tourism practices. Airbnb is an exemplary manifestation of the ongoing shifts within tourism from the “gaze” to “living like a local”. In this context, tourism is characterized by growing development of relational spaces (Mansfeldt, 2015; Richards, 2014) which include new types of accommodation such as Airbnb or Couchsurfing, as well as new opportunities for tourists and locals to meet (e.g. Experiences).

Airbnb is a so-called “lean” digital platform (Srnicsek, 2017) which acts as an intermediary between hosts and guests. Although it is an assetless company, it has quickly (the company was founded in 2008) become the leader in the short-term housing sector. Similarly to other digital platforms, it bases its fortune on two pillars, namely the “network effect” and “growth before profits” (Srnicsek, 2017) which is based on fast and pervasive new product launch.

Just over ten years after its foundation, the platform has reached a leading position in the short-term rental market with more than 5 million listings in more than 100,000 cities worldwide (<https://news.airbnb.com/>

fast-facts/). The platform benefits from this monopolistic position and – not surprisingly – it is moving beyond its initial core business by broadening its activities to become a comprehensive tourist platform where users can find not only the familiar accommodation offers (from shared rooms to entire homes) but a larger range of services available to the world and not only to Airbnb guests. These new services include tours and events, named “Experiences” and “Adventures”.

In particular, we focus on “Experiences” which are defined by Airbnb as “one-of-a-kind activities designed and hosted by locals. Unlike a typical tour or workshop, experiences go beyond the activities themselves. Indeed, they are required to offer a deep-dive into the local host's world through their passion. Hosts offer their guests special knowledge, unique skills, and inside access to local places and communities that guests couldn't find on their own, creating lasting connections and treasured memories” (source <https://blog.airbnb.com/what-are-airbnb-experiences/>).

Experiences, launched in 2016 with approximately 500 offered activities, have grown so rapidly that in 2020, 50,000 Experiences were available in more than 1 k cities worldwide (<https://news.airbnb.com/fast-facts/>).

This lucrative new service (short-term rental hosts pay only 3% of earnings to Airbnb, while Experiences hosts pay 20%) shows that the platform is trying to reach a massive new audience which as yet remains untapped by

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short-term rentals. In fact, according to the information given by the Airbnb platform, tourists can book an Experience without renting a house on the platform and an Experience-host does not necessarily need to be an accommodation-host to offer an Experience.

Furthermore, since Experiences are not tied to the location of the accommodation but rather based on a diversified pool of resources (from wine tasting to art tours), they potentially enlarge the pervasiveness of Airbnb catchment areas outside the city centres (Picascia, Romano, & Teobaldi, 2017). This aspect is a hypothesis we aim to explore through our analysis of the Experiences' typology and spatial distribution.

Similarly to short-term rentals, Experiences are presented as opportunities for individuals to supplement their incomes by commodifying their skills and even "passions" (source <https://blog.airbnb.com/what-are-airbnb-experiences/>).

In short, Experiences are promoting self-entrepreneurship (Kenney & Zysman, 2016) coupled with jobs that offer flexibility, autonomy, work/life balance. In this context, Experience-hosts who create an activity based on personal interests/passions, take advantage of the large platform community as a means to "showcase" their talents to a wider audience than could be reached otherwise. Experience-hosts are required to declare their competence when posting an activity in an informal way as the website declares: "everyone who hosts an experience on Airbnb must demonstrate high levels of expertise and the ability to connect with guests" (<https://blog.airbnb.com/experiences-quality-standards>). Thus, the professional quality standards required by the platform are satisfied by the host's declaration about how long he/she has been practising his/her passion or skill. In short, no formal licences or certification are needed, similarly to short-term rentals advertised through the platform, which need not be formal, certified, licensed tourist accommodation.

These new services introduced by Airbnb may be considered as an initiative to counterbalance the short-term rental market, which has grown increasingly controversial. The growing number of regulations (e.g. restrictions of short-term rentals to certain areas, for limited time periods, short-term rental bans, etc.) in cities around the world are threatening the company's primary core business (Guttentag, 2015, pp. 1199–1204; Gottlieb, 2013; Nieuwland & Van Melik, 2020) and contributing to the diversification of service supply.

This paper is experimental as Airbnb's Experiences have not been studied from a social science perspective. We believe that many issues have not yet been addressed about their effects both in space and on platform-mediated tourist practices. We aim to investigate the following aspects: Do Experiences contribute to exacerbating the tourist concentration effect in city centres? What is the non-accommodation space created by the Experiences? Which place-related resources are commodified? From an economic point of view, what supplementary income can they generate? Who is offering Experiences, and what is their professional profile?

