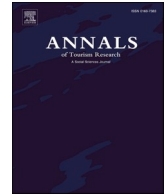




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Research note

Platform-mediated local power in tourism

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ABSTRACT

This research note develops a conceptual framework for analysing how digital platforms reconfigure place-based power in tourism. Rather than treating the “local turn” as a bounded community or an ontological essence, the note approaches locality as a relational and contested claim, historically produced through political economy, mobilities and uneven social hierarchies, which is increasingly validated through platform infrastructures. Drawing on critical tourism political economy and platform studies, the note introduces platform-mediated local power to describe how platforms shape who can credibly claim local legitimacy, how such claims circulate across publics, and how they are converted into economic participation under ranking, review and recommendation regimes. Through the interrelated dimensions of visibility, credibility and convertibility, the framework shows how algorithmic mediation reorganises long-standing asymmetries in land, capital, labour, and representation by layering informational control onto material relations. The note concludes by arguing that decolonising tourism knowledge must be pursued alongside efforts to contest platform infrastructures through regulation, transparency and alternative forms of data governance.

From the local turn to platform-mediated locality

The “*local turn*” in tourism studies reflects a sustained effort to foreground place-based agency, knowledge and voice in response to critiques of enclave development, foreign ownership and extractive growth (Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2022). However, this turn should not be understood as an epistemic origin point. Long before it was named, critical political economy and dependency approaches theorised locality as a structured position within unequal circuits of capital, labour, land and state power (Bianchi, 2018; Chaperon & Bramwell, 2013). In this longer view, “the local” is neither inherently small nor authentically rooted. It is instead relationally produced and internally differentiated through classed, racialised, gendered and institutional dynamics. This relational understanding aligns with critical scholarship showing how claims to place-based identity are simultaneously produced through power and strategically mobilised as political and economic resources rather than reflecting pre-given cultural essences (Anthias & Asher, 2026).

This attention to locality coincides with the platformisation of tourism. Platforms such as Airbnb, Booking.com, Google Maps and Tripadvisor now mediate accommodation, mobility, consumption and evaluation across destinations. These systems organise tourism markets through ranking, recommendation and review architectures that shape what is visible, credible and economically viable. Platforms therefore do not simply represent tourism spaces, but they actively construct them.

This research note argues that platform infrastructures reconfigure how locality is publicly recognised and economically mobilised in tourism. Locality today functions not only as a spatial or cultural reference but also as a platform position, granted, amplified or

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suppressed through algorithmic mediation. Importantly, this does not imply that platforms create locality anew. Rather, they re-code existing social and economic relations by operationalising “localness” as a set of measurable and monetisable signals.

To conceptualise these dynamics, we introduce platform-mediated local power, the platform-conditioned capacity to have place-based legitimacy recognised and circulated, and to translate that recognition into market participation and value capture. This framing shifts attention away from idealised notions of “empowering locals” and toward the political economy of recognition, visibility and accumulation under platform governance.

The local and its limits under platform mediation

Tourism scholarship has long cautioned against treating the local as a coherent or benign category. Locality is frequently mobilised for legitimacy and differentiation, yet it often masks internal hierarchies and exclusions (Salazar, 2012). Platform mediation intensifies these tensions by making “localness” increasingly dependent on infrastructures that determine discoverability and trust. For many users, an actor appears local insofar as it is legible through rankings, reviews, geotags and semantic associations. Lived locality persists, but platform representations increasingly discipline which local meanings circulate and which remain marginal.

While tourism research has examined online reviews and social media, less attention has been paid to how platforms govern locality as a political-economic relation. The issue is not merely algorithmic bias, but how platform infrastructures establish evaluative rules through which place-based legitimacy is verified and monetised. These rules interact with, rather than replace, existing inequalities in land ownership, labour segmentation and capital access.

Platform governance and the politics of visibility

Platform studies and critical data scholarship highlight how platforms function as infrastructures of coordination and extraction (Srnicek, 2017). Participation requires compliance with opaque ranking systems whose criteria are rarely transparent or contestable (Pasquale, 2015; Tuomi & Ascenção, 2023). Such systems exemplify broader forms of algorithmic governance in which power is exercised through indirect, procedural and often depoliticised mechanisms rather than overt regulation (Kalpokas, 2019). In tourism, what appears “local,” “popular,” or “authentic” is often the outcome of platform curation rather than neutral aggregation.

Visibility becomes a central modality of power, not because it is new, but because it is reorganised under platform mediation (Beer, 2019). Visibility regimes vary across contexts: domestic and international publics search differently, map interfaces structure attention differently from review lists, and platform-specific logics generate multiple markets of visibility. Across these regimes, however, platforms reward professionalised practices such as frequent updates, standardised aesthetics, rapid responsiveness and sustained review velocity. These requirements advantage actors with capital, organisational capacity, or external management, intensifying pre-existing inequalities.

These dynamics parallel debates on data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). As earlier extractive regimes appropriated land and labour, platforms appropriate data traces generated by tourism encounters. Value is produced not only by hosts and workers, but also by tourists whose reviews, ratings and geolocated interactions feed platform analytics. This process resonates with analyses of tourism valorisation, which emphasise how tourist practices generate value that is subsequently captured through mediated circuits of accumulation rather than remaining with place-based actors (Frenzel & Frisch, 2022). Surplus capture, however, is concentrated through commissions, promoted listings and data monetisation. Some commentators interpret these rent-extractive arrangements as signalling a shift toward platform-based forms of dependency and control that resemble neofeudal relations rather than competitive markets (Varoufakis, 2024). Informational control thus layers onto material relations rather than displacing them. As a result, property, rent, labour and state infrastructures remain decisive, while platform visibility often reinforces the position of already advantaged actors.

