MEDIA & COMMUNICATION STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The production of locality on peer-to-peer platforms

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Abstract: A recurrent subject in modern travel discourses is formed by anti-tourism: a desire of travellers to reach beyond the allegedly superficial experiences that the tourism industry fosters. This paper explores the anti-touristic attitude in the context of online peer-to-peer platforms: collaborative services enabling barter in labour, skills, knowledge and goods between consumers and service providers—or, in this case, between “outsiders” and “insiders” of touristic space. A method involving computational keyword analysis and qualitative content analysis is adopted in order to analyse the platforms’ multisemiotic content. It is argued that the insider, as a commodified identity type and a signifier for authenticity, is produced by the platforms’ advertisements. These insiders provide a stylisation of everyday personal experiences, in which locality becomes a type of “authentic” experience prompted by minute personal activities. The authenticity discourses that insiders adopt are paradoxically related to the stereotypical forms of imagination that are found on the platforms, as well as the computational arrangement of measurement and comparison. The study thus shows how attitudes of anti-tourism are internalized and capitalized on by the tourism industry within peer-to-peer ecologies.

Subjects: New Media; Programming & Programming Languages; Tourism; World Wide Web & Internet

Keywords: anti-tourism; locality; sharing economy; peer-to-peer; authenticity; identity

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Anyone who has been abroad as a tourist will be familiar with a certain discomfort that accompanies it. As a tourist, one is always an outsider. Many travellers feel the desire to shed the shackles of being a tourist—a phenomenon that is often called “anti-tourism”. It is this desire that is accommodated for on certain online peer-to-peer (P2P) platforms such as Vayable.com and Spottedbylocals.com: websites through which locals of touristic places can offer guided tours to visitors. This paper analyses the user interactions on these platforms, and it shows the different rhetorical techniques that are used on them. This is done in order to explain how the modern-day tourist fascination with authenticity and “locality” is leveraged by technology companies. The paper shows that what is considered as “locality”, here, is actually made up by small and everyday actions and behaviours, such as buying bus tickets or ordering a dish—actions that become strategic and profitable performances on these platforms. The tourist, in other words, gets to play as a local, and as such, the P2P platforms under analysis are not so much anti-touristic as they are super-touristic.

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1. Introduction

Querying Google, Bing or Yahoo for pictures with the search words “tourist” and “traveller”, one can find the following images leading the search results (see Figure 1).

The normative difference we encounter here is a familiar one: the traveller is construed as a sensitive and curious creature, better attuned to the experiences and unexpected happenstances that a voyage offers. The sheer popularity and dominance of these images indicates a long-standing attitude within the social structure of tourism that we can call anti-touristic. This concept denotes an aversion to the superficial experiences associated with traditional mass tourism, and the desire to be separated from the perceived commonalities of tourist crowds (McWha, Frost, Laing, & Best, 2015; see also Bruckner & Finkielkraut, 1979; Buzard, 1993; Dann, 1999, 2012; Fischer, 1984; Fussell, 1982; Hennig, 1997; McCabe, 2005; Pearce, 1982; Porter, 1991; Urbain, 1991; Week, 2012). Individuals who consider themselves “travellers” tend to pursue forms of symbolic capital by taking an interest in local culture—particularly vis-à-vis their consumer culture contemporaries, the “tourists” (Cohen, 1988; Galani-Moutafi, 2000; cf. Hulme & Youngs, 2002, p. 7; Jacobsen, 2000; O’Reilly, 2005, pp. 155–157). The popularity of anti-tourist attitudes appears to us amidst the marred social relationships of modern tourism, characterised by the tall tales, photoshopped images and idealised scenarios of tourism companies, as well as the many staged back-regions of modern tourism that foster a “weakened sense of reality” (MacCannell, 1999, p. 93), causing some concern among tourists about which encounters are “authentic” (Kane, 2012; McWha et al., 2015; Week, 2012).

It is this anti-touristic concern for authenticity that is stressed, capitalised on, and accommodated for on web platforms—both those run by tourism operators such as Viator (viator.com), and as
peer-to-peer services, with platforms such as Vayable (vayable.com) and Spotted by Locals (spottedbylocals.com). They provide a form of hosting and guesting characteristic of what Jennie Germann Molz calls “network hospitality” (2014): a system of advertisements, recommendations, and instructions about trips, which are provided to the platform’s users (“travellers” in the ideological sense) to help them avoid trodden paths and tourist traps. Such online repositories of anecdotal stories and (or as) advertisements often appear in the context of the sharing economy, specifically as peer-to-peer (P2P) systems, enabling consumers to directly barter products and services.

These systems have had a significant impact on a number of long-established services and industries. Within the tourism sector, observers have noted a sizeable shift in consumer behaviour due to P2P services (see also Germann Molz, 2014; Guttentag, 2015)–for instance, in 2013, users on Airbnb contributed 185 million euros in economic activity in Paris (Airbnb, 2013). These socio-economic changes in distributed, online environments are often accompanied by expressions of value that hail from the 1970’s ideologies of computers as harbingers of liberation and democratisation, “peer-to-peer adhocracy” and “expressions of the true self” (Turner, 2006, p. 3). Further, the “P2P-movement”, as it is sometimes called, is referred to in light of its power to subvert the position of dominant corporations and brands.