The case study is that of Florence (Italy) which has been chosen because it is one of the world's main tourist cities, with 10 million arrivals per year for a population of 379,000 inhabitants (2018). In addition, the city ranks third in Italy, after Rome and Milan, by number of Airbnb accommodation listings in 2019.

1.1. Theoretical framework

The success of short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb has given rise to an animated scientific and political debate on the effects of this growing phenomenon. The wide-ranging debate on short-term rentals and Airbnb has addressed many different topics, such as social inequalities and threats to established businesses and labour (e.g. hotels and other traditional types of tourist accommodation) (Fang, Ye, & Law, 2015; Guttentag, 2015; Oskam & Boswijk, 2016; Sigala, 2018; Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2015; Zervas, Proserpio, & Byers, 2017). Other works have focused on Airbnb's "disruptive business model" (Guttentag, 2015) and marketing process (Brochado, Troilo, & Aditya, 2017; Varma, Jukic, Pestek, Shultz, & Nestorov, 2016; Wang & Nicolau, 2017), or on the impacts on the housing market in cities all over the world (see Guttentag, 2019 for a review).

Recent literature on Airbnb has mainly explored short-term rentals and their spatial effects in urban areas. Results converge on the fact that short-term rentals have put pressure mainly in the historic city centres (see Arias Sans & Quaglieri, 2016; Celata, Capineri, & Romano, 2020; Picascia et al., 2017) creating disruptive phenomena such as overcrowding, disturbances and critical spatial proximity with residents; in fact, an arena for overtourism (Celata & Romano, 2020). Beyond the spatial dimension of listings distributions and patterns, investigations of hospitality spaces have highlighted the crucial role of the relationship between hosts and guests (Farmaki, Christou, & Saveriades, 2020) also defined by Mansfeldt (2015) as a "state of in-betweenness", a liminal space between tourists (guests) and locals (hosts).

Platforms are in fact digital infrastructures that play the role of intermediary between users or services by steering how they connect with each other (Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018, pp.22–26); as mentioned, they base their business model, among others, on the "growth before profits" model and on the so-called "network effect" (Srnicsek, 2017). In this regard, Airbnb can be considered as a "network orchestrator" (Libert, Wind, & Fenley, 2014): the platform is a hyperconnected and globally distributed network with a commercial aim that functions as the interface between hosts and guests, coordinating supply and demand of accommodation and services (e.g. Experiences) by disintermediating traditional commercial channels. Airbnb's coordination mechanism relies on the standardization of norms for hospitality, which encourages hosts to provide value-added services and to "behave well". Indeed, this mechanism is based on recommendations rather than codified rules and on rewards for appropriate behaviour: the more a host follows the norms and values, the more likely it is that he/she will succeed in the marketplace. In this process, the descriptions provided by the hosts about their activity are fundamental since they aim to build trust, provide guarantees and assist guests in deciding whether or not to join the activity (Celata, Capineri, & Romano, 2020). Airbnb's expansion strategy has introduced Experiences based on immersive travel experiences (Kokalitcheva, 2016; Meltzer, 2016) which boost the link with the environment in which tourists are staying; in addition, Experiences feed on private lives and shared cultural experiences. In this framework, tourism consumption and tourism production take place as a co-creative process between 'tourists' and 'locals' linked and mediated by the platform (Richards, 2014, p.9). Indeed, Airbnb Experiences reflect the principles of the experience economy which focuses on the user's experience as the value-added element: the *mise-en-scène* of the service actively engages with users in order to turn an ordinary tour into a memorable experience (Andersson, 2007; Pine, Pine, & Gilmore, 1999). In this respect, the lean business model is able to concentrate and maintain immense market power by capturing a socially produced economic value (Rossi, 2019) and then transferring it to places. "Platforms mediate spatial interactions, and thereby exert immense power over local economic geographies [...] and achieve this power through the strategic deployment of conjunctural geographies – a way of being simultaneously embedded and disembedded from the space-times they mediate" (Graham, 2020, p.1). On the platform, the assets (accommodation or Experiences), their descriptions and reviews conveyed respectively by hosts and guests, and monetary transactions travel in the space of flows managed by the platform; at the same time, the interactions between hosts and guests link the space of flows to places, that is, the locations where Experiences happen. In this process the Experiences-host plays an important role, acting as a 'switcher' (Castells, 1996) and provider of the tourist experience. In socio-economic terms, Sundararajan predicts the rise of "crowd-based capitalism in which a majority of the workforce shifts away from holding a full-time job as a talent or labour provider, and instead runs an individual business, one that perhaps uses a mix of labour and talent inputs from themselves and others. This will allow millions of newly minted owners to capture a tiny slice of the economy's capital" (Sundararajan, 2017 p.488). Beyond the much-explored quantitative aspects related to the diffusion, distribution and spatial concentration of accommodation, the platform has increasingly frequently developed a variegated universe composed of different forms of jobs – more or less regulated – enabled by the opportunities offered by platform itself (e.g.

cleaners, key holders, caretakers etc.). In short, the platform can quickly transform work or create entirely new categories of work (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). It is clear that Airbnb has now expanded to the point where it is impacting tourism's traditional accommodation (Zervas et al., 2017) and labour market, where platform labour can be viewed as an alternative “safety net” (Schor, Attwood-Charles, Cansoy, Ladegaard, & Wengronowitz, 2018) or as an indicator of precariousness rather than innovation.

