

The Emergence of Free Tours: Catalysts of Platform-Mediated Tourism Encounters

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Abstract

■ This article explores the platformisation of tourism encounters, focusing on platform-mediated free tours as emerging digital intermediaries. Despite their rapid growth, free tours face regulatory challenges and remain underdeveloped in the literature. Through literature review and a systematic bibliometric analysis of relevant academic articles, we identified key concepts shaping this innovation, using VOSviewer to analyse co-occurring keywords and thematic categories. Recent publications, mainly by European scholars, feature case studies of European cities in geography and hospitality/tourism journals. Our findings reveal four thematic categories: economic, geographical-spatial, legal, and social, highlighting the limited scholarly attention to free tours compared to other platform-mediated sectors like short-term rentals. We propose theoretical and empirical questions to guide future research, advocating for a conceptual framework integrating the platform economy,

Resumen

■ Este artículo explora la plataformización de los encuentros turísticos, centrándose en los tours gratuitos mediados por plataformas (*free tours*) como intermediarios digitales emergentes. A pesar de su rápido crecimiento, los free tours enfrentan desafíos regulatorios y están poco desarrollados en la literatura académica. A través de una revisión de la literatura y un análisis bibliométrico sistemático de artículos académicos relevantes, se identifican los conceptos fundamentales que configuran esta innovación, utilizando VOSviewer para analizar la co-ocurrencia de palabras clave y las categorías temáticas. Las publicaciones recientes, principalmente de académicos europeos, presentan estudios de caso de ciudades europeas en revistas de geografía y hospitalidad/turismo. Los hallazgos revelan cuatro categorías temáticas: económica, geográfico-espacial, legal y social, destacando la limitada atención académica a los free tours en comparación con otros sectores mediados por

tourism experiences, and the encounter itself. This framework contributes to understanding tourism encounters within the context of free tours, emphasizing the theoretical intersection of these concepts.

Keywords: free tours; platform-mediated free tours; platform economy; tourism encounter; bibliometric analysis.

plataformas, como los alquileres vacacionales de corta duración. Proponemos preguntas teóricas y empíricas para guiar futuras investigaciones, abogando por un marco conceptual que integre la economía de plataforma, las experiencias turísticas y el propio encuentro. Este marco contribuye a la comprensión de los encuentros turísticos en el contexto de los free tours, enfatizando la intersección teórica de estos conceptos.

Palabras clave: free tours; free tours mediados por plataformas; economía de plataforma; encuentro turístico; análisis bibliométrico.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms are among the technological innovations that have most profoundly transformed tourism in recent years, bringing about significant changes (Kuhzady et al., 2020; Sainaghi et al., 2020; Sarlay & Neuhofer, 2020). Much of the focus on the platform economy (PE) in tourism research has been on short-term rental platforms, with Airbnb at the center. However, other manifestations of the tourism-related PE have received little academic attention despite their rapid development (Rojanakit et al., 2022).

'Free guided walking tours', also known as 'pay-what-you-wish tours' or 'tip-based tours', but usually known as 'Free Walking tours' or 'Free Tours' are a relatively new phenomenon that represents one such manifestation. Free tours (FT) started in Berlin in 2003 (Duarte & Martínez, 2020; Leal Londoño & Medina, 2018) and have since spread around the globe (García & Ruiz, 2022; Widtfeldt Meged & Zillinger, 2018), becoming an important platform-based activity, particularly in tourism-dense cities (García & Ruiz, 2022).

FT are similar to conventional fee-based (CFBT) tours (Koerts, 2017; Leal Londoño & Medina, 2018), except that there is no fixed price. Instead, tourists are encouraged to give a voluntary tip to their guide based on how satisfied they are with the tour and, accordingly, what they think it is worth (Widtfeldt Meged & Zillinger, 2018). While price is commonly regarded as the distinguishing factor between CFBT and FT, there are additional aspects to consider, especially in terms of their relationship to the PE. CFBT are typically organised by established tour companies, have pre-defined itineraries, employ professional guides and adhere to traditional business models. In contrast, FT, organized by individuals or local groups, often utilize online platforms and social media, enabling greater flexibility and accessibility for aspiring guide (Koerts, 2017). Commercial

platforms leveraging technology to facilitate FT operate as intermediaries, connecting tourists with local guides. These platforms typically provide user-friendly interfaces for booking tours and may offer additional services such as tour recommendations and customer reviews. Additionally, they serve as marketing channels for guides, allowing them to reach a wider audience and attract more participants to their tours.

The issue of FT has become a prominent topic in recent years due to their impacts in cities, including concerns about lack of regulation, exploitation of workers, overconcentration of tourism flows, and socio-spatial impacts such as overcrowding and environmental degradation (Buhalis et al., 2020; Duarte & Martínez, 2020; Gössling et al., 2021; Leal Londoño & Medina, 2018). Despite these concerns, there is a clear gap in the literature focusing on how these free tours, mediated by digital platforms, affect traditional tourism services and the broader tourism economy. Existing research has largely overlooked this sector compared to other platform-mediated services such as short-term rentals, leaving a significant gap in understanding their economic, legal, and social implications.

In response to these and other controversies surrounding FT, this article aims to provide a state-of-the-art on platform-mediated free tours (PMFT), conceptually addressing the major issues concerning them. To this end, we conduct a comprehensive bibliometric analysis focusing specifically on FT, identifying recent publications in geography and hospitality/tourism journals, authored mainly by European researchers and based on case studies of European cities. Through in-depth content analysis, we then group the article topics into four interrelated approach-based categories: economic, geographical-spatial, legal, and social.

The article presents a pioneering analysis of PMFT, focusing on the digital mediation of tourism encounter (Crouch et al., 2001a). One of the article's main contributions is the introduction of a novel conceptual framework to comprehend the intricate dynamics involved in the platformization of tourist visits, emphasizing the significance of digital mediation not only in facilitating accommodation but also in shaping the very essence of the tourist experience itself. This groundbreaking approach sheds light on a previously overlooked aspect of tourism, highlighting the transformative role of digital platforms in reshaping how tourists engage with destinations. Thus, this study addresses the existing research gap by examining FT as a significant yet under-researched sector within the broader platform economy in tourism.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework, concluding with the conceptualisation of free tours within the tourism encounter. Next section outlines the methodology, including the bibliometric approach and data sources. Section 4 discusses the key findings, while Section 5 delves into their theoretical

implications. Finally, last section summarises the conclusions and suggests directions for future research.

