

Special Issue
Enhancement, Management,
and Sustainability of Tourism in Italian
Small Villages

FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory,
Tourism, Technology

Guest Editors

Ilaria Marotta

Salvatore Monaco

Marina Novelli



Editor in Chief: Fabio Corbisiero
Managing Editor: Carmine Urciuoli

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From Rural to Digital: Insights from Airbnb Gastro-Experiences in Italian Inner Areas²

Introduction

A new interest in the enhancement of local assets within inner areas has been increasing during recent years, eventually leading to a tourist transition of many formerly abandoned places (Salvatore *et al.*, 2018). This process has resulted in both positive and negative outcomes, leading to measured improvements in rural and inner areas, balanced with certain threats to their authentic heritage. In some ways, this tourist transition has helped small towns overcome the stereotyped images of marginalization, while in other cases, it has led some to risk falling into a category of a fabricated “idyllic rural lifestyle” (Bell, 2006) suitable for holiday purposes, but lagging in the support and development of adequate services for year-round residents (Barbera *et al.*, 2022). Extensive literature on sustainable rural development and tourist transition relies, among others, on two concepts of countryside capital (Garrod *et al.*, 2006) and nexogenous development (Bock, 2016) to frame these processes.

The study here presented applies these concepts to assess the impacts of eno and gastro-tourism offerings through Airbnb’s *Experiences* platform—an offshoot of the company’s original accommodation model. *Experiences* are a compilation of activity-based offerings, with the aim of highlighting more “authentic” services to tourists in coherence with local cultural heritage. *Experiences* have allowed Airbnb to expand its model, providing a space to market activities that are often sold without a tie to accommodations or an overnight stay. Launched in 2016, the *Experiences* project aimed to engage rural tourism providers and expand Airbnb’s network beyond an urban context (Airbnb, 2017a). This kind of networked hospitality exemplified by Airbnb’s model (Oskam, Boswijk, 2016) has already triggered significant innovations by combining advantages for travelers by offering low-cost accommodations with those for residents, who earn extra income from their existing assets. However, the idea of *Experiences* offers an even further step in “alternative hospitality” by gaining specifically from its “secondary effects” (Oskam, Boswijk, 2016)—namely, the experiential value of “living like a local.”

In recent research, Leick *et al.* (2023), highlighted how the Airbnb tourism model has become a “double-edged sword” for small communities. On one hand, Airbnb tourists can positively impact local economies by increasing daily spending on attractions and services, such as museums, restaurants, and shops. However, its predatory nature—largely based on a rather unregulated marketplace—raises concerns. Additionally, Airbnb undeniably contributes to rural gentrification and overtourism pressures, with rental price increases (particularly in urban contexts) and excessive tourist influxes, especially during peak seasons. It may also trigger social conflict driven by unfair competition with other common low-cost accommodation facilities in rural regions, like B&Bs, hostels, and camping sites. This research presented narrows in on one category of these *Experiences*—food and drink offerings—with the intention of understanding how their slow proliferation, via this socially innovative digital platform, has impacted sustainable development across rural and inner communities throughout Italy. The main question to guide this research ask: has Airbnb’s new initiative achieved the aim of supporting the enhancement of local heritage in a socially and economically sustainable way?

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To further inform the study, the following three sub-issues are addressed:

How has the proliferation of Airbnb Food and Drink Experiences in rural Italian spaces triggered new forms of gastro-tourism, if at all?

How does Airbnb's platform either support or undermine tourism initiatives of local community members in rural and/or marginal spaces?

What role could innovative digital platforms like Airbnb play in driving rural development efforts in terms of nexus?

Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study draws insights from three different case studies. After a detailed desk mapping of all Italian eno and gastronomic *Experiences* advertised via the online platform, fieldwork was conducted from June to August 2022, which entailed in-depth, semi-structured interviews with tourism providers and survey responses from rural tourism *Experience Hosts*.³

1. Gastro-tourism in rural areas

From the theoretical standpoint, this study relies mainly on the nexogenous framework (Bock, 2016), which calls for both endogenous and exogenous approaches to rural development through socially innovative strategies. Bock's definition emphasizes «the importance of reconnection and reestablished socio-political connectivity of especially marginal rural areas» (p. 570). Nexogenous development is driven by bottom-up community initiatives, coupled with the utilization of external resources and capital to support these efforts. Airbnb's Experience model fits this framework by attempting to bridge the gap between the commodification of rural resources through agricultural-based, eno or gastro-tourism offerings and the power and capital of a global digitalized platform. The element of social innovation (Barbera, Parisi, 2019) is equally significant and has served as a complementary guiding category of this research, as it is a notable avenue of development recognized by the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas (INSIA). Namely, innovation in this context refers to a social and organizational change that can establish a mutual learning relationship among various social actors: formal institutions, economic operators, associations, and citizens. Such innovations can be achieved through continuous dialogue that allows for the exchange of embedded local and external knowledge within the frameworks of community engagement and place-based policies (Lucatelli *et al.*, 2022).

A growing emphasis on multifunctional approaches to rural regeneration emerged during the twentieth century, with tourism highlighted as a compelling way of diversifying countryside economies. Given the documented outmigration of many young people from peripheral spaces in the Italian countryside (East, 2017; Li *et al.*, 2019), rural dwellers must seek innovative solutions to address the economic stagnation that accompanies this exodus. Some rural gastro-tourism offerings provide a nexus that links local producers and external consumers or investors, resulting in greater financial support through income diversification and the introduction of outsiders, often brought about by socially innovative offerings that may eventually make the countryside more economically and socially vibrant (Garrod *et al.*, 2006).