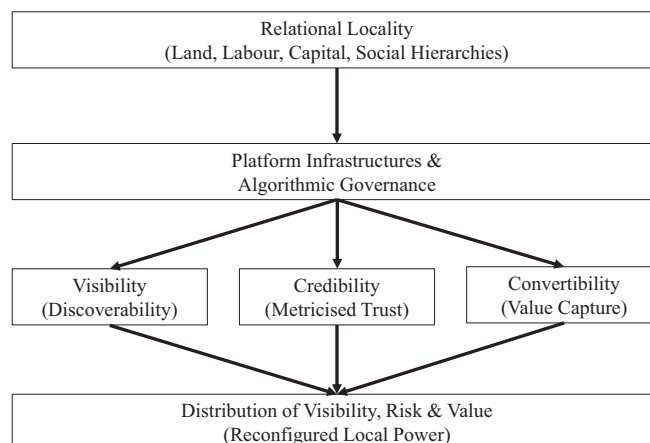


Fig. 1. Conceptualising platform-mediated local power.

Conceptualising platform-mediated local power

Platform-mediated local power refers to how platform infrastructures mediate who can credibly claim local legitimacy, how that legitimacy circulates, and how it is converted into economic participation. We thus conceptualise it through its three interrelated dimensions: visibility, credibility and convertibility. Our conceptualisation is illustrated in Fig. 1 below.

First, *visibility* concerns platform-conditioned discoverability, or simply put who appears in search results, map listings and recommendations. Visibility has always been uneven in tourism, but platforms reorganise the mechanisms through which unevenness is produced. Rather than creating a new axis of inequality, platform ranking systems intensify existing asymmetries by transforming attention into a managed and often purchasable resource.

Second, *credibility* focusing on how trust and legitimacy are produced under platform governance. Ratings and reviews do not replace interpersonal or institutional trust, but partially metricise credibility within hybrid evaluative infrastructures. Platform designs encourage standardised performances of reliability and authenticity, shaping how “local distinctiveness” is recognised. These processes are not neutral, since credibility is unevenly granted across social difference, and users increasingly engage with reviews strategically rather than naively.

Convertibility captures the translation of platform recognition into income and livelihood security. Convertibility depends on fee structures, advertising markets, contractual asymmetries and the capacity to absorb reputational volatility. While multiple actors produce value in platform tourism, surplus capture is frequently skewed toward platform owners. Platform-mediated local power therefore reflects not only cultural recognition, but the political economy of value extraction.

These dynamics also operate within destinations. Platform infrastructures intensify competition among place-based actors through reputational conflict, review manipulation and strategic visibility practices. Moreover, because much tourism data is produced by tourists, some actors cultivate relationships with highly visible visitors or influencers to generate reputational traces. Locality is thus co-produced through unequal relations of attention and mobility rather than residing within a bounded community.

Epistemic and political implications

Platform-mediated local power challenges assumptions underpinning the local turn. Amplifying local voices does not automatically democratise representation when platforms determine which voices are legible and valuable. Platforms act as epistemic intermediaries, shaping how places are known. Authenticity becomes less a matter of lived recognition than of compatibility with platform logics that reward particular narratives, aesthetics and behaviours.

At the same time, platform participation deepens dependency. While platforms promise opportunity, opting out often entails losing visibility, income and reputational continuity. These dependencies are rarely detached from material conditions. Actors with capital buffers and property are better positioned to navigate platform volatility, while precarious workers and small operators face amplified risk.

Locality, then, is neither erased nor fully captured by platforms. It is increasingly mediated through infrastructures that condition how place-based legitimacy is recognised and monetised. As actors adapt to these conditions, they engage in algorithm-oriented place making, reshaping how locality appears in tourism markets.

The future of the local

Platform-mediated local power reframes debates about locality in tourism. Locality can no longer be understood solely as a spatial or cultural identity, nor reduced to a platform position alone. It is both lived and mediated, materially grounded and informationally organised. The central question, therefore, is not simply how “locals” can be empowered within tourism systems, but how place-based legitimacy, visibility and value capture are computed, circulated and constrained through platform infrastructures.

Future research can advance this agenda through digital ethnographies of platform governance that examine how residents, workers, and operators experience ranking systems in everyday practice, comparative audits of visibility regimes across platforms, interfaces and publics, and investigations into community-based or publicly governed data arrangements that seek to broaden how locality is represented and valued. Such approaches can help clarify how algorithmic mediation intersects with longer-standing political-economic relations in specific destination contexts.

Beyond representation, the future of the local in tourism will hinge on struggles over how platform-mediated markets organise the distribution of visibility, risk and value. Platform governance does not merely shape place representation. It conditions access to income, labour security and actors' economic viability within destinations structured by platform infrastructures. Local power thus operates not only through symbolic claims to place, but through collective, institutional and regulatory interventions that reshape accumulation and dependency in platform economies. Viewed this way, the local is not an idealised alternative to global systems, but a contested terrain within them.

Efforts to decolonise tourism knowledge remain essential, but they are insufficient if pursued in isolation from the infrastructures that govern recognition and exchange. Contesting platform-mediated local power requires attention to the political and economic conditions under which locality is rendered legible and monetisable, including regulatory oversight, transparency and interoperability requirements, cooperative or public platform alternatives, and locally governed data systems. In the platform economy, to be “local” is increasingly to be ranked.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Argyro Elisavet Manoli: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

I have nothing to declare.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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