This discursive function of P2P systems connects rather easily to the anti-touristic ideology of the “traveller”. P2P travel platforms therefore typically market themselves as the ideological counterpart of the corroded tourist system (see for example Fast Company, 2015; Financial Times, 2014; Swischer, 2014). Visiting a place, under this logic, allows one to forego familiar institutional roads (travel agencies, hotel chains, certified guides), and engage in allegedly direct, unmediated contact with insiders or locals. The key concept with which P2P-like platforms are associated is “disruptive innovation” (see also Christensen & Raynor, 2003; Guttentag, 2015)—that is, these services disrupt the regular affairs of tertiary industries through user-friendliness and cost-effectiveness, their benefits falling upon the end-user (see also Law, 2009; Law, Leung, & Wong, 2004; Lawton & Weaver, 2009; Mayr & Zins, 2009).

This article provides a computational keyword analysis in order to engage with text and imagery on abovementioned platforms. It focuses on the “production of locality” and its main question is by which means the notion of the insider or local, as a commodified identity type and an ideological signifier for anti-tourism and authenticity, is constructed.

2. Anti-tourism and (trans)locality

Anti-tourism can be traced back to the popularisation of Rome as a touristic destination in the 18th century. Writers in the Romantic tradition, such as William Wordsworth and George Gordon Byron, started explicitly disassociating themselves from the masses and the ordinary forms of experience they felt were accompanying it. The first line of Wordsworth’s The Brothers—“These Tourists, Heaven preserve us!”—is indicative of this sentiment. And Byron, in Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, offers an alternative to the tourist experience: the perceptive and politically curious Byronic hero who says farewell to house, home, and heritage to travel through Europe on his own, sensitive to the political climate and particularities of the places he visits. Authors such as Charles Dickens, Henry James and Edward Morgan Forster would draw similar distinctions (Buzard, 1993; Fussell, 1982), and tourists would go on to be portrayed with colourful metaphors from the animal kingdom—one can think of herds, swarms, or droves (Culler, 1990, p. 153).

Since the popularisation of mass tourism in the 1950s, the attitudes of distinction with other tourists seems to constitute an integral part of the structure of tourism, instead of taking place “outside” of it. Tourism studies would come to take up this debate some years later (see for instance Aubert, 1956 or Jacobsen, 2000). Tourism, it was noted, has a self-efficacy quality; the very “language of tourism” is one of sentiments about distancing oneself from the other tourists (see also Culler, 1990, p. 3;
Dann, 1999, p. 160). Likewise, the process of avoiding unsolicited happenstance that occurs on anti-touristic platforms is characteristic of and endemic to the logic of tourism. If we agree that authenticity is always partly a constructive and symbolic matter (Bruner, 1994), the commodification of tentatively authentic experiences is a matter of ideology, and the question becomes how this ideology is articulated on the platforms offering it.

In the context of peer-to-peer platforms, what is predominantly subverted is the impersonality of the relationships between tourists and locals. What is “prosumer” instead we might see as an effect of that which Arjun Appadurai has called the “production of locality”. With locality, Appadurai refers broadly to “a complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts” (1996, p. 178). That is, locality is a context-dependent set of shared perceptions, values, beliefs and ideas that develops within certain historical genres. A classic example of a locality-producing genre, to Appadurai, is the “industrial novel” of the 1840s, couched in a middle-class consciousness related to the development of industrial capitalism. By analogy, we might propose that the types of discourse we find on P2P services are part of the contemporary generational social structure of locality: what is bought and sold is primarily a matter of local knowledge. And as Appadurai indicates, much of what is considered “local knowledge” is actually knowledge on “producing reliably local subjects as well as about producing reliably local neighbourhoods within which such subjects can be recognized and organized” (1996, p. 181). Against the backdrop of late modernity, he asks the rhetorical question: “what is the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalized, de-territorialized world?” (1996, p. 52), noting that locality loses its ontological status as the world becomes increasingly destabilized by flows of people (i.e. migration, tourism) and knowledge (i.e. the Internet).

More directly to the point of tourism, Appadurai notes that for a large part, “the logic of movement is provided by the leisure industries, which create tourist sites and locations around the world [...] [M]any such locations create complex conditions for the production and reproduction of locality [...] what we might call translocalities” (1996, p. 192). With translocality, Appadurai points towards a mobile situatedness of the individual that implies more than a state of transnationality: it is a mass-mediated decoupling of identity and territory in which experiences and social actions regarding taste, pleasure, and politics can unexpectedly converge and intersect. Such translocal phenomena are endemic to superdiverse societies (Blommaert, 2013; Vertovec, 2007, 2012), typified by a “diversification of diversity” within which citizens may simultaneously be a part of several orders of indexicality, systems of meaning, or social relations. Looking back, with this in mind, on our conception of anti-tourism, we see a peculiar tension arise. The ideology of anti-tourism, with its focus on the conscription to “authentic” and “local” identities instead of the globalised tourist identity, is paradoxically related to the global flows of information on peer-to-peer services and the concept of translocality. In the analysis of the peer-to-peer platforms under discussion here we will take this tension into account: we will ask what counts as local or translocal within the discourses we find on these platforms.