1.2. Objective and methodologies

In order to answer our research questions, we applied different methodologies. By using Geographic Information System, Text Mining and Social Network Analysis (SNA), the work investigates a) the spatial distribution of the Experiences, b) the typology of the Experiences, c) the host's professional profile and d) the (estimated) revenue generated. We mapped the locations of the Experiences to explore the spatial dimension of these new tourism practices in relation to their category (art, food, sport, etc.). We developed a textual analysis of descriptions of the Experiences' to identify the local resources involved in these activities. Finally, we performed a network analysis in order to highlight the most central topics in the 'Experience' descriptions posted on the Airbnb website. The spatial analysis allows us to map the areas involved in the offer of Experiences, while the textual analysis of descriptions of the Experiences highlights the activities and local resources offered in a specific place. Finally, SNA allows us to extract the attributes of the place that play a central role (measured by the indegree prestige and eigenvector centrality) in the Experiences.

We collected Experiences using the keyword “Florence”: the search returned 385 Experiences (2019). For each Experience, we extracted the following data: category, price per person, duration of the activity, number of reviews, descriptions of the Experience and their locations, hosts' portrayals. The category is a classification system which the platform uses to feature activities (e.g. sport, nature, food, entertainment, fitness, art and culture). Price and number of reviews are relevant data to estimate the income generated; in other words, the number of reviews is a proxy for the demand: the more reviews, the more the activity has been purchased. Nevertheless, we are aware that the number of reviews may not be exhaustive since not all the users leave a review. The descriptions are hosts' notes about themselves and the activity offered. Such information is part of the larger family of user-generated digital content (Capineri et al., 2016) which are a challenging source for the analysis we aim to develop since they are contributed voluntarily by the hosts. The data were analyzed to obtain: the spatial distribution of the Experiences, the income they generate, the salient categories and the typology of resources they are based on (e.g. food, art, sport, etc.) and the hosts' professional profiles related to the qualifications they declare in the host profile (e.g. “I am an architect”). The analysis developed as follows. First, we georeferenced the locations of the Experiences and then mapped the number of reviews and their estimated income according to the formula $n \text{ of reviews} \times \text{price}$. Second, we applied the topic modelling¹ method to investigate the salient resources conveyed in Experiences, and we extracted 11 topics from the Hosts' descriptions (Table 2). A ‘topic’ is a cluster of words deriving from descriptions of Experiences which recur in the textual corpus. Topic extraction allows us to determine what Experience-hosts are writing about in their descriptions.

Then we performed a network analysis in order to highlight the most central topic (Fig. 2). The software used is Arcmap, Wordstats and Gephi. As regards professional profiles, we manually collected the qualifications in the 385 descriptions in order to explore who finds it beneficial to get involved in Experiences. Hosts' declarations about their expertise, skills and occupation have been considered reliable, since on digital platforms the host's reputation plays a key role along with the service offered (Celata, Hendrickson, & Sanna, 2017). The host describes himself/herself as a trustworthy, “open” individual (Ronzhy, 2013; Tussyadiah & Park, 2018) in

order to enable the platform to promise an experience that complies with the requirements of being “authentic”, “behind the scenes”, “local”, etc. (<https://blog.airbnb.com/>). We are aware of the complexity of the host's moral responsibility as explained by Farmaki, Stergiou, and Kaniadakis (2019), but we assume that Experiences-hosts need to be as trustworthy as possible since the relationship with guests takes place in real life, and face-to-face. As Roelofsen and Minca argued, “the production of the Self through such profiling practices shows how digital bodies are supposed to represent real and truthful bodies, an Avatar of each individual's actual bios necessary to enter a (digital) community of fellow hosts/guests” (Roelofsen & Minca, 2018, p.175).