Territorial food heritages—or *terroir*—are often employed to convey value and legitimacy to community outsiders and tourists, and thus play a central role in developing a successful rural tourism offering. Bessière (2013) argues that utilizing territorial gastronomic identities is an effective way to shape a tourist offering. In a similar vein, Vaquero Piñeiro *et al.* (2019) frame local food offerings as both social and cultural capital linked to territorial growth, essentially reiterating the idea that heritage is the basis for rural development—particularly around food-related traditions. Contemporary rural offerings have worked to strike the balance between selling the idealized notion of rurality as framed through food heritage, while rejecting its original status as a place of

3 "Hosts" is the term Airbnb uses to describe tourism providers who advertise an offering on their website.

backwardness. To further this notion, some scholars (Guan *et al.*, 2019) refer to a “cultural turn:” indicative of the trending reimagination of rural spaces as havens of food heritage.

Yet, an inherent contradiction arises around heritage and authenticity when utilized for profit-centric activities. In Reynolds view (1994) as an attraction becomes more popular, it is often then perceived to be less authentic; thus suggesting the dilution of tradition through the food heritage title when utilized for the sake of tourism. However, while marketing rural experiences may inherently undermine food heritage authenticity, this process may support the longevity and survival of certain rural spaces. Therefore, the inherent contradiction in the fabrication of authenticity for the sake of tourism lies in its power to ensure the continual production and re-invention of local tradition.

To achieve this objective, Andreoli and Silvestri (2017) urge a greater emphasis on the connection between agriculture and tourism, particularly in inner areas, to provide a more comprehensive rural offering. Other scholars (Figuers, 2013; Uludağ, 2019) argue that a rural tourism offering lacking a focus on gastronomy can lead to an increase in the threats to the region by eventually weakening local agriculture. Thus, while some (Li *et al.*, 2019) ultimately conclude that the future of rurality is not agriculture in strict terms, the reality would seem otherwise, especially with a multifunctional approach.

Beyond and across food heritage practices, rural development via tourism is widely recognized as a way to capitalize on local resources (Garrod *et al.*, 2006; Li *et al.*, 2019; Ray, 1998)—whether through food, language, landscape, or cultural traditions—as commodities to attract tourists. The ability to recognize and utilize these resources in a touristic model is highly reflective of van der Ploeg’s (2010) emphasis on employing local knowledge—*art de la localité*—in multifunctional rural development efforts.

Relatedly, social innovation has become increasingly referenced in the literature as a way to emphasize efficiency and increased social benefits, along with a focus on collaboration and network building (Barbera, Parisi, 2019). These factors are also addressed within the paradigm of nexogenous development.

Approaching innovation in rural tourism can be done from multiple perspectives. In essence, alternative forms of tourism are considered innovations to the dominating form of mass tourism today. While innovations in tourism offerings need not be exclusively technical, the reference to Internet connectivity suggests that digital elements may play an integral role in the success of tourism offerings (Sidali *et al.*, 2011; Aleffi, Cavicchi, 2020). Alternatively, the intangible nature of these innovation processes must also be addressed (Quaranta *et al.*, 2016), as network building, trust, collaboration, and knowledge exchange are all essential immaterial factors for the sustainable development of rural areas.

Therefore, a successful development strategy through an innovative approach does not take root in isolation, but rather seems to depend on the empowerment of local community members (Aleffi, Cavicchi, 2020; Barbera, Parisi, 2019; Basile, Cavallo, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2019; Moscardo, 2008; Quaranta *et al.*, 2016; Salvatore *et al.*, 2018), as well as on the incorporation of urban or peri-urban resources and actors into the initiative, as argued by Bock (2016) and Li *et al.* (2019).

2. From rural to digital: where is the nexus?

It is widely accepted that connectivity and collaboration are key to effective rural development strategies rooted in innovation. A mix of endogenous and exogenous influences allows for greater resilience in rural systems. Within the context of the brain drain as a defining feature of marginalized areas, the return and expansion of more innovative thinkers with a greater ability to adapt and transform is seen as essential to the countryside’s survival (Li *et al.*, 2019).

Bock (2016) similarly notes the power of combining traditional, local knowledge with external sources of modernization through the nexogenous development model, which seeks to merge efforts of both internal and external actors. The nexogenous approach is itself an innovation in the realm of rural development efforts. The current literature, then, makes clear that the preservation of rurality, almost ironically, requires the incorporation of external resources—both of financial and social capital, as also highlighted by the INSIA approach to local development (Lucatelli *et al.*, 2022). Essentially, marginalized areas must aim to better connect with globalized spaces, which is not to argue for their urbanization, but rather for their ability to channel the services of urbanity while maintaining a local character. To pursue this principle of territorial cohesion—which ensures that economic activities, social development, and growth opportunities are evenly distributed across different regions—it is paramount to improve access to basic services and infrastructure, such as health, education, and work. However, the digital divide that often exists between urban and rural areas poses an additional challenge in meeting these social needs. In particular, the role of technology in the 21st century is also unavoidable and now widely recognized as an effective tool for marketing and communication, especially in tourism. Some scholars (Andreopoulou *et al.*, 2014; Pato, Duque, 2021) have recognized the inherent linkage between rural tourism and sustainability, and they call for the improved implementation of website-based marketing as a tool to successfully communicate those values. Pato and Duque (2021), for example, reiterate that technology should be included as an additional pillar of sustainability. Electronic word of mouth may also play an important role in the development and growth of rural tourism businesses, which is achieved through the creation and maintenance of captivating websites by tourism providers (Pato and Duque, 2021): a concept that today could extend to all forms of social media.

Within this realm, Airbnb *Experiences* have become a relevant case in nexogenous-driven rural development efforts through eno and gastro-tourism. As a relatively newer global platform with potential to encourage exchange amongst people from across the world, Airbnb activity might shed a new light on approaches to socially innovative rural development. Over the past few years, the company has used the platform to promote rural development and the regeneration of abandoned towns, most evidently through its Italian Villages project, which is the product of a partnership with the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Activities, and Tourism, or MiB-ACT (Airbnb Newsroom, 2017). The project intended to «Showcas[e] these small Italian towns to travelers from all over the world [...] helping to improve their local economies by encouraging off-the-beaten-track, sustainable tourism» (Airbnb Newsroom, 2017, p. 5). More recently, the company has also launched its Rural Bootcamp to train Hosts in these areas, with the aim of improving their platform utilization (Airbnb Newsroom, 2022). Another project, “The Italian Sabbatical,” launched in 2019 as a partnership between Airbnb and a local Italian NGO, brought volunteers from around the world to the village of Grottole to drive community regeneration (Airbnb Newsroom, 2019). Additional partnerships with Slow Food, Agritourist, Touring Club Italiano, and the Associazione Nazionale degli Alberghi Diffusi have contributed to the company’s work in this realm (Airbnb Newsroom, 2022).

