

# “Food demons have taken over our cities”: Unpacking foodification and airbnbification of an historical market in a southern Europe city

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the interrelations between foodification, touristification, and airbnbification through an in-depth case study of a historical fish market area in Catania, a mid-sized city in southern Europe. Drawing on a mixed-method approach that combines on-site field surveys, GIS-based mapping, and long-term ethnography, the study explores how these processes, although spatio-temporally sequenced, become mutually reinforcing in a middle-sized city of Southern Europe characterized by a fragmented local governance, and without clear or coherent institutional tourism strategies. In so doing, first the paper provides a novel insight on the literature on foodification and its triangulation with tourism-driven transformation in a “peripheral” city of the Global North: food acts first as an urban manifestation of global consumption-driven restructuring, while, in a second stage, as a co-producer of touristification and airbnbification, which are growingly fostered by - and intertwined with - consumption of food.

Moving across different scales - from the circumscribed space of the market to the surrounding neighbourhood, and from material transformations of retailscapes to the restructuring of symbolic everyday rhythms, the paper shows how touristification amplifies the symbolic and commercial remaking initiated by foodification, while airbnbification consolidates these dynamics by exacerbating the symbolic displacement of local retailscapes, deeply connected to the shift in urban imaginaries produced by the historical market's transformation.

## 1. Introduction

“Food demons have taken over our cities”.<sup>1</sup> This is the highlight of an Italian national magazine in 2017, that exemplifies a national-scale ubiquitary process: between 2012 and 2023 the Italian historical urban districts have reinforced their role as attractive poles for tourism and leisure, with a decline in traditional retail activities and a corresponding increase in accommodation (+42%) and food services (+2,3%) especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ufficio Studi Confcommercio, 2024).

This pattern aligns with what Sloterdijk (2006) defined the “crystallization” of retailscapes that implies optimization and aestheticization of urban retail spaces through new food and leisure-related branding strategies articulated around eating out and related food-activities for “urbanites”, including both locals and tourists (Joassart-Marcelli, 2025).

Cities (re)build themselves as theatres of consumption, hyper-socialization, hospitality, and entertainment (Bell, 2007; Lindner & Sandoval, 2021), performing as “stages” that (re)produce hegemonic power relations, new inequalities, and conflicting re-semantizations of public space increasingly dominated by foodtainment (Finkelstein, 1999; Mathews, 2010) through commoditized authenticity, privatized commons and aestheticized urban spaces (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2024; Zukin et al., 2009). This rise of food as a symbolic consumption good fosters new inequalities at the urban scale due to its connections with commercial displacement and the related erosion of local communities' identities driven by gentrification-like processes (Alkon et al., 2020a, 2020b; Hyde, 2014a, 2014b), leading to the neologism “foodification”. First used in the journalistic field in 2010 by the Brooklyn Paper to identify a gentrification induced by “foodies” (Frixia, 2019),<sup>2</sup> foodification has been mobilized as an analytical grid for food-driven

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<sup>1</sup> L'Espresso 23/02/2023, <https://lespresso.it/c/idee/2017/2/23/le-nostre-citta-invase-dal-demone-del-cibo/43507>.

<sup>2</sup> In Italy, the word has gained momentum thanks to a collective of artists and activists, Paolo Tessarin and Marco Perrucca, authors of a theatrical drama, a book and a blog on this topic, available at <https://www.foodification.it>

transformations in several cities, where they are growingly intertwined with touristification and airbnbification (Joassart-Marcelli, 2025; Smigiel, 2024; Loda et al., 2020; Gravari-Barbas & Guinand, 2017; Van Crielingen & Fleury, 2006; Cocola-Gant, 2023; Ruiz Romera et al., 2025).

Far from being conceptually and operationally distinct, foodification, touristification and airbnbification can reveal themselves as diachronically consequent and/or overlapped processes; however, where urban districts are strongly characterized by a food-based historical identity - like in the case of historical food markets - the role of foodification as a driver of transformation, as well as its triangulation with touristification and airbnbification, need to be further explored.

This research scrutinizes to what extent the complex tangle between fading old market resistance “outposts” and new food-related tourist functions, read through the lens of foodification, paves the way to, and intersects with, touristification and airbnbification (Gant, 2016; Hoffman & Heisler, 2020; Novy & Colomb, 2016) through an empirical case study based on a middle-sized Southern Europe city, Catania, located in eastern Sicily (Italy). It research explores the food-driven transformation and the related impacts in a historical fish market that, although still active in selling food, over the last years has enlarged its tourist appeal: first as an attractive “exotic” place for passing-by tourists in search of “authentic” experiences; second as an area increasingly invaded by tourism-oriented restaurants and street food shops; third, particularly after the Covid-pandemic, as an area highly attractive for holidays homes, B&B and Airbnb.

Through a multi-method approach, combining a field survey, a GIS-based mapping and long-term ethnographic research, including semi-structured interviews, the paper critically scrutinizes 1) the ways in which the traditional functions of the historic market overlap and/or clash with foodification; 2) how new functions, and related symbolic values, trigger and intersect with touristification and airbnbification; 3) and if these transformations are embedded in institutional strategies of restructuring of the old fish market.

While Mendes (2016) and Cocola-Gant (2018) argue that Airbnb profits from gentrified cities and fosters processes such as capital investment in housing and exclusionary displacement, we support the view that in some contexts historically vocated to food selling and consumption (like traditional food markets), where gentrification does not occur in the “classical” version (Lees et al., 2008) - in terms of displacement of older working-class residents - airbnbification is the last stage of a longitudinal urban transformation triggered by foodification and touristification, not always inserted in a wider institutional program of urban restructuring. This creates a kind of “indirect displacement”, intended not a physical one, but rather in terms of erosion of local place identities that shape new transitory urban landscapes (Rozena & Lees, 2023).

By exploring the process in a middle-sized city of Southern Europe, more peripheral in terms of investments and big-scale projects attractiveness if compared to other Mediterranean cities like Barcelona and Lisbon (Graziano, 2022), the paper provides a novel insight on the literature on foodification and its triangulation with tourism-driven transformation, insofar as food acts first as an urban manifestation of global consumption-driven restructuring, while, in a second stage, as a co-producer of touristification and airbnbification, which are growingly fostered by - and intertwined with - consumption of food.

We highlight the connection between the antecedent (foodification) and the consequent (touristification and airbnbification) in the reproduction of a “touristspace”, in line with Freytag and Bauder (2018) who hold the view that touristification “should not be regarded as a unidimensional, linear cause-and-effect model, but as a multi-dimensional, complex concept reacting the interplay of heterogeneous actors and settings”.

The paper is organized as follows: the second section includes the literature review at the interplay between foodification, touristification and airbnbification, with a specific focus on historical markets as arenas

and catalyst for the above-mentioned processes; in the third section the case study, methods and materials are included; the fourth section deals with findings, and discussion and final considerations are included in the last sections.