2. Conceptual underpinnings: free tours and the tourism-related platform economy

2.1. Platformisation of the collaborative economy in the tourism industry: Transitioning from accommodation to experiences

The collaborative economy has become a prominent economic practice worldwide, but it is not yet well understood (Lane & Woodworth, 2016; Rojanakit et al., 2022). It proposes innovative and flexible business models that provide access to unused assets at a remarkably affordable cost (Widtfeldt Meged & Zillinger, 2018). Its emergence can largely be attributed to the global economic crisis of 2008 (Schor & Cansoy, 2019), which led to high levels of unemployment and increased job insecurity. As a result, many people sought new sources of income and affordable services (Rivera et al., 2017). Despite its prevalence, a clear and universally applicable definition of the collaborative economy remains elusive (Schor, 2016). Scholars have attempted to define it from different perspectives: sharing (e.g. Belk, 2014, 2018), lending (e.g. Jenkins, 2014), reuse (e.g. Lessig, 2008), charity (e.g. Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998), sustainable consumption (e.g. Young et al., 2010), and even anti-consumption (Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010). In tourism, the term 'collaborative' commonly refers to tourists who use digital platforms to book services (Cánovas & Villanueva, 2015). At first glance, tourism platforms have positioned themselves within the sharing economy, promoting them as a source of income for residents. However, this concept has faced criticism due to its ambiguity and the fact that it encompasses a variety of tourism practices. Concerns have arisen due to undefined legal frameworks for platforms, which may clash with traditional tourism, raise safety issues, and contribute to inequalities in the accessibility of collaborative tourism (Zervas et al., 2017).

Various types of platforms serve tourists, including short-term rentals, transport, accommodation exchanges, dining reservations, and travel experiences. These models all involve peer-to-peer exchanges where individuals or entities share resources (Muñoz & Cohen, 2017). They often facilitate interactions in which novice travellers can seek guidance from seasoned travellers (Mertena et al., 2022). Not only do they mediate in physical services like accommodation, but they also facilitate the tourism encounter. Launched in 1999, Couchsurfing became a pioneer of online tourism platforms, paving the way for specific on-demand services at a lower cost than traditional providers (Forgacs & Dimanche, 2016). This led to the emergence of Airbnb in 2008, which brought economic benefits to both tourists and residents (Oskam & Boswijk, 2016). Since then, Airbnb has reported millions of stays (Gil & Sequera, 2022; Schor, 2016), has gained favour in Silicon Valley (Crommelin et al., 2018) and has dominated the online tourism platform landscape (Pastor & Rivera-García, 2020).

This development has led to the concept of 'platform economy', coined by authors such as Kenney and Zysman (2016). The growth of the platform economy, exemplified by the valuation of Airbnb, has garnered attention (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015). Gurrán (2018) found that online vacation rentals and home-sharing platforms had globally transformed tourism mobilities. Thus, platforms such as Airbnb are not merely intermediaries for physical services like accommodation but also facilitate non-physical services such as the tourist encounter, reshaping the tourist experience and the commercial tourism landscape. As short-term rentals gained prominence, platforms expanded to include other tourism services, such as travel experiences, thereby solidifying their status as a socio-geo-economic phenomenon, aiming to offer experiential and authentic holidays epitomised by 'live like a local' mottos and activities such as FT (Capineri and Romano (2021).

2.2. Unravelling the model of platform-mediated free tours

FT have grown significantly in recent years, mainly due to the support and intermediation of multinational platforms such as Sandemans, Guruwalk, Civitatis and Freetouring (Gutierrez Duarte & Roldán Martínez, 2020). Technology plays a pivotal role in the marketing and operation of FT. Without these platforms, FT would not enjoy the success they do today, as the business model may not allow for scalability. When clients book through a platform, they do not make any payment upfront. Instead, they wait to undertake the activity and then, based on their satisfaction, provide a tip to the guide. It is the guide who pays a fee to the platform for each client (García & Ruiz, 2022). In theory, FT align with the principles of collaborative consumption as the consumer sets the price and sellers accept any payment upfront, even zero (Gerpott, 2017). The exchange of knowledge seems to exemplify a non-profit exchange model, mirroring the ethos of the collaborative economy, as guides frequently have available time and a genuine enthusiasm for showcasing their current place of residence for free (García & Ruiz, 2022, pp. 341). However, the term 'free' as a marketing tool is not entirely accurate (Nilsson & Zillinger, 2022). While it implies cost-free or tip-based services (Leal Londoño & Medina, 2018), tips replace fees (Azar, 2007), while not necessarily incentivising better service. Despite its widespread practice and economic impact, tipping remains a complex phenomenon (Banks et al., 2018) that defies standard economic models (Azar, 2007); a tip is not a salary. Tipping in FT is driven by efficiency, aiming to reduce costs, paperwork, and provide tax benefits. Workers opt for tipping to augment their income potential, while consumers utilize it to express gratitude and ensure service quality (Azar, 2007) resulting in dilemmas akin to those in the broader collaborative economy. Koerts (2017) compared FT to Airbnb, seeing the model as a means to circumvent regulation by exploiting market liberalization, such as the Bolkestein Directive, for unofficial guides (Abril Sellarés, 2014).

This poses challenges, as platform-mediated guided jobs may not adhere to standard procedures (Capineri & Romano, 2021). The rise of PMFT has not only triggered regulatory changes in cultural capitals (Cobo, 2022) but also ignited conflicts between FT operators and traditional guides (Nilsson & Zillinger, 2022).

Despite its promising outlook, this model's darker implications (Buhalis et al., 2020), including negative socio-economic impacts and conflicts in urban areas, have attracted significant scholarly attention (Morales-Pérez et al., 2020; Morrison et al., 2017; Richardson, 2015; Rojanakit et al., 2022). Moreover, understanding the link with host communities is crucial (Morales-Pérez et al., 2020) as it sheds light on how FT may exacerbate or alleviate these socio-economic impacts and conflicts, ultimately shaping the relationship between tourists, guides, and local residents reshaping the context of the tourism encounter.

2.3. Dimensions of tourism encounter: platform mediation in free guided tours

Thus far, we have observed how tourism has become a central niche of the platform economy, addressing one of the enduring inquiries of tourism scholars: why tourists travel (Moscardo et al., 2014). Meeting other people is recognized as a significant motive for travelling (Asplund, 1992; Crouch et al., 2001a). Tourism is perceived as an encounter between visitors and the place visited (MacCannell, 1973; Urry, 1990), shedding light on the question of why people travel and emphasizing the role of the tourism encounter in providing answers. Crouch and Desforges (2003) highlighted the complexity of tourism, in which tourists and their contexts interact, creating a mutual circulation. Spatial contexts, fellow tourists and locals shape tourist experiences, while intermediaries as guides can facilitate host-guest encounters (Crouch & Desforges, 2003), which are pivotal for authenticity (MacCannell, 1973). The tourist experience involves interacting with attractions, facilities and the local community (Huber & Gross, 2022; MacCannell, 1973) and engaging with places, people and objects to nurture imagination and memory (Crouch, 2000; Gibson, 2010), all while acknowledging that encounters can vary even within the same setting (Hill et al., 2014).

