



From private platforms to public value: An exploratory analysis of privately-owned public service digital platforms in Italy

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ABSTRACT

As privately-owned digital platforms increasingly shape public services, a critical question emerges: Do they serve the public good? This paper explores the public value outcomes from 25 privately-owned digital platforms across public service sectors in Italy, revealing both public value creation and destruction. The findings highlight both the opportunities and risks associated with digital platforms: while they improve service effectiveness, efficiency, and customization, they also raise concerns regarding inclusivity, user autonomy, decision-making, and data privacy, particularly where public and private interests intersect. The study contributes to the public value and digital governance literature by illustrating the complexities of managing digital platforms in public services and their broader implications for the service ecosystem.

1. Introduction

The rise of digital platforms has profoundly impacted traditional business models and transformed the dynamics of interactions between individuals and organizations. These platforms, exemplified by industry giants like Google, Apple, and Airbnb, have revolutionized the way services are designed, developed, and delivered (De Reuver et al., 2018), creating an environment where users can actively collaborate, contribute, and engage in value co-creation (Gawer & Cusumano, 2014; Hein et al., 2020). Expanding beyond private-sector applications, this study addresses a critical gap in understanding the broader impact of digital platforms on public governance. By investigating how these platforms influence both the creation and destruction of public value, we move beyond economic benefits to examine their societal implications and the complexities they introduce into predicting, assessing, and managing the outcomes of public service delivery.

What was once confined to specific industries has now transcended sectorial boundaries and permeated various aspects of society. The emergence of terms like “platform society” (van Dijck et al., 2018) and “platform economy” (Kenney & Zysman, 2016) reflects the growing recognition of platformization across diverse domains, including vital public services such as education, family assistance, healthcare, and urban transport. For example, Care.com, a privately-owned platform, facilitates access to caregivers and childcare services, while Uber Health,

a division of Uber, provides non-emergency medical transport to improve patient access to healthcare.

Nambisan (2009) introduced the idea of harnessing platforms for public services, enabling governments to leverage collective intelligence and capabilities to drive positive change. These platforms, supported by digital technologies, dedicated competencies, and resources, provide a transformative framework for governments, businesses, non-profits, and citizens to explore, experiment, and deliver innovative and responsive public services (O'Reilly, 2011).

Unlike commercial digital platforms, which primarily focus on generating profit for individual stakeholders, thereby creating *private*, or business, value (Jovanovic et al., 2022), public service platforms are expected to prioritize the provision of public services and address societal needs, creating *public* value (Ansell & Gash, 2018; Meijer & Boon, 2021). In this article, public value is defined as the outcome created through public services (Moore, 1995), which, unlike private value that serves individual consumption, is created for the collective benefit of society (Benington, 2011).

While digital platforms can help achieve efficiency gains (Brown et al., 2017), more importantly, they offer a means to overcome the limitations of traditional public service delivery models by involving external actors in co-creating services, enabling governments to meet more needs (Millard, 2018). This model represents an evolution in public governance, redefining the role of government from being solely

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responsible for delivering public services to actively facilitating and orchestrating a broader ecosystem of service provision and public value creation, where public, private, and community actors collaboratively address societal needs (Ansell & Torfing, 2021).

However, there is an inherent tension when platforms designed for public service also pursue commercial objectives, potentially blurring the line between generating private and public value (Cui & Osborne, 2023). Despite the recognized potential of digital platforms, there remains limited empirical evidence of the outcomes they generate in terms of public value (Meijer & Boon, 2021). Concerns exist about their effectiveness in increasing citizens' participation (van den Berg et al., 2020), improving service quality and outcomes (Buntaine et al., 2021), and promoting inclusivity (Xu & Tang, 2020). These concerns highlight the possibility that privately-owned digital platforms may inadvertently lead to negative outcomes, for example, by exacerbating inequitable access to public services.

Emerging research in the field of public administration and management has drawn attention to the issue of public value "destruction" as the inverse of public value creation within public services, calling for the integration of this concept into the broader framework of public value theory (Cluley et al., 2020; Cui & Osborne, 2023; Parker et al., 2023). This recognition becomes particularly relevant in complex and interconnected systems where the co-creation process can result in unintended co-destructions (Engen et al., 2021). Furthermore, concerns have long existed regarding the impact of digital technologies on unequal access to public services (Norris, 2001). Additionally, recent research has shown that while emphasizing user-centricity and personalization aims to enhance user experiences, it can inadvertently compromise important aspects such as data privacy and user autonomy (Weigl et al., 2024).

The intricate relationship between platform interactions and public value is evident in debates on negative societal drawbacks from conventional commercial platforms (Nash et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that even in the case of public service platforms, which are intended to serve a public value mission, such as improving access to healthcare and enhancing population well-being, public value can both be created and destroyed. This highlights the need to understand that the public value outcomes of these platforms do not solely stem from the intentions of the platform owner, but rather emerge from the multifaceted interactions among platform users (Meijer & Boon, 2021).

Our study is driven by the need for a more comprehensive assessment of public value outcomes in privately-owned public service digital platforms, an area where empirical evidence remains limited. Previous research has tended to emphasize positive contributions, often without considering the unintended negative consequences that may destroy public value. By addressing both positive and negative outcomes, we seek to fill this gap, anticipating potential repercussions such as the risks of perpetuating inequalities or compromising privacy even while improving accessibility and service efficiency. Thus, this study is guided by the following exploratory research question:

How do privately-owned public service digital platforms create or destroy public value?

We employ a multiple-case study approach to address the research question, utilizing comparative analysis across 25 privately-owned public service digital platforms operating in Italy. Following Gawer's (2021) distinction, the collected cases primarily represent transaction platforms that mediate exchanges between actors, rather than innovation platforms that provide technological foundations for complementary innovation. The cases also represent citizen- and service-provider engagement, rather than governmental platforms that serve internal functions (Thompson & Venters, 2021). Data were collected through secondary sources and supplemented with interviews for eight primary cases to assess public value across multiple dimensions.