Therefore, within community-based tourism, Airbnb may emerge as a particularly interesting player to drive nexogenous development by offering the services of expansive, digital connectivity to promote the values and local offerings of rural areas.

While initially, the utilization of modern technology and global capital to bolster local, traditional producers appears aligned with Bock’s framework (2016), it has become apparent that the actual efficacy of the platform in practice may deviate from its stated mission. Since research into the impacts of Airbnb’s *Experience* platform is almost non-existent, it proves difficult to draw conclusions on sustainability factors. There is extensive research, however, on the company’s original accommodation model, particularly in urban areas. In this realm, Airbnb has been criticized for its community and economic impacts. For example, in their Lisbon-based study, Petruzzi *et al.* (2020) note a mixed perception of Airbnb, with most complaints targeted toward the impacts on

local housing markets and the increase of overtourism in high traffic areas. In October of 2023, Florence instituted a ban on new short-term rentals across the city in an attempt to regulate housing and rental prices for locals (The Guardian, 2023). Leick *et al.* (2023) note similar concerns in the early findings of their fieldwork from Norway, Iceland, and Denmark.

Newer studies on Airbnb's role in rural areas has emerged only within the last three to four years, coinciding with its recent expansion outside of cities and urban contexts. Presenza *et al.* (2020) analyze Airbnb as a model case study for its reliance on social innovation to adopt a more sustainable business model. As a multisided platform, which is a digital space that allows two or more players to directly interact, Airbnb has succeeded in expanding its network and innovating new projects that involve both rural and urban actors. Particularly notable in the sustainable tourism realm was its recent addition of Social Impact Experiences (Presenza *et al.*, 2020).

Thus, while not yet widely developed, emerging literature recognizes the potential of innovations through multisided platforms to support sustainable rural development. Airbnb *Experiences*, then, are still a relevant case study, as tourists can search for an activity in their desired destination related to gastronomy, culture, sports, art, and more—all of which are hosted by locals. While opinions of the platforms expansion into rural areas are ultimately mixed, several tactics exist to mitigate the negative effects of Airbnb's growth—like taxations or limitations on its expansion. While the concerns around overpopulation, preservation of local identities, and economic investment in communities have largely impacted urban areas thus far, many fear that rural tourism providers may begin to face the same challenges if Airbnb continues to expand into the countryside. The potential for these trends to spread calls into question whether or not Airbnb's offering truly promotes a sustainable tourism model, and particularly if it effectively supports a sustainable approach to rural development through real social nexus and community engagement.

3. Research method and tools

To study the impact of Experiences in rural communities, the researchers adopted a mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2003), combining desk mapping and survey responses with participation in three case studies. From March to June 2022, the researchers' first phase of data collection focused on creating a database of every applicable Experience to cross-reference with corresponding indicators in the related municipalities. Then, qualitative data gained from in-depth interviews and participant observation during fieldwork from June to August 2022 served to support these findings. The study was not regionally bounded, but rather looked at Food and Drink Experiences throughout all of Italy. In fact, the researchers selected three cases based on geographical diversity—mountains, coast, and plains—to explore potential variances in tourism development according to the culture and economy of different territories.

Through the methodological framework, the researchers employed a place-based strategy to highlight the individual identities of municipalities within a wider national context. Comparing micro-level data on tourist flows to regional and national totals, alongside findings from qualitative interviews, the researchers intended to uncover the territorial differences in rural tourism development through social innovation.

3.1 Background interviews

From March to July 2022, the researchers conducted a limited number of background interviews with four key informants as part of an exploratory phase aimed at better understanding Airbnb's mission, model, structure, and dynamics through its Experience offerings. While they contacted numerous Airbnb corporate employees with requests for interviews, regrettably none were

granted. To compensate for this lack of internal perspective, the researchers instead conducted proxy level interviews with professionals working in the realm of rural development—most with some degree of collaboration with Airbnb. These included a Slow Food employee, the co-founder of a local start-up, the CEO of a social enterprise/NGO, and a popular food tourism provider. The interviews were semi-structured and primarily addressed themes around rural development, rural networks and coalitions, digital platforms, and values like heritage and terroir.

3.2 Airbnb Experiences mapping

Simultaneously, from March to June 2022, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to compile a thorough list of all relevant offerings on Airbnb’s website. The total count of relevant Experiences fluctuated in number from 1,675 to 1,683 over the months of data collection, as Hosts can add or remove their offering from the site at any point depending on their willingness and availability to accommodate tourists. Every applicable Experience was cross-referenced with the ISTAT grade of urbanization to filter only for those hosted in rural areas. Ultimately, the created database included a list of 329 Experiences that fit the predetermined criteria: those related to eno or gastro-tourism and hosted in a place classified as rural, according to ISTAT.

3.3 Survey design and distribution

To supplement the desk research, a fifty-five question survey was sent to Hosts in the sample of Experiences (239) and responses were collected from June to August 2022.⁴ Given the relatively low sample population, the survey was sent to all 239 providers with the hope of increasing responses to yield statistically significant data. The survey was composed of five sections referring to different research dimensions as stated below (Figure 1):

- (1) Host Background
- (2) Airbnb Experience Offering
- (3) Collaboration with Airbnb
- (4) Community Development via Tourism
- (5) Social Innovations and Offering Uniqueness

Figure 1 - Dimensions and aspects investigated in the survey

Survey Dimensions	Specific Aspects Investigated
Host Background	Demographics, Education, Business Establishment
Airbnb Experience Offering	Name, Focus, Seasonality, Visitors’ Profile
Collaboration with Airbnb	Duration, Booking Rate, Prices/Fees/Commissions, Quality Assessment
Community Development via Tourism	Engagement and Impact, Ecological Outcomes, Sustainability
Social Innovations	Training, Technology, Language, Territorial Networking, Business Evolution

The survey received 68 valid responses, representing a 28.5% response rate.

