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*Mobility as a lens of social engagement in the urban context:
The case of Florence university students*

Keywords: mobility, social engagement, university students, urban context, Florence.

Mobility has long been recognised by the social sciences as a particularly effective lens through which to analyse the functioning of an urban system from multiple perspectives. This study focuses on both routine and leisure mobility of the student population – a significant component in a university city like Florence – to examine both the adoption of sustainable mobility models and the extent and forms of participation in the city's socio-cultural life. The study demonstrates the efficacy of analysing mobility as a methodological tool in urban social research, highlighting its potential to detect dynamics of inclusion and/or exclusion.

La mobilità come lente di coinvolgimento sociale nel contesto urbano: il caso degli studenti universitari a Firenze

Parole chiave: mobilità, coinvolgimento sociale, studenti universitari, contesto urbano, Firenze.

La mobilità è stata da tempo riconosciuta dalle scienze sociali come una lente particolarmente efficace per analizzare da più prospettive il funzionamento di un sistema urbano. Questo studio si concentra sulla mobilità sia di routine che di svago della popolazione studentesca – componente rilevante in una città universitaria come Firenze – per esaminare sia l'eventuale presa di modelli di mobilità sostenibile, sia la misura e le forme della partecipazione alla vita socio-culturale cittadina. Lo studio dimostra l'efficacia dell'analisi della mobilità come strumento metodologico nella ricerca sociale urbana, mettendo in luce il suo potenziale nel rilevare dinamiche di inclusione e/o di esclusione.

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1. INTRODUCTION. – Mobility studies have seen a revival in recent years, moving beyond a purely quantitative, transport-oriented perspective towards a more social understanding of accessibility (Cresswell, 2006). This renewed approach recognises that access to places or services is a core aspect of our engagement with space, influencing not only practical daily routines but also shaping opportunities for social participation, interaction and identity formation. Moreover, mobility is not solely determined by physical and technical factors but is also shaped by social dimensions such as age, gender, socio-economic background, income and disability among others. Recognising these social influences enables us to reframe mobility as a socio-spatial practice – a network through which contemporary social life is articulated. This perspective shifts our focus from people merely moving from one place to another, to understanding how these movements reflect and impact broader socio-cultural structures, thereby providing deeper insights into the social implications of mobility¹.

This paradigm shift has revealed a plethora of structural and individual factors which determine mobility behaviours and which either facilitate or hinder access to resources, services and opportunities for urban engagement and participation (Tyrinopoulos and Antoniou, 2012). Mobility demand comprises distinct segments with specific needs and reflects the diverse composition of society (Dillman *et al.*, 2021), but urban mobility policies, often grounded in utilitarian engineering approaches, struggle to address these different needs of the various social groups, with consequences for the system's efficiency. Such approaches often fail to account for the ways in which mobility practices combine with social interactions, contributing to urban vibrancy or exclusion. More importantly, they can exacerbate social inequalities by neglecting the mobility challenges faced by vulnerable groups, such as low-income individuals and people with disabilities, unintentionally reinforcing disparities rather than mitigating them (Rolfe, 2017).

Within this context, our paper focuses on a specific segment of urban mobility demand – university students. This group was selected for its distinctive characteristics: students tend to have relatively sustainable lifestyles, are highly mobile, and are in a formative life stage, where social behaviours take shape (Cadima *et al.*, 2020). As students navigate their early independent years, their mobility practices reveal not only their immediate needs and preferences, but also their capacity to shape urban dynamics and social life (Whalen *et al.*, 2013). Thus, analysing how university students move around the city – both in their routine movements and during their free time – is a first step to interpreting their impact on the city's social, economic and cultural fabric. Besides, for the city itself, understanding

¹ For a reading of the mobility system as a metaphor for the social system, see Adey and Bissel (2010).

students' mobility patterns provides insights into how to better accommodate this demographic, improving both the students' urban experience and the city's capacity to foster inclusion and vibrancy.

Exploring students' travel motivations, their modes of accessing campus, the places they visit outside the university, and their leisure activities is particularly relevant, as the mobility patterns and lifestyles they adopt now may have a lasting impact on their future behaviours and engagement with the urban setting (Ryan and Huimin, 2007)². Leisure mobility, in particular, provides a window into the social lives and interactions that contribute to the making of urban settings, as they are often indicative of broader lifestyle preferences, encompassing pastimes that students actively and freely choose to engage in for enjoyment, relaxation and social interaction (Mosonyi *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, factors related to housing – such as location, cost, composition and level of satisfaction – affect where and how students choose to spend their free time (Franz and Gruber, 2022), as well as the places and activities they might avoid (Cook *et al.*, 2022). By understanding such interconnected choices, we can paint a more accurate picture of the reciprocal relationship between students and the city, which can inform policies aimed at supporting their social integration and participation (Cicognani *et al.*, 2007).

In this paper, we aim to bridge gaps in our understanding of the student world and its relationship with the urban setting by analysing this group's mobility demand using Florence as our case study location. Florence, with a student population estimated to be 56,000³ (approximately 15% of the total population of 362,613⁴), provides an ideal setting for a student-centred study. The city's rich cultural landscape, compact layout and high-density, create a context where student mobility choices can reveal interesting interactions with the urban setting, yielding results that are useful for both academic research and urban policy.

Our research question is: To what extent can mobility serve as a methodological lens for exploring social dynamics? We will address this question by investigating university students' mobility in Florence, focusing on both routine trips to university and leisure movements when accessing their pastimes, with the further motive of understanding how these choices reflect their engagement with the city. In doing so, we will look into the factors influencing their modal choices, the impact of available infrastructure on these choices, the extent to which environ-

² See Zasina (2021), *The student urban leisure sector: Towards commercial studentification?* for a discussion on how the leisure venues that students populate, and activities they engage in, betray the nuanced roles they take on as actors of urban change.

³ See Università degli Studi di Firenze. *International Students Guide* at www.unifi.it/sites/default/files/migrated/documents/international_students_guide.pdf.

⁴ See ISTAT (2025). *Population data for Florence*. Retrieved 18 January, 2025, from <http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?QueryId=18561>.

mental considerations influence their decisions towards sustainable transport, and how their engagement with shared public spaces shapes urban dynamics.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: First, we will look at some of the main literature on mobility as a methodological tool for exploring social dynamics, as well as literature on the significance of examining university students' relationship with the city; next, we will present our methodological approach; we will then examine and discuss the data collected on UniFi students' mobility choices for routine and leisure trips, using this information as a lens through which we can aim to understand students' relationship with the city; finally, we will conclude by highlighting the study's key findings⁵.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Mobility as a lens for urban social dynamics. – Mobility embodies freedom and the capacity to move, and encompasses both spatial and social dimensions (Kristensen *et al.*, 2023). Beyond the mere flow of transport through physical space and time, it functions as social capital, simultaneously reflecting and shaping social hierarchies (Stroope, 2021). In this sense, it serves as an indicator of individuals' access to resources, underscoring disparities within society based on the availability, quality and accessibility of mobility-related assets. This duality qualifies it as a lens through which urban dynamics, social life, and broader societal transformations become visible (Kaufmann, 2014). For this reason, mobility can act as a policy tool, offering insights from daily trajectories that reveal people's use of urban spaces, enabling the design of policies aligned with real-life urban engagement patterns (Ahas *et al.*, 2010).