Exploring the outcomes of these platforms is significant as existing studies have primarily focused on government-led initiatives

(Thompson & Venters, 2021), neglecting the significant role that privately-owned platforms can play (Meijer & Boon, 2021). By broadening our scope to encompass privately-owned platforms, we aim to cultivate a more comprehensive understanding of how these initiatives can either create or destroy public value, offering broader implications for public service governance.

The study finds that privately-owned platforms can create public value by enhancing service efficiency and access but that they also risk destroying value through data privacy infringements and social exclusion. Our research sheds light on the complexities and challenges of managing public services through digital platforms, particularly the inherent tensions between market viability, financial sustainability, and public value creation. Our findings suggest that public governance mechanisms, including interoperability and shared frameworks, may help address these tensions and support privately-owned public service platforms in better serving societal needs.

Altogether, our study contributes to the public value theory by showing how privately-owned public service platforms can both create and destroy value, highlighting the tensions between public interests and private gain motives. The study also provides practical insights for policymakers and public managers on how to navigate issues of inclusivity, privacy, and governance when shaping digital public services.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 offers a comprehensive literature review on public service digital platforms and their public value outcomes. Section 3 outlines the research methodology. Section 4 presents the findings from the comparative case analysis. Section 5 highlights the key contributions and policy implications. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper by addressing its limitations and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Public service digital platforms and public value

2.1. Understanding public service digital platforms

Digital platforms are infrastructures that enable multiple user groups to interact, collaborate, and engage in transactions. They consist of both technological elements (e.g., software, hardware, and architecture) and social elements (e.g., actors, activities, processes, rules, and standards), which together form the platform's digital ecosystem (De Reuver et al., 2018).

These platforms represent a new organizational model that fundamentally transforms service design, development, and delivery by fostering interconnectedness (Gawer & Cusumano, 2014; Hein et al., 2020). They have become integral to organizing and mediating various aspects of economic and social life (Kenney & Zysman, 2016), extending their influence beyond sectorial boundaries to encompass the realm of public services. Public service digital platforms offer a virtual space where citizens, service providers, and government entities can come together (Bekkers, 2003). They hold the promise of delivering services more efficiently and effectively (O'Reilly, 2011), and harness collective intelligence and capabilities to tackle societal challenges (Ansell & Gash, 2018; Ansell & Torfing, 2021).

Scholars have proposed different frameworks and classifications to capture the essence of public service digital platforms. For instance, Ansell and Miura (2020) classify platforms by *interaction* and *innovation* leverage, assessing how platforms enable interaction among users and foster innovation. Haveri and Anttiroiko (2021) focus on *local embeddedness* and *scaling potential*, considering how platforms integrate with local contexts and their potential for expansion. Falco and Kleinhans (2018) build on Linders' (2012) classification, focusing on the direction and exchange of information and resources among government, service providers, professionals, and citizens. Nambisan's (2009) work suggests further classification based on the platform's scope, distinguishing between *exploration*, which focuses on sharing information and discovering new service configurations; *experimentation*, which allows for testing service solutions; and *execution*, which supports the delivery of

services.

Acknowledging the government's multifaceted role in such platforms, Thompson and Venters (2021) identify roles like *builder*, *leader*, *catalyst*, *arbitrator*, and *decentralized partner*. These roles lead the government to engage in activities such as platform development, procurement, creation of standardized capabilities and resources, promotion of utilization, and provision of open data and funding. While literature emphasizes government-led initiatives, private companies can also own and lead public service digital platforms, aiming to create public value while generating profit (Meijer & Boon, 2021).

Private companies play diverse roles in developing public service platforms. They often fill gaps in public sector provision, offering services like healthcare, education, and immunization (Levin & Kaddar, 2011; Valente & Crane, 2010). Large tech companies, acting as both product providers and platform hosts, have significant power but face regulatory challenges due to their dual nature (Atal, 2020). Public-private partnerships have led to innovative solutions in urban transport (Mahesh et al., 2011) and education (Menashy, 2015). Private firms collaborating with public sector partners, especially through cooperative agreements and grants, are more likely to develop enabling technologies (Rathje & Katila, 2021). Government technological capacity influences public-private partnerships in digital service delivery, with both low and high-capacity governments being more likely to collaborate with third-party platforms (Ma et al., 2021). However, despite these collaborations, there is limited understanding of how private involvement in public service platforms impacts public value, especially in terms of potential value destruction, which this study aims to address.

Moreover, the literature's exploration of pricing and revenue mechanisms is limited, possibly reflecting its focus on government-led platforms. Most public service digital platforms still rely on government funding or philanthropic grants (Cingolani, 2021; Ranerup et al., 2016), but some have introduced revenue collection from citizen users and pricing plans based on service levels (Falco & Kleinhans, 2018).

Further research is needed to understand the role of digital platforms in public value creation, considering government involvement complexities and the trade-off between societal outcomes and commercial sustainability in the public service domain.

2.2. Understanding public value: creation and destruction

We employ the lens of public value as our analytical framework to gain a comprehensive understanding of privately-owned public service digital platforms and their outcomes.

The concept of public value is related to, but distinct from, research on public values (Bryson et al., 2014). While public values refer to the principles, ideals, and norms that guide what is considered desirable or ethical in public life (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Nabatchi, 2012), public value is the value created by government through services, and other actions (Moore, 1995). In other words, public value refers to the effectiveness and worth of public services in addressing societal needs, whereas public values serve as guiding ideals for these actions.

