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MAIN SECTION

The Disneylandization of the Historic City of Florence

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ABSTRACT

This article theorizes the *Disneylandization* of historic cities through an in-depth sociological analysis of contemporary Florence. Building on the concept of *enrichment capitalism* developed by Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, and extending debates on *Disneyfication* introduced by Alan Bryman, the study argues that Florence has moved beyond heritage valorization toward an emergent form of entertainment-industry capitalism. Drawing on participant observation conducted between 2021 and 2025 within the UNESCO-designated historic center, the article develops a phenomenology of overtourism focused on the proliferation of staged "authentic experiences," the spectacularization of traditions, and the transformation of everyday urban practices into consumable events. These aesthetic and experiential shifts are interpreted through a dialogue with classical urban sociology, particularly the writings of Georg Simmel and Pierre Bourdieu, to highlight a reversal of Florence's historical role as an antidote to metropolitan alienation. The findings show how short-term rentals, real-estate speculation, and platform-driven tourism converge to convert the city center into a diffused hotel and entertainment park, progressively expelling residents and eroding living cultural heritage. The concept of *Disneylandization* is proposed as a critical tool for capturing this advanced stage of urban transformation in Italian cities of art.

KEYWORDS
Disneylandization; Overtourism; Entertainment-industry Capitalism; Urban Heritage; Florence

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1. Overtourism surpasses enrichment economy

Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre developed their concept of 'enrichment capitalism' by observing the transformation of the former workers' city of Arles and the Castles of the Loire Valley into hotspots of mass tourism.[1] After the shutdown of the Railway Repair Workshops, Arles entered a period of economic decline marked by mass unemployment. However, the intervention of Maja Hoffmann and her Swiss-based Luma foundation introduced a complete contrast by transforming the city's economic and cultural vocation.[2] Following the model of Bilbao's recovery thanks to the implementation of the Guggenheim Museum, Hoffmann transformed the former industrial site of the city into an art show and production area with a new symbolic building dominating the skyline.[3] Reproposing the architectural style of Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum, Frank Gehry realized the iconic Luma Tower to become the new symbol of the city. The Hoffmann investment was followed by other interventions of private and public donors to valorize Arles's historical and artistic heritage: above all featuring Arles's reminiscences in the work of Vincent van Gogh. What was previously the public patrimony of the city—according to Boltanski and Esquerre's central thesis—became a touristic production machine substituting the traditional capital valorization by means of the production of industrial goods (or their maintenance in the case of Arles)—with a new form of capitalism founded on the economic valorization of cultural heritage.

Enrichment capitalism is seen as a direct consequence of the financialization trend that the economic system underwent during the neoliberal age. Putting more and more money into new schemes attracting rapid gains and promising speculative rewards also relocates material production to developing countries, where wages can be made more 'cost-efficient' and social security expenses are reduced to a minimum. Deprived of its historical channel of valorization via the production of goods, in its traditional territories across Europe, capitalism has invented new ways of valorization, often starting genuine processes of primitive accumulation based on the appropriation of common goods, such as material and immaterial heritage and cultural goods. Furthermore, booming revenues in the finance sector during speculative bubbles demand securitization through investment in real-estate. This leads to an increase in both property values and yields. It is a trend that triggers a race to discover new low-cost areas for property investment (such as the city of Berlin in the 1990s) and to invent new methods for improving property yields. Official statistics show that these processes have completely transformed the real-estate market in

1 Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).

2 ibid., 56–63.

3 See https://www.luma.org/arles.html.

Europe, making it much more expensive for its population to buy their own home.[4] A classic development in the sense of the eternal struggle between industrial capital and ground rent—one would say.

Yet, the speculative turn also extended to intangible goods. European schemes for the protection of denominations permitted the commercialization of a number of traditional recipes thanks to the invention of products that characterize the identities of specific territories beyond the already established classical ones like Parmigiano Reggiano or Aceto Balsamico, thus attracting the attention of non-specialist tourists. The interesting aspect of this development—as remarked by Boltanski and Esquerre—is that product creation is supported by an intensified narrative invention. It is not just a particular object that is sold, e.g., a jar of preserves made from beans using a specific recipe. The entire narrative surrounding the tradition and the people who developed it is also sold alongside the jar of beans. This valorization mechanism assembling products and narratives constitutes a crucial element for the added value of a new class of commodities and slowly extends to the whole domain of cultural heritage, including monuments, buildings and artworks. This should be seen as the most interesting and at the same time concerning aspect of the issue. As we will see with reference to the Loire Valley Castles, visits to monuments transform into events, adding narrative elements to their historical and artistic content that highlight the particular experiential value tourists can enjoy. Visiting them is no longer just a form of cultural education; it adds real-life value to the trip and can be shared on social media.

What was once considered to be a cultural value in itself, a value involving public institutions that were duty-bound to intervene, so protecting and preserving the said value for future generations and accordingly investing taxpayers' money for this purpose, now becomes a tool for capital valorization. Due to the massive tax cuts for enterprises and higher earners that were introduced in the neoliberal age following the illusion of trickle-down economics,[5] public funding for cultural heritage conservation has suffered such a significant reduction that it has often become impossible to fulfil the task. The relieved economic elite, however, often held back on the donations that their propagandists had predicted. The money flowed much more into unproductive luxury products and further financial speculation. This left the guardians of cultural heritage alone with the dilemma of its protection. The call for 'alternative financing options' grew louder, prompting a shift towards more creative approaches in the search for solutions.

The private sector has of course assumed a pioneering role in this regard.

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4 See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Housing_price_statistics_-_house_price_index.

5 Joseph Stiglitz, "A critique to Trickle-down economics," *Exploring Economics*, 2015, *https://www.exploring-economics.org/de/entdecken/joseph-stiglitz-trickle-down-economics-is-absolute/*.