## 2. Foodification as a driver of urban changes

Recently emerged as “a new actor worth of much examination in regard to gentrification processes and dynamics” (Anguelovski, 2015a, 2015b, p. 184), food reshape selective functions and foster socio-economic polarizations in cities, especially in Southern European historic centres, growingly transformed “into a food-dominant retail space” (Loda et al., 2020), where the normalization of a food-centric culture mirrors more nuanced cultural, political and identity claims, beyond the mere action of eating out. This “foodie culture” follows a strict logic of distinction by mobilizing a wide repertoire of labels - from “authentic” or “exotic” to “ethnic” and “organic” - to display social status (Johnston & Baumann, 2015) that fuels a “bivalent class narrative” (Petrovici & Bejinariu, 2023). This logic is specifically articulated via *culinary* cultural capital (Bell, 2002), that is practiced, reproduced and performed in and through specific places.

The neologism foodification first appeared in the Brooklyn Paper in 2010,<sup>3</sup> and is generally regarded as the growingly ubiquitous process through which urban spaces undergo gentrifying-like change through specific food-related spatial dynamics: food becomes both a catalyst of, and entangled with, specific discourses, material forms, and practices that contribute to fostering material and symbolic displacement within a neighbourhood (Bourlessas et al., 2022).

Foodification has emerged as a critical analytical perspective to describe the systematic transformation of urban food environments from material and social spaces of everyday provisioning and working-class sociality into arenas of aestheticized experiences, global food lifestyle consumption, where exclusionary mechanisms are enacted (Rozena & Lees, 2023), ranging from the “retail displacement” (Monroe Sullivan & Shaw, 2011) to “resource displacement”. They may trigger additional displacement processes (Bourlessas et al., 2022), and “symbolic displacement” (Shaw & Hagemans, 2015), affecting long-term users and residents for the gradual erosion of highly symbolic shopping points relevant for the local community identity. What appears to be a simple transformation of commercial and consumption offer not only mirror and/or exacerbates, but in many cases causes a much deeper socio-economic and structural change. These micro-geographies of consumption, through which entrepreneurs/shop owners and gentrifiers/consumers shape their sense of belonging to the transnational consumption elite (Rofe, 2003), trigger a domino effect according to Van Crielingen and Fleury (2006), who first argued that retail transformations are factors from which the phenomenon arises, rather than being induced by it.

The recently emerged literature focusing on food and foodscapes in gentrification-related processes (Hyde, 2014a, 2014b; Anguelovski, 2015a, 2015b; Alkon et al., 2020a, 2020b; Joassart-Marcelli, 2021) has led to a wider reflection on the dynamics, effects and actors beyond the material displacement of residents. The growing relevance of aesthetics - “the realm of the visual, symbolic, sensory and seductive” (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2024), - has been widely regarded as a driver of urban change (Summers, 2019), being, in Lindner and Sandoval's words (2021), “one of the battlegrounds where urban spatial power struggles are played out through displacement, exclusion, and division”.

Besides echoing global consumption models, the changes in foodscape also embed structural changes in the commercial sector, marked by the progressive disappearance of family-run traditional stores, thus

<sup>3</sup> Kristen V. Brown, 01/03/2010, retrieved from <https://www.brooklynpaper.com/fork-this-foodies-are-now-leading-the-gentrification-of-brooklyn/>, last access 10/11/2025.

fostering what Zukin et al. (2009) called the “domestication through cappuccino”. The related rhetoric of authenticity and village-like atmosphere mobilizing “alternative” consumption models is growingly interrelated with wider globalized neoliberal waves and further amplified by the aestheticization of the ordinary life through digital media (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2024).

The food-driven exclusionary dynamics embedded in urban spaces make food-related venues as socio-spatial infrastructures where the link between food and consumption is spatialized and the logic of culinary distinction is performed (Loda et al., 2020).

This is particularly relevant for historical markets. On the one hand, they are neglected in some urban contexts as a result of the strategic agenda of neoliberalism which, through the modernization and optimization of public services, purposely excludes them, labelling them as secondary low-budget spaces to be ignored or even regarded as obstacles to regeneration programs. On the other hand, once sanitised, hygienised, and (re)branded as “cool” spaces, historical markets can be transformed into “new frontiers of gentrification” (González & Waley, 2013), often driven by big-scale regeneration projects and related discursive operations that legitimize the modernization and sanitization of the selling areas in the name of new consumption models, with the associated risks of the displacement of historic traders, local consumers, and cultural identity. With the shift from the neutral action of buying food to “living a food experience”, the commodification of the market experience mobilizes a galaxy of narratives at the intersection of class, food, and social capital, exploiting the rhetorics of organic, origin, authenticity, and quality, against the discount logic attributed to the more vulnerable social groups (Anguelovski, 2016).

Through careful curation of food aesthetics, ranging from layout and visual presentation to narratives around origin and artisanal quality, such spaces de-fetishize food commodities by linking them to specific processes and geographies, only to re-fetishize them as desirable and “alternative” goods.

Following González and Waley (2013), several ongoing changes in historic markets can be interpreted and analyzed in terms of neoliberal urban restructuring. The change in consumption landscapes, including the decline of historical retail function, and the emergence of new tourist-driven foodscapes are not, according to the authors, the result of “natural” and spontaneous shifts in consumption patterns and demand, but of targeted, coordinated market and state neoliberal strategies. In the case of historic markets, three specific perspectives come into play: the first - and most critical - is the aforementioned urban restructuring process, orchestrated by the neoliberal state at various scales, shaping city centre spaces that are increasingly privatized and commodified through targeted disinvestment in specific areas. The second perspective is closely connected to displacement, or the removal of consumers/regular customers, in many contexts often from disadvantaged socio-economic groups (elderly, low-income, minorities), and of street vendors. The third perspective is linked to the promotion and narration of the market as a consumption food experience, through the fetishization of food and processes of gradual sanitization/cleaning of spaces increasingly targeted to the global consumption elite including both local and tourists.

In this framing, historic food markets become particularly powerful instrument for the construction of urban authenticity narratives, specifically because of their deep embeddedness in local material culture, their sensory intensity, and their readability as repositories of pre-modern or pre-global urban life. This “staged authenticity” (MacCannell, 1973; Rickly, 2022; Moore et al., 2021), however, is inherently selective, insofar as it performs the spectacle of tradition while systematically marginalizing the actual social actors - fishmongers, working-class vendors, low-income shoppers - whose practices produced that tradition in the first place (Zukin, 2008).

This spatialized food distinction is mobilized both through the new economic value thanks to pricing mechanisms and fostering cultural implications linked to the concept of the “consumer-citizen” (Bourlessas

et al., 2022; Johnston et al., 2011), that increasingly intersects with the cosmopolitan elite of consumption, tourists included.

While foodification describes the cultural and economic reorientation of food spaces, touristification captures a broader and more systemic process: the restructuring of entire urban neighborhoods - their land use, social composition, commercial fabric, and spatial organization - in response to the demands and logics of mass tourism (Milano et al., 2024), thus deteriorating living conditions of inhabitants; the negative effects of the sector hyper-specialization far outweigh the positive ones (Ojeda & Kieffer, 2020).

The process, implying the subordination of urban space to tourism as an organizing economic and political principle (Colomb & Novy, 2017; Clancy, 2022; López-Gay et al., 2021), not only can be shaped by specific characteristics of the places where it emerges (Gravari-Barbas and Guinand (2017), but it also takes form as a “bottom-up process in which tourists actively take part with all their different characteristics” (Freitag & Bauder, 2018).

Over the last years, this scenario has been further complexified by Airbnb and other short term rental platforms. First coined by Peters (2016), the term airbnbification refers to a tourism-oriented niche of the platform economy that is especially evident in “gentrified areas, such as city centers, tourist hotspots, and culturally vibrant neighborhoods attracting gentrifiers”, as Lei et al. (2025) put it.