Guided tours contextualise encounters between visitors and places and are widespread across tourist destinations (Zillinger et al., 2012). As such, they have been extensively studied in the tourism literature, including the related motivations, guide roles and site impacts. But what is a tour? To comprehend the role of FT, we must first define the term tour. In our academic opinion, one of the most accurate definitions has come from Page and Connell (2020), who described it as a structured activity in which a group of individuals visit a particular destination, accompanied by a guide who offers information and interpretations about the site. Guided tours may involve large groups following a guide carrying a distinctive object, such as a yellow umbrella, which can lead to negative perceptions. Stereotypes and mockery have surrounded guided tours, which are

sometimes seen as scripted performances (Zillinger et al., 2012). The presence of a guide is a pivotal element in the definition of guided tourism or guided tours, with the guide acting as a mediator in the cultural encounter between tourists and the destination (Holloway, 1981).

FT, with platforms emerging as new intermediaries that disrupt traditional models, encompass these perspectives. They align well with the literature on tourism encounters, contextualising interactions between visitors and destinations for intimate and authentic experiences. Moreover, they fit within the literature promoting interactions between visitors and locals, thereby challenging traditional tourism intermediation (Hill et al., 2014). They could even be aligned with the concept of 'Service Encounter', viewed as an interaction of a tourist with a service during a period of time, involving not only service employees but also facilities, new technologies, and other tangible elements (Bitner, 1990; Shostack, 1985). Unlike conventional guided tours, some FT platforms label themselves as leisure/recreational activities, offering dynamic, interactive experiences for engagement and immersion in local culture (Guruwalk, 2022). This dynamic approach counters the notion of scripted performances and promotes the kind of interaction and understanding (Hill et al., 2014) that can reshape tourism intermediation.

2.4 Conceptual framework of free tours within the tourism encounter context

The platforms represent a novel form of tourism intermediation that introduces new elements to the tourist encounter. Platforms that disrupt guided tours mirror Uber/Lyft in the ride-sharing industry, allowing anyone to guide without the need for certification (López, 2018). These platforms take no responsibility for quality or safety, and charge guides for tour rights, leaving them in more irregular labour situations. Visitors – now digital tourists (Pearce, 2011) – search online for low-cost local experiences. FT guides vary, but are often self-employed (Cruz, 1999) and local. Their roles are multifaceted, including leader, intermediary and informant (Cohen, 1985; Leclerc & Martin, 2004; Nilsson & Zillinger, 2020a). The places presented by guides are typically historically rich urban environments (García & Ruiz, 2022; Nilsson & Zillinger, 2020a). Regulators, from local authorities to supranational bodies such as the European Union, also influence this ecosystem. Walking is an activity that tourists frequently encounter while travelling (Ram & Hall, 2018). Walking (and the walkability of places) plays a vital role in the tourism encounter and is a key characteristic of FT. Walking can inspire new thoughts and foster an intimate engagement with space, as noted by Crouch et al. (2001b), thus making it essential to the immersive and intimate experience of FT.

Considering the aforementioned, elements that shape the tourism encounter within the FT phenomenon are the visitor, the guide, the place, and the platform. In the context of FT, these components play distinctive roles in influencing the dynamics of the tourist experience. The visitor brings their expectations, interests, and perspectives, shaping their

engagement with the tour and the destination. The guide serves as a facilitator, providing information, interpretation, and context to enhance the visitor's understanding and appreciation of the place. The destination itself, with its cultural, historical, and geographical attributes, serves as the backdrop for the encounter, enriching the visitor's experience. Additionally, the platform mediates the interaction between visitors and guides, offering a platform for communication, booking, and coordination. Together, these elements intertwine to create a multifaceted and dynamic tourism encounter within the framework of FT. However, it presents clear differences compared to the previous system of arranged and prepaid visits.

Our literature review shows limited theoretical reflection on the FT phenomenon in the tourism sector, with no schematic representation of the phenomenon even found. Given this gap, it becomes imperative to construct a conceptual framework. This framework, represented in Figure 1, elucidates the meaning and explanation of the new encounter in the PMFT tour scenario. It is not prescriptive but reflexive and provides key insights into the concepts surrounding FT and the guide-place-platform-visitor relationship. This is also crucial to understanding the socio-spatial impacts and governance of this practice. In the context of FT, all of this unfolds within the 'tourism encounter' setting, facilitated by the online platform that intermediates guide-visitor interactions. The main flow involves information conveyed by the guide, termed 'storytelling', 'narrative', or 'counter-narrative'. The central role of guides in FT extends beyond narrating historical anecdotes; they emerge as interpreters of destinations, influencing tourists' perceptions and shaping experiences. This transactional cultural flow, as described by Crouch (2000), enables a multisensory perception and multidimensional articulation of the place. The tour experience culminates in an economic transaction, as tourists compensate guides through tips. Additionally, guides pay platforms for referring visitors, effectively entering into a marketing arrangement. There are also flows between visitors and platforms. Users can rate platforms, thereby boosting their online reputation through electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). Trust, which is crucial for online transactions (McCole, 2002; Wu & Chang, 2006) fosters positive interactions. Guides therefore aim to satisfy customers so that they will leave positive feedback on platforms.