3. Analysing insider discourses

This paper takes an interest in the platforms’ home page, about page, and the listings themselves. The latter will be accessed by means of a computer-assisted content analysis, informed by a symbolic interactionist perspective—that is, it analyses online tourism as a product of everyday social interactions of individuals, and it regards language in terms of its social effects (Blommaert & Varis 2015, p. 6). By tracing straightforward quantitative elements such as word frequencies, keywords in the text can be detected, and persistent discursive patterns on the platforms can be recognised that shape and influence the social structure of tourism that is prompted by these platforms.

Using macroanalytic strategies serves the purpose of temporarily de-emphasising individual occurrences of features or words, in favour of a focus on the larger system or corpus and its aggregate patterns and trends (Jockers, 2013). The underlying assumption of this type of analysis is that it
provides a framework to see, within individual texts, where certain words or features arise. Instead of gathering qualitative data for the modelling and statistical analyses of data to test hypotheses (Stepchenkova, Kirilenko, & Morrison, 2008), computational models will be used to evoke an interpretative analysis (Ramsay, 2011).

A methodological question to be answered first is how to find a selection of words that allows for a fair comparison between the platforms. The method adopted here is to focus on a number of large and popular cities that appear on all platforms. Data was collected from six different popular touristic cities in Europe: London, Paris, Istanbul, Barcelona, Amsterdam and Rome. Scraping all the advertisements within the scope of these cities yielded a Viator subcorpus \((N = 995,905 \text{ words})\), a Vayable subcorpus \((N = 77,070 \text{ words})\) and a Spotted by Locals subcorpus \((N = 182,403 \text{ words})\). These platforms will be understood as different producers of locality. For the content analysis, the most notable words per subcorpus have been selected—that is, words that appear on the very top of their respective (relative) frequency lists. To see how they are distributed across their own subcorpora, a graph of these words and their normalized frequencies was drawn up, represented in a

![Figure 2. Comparative analysis.](image)

Notes: The analysis was performed with a homebuilt text analysis tool in Python. See [http://www.github.com/tomvannuenen/corporeal](http://www.github.com/tomvannuenen/corporeal). Stopwords were removed when analysing the results.

| Word   | Viator   | Vayable  | Spotted by locals |
|--------|----------|----------|------------------|
| Tour   | 0.981619733 | 0.954508266 | 0.009868259      |
| Time   | 0.514607317 | 0.192200304 | 0.200106358      |
| Guide  | 0.488098764 | 0.219471969 | −0.043337659     |
| Food   | 0.060849177 | 0.290897757 | 0.244513522      |
| Experience | 0.163871052 | 0.250639585 | 0.050986004      |
| Place  | 0.074404687 | 0.161032687 | 0.316332516      |
| Bar    | 0.01777278  | 0.033764918 | 0.212167563      |
| Find   | 0.031729934 | 0.084412296 | 0.213264036      |
| Little | 0.020082237 | 0.044154124 | 0.1288356        |
percentage-based stacked bar chart (see Figure 2 and Table 1). The analysis of the separate platforms that we will now engage in pertains to these words, as well as their most-frequent word clusters.

4. Viator

Viator (viator.com) is a tourism operator, and a daughter organisation of travel website company TripAdvisor since 2014. It is also decidedly the largest platform in our data-set. Viator’s About page notes that the platform includes “more than 3,000 affiliate sites that include major hotel chains and airlines, online travel agencies, city-specific sites and more” and features over 800,000 verified reviews, photos and videos (See http://www.viator.com/about/about-viator/viator-who-we-are). Viator is not a peer-to-peer platform in a strict sense—it provides tourism advertisements in cooperation with local businesses, but does not offer any peer-to-peer freedom for its “prosumers” to list tours and other experiences. Yet we may recognise that the framing of the platform is one of peer-to-peer adhocracy, highlighting the seemingly direct and unmitigated contact between clients and insiders. Regarding this platform allows us to see the strategic construction of the central concept in this paper, i.e. the insider.

On Viator, users can sign up for tours given by such insiders (which becomes apparent in the platform’s tagline, “travel with an insider”). We may immediately note that the word “insider” itself, however, appears only 79 times in the subcorpus. Why this paucity? The cluster “insider tips” emerges as the most frequent one: these tips refer to the contractor offering the tour (e.g. “get insider tips from your guide”). On the About page, too, Viator refers to these contractors as insiders: “Our team of travel insiders is obsessed with finding the best things to do everywhere we travel.” This leads to the question who, or what, the insider refers to. If it would be solely the local provider of a guided tour, we might say that this is far from a new phenomenon (think of the local cannibals guiding the runaway protagonists in Herman Melville’s Typee, or the Oriental guides in E.M. Forster’s A passage to India). The insider that is referred to, here, is constituted not only by the local guide, but also by the itinerant Viator employee who “obsessively” picks these local guides and determines who is listed on their web platform. The insider, put differently, can signify both the local and translocal guide: the dominant function in both roles is to accurately locate and disperse valuable information about a place.