The process has been emerging as crucial engine of planetary gentrification, both by creating more nuanced forms of rent gap and/or fostering new forms and outcomes of displacements (Smigiel, 2024; Grisdale, 2019; Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018) mutually driven by tourism and real estate market, that has recently emerged as profitable arenas for capital investment in search of rapid and high returns, especially in Southern Europe (Cocola-Gant et al., 2020; Wijburg et al., 2024; Tulumello & Allegretti, 2021).

The link between touristification and airbnbification is usually demonstrated by this shift in the housing market from long-term residential tenancies to short-term tourist stays, growingly mediated by the economy platforms (ib.). Their overlapping is made visible in public space functionality that is reshaped through the increasing appropriation of urban areas for tourism purposes, resulting in forms of spatial dispossession linked to visitor congestion, street pedestrianisation, and the expansion of outdoor restaurant and café terraces, which reduce the effective availability of streets and squares for everyday use (Wong et al., 2024). Finally, local retail - and foodscape usually undergo significant restructuring, as retail activities catering to local residents are progressively displaced by businesses targeting tourists (Blázquez-Salom et al., 2019), especially those food-oriented. However, the temporal sequence not always follows this path, insofar as food can act not as an effect and/or manifestation but rather as a driver of transformation.

So, while the relationship between airbnbification and touristification has been extensively documented, its correlation on prior processes of foodification of a circumscribed defined space such as a market has received comparatively little attention, especially in contexts, like peripheral cities of the Global North, where these processes of market “filtering up” are not officially supported by ad hoc institutional strategies. Nonetheless, by producing the conditions of cultural visibility and gastronomic attractiveness upon which tourism demand feeds, foodification can function as a precondition of the subsequent tourism-oriented transformation and the penetration of short-term rental platforms into a given urban area. In this vein, the touristification and airbnbification of a historic food market neighbourhood can be understood as the spatial sequence of a longer and more complex process of food culture revalorization, one in which the commodification of culinary heritage plays a foundational, if often overlooked, role. We argue that this can foster a symbolic displacement (Atkinson, 2015), affecting the “sense of belonging and personal disaffection”, the “loss of community life”, “changes in the retail and leisure sphere and aesthetic-physical changes in the neighbourhood” (Pastak & Kährlik, 2021, p. 815) that, far from being confined to residents, as demonstrated in several studies

(ib.), can be also felt, in the case of a historical market, by vendors and consumers.

3. Introduction to the case study: The historical fish market in Catania

The traditional fish market called “A Piscaria” (in Sicilian dialect, “La Pescheria” in Italian language) is located in the historical centre of Catania, a middle-sized city of Southern Italy. Since the early 1990s the city began to align with the Europeanization and culturalization of urban governance fostered by EU structural funds and “soft” neoliberal policies mobilizing culture and creativity as instrument of urban regeneration although with a moderate and more limited impact if compared with other European contexts (Ruggiero & Graziano, 2017). In 2000s the city underwent a fiscal crisis due to the financial insolvency of the local municipality that neglected long-term urban strategies and led to the privatization of public utilities and the deregulation of urban planning (ib.).

Over the last twenty years, like in several Southern European contexts (Cocola-Gant, 2018; Mozo Carollo et al., 2024), tourism has been increasingly mobilized by local actors as a universal panacea, labelled as the “new oil” for a new tourism-driven urban economy also thanks to the growth of low-cost air connections and the proliferation of tourism rent platforms such as Airbnb.<sup>4</sup> The city experienced a total increase of 1704 accommodations listed in Airbnb from 2018 to 2024 (Table 1), with a percentage growth rate of approximately 66.05%, effectively doubling in six years. Out of the 4284 listings in 2024, 899 are entire apartments. (See Table 2.)

The increase is particularly relevant in the first administrative district including the historic centre (Fig. 3), covering approximately 5.39 km<sup>2</sup>: the listings increased from 1561 in 2018 to 2788 in 2024 (+78.6%), while the average cost per night nearly doubled, rising from approximately €55 to €100, corresponding to an overall increase of about 81.8% and to a spatial density growing from approximately 290 to 517 listings/km<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 1). Table 3 shows that the most significant increase was recorded for entire apartments, which more than doubled from 1007 to 2057 listings (+104.3%), while private rooms saw moderate growth from 542 to 701 units (+29.3%) and shared rooms and hotel-style accommodations remained marginal and relatively stable. At the same time, small hosts increased from 312 to 475 (+52.2%), medium hosts from 623 to 1064 (+70.8%), and large hosts from 166 to 313 (+88.6%). This structural shift signals a gradual transition from a predominantly occasional hospitality system towards a professional, investment-oriented market configuration, progressively redefining the socio-economic dynamics of the historic centre as a whole.

Table 1  
Trends in Airbnb hosting in Catania (2018–2024)<sup>1</sup>.

| Year | Total Airbnb | Total Airbnb apartment hosts | Small hosts | Medium hosts | Large hosts |
|------|--------------|------------------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| 2018 | 2580         | 1153                         | 142         | 106          | 5           |
| 2024 | 4284         | 2052                         | 305         | 193          | 14          |

Source: InsideAirbnb 2018–2024.

<sup>1</sup> Small hosts manage from one to two apartments, medium hosts manage from 3 to 9, large hosts from 10 onwards.

<sup>4</sup> From 2014 to 2023, tourist arrivals have increased of 7, 95% and nights of 23, 24%, while the Catania Airport had almost doubled the number of passengers from 2014 (7.304.012) to more than 12 million passengers in 2024 [www. Aeroportocatania.it](http://www.Aeroportocatania.it); Data on retail confirm a decrease in retail shops of –18, 21% in the historical centre while food-related businesses increased of +31.48% in 2024, source: <https://www.confcommercio.it/-/demografia-impresa-citta-italiane>.

3.1. Methods and materials

The research is based on a long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the market area (Oswald et al., 2024) conducted from 2018 to 2026 on different days of the week and at different times of the day, with an average of three on-site fieldworks a month. A note diary was used together with a photographic corpus to capture and identify the changes that occurred over time, in line with methodological approaches related to visual grounded theory (Blazquez-Salom et al., 2019). During the ethnography, a series of unstructured conversations were carried out with 8 fish vendors (F), 4 shop owners (S), 6 restaurant owners (R), 30 tourists (T), an Airbnb host (H1), and 24 visitors (V), namely residents of Catania or nearby towns who visit the market area for non-touristic reasons. They were selected through on-site haphazard sampling (Gobo & Molle, 2017), for a total of 73 interviews. Out of these, 19 tourists and visitors were interviewed individually, while the others were interviewed in couple or small groups of three/four people to keep the original composition as encountered during the fieldwork, although their individual responses were noted. The average length of each conversation ranged from 10 to 20 min, aimed at unpacking personal experiences of the respondents in terms of uses, perceptions and expectations of the fish market area. As for the local people, an additional question dealt with their personal views on the market transformations over the years. Interviews were transcribed and scrutinized through an inductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), aimed at identifying the main recurring themes directly from the data gathered, after the familizing and coding phase.