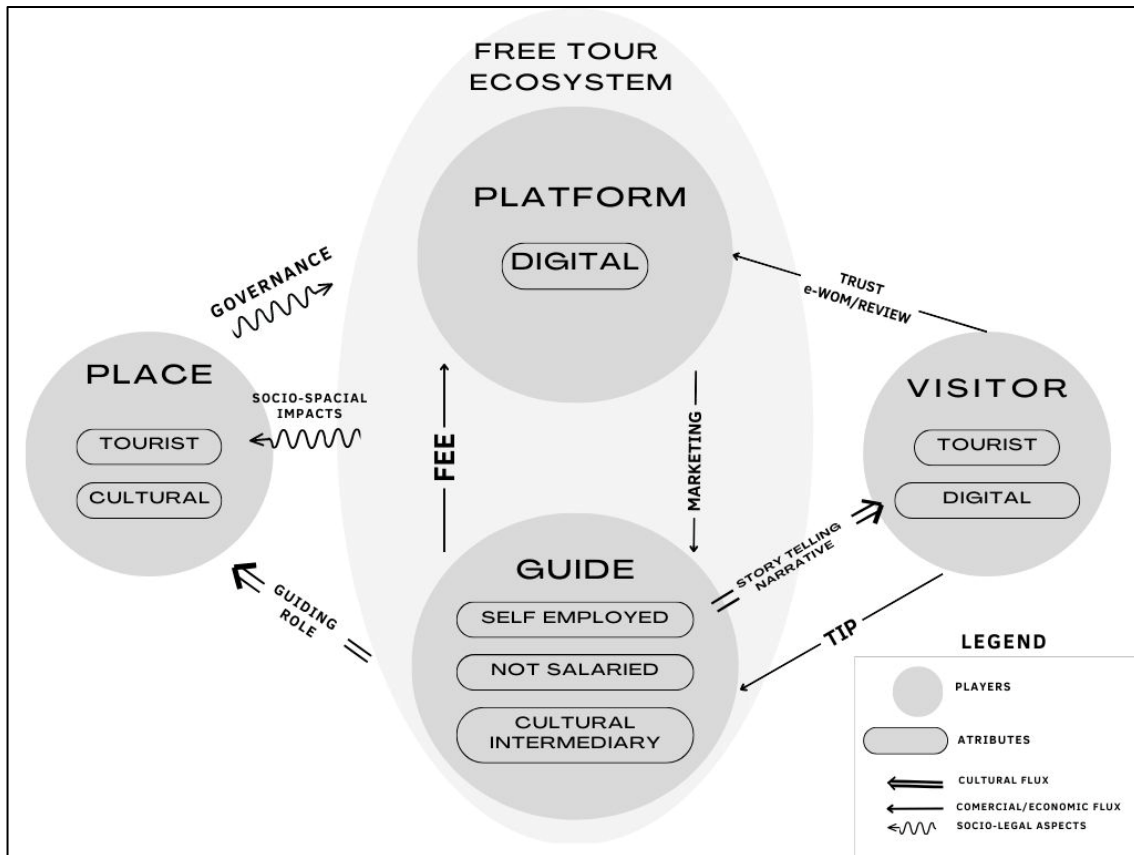


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of free tours within the tourism encounter context.

Source: Authors.

In the next section, we will discuss the bibliometric analysis that we conducted to develop this conceptual framework, which contributes new theoretical knowledge about PMFT.

3. METHODOLOGY

In our study, we recognized the significance and necessity of bibliometrics as a methodological tool to navigate concerns over the relations between sections and to provide insights into the literature on free tours (FT) within the framework of the tourism encounter. Our methodological approach consisted of several phases:

First, our research objective focused on conducting an integrative bibliometric analysis to explore the literature on FT within the framework of the tourism encounter, aiming to address the identified gap in knowledge regarding the platformisation of tourist visits. Our second objective was to investigate the reasons behind the relatively sparse literature on FT compared to the extensive body of research on the short-term vacation rental sector, such as Airbnb, which is also mediated through platforms. This involved examining factors contributing to the difference in scholarly attention and publication output between these two areas within the tourism sector. We selected multiple relevant data sources such as Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, Academic Search Ultimate, Periodical Archive Online, and Google Scholar to ensure comprehensive coverage of

academic publications. The rationale for choosing these databases lies in their extensive indexing of peer-reviewed journals and their relevance to tourism and social sciences. By including both Web of Science and Scopus, we aimed to capture a wide array of high-impact articles, while Google Scholar offered broader coverage. We focused on articles published in English and Spanish to address the primary languages prevalent in the academic discourse on tourism, allowing us to capture significant insights from both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking researchers. While we acknowledge that other languages might yield valuable contributions, our focus on these two languages provided a manageable scope given the time constraints of the study.

We then implemented a well-defined search strategy using specific terms such as 'free tours', 'free walking tours', 'free guided tours', and 'free guided walking tours' in both English and Spanish, targeting titles, abstracts, and keywords. Although only four queries were selected, they were carefully chosen to encompass the various terminologies associated with the phenomenon, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the literature.

A timespan of 2000 to present was chosen and justified based on the emergence of free tours as a phenomenon around 2003 and the rapid growth of the platform economy in tourism over the last two decades. This period captures the evolution and development of free tours within the broader context of digital platforms, ensuring our analysis reflects the most relevant and recent insights. Through a selection process based on pre-defined inclusion criteria—including publication status, specific words present in the text, publication period (2000-present), and relevance to social and human sciences within platform economics or tourism categories—we identified 22 relevant articles.

Data extraction was carried out systematically to gather vital information, including authors' names, publication year, country of origin, methodological approaches, variables measured, and key findings. This data informed further analysis. For the bibliometric analysis, we used VOSviewer, a tool that performs network analyses of co-occurring keywords and thematic categories from the selected articles. VOSviewer generates a map based on the weight and co-occurrence of terms in titles, abstracts, and keywords, providing insights into relationships and patterns in the literature on FT and the collaborative platform economy, using the 'full count' method for comprehensive analysis. An integrative analysis then synthesised the findings, identifying common patterns and trends and drawing meaningful conclusions to enrich the existing body of knowledge and provide a comprehensive understanding of the research landscape, allowing us to develop the proposed conceptual framework.

Finally, we interpreted and discussed the results in relation to existing theories and identified knowledge gaps. In the following sections, we highlight the main findings of

our meta-analysis, complemented by visualisations of the bibliometric networks, and summarise our conclusions and recommendations for future research.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Bibliometric findings

Despite the growing prevalence of FT within the platform economy, our bibliometric findings reveal that academic attention towards this topic remains relatively limited compared to other areas within the tourism sector. Our analysis underscores the importance of understanding the evolution and dynamics of FT within the broader context of the platform economy. The number of articles related to 'free guided tours', 'free tours', and 'free walking tours' has remained relatively constant since they began appearing in 2015, with no significant increase or decrease. This stands in stark contrast to the extensive articles on Airbnb, a prominent player in the platform economy. The continued lack of sustained scholarly interest poses a challenge to the research rationale, as it centres on recognising the need for further exploration. Since 2015, there have been three publications per year, with the exception of 2019, when none were found. In 2022, the count increased by two to five due to the publication of the *Encyclopedia of Tourism Management and Marketing* (Buhalis, 2022), which features chapters by García and Ruiz (2022) and Nilsson and Zillinger (2022), as shown in Table 1. This table provides a synopsis of the academic articles on FT, categorised by key themes and authors.

The articles cover a spectrum of approaches, each illuminating different dimensions of the phenomenon. From an economic standpoint, the explorations delve into the intricacies of the access economy, examining evolving business models in the context of the ongoing transformation catalysed by the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The discussions also explore the intriguing interplay between the contemporary model and its early roots in the sharing economy, while taking into account the profound impact of Covid-19 on the scene/profession.

Geographic-spatial approaches are also explored, providing insights into the spatial behaviour of tourists and their impact on landscapes. Concepts such as geolocation and glocalisation are critically analysed, as are the emergence of urban tourism precincts and the nuanced interactions within bubbles of cosmopolitan non-space. The legal approach unravels the sector's intricate legal complexities, addressing issues of intrusiveness, unfair competition and the vulnerable labour conditions of tour guides. Meanwhile, the social approach offers a deep dive into the behavioural intricacies of evolutionary economics, focusing on corporate social responsibility and cultural differences between nations.