This happened in France earlier than in other countries. Thanks to the eternal rivalry between the two magnates Arnault and Pinault, the valorization techniques developed in the luxury goods sector expanded to *haute couture* and later to the art market.[6] The proliferation of narratives that seek to justify the increasing senselessness of ready-made art products has undergone a manifest acceleration. The non-economic logic of art production, as recognized by Pierre Bourdieu,[7] which posits the long-term rejection of cheap commercialization as a necessary precondition for the accumulation of symbolic capital by future avant-gardes, has been superseded by the sophisticated invention of extreme flexible last-minute narratives. These have the capacity to quickly adapt commodity-art to the prevailing ideological trends in the art market, thereby substituting art's symbolic capital. However, this process concomitantly results in a significant increase of volatility in the value of artworks.[8]

As I could observe in the course of another ethnographic research project, the logic reversal in the field of conservation for architectural and artistic heritage has led to the exemplary transformation of some of the most important Chateaux of the Loire Valley. For visitors, this phenomenon is particularly evident in the case of the privately owned Château de Chenonceau. The castle, which was constructed, embellished, and extended by a significant number of noblewomen and Queens of France, including Catherine de' Medici, is of substantial historical significance. Nevertheless, the preservation of the architectural structures and gardens represents a considerable challenge, particularly in view of the fact that access to public funding for restoration is becoming progressively more arduous. The proprietors of the castle have thus resolved to initiate a regulated metamorphosis of the site into a leisure destination, with the objective of transforming a visit to the castle into an event of both recreational and cultural significance. The experiment was successful, so that Chenonceau now attracts up to 800,000 visitors *per annum*.

In Chenonceau the visitor is accompanied through buildings and gardens by a well-structured narrative audio guide and is presented with a reconstruction of the rooms in which the illustrious owners of the castle lived from time to time. A representation of historical reality is proposed that becomes capable of conveying emotions, a feat further compounded by the impressive floral decorations, which are cyclically renewed using flowers and plants from the rich garden. As can be seen from the satisfied expressions of the visitors, the experiential journey works and is sealed by many a selfie in front of the important backdrop.[9] The fact that the

6 Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichissement*, 287–325.

7 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 29–141.

8 Gregor Fitzi, "The Heuristic Significance of Art Sociology," *Simmel Studies* 26, no. 1 (2022): 107–132.

9 Gregor Fitzi, "Participant observation notes," in *Project Overtourism* (manuscript, 2021–2025).

reconstruction of the historical apartments does not comply with philological criteria does not seem to shock visitors, even though it causes great scandal among historians at the nearby University of Tours. The paintings on display are mostly historical copies of originals made at various times and exhibited in other museums around the world. The fine tapestries come from other places and are from different eras than when the palace apartments were built or inhabited. However, this does not matter. What counts is the immediate experience of the place, beyond which most visitors prefer not to venture—this is a leading aspect of contemporary tourism. Added to these impressions is the aesthetic pleasure of visiting the well-kept gardens, the playful moment of walking through the labyrinth, which everyone enjoys.

At Chenonceau, one observes how the economy of heritage valorization that had impressed Boltanski and Esquerre is transformed into an economy of entertainment and experience generation. Here the approach is still practiced with a certain moderation—thanks also to the control that a single private ownership can exercise over the entire site. The transition from heritage valorization to entertainment and spectacularization, already visible in the case of the French cultural heritage, represents a fundamental analytical juncture to understand the transformation undergone by Italian cities of art and in particular Florence, which was the major subject of my participant observation during recent years. Here, in fact, one can witness how the transformation process in today's pathways of capital accumulation goes beyond the stage of the economy of valorization, described by Boltanski and Esquerre, to enter a further phase that characterizes itself as an 'entertainment-industry capitalism.' In a way, this is the novelty of the phenomena that can be observed in Florence.

2. The Florence case study

To illustrate the thesis concerning the unique aspect of the Florentine transformation I will proceed as follows. I will present an introductory brief history of tourism in Florence since the pandemic. Using the materials of a participant observation in the historical city center that corresponds with the 'UNESCO area' within the former 16th–century city walls, I then develop a phenomenology of the current overtourism trends in the city. Subsequently, I question the overall perception that is generated by the materials resulting from the participant observation in terms of sociological aesthetics. I proceed to compare them with the classical analysis of Florence as a 'city of art' in terms of Georg Simmel's contrast with the 'modern metropolis' produced by the development of the historical form of manufacturing capitalism in Berlin at the end of the 19th century. The results of the comparison are eventually discussed against the backdrop of the quantitative data concerning the business model of the 'diffused hotel' that characterizes the current tourism development in Florence and

the correlated tendency to real–estate speculation. In the conclusions, I show to what extent Florence not only represents a realization of the economy of enrichment in the style of Boltanski and Esquerre, but furthermore develops the traits of an economy of entertainment that is comparable to that of the us-American entertainment sites of Disneyland and Disney World and their neighboring cities.[10]

During the pandemic Florence's city center was completely empty. Walking around the area before the curfew at 10 pm was a surprising experience. One could guess at the proportions of space that conformed to city life during the heyday of its splendor in the Renaissance. After the pandemic, the then local administration conceded a phase of strong deregulation in every touristic activity, thus hoping to encourage rapid recovery from the losses of the foregone period when hardly any tourists came to Florence. Entire streets were filled with tables and chairs and a joyfully anarchic and alcohol-fuelled atmosphere spread. Restaurants no longer waited for their clients and started to accept massive reservations from tour operators to fill their halls. Lunch and dinner started to be served in a half-hour rhythm generating huge queues waiting in front of restaurant doors—both aspects being completely unusual phenomena for Florence. The already thriving short-time rentals boomed after the pandemic, transforming the whole UNESCO zone into a diffused hotel, thus generalizing the business model and awakening interest of financial speculators. As a real–estate agent testified in an interview: "In the past people came into my office asking what the square-metre price was for an apartment, now they only ask what the average return per night is."[11]

Florence is a city whose population traditionally votes for leftist parties. The municipal administrations since 2009 were led by the center–left, moderate leftist party *Partito Democratico*. At the same time, this had been strongly influenced by the pre dominant neoliberal ideology, and exhibited a protracted reluctance to intervene vigorously to control the economic development trends, as these increased the flow of money into the city and thus also into the municipal coffers. International online platforms increased the provision not only of apartments but also of 'authentic experiences' that tourists can collect during a stay in the historical city center. Thus, hundreds of city tours on golf–cars, electric scooters,

10 The concept of 'Disneylandization' that I am introducing here differs from Alan Bryman's concept of 'Disneyization' in that Bryman focuses on the expansion of entertainment modalities typical of Disney's narrative landscapes beyond the boundaries of Disney's corporate sites. See Alan Bryman, *The Disneyization of Society* (London: SAGE, 2004). Theming, hybrid consumption, merchandising and performative labor are crucial topics there (ibid., 2). The concept of Disneylandization broadens this focus by demonstrating how the process of creating 'authentic experiences' transforms existing sites, such as historical city centers, into entertainment parks, in line with the 'adventure society' theory developed by Gerhard Schulze in his study of the invention of experience. See Gerhard Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft. Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 1993). The term 'Disneylandization' may sound exaggerated, but it is not without merit. The developments taking place in Florence's city center are indeed of a striking innovative intensity that they demand a specific denomination.