During the last fieldworks (November 2025; April 2026), a comprehensive unit-by-unit survey of all active retail and food-service shops was carried out. The field survey area, defined by a radius of approximately 150 m around the fish market and covering approximately 21,000 m<sup>2</sup>, was delimited following the extent of the wider market area, that includes the historical fish market and the surrounding streets where grocery vendors and food shops were traditionally located across the history.<sup>5</sup>

Each commercial unit was manually identified, geolocated, and classified according to the different level of transformation across a continuum between traditional and full touristified, reinterpreting the semantic differential model, first developed by the psychologist Charles Egerton Osgood (1916–1991) and tested in retailscape analysis (Carreras et al., 2016).

We analyzed each shop or restaurant across four macro-variables (Table 3): 1) Commercial typology based on customer target: the degree to which it serves local everyday needs versus tourist-oriented consumption; 2) Culinary or product offer: the extent to which the food or retail offer reflects local and/or seasonal tradition versus standardized, generic, or globally curated selections, as well as pricing choices; 3) Product identity: ordinary or “staged”, pre-existing or displaced original functions; 4) Aesthetic register of urban furnishings, including shopfront design, signage style, and interior decor, menus or product labelling in one or dual or more languages, as proxy for tourist-oriented positioning assessed on a spectrum from functional to staged heritage or hyper-designed global aesthetics.

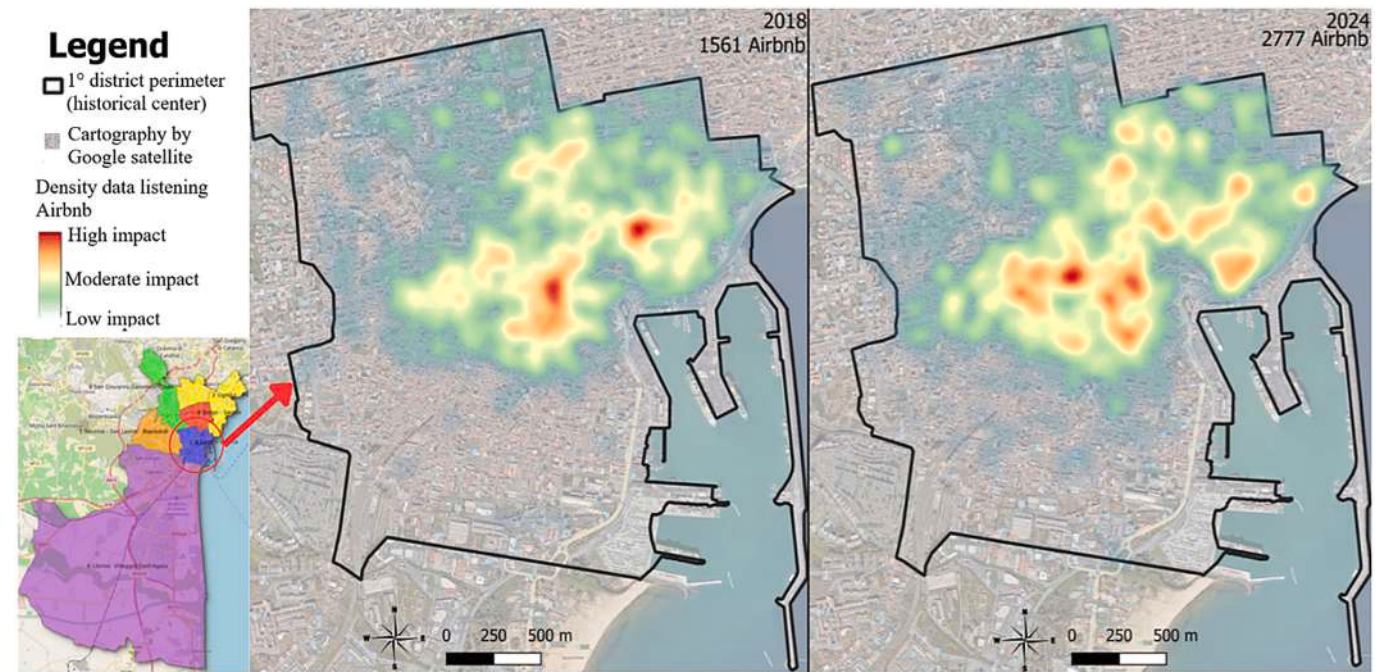
For each variable we mark the position on the scale from –3 (non-touristified) to +3 (fully-touristified), while 0 stands for neutral. The score derived from the four variables allows each unit to be classified into one of three categories along the foodification/touristification continuum: 1) traditional/historical: historical restaurants and shops and/or that have a strong continuity with pre-tourist retail traditions, serving local clientele, and displaying limited or no tourist-oriented adaptation; although it can obviously attract a tourist clientele, it is

<sup>5</sup> The identification of the market area was made through historical cartography (Sebastiano Ittar's map, 1833, available at [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File: Planimetria\\_di\\_Catania\\_-\\_Sebastiano\\_Ittar,\\_1833.jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Planimetria_di_Catania_-_Sebastiano_Ittar,_1833.jpg)).

**Table 2**  
Trends in accommodation types for Airbnb listings in historic centre from 2018 to 2024.

| Year | Entire home/<br>apartment | Private<br>room | Shared<br>room | Hotel<br>room | Total<br>Airbnb | Small multi-host<br>owners | Medium multi-host<br>owners | Large multi-host<br>owners |
|------|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------|-----------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 2018 | 1007                      | 542             | 9              | –             | 1561            | 312                        | 623                         | 166                        |
| 2024 | 2057                      | 701             | 12             | 10            | 2788            | 475                        | 1064                        | 313                        |

Source: Inside Airbnb 2018–2024.



**Fig. 1.** Density map of Catania showing Airbnb data (2018–2024). Source: E.R. Giuffrida's elaboration from Inside Airbnb 2018–2024.

**Table 3**  
The semantic differential model used for each commercial unit surveyed.

| Variable                                                   | Non-touristified/Historical commercial unit (–3) | –3 | –2 | –1 | 0 | +1 | +2 | +3 | Touristified commercial unit (+3)              |
|------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|----|----|----|---|----|----|----|------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Commercial typology/Customer target                     |                                                  |    |    |    |   |    |    |    |                                                |
| 1.1 Exclusively local residents                            |                                                  | ○  | ○  | ○  | ○ | ○  | ○  | ○  | Exclusively tourists/visitors                  |
| 1.2 Year-round stable customer flow                        |                                                  | ○  | ○  | ○  | ○ | ○  | ○  | ○  | Strongly seasonal customer flow                |
| 2. Pricing and offer typology                              |                                                  |    |    |    |   |    |    |    |                                                |
| 2.1 Prices aligned with local purchasing power             |                                                  | ○  | ○  | ○  | ○ | ○  | ○  | ○  | Prices oriented to tourist expenditure         |
| 2.2 Essential/everyday goods and services                  |                                                  | ○  | ○  | ○  | ○ | ○  | ○  | ○  | Non-essential/experiential offer               |
| 3. Product identity                                        |                                                  |    |    |    |   |    |    |    |                                                |
| 3.1 Ordinary/unmarked offer                                |                                                  | ○  | ○  | ○  | ○ | ○  | ○  | ○  | Staged/branded “authentic” product             |
| 3.2 Original/pre-existing function preserved               |                                                  | ○  | ○  | ○  | ○ | ○  | ○  | ○  | Original function replaced or displaced        |
| 3.3 Local/regional supply chain                            |                                                  | ○  | ○  | ○  | ○ | ○  | ○  | ○  | De-localised/generic supply chain              |
| 4. Spatial and linguistic landscape                        |                                                  |    |    |    |   |    |    |    |                                                |
| 4.1 Signage and menu exclusively in local language         |                                                  | ○  | ○  | ○  | ○ | ○  | ○  | ○  | Multilingual/English-dominant signage and menu |
| 4.2 Ordinary interior furniture oriented to functional use |                                                  | ○  | ○  | ○  | ○ | ○  | ○  | ○  | Global/Hyper-designed Interior furniture       |
| 4.3 Ordinary shopfront                                     |                                                  | ○  | ○  | ○  | ○ | ○  | ○  | ○  | Global/Hyper-designed shopfront                |