The articles also examine the pivotal role of guides as trust generators and explore the dynamics of networks and relationships among various actors. The significance of new storytelling, i.e. narrating destinations, and the use of social media for marketing are also rigorously examined, as are the performative nature of tourism experiences and the profound impact of trust on visitors' experiences and learning.

Main approach	Theme	Authors (year of publication)
Economic	Access economy	Koerts (2017)
	Business models	Bautista et al. (2016), García & Ruiz (2022), Gutiérrez & Roldán (2020), Koerts (2017), Kukla Gryz et al. (2022), Leal Londoño & Medina (2017), Londoño & Medina (2018), Widtfeldt Meged & Zillinger (2018), Nilsson & Zillinger (2022)
	Impact of Covid-19 on the profession	Dogramadjieva (2021), Galí (2022)
	Current model controversy vs. initial sharing economy	Dogramadjieva (2021), García & Ruiz (2022), Gutiérrez & Roldán (2020), Koerts (2017), Londoño & Medina (2018), Navalón-García & Mínguez García (2016), Navalón-García & Mínguez García (2021), Nilsson & Zillinger (2020), Nilsson & Zillinger (2022)
	Fourth Industrial Revolution	Meged (2020)
	Theory of job crafting	Meged (2020)
	Theory of disruptive innovation	García & Ruiz (2022), Londoño & Medina (2018), Widtfeldt Meged & Zillinger (2018), Nilsson & Zillinger (2022)
	Voluntary payments in the tourism sector	Bautista et al. (2016), Butz & Harbring (2022), García & Ruiz (2022)
Geographical-Spatial	Bubbles of cosmopolitan non-space	Nilsson & Zillinger (2018)
	Evolutionary economic geography (knowledge and innovation)	Londoño & Medina (2018)
	Geolocation	Foronda Robles et al. (2022)
	Glocalisation	Dogramadjieva (2021), Nilsson & Zillinger (2020)
	Spatial-temporal behaviour of tourists	Foronda Robles et al. (2022)
	Tourist flows and their impact on landscapes	Foronda Robles et al. (2022)
	Urban tourism precincts	Foronda Robles et al. (2022)
Legal	Intrusiveness and unfair competition	Duarte & Martínez (2020), Galí (2022), García & Ruiz (2022), Gutiérrez & Roldán (2020), Koerts (2017), Meged (2020), Navalón-García & Mínguez García (2016), Navalón-García & Mínguez-García (2021)
	Labour precariousness and legal unprotectedness	Dogramadjieva (2021), Galí (2022), García & Ruiz (2022), Gutiérrez & Roldán (2020), Koerts (2017), Londoño & Medina (2018), Meged (2020), Navalón-García & Mínguez-García (2016), Navalón-García & Mínguez-García (2021), Nilsson & Zillinger (2018), Nilsson & Zillinger (2020)
	Voluntary workers	Bautista et al. (2016)
	Legal-tax regulation	Abril Sellarés (2014), Gutiérrez & Roldán (2020)
Social	Behaviour in relation to the concepts of knowledge in evolutionary economics	Leal Londoño & Medina (2017)
	Corporate social responsibility (CSR)	Butz & Harbring (2021)
	Destination image	Londoño & Medina (2018), Nilsson & Zillinger (2020)
	Guides as trust generators	Widtfeldt Meged & Zillinger (2018), Nilsson & Zillinger (2020)
	New storytelling and the narratisation of destinations	Widtfeldt Meged & Zillinger (2018), Nilsson & Zillinger (2020), Pawlusz & Polese (2017)
	Network theory	Meged & Zillinger (2015), Widtfeldt Meged & Zillinger (2018)
	Relationship between actors	Meged & Zillinger (2015), Navalón-García & Mínguez-García (2021), Nilsson & Zillinger (2020), Nilsson & Zillinger (2022)

	Social media as marketing	García & Ruiz (2022), Nilsson & Zillinger (2018), Nilsson & Zillinger (2022)
	Theory of cultural differences among nations	Kukla et al. (2022)
	Tourism as a performative process	Uzelac et al. (2015)
	Trust	García & Ruiz (2022), Meged & Zillinger (2015), Widtfeldt Meged & Zillinger (2018), Nilsson & Zillinger (2022)
	Visitors' experience and learning	Villa (2016)

Table 1. Articles published in the fields of geography, hospitality and tourism between 2015 and 2022.

Source: Authors, based on the WoS and Scopus databases.

A total of 19 academic journals have contributed to the subject during this period, 58% of which focused on tourism. Notably, the Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism and the Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change each published two articles connecting tourism and FT. The Encyclopedia of Tourism Management and Marketing also featured two entries on the subject. Sixteen journals published single articles on the research themes explored. Of these, 50% were specific to tourism and 31% had a JCR impact factor. This indicates a primarily tourism-focused academic approach to this activity, rather than one focused on geography or other disciplines. Additionally, it was noted that prominent tourism journals have yet to cover the subject extensively, favouring social sciences over managerial aspects.

The trends in annual scientific production on free tours reveal a gradual increase in publications over recent years. Following a notable dip in 2019, interest in this area has surged, culminating in five publications in 2022. This trend indicates a short but growing recognition of free tours within academic discourse, reflecting their increasing relevance in the context of the platform economy and tourism encounters.

4.1.1. Geographical coverage of the bibliometric findings

The academic literature on FT shows geographical disparities. Of the 42 authors in 22 publications, one author is from Asia (Pakistan). The research spans 13 countries, with Spain (38%) and Sweden (19%) standing out. Four countries (Germany, Denmark, Spain and Sweden) contributed to two or more publications, associated with large cities and Western contexts.

Regarding geographical focus, 95% of the studies are on European destinations, reflecting a Global North bias. Only one article out of 22 examines a non-European destination (Melbourne, Australia). Analysing the data by research country reveals that Denmark and Spain are the most prevalent countries for single-destination studies, each accounting for 21% of the total. Additionally, four studies explore multiple destinations (21% of destination research). The remaining 37% comprises seven articles focusing on a single destination, with no country repetition.

A breakdown of the data at city level shows that Copenhagen is the most researched city, appearing in five articles. Barcelona follows with three, while Berlin, Tallinn, Madrid and Budapest appear in two articles each.

4.2 Scope and context of the analysed articles

Our review of the literature on FT (and/or guided) tours reflects a range of perspectives, though some are limited. These perspectives have been categorised thematically in Table 1, showing the authors behind each approach. Economic aspects have received the most extensive coverage, with 17 articles discussing business models and the controversy surrounding the early collaborative economy. Social and legal aspects are also prominent, with 14 and 16 articles respectively. Geographical aspects and spatial impacts are less explored.

