

Perceptions of vulnerability and precariousness of Airbnb workers in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

Platform work in the tourism sector has grown exponentially since 2014. Airbnb was a driving force for the Portuguese economy after the 2008 crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism was cancelled, and most workers did not have access to social benefits, causing a potential disruption in their careers. There is a gap in research regarding the analysis of the occupational trajectories of Airbnb workers and the effects of the 2008 crisis and the pandemic on their lives. Between 2020 and 2021, in-depth interviews were conducted with Airbnb workers and activists in order to analyse their occupational trajectories, collective voice and business models. The article concludes that, while Airbnb changed the tourism landscape, those who work for it remain precarious.

KEY WORDS

Airbnb; collective voice; digital platform workers; gig economy; Portugal; precariousness

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Introduction

The emergence of Digital Labour Platforms (DLP) signals an important transformation in the world of work. DLP are private internet-based companies acting as intermediaries for services requested by individuals or corporate consumers (European

Commission, 2021). They also enact forms of non-standard employment in many countries (Pesole, Fernández-Macías, Urzú Brancati & Gómez Herrera, 2019), offering a new type of work organisation, management and control, defined as ‘uberisation’ (Abílio, Amorim & Grohmann, 2021).

The symbolism of the expression ‘uberisation of work’ has become synonymous with the rise of a new ‘precariat’ and/or proletariat, seen by many as a new and complicated phase in the development of technology and an attack on organised labour, resulting from the way it contributes to the erosion of standard employment relationships (Huws, 2003; Standing, 2014a). However, national and academic debates in many countries have been mostly centred on ride-hailing and food delivery platforms, leaving freelancing activities, like those involved in the provision of Airbnb services, outside of the mainstream discussion and the scope of trade union interests (Boavida et al., 2021).

Although lodging platforms are not primarily categorised as Digital Labour Platforms, they involve labour under a variety of working conditions and employment relationships. There is a wide range of work related to the provision of accommodation that can be carried out by the hosts themselves or by third parties, including infrastructure maintenance, reception and cleaning (Roque, Boavida & Moniz, 2023). Additionally, Airbnb hosts provide a service that is distinct from the ownership of the property, since not all hosts own the properties they manage.

Tourism has been considered to be the main driver of social and economic recovery to mitigate the effects of the Portuguese ‘Troika crisis’, which relates to a governmental programme, in April 2011, to prevent state insolvency in the debt crisis¹ (Drago, 2021). This was a bailout programme that drew a total of 78 billion euros from the so-called Troika (i.e. the International Monetary Fund, the European Financial Stabilisation Mechanism and the European Financial Stability Facility). Portugal exited the bailout in May 2014, when positive economic growth became noticeable after three years of recession. In the aftermath of this crisis, many people who were laid off decided to take a chance on local accommodation by investing their savings. This was not only as a means of earning additional income, but in fact it became their main profession (Roque, 2021).

While the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digitalisation and platformisation of work, it also revealed how vulnerable Airbnb workers could be. Tourism was cancelled, leading to the dismissal of workers who, for the most part, were not considered eligible to benefit from social security. The new forms of entrepreneurship, promoted by platforms, were exposed as precarious and exploitative, with poor working conditions, leading to vulnerable trajectories. The ‘self-employed worker’ narrative hindered unionisation, transforming these workers into a mass of self-exploiting entrepreneurs (Roque, 2021). The case of such workers employed in the short-term rental sector requires further analysis, especially in countries like Portugal, where controversial legislation on short-term rentals has been significantly debated, but not analysed.

1 https://www.fct.pt/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/ENEI_Anexo-B_-PrioridadesEstrategicas_05junho2014.pdf

There is Portuguese academic literature on how platforms change value chains, contributing to economies of scale and generating new kinds of relationships between companies, with a particular focus on how platforms operate (Pugliese, 2016; Brochado, Troilo & Shah, 2017; Estanque, Costa, Fonseca & Santos, 2018; Gouveia, 2018; Amado & Moreira, 2019; Rebelo, 2019; Teles & Caldas, 2019; Leonardi & Pirina, 2020; Boavida et al., 2021). However, there is little research on who Airbnb workers are and how they perceive themselves and how their occupational trajectories develop: in other words, on their subjectivities. There is also a need to investigate how a precarious subjectivity might relate to their professional activity. These workers' professional activity can be conditioned, especially in crisis scenarios, where uncertain and self-employed work can subjectively place workers in a situation of extreme vulnerability, having to self-support from their resources without access to social protection (Ross, 2009; Armano, Morini & Murgia, 2022).

Although Airbnb may not fit the traditional definition of a digital labour platform, its analysis is relevant because precarious workers occupy several positions in activities linked to online letting. They might be the owners, managers and/or workers, and all of these roles might be represented by one individual who might own the means of production and be a self-employed entrepreneur while also being a manager of the property. Roque (2021) found that although Airbnb workers represent a different type of digital platform workers who might own their means of production, compared with couriers or tuk-tuk drivers (who might also own their means of production), they are still subject to many of the same challenges, including algorithmic management, platform deactivation, uncertain and low incomes, job disqualification, insecurity and lack of access to social security in employment and unemployment.