not the main target; 2) half-touristified: units displaying mixed characteristics, combining residual local functions with partial accommodation to tourist demand (e.g. selective bilingual labelling, partial menu redesign, or aesthetic hybridisation); 3) full-touristified: commercial units oriented almost exclusively towards tourist consumption, characterized by globally legible branding, wholly translated menus, curated heritage aesthetics, and a fusion-like product offer.

Pictures and notes taken during the fieldwork were compared with

Google Street View pictures dating back to 2016, if available, to explore the transformation.

The field-based data were processed through a QGIS-software<sup>6</sup> and

<sup>6</sup> In the case of shops and restaurants with several windows or entrances, a median point has been identified on the map.

intersected with data of the accommodation facilities listed in Airbnb from June 2018 to June 2024 retrieved from Inside Airbnb.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. 'A Piscaria: From foodification to airbnbification

Located in the heart of the historic centre near the port (Fig. 4), the fish market is held every morning in Piazza Alonzo di Benedetto since the early 19th century. The fish market area is made of a square under the level of the street, thus making a kind of "natural" theatre-like configuration for people arriving from the different access gates, who can lean on a balcony and see the "mise en scène" of fish selling. The fish market was historically surrounded by butchery, grocery and fish shops, as well as fruit and vegetables street vendors in the surrounding streets.

Currently, the market area spans about 7000 square meters, of which nearly 2300 are occupied by vendors' stalls that, over the past 15 years, have been surrounded by the increasing number of restaurants and street food shops targeted to international tourists, replacing grocery shops previously dedicated to fixed-location sales (Fig. 2).

The market has undergone a progressive aestheticization to its exterior appearance, offer and functions, enhanced by interventions specifically designed to attract cosmopolitan visitors rather than local residents, as shown in Table 4: 39 commercial businesses (28%) are categorized as full-touristified, while 29 (21%) as half-touristified; 10 businesses are related to traditional food selling (fish, grocery and butcher shops); a growing number of convenience stores, managed by migrant's communities, punctuate the most tourist street outside the market, leading to the Cathedral square. This transformation has highlighted an increasing and nearly complete reorientation of commercial activities towards tourist consumption, as restaurants, street food stalls, souvenir shops, and short-term rental listings have come to overlook the urban environment surrounding the market stalls.

Thus, traditional commercial activities such as grocery shops have been reduced to a residual presence, growingly displaced by new food-related activities (Figs. 3, 4), aligning with touristification seen as a "materialized object" (Freitag & Bauder, 2018) that makes tourism visibly at work.

These field survey data were triangulated with Inside Airbnb data. From 2018 to 2024, listings have increased of approximately 63% (Fig. 2): a particularly significant data if we consider the micro-urban scale of analysis of the whole surveyed areas, where the fish market occupies approximately 1500 m<sup>2</sup> of the total, serving as a morphological and symbolic nucleus around which short-term rental pressure has progressively intensified: this reproduces what Freitag and Bauder (2018) defines "as a non visible, or hardly visible, change in the use of existing infrastructure or environmental settings, such as the on-going transformation of regular housing into Airbnb apartments". What we call "keyboxscapes" at the micro-scale of building façades (Fig. 5) and passing-by tourists with suitcases (Fig. 6, 7, 8) are the immediately visible traces of the on-going restructuring of the area.

The ethnographic fieldwork discloses a polyphonic and often conflicting account of the area undergoing intense transformation in which the fish market is variously mobilized - selectively and asymmetrically - by different actors pursuing divergent spatial and economic interests. Rather than a straightforward narrative of "urban renaissance", what emerges is a nuanced topography of competing place imaginaries and a deepening tension between the "wannabe" sanitised tourist experience

and the unruly materiality of working market life, increasingly eroded by new tourism-driven functions (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2018).

##### 4.1. Food as an informal place branding resource

Central to this transformation is the strategic reappropriation of food - and of the fish market's sensory and symbolic identity - as an "bottom-up" place-branding resource (see Vanolo, 2017), not planned from the top-down within an institutional strategy but equally effective in re-designing the atmosphere. Restaurant owners interviewed before the Covid-19 crisis articulated a coherent, although informal, territorial branding logic, mobilizing the market's reputation as an asset for positioning their food offer within a globalized demand landscape. With over 60% of their clientele made of international tourists (R1), these operators consciously drew upon the "exotic" charm of the *Pescheria* (Fig. 6, 7) - its vendors' performative/theatrical calls, the multisensory density of food, and what several described as an atmosphere of "Mediterranean decadence" - to shape a cosmopolitan culinary offer and consumption experience that reinterprets Sicilian tradition through a fusion idiom:

"We opened a year ago [2017], right here. We chose the *Pescheria* because tourists come here in the morning and stay for lunch. My clientele is 90% tourists, especially when cruise ships dock at the port. In fact, I adapted the menu, reinterpreting Sicilian culinary tradition with a fusion twist." (R2).

Several restaurant owners explicitly positioned themselves as catalysts of the district's "renaissance", aligning their commercial strategies with what they described as an international momentum: "There is a proliferation of restaurants and B&Bs here; the *Pescheria* is being reborn thanks to us" (R3-7). This entrepreneurial self-representation resonates with what Zukin et al. (2009) have theorised as the commodification of local identity through selective cultural anchoring, wherein the traces of working-class urban life are aestheticised and leveraged as symbolic capital for upscale consumption.

The vulnerability of this tourism-dependent urban micro-economy was starkly exposed by the Covid-19 crisis, with the sharp decline in tourist flows during lockdown and in its immediate aftermath: "Without tourists, we're dead" (R4, R5, September 2020). Yet this interruption proved temporary, since from 2022 onwards, the recovery of hospitality activity in the area accelerated significantly, intensifying the structural dependency on tourist consumption that the crisis had momentarily disrupted, like in other South European cities (Tulumello & Allegretti, 2021).

It is precisely in this post-pandemic phase that the Airbnb economy has emerged as a significant corollary - and spatial amplifier - of the tourist-oriented foodscape, further exacerbated by the controversial pedestrianisation of several streets surrounding the area that, according to some residents, can enable the expansion of tourism-oriented activities (see also Villar-Abeijón et al., 2026). An Airbnb host interviewed (H1) offered an enlightening account of this dynamic: having placed two apartments on the platform after the pandemic - one a family property, one purchased specifically as an investment - the decision was openly framed as a strategy to capitalise on what the host described as the "*Pescheria* effect": the concentration of atmospheres and media visibility generated by the foodification of the area.