In this article, we focus on public value as a managerial concept concerned with creating meaningful outcomes that address societal needs (Moore, 1995). Originally, public value guided public sector management, emphasizing the role of public managers (O'Flynn, 2007; Stoker, 2006). Over time, the concept has broadened to recognize contributions from diverse organizations, including non-governmental and private entities, and active citizen participation (Bryson et al., 2017). This expanded view acknowledges that public value emerges from interactions among societal actors within complex systems, extending beyond the public sector alone (Thabit et al., 2024).

Since its inception, the public value framework has garnered significant scholarly attention, encompassing three components. First, the process of creating public value is often analyzed through Moore's strategic triangle, which suggests that a strategy or an action generates

public value when it meets three interdependent conditions: democratic legitimacy and support from the authorizing environment, operational capacity to implement it effectively, and alignment with public value goals (Bryson et al., 2017; Moore, 1995). Second, beyond the process of value creation, public value refers to the societal outcomes that emerge as a result of public service delivery, such as enhanced well-being, or increased inclusivity. Finally, measuring public value outcomes remains an ongoing challenge (Faulkner & Kaufman, 2018). Scholars have approached this issue through both normative perspectives (Moore, 1995, 2014) and non-prescriptive psychological theories that view public value as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by individual and collective perceptions (Meynhardt, 2009).

Despite its widespread adoption, the public value framework has faced several criticisms (Hartley et al., 2017), particularly for being overly optimistic about creating public value, while overlooking the potential for value destruction or harm (Cluley et al., 2020). Negative public value outcomes may manifest as a "failure" (Bozeman, 2002), "destruction" (Benington, 2011; Cui & Osborne, 2023; Kelly et al., 2002), "disvalue" (Esposito & Ricci, 2015), or "displacement" (Hartley et al., 2019). These public value outcomes can occur when mechanisms for articulating and aggregating values fail, giving rise to situations like imperfect monopolies and benefit hoarding (Bozeman, 2002). Interactions among different actors in public service ecosystems can also lead to the co-destruction of value, as opposed to co-creation, when their resources are not effectively integrated or when conflicts of interest arise (Engen et al., 2021). Value destruction can manifest at any stage of the public service delivery process, necessitating dynamic thinking and contingency planning to prevent it (Cui & Osborne, 2023).

Value destruction can occur through ignorance, disproportion, backlash, or exploitation (Cui & Osborne, 2023). In public services, it may result from interactions between providers, users, and other actors (Engen et al., 2021; Zavolokina et al., 2023). Digital platforms, while creating convenience, can also lead to societal problems like misinformation and privacy concerns (van Dijck, 2021). Some platforms strategically demonstrate their public value orientation to strengthen their position amid declining revenues and regulatory threats (Cinnamon, 2020). The tension between public and private values in platform governance is highlighted in the literature (Cammaerts & Mansell, 2020), with calls for a more democratic approach to policy and regulation. Value destruction in platform ecosystems can stem from opportunism, unjust rent appropriation, and power asymmetry (Sahaym et al., 2022)(Sahaym et al., 2022). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for managing ecosystem relationships and fostering value co-creation (Meijer & Boon, 2021)(Meijer & Boon, 2021).

In our study, we follow Moore's managerial conceptualization of public value, as distinct from public values, allowing for a direct assessment of public value outcomes generated by public service digital platforms. We conceptualize public value as an assessable outcome, focusing on the observable effects of these platforms rather than the subjective perceptions emphasized by Meynhardt. Additionally, we adopt the concept of public value "destruction," as opposed to "creation," to denote negative changes resulting in fewer and inferior outcomes due to the interactions and activities of privately-owned public service digital platforms.

This aligns with an evolving understanding of public value that acknowledges both the positive and negative outcomes and highlights the importance of considering and managing the complexities associated with digitally-enabled co-created public services.

2.3. A framework to assess public value in public service digital platforms

Public service digital platforms can generate positive outcomes, such as increased citizen participation and empowerment (Baka, 2017), community building (Kordzadeh & Warren, 2013), improved coordination and collaboration leading to service efficiency (Brown et al., 2017; Cordella & Paletti, 2019), transparency and accountability

(Linders, 2012), and improved service quality and responsiveness (Ranerup et al., 2016). However, it is important to acknowledge that these platforms can also negatively affect individuals' privacy through a decline in sustainability, and the exacerbation of inequalities in access to services (Xu & Tang, 2020).

Digital technologies have been widely recognized as enablers and carriers of public value (Cordella & Iannacci, 2010; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2019). Previous research has explored the public value contributions of various digital technologies, including smart city technologies (Neuroni et al., 2019), blockchain (Schwabe, 2019), and government-as-a-platform (Cordella & Paletti, 2019). However, an excessive focus on digitalization and user-centricity has a potential downside, inadvertently disrupting social inclusion and privacy; essential aspects of public value (Weigl et al., 2024).

Therefore, to comprehensively assess public service digital platforms, it is necessary to consider both the creation and destruction of public value (Meijer & Boon, 2021). Drawing upon the comprehensive framework that Twizeyimana and Andersson (2019) proposed for assessing public value in digital public services, our evaluation of public service digital platforms aims to examine their positive and negative effects on public value across five dimensions. These dimensions, as illustrated in Fig. 1, encompass the effectiveness of services, administrative efficiency, open capabilities and resources, ethical behaviors and public trust, and societal values and well-being.

Effectiveness assesses how public service digital platforms improve service delivery through personalization, access to relevant information, service diversity, timeliness, citizen empowerment, service quality, and inclusivity. Administrative efficiency focuses on streamlining processes, reducing bottlenecks, and lowering costs associated with administrative tasks. Open capabilities and resources evaluate resource sharing, including open data availability, interoperability, and public-private collaboration. Ethical behaviors and public trust assess adherence to ethical principles, data privacy, transparency, and trust-building, ensuring fair and accountable platform operations that respect individual rights. Lastly, societal values and well-being evaluate the broader impact on social cohesion, community building, sustainable development, and effectively addressing critical societal challenges.