This highlights the diffusion of platform work processes and logics across different areas across the platform economy and the economy in general. According to Hardt and Negri (2004:66), there is a tendency for 'immaterial labour' to operate without stable long-term contracts and to adopt the precarious position of becoming flexible and mobile, which is the case in relation to Airbnb. According to Mitropoulos (2006) and Kalleberg and Vallas (2018:5), an increasing proportion of the workforce is engaged in intermittent or irregular work, resulting from structural forces that have converged to erode or to constitute a collapse of traditional forms of Fordism. These forms of precarious work constitute the objective conditions of contingent employment and its consequences in terms of income and social protection (Choonara, 2019). Contingent employment can become a subjective experience that denotes a condition so extensive that it transforms into an 'existential precariousness' (Fumagalli, 2007), affecting all aspects of the life trajectory and leading to a condition of vulnerability and uncertainty, both in terms of everyday life and perception of the future (Bourdieu, 1998; Armano & Murgia, 2013:488). This condition of vulnerability and uncertainty among most Airbnb workers results because they are entrepreneurs themselves (Foucault, 1991; Antunes, 2018) and own their own human capital, resulting in forms of subjectification and self-construction based on individualisation and business logic (Bröckling, 2016). In this sense, this article will also present the effects of precariousness not only in the labour sphere, but also on the subjectivity of workers (Morini & Fumagalli, 2010; Murgia, 2010; Armano, Bove & Murgia, 2017; Armano, Morini & Murgia, 2022).

The rest of this article is structured into six further sections. We next present the objectives and methodology used in this paper; we then summarise the Portuguese context of the gig economy; this is followed by a section that presents the business model and the occupational profiles of Airbnb workers in Portugal; we go on to analyse their collective voice; finally, we discuss the results before presenting the conclusions.

Methodology

Between November 2020 and January 2021, 25 people were contacted but only 15 agreed to be interviewed, using snowball or non-probability sampling. The interviews were conducted with six women and nine men, mostly white, from Mainland Portugal and the Autonomous Regions. This article was developed using the collection of primary empirical data and relevant secondary sources, such as national statistics, legal information regarding legislation, media and regional and national surveys relating to the hotel sector. Furthermore, non-participant observation was also carried out on social networks, such as Facebook groups, and used to establish primary contacts with workers who work in this service and with members from the associations ALEP (Local Accommodation Association of Portugal), ALA (Local Lodging Association of Azores) and the group ALESC (Local Accommodation Clarification Group) and to analyse and understand the context in which these individuals interact and organise themselves.

This article aims to develop an understanding of the subjective component of the social behaviour of individuals who work with and for the Airbnb service in a context of precariousness, that is, their subjectivity as revealed through personal experience in this context and how they perceive this precarious world (Goetz & LeCompte, 1988:114; Bogdan & Biklen, 1994:54; Lindlof & Taylor, 1995). Firstly, the analysis investigates how the uberisation process of the labour market affects the lives of Airbnb workers and owners in Portugal through a process of proletarianisation; secondly, it aims to analyse how platforms have transformed the socioeconomic working conditions that brought an army of workers to platforms in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The article further aims to demonstrate how precarity in the Airbnb service is multifaceted, that is, precarity can affect differentially the various types of Airbnb workers who, in most cases, present a hybrid profile. Although this activity is typically associated with the middle class,² this is not recognised by the Portuguese Classification of Professions and some of these workers could be regarded as bogus self-employed. The qualitative analysis of the interviews made it possible to investigate this in depth, through first-person accounts of the experiences obtained by each worker in the sector. Dimensions such as age, gender, income, social class, educational qualifications and occupational trajectory were analysed. During the pandemic, fieldwork was conditioned by certain prophylactic constraints to which researchers had to adapt. However, all major difficulties were overcome, and interviews were adapted to be safe

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jul/27/airbnb-panel-democratic-national-convention-survey>

in the context of COVID-19, using digital and social media (Facebook, Zoom, Skype) and telephone communications.

The gig economy

The increase in the uberisation of work has been designated interchangeably using a number of terms, including 'gig economy', 'sharing economy', 'on-demand work', 'collaborative work' and 'crowdsourcing', encompassing a range of new forms of informal, independent and intermittent work, with the subordination of workers to digital platforms (Srnicsek, 2017; Casilli, 2020). The emergence of online platform companies for workforce management in the twenty-first century has impacted the organisation of production processes, as well as labour markets.