Publication citations are often an indication of relevance and quality. Of the 22 articles, 18 received a total of 118 citations, averaging 6.5 citations per article. Four articles have not been cited. Notably, three articles account for 60% of these citations, with Widtfeldt Meged and Zillinger (2018) standing out with 33 citations. M. Zillinger is the most cited author, with 52 citations across three publications on the subject.

Co-occurrence analysis was performed on keywords with at least three occurrences in a single article (Table 2 and Figure 2). Strongly related terms include Tour (30 occurrences), Free Tour (13), Guide (11), Tour Guide (11), Tourism (9), Payment (7), Glocalisation (7), Tip (6), Profession (6), Practice (6), Visit (6) and Storytelling (6). The size of the items in the graph correlates with the frequency of occurrence, and closer proximity implies higher co-occurrence. Some terms show a higher link strength despite fewer occurrences. This is true for 'Storytelling', which has a link strength index of 144, indicating its significance despite fewer occurrences compared to other terms.

	Occurrences	Links	Link strength
Cluster 1 (10 items)			
Tour	30	29	356
Glocalisation	7	17	145
Knowledge	5	22	84
Economy	4	15	35
Free	4	17	54
Collaborative economy	3	9	22
Current transformation	3	10	51
Europe	3	15	39
Innovative City Tour	3	10	51
Rise	3	18	40
Cluster 2 (8 items)			

Guide	11	24	169
Tourism	9	14	52
Payment	7	8	48
Tip	6	15	55
Free Walking Tour	5	8	29
Role	5	13	38
Performance	4	3	24
Certified Guide	3	5	18
Cluster 3 (6 items)			
Free Tour	13	19	109
City	6	24	90
Visit	6	5	42
Tourist	5	15	48
Visitor	5	14	61
Tourist Flow	3	5	18
Cluster 4 (5 items)			
Practice	6	15	124
Storytelling	6	10	144
Place	4	14	73
Local Context	3	17	75
Urban Place	3	10	81
Cluster 5 (4 items)			
Tour Guide	11	24	163
Profession	6	9	108
Covid	4	17	82
Data	4	20	66

Table 2. Items in the bibliometric analysis

Source: Authors.

In a co-occurrence network, relevant noun phrases are grouped into clusters that represent distinct themes (Van Eck & Waltman, 2011). The network's mapping highlights the central prominence of the word 'Tour', which is linked to all clusters, along with 'Guide', 'City', and 'Tourist', which display connections to every cluster. This alignment is consistent with the tourism-oriented focus of the journals that have examined PMFT activity.

The five colour-coded clusters (Figure 2) correspond to the themes identified in the literature review (Table 2). The red cluster is associated with the 'tour dimension' facilitated by platforms, with a high repetition of keywords. The green cluster relates to 'the act of being a tourist or the tourist experience of a tour', featuring terms such as guide, tourism, payment, tip and role. The blue cluster focuses on the concept of

'guidance' or guiding as an action. The yellow cluster explores the setting and the 'encounter' itself, encompassing the geospatial aspect, the place context, the city and the narrative. The purple cluster examines the 'guide' from a professional standpoint, considering aspects such as certification and professionalism in the mediation of tourism encounters.

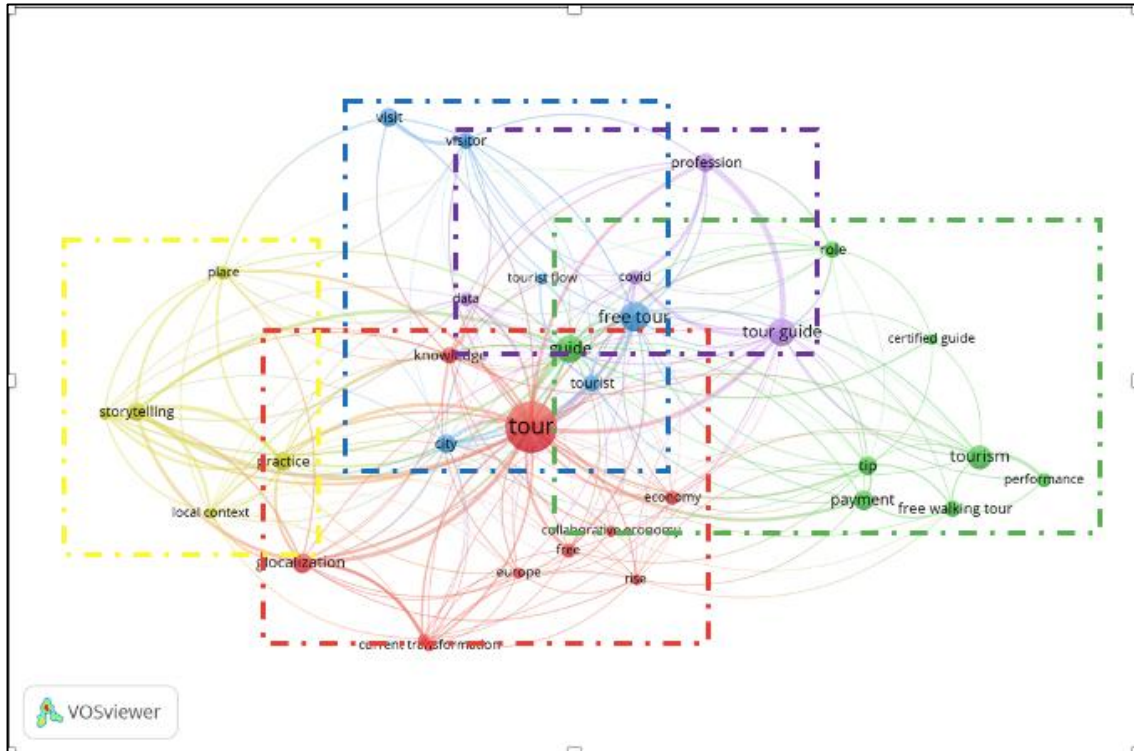


Figure 2. Keyword mapping according to co-occurrence
Source: Authors' own work using VOSviewer.

Using a time frame map, Figure 3 shows how the different topics mentioned above, related to this tourism activity, have gradually appeared in the associated literature.