11 Fitzi, "Participant observation notes."

self–balancing monowheels groups started to cross the historical center shouting instructions to participants through their loudspeaker. An infinite number of visits were organized to the last surviving 'traditional stores' selling milk, cheese, or ham, joining the streets where not every spot had already been occupied by restaurants and fast foods. Added to this a number of 'authentic cooking experiences' by the inhabitants were proposed transforming even families' private lives into a commercial product. For the residents, the perception of the city has extremely rapidly transformed. Among other transformations of public space, overtourism induced an extension of its interest area to the whole of the city center—including the recovery districts where the Florentines used to go to avoid the hustle and bustle and escape the complete commercialization of their life-world. Today there is a diffused feeling of a loss of control over the city: everyday life seems to be completely steered by the algorithms of the major internet platforms for the tourism business. This has generated reactions of protest and tourism refusal, as has happened in many other tourism hotspots around the world. I have followed, and continue to follow, the initiatives of the inhabitants' and residents' movements who go on expressing their critical views, such as the *comitato 'Salviamo Firenze per Viverci.'* These have certainly succeeded in influencing a change of attitude within the municipal administration. However, unlike in Barcelona, for example, it does not seem that citizen mobilization is able to counteract the general development trend, which is greatly exacerbated by intense property speculation, particularly within the UNESCO–designated historic center.

The incumbent municipal administration, led by a woman who grew up in the city center and with a clear perception of the transformations taking place, was confronted by the increasing discontent of the city dwellers and started to act more decisively to control the transformation. The situation, however, is as follows. Tourism operators constantly invent new business models that the municipal administration tries to sort out afterwards, without being able to rely on a comprehensive regulation of the phenomenon that, unlike the city–state of Barcelona, can only be adopted at the national level. It is like a game of cat and mouse in a context of a lack of legislation, as the central government in Rome refuses to intervene and even boycotts the measures adopted by the commune or the Region Tuscany.[12] The history of the attempts to regulate the phenomenon at a local level can be summarized as follows. Since 2015 the Florentine administration intervened to delimit the opening of more hotels and restaurants in the city center. Every regulation was only possible in an indirect way by appealing to the defense of the city's artistic heritage and decorum, as happened in the case of the dispute that prevented the establishment

12 Azzurra Giorgi, "Turismo, il governo impugna la legge regionale toscana", *la Repubblica Firenze*, Mar. 07 (2025), https://firenze.repubblica.it/cronaca/2025/03/07/news/turismo_governo_impugna_legge_regionale_toscana-424049140/.

of a McDonald's fast-food restaurant next to Florence's cathedral. At the same time, the restrictive focus on the traditional hotel industry led to another phenomenon: the explosive development of short–term rental apartments. The limitation of Wild West circumstances in this market already started around 2015–2016 thanks to a contract between the city administration and the main internet providers, so that the overnight tax is no longer evaded but paid automatically when the room is booked. The agreement has become a significant source of income for the municipality and experienced an important progression, amounting today to approximately 80 million euros per year. Nonetheless, the problem became the uncontrolled increase in the number of apartments available for short–term rentals.

The first timid interventions on the matter were followed in 2023–2024 by a restriction of short–term rental availability: a register was set up of already active rental offers, with a subsequent ban on the new ones without any registration in the UNESCO area.[13] To get round this regulation, just to give an idea of the government's attitude, the incumbent minister of tourism, also an entrepreneur in the tourism sector, sued, but lost in multiple instances.[14] These direct measures were followed by a colorful bouquet of actions for 'urban decorum' which, however, indirectly target short–term rentals. These included the prohibition of key-boxes, which the landlords hung on the road signs outside the apartment doors (a point that we will return to), and the prohibition of alcohol sales in convenience stores from 9 PM to 6 AM. The latter measure greatly curtailed the phenomenon of alcoholic comas that had strongly increased in the previous phase of the booming tourism development after the pandemic. Then, there was an intervention on tour guides who can now only operate with earphones and no longer with loudspeakers, giving some relief to city dwellers. In addition to these measures, a regulation of the circulation of golf–cars, electric scooters, self–balancing monowheels guided tours took place to delimit their proliferation and streamline their appearance.

However, all these measures represent a drop in an ever–swelling ocean. All the measures of the municipal administration are being adopted in the absence of a framework legislation that takes into account the needs of residents in highly touristic cities of art. The introduction of a general ban on short–term rentals, similar to the one that will come into force in Barcelona in 2028–2029, does not appear feasible, as the incumbent Italian government actively opposes its adoption. The right–wing parliament majority is not interested in a regulation of the tourism phenomenon, so as not to undermine the interests of a significant portion of its electorate, which consists of upper classes who live off financial income and often directly off the thriving real–estate income generated by the

13 See https://www.comune.firenze.it/turismo/locazioni-turistiche-brevi.

14 Giorgi, "Turismo, il governo impugna la legge regionale toscana."

phenomenon of the diffused hotel scattered throughout the Italian cities of art. The global trends occurring in Florence in an exemplary way are therefore spreading. Hence on the one hand, a phenomenological description must be provided, while on the other, an economic analysis is worthwhile of the backdrop for Florence's overtourism.