While the original framework by Twizeyimana and Andersson (2019) primarily focuses on the improvements across these five dimensions, our evaluation acknowledges the importance of considering both the improvements, or creations, and negative outcomes, or destructions, to public value. Fig. 1 illustrates this dual perspective across the five dimensions of public value. Unintended consequences of public value destruction in privately-owned public service platforms can destroy public value in several dimensions in the sense of the analytical framework by Twizeyimana and Andersson (2019). The effectiveness of public services may suffer as service quality declines and vulnerable groups face access barriers. Administrative efficiency is also at risk, as private platforms may monopolize data and disrupt the broader public service ecosystem. Open capabilities and resources can be limited when private interests restrict public control and exclude smaller providers. Ethical behaviors and public trust may decline due to privacy violations and lack of accountability, eroding confidence in public institutions. Finally, societal values and well-being may shift, with a focus on efficiency over inclusivity, ultimately steering public services away from collective well-being. Given the potential severity of these negative consequences, it is essential to study how digital platforms can lead to public value creation or destruction, providing insights into more effective governance in the digital public service landscape.

3. Research methods

We adopted a multiple-case study design to capture the diversity and complexity of public value outcomes across privately-owned digital platforms. This approach enables theoretical replication, allowing us to identify patterns that are consistent across cases as well as to explore

contrasts between them (Eisenhardt, 1989). Following the approach outlined by Meijer and Potjer (2018), we conducted an explorative comparative case analysis of 25 cases of privately-owned public service digital platforms in Italy. By comparing these platforms in different public service sectors, we strengthen the empirical grounding of our findings and enhance their potential generalizability beyond individual contexts (Yin, 2017). Our research methodology comprises three stages: case selection, data collection, and analysis.

3.1. Case selection

We focused on platforms that support the delivery of public services (Nambisan, 2009) and operate as digital ecosystems, integrating both technological infrastructure and social elements (De Reuver et al., 2018). To ensure study relevance, we selected transaction platforms (Gawer, 2021) that facilitate engagement between citizens and service providers owned or managed by private organizations (Thompson & Venters, 2021).

Our definition of public services extends beyond state-owned or contracted services to include any service contributing to societal well-being and the functioning of society (Flynn & Asquer, 2016). These services span sectors such as healthcare, education, welfare and family assistance, mobility, utilities, job inclusion and employment, financial aid and social assistance, tourism and cultural promotion, as well as legal aid and judicial services. Our case selection focuses on Italy due to its advancements in digital public services¹ and government efforts to implement interoperable systems (Cordella & Paletti, 2019). Despite high public spending on public services,² Italy's reliance on private service offerings and increasing out-of-pocket costs³ provides a fragmented landscape ideal for analyzing privately-owned public service digital platforms.

The identification of cases was an iterative process from June 2021 to July 2022. Using Google searches, expert consultations,⁴ and snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), we compiled a list of 85 cases, seeking diversity over exhaustiveness.

To ensure relevance and facilitate comparison – crucial in the context of comparative multiple-case studies (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stewart, 2012) – we first applied selective case selection criteria, followed by diverse criteria (Seawright & Gerring, 2008):

- **Selective criteria:** Platforms were required to support public service delivery, operate as digital ecosystems, target citizens as end-users, have been active for at least two years, and have sufficient accessible data. We filtered out basic websites, standalone software solutions, exploration or experimentation platforms, and B2B platforms lacking significant citizen engagement.
- **Diverse criteria:** We classified the selected platforms based on key criteria, including public service area, revenue sources, and the role of government (see Appendix A of the Supplementary Materials). Based on this classification criteria, we sought diversity across cases.

¹ See European Commission, *Digital Economy and Society Index*, 2022; statistics available at <https://digital-agenda-data.eu/datasets/desi>

² See Eurostat, *Government expenditure on general public services*, 2021; statistics available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Government_expenditure_on_general_public_services#:~:text=At%20the%20level%20of%20the%20reporting%20countries%20in%202021%2C%20expenditure,Iceland%20reported%203.6%20%25%20of%20GDP.

³ See European Commission, *State of Health in the EU. Italy 2021*; report available at https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-12/2021_chp_it_en_english.pdf

⁴ For example, we leveraged the mapping of digital platforms in welfare realized by Università Cattolica under the project WePlat; furthermore, we engaged with local investors who have a specific interest in public services, such as Oltre Impact, Fondazione Social Venture Giordano Dell'Amore, Rancilio Cube, and Avanzi.