Industrial relations researchers have focused on several different types of labour platform. The gig economy includes companies that use web-based technologies (digital platforms), and on-demand work using location-based applications. In the first case, work is outsourced through an open call to a geographically dispersed crowd of organisations and individuals for work activities that entail performing a series of microtasks (crowd work), that is, organising the outsourcing of tasks to a large group of online workers. In the second case, location-based applications allocate work to individuals in a specific geographical area, typically to perform local, on-demand service-oriented tasks such as driving, running errands or cleaning houses, managed by companies that also intervene in the selection and management of the workforce, establishing minimum quality standards (Cardon & Casilli, 2015; Eurofound, 2015; Greenhouse, 2015; Kessler, 2015; Rogers, 2015; Ruiz & Montero, 2017; Srnicsek, 2017; Casilli, 2020; ILO, 2020). In this sense, Digital Labour Platforms have brought a new form of externalisation of work to an indeterminate and depersonalised mass of workers who are required to be available 24/7 and to work according to just-in-time and just-in-place strategies (Abílio, 2020; Wells, Kafui & Cullen, 2021).

Platform work is increasingly hailed as providing opportunities for micro-entrepreneurs. This is the case with Airbnb, with the platform seen as facilitating transactions between accommodation providers and customers by providing travel information and booking services. It is also a community marketplace for people to advertise, discover and book spaces around the world using their cell phones or personal computers. The digital labour platform creates a task marketplace for mediating physical management and work (often through an app) carried out offline, and for digital services carried out online for completion and evaluation (Howcroft & Bergvall Kåreborn, 2018). The Airbnb digital platform is seen as a marketplace by many workers, offering them the possibility of improving their professional activity as employers and not as employees.

Airbnb, Booking, VRBO (formerly HomeAway) and TripAdvisor are platforms that operate on a semi-exclusive basis. Airbnb penalises anyone who advertises the same property simultaneously on other platforms, withdrawing their properties (Roque, 2021). However, each platform (algorithm) can influence the customer's choice by determining which properties appear first during a customer's internet search, and

through reviews and ratings provided by other customers. This also leads to the collection of customer data, that generates additional value for these companies. While platforms are presented as a success resulting from technological innovation, they are also economic actors in the capitalist mode of production, in search of new markets and new means of generating surplus value (Srnicek, 2017).

Airbnb in Portugal

Digital Labour Platforms have grown considerably in countries like Portugal, especially in the aftermath of the Great Recession, as many workers began to look for alternative sources of income due to the employment crisis, manifested through wage instability and high unemployment rates (17.7%)³ (Chicchi, Frapporti, Marrone & Pirone, 2020). This has resulted in the proliferation of multiple atypical and precarious forms of work to the detriment of salaried work, associated with effective contracts and social protection. In some contexts, this trend has led to a gradual dismantling of institutional and regulatory labour protections (Carmo, Caleiras, Roque & Assis, 2021).

Since 2014, Portugal has seen a boom in tourism, driven mainly by the low costs of flights and accommodation that followed the 2008 financial crisis (Boavida & Moniz, 2019). In 2019, the country ranked twelfth as the most competitive tourism destination in the world (WEF, 2019). Tourism thus played an important role in the construction of Portugal as an international 'destination brand'. As part of this process, the accommodation industry grew exponentially, especially in the case of Airbnb, which evolved from a form of collaborative economy to a professionalised business.

The initial launch of the Airbnb platform was in 2009,⁴ in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and in the context of a broader boom of low-cost tourism (Roque, 2021). Airbnb represents a form of alternative tourism, enhancing the dynamics of cities and the revitalisation of the economy, especially in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Portugal was among the first countries to regulate accommodation for short-term rentals and was one of the few countries with national legislation relating to this activity, namely the Municipal Local Accommodation Regulation for Lisbon in 2019.⁵ Legislation was introduced at state, regional and municipal levels to limit the number of accommodations in certain areas where tourist activity was very intense. The regulation, however, did not concern work (Roque, 2021). According to the interviewed President of the Local Accommodation Association of Portugal (ALEP), in November 2014, there was a change in the law that brought a series of challenges, mainly in terms of taxation, that is, everyone providing rented accommodation had to be sole proprietor or company. There was also a civil liability insurance relating to Airbnb, mandatory for

3 https://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_destaque&DESTAQUESdest_boui=151972007&DESTAQUEStema=00&DESTAQUESmodo=2&xlang=pt

4 See news reports of Cristiana Faria Moreira in the daily newspaper *Público*, 25 June 2019. <https://www.publico.pt/2019/06/25/local/noticia/airbnb-historia-ideia-caseira-mudou-lisboa-1877492>

5 More information on the Municipal Regulation of Local Accommodation for Lisbon is available at <https://dre.pt/dre/detalhe/aviso/17706-d-2019-125933896>

Mainland Portugal, which provided certification to the owner and assistance and protection to the guest in the event of an accident.⁶ Another issue that affected the Airbnb service was related to capital gains. Another interviewee, the coordinator of ALESC, stated that most Airbnb workers do not have a basic understanding of taxation mechanisms, which was why, in her view, they become ineligible for social benefits. This is because taxes (personal income tax) resulting from the withdrawal or sale of properties used for Airbnb purposes are treated as capital gains.⁷