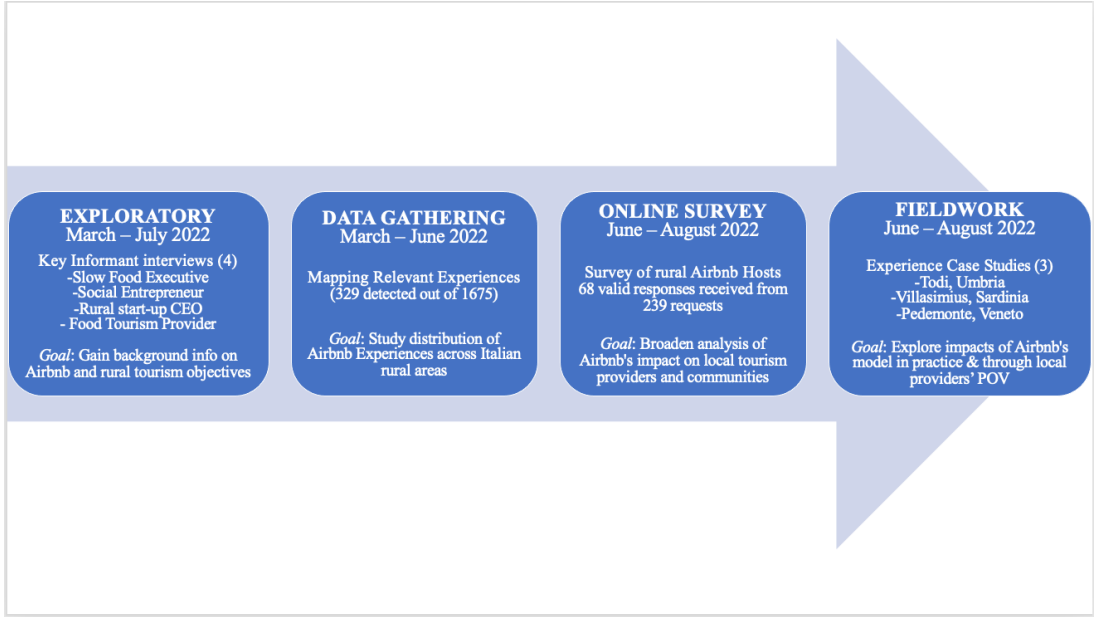
4 The number of Experience Hosts (239) was fewer than the number of Experiences (329) in the sample because some individuals sell multiple offerings. Furthermore, between the time of data collection and survey distribution, certain Experiences were removed from Airbnb’s website. These two factors account for the difference in number between included Experiences and the survey population.

3.4 Fieldwork and case study selection

To complement the data collection, the researchers made a purposive selection⁵ of three case studies, drawn from the Experiences sample, for participation and observation. Fieldwork for each case study Experience was conducted from June to August 2022, lasting approximately three days each. The researchers prioritized Experiences offered in inner areas, per the INSIA classification. Furthermore, to create conditions of comparability, the researchers guided the selection based on differences in ISTATs altimetric zone categories, selecting one in a mountainous area and one along the coast. The third case was classified as an Intercommunal Pole B (INSIA) and a small city or suburb (ISTAT); therefore, it was neither marginal nor rural.⁶ Instead, it offered a point of comparison about the use of digital platforms between rural and urban areas. The final case selections were in Todi, Umbria; Villasimius, Sardinia; and Pedemonte, San Pietro in Cariano, Veneto.

A total of eight interviews were conducted during fieldwork with both tourism providers and professionals in the field of rural development and tourism innovation. Only three of the eight interviewed collaborated directly with Airbnb to market their offering, while the remaining five were additional providers in the vicinity. Interviewing both classes of operators allowed for greater understanding about the platforms’ influence and prevalence in these communities. The interviews were semi-structured and the researchers followed a guide of main topics and sub-topics to conduct them, which included the following primary themes: demographic information, collaboration with Airbnb, the *Experience* offering, and sustainable development. The full research process is summarized below (Figure 2).

Figure 2 - Timeline of research process and tools



5 The selection was purposive because researchers prioritized cases in rural and inner areas, with geographic diversity (North, Central, South/Islands). Once these criteria were accounted for, the selection of viable cases was ultimately random, relying also on the tourism providers’ willingness and ability to participate.

6 The selected case study located in Pedemonte, Veneto is considered a ‘*frazione*,’ which means that the area is too small to be listed in ISTAT and INSIA databases. Therefore, the researchers relied on census data from the municipality in which it resides: San Pietro in Cariano.

4. Findings and results

From the initial desk research, it became clear that the expansion of Airbnb *Experiences* into rural areas was limited. Only 20% of the sampled total of 329 were hosted in rural areas, and even fewer in inner areas, suggesting that while Airbnb may market its platform as a tool for rural development, its impacts thus far are minimal. Furthermore, an analysis of the distribution of sampled *Experiences* across regions showed that the highest number (43% of the sample) were located in Tuscany, which is already a popular tourist destination, whereas less visited regions, like Marche, Molise, and Val d'Aosta offered less than 3 *Experiences* each. These regional differences suggest that *Experiences* have increased proliferation in areas with an already developed economy for gastro-tourism. This disparity led the researchers to hypothesize that the cause may reflect a lack of authentic, locally-based engagement from Airbnb corporate personnel or appropriately targeted marketing in more marginal communities.