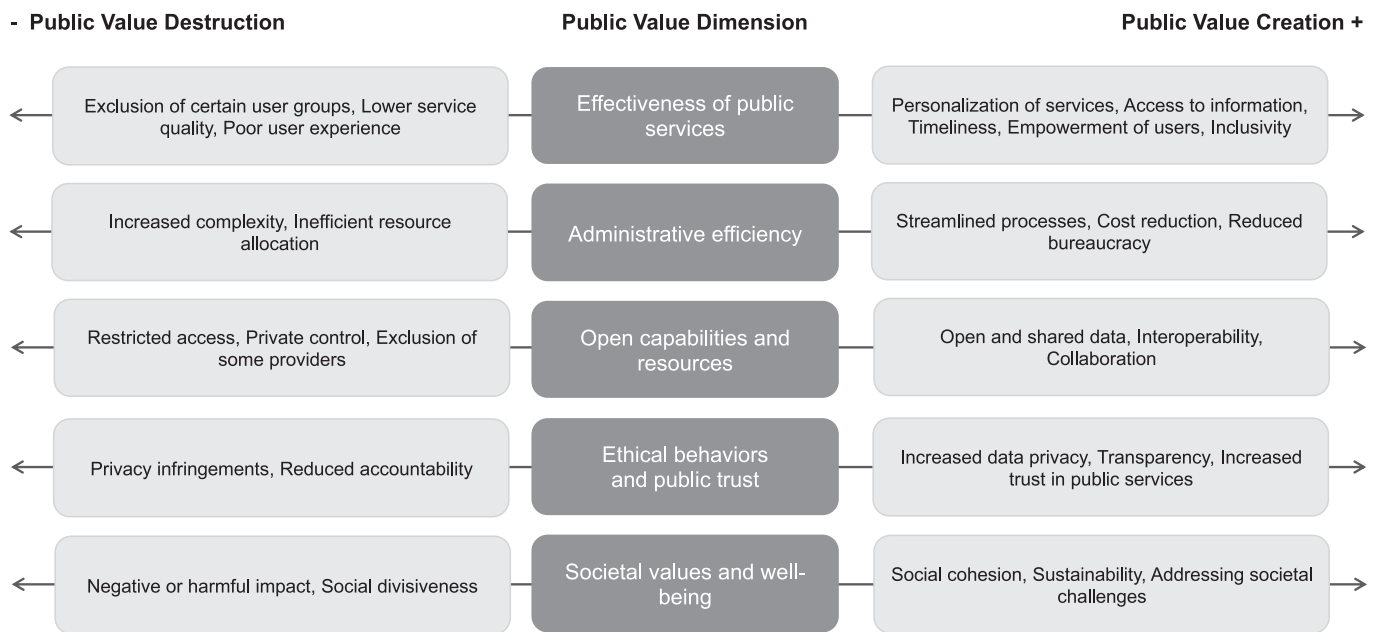


Fig. 1. Framework to assess public value in public service digital platforms.

This combined strategy led to the selection of 25 cases, outlined in Table 1.

3.2. Data collection

Our unit of analysis for the case studies (Yin, 2017) was the digital platform ecosystem, from which we collected data on three key components (De Reuver et al., 2018), as detailed in Appendix B of the Supplementary Materials:

- Technological infrastructure and functions: The software, hardware, and features that enable the platform to execute its primary functions, as well as its value generation for both users and the platform.
- User base: The characteristics, behaviors, and preferences of the platform's user groups.
- Governance: The rules and policies governing platform operations, including data privacy.

For all 25 cases, we analyzed key secondary data, including platform websites, grey literature (Godin et al., 2015), newspaper articles, company reports, privacy policies, and user reviews. To deepen our analysis, we selected eight primary cases for which we conducted semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders: founders, top managers, or investors. The choice of these eight cases was guided by convenience sampling, meaning they were platforms where we were able to secure access to key stakeholders (founders, top managers, or investors) who were willing to be interviewed within the timeframe of the project. Beyond access, these cases were also chosen because they represented a range of platform types and stakeholder constellations, allowing us to enrich the comparative analysis with firsthand insights from stakeholders involved. The interviews focused on founders, top managers, or investors because we wanted to capture the strategic and organizational logics that shape platform design, governance, their impact on public value, and envisioned implications for various stakeholders, including citizens, platform owners, service providers, professionals, and the government. While the perspective of external stakeholders such as citizens or service providers is highly relevant, their experiences were already partly accessible through secondary data such as user reviews, and media coverage. In contrast, the internal perspective is rarely documented and could only be obtained through direct conversations

with those directly involved in the platforms' creation and management. The interviews, lasting 45 to 60 min, were conducted in person or by phone.

The data collection process, primarily conducted by one author, was systematically organized to maintain a chain of evidence (Yin, 2017). The first author created a case study database, with each case documented in a separate file containing data and notes from the analyses. The second author reviewed these notes, ensuring accuracy and consistency in data interpretation and analysis.

3.3. Data analysis

To systematically analyze our cases and the collected data, primarily consisting of text-rich documents, we coded all materials to identify indicators related to the creation and destruction of public value. Drawing on Moore's (1995, 2014) conceptualization of public value, we dealt with it as a structured yet interpretative process, guided by an a-priori coding scheme (see Appendix C of the Supplementary Materials). Our a-priori coding process drew on the five dimensions of public value identified by Twizeyimana and Andersson (2019):

- Effectiveness of public services: We coded for indicators of both improvements and reductions in the quality, accessibility, and effectiveness of public service delivery.
- Administrative efficiency: We coded for indicators of both streamlined processes and potential inefficiencies, including added bureaucratic burdens or resource misallocation.
- Open capabilities and resources: We coded for indicators of both support for and limitations on open data use and resource interoperability, affecting integrated services and public-private collaboration.
- Ethical behaviors and public trust: We coded for indicators that either fostered or compromised public trust and ethical practices, such as data privacy, transparency, and accountability.
- Societal values and well-being: We coded for indicators of both positive contributions to societal goals, such as environmental sustainability and social inclusion, and any instances of harm or setbacks in these areas.

As systematic outcome evaluations were unavailable for the

Table 1
Overview of selected cases.