The President of ALEP, when interviewed, noted that in other European countries Airbnb regulation is mainly municipal, resulting from the reaction to public perceptions of the sector, which are negative, leading to the view that it should be prohibited, and creating difficulties in reconciling positive and negative impacts. He further stated that their accommodation activity has been related to the use of holiday homes. Accommodation establishments, accommodation apartments and houses are all considered 'establishments' in accordance with Ordinance No. 517/2008 Series I of 25 June. Airbnb has a business model that aggregates a wide variety of spaces to rent, from shared rooms to private islands. According to this interviewee, the Airbnb business model is an example of the sharing economy, functioning as a community built on sharing, allowing people to add value to assets that are idle or underused.

In Portugal there are four types of properties, but the predominant ones are apartments, villas or detached houses and small collective accommodation establishments (hostels/dormitories). Airbnb activity covers not only the property rental business itself, but also the entire surrounding local economy and aspects of the entire life of the neighbourhood, creating social bonds and interdependence. While looking at the broader, more complex picture, our case study identified several positive impacts, including stronger bonds of interdependence and greater employment opportunities. Being recognised as a form of alternative tourism, Airbnb has helped to increase the dynamism of cities, revitalising their economies after the Troika crisis. According to the President of ALEP, Airbnb represents an international trend: an alternative to hotels, attracting people who want to be closer to real life and to obtain a more authentic experience. Even though this might seem exaggerated, it is the narrative local Airbnb hosts wish to transmit to attract guests, making this type of accommodation seem cheaper, a more homely and nested cultural experience than that provided by hotels, especially for families. In Mainland Portugal, there are regional differences: in Lisbon and Porto tourism has basically urban characteristics, while in Alentejo and the Algarve it is more seasonal and rural. In the Autonomous Region of Azores, there is a differentiated type of tourism based on the difference between islands, mainly due to variations in their transport networks and geography. Rural tourism predominates on the Islands of São Roque and Pico. Urban tourism can be found on the other main islands, such as Terceira and São Miguel. In the Autonomous Region of Madeira, although tourism is mostly related to nature, it can also be urban, extremely regulated and operating in parallel with traditional hotels.

6 <https://www.alesclarecimentos.pt/seguro-rc/>

7 <https://www.alesclarecimentos.pt/fiscal/mais-valias-no-al/>

Occupational trajectories of Airbnb workers

Airbnb's business model is based on two categories: hosts, often property owners, whose activity involves listing the property on the platform, which handles bookings and communications with guests; and non-owners who might be managers and workers who also take on tasks such as management, administration and cleaning activities (Roque, 2021). Lisbon and Porto have very similar demographic profiles, with hosts, mostly aged 50 and with university degrees (90%). In the Algarve, only 56% attended higher education and hosts are typically older, aged 58 on average (Pereira, Matos & Carreira, 2021).

The President of ALEP explained that there is a minority of companies exclusively dedicated to renting out properties through Airbnb, as well as private individuals who work as Airbnb hosts (either as property owners or managers). Close to 80% are individual entrepreneurs who own two or three accommodations; around 20% are micro-enterprises, whose employees are managing partners; and only 2 to 3% are employers with more than 100 units and 15 to 30 employees. Table 1 presents the profile and occupational trajectories of the 15 Airbnb interviewees, most of whom were workers and owners or hosts.

Our 15 interviewees comprised eight owners or hosts, five workers and twelve managers, with most of the latter also performing cleaning, laundry and reception activities. Some of these hosts were also owners of their own properties, while others managed third-party properties. Among our interviewees there was only one worker who received a salary in the context of Airbnb work. The majority were middle class, even though there were some people who had been born into poor families and struggled to make ends meet. Being an independent worker, especially a bogus one, does not necessarily signify a high status or high income. Our interviewees were mostly men (60%), although there was a strong presence of women (40%). Their ages ranged between 35 and 55 years old; most were highly skilled, had an academic degree, and worked on a part-time basis to supplement their income from other sources.

In urban centres, Airbnb generally represents self-employment and a main professional occupation, not a supplementary source of income. In other regions, such as the Algarve, the scenario is completely different. This a region where seasonality and informality characterise the labour market, which is highly dependent on the tourism sector, especially during the summer. In the Azores, the profile of Airbnb workers is made up of a small number of people who dedicate themselves exclusively to this activity, mostly independent workers. However, there are also several retirees who have decided to put their homes on the Airbnb platform to earn extra income.