4.1 Key findings from the survey

The survey conducted among Airbnb *Experiences* Hosts (68 valid responses out of 239 distributed) helped to further contextualize the development of innovative, gastro-tourism offerings across rural Italy. Most of the sampled Hosts (about 68%) obtained, on average, a high level of education, but less than half (about 41%) received formal training in hospitality or tourism, suggesting a pre-existing level of innovation. Just over half of respondents (about 53%) indicated that their offering relied on seasonality and just under 80% reported that it revolved around a geographic origin label or heritage product, supporting the idea that agriculture and *terroir* are central to a rural tourism offering. From these responses, the researchers concluded that the influence of Airbnb has not significantly changed the type of offerings sold, but rather offered an innovation in marketing tactics to fulfill this long-lasting desire to encounter heritage.

When asked to report their satisfaction with Airbnb through a Likert scale rating from 1-5, the survey respondents indicated average satisfaction with regards to support provided (3.6), quality of communication (3.3), and profit split (3.0), as demonstrated below (Figure 3). Interestingly, about 34% of respondents reported receiving one to five bookings per week through Airbnb, while about 45% reported the same number of bookings per week through other Online Travel Agencies (OTAs). Despite the differences in bookings and the financial challenges posed by the commission rate, 94% of surveyed Hosts still reported a willingness to continue utilizing the platform. Thus, the desire for greater visibility, which providers frequently stated as a central motivator for its use, often seemed to override financial concerns. Ultimately, 65% of the survey respondents indicated that they believed collaboration with Airbnb has led to an increase of tourism in their area.

Hosts were similarly asked to rate the impact of their collaboration with Airbnb on various community indicators and their responses demonstrated that they perceived a much greater impact on business and economic development compared to community building and environmental considerations (Figure 4). However, almost 87% confirmed that sustainability was a central focus of their business, with various measures undertaken to support this objective, the most common of which was an *"exclusive use of local food"* in their offering (Figure 5).

The final section of survey questions revolved around innovation in the industry, such as through targeted trainings, the use of technology, language capability, business evolution, and the offering's uniqueness. About 20% of respondents indicated that technology was not a central part of their marketing strategy prior to the collaboration with Airbnb, and 19% indicated that they did not use technology in their business promotion at all prior to the collaboration. But the responses pointed at more than technical innovation, such as an ability to speak multiple languages and manage multiple businesses. Even prior to the survey collection, one key informant

had supported the notion that Airbnb Hosts tended to be innovative by nature: “Airbnb just select[s] projects that...you’ve never seen before. Only special projects. For example, the Italian Sabbatical was the first residency launched around the world. Also...Wonder Bee & Bee was the first house where you could sleep surrounded by one million bees. All these things because they [Airbnb] are very good in communication.” - Key Informant. In further support of this notion, 84% of respondents indicated that their business changed or evolved in recent years, but only 32% of respondents reported that no other similar businesses existed in the vicinity, suggesting that the uniqueness of offerings was low. Taken together, the survey responses suggest that Hosts tend to be fairly innovative, and that Airbnb collaboration may have pushed some toward more technological innovations in their business model.

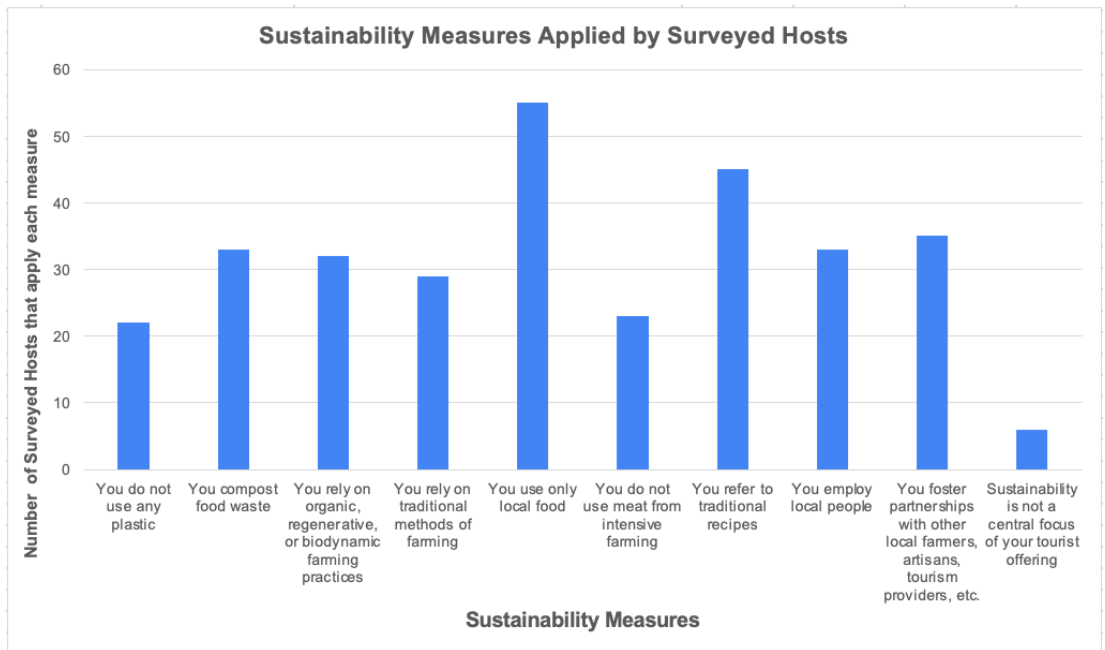
Figure 3 - Scores of Hosts level of satisfaction with Airbnb on various indicators

Level of Satisfaction with:	Average Scores
Technical support	3.6
Communication with Airbnb Operators	3.4
Individualized Support	3.4
Promotion and Marketing	3.3
Communication with Airbnb upper-management	3.2
Community building with other tourism providers	3.0
Percentage of Profit	3.0

Figure 4 - Scores of Airbnb's impact on various indicators according to surveyed Hosts

Impact of Collaboration with Airbnb on:	Average Scores
Your business development	3.9
Your quality of life	3.7
Local economy	3.7
Social culture of local community	3.6
Environmental conditions of local community	3.4

Figure 5 - Sustainability measures undertaken by surveyed Hosts



4.2 Fieldwork findings

The diversity of interviewee's geographical background offered an interesting point of comparison to understand how general perceptions of rurality across contexts influence digital platform use. Interestingly, only three out of the twelve interviewed providers (four key informants and eight tourist operators) obtained education in a field related to food or agriculture, while none were trained in hospitality specifically. Throughout the fieldwork, themes around coalitions, sustainability, heritage, capacity-building, and personal values emerged. Manual coding from the interview transcriptions made evident that the central guiding values for providers revolved around their sustainability initiatives, territorial identities, or personalization of the visitor experience.