Vermeersch and van Dijk (2024) view mobility as a critical social phenomenon that illuminates social dynamics, power relations and urban engagement. Here, mobility transcends logistical concerns and emerges as a social process with profound implications for urban identity and inclusivity, recognised across research fields for the insights it can offer into urban residents' lifestyles and the processes that shape cities (Wang *et al.*, 2022). This perspective has also opened the way for examining mobility spaces as microcosms of urban life (Bovo *et al.*, 2022), where everyday interactions unfold, and for focusing on the relationships, negotiations and exchanges that occur in mobile spaces. It is in this vein that Tuvikene *et al.* (2023) propose that public transport be regarded as public space – as it serves as a social arena where encounters between diverse demographics shape the inclusivity of urban life. Following this logic, transport serves more as a means to achieve broader aims than an end in itself (Kent, 2022). Driving a

⁵ Throughout this paper, “UniFi students” refers to students at the University of Florence.

car, for instance, is not just a physical act of movement, but it is driven by underlying needs – caring for others, connecting with people or accessing resources. Understanding mobility as a socio-cultural process, therefore, requires an understanding of these underlying motivators, and the interactions that occur within urban spaces, rather than an understanding of the physical movements themselves (Kent, 2022).

This shift in how mobility is conceptualised has subsequently led to a shift in how it is studied. The importance of qualitative methods for understanding underlying motivators and analysing segments of mobility demand is now unanimously accepted, especially when it comes to exploring mechanisms of social exclusion (Røe, 2000). Such approaches provide a deeper understanding of why individuals make certain choices, allowing researchers to delve into the social dimensions of mobility, and to illuminate persistent challenges that can go undetected in purely quantitative studies. Ultimately, the effectiveness of mobility research could be significantly enhanced by prioritising a thoughtful integration of both qualitative and quantitative methods, rather than favouring one over the other. This integration aligns with Książkiewicz (2012) who advocates a combined approach, acknowledging that while quantitative methods are indispensable for large-scale empirical data and predictive modelling, qualitative approaches are necessary for understanding the behaviours, needs and values of diverse social groups⁶. Mixed-methods frameworks, particularly in transdisciplinary mobility research, align with current calls for mobility studies aimed at designing systems that are responsive to the needs of various social groups (Rosano, 2019), enhancing efficiency and providing an equity lens, by allowing researchers to explore both broader patterns and finer social dimensions (Wu and Zhou, 2023).

2.2 University students' role in shaping urban contexts. – University students represent a distinctive demographic marked by mobility, adaptation and identity formation. Worsley *et al.* (2021) assert this group's significance for its transitional stage of life, during which students shape and are shaped by their urban environments. Since the 1970s, researchers have recognised students as a key study group for understanding the urban setting, given their influence on social, cultural and economic urban dynamics⁷. By engaging with the city, students contribute to its socio-economic and cultural fabric, and cities, in turn, shape students' everyday

⁶ An example of the usefulness of an integrated approach can be found in Derevensky and Gupta's (2001) research.

⁷ Castells' *The Urban Question* (1972) marked a shift towards students, by looking into the socio-spatial dynamics of urban populations and laying foundational ideas about how students engage with the urban. Although not exclusively focused on students, Castells' work highlighted the importance of demographic-specific urban identities, which paved the way for later studies on students' roles in place-making.

experiences (Chatterton, 1999). This reciprocity between students and the city has led to student-centred approaches designed to reveal how urban environments influence young, transient populations and vice versa (Savino *et al.*, 2024).

Savino *et al.* (2024) have shown that universities in medium-sized cities are central to urban identity and infrastructure, echoing findings by Blizek and Simpson (1978) on the urban university's impact on its city and residents. Both studies suggest the integral role of universities in urban development, where students catalyse both immediate and lasting changes within the city. Building on this, Cisneros (1995) argues that students actively engage with and learn from the city, which serves as an “ideal setting for learning about how society works and how to improve it”. This is a place where students have the opportunity to “put their ideas and ideals into practice in a real-world context where their actions can make a real difference” (Cisneros, 1995, p. 6)⁸. This view frames students not just as observers but as active participants in urban life, contributing to the dynamic socio-spatial fabric of the city.

Participation in urban life is of course influenced by their housing conditions, which affect students' relationship with the city, and even more, their relationship with the city centre (Nash and Mitra, 2019). Proximity to the city centre not only enhances social interactions, but also integrates it into students' routines as a space for socialising and recreation. Satisfaction with one's living environment and participation in leisure activities contributes to overall well-being, particularly when the setting offers a balance of vibrant social life and comfort (Sirgy *et al.*, 2006). In this context, the students' sense of belonging and satisfaction with their university city is influenced by the availability of affordable housing, efficient transport and safe and vibrant social spaces (Insch and Sun, 2013). This dynamic holds particular importance in historic and touristic cities like Florence, where a distinctive urban space warrants a targeted exploration of how students engage with its social setting⁹.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data Collection. – In this study, we have opted for a combined approach, employing both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, aligning with the recommendations of Książkiewicz (2012). This approach allows us

⁸ This concept builds off Blizek and Simpson's (1978) work on the “urban university”. While the presence of the university plays a significant role in the intellectual life of the city, the city can play an important role in the intellectual development of the student body (the university).

⁹ See Bologna *et al.* (2023) for an in-depth exploration of student housing conditions within the distinct context of Florence, a city that embodies both the characteristics of a university hub and a popular tourist destination.

to balance the large-scale empirical scope of quantitative data with the deeper insights offered by qualitative methods, particularly in understanding the social dimensions of mobility as highlighted by Røe (2000). By adopting this mixed-methods framework, we aim to capture the broader patterns of student mobility while also exploring the motivations, behaviours and social interactions that shape their engagement with the city.

In the first stage, standardised questionnaires with predominantly open-ended questions were distributed to 2,006 students (accounting for 3.7% of the total students enrolled in the University of Florence) to gather information on routine and leisure movements. The questionnaire, which comprised a total of 18 questions, was conducted between May and June 2022. Open-ended questions were chosen for several reasons: first, to minimise the risk of leading the participants, thereby reducing potential bias; second, to capture the context and underlying reasons behind participants' responses as effectively as possible, which was critical for this study. Participants were given written questionnaires to allow sufficient time to reflect and formulate their answers, and they were approached in person at all the different UniFi sites, ensuring a wide representation across the university. To assess the representativeness of the sample, we compared the distribution of participants across the various schools at UniFi with the overall enrolment data. The sample achieved reasonable alignment with most faculties, except for the School of Engineering, which was overrepresented by 10.5%.

The qualitative component of the study involved semi-structured interviews. In May 2022, interviews to 14 UniFi students were conducted. These participants, a mix of Italian and foreign students, were selected based on their willingness to engage in extended conversations about their mobility choices, allowing for a deeper exploration of their experiences. In June 2023, the data from these interviews was supplemented by another 21 interviews of UniFi students during the Urban Workshop "I Live in Florence". This workshop, part of the UniFi Master's programme in *Geography, Spatial Management, Heritage for International Cooperation*, held at the Casa del Popolo di San Niccolò, provided extended access to participants and the opportunity to delve further into their mobility practices¹⁰.