#	Name	Year of inception	Description	Public service area	Revenue sources	Role of government
1	Amaliacare*	2020	Access to caregiving services for the elderly, including training and contract assistance	Welfare and family assistance	Transaction fee	No role
2	BonusX*	2019	Helps citizens navigate bureaucracy by matching users with eligible bonuses, subsidies, and tax incentives	Financial aid and assistance	Transaction fee Subscription fee paid by service providers Sale of data	No role
3	Chi Odia Paga*	2018	Provides immediate legal assistance to victims of online hate	Legal and judicial services	Success fee	Funder and promoter
4	Comuni-chiamo*	2011	Facilitates communication between citizens and local municipalities	Utilities and urban services	Subscription fee paid by government	Buyer and contributor
5	Doctolib*	2013	Connects hospitals, healthcare professionals, and patients; enables collaboration on patient care	Healthcare	Subscription fee paid by service providers	Buyer and user
6	Doctorium*	2016	Offers online medical consultations, visits, and remote telemonitoring	Healthcare	Transaction fee	Funder
7	Futurately	2019	Provides personalized high school guidance using gamification techniques	Education	Subscription fee paid by citizens	No role
8	GoodGo	2020	Rewards sustainable mobility and use of local public transportation	Transportation and mobility	Subscription fee paid by government	Buyer and contributor
9	Job Me too*	2011	Connects job seekers with disabilities to potential employers	Job inclusion and employment	Transaction fee Sale of data	No role
10	Junker	2014	Provides accurate waste disposal information and facilitates data sharing	Utilities and urban services	Subscription fee paid by government	Buyer and contributor
11	Lamimed	2020	Provides online triage and directs patients to appropriate healthcare solutions	Healthcare	Transaction fee Subscription fee paid by citizens and service providers	No role
12	Le Cicogne	2013	Connects families with caregivers for children	Welfare and family assistance	Transaction fee	No role
13	Mio Dottore	2015	Matches hospitals, healthcare professionals, and patients; offers online consultations	Healthcare	Subscription fee paid by citizens Subscription fee paid by the service providers	Buyer and contributor
14	Mio Pediatria	2018	Connects paediatricians with parents for scheduling and care management	Healthcare	Subscription fee paid by service providers	No role
15	Municipium	2013	Enhances communication between municipalities and citizens, centralizing access to municipal services	Utilities and urban services	Subscription fee paid by government	Buyer and contributor
16	myCicero	2019	Helps citizens find parking, pay for it, and plan public transport trips	Transportation and mobility	Subscription fee paid by government Advertisements	Buyer and user
17	Mygrants	2017	Microlearning app for migrants providing training and job placement access	Job inclusion and employment	Subscription fee paid by government Sale of data	Buyer and user
18	Pinbike	2019	Certifies and rewards citizens for using bicycles in their daily commuting	Transportation and mobility	Subscription fee paid by government and service providers	Buyer and contributor
19	Schoolr	2019	Connects families with qualified instructors for extra school support	Education	Transaction fee Sale of data	No role
20	Sharry Land*	2018	Community platform promoting Italian cultural heritage and sustainable tourism	Tourism and culture	Subscription fee paid by service providers Advertisements	Contributor and promoter
21	Skuola.net	2000	Community platform for high school students featuring forums and peer support	Education	Advertisements	No role
22	Ugo	2014	Provides access to elderly caregiving services tailored to specific issues, clinical needs, and personal preferences	Welfare and family assistance	Transaction fee	No role
23	Unobravo.com	2019	Connects individuals with therapists based on specific issues, clinical needs, and personal preferences	Healthcare	Transaction fee	Funder
24	Westudents	2018	Combines a smart diary and e-learning for students and teachers	Education	Subscription fee paid by government Advertisements Sale of data	Buyer and user
25	Yoopies	2012	Matches supply and demand in home care services, including childcare, tutoring, cleaning, and pet care	Welfare and family assistance	Transaction fee	No role

The information presented in the table is based on data compiled as of June 2023; therefore, some details may be subject to change over time. The marked cases (*) are our primary cases.

examined cases, we utilized the coding scheme to identify patterns and thematic interpretations of public value creation and destruction. We aimed to conduct a qualitative assessment rather than to provide quantitative measurements.

The coded data were extensively discussed between the two researchers to ensure a thorough interpretation of the findings. Given the relatively small number of cases, in-depth discussions were selected to achieve intercoder consensus, rather than aiming for a quantitative assessment of intercoder reliability (Saldana, 2021).

4. Comparative case analysis

Table 2 summarizes the findings of our comparative case analysis, highlighting both the creation and destruction of public value across the cases. In the following paragraphs, we present a more detailed discussion of these findings, with supporting evidence drawn from user reviews, document analysis, and interview insights. To capture more of the richness of the qualitative material, Appendix C in the Supplementary Materials provides illustrative examples for each coding category.

Table 2

Public value creation and destruction by dimensions and key sub-indicators in public service digital platforms.

Public value dimensions	Sub-indicators	N. of cases	
		Creation	Destruction
Effectiveness of public services	Personalization of services	16	0
	Access to relevant information to make informed decisions	12	0
	Availability and diversity of services	9	0
	Timeliness of services	9	0
	Empowerment of citizens and service professionals	8	8
	Quality and experience in service delivery	6	5
	Inclusivity of public services	3	14
	Integration and seamlessness of services	3	15
	Reduction in bottlenecks and queues in service delivery	7	0
Administrative efficiency	Effective management of public resources	7	0
	Streamlined communication	6	0
	Achievement of cost reduction and savings in government budget	4	0
	Reduction in administrative red tape	3	0
	Data-driven decision-making by the government	7	0
Open capabilities and resources	Openness of data resources and interoperable systems	6	13
	Public-private partnerships in services	5	13
	Promotion of ethical behaviors	8	1
Ethical behaviors and public trust	Trust in government	4	0
	Rule of law	1	0
	Security of citizen privacy	0	7
Societal values and well-being	Achievement of societal outcomes	20	0
	Promotion of a sense of community and social cohesion	4	0

Note: The values in the “Creation” column represent the number of cases where positive outcomes were identified for each sub-indicator within a specific public value dimension. Conversely, the values in the “Destruction” column indicate the number of cases where negative outcomes were found for the sub-indicator. The values reflect the absolute presence of positive or negative outcomes rather than the degree, depth, or scope of those outcomes. Each case counts as one, and the values provide an indication of the prevalence of positive or negative outcomes across the analyzed cases.

4.1. Creations of public value

Addressing the first part of our research question, we found indicators of public value creation by privately-owned public service digital platforms across several dimensions, including improvements in public service effectiveness, administrative efficiency, and the promotion of societal values and well-being.