What is the nature of these forms of information? This becomes clearer when the most notable word in the subcorpus is traced: “tour”. It turns out to be a signifier for the archetypical tourist-friendly kinds of offers that can be found on the platform—mostly “walking tours”, which is the most frequent cluster (1,074 occurrences). In this context of archetypical tours, such as to the Vatican and Colosseum, recurring assets provided by the insider are “skip-the-line” tickets (being mentioned 747 times in the Viator corpus alone), allowing tourists to avoid tourist queues for an additional fee. Since such tickets are usually available to any visiting tourist, the flexibility of the “insider” as a concept starts to become clear. There does not seem to be anything “local” about these local guides, save for their capacity of safeguarding minor time-sparing advantages for their clientele. Yet, despite offering mostly archetypical mass tourism activities and benefits, Viator does appropriate the language of anti-touristic sentiments in its slogans. On its front page, the header displays a series of testimonials from satisfied users (see Figure 3).

The multisemiotic message to the website’s visitor here involves imagery, text, and a star ranking. The picture shows a couple—presumably the local and the tourist—posing in front of Rome’s Colosseum. Meanwhile, the apparent guide on the picture is lending himself to a personal, friendly photo with one of his customers. The accompanying central quote, a testimony from one of the platform’s customers, implies a degree of unexpected pleasure: the insider of the trip turned out to be a local professional in his/her field, having been part of the site’s excavation. Finally, there is a familiar marker of metrification, expressed by the 5-star rating. It offers a sense of statistical objectivity (Irani, 2015) to indicate the accuracy of the platform in matching the right insider with the right tourist. In fact, the platform goes to some lengths to signify the commodification—and
measurability—of its insiders. The “About Us” section of the website notes that the tourist does not have to do anything in order to create a valuable experience:

We've done the homework, made all the connections, and even pulled a few strings to make sure our customers have unprecedented insider access provided by a global network of trustworthy and reliable local businesses. (See http://www.viator.com/about-us)

Viator, in other words, makes use of the rhetorical efficacy of the insider, which itself functions within the logic of anti-tourism. The platform’s header image alone refers to the transient yet intense forms of intimacy that are often connected to the hypermobile social interactions of network hospitality (Bialsiki, 2011, 2012; Germann Molz, 2014). However, the platform’s curators also employ thorough systems of quality control to determine who can rightfully nominate themselves with these terms. In fact, the role of these insiders seems to be to protect the customer against the uncomfortable or unpleasant surprises that are central to the traditional traveller experience (Jacobsen, 2000, p. 288). The division between Viator and traditional “offline” tourist organisations is, in this instance, hard to maintain, which underscores the strategic flexibility with which the concept of the insider can be used.

The word “time”, as can be seen in Figure 2, is another matter of concern within the corpus—especially on Viator, the word appears frequently. It signifies the temporal preoccupation that characterizes tourist behaviour—that of optimizing and regulating one’s allotted holidaymaking time. The most frequent cluster it appears in is “free time”: the “in between” period during the tour in which tourists can walk around by themselves (e.g. “enjoy some free time at the waterfront”). Again, we see that many of the experiences that Viator offers are archetypically “touristic”. This would suggest that the insider, instead of becoming a “friend” as the header picture suggests, mainly acts to uncover or disclose parts of the city that are otherwise kept concealed. The high frequency of the word “guide” confirms this suggestion: more than in the other two subcorpora, its frequent use on Viator indicates this advertisement is set up in a recognisable style of the tourist brochure, in which the promise of the guide’s knowledge and reliability are reaffirmed. The word is used most often as a noun: the cluster “guide will”, being the most frequent one, demonstrates the promissory indexicality (e.g. “your guide will reveal”, “your guide will navigate”). It is a promise that is familiar from the travel brochure on which the platform is modelled, and the adverbial modifiers of the word, such as “expert guide” and “professional guide”, further show that Viator’s front as a peer-to-peer platform is primarily a rhetorical construction.
5. Vayable

Shifting the focus to peer-to-peer platform Vayable, the insider appears again, but is framed differently: the contractors on the platform are again constructed as experts, but here the freedom they have to market their own product (and thus, the personal contact between tourist and tournee without “unnecessary meddling” of the platform itself) is emphasised. The front page reads “Discover and book unique experiences offered by local insiders”, while the How This Works page adds: “Vayable is a home for anyone looking to experience honest, local culture through experiences created and hosted by passionate local Insiders” (see https://www.vayable.com/how_this_works).