3.2 Sampling and Data Analysis. – The questionnaire respondents accounted for 3.7% of the total students enrolled in the University of Florence. Of these participants, 62% were female and 37% male¹¹, providing a diverse representation of the student body. While the study concentrated on students, the sample was

¹⁰ See Bourlessas P. and Puttilli M. (2024). "Is this the city of beauty?": facilitating critical student subjectivities through a creative place-based urban geography workshop in Florence, Italy. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 1-18. DOI: 10.1080/03098265.2024.2403064

¹¹ According to official University of Florence data, the gender distribution of UniFi students is 58.4% women and 41.6% men (reference year 2021-22).

non-targeted in that it did not focus on any particular department, gender, or age group. This approach was chosen to provide a broad, representative view of the student body and to avoid bias towards any specific sub-group, maintaining the diversity of the university's population. The recruitment strategy aimed to ensure that the sample represented students from a range of campuses and demographics, with a focus on understanding how they socially engage with the city.

Upon completion, the questionnaire responses were transcribed by the researchers, coded, and processed using SPSS software for quantitative analysis. The collected data was analysed quantitatively using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, means and cross-tabulations, to identify patterns in students' mobility behaviours as they engage with the city. Additionally, correlations between key variables, such as mode of transport and frequency of use, were examined in order to explore associations that shed light on students' social interactions and engagement within Florence. This approach allowed us to draw conclusions on how students' mobility choices reflect broader social behaviours and connections within the urban context. The interview transcripts were analysed qualitatively through thematic analysis, focusing on uncovering key themes and patterns in students' mobility practices and their social engagement with the city.



Source: LaGes, 2024.

Fig. 1 - Spatial divisions used to classify students' reported living locations

3.3 Living Arrangements. – In the context of this study, it is important to first clarify the distinction between “residence” (*residenza*) and “domicile” (*domicilio*), as defined in Article 43 of the Italian Civil Code¹². While “residence” refers to the place where a person habitually lives, “domicile” refers to the location where they have established the principal seat of their affairs and interests. For students, this distinction is significant, as many maintain their formal residence at their family home while establishing their domicile in the city where they study. However, in this study, the two terms are used interchangeably to refer to the place where students have reported to live during their studies, regardless of their formal registration. This approach ensures that our analysis reflects the active student population engaging with the Florentine urban environment – both those whose formal residence is in Florence and those who have established their domicile there for the duration of their studies – allowing us to better assess students’ impact on the city’s socio-economic and cultural fabric, as both groups play a role in shaping its public spaces and local dynamics.

Based on their reported living arrangements, students were divided into six categories: City of Florence, Wider Florentine Area¹³, Rest of the Metropolitan City, Municipalities of the FI-PO-PT Metropolitan area¹⁴, Other Municipality in Tuscany, and Other Italian or Foreign Municipality. Four categories together constitute the metropolitan area (City of Florence, Wider Florentine Area, Rest of the Metropolitan City, and Municipalities of the FI-PO-PT Metropolitan area), as shown in Figure 1, which is well-connected by a public transport network.

More than half (55%) of the students reported living in the City of Florence. Including those living in the Wider Florentine Area, as shown in section C of Figure 1, brings the total to two-thirds of the sample. Adding students who live in the Rest of the Metropolitan City (section D) or the Municipalities of the FI-PO-PT Metropolitan area (section E) increases the total to 89.7% of the sample. Thus, just under 90% of the students interviewed reported living in the City of Florence and the surrounding metropolitan area. However, this does not imply that they have legal residence (*residenza*) in Florence; rather, it indicates where they are based during their studies. Students who reported living in the remaining two categories (Other Tuscan Municipality and Other Italian or Foreign Municipality) amount to 10.3% of the sample (Fig. 2). Following the DSU Toscana definition, these students are categorized as “off-campus” (*fuori*

¹² See Art. 43 of the Italian Civil Code, which defines domicile and residence. Available at Gazzetta Ufficiale.

¹³ These are the Municipalities of Florence, Bagno a Ripoli, Campi Bisenzio, Fiesole, Impruneta, Scandicci, Sesto Fiorentino, Lastra a Signa, Signa and Calenzano.

¹⁴ On the ways that Florence-Prato-Pistoia are functionally connected in a metropolitan area, despite the fact that they were not recognised as a metropolitan area at the time of the passing of Law 142/90, see Romei (1998).

sede), as their living location is in a municipality different from the main location of their course of study, with public transport travel times exceeding one hour¹⁵. While our survey does not capture the distinction between formal residence and actual living arrangements, it highlights how students' reported living locations shape their mobility practices and engagement with the city.



Source: LaGes, 2024.

Fig. 2 - Share of students by living location

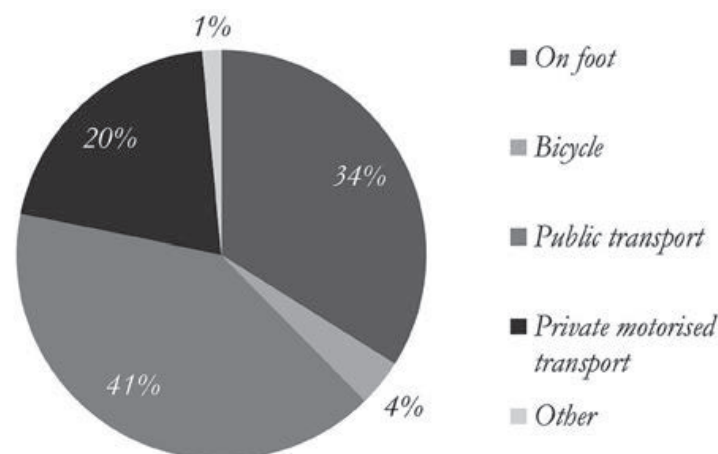
4. DISCUSSION. – This section investigates the mobility patterns of university students in Florence, analysing first their routine trips and the factors influencing their modal choices, and then their reported living arrangements, pastimes, leisure trips and urban practices. As previously stated, by enquiring into these aspects of their movement and using mobility as a methodological tool, we aim to understand their decision-making process, and how their mobility patterns and lifestyles shape their engagement with the urban setting.

4.1 *Routine mobility and academic spaces.* – In the first part of the discussion, we begin by examining the modes of transport students use to reach the university. A significant 32.7% of our student sample take the train to campus, using the railway towards Florence from the northwest (Florence-Prato-Pistoia line), west (Florence-Empoli-Pisa), southeast (Florence-Figline-Arezzo) and north (Faentina). Notably, 20% of the students who reported living in the Wider Florentine Area and 75% of those who indicated living in the Municipalities of the FI-PO-PT

¹⁵ For the DSU Toscana definition of a student off-campus (*fuori sede*), see www.dsu.toscana.it/posto-alloggio.

Metropolitan area or the Rest of the Metropolitan City reach Florence by train. Only 2.6% of the students interviewed use the regional bus, and this group almost exclusively refers to those living in Municipalities outside the FI-PO-PT Metropolitan area.