2.1 Phenomenology of overtourism in Florence

On the level of phenomenological analysis, the overtourism in Florence is characterized by a very rapid transformation of its appearance due to two main development tendencies: 1. the continuous invention of new 'authentic experiences' to offer to the tourist masses coming into the city, and 2. the regulating interventions of the municipal administration 'protecting decorum' and the artistic heritage to avoid the complete transformation of the city into an entertainment park. Nevertheless, a certain set of 'authentic experiences' have established themselves in the meantime and are now considered standards for a visit to Florence, often replacing the classical museum excursions. The following report relates data from a participant observation that I conducted principally over two periods of time: from January to May 2024 and from January to May 2025. The methodology of the observation follows the 'sociological flânerie method' as, on the one hand, Simmel practiced it with reference to his analysis of the Italian cities of art in contrast to the booming development of the capitalist metropolis of Berlin[15] and, on the other, as it was later tacitly further developed by Bourdieu. To this end, Bourdieu focused his walking research studies on the distribution of cultural capital in Paris, as he related in his memoirs.[16] It is interesting to follow Bourdieu's reasoning on how the sociologist's mind deals with social reality by wearing out the soles of his shoes. He shares this methodological approach in common with Simmel, and he would probably have discussed this at greater length had the German classic, Simmel, not been monopolized in France by the intellectual right. This is a disaster for which French culture today still pays a high price.

There are two specific passages in Bourdieu's autobiography, which 'is not an autobiography' in René Magritte's sense of *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*,[17] that illustrate the path that I have also taken to establish the methodology for my variation of a 'strolling sociological aesthetics' in the Simmel–Bourdieu tradition.

Bourdieu reports about his first walking impressions concerning the

15 David Frisby, *Sociological Impressionism. A Reassessment of Georg Simmel's Social Theory* (London: Heinemann, 1981).

16 Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-Analyse* (Paris: Raisons d'agir, 2004), 87f.

17 Didier Eribon, "Sur Bourdieu et l'Esquisse pour une auto-analyse," *Site personnel de Didier Eribon*, 2008, https://didiereribon.blogspot.com/2008/01/bourdieu-et-lesquisse-pour-une-auto.html.

Parisian metropolis when he was still a student:

> As a young student in preparatory classes, I was in awe of Paris, which brought literary memories to life. I naively identified with Balzac (my astonishing first encounter with his statue at the Vavin crossroads!), to the point that I often found myself following strangers on my Sunday outings to discover their neighborhood, their house, their surroundings, which I tried to guess.[18]

The spontaneous attitude of the young researcher, classifying people and their belonging to particular urban neighborhoods, was later transformed into a more structured approach of the sociological eye:

> I had long periods of investigative passion when I was conducting the research that led to *La Distinction* […]. I spent hours listening to conversations in cafés, on boules pitches, football pitches, in post offices, but also at parties, cocktail receptions and concerts. It was not uncommon for me, unable to resist, to find an excuse to strike up a conversation (it's much easier than you might think) with someone I wanted to get to know better and to investigate, without appearing to do so, a particular issue that interested me.[19]

The watching, listening, and chatting approach of the 'strolling sociological eye' is also the one I adopted during my stays of participant observation in the historic center of Florence. However, in doing so I paid particular attention to the aesthetic appearance of the phenomenon of overtourism. Accordingly, collected data is presented in the order of its optical relevance to the strolling observant participant in the city's activities. In turn, the relevance of individual activities is connected to the prominence of their image in the city's landscape as well as to the number of tourists taking part in them. This diverts attention from the traditional focus of tourism studies on airports, stations, queues outside museums, and so on, to the specific novelties offered by the recent overtourism development.

Therefore, I shall start with the most peculiar phenomenon that can be observed in Florence: the invention of traditions. This experience shows to what extent the association of narratives with the sale of products for tourists transforms everyday city life and even the appearance of the historical center. After the pandemic, there appeared so–called 'wine-windows selling points' at different city–center locations. Set into the wall of historical buildings, tourists now find small niches, where they can retrieve their wine glasses or cocktails, which are served from the inside—that is mostly from the nearby café where they would order the same thing served at the counter. However, the niche setting of the glass retrieved from the inside of the building is essential for the obligatory selfie that bears witness to a tourist visit to Florence, 'the city with the wine-windows' (photo 1).

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18 Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*, 87.

19 ibid., 88.



PHOTO 1 Gregor Fitzi: Participant observation photo 1©

Thus, the question arises about what the historical backdrop of this ritual is. To be sure, an important number of buildings in Florence have a small wine–window beside the main entrance, where in historical times noble families used to sell bottled wine, as far as they had a wine production in the countryside. Yet, these wine–windows were no longer in use for at least a century. Even speaking with Florentines aged ninety and older, I did not find any witness of this 'tradition.' Yet today it counts as one of the 'musts' for a city–center visit. The question to consider is thus on which path the reinvention of this tradition could take place. In the early days after the pandemic, tourist guides simply stated that the tradition has continually existed since the Middle Ages. The only difference is that in former times you retrieved your bottle of wine through the window, whereas nowadays you will only collect your Aperol Spritz. At some places, even a miniature plaque was added to the wine–window, inviting tourists to knock to get a bottle of wine. Of course, thousands of tourists do so, without getting any answer from the inside and asking passers–by, like me, why no one opens the window. Nonetheless, it is still an experience worth a photo.

Later on, however, tourist guides started to adopt a different version of the story. They admitted that the tradition was interrupted but stated that it was revived during the pandemic, to sell things by avoiding contact among people. This statement, however, also does not correspond to reality, since nobody was allowed to sell anything during the pandemic, unless this was from regularly authorized grocery stores. What is interesting about the statement is nevertheless the remark that there actually was a reprise or a new invention of the tradition. This helps us to reconstruct the empirical backdrop of the phenomenon. The first commentator to speak about the Italian 'wine-windows' was Stanley Tucci in his docuseries about Italy on CNN, arguing that this was a living tradition in Italy. His statement generated among the program's viewers the expectation of experiencing the ritual of getting a drink from the 'wine-window' during their trip to Italy. Where there is demand, there is also supply, as Adam Smith formerly observed. So, tour operators did not hesitate to propose

this experience to their clients. Where historic wine-windows existed in old buildings, Italian entrepreneurs asked to implement a cocktail–bar. And where they did not exist, such windows miraculously appeared overnight next to existing premises—often during the month of August when everyone is on holiday and social control is very loose. *Voilà*, the ready-made! The narrative was there, the economy of valorization could be implemented, and the experience of the event could eventually be enjoyed by millions of tourists who now look at Florentines with a knowing glance as though to say: I am wise to your tradition!