According to the President of ALEP, there are companies that live exclusively from Airbnb, but there are also some individuals who are in management and who are owners. These are mainly older workers, in their 40s and 50s, who left their fields of professional work due to layoffs that occurred during the Troika crisis. With no alternatives, they decided to invest their compensation and savings into the Airbnb business, managing to find a new meaning for their lives. One female interviewee, 40 years old, who had previously worked in customer marketing and sales and had been sacked during the Great Recession, recounted how she decided to invest her

Table 1: Profile and occupational trajectories of interviewees in Airbnb, November 2020

Interview	Age	Gender	City	Education	Previous Occupation	Present Occupation in Accommodation
1	39	F	Lisbon	Degree in Environmental Engineering; Master's in Veterinary Medicine	Veterinarian ALEP former president	Full-time worker, Manager
2	45	M	Lisbon	Degree in Computer Engineering	Computer Engineer	Part-time owner and manager
3	40	F	Lisbon	Degree in Social Sciences and Humanities	Customer Marketing and Sales ALEP former president	ALEP former president; ALESC president; Full-time owner and manager
4	43	M	Porto	Secondary School	Room Assistance at Show House Accountant	Part-time worker, receptionist and room assistance at show house Part-time manager; owner; ALEP and ALESC Accountant
5	49	M	Porto	Bachelor of Accounting	Copywriter Translator Freelancer	Part-time worker, manager
6	40	F	Lisbon	Degree in Communication; Masters in Multimedia	Electrical Engineer	ALA President; owner
7	46	M	Azores	Degree in Computer Engineering	Lawyer	Full-time worker, manager and owner;
8	48	F	Porto	Degree in Law		

Table 1: Profile and occupational trajectories of interviewees in Airbnb, November 2020 (Continued)

Interview	Age	Gender	City	Education	Previous Occupation	Present Occupation in Accommodation
9	56	M	Algarve	Civil Engineering Degree	Civil Engineer	Full-time worker, manager, owner
10	49	F	Azores	Secondary School	Accountant; Medical Emergency Technician	Part-time Worker, owner and manager
11	52	M	Lisbon	Degree in Management	Partner; General Manager-Consultancy Services	AEP President/Owner
12	40	M	Porto	Degree in Architecture	Architect	Owner
13	42	F	Azores	Secondary School	Public Servant	Manager ALEP Board Member
14	40	M	Algarve	Degree in Management and Computer Systems	Computer Systems Technician	Full-time manager
15	30	M	Madeira	Civil Engineering Degree	Civil Engineer	Full-time manager
Average	44	F— 40%; M— 60%	Lisbon	80% Degree 20% Secondary School		

Source: Authors— Data from interviews.

compensation into the creation of an accommodation company only employing women. Nevertheless, during the pandemic she had had to lay off six of the nine workers.

Since 2011, I became precarious, unemployed and took advantage of this opportunity to create my own business ... Only employing women with open-ended employment contracts ... we had to lay off a lot of people, because we depended exclusively on tourism. [Interviewee 3, Woman, 40 years old]

Some interviewees mentioned that Airbnb hosting is a very unstable and seasonal activity, and that they therefore needed another main activity to obtain income to pay for their regular expenses.⁸ Their previous work experience varied across a variety of industries and professions, including veterinary, accountancy and research services, customer marketing, sales and engineering. In fact, there was a considerable mismatch between the qualifications of these workers and their professional roles in Airbnb. None of the interviewees had prior training or experience in the tourism sector, as in the case of this female interviewee:

I am a kind of a definition of precariousness due to my training, I've never worked in the area. I think it's the life story of someone who ends up in the Gig Economy. [Interviewee 3, Woman, 40 years old]

Most of the interviewees were married or in a marital relationship, but only a few had children. However, most of them were from the middle class, although there were cases, among the ancillary and the independent workers, who were from the proletariat. These had roles that were intermediary and invisible, mostly subcontracted through temporary work agencies, internship programmes created by the employment centre or family members, carrying out ancillary tasks such as cleaning, laundry, electrical maintenance, plumbing, gardening and food supply. The tasks of an Airbnb manager included not only the office work, but multiple interrelated tasks, all of which required total availability. A female manager, 39 years old, who had previously been a veterinarian, was a manager for third-party properties that she did not own, including other activities. For that she had to become an entrepreneur, even though she considered herself to be a bogus self-employed person, because, even though she could arrange her own schedule, she also had to fulfil specified tasks and had a contract with the people she represents.

I have to adapt to different situations, I don't just manage reservations, or payments, no. I have to manage reservations, payments, inspect the apartments, make inventories, purchases. Among all other things, I have to buy detergents, monitor cleaning, check if the handkerchiefs are okay, receive guests, talk to guests, clarify their doubts, recommend places. [Interviewee 1, Woman, 39 years old]

8 <http://www.airbnbitizen.com>

According to AirDNA reports⁹ (Short-Term Rental Data Analytics, Vrbo & Airbnb Data), during the pandemic outbreak the number of active listings on the Airbnb platform decreased from 20,000 to 10,942 in Lisbon. This is a service where only the strongest survive, with the remainder being affected by high levels of precariousness and vulnerability. This was the case for a 40-year-old female interviewee whose dismissal resulting from the Great Recession crisis led her occupational trajectory towards the Airbnb service. She was a freelance copywriter and translator simultaneously, while managing Airbnb.