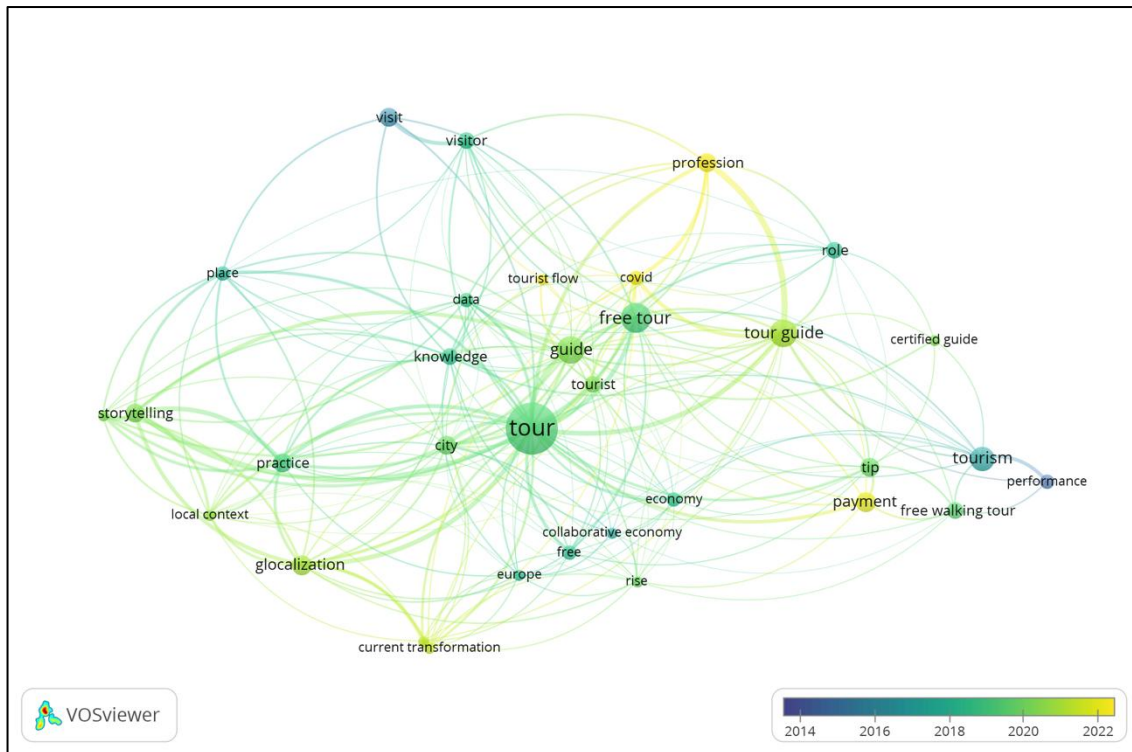


Figure 3. Mapping of words according to temporal overlay visualisation
Source: Authors' own work using VOSviewer.

The following sections provide an in-depth analysis of the themes and categories identified.

4.2.1. Economic approaches

In the initial phase of research into this activity (2015 to 2019), most articles emphasised the novelty of this economic endeavour and the differences between FT and conventional fee-based tours. At that time, a controversy that continues to this day had already begun: authors such as Dogramadjieva (2021), García and Ruiz (2022), Gutierrez Duarte and Roldán Martínez (2020), Koerts (2017), Leal Londoño and Medina (2018), Navalón-García and Mínguez Garcia (2016, 2021) and Nilsson and Zillinger (2020, 2022) observed that FT platforms had more differences than similarities with respect to the original collaborative economy model. In this regard, there is no particular difference from the development of other types of platforms, such as Airbnb or Uber, which some authors, such as Van Dijck et al. (2018), warned also derive value from circumventing regulation. Therefore, as Gurrán (2018) concluded when arguing that online holiday rental platforms have transformed not only the accommodation sector, but global travel, it would follow that FT platforms are to the traditional tourism sector what holiday rental platforms are to the traditional hospitality sector.

As the discourse on the collaborative economy model continued, experts began to turn their attention to the economic and social consequences of FT. Scholars started to analyse how this emerging phenomenon in tourism might affect local economies and

conventional tour operators. Some researchers, such as Oskam and Boswijk (2016), argued that FT have the potential to generate positive economic impacts in cities by attracting more visitors and boosting spending in local businesses. However, others have pointed out that these benefits may not be evenly distributed and that FT may exacerbate existing inequalities in the tourism industry, leading to a concentration of power in the hands of a few large platforms, to the detriment of small and medium-sized enterprises (Koerts, 2017).

4.2.2. Socio-spatial impacts and legal considerations

While early studies focused on the differences between FT and traditional fee-based tours, once the initial controversy surrounding the emergence of FT and their compatibility with the collaborative economy model had died down, later studies delved deeper into the social and spatial impacts and legal considerations of this new form of tourism. Researchers such as Leal Londoño and Medina (2018) and Navalón-García and Mínguez (2021) highlighted concerns about the gentrification of certain areas and the commodification of urban space. The concentrations of visitors that FT bring can drive up property values and potentially displace local residents. Similarly, the transformation of public spaces into tourist attractions can disrupt the daily lives of those who live and work there. Legal considerations have also been brought to the fore, particularly with regard to labour inequalities.

An important aspect of FT is the role of the guide. While FT are often marketed as a more authentic and local experience, the guide's interpretation of the tour can shape the narrative and ultimately affect the tourist's perception of the destination. However, the role of the guide also raises ethical and labour concerns. Gutierrez Duarte and Roldán Martínez (2020) pointed out that many FT guides are classified as independent contractors and are not formally employed by the platforms they work for, which can lead to a lack of labour protections and benefits, further exacerbating the precariousness of work in the tourism industry.

4.2.3. Geographical and spatial dimension

In addition to highlighting the different business models and their impact on society, the geographical and spatial dimensions of FT are also of concern and have been explored by several scholars in recent years. As noted by Leal Londoño and Medina (2018), the influx of visitors on FT can contribute to gentrification and the displacement of local residents. Additionally, FT can turn public spaces into tourist attractions, disrupting the daily lives of residents and contributing to the commodification of urban space (Navalón-García & Mínguez Garcia, 2021).

Despite these concerns, FT have also been found to have positive impacts on local economies. Oskam and Boswijk (2016) argued that FT have the potential to attract more

visitors and boost spending in local businesses, particularly in areas that are less frequented by current tourists.

5. DISCUSSION

The steady number of articles on this topic, which contrasts with the explosive growth in other segments of the platform economy, underscores the need for sustained academic interest in this evolving phenomenon. In this section, we contrast our bibliometric findings with the conceptual framework set out in Section 2.4. Our analysis of academic interest in FT shows a steady number of articles on the subject since they began to appear in 2015. This stands in stark contrast to the dynamic increase in literature on other segments of the platform economy, most notably short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb. The lack of sustained scholarly attention given to FT poses a challenge to the impetus behind this research, which rests on the recognition of the need for deeper exploration in this area. This echoes the observations made in section 2.1 regarding the unclear understanding of the collaborative economy, suggesting that the academic community may still be grappling with the implications and definitions of emerging models like FT (Schor, 2016; Lane & Woodworth, 2016). The static nature of academic output raises questions about the factors contributing to the limited interest in this unique form of tourism within the platform economy.