Examining travel modes specifically within the City of Florence – including students who arrive in Florence by train or regional bus, once they have actually entered the city – reveals interesting patterns (Fig. 3). Nearly 80% of students make sustainable modal choices, accessing the university on foot (34%), by public transport (41%) or by bicycle; only one-fifth use private motorised transport. While this reflects a significant uptake of sustainable mobility among students within the city, it is important to note that these findings cannot be directly compared with the general population data from the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan of Florence (PUMS), which measures overall modal share, including both trips within Florence and commutes into the city from surrounding areas. According to the PUMS, 75% of trips are made by car or motorcycle, while only 25% use public transport or bicycle¹⁶. But although the two datasets differ in scope, the contrast does show that students, as a demographic group, engage more with sustainable modes of transport when navigating the city. More specifically, 35.3% of our student sample reach Florence using public transport, highlighting their commitment to sustainable mobility during their commute and within the city, which reflects a more general inclination towards environmentally friendly practices among students.



Source: LaGes, 2024.

Fig. 3 - Share of students by living location

¹⁶ See Urban Plan for Sustainable Mobility (PUMS) of the Metropolitan City of Florence and its environmental report, 2019, Appendix 1, p. 5.

Besides, this inclination towards more sustainable mobility can be explained by the fact that students, being younger, are generally more physically able and willing to move on foot (Muñoz *et al.*, 2016), and they are less likely to own a car due to economic reasons (Danaf *et al.*, 2014). Also, beyond these practical considerations, said inclination may also reflect a desire to experience and interact with the urban space in a socially active way. This would align with Vermeersch and van Dijk (2024) who conceptualise mobility as a social phenomenon, emphasising that walking is not merely a mode of transport, but a way to actively engage with the socio-spatial fabric of the city – it transforms the routine commute into a form of urban participation. By traversing public spaces on foot, students become visible actors in the urban context, creating opportunities for spontaneous social encounters. This form of interaction reaffirms their role as active participants in the Florentine social life, engaging with physical spaces and with the socio-cultural dynamics that define these spaces (Castells, 1972).

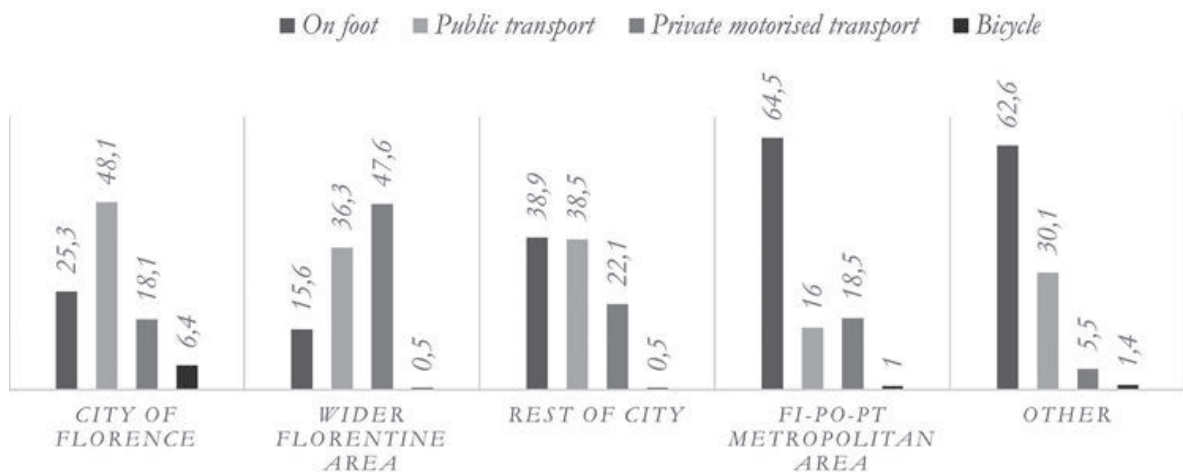
Kashif, a 23-year-old master's student currently living near Piazza della Libertà, provides an example of this dynamic. He explains, "I walk to class because my finances don't allow me to use public transport every day and I haven't got a bus pass. But walking to uni has given me the chance to get to know the city, to stay physically active and also socially active". While he does not provide specific examples, his reflections suggest a growing sense of familiarity with Florence and its rhythms – an engagement that goes beyond the practicalities of transport and contributes to a deeper connection with the city's environment. His account shows how walking, shaped by financial constraints, becomes a means of both practical mobility and meaningful social engagement, allowing students to navigate the city affordably while building connections with its spaces and people¹⁷.

Using public transport also offers opportunities for social engagement, as literature identifies it as a public space that facilitates mobile encounters across diverse groups and neighbourhoods (Bovo *et al.*, 2023). Both walking and public transport foster communal experiences that contrast with the isolation associated with private vehicle use (Tuvikene *et al.*, 2023). And Kashif's narrative underlines the dual role of sustainable mobility modes in enabling both physical accessibility and meaningful social interactions, and shows mobility to be not a mere logistical concern, but a socio-cultural practice through which students contribute to the shaping of Florence's urban identity.

Students who live in Florence at the time of the survey (the largest group in the sample) make sustainable modal choices in 80% of cases – 25% access the university on foot, 48% by public transport and only 6.4% by bicycle; meanwhile, 18%

¹⁷ While the interviewees included both Italian and foreign students, the quotations presented in this paper predominantly feature foreign students, as their experiences often highlighted more complex aspects of mobility, offering richer perspectives for the analysis.

use private motorised transport to reach the university campus. Similarly, 80% of students who reported living in the Municipalities of the FI-PO-PT Metropolitan area, and over 77% of those who reported living in the Rest of the Metropolitan City, travel to Florence using sustainable modes. However, the percentage drops to 52% for students living in the Wider Florentine Area (Fig. 4).



Source: LaGes, 2024.

Fig. 4 - Travel mode in the City of Florence by students' living location

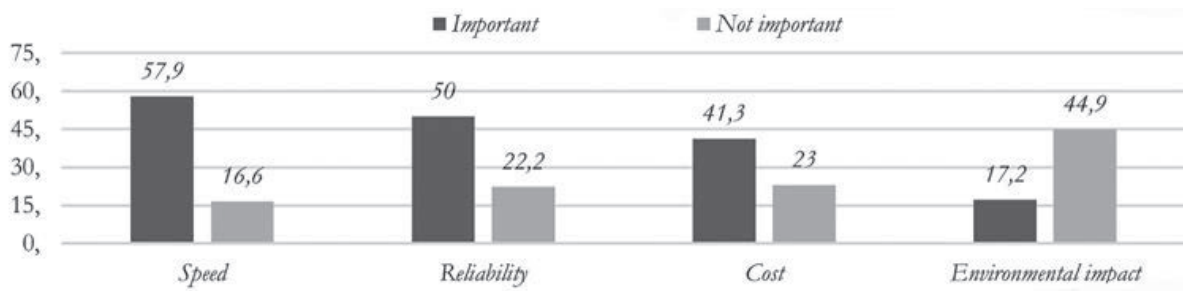
The high percentages of walking and public transport use among students living in the City of Florence suggest that proximity to university encourages the use of sustainable mobility (Fig. 4). Besides, shorter distances not only make walking feasible, but also provide opportunities for students to experience the city's spaces more deeply, fostering social engagement with the urban environment, as Kashif's account shows. The Rest of the Metropolitan City and the Municipalities of the FI-PO-PT Metropolitan area are well-connected to Florence through frequent regional trains, allowing students to directly and quickly access the city and, from there, reach their university site on foot. This connectivity explains the impressively high numbers of students travelling on foot in these two cases (Fig. 4).

