


Platformised Performances: Free Walking Tours and the Informal Sharing Economy

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Abstract

This article examines platform-mediated free walking tours as an informal and performative manifestation of the platform economy in tourism. Drawing on multi-sited urban ethnography (participant observation of 20 free walking tours and 18 semi-structured interviews with guides across Barcelona, Lisbon and Naples, May–September 2024), the article shows how algorithmic reputation systems structure narrative choices and incomes; how affective/performance labour is calibrated to ratings and tipping; and how spatial concentration produces congestion and informal territorialisation of public space. Conceptually, the article advances debates on platformised informality by bridging performative tourism, gig-work governance and urban justice, and outlines policy avenues (light-touch licensing, route decentralisation, and minimum labour standards). Implications are discussed for tourism policy, urban planning, and the theorisation of informal economies in platform-mediated contexts. Overall, the study advances understanding of how platformised informality reconfigures cultural labour and urban governance, extending debates beyond emblematic cases such as accommodation and ride-hailing.

Keywords: platform economy; tourism informality; free walking tours; reputation algorithms; performative labour; urban ethnography; urban governance.

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1. Introduction

The rise of the platform economy (García & Ruiz, 2022a) has profoundly reshaped the landscape of global tourism, disrupting traditional service models and institutional frameworks. Promoted as a means to

democratise access, empower local actors, and foster sustainable practices, the sharing economy has become a powerful narrative in policy circles, industry rhetoric, and academic discourse alike (Belk, 2014; Paulauskaite et al., 2017). Platforms like Airbnb, Uber, and BlaBlaCar have been widely studied for their transformative effects on urban environments, labour structures, and consumer behaviour. Yet, beyond these emblematic cases lies a spectrum of lesser-known, under-researched practices that embody the complexities, contradictions, and tensions inherent in platform-mediated tourism. One such practice is the Free Walking Tour (FWT) (García & Ruiz, 2022b). FWTs have proliferated across cities worldwide, particularly in Europe and Latin America, as informal, platform-organised, tip-based walking tours. These experiences are typically led by independent, usually non-certified guides who register on peer-to-peer platforms such as FreeTour.com or GuruWalk. Promoted as accessible, spontaneous, and ‘authentically local’, FWTs appeal to travellers seeking low-cost, narrative-rich encounters with urban space. However, behind their informal ethos lies a complex and often problematic dynamic: FWTs operate at the intersection of unregulated labour, performative storytelling, and commercialised visibility. As such, they offer a compelling case through which to interrogate the evolving logic of the sharing economy and its implications for tourism planning, labour ethics, and urban sustainability.

This paper examines FWTs as a performative and informal modality of the platform economy in tourism. Drawing from critical literature on the sharing economy, platform capitalism, and urban tourism, the study situates FWTs within broader debates around labour precarity, algorithmic governance, and spatial justice. The article argues that FWTs—despite their collaborative and low-threshold appearance—are deeply embedded in neoliberal tourism circuits, shaped by digital reputation systems, self-branding pressures, and regulatory invisibility. As platforms mediate the guide–tourist relationship, they not only facilitate access but also subtly transform the nature of tourism work and the governance of public urban space. Unlike formal guiding services regulated by licensing, training, and institutional oversight, FWTs thrive in legal grey zones. Guides are typically not subject to professional standards, and their income depends entirely on voluntary contributions, usually in cash, at the end of the tour. While this model provides flexibility and low entry barriers, it also exposes guides to financial uncertainty, platform dependency, and social vulnerability. The absence of contracts, protections, or minimum compensation reflects a broader pattern of informal professionalisation, whereby digital platforms extract value from labour without offering corresponding rights or recognition (Mosaad et al., 2023). In this sense, FWTs exemplify the structural precarity embedded in the gig economy and challenge simplistic celebratory accounts of peer-to-peer tourism.