Besides the reinvention of historic traditions, Florence's city center encounters the spectacularizing of existing ones. Traditional Tuscan cuisine is a 'poor kitchen' that has its roots in the sharecrop regulation of agriculture which remained in force until the 1960s. Farmers were forced to surrender half of their harvest to the landowner, so that they lived from a frugal diet based on vegetables, olive oil, bread, and pasta. Meat was only available during feast meals for special occasions such as Christmas, Easter, weddings, and baptisms, and normally consisted of chicken and rabbit dishes. Beef was extremely rare, because cows were means of milk production and oxen were needed to plough the fields. Only in exceptional cases they were slaughtered. However, as mechanization slowly made its way through Italian agriculture after WWII the breeding of particularly robust cattle, such as the Tuscan Chianina variety, lost its relevance and popularity. This is how the new market outlet for Florentine steak was born in the period of the 'economic boom,' when it became a sign of social distinction to be able to put a steak on the table. Today, selling *bistecca alla fiorentina* to tourists represents one of the most important revenue factors for this product. However, what is new is the *spectacularization* of the product that takes place under the auspices of overtourism, so that it became a key visual component of the transformation of the city–center appearance. Exhibitionism of raw meat in restaurant windows in various stages of decomposition did not exist before in Florence. The kitchen was a space of intimacy, and the cuts of steak were only displayed at the customer's table when the steak was ordered. At the same time, meanwhile, believing that the best way to attract the customer is to unveil without any conception about the dialectic of concealment, the public space of the city center has been populated with quarter oxen on display on the sidewalks. Here, the logic of unconditional hard-core show has prevailed (see photo 2, 3).

A further interesting phenomenon of overtourism is the need for re-materialization of the travel experiences beyond the millions of selfies that are constantly being taken. The latter phenomenon would merit a separate study, especially concerning museums visits. Artworks were usually enjoyed by looking ahead to immerse oneself in their atmosphere, which helped to escape from everyday reality through aesthetic perception, and thus contributing to the critical reflectiveness of culture. Today,



PHOTO 2-3 Gregor Fitzi: Participant observation photo 2, 3©

instead, this possibility is denied a *priori*, since museum visits take place with backs turned, so that the narcissism of selfies intrudes between the observer and the work of art. Now we know why the smile of Mona Lisa is so mysterious. At some point, however, the complete dematerialization and narcissistic immanence of today's iconic universes is no longer enough for the exhausted psyche of our contemporaries. The memory of authentic travel experiences demands to be rematerialized. The booming market of fridge-magnets, baseball caps, and t-shirts of improbable universities testifies to this. The interesting phenomenon in Florence is the second life of the photo booth. Since the introduction of biometric passports, traditional identity photos are no longer valuable. The majority of Florence's photo booths were dismantled. Yet, the one that was placed in the district of San Frediano survived in the wake of the neighborhood being elected in 2023 to the title of the 'coolest neighborhood in the world' featured in the Lonely Planet guide.[20] Ever since, the district, which was previously a recovery haven of Florentines away from the tourist tsunami in the quadrilateral area between the cathedral and the Uffizi, has completely turned upside down. The proximity of small local shops has disappeared, being substituted by streets full of restaurants and fast-food outlets. However, the photo booth got a new life and became a crucial

20 Edoardo Semmola, "Firenze, la Lonely Planet è certa: 'San Frediano più cool di NY,'" *Corriere fiorentino*, Aug. 26 (2017), https://corrierefiorentino.corriere.it/firenze/notizie/cronaca/17_agosto_26/firenze-lonely-planet-certa-san-frediano-piu-cool-ny-bb68bd72-8a5b-11e7-9a9b-61aa855bd802.shtml.



PHOTO 4-5 Gregor Fitzi: Participant observation photo 4, 5©

motor for the re-materialization of rituals of the journey to Florence. Here is proof that you have really been there—even if the result is not always at the height of expectations **(see photo 4, 5)**.

A further transformation, which catches the attention of the sociological *flâneur*, is the transformation of historical venues in the city into tourists' entertainment hubs. The phenomenon can be measured on a scale of steps, ranging from the adaptation of local places to fit the presumed tourist's expectations, to the complete annihilation of traditional places of 'authentic Florentine experience.' A typical example of the last type is the end of the Café Gambrinus–Halle complex. This was a historical café and cinema near the most central Repubblica square—as the name is still carved on the building façade. Originally, this was a café–restaurant with a winter–garden and roof terrace inaugurated in 1894 and located beneath the other historical literary-cafés, like the Giubbe Rosse or the Gilli, where the Italian artistic avant-gardes met. In his novel *Il salto vitale* Ardengo Soffici, a representative of second futurism, gave a vibrant description of city life that occurred in the halls of the Gambrinus.[21] After WWII the ground floor was readapted to one of Florence's largest cinemas, leaving the original bar at the entrance intact. A further particularity of the site was the huge cellar where one of the city's most prestigious billiard halls was located. Nonetheless, since 2007 all this has had to give way to the Florentine seat of the Hard Rock Café.

21 See Ardengo Soffici, *Il salto vitale. Autoritratto d'artista italiano nel quadro del suo tempo*. Vol. 3. *Giovinezza* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1954).

An example of the partial transformation of historical venues into 'tourists' entertainment hubs' is, on the contrary, the Café Rivoire in front of the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence's city hall. The café, like the other historical venues in the city center, was characterized by its linear and to some extent severe style comparable to their model of Vienna's café houses. Pictures of the Florentine avant–garde of the 1950s hung on the wall. However, also here when the historical ownership gave up in 2020 there was a stylistic break and an adaptation to the current standards of mass tourism. To improve the productivity of the location a kitchen has been added so that lunches and dinners can be served on the café terrace. The interior design was aligned to the other cafés of the same chain. Now the café premises are full of late Baroque Madonna paintings as they are found in some churches. The tables and historical seats have been replaced by pink armchairs whose color tone is also echoed in the ceiling decorations. The arrangement is accompanied by a stuffed neck of a giraffe that towers in the center of the room (photo 6).