##### 4.2. The exoticization of historical foodscapes, between attractiveness and disgust

Tourists who have chosen to stay in Airbnb properties within or immediately adjacent to the *Pescheria* area confirm that the market's "exotic" atmosphere was a decisive factor in their accommodation choice, as underlined by five respondents (T17- T21) who described the decision to stay in the area as strongly connected to the desire to inhabit within, rather than merely visit, the market. Their visions suggest that the market's symbolic capital is not only a driver of foodification, that

<sup>7</sup> QGIS version 3.40 software was used to define the boundaries of municipalities, based on ISTAT 2023 website: <https://www.istat.it/notizia/confini-de-lle-unita-amministrative-a-fini-statistici-al-1-gennaio-2018-2/>. The Inside Airbnb database has some limitations: first, it does not provide a total accuracy of listings geolocalization; second, it doesn't allow to retrieve the number of housing units for the categories of hosts identified (small, medium, large). However, the database can be regarded as reliable in mapping the diffusion trends of the process (Wang et al., 2024).

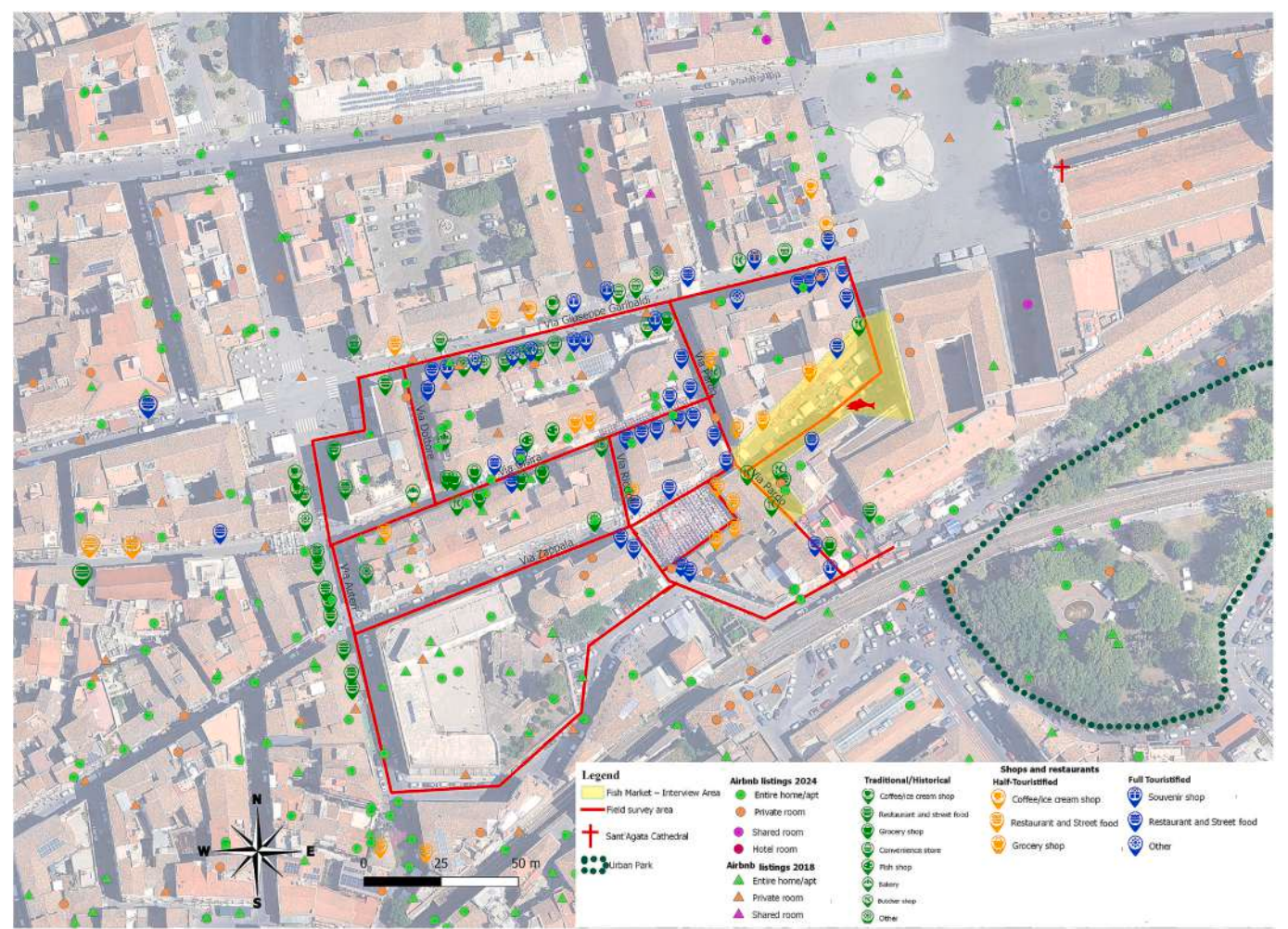


Fig. 2. The Market study area in Catania historical Centre. Source: E.R. Giuffrida's elaboration on different sources of data.

**Table 4**  
commercial units identified during field survey classified according to the semantic differential model.

| Commercial Category      | Classification by degree of touristification |                   |                   | Total |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------|
|                          | Traditional/<br>Historical                   | Half-touristified | Full-touristified |       |
| Coffee/Ice cream Shop    | 2                                            | 3                 |                   | 5     |
| Grocery Shop             | 6                                            | 2                 |                   | 8     |
| Convenience Store        |                                              | 9                 |                   | 9     |
| Fish Shop                | 1                                            | #                 |                   | 1     |
| Butcher shop             | 6                                            | 1                 |                   | 7     |
| Bakery                   | 2                                            | #                 |                   | 2     |
| Restaurant & Street Food | 9                                            | 14                | 25                | 48    |
| Souvenir Shop            | #                                            | #                 | 10                | 10    |
| Other                    | 9                                            | #                 | 4                 | 13    |
| TOTAL                    |                                              |                   |                   | 143   |

represented the first wave of spatial and functional reconfiguration - but also influences the short-term rental demand.

Yet the relationship between the market's material life and the tourist experience is deeply ambivalent, structured by a logic of attraction-repulsion that uncovers the inner tension at the heart of tourism-led urban transformation. What draws visitors to the *Pescheria* - its sensory excess, its noises and smells, the visible labour of fish vendors, the

exotic atmosphere - is simultaneously perceived as an obstacle to the sanitised, comfortable experience that restaurant-going tourists expect (González & Waley, 2013). Restaurant owners articulate this contradiction, framing the market's material residues - above all the smell and waste left after the close of trading - as incompatible with tourist expectations:

"We have many problems with the market: the fishmongers and shopkeepers don't respect the pedestrianisation, they often occupy the streets not only for loading and unloading goods, but also for selling, thus disturbing my customers. But the most serious problem is the dirt: by midday, they leave, leaving piles of foul-smelling trash. It's unacceptable for tourists to walk through this unpleasant smell!" (R5; R6).