Comparing this peer-to-peer platform with tourism operator Viator, where insiders are produced in terms of their ratified reliability, we can see that on Vayable their entrepreneurial spirit and intrinsic local knowledge are emphasised. What renders the insider so particularly effective as a figure is perhaps the recognisability of the work relationships that it is a part of: we can recognise both the figure of the comfortably predictable local, the associate partner in the system of tourism—as well as the wayward, self-employed local who runs her own business and accompanies the tourist at her own leisure. This work relation, however, remains implicit at all times, as the anti-touristic voice involves presenting tours as an exchange amongst equals, instead of an asymmetrical tourist-touree relationship. Vayable’s How This Works page offers: “In the Nineteenth Century an industry began to grow around traveling for enrichment, culture and human connection.” Similarly, the types of testimonial that are found on this platform do not so much refer to the excellent knowledge of the guide, but employ an existential register (See Figure 4; see also Wang, 1999). Matters regarding “what it means to be human, what it means to be happy, and what it means to be oneself” (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006, p. 300) are key here, and the functional goal of Vayable seems to be to frame the insider as a figure in the niche of offbeat and alternative tourism (Dann, 1996) that opens up the possibilities for such modes of travel.

Further, personal contact with the host is considered much more important here than it was with Viator—in this sense, the kind of anti-tourism on offer here is not necessarily based on the solitary, romantic gaze described by Urry (2011). It is sometimes argued that the anti-tourist logic assumes that more authentic experiences are found as fewer other tourists are involved (Jacobsen, 2000, p. 287). While this seems still a recognisable sentiment, it needs to be added that in an increasingly saturated tourist sphere, in which most travellers will encounter other travellers, the anti-tourist structure refers no longer primarily to the need to be alone, but also to individualisation and personalisation. That is, the traveller wants to personally compose his or her experience to significant detail, and this includes the personal contact with the local other.9

Looking at the word “experience”, then, it is found to be significantly more common on Viator and Vayable than it is on Spotted by Locals. The word is used colloquially as a stand-in for “tour” (e.g. “your experience concludes” or “start your experience”), and modified for exaggeration (“unique experience”). But more significantly, the word signifies a difference in the function of the insider on Vayable and Viator, respectively. In the Viator subcorpus, the top clusters surrounding the word “local” are “led by a local”, “tips from a local”, and “absorb the local”. Looking at the context of these words, it becomes clear that Viator produces locality as a resource that might be consumed, but not

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**Figure 4. Vayable testimonial.**

*Note: Retrieved from https://www.vayable.com/how_this_works.*

> “Vayable has forever changed how I experience the world. I now always have a friend and amazing experiences waiting for me at every destination.

PETER G. (COMMERCIAL PILOT)
experienced. By contrast, Vayable contains clusters around “local” involve “like a local” and “as a local”, signalling how the locality that is produced by the insider can be transferred to the visiting tourist through physical proximity. Locality is, in this sense, a commodified identity type that is itself translocal (i.e. a decoupling of identity and territory). This can be further corroborated by briefly turning to the reviews of Vayable tours, where user attitudes toward internalizing locality emerge. For instance, in an evaluation of an advertisement for a local tour of London, a satisfied customer responds: “Excellent local tour! […] I feel more like local after the experience” (https://www.vayable.com/experiences/373-explore-london-like-a-local).

What is telling in this context is that many of the types of experiences on offer on Vayable are not so much spectacular, but rather of a commonplace nature. One insider in Paris writes: “I'll help you understand the layout of Paris, how to get around, tips for using the metro, buying tickets, French etiquette, and more” (https://www.vayable.com/experiences/1494-navigate-paris). The information, here, is decidedly unspectacular, as such information may surely be found in most travel guides. Locality, again, derives wholly from the everyday embodied act, the “human point of contact” as Vayable puts it on its How This Works page. The anti-tourist attitude here is expressed through a stylisation of the mundane routines of travel—after all, the instructions of how to buy tickets can be found on most ticket machines, and might be asked to dozens of (local) people. In other words, Vayable's advertisements engage in the customisation of the mundane, turning it into a noteworthy event or “experience” by the presence of this specific insider. This stylisation and customisation of course serves an ideological purpose. It is a commercial distinguishing, grading, and branding of “local” activities that are in fact rather mundane; it is an attempt to make the customer feel “normal” (and not a tourist) through a whole touristic discourse of abnormality. This shows the intrinsic theatricality of “becoming a local”: travellers, rather than transforming into a local, learn how to play the role of being the local.

In more general terms of their content, the difference between the two corpora can be underscored by looking at the number of tours that are posted by their tour operators both on Vayable and Viator. As it turns out, the overlap in these tours is negligible, which seems to indicate that both platforms offer distinct kinds of advertisements, and relatedly, distinct kinds of production of locality. The most salient word in the Vayable subcorpus, “food”, signifies a related difference in the production of locality compared to Viator. Local cuisine is heavily employed as an index of locality, with “street food” and “local food” being the two most frequent clusters. The preference for tasting unfamiliar food as an anti-touristic attitude has been established before (Jacobsen, 2000, p. 293; Pearce, 1982, p. 32), and the sizeable difference between Viator on the one hand, and Vayable and Spotted by Locals on the other, is telling in this regard. One such food insider in the “non-touristic, typical Parisian neighbourhood” of Marché d’Aligre in Paris writes: “Yes, it is important to eat what locals eat, but even more important: to do it the way they do! I’m a food historian with six years of food touring experience” (see https://www.vayable.com/experiences/5883-learn-to-eat-like-a-local-in-paris).