2. Results

Research on Airbnb's spatial dimensions has focussed on the geographical distribution of listings and shown how short-term rentals have contributed substantially to the over-touristification of city centres (Arias Sans & Quagliari, 2016; Benítez-Aurioles, 2018; Picascia et al., 2017). In line with these results, our analysis has revealed that the majority (77%) of the Experiences (measured according to the number of reviews) are concentrated within Florence city centre. This concentration includes predominantly Experiences based on cultural resources and landmarks (e.g. cultural walks, historical tours, museum visits, famous points of interest) which are located within the UNESCO area of the city (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/174/>). Moreover, Experiences are activities centred on different place-based resources (markets, cafes and pubs, gardens) which are offered by hosts in a way that is non-packaged and unique as required by the platform. The remainder of the Experiences (23%) are distributed in the ring area (Fig. 1) which includes several small towns and defines a sort of “greater Airbnb-fied Florence”. These locations feature the traditional Tuscan countryside where wine or olive production takes place, and where organic farming or high-quality food production are carried out mainly on family-run farms. Such a distribution pattern seems to confirm the enlargement of the platform catchment area towards locations outside the city centre, which are more appealing for a dive into niche attractions that only an indigenous guide can reveal.

The analysis revealed that most of the Experiences include culinary activities and food tasting (Table 1). Cooking classes, food and wine tasting, and vineyard visits are the focus of 59% of the Experiences. It seems that artistic resources, the key features of art cities like Florence, have been overshadowed by culinary resources, which are perceived as the best means to explore new cultures and ways of being for an experiential type of tourism (Hall, 2005). Furthermore, several activities advertised on the platform fall into some sort of creative proposal (e.g. Spritz experience; A swim in a stream; The mysterious mentalist's home, Treasure hunt) which demonstrates how the hosts showcase skills and resources and try to tap into niche interests and curiosity in the performative platform environment.

In relation to the 11 topics extracted (Table 2), it is interesting to observe the significant areas around which the descriptions of the Experiences are structured: some refer to resources involved in the activity (e.g. points of interest, organic food, museums, markets, neighbourhoods, etc.), others to specific locations (e.g. countryside, city centre, Chianti) or to the type of activity (e.g. general tour). Three topics highlight qualitative features (e.g. typical, local, family). Table 2 shows these topics ranked according to the indegree prestige² and eigenvector centrality³ indices. More specifically, “typical” is the most central topic used to describe genuine Florentine experiences, followed by Point of Interest and Organic Food.

The diagram below, whose edges represent relationships among the identified topics, highlights a peculiar structure characterized by two

² The indegree prestige metric for a node n is defined by the number of other nodes that are directly pointing to n .

³ The eigenvector centrality is a method of computing the centrality of each node in a graph, where the node here is represented by a topic; the assumption is that each node's centrality is the sum of the centrality values of the nodes that it is connected to.

¹ Topic Modelling consists of extracting k topics that capture the most salient semantic nuclei within the corpus, each including a ranking list of strongly-associated terms.