Conversely, the decline in sustainable mobility choices among students who reported living in the Wider Florentine Area (Fig. 4) indicates that infrastructural gaps – especially a lack of direct public transport routes – limit their ability to engage with these modes of transport. This reflects unequal access to mobility-related resources, which Kaufmann (2014) identifies as a significant barrier to achieving social and spatial inclusion. Pablo, a geography student currently living in San Jacopino, illustrates this challenge, describing how the lack of direct routes

forces him to navigate through Florence's central train station area (Santa Maria Novella) to get from San Jacopino to Porta Romana. He explains, "It's really difficult to reach other parts of the city without passing through the centre. For example, if I wanted to go from San Jacopino to Porta Romana, I would *have* to pass through Santa Maria Novella. So, I'm forced to struggle with the traffic and the weather and the tourists, and lose time; and I haven't even chosen this route, so I don't have an active role in the situation". Pablo's frustration shows how infrastructural shortcomings not only reduce mobility efficiency but also undermine a sense of autonomy and control. His narrative emphasises how infrastructure design can affect the quality and intentionality of mobility, suggesting that students in better-connected areas may experience greater autonomy in their journeys.

We assessed the importance students place on different factors when choosing their mode of transport to university, asking them to rank the following factors in terms of importance: speed, reliability, cost, comfort, safety and environmental impact. Given the rising environmental awareness globally and the frequent positioning of students as advocates of sustainability, we anticipated environmental impact to rank higher among this demographic. However, previous research suggests that environmental awareness does not necessarily translate into sustainable behaviours (Bozdoğan Sert *et al.*, 2016), and our findings align with this observation. Speed and reliability – especially in terms of predicting travel time – are the most important factors for nearly 60% and 50% of the students respectively. Cost ranks third in importance, reflecting students' financial limitations. Interestingly, comfort and safety appear less critical, possibly due to Florence being perceived as a relatively safe city, despite official statistics indicating significant variations across different types of crime¹⁸. Finally environmental impact is considered very important by only 17% of the respondents, and unimportant by 45% (Fig. 5).

¹⁸ For official statistics on crimes reported to judicial authorities by the State Police, Carabinieri and Guardia di Finanza, see ISTAT's database on security and crime (<http://dati.istat.it/>). According to the latest data, Florence reports higher-than-average rates of property-related crimes, including theft and pickpocketing, but relatively lower rates of violent crimes compared to other major Italian cities. However, while official statistics provide an objective measure of crime rates, public perception of safety also plays a significant role in shaping mobility choices. According to Numbeo's crowd-sourced safety index (www.numbeo.com/crime/in/Florence), the feeling of safety when walking alone during daylight in Florence is 78.69/100 (high), while at night it drops to 50.65/100 (moderate), which means that while property crimes are a documented concern, Florence is still perceived as a generally safe city in terms of personal security.



Source: LaGes, 2024.

Fig. 5 - Importance assigned to different factors

These findings suggest that environmental concerns are not the primary drivers of students' modal choices. Despite an increasing global focus on sustainability and the reasonable expectation that students might prioritise these values, it becomes evident that practical factors, like speed, reliability and cost take precedence in shaping routine transport choices among UniFi students (Fig. 5). This highlights that, although students may be aware of sustainability issues, their mobility practices are influenced mainly by the need to navigate their routines efficiently within the urban space, with environmental considerations playing a secondary role. So our results align with Kent (2022) who has shown that mobility choices are primarily shaped by underlying needs such as accessing resources or connecting with others.

Considering this focus on efficiency then, examining the actual travel times students experience seems apt. Given the high proportion of students who reported living in the City of Florence or in well-connected areas (Fig. 1), the travel time required to reach the university sites is generally short. Although the average time is 38 minutes, more than 56% of university students manage to reach campus in less than half an hour. Travel times vary, of course, depending on students' reported place of living, so in order to deepen our understanding of the students' modal choice, it was necessary to focus specifically on those living in Florence at the time of the survey¹⁹, who still account for more than half of the total students enrolled at the University of Florence. For them, the average travel time to the university is 22 minutes. The shortest value corresponds to travelling on foot (15 minutes), followed closely by travelling by bicycle or scooter (17 minutes). Higher values – nonetheless still relatively low – are associated with trips made by car and public transport (Table 1).

¹⁹ It was not possible to include in the analysis students reaching Florence by train or regional bus because of the difficulty in distinguishing between the time taken to reach the city and the time taken from the point of arrival in Florence to the university campus.

Table 1 - Average travel time to the university campus

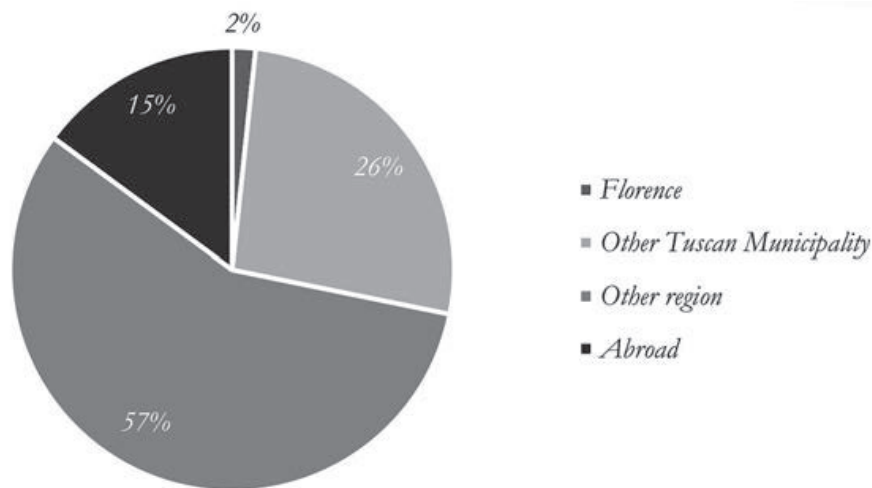
<i>Transport Mode</i>	<i>On foot</i>	<i>Scooter</i>	<i>Car</i>	<i>Bus</i>	<i>Tram</i>	<i>Bicycle</i>
Travel time in minutes	15.62	17.56	21.29	24.83	23.79	17.56

To synthesise our findings thus far, our exploration of students' routine mobility reveals several insights into their social interactions with the urban space. First, students in general prefer to walk or use public transport, which reflects a commitment to sustainable mobility, as well as a more pronounced need to socially engage in the urban context. Second, when there is the possibility to walk, and where there are direct public transport connections, students tend to choose these modes to access their university site, which attests to a desire to assume an active and visible role within the urban space. Third, students prioritise efficiency, punctuality and affordability in their journeys to class, seeking modes that minimise travel time while avoiding delays and disruptions. Consequently, walking emerges as the preferred mode in this regard, as it aligns with the factors students consider most critical – speed, reliability and cost. Fourth, walking consistently offers the shortest travel times, further validating its suitability as the most efficient, direct and dependable option for students' commutes. Moreover, walking fosters a physically and socially active presence within the city, enabling students to get to know the city and connect with Florence's spaces and its residents on a more personal level.