PHOTO 6 Gregor Fitzi: Participant observation photo 6©

Furthermore, there are a number of other places that were reconverted to hubs of tourist experiences. An example is pastry laboratories. Courses for tourists to learn about the preparation of 'traditional Florentine recipes' have already existed for decades. However, the novelty strikes quite a different note. What is peculiar is the spectacularization of these experiences, so that they take place in a way that must be visible for everybody. A café in the heart of the old town that specialized in the offer of *bomboloni*, the traditional Florentine donuts, has for example been converted into an open–air confectioner laboratory, where tourists can watch and take knowing part in preparing the most authentic Florentine cakes. By doing this, they must be visible from the street. Not only because this is advertisement for the organizers, but also because the experience is only considered authentic, if exposed to the 'panopticon of overtourism' that adds to it a particular symbolic surplus value (see photo 7).

The feeling of native Florentines of being expropriated from the familiar places of everyday life continues when they go to the few still existing small local shops. At the same time, another presentation is happening with tasting experiences. Therefore, no grocery shopping. The most macroscopic evidence of this space occupation is given by the reality of the diffused eatery that the city center has been transformed into. Not only the first floor of the central market, the *Mercato Centrale*, has been turned into a huge eating refectory for tourists. Traditional as well as newly invented



PHOTO 7 Gregor Fitzi: Participant observation photo 7©

restaurants are overbooked and surrounded by endless queues of customers waiting for their eating experience at half–hourly intervals. This is the absolute opposite of the Italian convivial tradition. The city center thus appears to be full of queues, so that some compassionate landlords have provided chairs for the waiting people (photo 8, 9).

The most tenacious queues are to be found outside the selfie sandwich store, which became an absolute must for every visit to Florence. The owners had to hire a security service to bring order to the queues lining up before, by now, the multiple stores and completely blocking the narrow city center street, even at night (photo 10).

This is the most exemplary story of Florence's overtourism. A simple wine and sandwich store, where every Florentine had once visited while playing





PHOTO 8-9 Gregor Fitzi: Participant observation photo 8, 9©

hooky from school, became overnight a global hit as the owner's son posted a photo on social media with the slogan: 'I am eating the best sandwich in the world.' The post went viral. Everyone wanted to have a selfie with that same sandwich to claim to have been in Florence. Meanwhile, the sandwich store became a global franchising trademark and can be found everywhere, even in Las Vegas. A less visible side of the global eatery phenomenon can yet be accessed on the 'experience pages' of the major internet booking platforms: the 'authentic dinner and cooking together with the resident'—and on request, with supplementary conversation in Italian. Florentine families have thus discovered a new business model to supplement their monthly income in the face of salaries that are frozen at the level of 25 years ago and present to visitors a stylized version of what tourists expect to be Italian private life.



PHOTO 10 Gregor Fitzi: Participant observation photo 10©

The most impactful side of the urban transformation in Florence's city center, however, is not the diffused eatery, but the diffused hotel. This phenomenon has a perceptive side, on which I will first focus. In other words, this involves the pervasive presence of hundreds of people dragging trolleys and producing a typical noise on the irregular historic stone streets and sidewalks. There is a multiplication of keypad–door–bells, which in contrast to Paris never existed in the Florentine urban landscape. Then, there is the creative hanging of key-boxes on window grills, on bicycle racks, even on road signs (photo 11, 12).

The residents of the buildings were horrified. Anyone could break into the key boxes and take the front door keys. However, in the end, the municipal administration succeeded in banning them for the usual reasons of decorum. All these appearances are a sign of the automatization experienced by the short-term rentals business. Gone are the days of the romantic advertising idea: namely, the penniless artist rents out space in his atelier to passing tourists, one of whom would surely become his muse. Instead, we face a veritable industrialization of real estate rental income. The owners of the apartments rent them out to agencies that handle customer relations, administration and cleaning, by employing low-cost immigrant labor. Tourists often do not meet anyone; they open the door by calling a phone number and only have email contact with the management agency. The income is maximized, with the least expenditure of economic and human resources in a property market that produces an enormous



PHOTO 11 Gregor Fitzi: Participant observation photo 11, 12©

speculative bubble. Behind the phenomenological appearance of the scattered hotels that characterize overtourism in Florence, there lies the substance of financial speculation that drives it.

2.2 The economic backdrop of overtourism in Florence

Since the rise of the online booking sites, local middle–classes started to rent their inherited grandma–flats to the incoming tourists. Nonetheless, real–estate speculation rapidly began to dominate the market. This is best illustrated by sites that recommend yield–optimized real–estate investment across the world.[22] The opening statement of the site is revealing. Asking the question from the viewpoint of the real–estate investor: how is Florence performing in 2025? The answer is unequivocal: great! With a 95% score composed on the basis of overwhelming positive development in: rental demand 88%; revenue growth 59%; seasonality 64%; and regulation 70%. For the currently 17,360 short-term rentals in Florence, with an increment of +3% on the past year, the yield data are: annual revenue $28,000, +3%. Occupancy rate: 62% +4%. Average daily rate: $215.4 +3%. Revenue per available rental: $130.4 +6%. The typical rental type in Florence is: entire home (85%). Private room (14%) and none–shared room. The annual availability is 1–90 nights (25%). 91–180 nights (20%). 181–270 nights (17%) and 271–365 nights (38%).

22 See https://www.airdna.co/vacation-rental-data/app/it/toscana/florence/overview.

The minimum stay of tourists is: 1 night (0.7%). 2 nights (43.0%). 3 nights (15.8%). 4–6 nights (5.3%). 7–29 nights (1.4%). Adding to this there is the growing group (33.8%), of mostly study-abroad students, which stays 30+ nights. Furthermore, there is a number of 5 major property managers who each administrate between 250 and 100 apartments.