In discussing their work, many referred, even if implicitly, to multifunctional approaches, while also referencing a concern for socio-economic sustainability, as much as for environmental. When asked about their use of digital platforms, all recognized the value, emphasizing the significance of greater visibility provided by digital marketing. While the interviewed tourism providers acknowledged the power of digital platforms to promote tourist offerings on a wider scale, they stipulated that the commission paid to OTAs created certain challenges. As one Host noted: *"Airbnb has become extremely expensive. [But] what I like of Airbnb is the social element... we can talk to people before we okay them. Sometimes, it's more than just reading the reviews, it's reading what they write"* - Airbnb Host from Todi.

In discussing the increase of tourism to local areas, providers attributed this trend in part to the use of digital marketing services. Another provider further noted that online connectivity was a highly significant component for business development, stating: *"without Booking [the OTA] you can't sell...let's say that it has become huge."* - Tourism provider from Villasimius. This statement supports the survey findings and helps to explain why providers continue to utilize digital platforms despite financial barriers. However, the importance of word of mouth also recurred across the interviews.

Finally, many regarded the impact of COVID-19 as an impetus for increased interest in and demand for rural tourism. Providers frequently mentioned innovations, not only in response to the

challenges posed by the pandemic, but also implicitly as a result of their role in the so-called new peasant generation (Dourian, 2021; Milone, Ventura, 2019).

Ultimately, while Airbnb advertises its work in rural development, its impacts may be minimal. Some of its greatest impediments revolve around a lack of recognition for embedded infrastructure and accessibility challenges that limit tourism growth in remote settings, as well as of awareness for the values that drive rural communities. Perhaps with time and especially through increased partnership with local stakeholders, the company could adopt new measures that would prove more effective to bridge the urban-rural divide, currently evident in the limited proliferation of *Experiences* in remote or peripheral areas. For a summary of comparisons among the three case study findings, see Figure 6 below.

4.1.1 Case one: Todi Umbria (central Italy)

Todi is a landlocked town in central Italy, classified as rural (ISTAT) and an intermediate inner area (INSIA).⁷ Todi's population has decreased by just under 5% between 2002 and 2020, in contrast to growth in both the province of Perugia (6.44%) and the region of Umbria (4.76%) over the same period. Despite the decline in its resident population, tourism in Todi has continued to expand, with a growth in both establishments and beds of over 150% and 130% respectively across the aforementioned years. The tourism function in Todi has also increased, with the current figure now suggesting an important level of activity. Its 2020 tourist function (0.144) surpassed both the provincial (0.113) and regional levels (0.101), positing Todi as an important center of tourism growth for Umbria as a whole. During fieldwork there, the importance of Todi's economy and cultural lifestyle were evident. Through observation, researchers noted that tourism was largely nature or agriculture-based in offering and reflective of the primary territorial productions: olive oil and wine. Slow Food, both as an organization and a philosophy, emerged as a significant force in the development of a territorial gastro-tourism in this area, and all interviewed providers expressed the importance of local food productions for both environmental and socio-economic sustainability.

The *Experience* attended revolved around olive oil and slow food values—a focus that demonstrates a clear linkage between territorial heritage and the centrality of agricultural production. The Host, a retired mechanical engineer, bought and regenerated his property seventeen years ago for the purpose of olive oil and wine production. He began complementing his farm activity with *Experiences* four years prior, employing a multifunctional business approach through the rental of his guest villa to accompany the tours, tastings, and agricultural productions. The visit began with an immersive tour through the olive groves, followed by an informational session on the characteristics that determine a quality oil, and a tasting of three varieties, including the Moraiolo, a Slow Food presidia. Throughout the *Experience*, the Host emphasized values for sustainability, authenticity, and territorial heritage, which all informed his dedication to provide a high-quality and exclusive product. These elements emerged as seemingly central to the marketing strategy—one centered around a B2C (Business to Consumer) philosophy to ensure quality and personalization.

Innovation in gastro-tourism initiatives in Todi was evident during the *Experience*, as well as in other local tourism projects. One of the newest offerings, the so-called "*Transameria*," was recently developed through a partnership between Slow Food and the cyclist organization *Uncover Umbria*. The *Transameria* is highly emblematic of a socially innovative and sustainable tourism project influencing Todi's development. A designated route for hikers or cyclists, the historic road serves to guide participants to local producers for a taste of territorial products. The project's founder indicated an interest in collaborating with Airbnb after undergoing a Slow Food-led training intended to educate potential future Hosts on Airbnb's founding principles, which

⁷ The intermediate inner area classification means that it is located between 20 to 40 minutes driving distance from a service center (Casavola, 2014, p. 25).

can then be transferred to others by capitalizing on the power and reach of digital platforms. She captured the significance of Slow Food's involvement in these projects, while suggesting the need for growth through global collaborations: *"That [the work] of Slow Food... has helped many small farmers, producers, agrarians, etc. But now, there is a need to do something more. Otherwise, there is the risk that young people abandon agriculture for good."* - Tourism Provider from Todi. While the role of OTAs and other digital services, like Google Reviews, play a significant role in building networks by helping to disseminate information more widely, a more traditional form of marketing through word of mouth is still highly regarded by local providers for its efficacy and more personal element. As one provider noted: *"the direct experience [is important]. In the sense that the guest obviously returns home, which is a fundamental thing, where you don't have to pay anything: word of mouth."* - Tourism Provider from Todi.