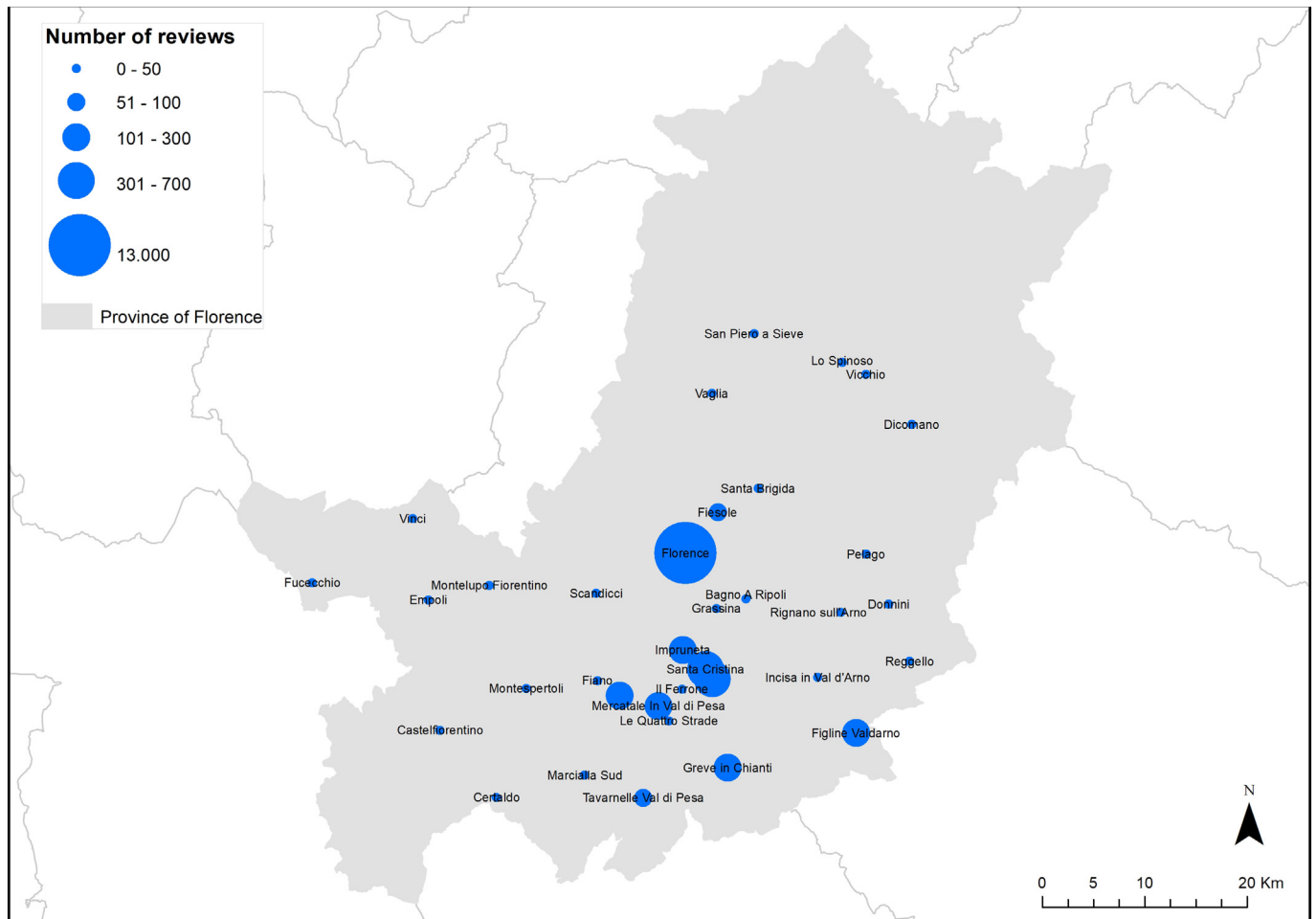


Fig. 1. Spatial distribution of Experiences by number of reviews. 2019. Data: [Airbnb.com/experiences](https://www.airbnb.com/experiences).

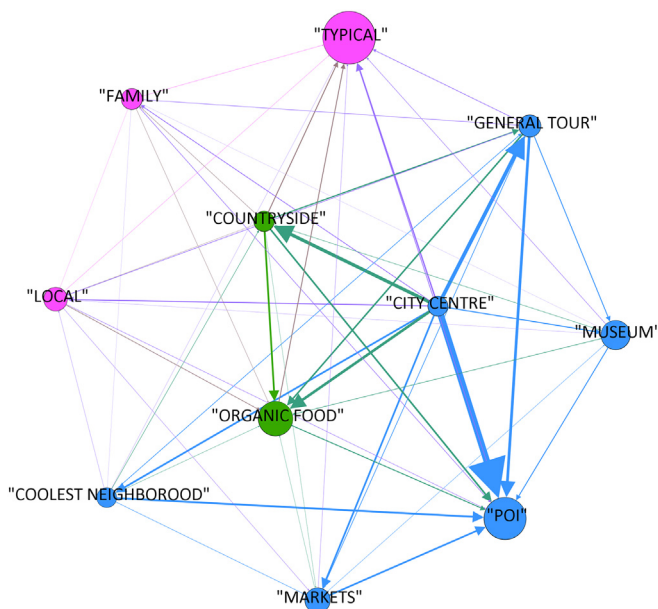


Fig. 2. The topics network. Nodes are sized by eigenvector centrality; edges are sized by frequencies of the relationship among topics.

“worlds” of Experiences. The first includes experiences which take place in the countryside and engage food-related resources (in green). The second (in blue), which relates to the city centre, reveals the interest in museums, cultural walks, the main artistic buildings (POIs) but also food markets, organic food and “cool” neighbourhoods (e.g. San Frediano) (<https://www.lonelyplanet.com/articles/10-of-the-worlds-coolest-neighbourhoods-to-visit-right-now>).

The last step of the analysis addressed the hosts' professional profiles (Table 3). Similarly to listings, the platform provides hosts' portrayals which disclose relevant qualities (qualifications, tastes, personality, relationships, etc.) to sketch out what kind of person the tourist will meet during the Experience. Our analysis has focused only on the professional profiles to highlight who is offering activities on the platform as a potential income generator. Such a feature is particularly relevant in peer-to-peer platforms since guests search for an experience combining authenticity with professional hospitality (Zhu, Cheng, Wang, Ma, & Jiang, 2019).