From a spatial and urban perspective, FWTs reconfigure access to the city and its heritage. By offering non-official narratives and alternative routes, they decentralise the tourist gaze and potentially subvert dominant heritage regimes. However, they also contribute to the overuse of central areas of the cities, especially when aggregated demand funnels large volumes of tourists into specific routes. Without coordination with local authorities, these tours may lead to congestion, nuisance for residents, and appropriation of public space for private gain. The lack of accountability mechanisms further complicates the integration of FWTs into urban tourism strategies, posing risks for long-term sustainability and equity (Farmaki et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2019). Furthermore, the digital infrastructure underpinning FWTs plays a pivotal role in shaping their operation and social dynamics. Platforms act as intermediaries, but also as regulators: by curating visibility, filtering feedback, and ranking guides, they impose an algorithmic discipline that rewards conformity, emotional labour, and client satisfaction over critical engagement or ethical consistency (Räisänen et al., 2021). Guides are incentivised to

optimise their performance, adjust their narratives, and perform affective labour to maximise tips and ratings. As a result, the distinction between authentic storytelling and market-oriented entertainment becomes blurred, raising concerns about the commodification of culture and the reproduction of tourist stereotypes under the guise of localism.

This article contributes to the growing literature on the dark sides and contradictions of the sharing economy (Buhalis et al., 2019; Geissinger et al., 2019; Gil & Sequera, 2022) by focusing on a tourism practice that has remained relatively underexplored despite its global reach and socio-political relevance. By foregrounding the case of FWTs, this article aims to unpack how platformised performances challenge established categories of tourism planning, labour ethics, and participatory heritage. It positions FWTs not simply as informal alternatives to formal tourism, but as a symptom of a larger structural shift—one in which digital platforms increasingly mediate, commodify, and govern tourism practices while evading regulation and accountability.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework, reviewing literature on the sharing economy, performative tourism, platform labour, and urban governance. Section three presents the methodology, drawing on qualitative data from fieldwork conducted in selected Southern European cities. Section four presents the main findings, organised around key dimensions of FWTs: performativity, labour precarity, spatial dynamics, and platform governance. Section five discusses the implications of these findings for tourism planning and policy. The conclusion reflects on the need to critically rethink the role of informal tourism practices within the broader trajectory of post-pandemic, platform-mediated tourism futures.

This article makes three contributions. First, it conceptualises free walking tours (FWTs) as platformised performances, showing how staged authenticity and affective labour are disciplined by algorithmic reputation (linking classic debates on authenticity with contemporary gig-work governance). Second, it empirically documents precarious professionalisation among guides, beyond celebratory sharing-economy narratives. Third, it foregrounds the urban governance implications of cumulative FWT activity for spatial justice and sustainable visitor management.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Sharing Economy: Between Ideology and Contradiction

The sharing economy has been widely promoted as a more equitable, decentralised, and sustainable alternative to traditional capitalist models. In tourism, its appeal lies in the promise of democratised access to unique, affordable, and locally grounded experiences (Belk, 2014; Paulauskaite et al., 2017). However, the rapid platformisation of the sector has shifted the sharing economy from its grassroots, collaborative ethos toward profit-driven structures.

While early discourses emphasised mutual benefit and community empowerment, more recent critiques highlight how dominant platforms increasingly operate under extractive and centralised business models (De las Heras et al., 2021; Geissinger et al., 2019). Srnicek (2017) conceptualises this transformation as ‘platform capitalism’—a mode of accumulation based on the control and commodification of digital infrastructures and user-generated data. Within this framework, the sharing

economy becomes less about genuine sharing and more about monetising access to underregulated markets (García et al., 2024).

Empirical studies, such as Gyódi (2019), show how platforms like Airbnb function more as conventional commercial actors than as collaborative innovators, reproducing dynamics of exclusion and market consolidation (García et al., 2024). This context frames FWTs as ambiguous practices: while discursively presented as grassroots and inclusive, they often replicate the structural inequalities of neoliberal tourism economies.

Beyond popular framings of ‘sharing’, scholarship differentiates sharing, on-demand/gig work and second-hand/product-service models, with distinct regulatory and sustainability implications (Frenken & Schor, 2017). This helps situate FWTs as on-demand, platform-mediated services, not “pure sharing”, and clarifies why platform capitalism’s extractive logics apply here.