Local accommodation was a project, a dream that I had for many years ... I kept putting it off because I had a stable job, until they fired me in 2014 ... I had a departure that was negotiated, with compensation that allowed me to continue to create my business and access to unemployment benefit ... In 2016 I opened a local accommodation activity as an independent worker, issuing green receipts.¹⁰ I ended up working in the local accommodation business because of circumstances. [Interviewee 6, Woman, 40 years old]

With the onset of the pandemic, there was a cancellation of bookings right across the tourism sector. One of our interviewees who was an Airbnb manager for third-party properties, and was on the green receipts regime, mentioned that she lost her Airbnb activity because most Airbnb platforms unilaterally cancelled all the reservations of their host customers, without any compensation.

In one week. I lost 4 months of reservations, and the worst thing was that the cancellation was unilateral and not managing the mess ... In the case of Airbnb, I felt completely unprotected ... it was irreversible. There was no amount of money that they could hand over to the managers to compensate, because the damage had already been done. In my case, it cost me my business. [Interviewee 6, Woman, 40 years old]

Another worker, who was simultaneously a receptionist for a third party and a manager for his husband's property, mentioned that the situation for hosts became very problematic during the pandemic, especially for informal workers:

There is currently no significant support, at least for some specific cases, namely for micro-enterprises, for individual entrepreneurs. And there needs to be an exemption of funds here so that many companies can survive, reach next year because there are many that are closing and facing serious financial problems ... If there was some way to get companies to provide employment contracts to workers, that would give them some stability and some security, although at the

9 AirDNA tracks the performance data of 10 million Airbnb and Vrbo vacation rentals. <https://www.airdna.co/vacation-rental-data/app/pt/lisboa/lisbon/overview>

10 An independent worker can be a self-employed professional or someone who provides services (e.g. on a freelance basis) or sells goods, either exclusively or in conjunction with a main activity. Self-employed workers must issue green receipts to prove that they have received payment for providing a certain service. However, despite officially being a service provider/independent/self-employed worker, in reality, he is a subordinate worker, dependent on the employer. <https://eportugal.gov.pt/guias/trabalhador-independente>

moment, having a contract and not having one is very similar. [Interviewee 4, Man, 43 years old]

The majority, who were independent workers, had to survive from their savings or with the help of their families, since they were not eligible for the extraordinary government support for workers' income.¹¹ It was only accessible to individual entrepreneurs in the apartment and housing sectors who opened a second independent activity and made social security contributions and/or payments.

This happened especially in the case of subcontractors, cleaning and laundry services and the independent workers, who only worked through Airbnb rental contracts and did not have fully formal accounts, because this work represented a supplement to their income.

In my case, I have a cleaning employee who works part-time, and she cannot access any support; layoffs are not for part-timers. Therefore, there is no support for part-time workers. [Interviewee 1, Woman, 39 years old]

One Airbnb manager indicated that she could only survive by maintaining her second professional activity, an intermittent one, as a freelance communication copywriter and translator:

During the pandemic everything came to a complete standstill [...] in my previous activity that I already had, managing local accommodation. I kept some clients and maintained the relationship I already had with them, because now that is what I am allowing myself to earn some income. [Interviewee 6, Woman, 40 years old]

Airbnb workers became hostages to precariousness and to the possibility of unemployment in a context of socioeconomic crisis, feeling powerless in the face of the fierce competitiveness of the market, being forced to reduce their workforce and close their businesses. As such, many were coerced into participating in games of acceptance and consent, maintaining informality, and receiving a daily cash payment in hand with the expectation of a future employment contract.

The context of socioeconomic vulnerability favours the generalisation of precarious work, informality and exploitation (Burawoy et al., 2000). On 31 March 2020, Brian Chesky, Executive President of Airbnb, as a consequence of numerous complaints from hosts, reconsidered his decision not to compensate workers for their losses during the COVID-19 lockdowns and refunded 25% of the normal cancellation fee, keeping a minimum percentage of the value of these reservations captive in the accounts of guests with vouchers.¹²

11 This procedure regulates the procedures for granting extraordinary income support to workers, created with the aim of ensuring the continuity of income for people in situations of particular economic lack of protection caused by the COVID-19 disease pandemic. <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/portaria/19-a-2021-155273784>

12 <https://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2020/03/31/airbnb-compensation-hosts-cost-covid19-cancellations/>; https://www.rtp.pt/noticias/covid-19/airbnb-tem-228-milhoes-de-euros-para-compensar-anfitrioes-por-cancelamentos-ate-31-de-maio_n1217041

Collective voice

Airbnb's business model is based on a high proportion of freelance workers who do not have a dependent employment relationship. Nevertheless, there are also bogus self-employed workers and salaried workers who, sometimes, can be found in informal and internship situations. Airbnb can be a very atomised and competitive activity, although there is no specific regulation to cover it for the Airbnb service. These hosts and workers are ignored by both unions and employers' associations, organising themselves into business associations with their own relevant dynamics, despite their lack of involvement in any process of social dialogue or collective agreements.