One significant dimension of public service effectiveness is the enhanced personalization of services. Public service platforms enable tailored experiences that align closely with individuals’ specific needs, conditions, and preferences, departing from the traditional one-size-fits-all approach typically employed by government services. For instance, *Unobravo.com* matches users with therapists who are best suited to their unique mental health needs and personal preferences. As one user explained, “I found the initial questionnaire extremely helpful in identifying the type of specialist best suited for me. After years of therapy, I realized the method I was using no longer worked for me. Unobravo matched me with exactly the person and approach I needed!” (source: user review). This highlights how the platform effectively connects individuals with

specialized services, even for those who have previously struggled to find the right support.

Expanding access to relevant information is another important way these platforms empower citizens to make more informed decisions, potentially reducing long-term societal costs. Platforms like *Futurely* offer personalized guidance to students and their families, helping them navigate the educational landscape and choose the most suitable academic and career paths. As one of the founders of *Futurely* explained, “At 17 or 18, there’s anxiety about failure and the fear of not choosing the right path, which leads to additional costs for families and the labor market. Our platform offers digital journeys through gamification, helping students discover the job market and their social-emotional learning skills to better understand their true vocation” (source: newspaper article).

Public value creation also extends to increased service availability and diversity, addressing gaps in provision and catering to the needs of specific target groups. *Jobmetoo*, for example, focuses on improving employment opportunities for people with disabilities. As the founder explained, the platform emerged from “a shared desire among people with disabilities to be on equal footing with others, even in the search for employment” (source: interview). *Jobmetoo* not only connects people with disabilities to suitable jobs but also helps employers meet legal requirements, providing an innovative service in an area that was previously underserved by both public and private actors.⁵

Platforms further enhance service timeliness and responsiveness, reducing waiting times and improving access. *Chi Odia Paga*, for instance, offers quick feedback on incidents of cyberbullying and online hate, empowering citizens to assert their rights in a timely manner. Similarly, platforms like *Doctolib* and *Miodottore* streamline healthcare access by simplifying appointment booking and communication between patients and healthcare professionals. One *Miodottore* user remarked, that the platform “simplifies the search for available doctors, reduces waiting times at the clinic, and cuts down overall time,” improving the patient experience compared to traditional healthcare systems (source: user review).

Another major creation is administrative efficiency. By reducing bureaucracy and streamlining processes, platforms like *BonusX* simplify applications for financial aid programs, easing the burden on both users and public administrators. As one of its founders noted, “by submitting only eligible and well-prepared applications, *BonusX* minimizes the time and effort required by public administration personnel to analyze and process requests, ultimately enhancing administrative efficiency” (source: interview). Similarly, other platforms like *myCicero* contribute to revenue generation for public administrations by simplifying fee collection and earnings management for local municipalities. “In Italy, only 3% of local transport and parking tickets are purchased through digital channels. *MyCicero*’s real-time updated search system helps citizens find and pay for parking directly from their smartphones, thereby boosting revenues for local administrations from this service” (source: newspaper article).

Ethical behavior and public trust are priorities for platforms like *PinBike* and *GoodGo*, which promote and incentivize environmentally friendly transportation options, fostering environmental responsibility and sustainability among users. Similarly, platforms such as *Amaliacare* and *Mygrants* demonstrate a commitment to reducing irregular employment and labor exploitation, particularly among immigrant workers. As the founder of *Amaliacare* stated, “We are strongly driven by one social goal: to reduce the reliance on irregular work in domestic care”

⁵ In Italy, there exists a legal requirement (Legge 68/1999) for corporates to hire a certain percentage of individuals with disabilities based on their total number of employees. However, in the past, many corporates did not comply with this requirement and instead opted to pay fines due to the lack of appropriate services available. Source: Assolombarda, 2021; report available at: <https://www.assolombarda.it/servizi/lavoro-e-previdenza/documenti/ricerca-6-2021-la-legge-68-99-nell2019esperienza-delle-imprese-di-assolombarda-e-degli-stakeholder-analisi-e-proposte-di-miglioramento>

(source: interview).

Lastly, public service platforms exert a significant influence on societal values and well-being. Through the application of technology and innovative approaches, they facilitate the provision of essential services, promote inclusivity and diversity, and foster a sense of community. They address critical challenges like online hate and violence, traffic congestion and air pollution, waste recycling, landfill usage, dropping out of school, and supporting work-life balance for women.

4.2. Destructions of public value

While highlighting public value creation, our analysis also uncovered potential public value destructions, primarily in the areas of public service effectiveness, inclusivity, and ethical considerations.

In terms of public service effectiveness, we identified a trade-off between empowering users with personalized services and preserving their autonomy. Platforms can influence or “nudge” users, leading to an unconscious reduction in control over their choices. For example, *Lamimed* allows for “the precise identification of a treatment pathway based on scientific protocols covering 2,000 symptoms and 4,000 clinical conditions” but prominently features commercial partners. The platform “guides patients to book video consultations and purchase over-the-counter medications and supplements from third-party e-commerce platforms” (source: newspaper article).

Our analysis also revealed that inclusivity is not uniformly achieved, with certain user groups facing difficulties in accessing and utilizing services. Most platforms tend to cater to young, educated, affluent, and technologically proficient individuals, inadvertently excluding those who are less digitally literate. This exclusionary pattern is particularly pronounced in platforms targeting vulnerable populations like migrants, low-income families, and seniors. For instance, platforms like *Doctolib*, which aim to replace traditional patient-doctor communication channels, may unintentionally exclude older adults who are often less familiar with digital technology yet have more healthcare needs. One *Doctolib* manager explained, “We found that many older patients faced challenges using the app, which created a barrier to access. So, we updated the platform to allow family members, such as children or relatives, to manage their records and appointments on their behalf” (interview).