All these data speak the language of a substantial industrialization of financial investment in real estate in Florence. Buildings inside the UNESCO area transform into financial capital valorization machines and long-term rentals for city dwellers disappear from the market, promoting the final expulsion of the non–property–owning population from the city center. A secondary effect of this centrifugal trend is that real estate prices are rising in a radius of 30 km around the city center, also making it difficult to settle in the suburbs. The most prominent consequence of this development is the issue with school and high-school teachers. 'Winning' a permanent position as a teacher in a public–school contest is a rare stroke of good fortune in Italy, often representing the conclusion of a long and precarious working career. In normal conditions, nobody would refuse this opportunity. However, in Florence this happens more and more often, because teachers do not find flats to rent and cannot afford to buy property on Florentine conditions due to their meagre Italian wages. The outcome: Florence's education system suffers from a permanent shortage of teachers.

Florence is no longer a place to live, but the city has been transformed into an open–air factory for the production of financial income. The size of the factory can be reconstructed thanks to a graphic representation of the location of short-term rentals density (Chart 1).

This raises the matter of what could be a way out of the current development trend. In Italy, legislative intervention is only possible at the national level. In order to have a chance of success, such intervention would have to consider the interests of the Italian leisure class, which holds a large part of Italian real–estate assets. Currently, long–term tenancies can turn into social cases, sometimes with tenants who do not pay, but cannot be evicted from their accommodation. Accordingly, the owners of the approximately 10 million unrented apartments, more than 27% of the dwellings in Italy,[23] are deeply reluctant to let their properties for long-term rent. Short–term rentals, whose taxation is very low, are thus an attractive alternative. New legislation should at the same time provide for higher taxation of short–term rentals and draconian measures for breaking longer tenancies, especially in the case of defaulting tenants. A non–speculative housing market could thus be reborn, allowing the repopulation of city centers with families with children. Adopting such legislation, however,

23 Istat, "Quasi un'abitazione su tre non è occupata. Più della metà costruita nella seconda metà dello scorso secolo," *istat*, 01 Aug. (2024), https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Today-Abitazioni_01_08-2024.pdf.

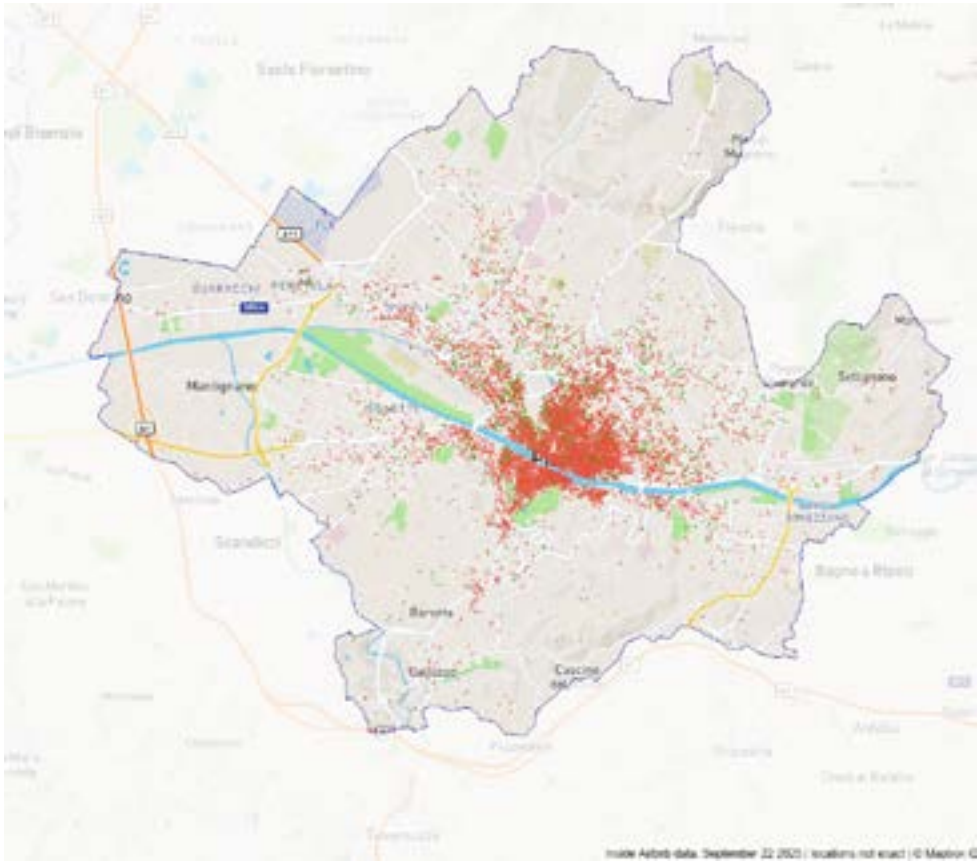


CHART 1 https://insideairbnb.com/florence/

requires governments with great courage, as it would displease two very influential groups of voters at the same time. Therefore, in all likelihood these measures will not be taken, leaving Florence to follow the fate of Venice toward the complete transformation of the historic city center into a site for the production of the current emerging form of capital appreciation intertwined with the booming tourist industry. This calls into question the logic that the development trend follows.

3. The logic of Disneylandization

A consistent proportion of the living cultural heritage is being lost, and along with it also everyday cultural practices that constituted one of the main attractions of Italian cities of art. To better understand what the transformation of Florence's city center into an entertainment park means, it is therefore necessary to conduct a comparative analysis between the current phenomenology that my observant participation established and the research in aesthetic sociology that Simmel conducted at the beginning of the 20th century. For Simmel, the Italian art cities constituted an existential antithesis to the rapid adaptation of life to the needs of the commodity-producing liberal capitalism of the early 20th century in Berlin's megalopolis. The comparison with Florence's city center appearance a hundred years ago reveals the analytical elements of a diagnosis that makes it possible to integrate the paradigm of enrichment capitalism

to describe the special nature of the development model that today prevails in Italian art cities. This is possible because the phenomena we are observing empirically today in Florence are not incipient, but rather a trend that began during Mayor Matteo Renzi's administration of the city (2009–2014) and then grew stronger until it completely escaped the control of the subsequent administrations led by Mayor Dario Nardella (2014–2024).