4.2 Leisure mobility and social spaces. – Differently from the previous section, where the emphasis was on student's routine mobility and the practical considerations that guide their choices, this section shifts focus to students' leisure mobility, which provides deeper insights into their social engagement with the city. By examining their leisure trips and the spaces they favour or avoid during their free time, we look to understand how students interact with Florence's socio-spatial dynamics, particularly in the historic centre.

The transition to university life marks a milestone in a young adult's journey towards independence and autonomy (Worsley *et al.*, 2021). For many students, this period represents their first significant opportunity to organise daily life separately from their families, embracing new responsibilities and freedoms (Cadima *et al.*, 2020). This shift naturally influences and is also reflected in their living arrangements, as well as their active role in Florence's socio-spatial and cultural fabric (Franz and Gruber, 2022; Cook *et al.*, 2022). In our study we found that while 64% of the students continue to live in the same house as their families, 36% move out of the family household and live independently for the duration of their studies. More than half of the students living independently (so half of the 36%) come from

other Italian regions; just over a quarter come from another Tuscan municipality²⁰, and 15% come from abroad (Fig. 6). Notably, only 2% of those *not* living with their families are from the City of Florence, while a substantial 40% of those living in Florence at the time of the survey continue to live with their parents.



Source: LaGes, 2024.

Fig. 6 - Previous place of living of UniFi students now living independently

Students living independently settle almost without exception (92% of cases) in the City of Florence (Fig. 7). This is also true for the very few students in the sample who reported living at a different address from their family, but whose families still reside in Florence (9 cases), or in areas well connected to Florence – in the Wider Florentine Area (6 cases), in the Rest of the Metropolitan City (4 cases) or the PO/PT Metropolitan area (5 cases). The tendency to move into Florence, instead of opting to commute from another nearby municipality, even when frequent and direct train line connections exist, partly reflects a desire to reduce home-university travel time even further. It also shows the city's significant appeal to the younger population, and in particular the appeal of the historic centre, where more than one-fifth of the students who do not live with their families have chosen to settle²¹. This decision highlights students' active role in rein-

²⁰ This category includes three of the territorial divisions used previously: the Wider Florentine Area, Rest of the Metropolitan City, and Municipalities of the FI-PO-PT Metropolitan area falling within the provinces of Prato and Pistoia.

²¹ The mentioned study carried out by Loda *et al.* (2022, p. 94) reveals that over half of under-25-year-olds (52.6%) in Florence would like to live in the centre of the city, while significantly fewer 26-40-year-olds (35.7%) and an even lower percentage of over-40-year-olds (29%) would be interested in living in the historic centre of post-pandemic Florence.

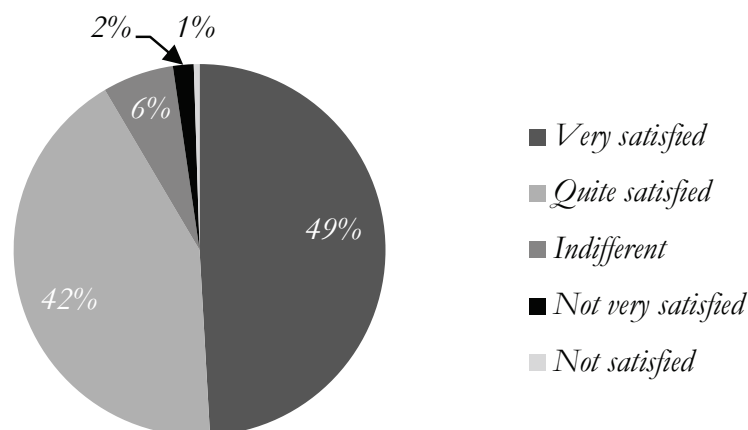
forcing the centrality of the historic core as both a residential and cultural space, reshaping its vibrancy through their presence.



Source: LaGes, 2024.

Fig. 7 - Current living location – when different from their family household

Students' satisfaction with their reported place of living is very high. In response to the question "Do you like the place where you live?" 91% of the interviewees responded positively, with 50% of them giving a *very* positive answer (Fig. 8). This was somewhat unexpected, considering the high volume of tourists in Florence and the fact that cities which attract mass tourism tend to be considered less livable by their own residents (Hernandez-Maskivker *et al.*, 2021). It is also worth noting here that no significant difference in the level of satisfaction has



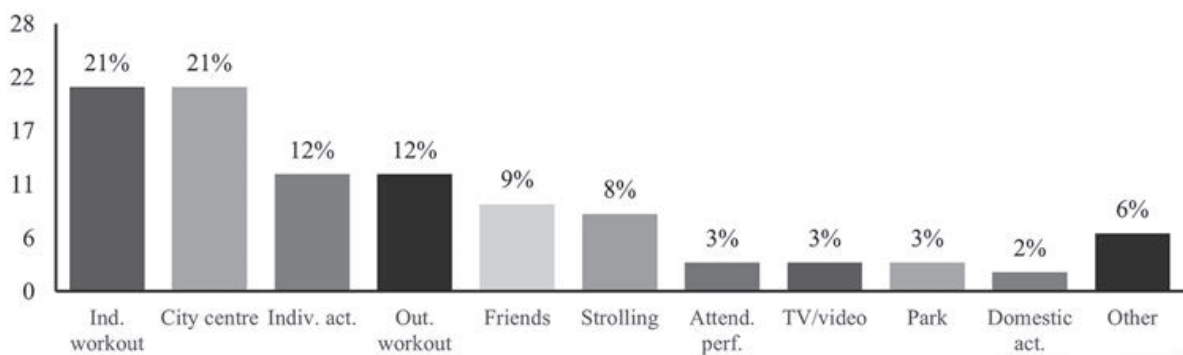
Source: LaGes, 2024.

Fig. 8 - Students' living locations and satisfaction levels

been noted between those who live in Florence at the time of the survey with their families, and those who live in Florence without their families.

Students' leisure mobility provides further insight into their contribution to the city's social fabric. Activities carried out during free time, as well as places visited or avoided, are – perhaps more so than academic activities and spaces – a clear reflection of students' preferences and their relationship with the city in general. For this reason, we first aimed to gauge activities carried out during free time in our survey through an open question. The students' responses were then grouped into the following eleven pastime activities in order of preference (Fig. 9):

1. Indoor workout (in a gym or at home)
2. Going into the centre
3. Individual cultural activities (e.g., painting)
4. Outdoor workout (e.g. football, horseback riding)
5. Hanging out with friends
6. Walking/strolling
7. Attending cultural performances (theatre, cinema)
8. Watching TV/playing video games
9. Visiting parks and gardens
10. Doing domestic activities (e.g., cooking, gardening)
11. Other



Source: LaGes, 2024.