2.2. Performative Tourism and Non-Institutional Urban Narratives

FWTs exemplify a form of performative tourism wherein urban space is narrated, embodied, and consumed through situated storytelling. Rather than relying on official heritage discourse, FWT guides enact and co-produce narratives in real time, often emphasising lesser-known, critical, or alternative histories (García et al., 2024; Paulauskaite et al., 2017). This resonates with Salazar’s (2005) notion of “glocal” tour guiding, where guides negotiate local cultural identity while responding to global tourist expectations. These performances blur the boundaries between guide and performer, heritage and entertainment, local and tourist.

Classic debates on staged authenticity show how narratives are curated and consumed within social arrangements that separate ‘front’ and ‘back’ regions (MacCannell, 1973). This aligns with long-standing research on the professionalism and role expectations of tourist guides (Ap & Wong, 2001), highlighting how guides negotiate between institutional expectations, visitor demands, and their own interpretive agency. In FWTs, guides mediate authenticity much like tourist guides as cultural brokers (Cohen, 1985), while performing emotional/affective labour to meet visitor expectations (Hochschild, 1983). Platform ratings intensify this dynamic by rewarding specific performance styles. As García et al. (2024) argue, this participatory form of narration aligns with the idea of ‘living like a local’ but must be critically examined. While it allows for a more experiential and potentially empowering encounter with the city, it is also shaped by the market logics of digital platforms. Thematic content, routes, and styles of delivery are often influenced by algorithmic feedback loops—especially customer reviews and ratings—which can standardise what is supposed to be ‘authentic’.

Thus, although FWTs enable access to non-official urban imaginaries, their performative agency is constrained by the expectations of digital tourism markets and the need to maintain competitive online reputations.

2.3. Platformisation, Algorithmic Reputation, and Informal Professionalisation

Research on the gig economy shows how algorithmic control shapes workers’ autonomy, scheduling and income volatility even when “flexibility” is promised (Wood et al., 2019). Policy and legal analyses describe a broader shift towards just-in-time work and non-standard employment in platform labour

(De Stefano, 2016; ILO, 2021), explaining why ambiguous professionalisation emerges without parallel protections. This framing fits guides' dependency on rankings and tips observed in FWTs.

This logic reinforces a system of algorithmic governance, where guides are autonomous in appearance but constrained by opaque ranking mechanisms. The emphasis on customer ratings encourages practices of self-exploitation, emotional labour, and reputational management. Newcomers often perform tours for free or for minimal earnings, hoping to accumulate sufficient visibility for future income.

Such dynamics foster a form of ambiguous professionalisation. As Gil and Sequera (2022) observe in the case of Airbnb, what begins as a casual, informal activity quickly becomes institutionalised and market-oriented, yet without the protections associated with formal employment. Similarly, FWT guides perform a functionally professional role—curating content, managing groups, navigating urban logistics—without being legally recognised as professionals. This grey zone reflects broader trends in the gig economy, where labour is fragmented, individualised, and underregulated (Mosaad et al., 2023).

2.4. Precarity, Sustainability, and Spatial Justice

From the perspective of urban sustainability and tourism planning, FWTs present a paradox. On the one hand, they offer low-cost, flexible, and often decentralised tourism experiences that may reduce pressure on traditional heritage sites. On the other, their rapid proliferation can contribute to urban congestion, particularly in high-tourist traffic areas, without contributing to local infrastructure or policy frameworks.

As Farmaki et al. (2023) note, peer-to-peer tourism models often operate outside traditional accountability systems, raising concerns about their long-term impact on communities. FWTs typically use public spaces without formal agreements or oversight, effectively privatising access through informal practices. This leads to tensions between spontaneous, democratised tourism and the need for inclusive, strategic urban governance.