Simmel published his essay on Florence after spending his holidays there—mostly in June—several times in the early years of the last century.[24] His Florence essay (1906),[25] together with those on Rome (1898)[26] and Venice (1907),[27] constitutes the theoretical counterpart to the analysis on modern urbanization in "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903).[28] The metropolis constitutes the precipitate of modern social transformation. It is characterized by the multiplication of ephemeral, casual and short-lived social contacts. If the urbanite were to make himself available to all these social exchanges with the same willingness adopted in the relationships of the intimate sphere, he would face a complete exhaustion of his psychic energies. Thus, where sufficient physical distance from one's contemporaries is no longer available, modalities of interaction develop that increase social distance. Reserve, cold politeness, tact, reading newspapers, books, or now cell phones on public transport serve as regulators of urban interaction. It is a form of coexistence that accelerates and fragments the pace of life, imposing more and more forms of mediation to fluidify social interaction. Money thus increasingly becomes the crucial institution of modernity. It anonymizes relationships and creates social distance where the spatiotemporal meshes of society become ever more compressed. Due to its ambiguity, the metropolitan aseptic machinery of interaction exerts a strong attraction on the urbanite. It has at its disposal all the suggestions of an intense, pulsating, and sexy life, which, however, can quickly turn into neurasthenia.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Italian art cities in Simmel's perception are located at the opposite end of mental life. Here, urban aesthetic perception is not confronted with a totalizing mechanism that reduces everything to fragmentation and monetarization. Especially in Florence, a sense of harmony prevails in the form of a wise balance between nature and culture.[29] The city's heritage of architectural and artistic monuments

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24 Gregor Fitzi, "Florenz in der ästhetischen Anschauung von Georg Simmel," *Simmel Newsletter* 5, no. 1 (1995): 34–45.

25 Georg Simmel, "Florence" (1906), trans. by Ulrich Teucher and Thomas M. Kemple, *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 7–8 (2007), 38–41.

26 Georg Simmel, "Rome" (1898), trans. by Ulrich Teucher and Thomas M. Kemple, *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 7–8 (2007), 30–37.

27 Georg Simmel, "Venice" (1907), trans. by Ulrich Teucher and Thomas M. Kemple, *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 7–8 (2007), 42–46.

28 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903), trans. by Kurt H. Wolff, in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel,* ed. by Kurt H. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950), 409–424.

29 Simmel, "Florence."

appears as a total artwork created by human culture that perfectly fits into the natural frame of its hills. These in turn do not speak the language of wild nature divorced from human intervention. Quite the contrary: cultivated nature expresses all the gracefulness of human care. Olive groves and vineyards redraw the contours of the hills, giving them an expression of complete harmony, which Simmel claims can be best experienced from the Basilica of San Miniato al Monte. This is a view, as it was for example painted by the Anglo–American painter Thomas Cole, in 1837, that inspires modern humanity with a utopian perception of a social reality capable of overcoming the life fragmentation typical for the metropolis of modern manufacturing capitalism. Simmel's diagnosis in urban sociological aesthetics thus culminates in the attribution of the status of the last escape from modern neurasthenia to the city of Florence. This strongly contrasts with the results of today's participatory observation constituting the starting point for the concluding remarks on overtourism's impact. The monuments, the landscape and the city are still there, yet they now appear as ruins of what they once were. Their fundamental otherness is obscured by their role as a mere backdrop to the tourism industry.

Before setting off on their trip, today's tourists are bombarded with endless suggestions on websites, directing their visit to Florence to completely different sets of experiences than at the beginning of the 20th century. The proposal of 'authenticity' claims to take tourists out of their bubble. However, these expectations are illusory: they are a fictitious reworking of what tourists' ideas about their destination are imagined to be. The invention of authenticity as imagined expectation of the other is therefore a crucial aspect of the anthropological transformation produced by overtourism in the face of cities that are gradually being emptied of real life, destroying daily practices and expelling their inhabitants. The aesthetic perception that the city of Florence produces is no longer one of harmony between nature and culture. Instead, it takes the form of a rapid, if not convulsive succession of commercialized experiences, pretending to be authentic. The visitor therefore no longer has the possibility of finding himself in a reality that is different from his everyday life in terms of life rhythm and cultural content. The city of art does not function any more as an escape point from the alienation of the modern metropolis and becomes a production site for a new capitalist development model.

Today Florence is the city of selfie sandwiches, the wine-windows, the never-ending queues, the diffused eatery, and the diffused hotel. It is a stressful and boring place from which one wants to escape as soon as possible, hoping to relax again at home on the sofa. It has become an entertainment park tailored to the supposed expectations of tourists and takes on the profile of an 'event-city,' sharing together with Venice the fate of the great US entertainment centers. Take, for example, Disneyland or Disney World. These had first sprung up outside urban centers, on the initiative of cultural industry majors, or as money-laundering centers of

the Italian American mafia, such as Las Vegas. However, their logic later extended to existing urban centers. A typical example is the city of Orlando near Disney World.[30] Here, numerous entrepreneurs developed low–cost entertainment parks, promising breathtaking experiences in order to divert at least part of the tourist flow directed towards the historic amusement park.[31] The logic of 'inventing entertainment' thus began to take hold of the tourism industry, extending after the pandemic to the classic art cities, mainly through tour operators and online booking sites. This development model for the tourism industry, currently one of the fastest growing sectors of the global economy,[32] is well suited to maximize returns on financial capital investment in real estate. This synergy gave rise to the business model that we see operating in Florence. To compete with other forms of investment, real estate must be able to exponentially increase its returns. Long–term real estate is not able to secure this, whereas short-term rentals have proven to be capable of doing so. However, this is only possible if tourist numbers in historic city's centers continue to increase, thereby also increasing property values. This is why the two business models of speculative property investment and the transformation of mass tourism sites into entertainment parks have married so happily, leading to the Disneylandization of Italian art cities. Venice has already gone a long way along this road, fulfilling Simmel's prophecy of a dead city reduced to a theatrical backdrop for major media events. Florence is following closely behind and becoming a production site for the old–world capitalism that has lost its manufacturing vocation. Thus, Italian cities of art have been transformed from a place of revival from metropolitan neurasthenia into the new frontier of the joint venture between entertainment-industry capitalism and real estate financial speculation.

30 Rebecca Williams, *Theme Park Fandom. Spatial Transmedia, Materiality and Participatory Cultures* (Amsterdam: AUP, 2020).

31 Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft*.

32 See https://wttc.org/news/global-travel-and-tourism-is-strong-despite-economic-headwinds.

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