4.1.2 Case two: Villasimius, Sardinia (Islands)

Villasimius is a seaside town in the southeastern part of Sardinia, just below the Costa Rei and about 60 kilometers outside the regional capital of Cagliari. The area is known for its beaches and marine life and is categorized as a coastal hill (ISTAT). As both a rural and peripheral inner area, Villasimius' 2020 population reached just 3,688 residents—an increase of about 28% from 2002. Yet, its tourist function (2.2) in 2020 highly exceeded the marker of predominant activity in an area. Villasimius' infrastructure revolves around its seaside offerings. The researcher's initial online search for accommodations yielded an impressive number of hotels and beach resorts, while all activity recommendations made by the onsite hotel staff featured restaurants and beach clubs, suggesting that the economy is structured almost entirely around sea and sand tourism. This reality is reflected in the statement by one interview participant, who suggested an element lacking in Villasimius' tourist offerings: *"It [the island] has always been sold as sea. There is not a structured offer of Sardinia. You don't sell the beauty of the patrimony, the archeology, the wine, the food."* - Tourism Provider from Villasimius.

Contrary to its primary focus on coastal tourism, the researchers aimed to assess alternative forms of tourism that could enrich and diversify the typical offerings. For this reason, they selected an *Experience* focused on wine and hosted by the vineyard proprietor and his father. Trained in architecture, the Host turned to wine in 2005, transforming his family property into a vineyard from its former grain production. The business is family-run with just five employees, and the Host noted that only a handful of other cantinas of the sort exist in Villasimius—implying the uniqueness of their offer. The three-hour *Experience* began with a brief, guided walk through the vineyard, as the Host and his father spoke informally about their property, commitment to organic and sustainable methods of agriculture, and their general wine production, before offering a tasting of the product while seated around an outdoor table under a large tree overlooking the vineyard. The tasting was highly informal in nature, centered more around conversation between the visitors and tourism providers, which demonstrated their value for the personalization of every tour. The discussion of the actual product—the wines tasted—was minimal, but the Host offered a brief description of the two bottles opened: a Cannonau red and a Vermentino white, which are both classified as organic, DOC products on their website, speaking to a value of *terroir*.

By offering an alternative to beach tourism, the Host demonstrated a certain level of innovation simply in the focus of his *Experience*. Interestingly, while he emphasized certain agricultural measures around the environmental sustainability of wine production, he also referenced the highly seasonal nature of Villasimius' tourism, implying a greater need for attention to the socio-economic sustainability of a beach-centric economy. This sentiment was further expressed by the second operator interviewed in the area, who argued that: *"one of the disadvantages could be... the seasonality... in the sense that you go from not having many guests... this tourism is not enough anymore"* - Tourism Provider from Villasimius.

The evidence of a tourism focused on rurality and agriculture in Villasimius was hard to find; yet the presence of tourists was not. Nevertheless, the Host noted that his collaboration with Airbnb stemmed from a desire to gain more visibility, and he further recognized an increasing demand for more experiences outside of the sea. He attempted to diversify his business by hosting vineyard dinners, cheese-making lessons, and yoga in addition to the wine tours. He commented off-hand that Airbnb tends to seek out a “wow” factor type of experience, which perhaps was reflective of his choice to offer the tasting outdoors amongst the vines.

During an interview with the second provider in the area, she spoke more about a desire to offer a form of slow tourism that highlights the territory beyond the sea. While she does not utilize Airbnb’s bookings system, this provider recognizes the omnipresence of digital platforms to sell accommodation spaces, so much so that her previous work with a tourism consortium led to the creation of a digital booking site run independently by the territory itself to avoid the profit loss from traditional OTA’s commission fees. Although the site did not survive, the initiative suggested the potential value of innovation through digital platforms to promote tourism. Villasimius may not struggle to attract guests—in fact, interview participants felt the area was characterized by mass tourism and not at all representative of a rural offering. However, the need to create and promote alternatives beyond the sea to ensure greater continuity of income across the year was evident from the interviews. In this sense, the use of Airbnb to highlight unique *Experiences* may serve as a potent tool to garner attention for other territorial offerings of Villasimius during the off seasons, while bolstering the economic sustainability of tourism as a livelihood.

4.1.3 Case three: Pedemonte, Veneto (Northern Italy)

Researchers had the opportunity to attend one final Airbnb Experience in the northern region of Veneto, offered in the countryside but not in a classified rural or inner area. Despite these differences, they chose to attend and interview providers to explore distinctions in both attendance and in the use of digital platforms across the so-called rural-urban continuum (Pahl, 1966). Furthermore, the case offered a third point of comparison from a geographic standpoint, with the area classified by ISTAT as plains. The Experience was hosted by a cantina in the town of Pedemonte and given its proximity to regional points of reference, like Verona and Lake Garda, the researchers noted a higher presence of tourists, despite the subjective ‘remoteness’ of the town itself. Located in the larger municipality of San Pietro in Cariano, whose surface area totals only 20 squared kilometers, Pedemonte composes just a fraction of that space. Yet, a minimum of eight cantinas exist in the village alone, suggesting a high presence and significance of winemaking. In this sense, a more specialized tourism tied to oenology and highly developed in structure and quality was evident, particularly due to the unique territorial heritage associated with wine, and to the production of Valpolicella and Amarone varieties.

Beyond wine-associated businesses, the researchers observed no tourist accommodations and very few restaurants in Pedemonte itself. Despite its vicinity to nearby cities and centers of commerce, all interviewed tourism providers subjectively characterized the town as rural. When asked about the use of digital platforms to market their offerings, they noted various OTAs, some of which were much more tailored to the wine industry, depending on the type of tourist they sought to attract. One provider preferred a much more specific guest, knowledgeable and highly interested in wine, while others opened their offering to the general public. The Experience Host listed several OTAs and partnerships with local travel agencies that she utilized to promote the offering, in addition to her more recent collaboration with Airbnb, which had begun just four months prior to the fieldwork. Like the other rural tourism providers, those interviewed in Veneto noted a high value for word of mouth, along with a desire for greater visibility, which digital platforms and websites provide.