This discourse of sanitary inconsistency reflects a broader logic of what urban scholars have theorised as the hygienisation of public space - the process by which the messiness of everyday urban life, particularly that associated with working-class economic practices, is reframed as a problem to be resolved in the interests of a more governable, aesthetically "fittest" urban environment (ib.; Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2024). The fish market, not yet fully hygienised, is perceived by restaurant owners as a controversial residual element that simultaneously produces the "exotic" atmosphere they exploit commercially but fails to conform to the standards of cleanliness that tourist consumption demands: "Tourists come here because they're attracted to the fish market, but of course, you can't expect them to eat among piles of trash or bad smell" (R5). The market is thus trapped in a double bind, which should remain "authentic" and "local", sufficiently "rough" to generate the affective value that underpins the area's tourism economy, but must

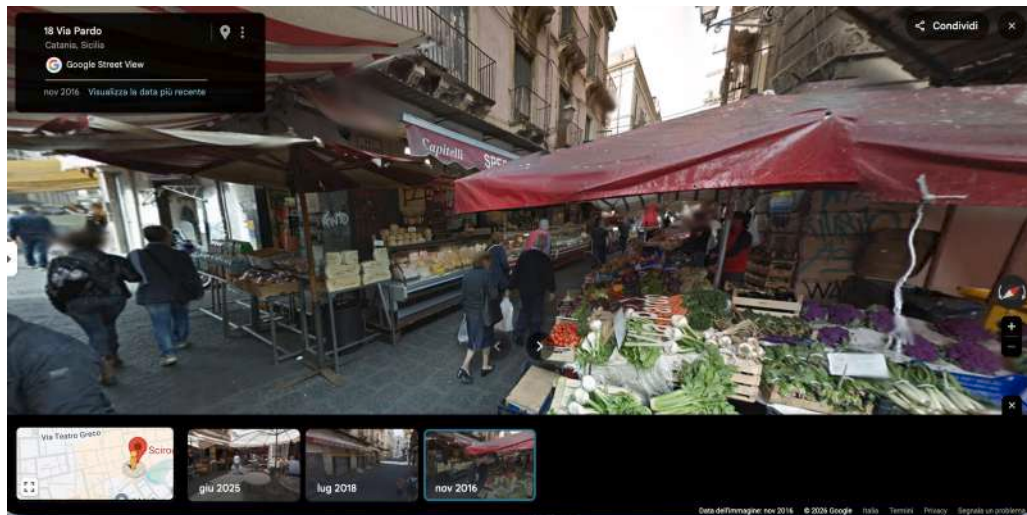


Fig. 3. Via Pardo, 2016. Source: Google Street View (2026).

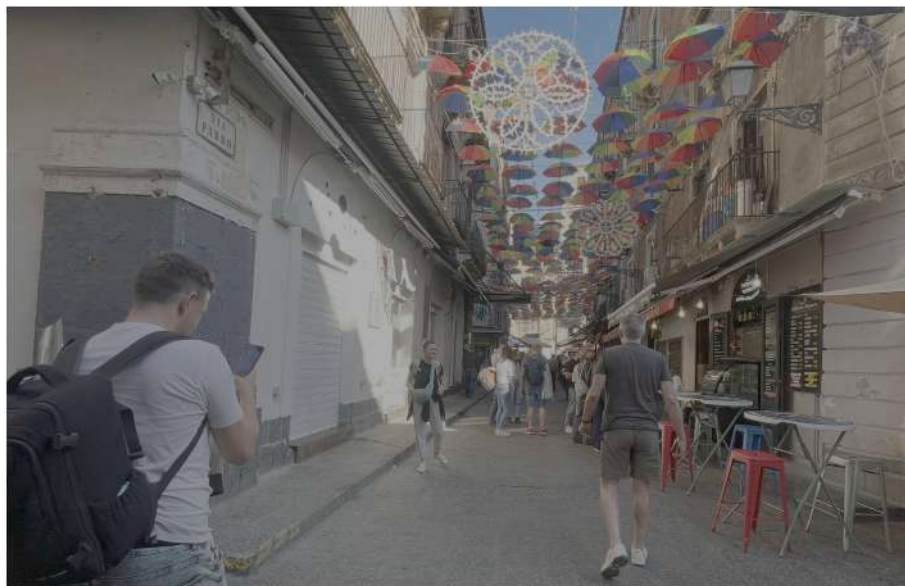


Fig. 4. Via Pardo, 2026. Source: T. Graziano 2026.

simultaneously be cleansed of the material conditions that produce that very authenticity, thus exploiting place identity by progressively displacing the material practices that foster it (Jover et al., 2023).

#### 4.3. Who wins and who loses

Fishmongers, positioned at the physical and symbolic centre of this spatial contradiction, describe an accelerating marginalisation that operates on multiple registers. Their economic function is eroded both by the competitive pressures of wholesale supply chains (“it is not true that restaurants buy fish from us; they go wholesale where they can find fish at cheaper prices and guarantee traceability”, F3) and by a structural shift in local consumption patterns, as locals increasingly prefer supermarkets for their fish purchases (F4, F8). Foodification that has transformed the streets around them generates footfall but not revenue: “There are so many tourists here, but they don’t buy fish, they only take pictures. I smile and joke. But what am I supposed to do with them? I can’t eat with pictures” (F9) (fig. 8). This unveils the displacement pressure at work: the fish market has been converted into a visual and

atmospheric resource consumed by tourists and restaurant owners, while the economic function of fish vending - the labour that produces the spectacle - is made increasingly precarious and invisible, both materially (physically demonstrated by the restaurants’ terraces) and symbolically (Fig. 9, 10).

Shopkeepers’ narratives outline a more differentiated picture, with those who have partially reoriented their offer towards on-site consumption - integrating “street food” and *aperitivo* formats into their traditional trading activity - have found a degree of adaptation with the new tourist demand: “We had to reinvent ourselves a bit, because tourists don’t buy meat or fish, and now they’re more numerous than the local customers. So, we do ‘aperitivo’ with a glass of wine and some snacks” (S3).

Tourists and local visitors’ perceptions diverge sharply along lines that mirror the contested terrain of place authenticity first theorised by MacCannell (1976) and Cohen (1988) (Rickly, 2022). Tourists are broadly drawn to the “authentic” experience the market provides, frequently describing it in terms of picturesque sensory encounter: “It’s all very characteristic, we’re happy to stay here, in the most authentic



Fig. 5. Keyboxscapes, via Dottore. Source: T. Graziano 2026.

Catania” (T4-T6). Notably, among the thirty tourists interviewed, seventeen were temporarily living in Airbnb accommodations or holiday rentals equipped with kitchens - yet none of them purchased fish at the market, while some among them (T10-T16) expressed discomfort at the smells and residual waste left after trading closes, in line with restaurant owners' view.

Local visitors, by contrast, display a more ambivalent attitude, by retaining a strong affective attachment to the market as a site of collective memory and material practices, but increasingly perceiving the transformations driven by foodification as a loss, in line with the idea of “loss of place” driven by symbolic displacement (Pastak & Kährlik, 2021): overcrowding, the dominance of tourist-oriented restaurants in the public space, the displacement of local food retailers, and what several describe as a decline in the quality and “real” authenticity of the culinary offer (V3, V9), increasingly perceived as a staged, commodified simulacrum of the working market that once served their daily needs.