The governance gap surrounding FWTs reveals a broader challenge for city authorities: how to regulate non-traditional tourism practices that fall outside established legal frameworks. Leung et al. (2019) argue that sustainable development of the sharing economy requires alignment of stakeholder interests, ethical commitments, and social responsibility. Without such alignment, the risk is that informal tourism reinforces inequality and overexploitation, even when framed as community-driven or 'alternative'.

The challenge, as Sharpley (2022) and Rastegar et al. (2023) emphasise, is to integrate such practices into models of tourism that foreground justice, degrowth, and socio-spatial equity, rather than defaulting to market-led solutions. Finally, debates on the right to the city and the governance of urban commons (Harvey, 2012) illuminate how platformised tourism practices may privatise benefits while socialising costs in public space, sharpening the need for just and participatory governance models.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-sited approach grounded in urban ethnography and critical tourism studies. Given the informal, performative, and platform-mediated nature of Free Walking Tours (FWTs), qualitative methods were deemed most appropriate to capture the nuanced dynamics of guide–tourist interactions, digital labour practices, and the socio-spatial implications of these tours.

3.1. Case Selection and Context

Fieldwork was conducted in three Southern European cities—Barcelona (Spain), Lisbon (Portugal), and Naples (Italy)—selected for their prominence as urban tourism destinations, their active FWT ecosystems, and their differing regulatory and socio-political contexts. These cities represent contrasting models of tourism governance while sharing challenges of overtourism, precarious labour, and contested urban space.

The selection of FWTs within each city followed a purposive sampling strategy. Criteria included:

- Active listing on major FWT platforms (FreeTour.com, GuruWalk, or Civitatis).
- Minimum of six months of guiding experience.
- Representation of diverse narrative styles and thematic content.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

The research employed a triangulated methodology consisting of:

- Participant observation: Attendance at over 20 FWTs across the three cities (May–September 2024), with detailed fieldnotes on guide performances, group interactions, spatial practices, and narrative strategies.
- Semi-structured interviews: Conducted with 18 FWT guides (six per city), lasting 45–90 minutes, exploring motivations, working conditions, perceptions of platform governance, and views on sustainability and authenticity.
- Platform analysis: Examination of the digital infrastructure of FWT platforms, including interface design, ranking mechanisms, user reviews, and terms of service, with screenshots and metadata collected for documentation.

3.3. Analytical Approach

Data were analysed thematically using inductive coding supported by NVivo (v.12) software. Codes were initially derived from fieldnotes and transcripts, focusing on labour conditions, algorithmic dependency, performative practices, and spatial dynamics. These codes were progressively refined into higher-order categories aligned with the study's research questions:

1. How do FWTs operate as performative and informal tourism practices?
2. How do digital platforms shape labour conditions and narrative choices?
3. What are the implications of FWTs for urban governance and sustainability?

The analysis incorporated elements of critical discourse analysis to interpret guides' self-positioning and the implicit governance logics embedded in platform interfaces. Sampling ceased upon thematic saturation, when no substantially new categories emerged.

3.4. Validation Strategy

To enhance trustworthiness, multiple techniques were employed:

- Triangulation: systematically comparing data from observations, interviews, and platform analysis to identify convergences and discrepancies.
- Peer debriefing: two sessions with colleagues in tourism and urban studies provided external perspectives, helping refine coding categories and reduce interpretive bias.
- Cross-validation: narratives of algorithmic dependency expressed by guides were corroborated by both field observations (emphasis on ratings during tours) and platform analysis (ranking algorithms privileging visibility).

3.5. Reflexivity

Researcher positionality was critically reflected upon. The author's prior academic involvement with tourism platforms created both familiarity and risk of confirmation bias. Reflexive fieldnotes and peer discussions were used to monitor assumptions and ensure analytic transparency.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the research objectives and gave verbal consent. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity, and identifiable platform usernames were excluded. Given the precarious and often informal status of participants' labour, special care was taken not to disclose sensitive details that could cause harm. The study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines established by the author's university.

4. Results

The findings from this study reveal the complex and often contradictory dynamics underpinning Free Walking Tours (FWTs) as platformised, informal tourism practices. Through thematic analysis of field observations, guide interviews, and platform data, four key dimensions emerged: urban performativity, algorithmic dependency, labour precarity, and spatial impacts. These interconnected aspects illustrate how FWTs both reproduce and reconfigure dominant logics of tourism in the platform era.