There is also a civic group of hosts, ALESC, and two business associations, ALEP and ALA. ALESC was created in 2014 representing the interests of the service on a *pro bono* basis and operating through a website and a Facebook group with 70,000 people, sharing information and knowledge. ALESC, according to its female coordinator, it is not an association, but a civic group unrelated to any political involvement, providing greater power of intervention by the representatives of this group and availability for dialogue with unions, municipalities and political parties.

In 2015, some of ALESC's members decided to create ALEP to represent the interests of the Airbnb service, lobbying the government, providing support to operators and members to engage at a national level with government authorities, city councils and tourism entities. Regarding more specific legal information issues, ALEP requires membership of the association, though an annual fee of 80 euros is charged, which includes civil liability insurance, which is mandatory for Mainland Portugal. ALEP's President said in the interview that this association reflects the diversity of Airbnb, representing around two-thirds of members who own between one and three properties. It has delegations in Mainland Portugal and the Autonomous Region of Madeira. In the Autonomous Region of Azores, Airbnb functioned as a major driving force for the entire local and regional economy, especially in the post-Troika period, functioning as an escape from the economic recession and creating a new dynamic economy in several areas.

No representation of Airbnb hosts and workers by traditional employer associations or unions was apparent in our interviews. In the case of the Azores, easy access to government and agencies and the morphology of the archipelago led to the creation of its own regional business association, ALA. However, in the Mainland and in the Madeira region, the traditional hotel sector is so dominant in employers' associations that Airbnb owners/workers do not wish to be represented by any interests other than those specific to Airbnb.

Our research suggests that Airbnb organisations are only interested in claiming broad representation to promote their lobbying activities with governments and other institutions in the tourism sector. According to an interviewed trade union expert, there is no interest from unions in short-term rental platforms, because most hosts are managers, entrepreneurs, and small or large business owners (Roque, 2021). However, this position is based on a misinterpretation, as many of these individuals are salaried workers and/or bogus self-employed workers, especially due to the myriad of roles that an Airbnb worker must perform. In this sense, every individual, whether defined as a digital, a platform or a regular worker and regardless of his or her social class or status,

should have access to protection in employment and unemployment. According to the Constitution, workers should be recognised as having freedom of association, a condition and guarantee for the construction of their unity to defend their rights and interests.

Discussion

From the analysis of these portraits, it became clear that Airbnb workers live in a constant state of instability, fearing the loss of their income, their dismissal, and inability to access their basic labour rights. It is not possible to build a career in the field, because it is not recognised as a professional category. Before and during the pandemic, most of these workers had to survive through a combination of taking on other activities, some informal, and drawing on their savings.

Although the 'uberisation' of the labour market leads to the fragmentation, intensification, exploitation and individualisation of work, at a certain point this process ends up generating forms of solidarity and/or organisation in business associations. That was the case for Airbnb employers and managers, who do not fit into the organisational schemes of traditional unions. The general profile of Airbnb workers indicates that most of them are older and more mature than average, owners of their means of production and economic, social and cultural capital. Some might argue that these individuals cannot be seen as conventional digital platform workers, but as capitalists. The majority of Airbnb workers do not perceive themselves as traditional digital platform workers, but as independent workers and freelancers (Roque, 2021). Our analysis of the precariousness of the working conditions of Airbnb workers reflects a process of erosion of wage patterns, full-time, and standardised working conditions, and barriers to accessing statutory protection rights. These workers have to struggle with high levels of precarity, sometimes working in situations of pluriactivity, short-term contracts or bogus self-employment (Moore & Newsome, 2018). This volatile workforce does not receive a fixed monthly salary, but a payment corresponding to the on-demand tasks performed, on a 'pay-as-you-go' basis, disregarding the periods when they are available for the guests (Irani & Silberman, 2013; De Stefano, 2016; Abílio, 2017).

They appear to have freedom and autonomy over their own work, but they are subject to the algorithm that operates on the Airbnb platform, where there is a transfer of risks from capital to the worker, who does not have access to social benefits. This transition from service worker to service provider, a process of subjectification, corroborates the narrative of the self-employed worker, combining elements both of being part of the bourgeoisie and proletariat (Kovács & Castillo, 1998; Scholz, 2016; Antunes, 2018; Perocco, Antunes & Basso, 2020). However, this complex subject has a business that is subject to algorithmic management and classification. It is a service that is dependent on platforms that mainly aim to facilitate work transactions, provide information, book services, carry the evaluation of the owner, manager or subcontracted ancillary worker but does not support the development of a genuinely autonomous enterprise. The Airbnb platform mediates physical management work carried out offline, and digital services and tasks carried out online, which are subject

to confirmation of completion and the devastating consequences of bad reviews by the customer and the platform, which can displace the property listing to a lower position on the webpage or lead to its deletion (Howcroft & Bergvall Kåreborn, 2018).