The manual performances and types of etiquette that the advertisement puts forward—how to order, how to eat, and so on—appear throughout the corpora, showing that the knowledge constituting locality is not merely denotational: knowing which food is popular alone is not enough. This shift of attention from the commodity of food to a secondary aspect of it (the way in which it is consumed) is a form of culture as accent, where “[small] differences acquire the status of fundamental aspects of being” (Blommaert & Varis, 2012, p. 1). We may note that the anti-touristic attitude is characterised by the assignment of such “metonymic marks” (ibid., p. 2) that signify a traveller identity.

6. Spotted by locals

Turning now to the front page of Spotted by Locals (spottedbylocals.com), another header with rotating photos can be seen, and the concept of the insider returns as well: the service is presented as a collection of “City guides with insider tips”. This platform, instead of offering tours, provides travel
guides written by locals—under the header one can read that the platform offers “up-to-date insider tips for city loving locals”. In terms of length, the stories are roughly as long as those on Viator and Vayable, and depict comparable places—the main difference is that the provided information itself is the service on offer here. Locals are occasionally dubbed “spotters”, which refers to their capacity of recognising which places are “tourist traps”, and which ones are unknown to the greater public and may thus potentially endow one with social capital of “travel” (see Figure 5).

The platform offers the promise that these “locals” correspond to all the characteristics that are commonly associated with them within the tourism sector: “Our spotters live in the city they write about, speak the local language, write only about their favourite spots, and keep their articles up to date.” One of these locals in the introduction movie of the platform rhetorically asks: “Why lose time going to all the tourist places when you can do what the locals do?” (http://www.spottedbylocals.com/about-us/ accessed 3 March 2016).

The insider thus aids in the discovery of the “typically” local site or scene. A related keyword that can be pulled here—which turns out to be quite more salient on Spotted by Locals than on the other platforms—is the word “find”. The term, it turns out, refers to the tourist and not the insider: it is the visitor who has to do the corporeal exploratory work, as Spotted by Locals’ insiders are absent during the tour itself.

While tourists are provided with precise and up-to-date instructions on where to go and what is worthwhile (on the platform’s front page, one can download the official app to look up relevant information on mobile devices, while walking through the city), the lack of an attendant tour guide allows the platform to brand itself as an anti-touristic means for visitors to explore the city by themselves, and thus become a local.

On Spotted by Locals’ “About Us” page, a video advertisement is offered in which a tourist can be seen standing beside the Acropolis in Athens with a dissatisfied look. “99% of tourists in Athens visit the Acropolis …”, the accompanying text reads. The tourist grabs his notebook and literally ticks off a box next to the name “Acropolis” (next to “Eiffel Tower” and “Statue of Liberty”). The next shot is set in an outdoor restaurant overlooking the same ruins, showing two people dining. “Less than 1% visits this local favorite”, the ad now reads, followed by the slogan: “Be the 1%”. Meanwhile, the insiders who provided these tourists with the information remain invisible in the ad—like they do during the trip itself. Spotted by Locals’ curators are here capable of mythologising and spectacularising the experiences on offer—as well as their alleged capacity of taking customers to a “back region”—even

![Figure 5. Spotted by Locals front page.](http://www.spottedbylocals.com)
Figure 6. Comparative measurements of words indexing precision.
further. The production of locality here becomes an informational matter entirely; the authenticity of the offered experience, therefore, can only be safeguarded if it hails from a “resident” or “aboriginal” source. This explains why the platform safeguards the reliability of its locals by requiring them to live in the city they write about.

The most notable and frequent word in the Spotted by Locals subcorpus is “place”, and it proves an opposite index to that of the “experience” that was found on Vayable. Since Spotted by Locals contains a repository of travel tips, locality is produced not through personal contact but instead by the dissemination of information. The keyword is used almost exclusively as a noun (the verb-form comprises under 1% of the word’s total usage), and it appears in crucial sentences in the advertisements, as the word usually refers back to the name of the tourist site that is being recommended. The most frequently occurring 3-word cluster that “place” is a part of is “place for a”, which refers to the use value of a certain place (instead of the inherent value of the place itself). Typical of the language of tourism, it includes suggestions that the visitor may pick up (e.g. “place for a coffee”, “place for a walk” etc.). Several other words appearing high in the list of salient keywords can be found, which may be understood as collocates of these places: most frequently, the word “bar”. The latter word is, as can be seen in Figure 2, typical of Spotted by Locals. The presence of the bar seems to point in a similar direction as the attention to “food” in the Vayable subcorpus: they both act as markers of a “traveller” discourse within which the “true” identity of a city is revealed. While the current platform explicitly incorporates a discourse of authenticity and anti-tourism (as we see in the introduction movie), the locality that is produced is still based on the recognisable touristic image of a city. One local writes: “For me, this place doesn’t have any specific visual theme, but rather it has a certain special atmosphere; one which most accurately reflects my experience and definition of the city of Barcelona—bohemian, alternative, relaxed” (see http://www.spottedbylocals.com/barcelona/mariachi/). The bar here is used as a trigger for the tourist’s imagination by becoming a synecdoche for an archetypical touristic impression of the city. The place is metonymic; it represents something that is not itself; it is a *pars pro toto* for a neighbourhood or the city as a whole. Through systems of popularity, either through metrics or customer feedback, a comparison becomes possible between mythological localities that users might want to visit.