4.1. Urban Performativity and Narrative Flexibility

Across sites, guides enact the city through situated storytelling that blends historical narration, humour, and personal anecdotes. Such narrative hybridity reflects broader glocalisation dynamics identified by Salazar (2005). Such platform-calibrated performances pursue "authenticity" while remaining sensitive to real-time group feedback and expected tipping. Read through classic debates on staged authenticity and the role of guides as cultural brokers, these performances are not merely spontaneous but orchestrated within recognisable scripts that manage visitors' expectations (MacCannell, 1973; Cohen, 1985). Such scripted expectations resonate with classic analyses of tour guiding professionalism and role performance (Ap & Wong, 2001). The prominence of emotional labour—warmth, enthusiasm, responsiveness—further underscores how affect is folded into value creation in platformised tourism (Hochschild, 1983).

One guide in Lisbon explained: “You have to read the group. If they are here for fun, I give them fun. If they want politics, I just sprinkle a little bit—otherwise the tips go down”.

This flexibility enables a sense of authenticity but is also shaped by pressure to secure positive ratings, which can dilute more critical or politically charged narratives.

4.2. Algorithmic Reputation and Platform Governance

Visibility and demand hinge on ranking positions and review scores, foregrounding guides’ dependency on opaque reputation systems. Consistent with research on algorithmic control in the gig economy, small changes in ratings can cascade into reduced bookings and income volatility, encouraging conformity and self-discipline to platform norms (Wood et al., 2019). Guides’ strategic requests for reviews and calibrated closing speeches illustrate reputational entrepreneurship under asymmetrical information conditions.

A Barcelona guide noted: “You are basically a slave to the algorithm. One bad review can put you at the bottom, and then you don’t work for weeks”.

This dynamic demonstrates how platforms externalise risk onto guides while exerting subtle forms of algorithmic discipline. The peer-review system, while presented as transparent, often reinforced conformity and emotional labour.

4.3. Precarious Autonomy and Informal Professionalisation

While guides value autonomy over routes and scripts, earnings remain uncertain and protections scarce. This precarious professionalisation mirrors labour patterns documented across on-demand work—flexibility coexists with fragmented employment status and externalised risk (De Stefano, 2016; ILO, 2021). The craft elements of guiding (curation, logistics, crowd management) accumulate into a professional identity without commensurate recognition or safeguards.

A Naples guide described the reality bluntly: “Sometimes I work two hours and go home with ten euros. It’s like gambling—you never know”.

Despite this, many embraced a professional identity, stressing their role as cultural mediators and performers of the city. Yet, the absence of collective organisation or recognition reinforced their vulnerability to exploitation.

4.4. Spatial Concentration and Informal Territorialisation

Tours cluster in central heritage nodes (squares, viewpoints, landmarks), creating acoustic overlap and crowding as multiple groups simultaneously “stage” the city. This accumulation amounts to informal territorialisation of public space for private economic purposes, raising governance questions widely discussed in urban theory (Harvey, 2012) and in sustainable tourism debates on visitor dispersion.

A Lisbon guide remarked: “We all start in the same square—sometimes five groups are talking at once. Residents complain, but we don’t have any official space”.

This concentration revealed a process of informal territorialisation, whereby public space was appropriated for private economic purposes without mechanisms to mitigate impact or ensure equitable use. In summary, the key findings across these four dimensions are synthesised in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Findings

Dimension	Key Insights	Illustrative Evidence
Urban Performativity	Guides blend storytelling, humour, and critical narratives; constrained by reviews	"If they want politics, maybe just a little bit" (Lisbon)
Algorithmic Dependency	Success depends on visibility, ratings, and opaque ranking systems	"One bad review can ruin your week" (Barcelona)
Labour Precarity	Flexibility paired with financial instability; no contracts or protections	"Sometimes I work two hours and go home with ten euros" (Naples)
Spatial Impacts	Tours concentrate in central areas, producing congestion and resident tension	"We all start in the same square... five groups at once" (Lisbon)

Source: own elaboration.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate how Free Walking tours function as both products and producers of platformised tourism economies. While often framed as participatory, grassroots, and low-impact, FWTs reveal underlying contradictions of the sharing economy, particularly in its informal and unregulated variants. Four key discussions emerge.