While impossible to draw conclusions from a single case to determine if proximity to urban centers impacts the use and efficacy of digital platforms, the researchers intuit that it may. As one key informant pointed out, the so-called brain drain and marginalization of rural communities makes developing an successful tourist offering even more challenging, which would ultimately impact the reach of visitors as well: “the problem is that everything in rural areas...doesn’t work really well. It’s really challenging. So, from suppliers, to access, to capital, to human resource... [there are many] difficulties to find people that want to work in the project because a lot of people that have [the knowledge] go to cities to work...And that’s why there are not a lot of companies that...invest in those areas.” - Key Informant.

Thus, a more in-depth exploration of digital platform use between rural and urban areas could represent a further step in the future development of this research. As expressed in additional interviews with other participants, the difficulty of selling Experiences in rural areas is often rooted in the lack of accessibility to those places: “We don’t really work with Experiences...because there is no demand... it’s hard for [people] to just go in the [remote] area to have an Experience. But its more common to go for an accommodation.” - Key Informant. Therefore, Pedemonte may prove more “popular” online than more remote offerings if tourists set a geographic boundary on their search for activities and offerings.

Figure 6 - Synthetic overview of the case studies from Airbnb Experience fieldwork

Case studies	Todi (Umbria)	Villasimius (Sardinia)	Pedemonte (Veneto)
ISTAT Municipality Classification	Rural	Rural	Small City or Suburb
INSIA Classification	Intermediate Inner Area	Peripheral Inner Area	Not an Inner Area
Altimetric Zone	Internal Hill	Coastal Hill	Plains
Airbnb Experience Type	Olive Oil Tasting	Wine Tasting	Wine Tasting
Number of interviews collected	3	2	3
Main keywords identified during interviews and direct observation	Innovation; Digital Platforms; Word of Mouth; Slow Food; Agriculture	Innovation; Coastal Mass Tourism; Diversification; Economic Sustainability	Terroir; Rurality; OTAs and digital platforms; Visibility; Agriculture; urban-rural dynamics

Conclusions and final considerations

The aim of this research was to study the impact of Airbnb’s eno and gastro-Experiences as potential drivers of rural development across Italy through the framework of nexogenous development and social innovation. As Barbera and Parisi (2019) note, the common thread among various forms of social innovation is the creation of new solutions that are more efficient, facilitate greater social benefits, and drive new partnerships. The researchers found that the current expansion of Experiences to rural and peripheral areas is limited—even if tourism is growing in some of these communities—suggesting Airbnb’s impact on rural development has been minimal thus far.

Airbnb's greatest support to rural communities is the visibility it provides on a global scale. The platform offers an innovative way to build networks and encourage electronic word of mouth (Pato and Duque, 2021). Rural tourism providers across the study highlighted the essentiality of partnerships, as well as the high value placed on word of mouth to grow their business. The platform offers a new way to achieve both goals digitally and on a much broader scale. Yet, in certain aspects, it also undermines rural provider's initiatives for growth, particularly through the commission rate, which is currently 20% (Campi, 2018, p. 44).

While Airbnb's catalogue of development initiatives and projects reflects a commitment to sustainable growth, the actual impact of its work is questionable. In some ways, the company does provide tools to help foster greater socio-economic and environmental sustainability to support growth, but the importance of a place-based approach in this study is fundamental. It appears that Airbnb has not yet fully succeeded in understanding the unique conditions of rural, and further, peripheral areas, to yield a notable and prolonged impact on development in these spaces—if any at all.

To enhance this study, a deeper investigation into the differing impacts of Airbnb eno and *gastro-Experiences* between rural and urban areas could yield interesting results. While this paper lightly touches on the urban-rural divide, more attention could be given to this dynamic. Furthermore, a number of limitations could be addressed in future research to strengthen this work. Limited time and resources prevented the researchers from conducting more extensive fieldwork. Increasing the number of case studies to be more nationally representative would yield further data from which to draw conclusions. Given that eno and *gastro-Experiences* were launched within the last 10 years and reached rural areas even more recently, it could additionally be valuable to repeat this fieldwork and data analysis within a few years to explore how Airbnb's growth in these spaces may impact the findings. Finally, a more thorough analysis of COVID-19's impacts on rural tourism growth should be considered, particularly given that this research was conducted on the pandemic's tail-end when its effects were still at play.

Airbnb's sustainability commitments and global reach make it an interesting case through which to study rural development driven by eno and *gastro-tourism*. In many ways it translates traditional forms of tourism marketing, such as word of mouth and network building, into digital versions through reviews and online connectivity. However, the values expressed by many rural tourism providers, both explicitly and subtly through their offerings, around personalization, *terroir*, and identity are not yet fully captured and transferred to guests by this platform. The inherent trade-off in the use of digital giants like Airbnb is reflected in the heightened visibility that diminishes personalization. Furthermore, amongst rural communities, Airbnb still seems to face competition from preexisting OTAs, including Expedia and Booking, or simply from the use of free platforms, like personal business websites, social media accounts, and Google.

Airbnb *Experiences* somehow seem to fit the model of social innovation that the INSIA has also sought to apply in addressing inner area marginalization. A more clearly defined and cohesive commitment from Airbnb in local rural development policies—which has been weak so far—might yield a synergetic relationship for the ultimate benefit of these communities. Together, the reinvestment of capital generated from Airbnb's activities into local knowledge, with the enhanced implementation of basic services currently lacking in these areas, have the potential to create a circular economy that could stimulate rural growth and allow a sustainable tourism to thrive. A robust economic system rooted in the services sector might produce returns to ensure the longevity and sustained growth of inner areas, and the strategy proposed by Airbnb might support a successful, innovative rural development strategy—if it can successfully incorporate rural values into its business model in the long term.

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