A crucial dimension emerging from the bibliometric analysis is the clear geographical disparity in academic contributions. The concentration of articles from Spain and Sweden underscores the association of FT with major Western cities. This disparity extends to the focus of these tours, with a notable emphasis on European tourist destinations. This geographical concentration reflects the broader context highlighted in previous sections, where the ambiguity of the collaborative economy leads to regional variations in its adoption and academic exploration (Zervas et al., 2017; Muñoz & Cohen, 2017). The implications of this geographical concentration extend beyond academia and reflect the wider reality of a predominantly Western-oriented phenomenon. The thematic categories identified in the review provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of FT. Economic aspects have received considerable attention, with discussions revolving around the compatibility of FT with the collaborative economy model.

The analysis reveals that FT platforms adopt a comparable structure to other platforms discussed within the theoretical framework. They resemble other accommodation or transportation models serving tourists and entail peer-to-peer exchanges, where individuals or entities share resources (Muñoz & Cohen, 2017). This mirrors the model of platform-mediated exchanges outlined previously, which characterises FT as a non-profit exchange model driven by consumer satisfaction (Gerpott, 2017). Furthermore, FT platforms facilitate interactions where inexperienced travellers can seek advice from seasoned travellers (Mertena et al., 2022). During the analysis, it is evident that there is a

recurring debate surrounding the potential positive and negative economic impacts of these tours on local economies. This debate in turn mirrors broader discussions about platform-based businesses and their effects on traditional industries, as described in this research, which highlights the complexities and interactions involved in the tourism encounter (Huber & Gross, 2022; Crouch & Desforges, 2003).

As the analysis progresses, socio-spatial concerns come to the fore. The socio-spatial impacts of FT, including gentrification and the commodification of urban spaces, raise questions about the role of tourism in shaping cities and communities. Additionally, the labour conditions of tour guides, who are often classified as independent contractors, spark legal and ethical debates. The precariousness of work associated with this type of employment aligns with broader concerns about the gig economy and the rights of workers within platform-based systems. The European Union, as a prominent regulatory body in Europe, has played a role in the relative proliferation of FT across the continent. It could even be argued that the EU, through the deregulation introduced by the Bolkestein Directive, has contributed to the erosion of tour guides' earnings. Understanding the rationale behind this decision, possibly aimed at attracting investment, requires consideration from a neoliberal perspective (Menz, 2010). In fact, EU funding directed towards such platforms is purportedly meant to create job opportunities (De Stefano & Aloisi, 2018; Huws et al., 2017). While this may increase the accessibility of the service due to lower labour costs, it is highly plausible that service will drive down wages in order to compete at the lowest price point, potentially undercutting other providers.

During the literature review, guides, who are central to the FT experience, emerge as interpreters of destinations, significantly influencing tourists' perceptions and encounters. This finding underscores the guide's role as described in previous sections, where guides are identified as multifaceted intermediaries shaping the tourism encounter (Cohen, 1985; Nilsson & Zillinger, 2020a). Yet their role is not without ethical dilemmas, as guides navigate labour challenges while moulding tourists' understanding of places. The juxtaposition of guides as both cultural ambassadors and precarious workers encapsulates the complexities of the FT ecosystem. The objectives of exploring the literature on FT within the framework of the tourism encounter, and of investigating the reasons behind the relatively sparse literature on FT, have been extensively fulfilled in this research.

Moreover, the findings resonate with the framework presented in Section 2.4, which emphasizes the necessity for a reflexive approach to understand the new dynamics introduced by platform-mediated tours (Crouch, 2000; Nilsson & Zillinger, 2020a). The findings of this analysis have practical implications for both platform operators and policy-makers. A nuanced management approach is needed to acknowledge the potential economic benefits and challenges of FT. Balancing the allure of authentic

experiences with the welfare of guides and local communities becomes paramount. Moreover, the socio-spatial impacts call for thoughtful urban planning and tourism policies that promote inclusivity and sustainable development on the need for a sustainable tourism consumption (Sharpley, 2021).

6. CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our comprehensive analysis of academic contributions to the field of FT within the platform economy has provided several key insights and raised important considerations. The findings of this study shed light on the intricate dynamics of PMFT within the tourism encounter framework. Our analysis reveals the significant role of these tours as novel intermediaries in shaping tourist experiences and interactions with destinations. Moreover, our research underscores the importance of integrating PMFT into broader discussions on sustainable tourism development. By recognizing their potential to enhance visitor experiences while contributing to local economies, policymakers and destination managers can devise strategies to harness the benefits of these tours while mitigating any associated challenges. This study highlights the urgency of adopting a holistic approach to tourism management that prioritizes sustainability, equity, and responsible tourism practices.

Our findings emphasize the transformative potential of PMFT in redefining the tourism encounter and shaping the future of destination experiences. By addressing the complexities and opportunities presented by these tours, we pave the way for a more inclusive, sustainable, and enriching tourism landscape. The ethical dimension of guide work, often precariously situated within the gig economy framework, raises critical questions about labour rights, professional standards and the broader implications of platform-mediated labour. The socio-spatial impacts of FT, including gentrification and the commodification of urban spaces, call for careful urban planning and policy interventions. Achieving a harmonious balance between the economic benefits of tourism and the well-being of local communities requires nuanced policy frameworks that prioritise inclusivity, sustainability and the preservation of cultural authenticity.

The implications and relevance of this article are significant for both academic research and practical application in the field of tourism. Our study provides a comprehensive understanding of PMFT within the tourism encounter context, addressing key knowledge gaps in the existing literature. Practically, this study offers valuable insights for tourism professionals and local communities affected by tourism. Better understanding of PMFT enables tourism authorities and destination managers to make informed decisions, promoting sustainable tourism practices that benefit all stakeholders.

Despite the valuable insights derived from this analysis, certain limitations can be identified. Data availability and the scope of the bibliometric analysis may have influenced the results.

The multifaceted nature of FT within the platform economy underscores the necessity for further exploration to ensure their integration into a broader framework of sustainable, equitable, and responsible tourism development. From the research, it is evident that there is a need for further exploration into the experiences of guides, encompassing their perspectives, challenges, and aspirations. Additionally, proposing strategies to enhance their working conditions and professional development is crucial. This deeper investigation would provide insight into how the evolving concept of guiding reshapes the tourism encounter, highlighting the necessity for ongoing research in this area. Additional studies are required to investigate the varied experiences of FT across different cultural, geographical, and regulatory contexts. The geographical concentration of academic contributions highlights the need for future research that will broaden the scope to encompass more diverse regions and destinations shedding light on the global implications of this phenomenon beyond the Western-centric perspective. The ethical considerations surrounding the work of guides in the gig economy warrant further investigation. Research could also delve deeper into the experiences of guides, exploring their perspectives, challenges, and aspirations, while also proposing strategies to improve their working conditions and professional development, thereby elucidating how this new concept of guiding modifies the tourism encounter and necessitates further investigation. This future line of inquiry is imperative due to the scarcity of existing literature and should be approached with consideration of the new conceptual framework presented in this article, which links platform-mediated free tours as a novel intermediary of the tourism encounter.

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