5.1. From Informal Innovation to Platform-Driven Precarity

The findings substantiate how FWTs operate as platform-mediated gig work, where promised autonomy is constrained by algorithmic metrics and demand variability—patterns consistent with comparative studies of ride-hailing and crowdwork (Wood et al., 2019; De Stefano, 2016; ILO, 2021). FWTs exemplify how informal, entrepreneurial practices are absorbed into the structures of platform capitalism. Similar to food-delivery workers or ride-hailing drivers, guides operate under conditions of reputational dependency, algorithmic surveillance, and income instability. Flexibility and autonomy are celebrated rhetorically but in practice coexist with structural precarity.

The parallel with Uber drivers or Deliveroo couriers is striking: in each case, platforms externalise risks (e.g. unstable income, lack of protections) while internalising value through digital intermediation. FWTs thus highlight how tourism is not exempt from broader patterns of gig work and underscore the need to rethink celebratory discourses of entrepreneurial freedom.

5.2. Performing Authenticity under Algorithmic Pressure

Bringing classic authenticity debates into dialogue with platform governance reveals how affect and narration are performed under reputational discipline (MacCannell, 1973; Hochschild, 1983). This hybrid lens clarifies why certain themes and tones become standardised and why "critical" content may be strategically minimised. The demand for authentic, local storytelling is mediated by digital infrastructures. What counts as authentic is not a neutral or organic process but is filtered through

ratings, algorithms, and customer expectations. This paradox echoes debates in other gig sectors, where affective labour (e.g. smiling, being accommodating) becomes a survival strategy rather than a genuine expression of identity.

FWTs therefore complicate the idea that informal tourism is inherently more authentic or democratic. Rather, authenticity is continuously performed, negotiated, and commodified, raising concerns about cultural simplification and stereotype reproduction.

5.3. Governance Vacuums and Urban Impact

From a governance perspective, FWTs illustrate a regulatory blind spot. Their cumulative presence reshapes urban life—congestion, noise, appropriation of public space—however they escape taxation and oversight. Similar tensions can be observed in the case of Airbnb, where neighbourhoods face housing pressures while platforms resist accountability.

In cities like Lisbon or Barcelona, where overtourism has become politically salient, FWTs add another layer of complexity: they democratise tourism access but risk undermining urban liveability. The challenge is not simply whether to regulate, but how to do so without suppressing the creative and participatory potential of informal tourism.

5.4. A Global Perspective on Informality

While this study focused on Southern Europe, similar dynamics have been reported globally. In Latin America, FWTs often overlap with broader informal economies and grassroots organising, sometimes filling gaps left by weak tourism governance (García & Ruiz, 2025). In Asia, rapid digital adoption has facilitated the proliferation of tip-based tours, but precarious working conditions mirror those observed in Europe.

This global diffusion of FWTs suggests that platform-mediated informality is not a regional anomaly but a structural feature of contemporary tourism economies. Comparative research could therefore enrich understanding of how cultural, regulatory, and socio-economic contexts shape the manifestations of this practice.