As the use of the word “bar” indicates, the type of knowledge for the insider is such that it must be up to date; the production of locality in the above instances refers to being acutely aware of the volatile and ever-changing social cityscape. In line with this, there is a significant number of words in Spotted by Locals that share a potential emphasis on knowledge about local details. A striking keyword can be found in this context: “little”. It appears almost exclusively as an adjective and adverb throughout the corpus, and is employed with notable frequency on Spotted by Locals, and the same goes for other adverbs such as “small”, “different”, and “old”. These words index a certain degree of authenticity, which is injected into the nouns that they modify. But tellingly, the word is not just a modifier for certain places. Especially on Spotted by Locals it is referred to in its broader sense, referring to time (“come a little later”), costs (“it costs a little less”), itineraries (“a little detour”), and so on. As such, it seems a pointer to a feature of anti-touristic language, in that it is precise, small-scale, and fine-tuned. We see the same pattern in the different usages of words such as “just” and “tiny”: although rather rare, they appear with notable frequency in the Spotted by Locals corpus—especially when comparing those numbers to the frequency of the word in the other subcorpora (“little” comprises 0.13%, “just” covers 0.28%, and “tiny” makes up 0.64% of the total word count in the subcorpus. See Figure 6) Again, it is the minute details that construct locality.

### 7. Conclusion

To summarise, all of the above websites serve as producers of insiders and “locality” (see also Heller, Jaworski, & Thurlow, 2014, p. 441). In all varieties, we ought to note, the construct is a normative projection of utility: imagining someone as an insider is linked to the symbolic capital that it represents for the one who does the imagining. In other words, insiders exist by virtue of the fact that their “insider-ness”, understood as commodified standing reserve, can be consumed by the outsider/visitor. It also appears that the mechanics of commodification and touristic imagination
differ in subtle but significant manners throughout these platforms. Viator construes its insiders liberally, both referring to their own employees and to custom selected experts catering to a potentially mass tourist audience. As such, the service is the farthest removed from the romantic anti-tourism framework whose discourse it nevertheless makes use of. Vayable constructs its insiders as local entrepreneurs and offers an altruistic discourse in which the tourist contributes to local communities. Spotted by Locals, finally, constructs the role of the insider by focusing on his or her capacity to guide the tourist to the destination’s back region.

In all of these contexts, insiders provide a stylisation and metonymisation of everyday personal experiences. Locality, in this sense, is a type of experience prompted by minute personal activities. Buying a bus ticket or ordering a dish, under this logic, can become metonymic markers for “being a local”. This process involves the commodification of locals or insiders as “others” for the visitor to consume. The contact between hosts and guests remains goal-oriented at all times, however; the other is not an end in itself (i.e. the other is not an “Other”). Instead, their role is one of use value: to construct and validate certain kinds of stylised experiences. Through this process, locality is allegedly conferred upon the visitor by the “authentic” local. The identity statements made by the insiders on these P2P-platforms, in this context, can be read as forms of self-interpellation (Lange, 2009; Varis & Blommaert, 2015): individuals hail themselves as bearers of commodified local knowledge, inscribing themselves in and expressing their affiliation with the ideological configuration of the insider and the production of locality.

The stylisation of everyday experiences in commercial P2P environments signifies that the production of locality is in fact not a phenomenon of anti-tourism, but might rather be called a form of supertourism. It deals in a form of play, namely playing that the visitor is the local. This form of play is instantiated on the P2P platforms where these visitors begin their journey: the metrified, gamified and up-to-date system of listings allows for immediate comparison between experiences and insiders. This acute comparativeness is remarkable: in an age of more broadly democratised online access, one might expect different individuals on platforms to share and leverage radically different types of stories. Yet the types of advertisements we have seen involve very similar orders of indexicality about “Rome-ness”, “London-ness”, and so on.