The analysis has shown that tourist guide is the most cited qualification (34%) but only a few declare themselves to be certified tourist guides. Other qualifications include food-related jobs (26%), which are often described as amateur professions, and art-related occupations (21%). It is quite interesting that a substantial number of hosts (8%) are highly qualified people (lawyer, architect, engineer) whose motivation to be an Airbnb Experience host is, they declare, based on their passions rather than on their professional skills (e.g. “I am a lawyer who loves cooking traditional food!”). Similarly to the typologies of activities, creativity finds space on the platform for professional profiling: some define themselves as “Airbnb

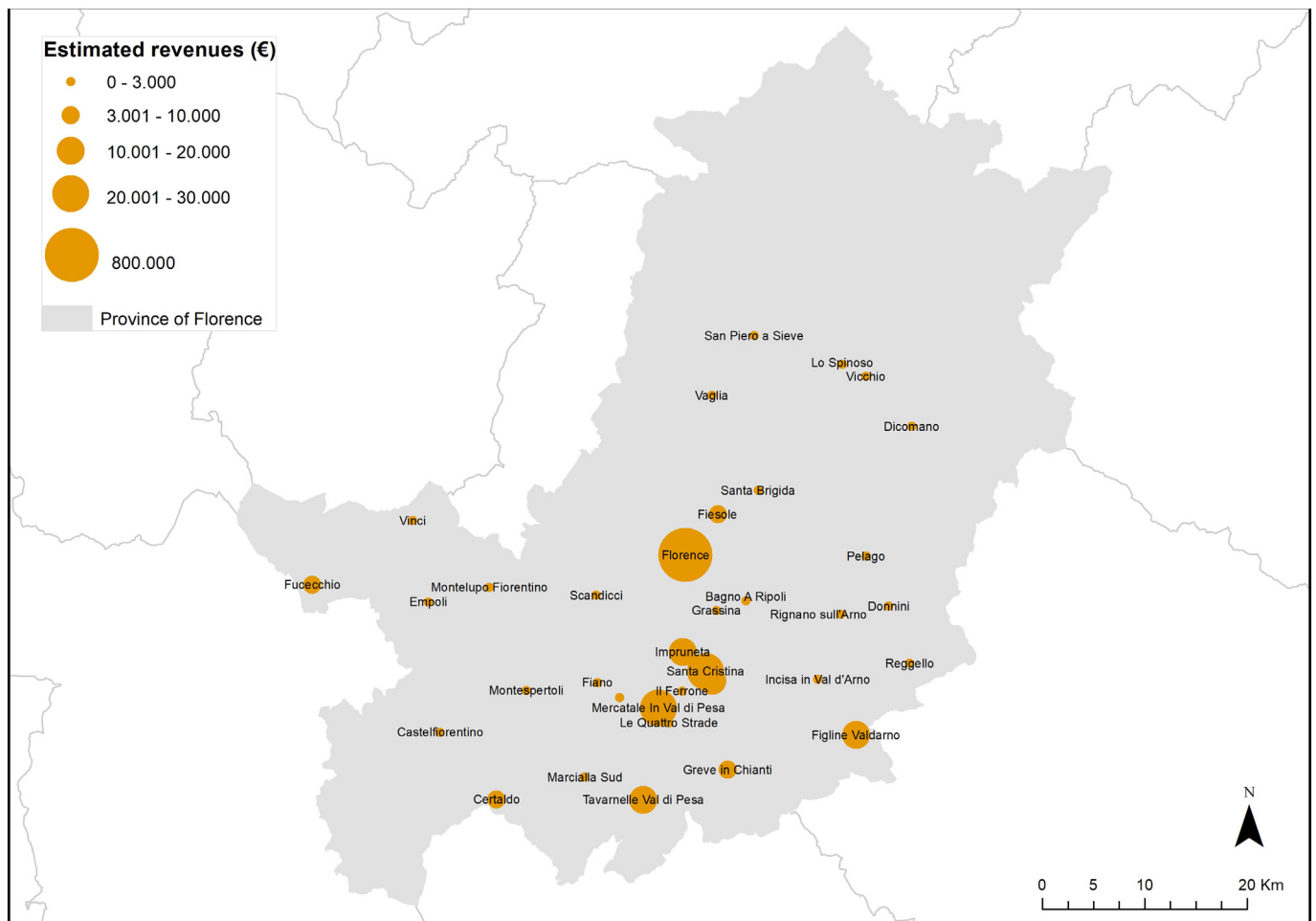


Fig. 3. Spatial distribution of the Experiences by estimated revenues. 2019. Data: [Airbnb.com/experiences](https://www.airbnb.com/experiences).

hosts”, Superhosts”, “Urban explorer”, “Startupper”. In general terms, hosts present themselves in a spontaneous way as ordinary people who are in love with their city – Florence – and wish to share their passion, thus building the effective sense of authenticity which is one of the platform's missions. Within such a context the negative consequences of new spaces of job offered within the platform seem particularly relevant if compared to jobs traditionally offered by professionals such as official and accredited tourist guides. The serious problem for governments and regulators is that while official guides go through accreditation procedures and regional

Table 1

Top 10 categories of Experiences by volume of reviews, duration, price, income.