#### 4.4. Looking for an instagrammable spot

A final and structurally significant dimension of this transformation concerns the role of social media in mediating and amplifying the processes described above. In line with research underlining the role of digital platforms in aestheticizing place imaginaries (Boy & Uitermark, 2017), the *Pescheria*'s visual identity has been both constituted and circulated through Instagram in ways that have materially restructured its spatial economy. A bottom-up initiative by restaurant owners - the installation of colourful small umbrellas strung between the buildings across the streets of the district (Fig. 10) - produced an immediately “instagrammable” urban scenography that functioned as a powerful attractor for selfie-seeking tourists, who subsequently remained for meals. More than one restaurant owner (R1-R6) confirmed that Instagram-driven footfall translated directly into revenue, positioning the platform as a veritable place-branding instrument, as also testified by the several selfie-taking tourists encountered during the fieldwork.



Fig. 6. Guided tour inside the fishmarket, Source: T. Graziano, 2025.



Fig. 7. "Eating pictures". Source: T. Graziano 2026.



Fig. 8. "A market with a view". Source: T. Graziano, 2022

Recognised by a local tourist guide as "the most Instagrammable site" in Catania, the *Pescheria's* digital aestheticisation reinforces selective narratives of authenticity and exoticism - narratives that systematically foreground the market's visual and atmospheric qualities while

rendering invisible the labour and spatial displacement that underpin them, converting a space of working-class commerce into a backdrop for tourist self-representation.



Fig. 9. The pervasive presence of restaurant terraces. Source: T. Graziano, 2024.



Fig. 10. Food-based branding strategies. Source: T. Graziano 2024.

## 5. Discussion

Retracing the spatio-temporal entanglement of foodification, touristification, and airbnbification in Catania's *Pescheria* district, the empirical analysis reveals them as mutually constitutive rather than disconnected phenomena: although first appeared along a temporal line, they act nowadays as a triadic connection of overlapped processes that allow to trace the specific mechanisms through which culinary heritagization of the market generates cascading effects at the neighbourhood scale in terms of symbolic displacement of the retailscape.

The fish historical markets can function, along a spatio-temporal analysis, both as driver of tourism-oriented transformation and as an outpost of resistance against it, with a specific nuance strongly connected with the symbolic value of food and "eating out". The local governance conditions under which these processes unfold diverge markedly from those documented in better-resourced urban contexts, driven by deliberate neoliberal strategies in traditional retail spaces (González & Waley, 2013), real estate market (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2021), or within urban renewal projects (Zhang & Li, 2025). The hypothesis of a specific neoliberal local strategy aimed at commodifying the fish market cannot be totally held, insofar the "orthodox" view of (dis)investments, capital flows and displacements are not retraceable in this case. Characterized by chronic fiscal stress, weak institutional capacity, and limited integration into mainstream circuits of urban investment, Catania occupies a structurally peripheral position within the European urban hierarchy, thus producing dynamics of peripherality more commonly associated with cities of the Global South. The fragmentation of local governance and the persistence of what is called an "austerity-led anti-growth" condition (Graziano, 2022) have produced a vacuum in which bottom-up, informally coordinated actors - principally restaurant owners - have operated as de facto urban entrepreneurs (Vanolo, 2017). This has generated visibility and desirability for the area without any official placemaking strategy, by allowing the triadic connection of foodification, touristification, and airbnbification to intensify with minimal institutional friction.

Significantly, while studies of commercial gentrification in contexts of active state-market coordination show how institutional frameworks can influence transformation through targeted policy instruments (Bantman-Masum, 2020), in the *Pescheria* their very absence forecloses even the possibility of mitigation, insofar as the process is rendered structurally opaque by the very informality through which it unfolds, making transformation simultaneously more pervasive and more difficult to contest.

While the rent gap literature has long established that the divergence between capitalised and potential ground rent creates the preconditions for reinvestment and commercial upgrading (Zukin et al., 2009), yet in contexts of chronic disinvestment and governance fragility, this gap does not close through deliberate speculative strategies but through informal, incrementally accumulated transformations driven by private operators acting without institutional coordination.

Unlike other cases of foodification (Bourlessas et al., 2022; Loda et al., 2020), in the *Pescheria* food triggers and actively generates the conditions of “desiderability” for subsequent processes in a context of governance vacuum, operating primarily through the reconstruction of spatial imaginaries towards cosmopolitan exoticism and tourism-oriented authenticity (Zukin, 2008). This reconfiguration of local uses and spatial imaginary unfolds at a scale that exceeds the market itself, thus producing a shift that makes retail displacement not only spatial but also symbolic: a dimension that quantitative approaches to commercial gentrification (Zhang & Li, 2025; Zhu et al., 2026), although methodologically rigorous, are structurally less equipped to capture.

The multi-voice approach of the interviews underline the lived, contested, and often contradictory experiences of actors positioned differently within the transformation, aligning with the calls for methodological pluralism in the study of touristification (Milano et al., 2024; Ojeda & Kieffer, 2020), and especially the need for qualitative methods capable of deconstructing hidden meanings (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2024). The triangulation allows the analysis to hold together the persistence of the market's economic role and the erosion of its social function; the enthusiasm of some local actors for tourism-driven visibility and the resistance of others; the informality of the rebranding process and the structural depth of its effects.

## 6. Conclusions

Although the “historical” function of the fish market survives and still has its economic attractiveness, the *Piscaria* case study shows to what extent the pervasive transformations of the surrounding area has been eroding its social meaning for locals, while being mobilized by restaurant owners as a catalyst of tourist attractiveness and as a back-drop “scene”: in a kind of spatial short-circuit, authenticity is staged for a cosmopolitan audience of international tourists who pass by and/or temporarily live in the neighbourhood “like locals”.

Foodification operates as a symbolic mechanism linking exoticized place-based cultural capital to global tourism circuits, deepening the uneven impacts of platform-mediated tourist economies and, consequently, tracing a *sunartesis*, a connection, with the two other interrelated processes. By proposing a connection-based reading of three intertwined processes - as constitutive dimensions of a single, compounding logic of urban restructuring and exclusionary symbolic displacement - we argue that although initially articulated across a temporal sequence, foodification, touristification, and airbnbification do not operate exclusively in sequence and/or in isolation, but rather shape a mutually reinforcing connection in which each process amplifies and enables the others.

Thus, empirical findings highlight to what extent foodification can function as the initial trigger, especially in a “peripheral” city characterized by the absence of institutional policies: by reframing a historic working-class market as a site of gastronomic authenticity and cultural heritage experience, although within an informal bottom-up and fragmented strategy supported by private operators, it generates the

conditions of visibility and desirability upon which tourism capital subsequently operates.

Furthermore, the paper provides novel insights of how peripheral positioning within the Global North reconfigures, rather than simply weakens, the dynamics of urban transformation. Governance fragmentation and austerity do not prevent touristification and airbnbification from unfolding, but they rather produce an informally coordinated and symbolically connoted process of transformation that sits uneasily within frameworks developed in contexts of more active urban entrepreneurialism and institutional coherence. The absence of deliberate speculative strategies for the fish market of the kind theorised by González and Waley (2013) does not prevent the emergence of exclusionary pressures through informal, incremental, and largely unregulated mechanisms. Significantly, whereas Zhang and Li (2025) show that commercial gentrification can be shaped by a structured and coordinated urban renewal project, in Catania this function is performed by the *absence* of such coordination: a veritable governance vacuum that allows the three interconnected processes of foodification, touristification and airbnbification to be mutually constitutive in reproducing new symbolic meanings without substantial frictions.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Teresa Graziano:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Software, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Emanuela Rita Giuffrida:** Software, Methodology, Data curation.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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