In sum, there exists a paradoxical relation between the kinds of comparable, stereotypical, and homogeneous touristic experiences we find on P2P platforms, and the ideology of personalisation and translocality we find in their discourses. Despite the processes of globalisation, superdiversity and translocality that complicate and disrupt archetypical tourist/local distinctions, and which are the rhetorical selling point of these and other peer-to-peer services like Airbnb (the promise being: you do not have to be a tourist anymore), we see that essentialist images of otherness are maintained within this globalised, interconnected order. In fact, “disruptive” online systems seem to play a role in promoting these forms of otherness, precisely because of the processes of commodifying identity that they engage in, by rendering identity measurable and comparable in online ecologies. By the same token, notions of authenticity are promoted in the touristic vernacular precisely because of this playful commodification and comparison of identity. The question becomes: who is the most authentic? In this sense, the guides on P2P platforms are presented as carriers of “objective” authenticity, as Wang (1999) calls it-authentic because of their inherent characteristics, which can be measured and compared by the customer. The places they show to the visitor, meanwhile, are considered authentic in a “constructive” way: they become real through the power that insiders/locals have to define them as such.

One consequence of the P2P production of locality in platforms under study here amounts to a matter of supervision. The popularisation of insider platforms contributes to the spatial distribution of the city, with a “rental boom” occurring in several of the world’s most popular tourist destinations, and local governments drawing up legislation to control the civic and economic ramifications of the sharing economy.11 This is something further research may concern itself with: local residents, capable of turning their neighbourhoods “inside out” and directly branding them to potential customers,
might find themselves increasingly aware of the symbolic material in the different parts of their neighbourhoods.

While the relationships between insiders and outsiders may be as much a front as the types of experiences they are assumed to “subvert”, a social realist approach seems necessary here. The production of locality does not just constitute false backstages (MacCannell, 1999, p. 102) that only claim to unlock the “real life” lived in a certain place. We need to take the P2P movement more seriously: the places that are touted may, in many of these cases, indeed be the places that are popular with locals and less often visited by great numbers of tourists. Similarly, a tour organised by a citizen who has lived in the region for years will often offer different insights into local customs and mental frames, different from those we may discern through “by-the-numbers” tourist operators. This reliance on the local is not a new phenomenon, as we noted already.

What is new is that the signs through which one can identify tourist areas in a city become less and less clear, as tourism becomes in itself anti-touristic. The fact that we can see someone, house keys in hand, stepping out of a modest apartment in the centre of the city (Airbnb), driving around by bicycle or in a car with a local license plate (Snapcar), or sitting in a restaurant surrounded by locals (TripAdvisor), is no sufficient signifier to indicate that such a person actually lives or works in the region. If theorists are right to assume that tourists can come to be defined as locals by mastering only minimal amounts of the hosts’ language (Pennycook, 2012; Piller, 2002), the same can be said about the semiotic capacities of direct, peer-to-peer locality production. P2P networked platforms, we might say via Appadurai, engender the “production of unreliably local subjects”. This is why, in the end, anti-tourism is not the right term to describe the social dynamics of these platforms, or the moral position they engender. To take an antagonistic position to tourism, in our context, would not mean to pit oneself against the “commonality of crowds”, but against the relentless ideology of individuality and translocality that characterises it, as well as the accompanying feelings of uncertainty about who, in actuality, is a tourist.

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Notes
1. It is productive, here, to think in terms of the “platform” instead of the “website” (see for instance Gillespie (2010) and Helmond (2015)). This means to epitomise the “multi-sided” nature of these online environments: users, contractors, and third-party developers are interconnected, and the value of the platform increases the more it is used by all of these parties (Hagi, 2014).
2. Such a focus on subversion, however, means taking the for-profit providers of these new services themselves enjoying the fruits of their participatory networks out of the equation (see also Bauwens, 2005; Lanier, 2003).
3. This method of analysis goes back to Williams’ Keywords (Williams, 1983) and has recently been popularised by literary scholars such as Moretti (e.g. Moretti, 2013).
4. Data of this website was gathered from the “tours and activities” sections of the respective six cities.
5. This is calculated with a tf-idf score: a statistical measure evaluating the importance a word has to a document that is part of an analytic corpus. A word’s importance increases proportionally to the number of times it appears in the document, but is offset by the frequency of the word in the total corpus. This can be used for successful stopwords filtering.
6. This is due to the difference in corpus size. Ratings have been normalised using Z-scores.
7. Such a percentage-based bar chart significantly reduces the visually striking difference between subcorpora. This is not deemed problematic, however, since the current analysis uses these numbers only insofar as they give us general directions about the differences in word frequencies.
8. All online sources were accessed 3 March 2016.
9. It might be added that, while the service-providing locals are construed as wilful entrepreneurs, it remains unclear to what extent they are actually benefitting from the peer-to-peer service they are using. In their study of crowdsourced micro-tasking services such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, Ekboa and Nardi (2014) note that an important effect of P2P systems is their assertion of “a functionalist view” of society, in which questions about social and/or economic factors remain hidden from view. The platform, meanwhile, does confer upon the insider the necessity to open up to and become personally involved with those who pay a visit.
In this context, the production of locality on Vayable implies a potentially more intensified intrusion into the personal sphere of the local guide than in the case of Viator.

10. The Spotted by Locals corpus has no overlap with the other two subcorpora, as the content of its listings is structurally dissimilar (that is, it consists of informative posts rather than listings of tour offerings).

11. See for instance The Guardian (2014, 2016).

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