Category	Reviews (%)	Average duration	Average price (euro)	Average income (euro)
Cooking classes	34.01%	3,6 h.	72	8153
Food tasting	12.61%	2,1 h.	58,8	6328
Wine tasting	8.62%	3,3 h.	67,2	2328
Historic walk	8.11%	2,4 h.	42,5	1439
Vineyard visit	3.96%	4,5 h.	108	8604
1 day trip	2.9%	3,4 h.	55	3210
Workshop	2.52%	3,3 h.	77,5	1142
Photo shoot	2.18%	1,8 h.	82,2	2289
Yoga class	2.08%	3 h.	29	2748
Cultural walk	2.03%	2,5 h.	47,8	530

Table 2

Main topics from the descriptions of the Experience, ordered by Indegree prestige.

Topic	Features	Indegree prestige	Eigenvector centrality
Typical	<i>Florentine experience</i>	1	1
Point of interest (POI)	<i>Artistic landmarks</i>	0.9	0.67
Organic food	<i>Organic food</i>	0.81	0.45
Museum	<i>Museums in town</i>	0.63	0.28
Markets	<i>Main food markets</i>	0.54	0.11
Local	<i>Local people</i>	0.54	0.16
General tour	<i>Indicates more general and less specified tour</i>	0.45	0.06
Family	<i>Family atmosphere</i>	0.36	0.03
Countryside	<i>Chianti</i>	0.27	0.01
Cooler neighborhood	<i>San Frediano</i>	0.18	0.04
City centre	<i>Unesco Area of the city</i>	0.1	0

selections, Airbnb-mediated jobs may not.⁴ Indeed, similarly to other digital platforms like Uber, Airbnb acts as “digital middleman and effectively shift risks from corporations to workers, weakens labour protections, loosens controls” (Isaac & Davis, 2014, p.16). As a result, the competition

⁴ Airbnb informs users that: “if the activities you want to offer are those reserved to tour guides or managers, you will need a specific license. You will also need to comply with the general requirements that apply to businesses”. <https://www.airbnb.com/help/article/1478/guiding-tours-in-florence?locale=en>

Table 3
Hosts professional profiles.

	Occupation	% of total
Guides	<i>Licensed tourist guide; Tourist guide; Bike guide.</i>	34%
Food	<i>Chef; Sommelier; Restaurant owner; Bartender; Pizza chef; amateur Chef; Farmer; Wine maker; Oil maker; Beekeeper; Truffle hunter; Food artisans.</i>	26%
Arts	<i>Photographer; Artist; Painter; Artisan; Designer, Master perfumer.</i>	21%
Higher qualifications	<i>Architect; Agronomist; Archaeologist; Computer scientist; Engineer; Journalist; Pharmacist; Lawyer; Marketing Specialist; Teacher.</i>	9%
Creative	<i>Host Airbnb, Superhost, Urban Explorer; Personal Shopper, Startupper.</i>	8%
Sport	<i>Yoga instructor, Runner, Fitness coach.</i>	1%
Student	<i>Student, Master student.</i>	< 1%
Retired	<i>Retired.</i>	< 1%

from Airbnb could be viewed as deskilling the whole sector. At the same time, the so-called platform economy, which makes it easier for people to make money by monetizing their existing assets, has been a source of income for many. In our analysis, 74% of total revenues are concentrated in Florence and the remaining 26% in the ring area (Fig. 3). This uneven distribution depends on demand and price for the Experience; furthermore our results are influenced by the fact that we searched for Experiences with the keyword “Florence”. This aspect is interesting since the place name “Florence” is attributed to Experiences held in locations which do not lie within the extent of the official and administrative area of Florence municipality. In short, Florence catching area is spatially spread to a larger extra-urban and rural area that boosts the appeal of the Florentine atmosphere and attractiveness. However, the critical aspect that needs further study derives from the possibility of generating such income through the platform in a complex and unregulated environment which generates an exogenous activity even in less urbanized areas where short-term accommodation is relatively scarce.

Such activity seems to highlight non-accommodation spaces, in line with the platform's expansion strategy where opportunities can be found both by enlarging geographical coverage and by offering new services outside the original business model, in what can be seen as an attempt to expand the ‘Florence’ experience, its renown, and the millions of tourists it hosts, over a wider area. Within such a context, Airbnb can be described as a space of multiple meanings where features, roles and practices are redefined (Farmaki et al., 2020). In this, it is reflecting a well-known notion of space as a heterogeneous and complex social construction (Foucault, 1986; Lefebvre, 2000) where spaces are highly dependent on the relations performed around them (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2004) and are increasingly co-shaped within the “space of flows” (Castells, 2015).