Fig. 9 - Students' favourite pastimes

As can be seen from Figure 9, two activities stand out, each chosen as a favourite pastime by over one-fifth of the students – indoor workout and going into the centre. It is noteworthy that “going into the centre” is exactly the expression used by the respondents to define this activity, which means that it qualifies for them as a pastime in itself because of *where* it takes place. Isabella, a 22-year-old student who currently lives near Piazza d’Azeglio and attending most of her

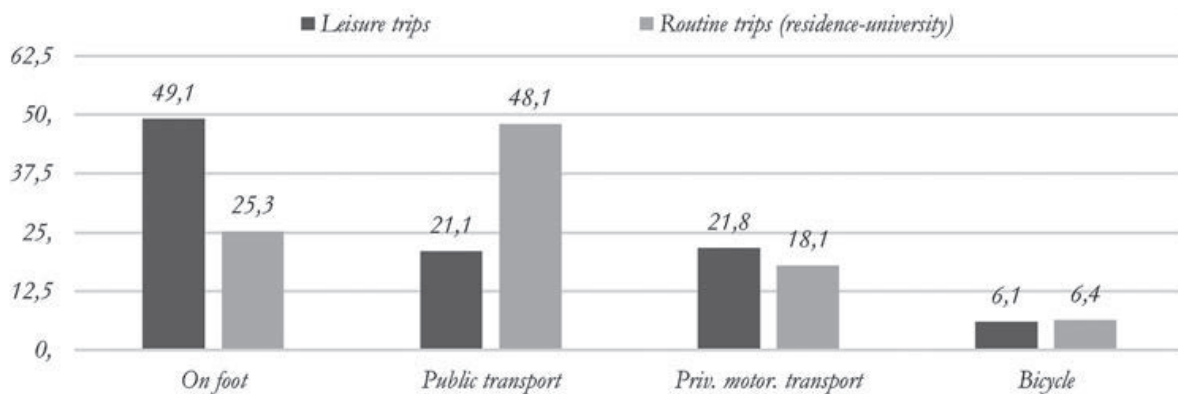
classes at the Via Capponi UniFi building, illustrates the connection between place and activity, explaining: “If I don’t have classes, my favourite thing to do is to go to the centre. I go to the centre at least once every day. I just enjoy exploring it, especially with friends, there’s always something to do and see in the centre”. Her narrative highlights the role of the historic centre not just as a physical location but also as a social and experiential hub where students interact with the urban environment and each other. This aligns with Insch and Sun’s (2013) argument that the existence of safe and vibrant social spaces fosters a sense of belonging in cities.

And of course students’ frequent visits to the historic centre add to its socio-cultural vibrancy, transforming it into a space of student-led urban participation and cultural interaction. Besides, the importance of the historic centre for student social life is further underlined by the overlap between leisure activities and the central location – many of the other pastimes, such as attending shows and hanging out with friends, also take place in this area, reinforcing the centre’s role as an anchor of student socialisation. At the same time, the relatively limited share of students who choose to spend their free time privately and at home (Fig. 9) underscores a broader preference for public and collective engagement in urban spaces.

Data on the mode of transport used when accessing these pastimes, compared to routine trips to the university, provides additional insights. Walking doubles for leisure trips, while the use of public transport decreases by half (Fig. 10). This suggests that time constraints are generally less significant for students when it comes to leisure trips, allowing other factors, such as enjoyment and social engagement, to influence their mobility choices²². Pedro, a 25-year-old master’s student from Brazil currently living in Campo di Marte, offers further insight into such motivations. Having grown up in Sao Paulo, he describes Florence as compact and easily walkable: “I walk even more than the Florentines, because coming from Sao Paulo, everything seems close to me in Florence”. His choice of walking, however, is not just based on convenience. He adds, “It’s mainly the architecture and the businesses that affect the route I’ll choose. Some streets I know I’ll be able to say hello to a vendor or someone else I know around there, so I prefer them”. Pedro’s account highlights how the aesthetic and social qualities of the urban environment influence students’ mobility decisions, with walking providing a mode of travel that facilitates connections with the city’s spaces and its people (Vermeersch and van Dijk, 2024).

²² This aligns with Sharmeen and Timmermans (2014), who observed that time is generally not an issue when it comes to social trips, allowing for habitually longer or more leisurely modes of travel.

Together, Isabella's and Pedro's experiences show how leisure mobility choices reflect deeper relationships between students, their social networks and the urban setting, and help shed light on the quantitative findings, demonstrating the significance of Florence's historic centre as a key site for interaction and social engagement.



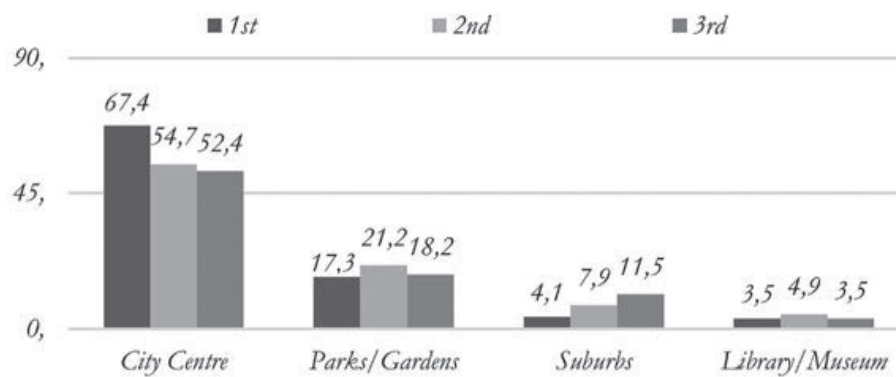
Source: LaGes, 2024.

Fig. 10 - Travel mode for leisure and routine trips

This need for social engagement with the city, as illustrated by the students' quotes, is further reflected in their favourite places, which we elicited in the questionnaire using an open question. The historic centre – as a whole or with mention of a specific place within it – is indeed cited as the first, second or third favourite place by 67%, 55% and 52% of students, respectively (Fig. 11). Parks and gardens come in second place (17%, 21% and 18%), whereas suburban areas and cultural spaces (libraries, museums) are mentioned by a limited portion of the student sample (Fig. 11).

Furthermore, within the historic centre, a number of places stand out as being the most popular among students²³. While many of these spots do not coincide with Florence's main tourist attractions, one notable exception is Piazzale Michelangelo, which is a favourite among both students and tourists due to its panoramic views of the city. But apart from Piazzale Michelangelo, we notice a certain divide between tourists, who primarily gravitate towards areas featuring the city's major landmarks, and students, who often opt for spaces that foster social engagement and a deeper interaction with the urban setting. Additionally,

²³ These are: Piazzale Michelangelo (mentioned by 101 students), the Lungarni (87 mentions), the movida areas (Piazza S. Ambrogio and Piazza Santo Spirito, with 101 and 77 mentions, respectively), and Piazza S. Croce (50 mentions).



Source: LaGes, 2024.