5.5. Beyond Binary Classifications

Finally, FWTs trouble binary distinctions between formal/informal and professional/non-professional. Guides are simultaneously cultural curators, entrepreneurs, and precarious workers; platforms are both marketplaces and regulators. Such hybridity calls for a conceptual shift: instead of asking what the sharing economy is, it is necessary to interrogate what it does—how it distributes value, structures power, and transforms everyday urban and cultural life.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined Free Walking Tours (FWTs) as informal, performative, and platform-mediated expressions of the sharing economy in urban tourism. Drawing on ethnographic research in Southern European cities, it has demonstrated how FWTs both democratise access to urban narratives

and reproduce precarious labour conditions, spatial pressures, and algorithmic dependencies. Three overarching contributions emerge:

1. Labour precarity in tourism platforms: FWTs illustrate how flexibility and entrepreneurial opportunity are accompanied by instability, lack of protections, and dependency on opaque digital infrastructures.
2. Cultural performance under digital governance: Authenticity, often presented as grassroots and alternative, is continuously performed within algorithmic frameworks that reward conformity and affective labour.
3. Urban impacts and governance gaps: By concentrating flows in central spaces, FWTs generate congestion and resident tension while operating outside formal accountability systems.

Policy and Practice Implications

- For policymakers and urban planners: Regulation should move beyond punitive restrictions toward adaptive frameworks that recognise informal practices while ensuring accountability. Options include light-touch licensing, participatory land-use planning, and minimum labour protections.
- For platforms: Increased transparency in algorithms, clearer mechanisms for dispute resolution, and support for professional training could mitigate some of the risks identified.
- For Destination Management Organisations (DMOs): Collaboration with FWT operators could channel tours toward decentralised routes, distributing visitor flows more sustainably and fostering inclusive heritage narratives.

Directions for Future Research

- Comparative studies across regions (e.g. Latin America, Asia) to capture global variations in how FWTs evolve under different governance regimes.
- Quantitative analyses of platform data (e.g. review systems, visibility rankings) to complement qualitative findings on algorithmic governance.
- Exploration of collective strategies (e.g. unions, associations, cooperatives) through which guides may contest precarity and negotiate recognition.
- Interdisciplinary approaches bridging tourism studies, labour sociology, and digital governance to advance a more holistic understanding of platformised informality.

FWTs are not marginal anomalies but central indicators of how tourism is being reorganised in the platform age. They remind us that who tells the story of the city—and under what conditions—remains a profoundly political question. Addressing the contradictions they embody is not only a matter of labour justice or tourism management but also of envisioning fairer, more sustainable urban futures.

Beyond well-studied cases like accommodation and ride-hailing, this article identifies FWTs as a paradigmatic site where performance, platform governance, and urban space intersect. The synthesis of authenticity/performance theory with algorithmic labour governance offers a transferable framework for analysing other platformised cultural services (e.g. tip-based tours, street performances, micro-experiences). This contributes conceptually to platformised informality and practically to the co-design of governance instruments balancing access, labour justice and spatial equity.

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(Title, Abstract and Keywords in Spanish)

Representaciones en plataformas: recorridos gratuitos a pie y la economía colaborativa informal

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Resumen

Este artículo examina los recorridos gratuitos a pie mediados por plataformas como una manifestación informal y performativa de la economía de plataforma en el turismo. A partir de la etnografía urbana multisituada (observación participante de 20 recorridos gratuitos a pie y 18 entrevistas semiestructuradas con guías en Barcelona, Lisboa y Nápoles, mayo-septiembre de 2024), el artículo muestra cómo los sistemas algorítmicos de reputación estructuran las elecciones narrativas y los ingresos; cómo el trabajo afectivo/performativo se calibra con las calificaciones y las propinas; y cómo la concentración espacial produce congestión y territorialización informal del espacio público. Conceptualmente, el artículo avanza los debates sobre la informalidad en plataformas al conectar el turismo performativo, la gobernanza del trabajo temporal y la justicia urbana, y describe las líneas de acción políticas (licencias de bajo impacto, descentralización de rutas y estándares laborales mínimos). Se discuten las implicaciones para la política turística, la planificación urbana y la teorización de las economías informales en contextos mediados por plataformas. En general, el estudio promueve la comprensión de cómo la informalidad plataformizada reconfigura el trabajo cultural y la gobernanza urbana, ampliando los debates más allá de casos emblemáticos como el alojamiento y los servicios de transporte.

Palabras clave: economía de plataforma; informalidad turística; recorridos a pie; algoritmos de reputación; trabajo performativo; etnografía urbana; gobernanza urbana.

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