3. Discussion and conclusions

Our analysis is an initial attempt to address relevant issues based on the analysis of Airbnb Experiences in relation to the development and the spatial effects of the platform economy, emerging tourist practices and employment opportunities mediated by the platform.

As our results show, Airbnb's expansion from accommodation rentals to tourism-related services reveals the enlargement of the platform's spatial reach in areas where accommodation listings are known to be less present. Even if the majority of the Experiences still take place in the city centre, the sprawl in the ring area demonstrates the power of the Experiences to engage with resources that are not confined to the accommodation space of the city centre. This sprawl is due to the Experience typologies which pivot on comprehensive activities mainly based on food and its “environment” (e.g. organic farms).

By doing so, Airbnb seems to have encompassed the ongoing transition within tourism driven by a demand for experiential and authentic holidays by augmenting the motto of “living like a local” (Paulauskaite, Powell,

Coca-Stefaniak, & Morrison, 2017). In this context, Experiences become a social practice where resources, both material and symbolic, are exchanged (Selwyn, 2000 p.19).

At the same time, from a socio-economic point of view, these new spaces replicate the tension between the desire of tourists for more memorable experiences and the quest of the hosts for new ‘spaces of enterprise’ (Farmaki et al., 2020). In such spaces, the new services are offered not by homeowners but by people who have the local knowledge, the know-how, the skills and creativity to set up more or less innovative activities which find their place in expanding platform-mediated tourist practices. Analysis of the hosts' profiles, according to the descriptions published on the platform, has revealed that the self-entrepreneurial capacity of the Experiences is appealing for a large variety of hosts ranging from tourist guides to highly skilled professionals (e.g. lawyers, architects). The hosts' professional profiles suggest a need for work or for additional income that come from more or less qualified people whose motivations need further investigation: are they unemployed? Or is their salary unsatisfactory? Or are their skills difficult to place in the regulated labour market? The income estimation suggests emerging spaces of domestic entrepreneurialism (Stabrowski, 2017) where the platform becomes the arena for self-employment opportunities. It is certain that with reference to the Experiences, labour rules and regulations seem to be even weaker – or completely absent – than for rentals.

As regards the employment aspect, Airbnb offers a platform for precarious and unregulated employment to a large population of workers in creative industries (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010). Therefore, from a socio-economic perspective, new challenges arise that concern above all the governance of a phenomenon that risks increasing precariousness instead of becoming an opportunity for self-employment. It seems clear that the platform's speed of development cannot be easily governed: institutional responses cannot keep up, for example, with the growth of an unregulated and precarious labour force working not just for themselves but for the platform too. As Van Dijck et al. (2018 pp. 156-159) remark, governments and institutions are not yet sufficiently equipped to deal with the complex platform mechanism. Indeed the societal implications of platformization will continue to unfold over the near future; while the outcomes are uncertain, it seems clear that there is a need to address the socio-spatial grievances and distortions that digital platforms generate (Casilli & Posada, 2019, p.15).

Time has passed since we started our analysis, but we cannot avoid a final remark about the impact of COVID-19 on Experiences. While the pandemic has heavily impacted tourism due to lockdown measures, the platform has rapidly generated alternative services: online Experiences (<https://www.airbnb.com/s/experiences/online>) have taken the place of those done in person. In this context, Experiences become fully ‘virtual’, digitally available via the platform, acting in the space of flows. This could be described as a resilient adaption of the platform itself to the pandemic; Experiences have not disappeared but they have been rapidly reconfigured: according to Airbnb, four months after launch there were more than 700 online Experiences. In this regard, the territory of platform intermediation (Barns, 2020) and its related consequences will need further exploration.

Our work and its results have many limitations: it deals with a single case study, while a comparative analysis among several destinations would enrich the analysis; the professional profiling and motivations need further investigation (e.g. dedicated surveys among Experiences hosts, see Farmaki et al., 2019); and a more sophisticated data collection method should be developed. However, the analysis of data retrieved from the digital platform proves an intriguing source of information to unveil ongoing phenomena driven by the platform economy (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). Despite these limitations, our study aimed to raise awareness of the widening strategy of Airbnb and the related effects in the fields of platform-mediated occupations and tourism practices. In the burgeoning literature on the Airbnb phenomenon, there is as yet a lack of attention paid to Experiences, so it is hoped that this article will encourage further research into this increasingly pervasive service.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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