Fig. 11 - Students' favourite places – in order of choice

it should be noted that many other places are mentioned by only one or two students; these places are lesser-known and not particularly significant from an artistic or historical perspective. However, the qualitative interviews reveal that the respondents have developed a special connection with them and a sense of belonging. This is highlighted through responses like: “I feel at home here”; “I like that the people know me here, so I can chat with them”; “There is neighbourhood life here, because you’re away from the tourists”²⁴. These answers reflect a desire – as discussed in the literature review – for a balance between vibrant socialising and a homely, comfortable environment (Sirgy *et al.*, 2006).

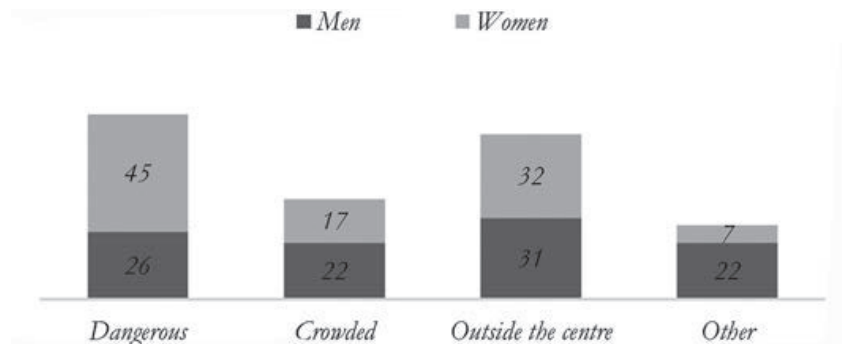
When students were asked if there are places in the city that they avoid, a significant majority answered negatively; 79% of male respondents and 69% of female respondents said there are no places they avoid. Of those who answered affirmatively, 21% were male and 31% were female, with slightly more than one-fifth going on to mention specific places they tend to avoid. Classifying the open-question answers results in three main categories – places avoided because they are perceived as dangerous, places avoided because they are too crowded, and places avoided because they are outside the city centre (Fig. 12). The students’ answers thus suggest different reasons for avoiding certain areas, ranging from a fear of violence and an aversion to overcrowding, to a desire to dwell within the centre.

Marta, a student living in the Oltrarno area but attending classes at the Novoli campus, provides insight into the second category, highlighting the stress caused

²⁴ These insights that express feelings of homeliness in a public space, and ways of dwelling by moving into and within the city, can help us better understand the students’ felt experience of the urban setting, and the networks of human and non-human features through which dwelling and mobility merge and interact, manifesting in the students’ lived experience (Todres and Galvin, 2010).

by overcrowding in tourist-heavy areas. She explains, “I go to the centre often, especially to meet friends or attend events. But I try to avoid certain places, like Piazza Pitti and Ponte Vecchio, because they’re always so crowded with tourists. It can get really stressful, so I tend to pick areas that feel a bit quieter or more familiar”. Marta’s account shows how individual mobility choices are shaped by practical considerations as well as a desire to sustain meaningful engagement with the urban setting. By seeking out “quieter or more familiar” areas, Marta shows a preference for spaces where interactions can occur at a more personal scale, allowing for deeper connections with her surroundings.

Places associated with feelings of danger are more commonly identified as the train station and Cascine Park in the evening, as well as more general locations such as “underpasses”, “alleyways”, and “side streets at night”. These responses indicate gendered differences, as this category is significantly female-heavy (45%)²⁵. Marta’s account, while focused on overcrowding, complements these findings by demonstrating how perceived comfort and familiarity play a central role in shaping students’ spatial preferences and avoidance patterns.



Source: LaGes, 2024.

Fig. 12 - Places avoided

Drawing from our discussion on students’ leisure mobility, we can highlight the following points: First, 36% of our sample reported living independently from their families during their study at the University of Florence, with 92% of them choosing to live in Florence and one-fifth even opting for accommodation within the historic centre. This attests to the city’s strong appeal to the younger population and reflects students’ desire to engage with its social life – particularly the life of the city centre. Second, this appeal does not disappoint, as the levels of satisfac-

²⁵ “Other” encapsulates a number of mentions that cannot be classified based on any homogeneous criteria, and that mainly refer to specific venues.

tion with their living arrangements recorded among students living in the City of Florence are high, which indicates that students are pleased with their decision to secure accommodation in the City, having developed a sense of familiarity and belonging with the urban setting. Third, “going into the centre” emerges as the students’ favourite pastime, making the centre a key space for student social engagement. A recent study by Loda *et al.* (2022) even showed that the perception of Florence’s historic centre improved markedly post Covid-19, which further explains this increasingly strong appeal of Florence’s urban core to younger populations. Fourth, walking is the preferred mode of transport for leisure trips as time constraints and the need for direct connections take the back seat, and social interaction and engagement become the priority.

5. CONCLUSIONS. – This study approached students’ routine and leisure mobility as a way of understanding their interaction with the urban setting – their movements serving as a lens through which their social engagement in the city becomes clearer. Several key findings arose from this inquiry.

Firstly, students exhibit a marked preference for sustainable mobility modes such as walking and public transport in their routine commutes. This choice is influenced not only by practical considerations of speed, reliability and cost, but also by a desire to socially engage with the urban space. Walking, in particular, emerges as the preferred mode of students who live in the City of Florence, or in areas well-connected to it, due to its ability to provide the most direct, dependable and efficient connection to the university, while also granting them a physically and socially active presence within the city. This preference reflects students’ intent to engage actively with their surroundings, an intent that is less evident in isolated modes of transport.

Secondly, in terms of leisure mobility, our findings highlight Florence’s strong appeal to the younger population. A significant proportion of students who choose to live independently from their families do so in the City of Florence, with a notable fraction opting for accommodation within the historic centre, showing a desire for immersion in the city’s social life. The high levels of satisfaction with their living arrangements suggest that Florence successfully meets these expectations, something that is further underlined by our finding that “going into the centre” is perceived as a pastime in its own right, even emerging as the students’ favourite leisure activity. Finally, walking again plays a prominent role in leisure mobility, as students prioritise interaction with the city over time efficiency, engaging with the historic centre despite challenges such as overcrowding and safety concerns in certain areas.

These findings reinforce the value of mobility as a social practice, highlighting its role in fostering interactions and shaping urban experiences. Students engage

with public spaces, such as Florence's historic centre, to assert their presence in the urban setting and contribute to its socio-economic and cultural vibrancy. The way they choose to move around the city does not only reflect a tendency towards sustainable mobility, or a more general inclination towards environmentally friendly practices, but it also shapes the social fabric of the urban environment. This aligns with broader themes in the literature, where mobility is seen as a tool for reading social processes (Wang *et al.*, 2022; Bovo *et al.*, 2022; Kent, 2022). In addressing our research question – “to what extent can mobility serve as a methodological lens for exploring social dynamics?” – this study demonstrates its effectiveness as a means of examining patterns of social engagement in the urban context. Students' mobility choices reveal the ways in which they interact with, adapt to, and influence the urban setting, and by examining such decisions and their underlying motivations, we can better understand this demographic's needs in order to inform the design of more inclusive and engaging urban spaces, benefiting both the students and the city as a whole.

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