The relationship between the property and the socioeconomic status of Airbnb workers differs greatly from other digital platform workers, such as Uber drivers, and couriers. In some cases, managers and freelancers hold economic, social and cultural capital, with ownership of their means of production (in this case one or more houses or rooms), academic skills and capital negotiation power (Bourdieu, 1985). The housing crisis has exacerbated such power differences. According to Wright (1997), who has a structuralist class perspective and adopts a trajectory approach, there are multiple types of exploitation, which result from the combination of different mechanisms, derived, above all, from the class structure. This is based on an unequal distribution of resources and the exchange of goods in the market, which can be distinguished between alienable resources (physical goods, material property as in the case of Airbnb) and inalienable resources (abilities, skills, qualifications). The monopolisation of the former leads to capitalist structural exploitation, while the monopolisation of the latter can lead to other forms of exploitation of human resources, such as the management of the workforce and organisational resources, as well as the control of decision-making mechanisms in organisations. The dichotomy between invisible ancillary workers and visible managers/independent workers leads to contradictory locations within this class (Wright, 1984). In this sense, Airbnb workers are platform workers, belonging to the precariat or cyber proletariat, being affected by unstable working conditions where the context of socioeconomic vulnerability favours the generalisation of precarious work, informality and exploitation (Huws, 2003; Standing, 2014b). In general, the interviewees revealed a feeling of disappointment manifested through tiredness, discouragement and frustration, leading to vulnerable and uncertain precarious lives and the reproduction and perpetuation of precarity (Lewchuk, Clarke & De Wolff, 2008; Gallie, 2009; Kalleberg, 2011, 2018; Standing, 2011). Precarious work is unpredictable, unstable, and insecure, subjecting workers to uncertain and low incomes, professional disqualification, insecurity and risks such as lack of access to social benefits and legal protections (Rodgers, 1989; Kalleberg, 2000; Vosko, 2010; Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013; Hewison, 2016).

Conclusions

This article has aimed to portray the reality of Airbnb activity in Portugal. The occupational trajectories of independent workers are constantly and deeply affected by the poly-crisis scenario that has grown in the twenty-first century, leading to intermittent, informal and precarious occupational trajectories of the worker, having repercussions over time, in a logic of constant readaptation of the employment and unemployment status (Carmo, Caleiras, Roque & Assis, 2021). The scenario of deregulation and labour flexibility is perpetuated through precarious, flexible and informal work regimes (Roque, Boavida & Moniz, 2023). In 2021, the European Commission drafted a new proposal with widespread political support, approved on 9

November, entitling platform workers to have a contract, a minimum wage, access to social benefits, and other legal protections. In May 2023, the Portuguese Green Paper on the Future of Work and the governmental Agenda for Decent Work implemented the presumption of an employment contract provided by the Portuguese Law 13/2023, of 3 April, in Article 12 of the Portuguese Labour Code only in relation to some platform workers, such as couriers and transport in an uncharacterised vehicle from an electronic platform (TVDE— transporte em veículo descaracterizado a partir de plataforma eletrónica) excluding Airbnb. This made Portugal the first legal system to have such a wide presumption being applied to digital platforms allowing workers to access a contract and labour rights. Nevertheless, this was only applied to delivery platforms, disregarding legislation discussion by the government for the Airbnb service, perpetuating situations of (bogus) self-employment and informality (Moore & Newsome, 2018).

In 2023, the Portuguese government began limiting the growth of the Airbnb business in Portugal. To address the country's housing crisis, the government approved a package of new laws and regulations prohibiting the possibility of granting new licences for short-term rentals in urban centres.¹³ In a context of a growing deregulated digital platform economy, which leads to greater flexibility, but also uncertainty about the future, will we continue to see the fragmentation of the working class and the perpetuation of precariousness and informality? The portraits of our interviewees revealed life trajectories filled with uncertainty and precariousness, where the multiplicity of roles and tasks that an Airbnb worker can assume and perform, from an owner/host to a manager, to a mere laundry worker, can imply different types of contracts. However, when these workers find themselves in situations of unemployment and income deprivation, not all of them are able to access social and government support or even survive with the help of a social network, such as family and friends. More worrying is that the trends of informality and uberisation of work are spreading to other sectors of the traditional economy. Are platform workers assuming that they 'own themselves', perceiving themselves as their own employers, while becoming 'proletarians of themselves'? (Filgueiras & Antunes, 2020:77; Perocco. Antunes & Basso, 2020). In this context of the metamorphosis of capitalism, how can unions reinvent themselves, expressing openness to dialogue and engage in negotiation, playing a relevant role in the issue of legislation and collective agreement regarding platform workers?

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¹³ <https://mundoconectado.com.br/noticias/v/31710/portugal-proibe-novos-airbnbs-e-restringe-novos-vistos-para-estrangeiros>

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