Additionally, platform accessibility is limited in sparsely populated areas, where there is often insufficient demand to sustain a critical mass of users and service providers. Service marketplaces are more viable in urban or densely populated areas, which already offer an abundance of service options. *Le Cicogne*, a childcare service platform, exemplifies this challenge, as one user shared: “I paid the subscription fee, then began my search for a babysitter, only to discover that the closest one was 25 km away and unwilling to travel to us due to the distance. In the end, my experience was negative” (user review).

Additionally, the absence of personal connection and human touch inherent in online channels may compromise the quality of services, particularly in domains such as education, healthcare, and welfare. A user of *Miodottore* described their experience, saying, “Screens act as obscuring filters in the relationship with my doctor. Communicating through a screen makes the medium feel like an adversary and throws me into a sense of detachment” (source: user review). Relying solely on digital platforms can reduce the depth of engagement and support, potentially affecting the quality of care and guidance provided.

Our analysis also found that these platforms often gather extensive user data, raising ethical concerns about data ownership and potential risks of misuse. Platforms relying on the sale of data and advertising can target less privacy-aware demographics, such as younger users. For example, *WeStudents*, a free community platform for students under 25, emphasizes its large user base and high engagement as attractive metrics for advertisers, stating: “Capture the future generation, we have 45,356 active users per month, and 2,856,789 actions completed this month” (source: company website). This approach supports platform viability but raises questions about balancing commercial interests with

safeguarding user data.

Lastly, our analysis revealed a prevalent lack of integrated solutions between privately-owned public service platforms and existing public services. In the few cases where the government actively commissions private platforms and provides interoperable software—such as *myCicero*, *Comuni-chiamo*, and *Municipium*—a more cohesive and integrated service offering is achieved for citizens. These platforms leverage open standards established by the central government, including *PagoPA* for payments, *SPID* for digital identification, and the *ANPR* national resident registry, which facilitate interoperability and enhance accessibility and consistency across public services. However, in the majority of the cases analyzed, private platforms operate as standalone entities, independent of existing public service infrastructures. This lack of interoperability creates significant challenges for citizens, who must navigate multiple, disconnected channels for communication, service delivery, and data management. As the Italian CEO of *Doctolib* highlighted, “To provide adequate healthcare support to citizens, regional healthcare authorities must create interoperable standards and leverage the best platforms the market already offers, rather than developing local ad hoc solutions from scratch, which only duplicate services, increase inefficiencies, and hinder collaboration” (source: newspaper article).

4.3. Discussion of the findings

The comparative case analysis of privately-owned public service digital platforms provides valuable insights into both their public value creation and destruction.

These platforms primarily create public value by providing personalized services that cater to individual conditions, needs, and preferences. This aligns with the ongoing transformation of public governance toward co-creation (Ansell & Torfing, 2021) and the increasing involvement of private, voluntary, and informal community sectors in public value creation (Bryson et al., 2017). Leveraging collective resources and expertise, these platforms address needs that traditional public services may overlook and enhance user experiences by mitigating common inconveniences associated with traditional public service delivery.

However, achieving inclusivity in public service digital platforms does not happen uniformly (Xu & Tang, 2020). While providing widespread access to services, specific user groups encounter disproportionate barriers that impede their full utilization and benefit. Additionally, the user-centric nature of these platforms, while facilitating customization and enhancing user satisfaction, may encroach upon individuals’ autonomy, subtly influence their decision-making abilities, and heighten the risks of privacy infringement and data exploitation for commercial gain (Weigl et al., 2024).

A key finding is that many platforms, rather than fostering collaboration, interoperability, and seamless provision of services, contribute to fragmentation. The lack of interoperability in sectors like healthcare leads to disconnected service delivery, underscoring the importance of government-facilitated standards and interoperable frameworks to ensure comprehensive, cohesive service offerings (Thompson & Venters, 2021). This insight aligns with the concept of government-as-a-platform, where the government provides a foundation for collaborative and integrated service delivery (O’Reilly, 2011).

Our comparative analysis also revealed cross-case differences. Certain dimensions of public value creation, particularly *effectiveness of public services* and *societal values and well-being*, were emphasized across service domains. By contrast, public value destruction manifested in more domain-specific ways. In healthcare and welfare, digital platforms often created tensions between personalization and exclusion, or between the complementarity of public and private services and system fragmentation. In these domains, however, privacy risks were less pronounced, as platforms typically operate within stricter regulatory frameworks. Conversely, the risks of data exploitation and privacy infringement were more evident in domains such as education and other

citizen-facing services, where monetization models relied more heavily on user profiling and advertising. Overall, these patterns suggest that public value destruction is more domain-specific, underscoring the importance of sector-specific approaches to the governance and regulation of digital platforms.

Finally, while we applied the concept of public value destruction, our findings also resonate with other relevant concepts. The trade-offs associated with user-centricity and the digital divide closely align with the concept of public value displacement, where creating value in one area may displace it to another (Hartley et al., 2019). Furthermore, the lack of interoperability often hinders platforms from reaching their potential, aligning with the concept of disvalue, where public value outcomes diverge from intended goals (Esposito & Ricci, 2015).

5. Contributions and policy implications

This study addresses a gap in the existing literature by examining public value outcomes from privately-owned public service digital platforms, offering both theoretical contributions and practical guidance.

First, our research contributes to the public value literature by engaging with the ongoing debate on public value destruction. Building upon previous studies (Cluley et al., 2020; Parker et al., 2023), our findings confirm that public services, particularly when delivered within complex and interconnected systems such as public service digital platforms, can both create and destroy public value. This underscores the need for public value theory to consider the overall value generated for the public, incorporating both positive and negative consequences, intended and unintended. Our focus on privately-owned platforms highlights the tensions between public value creation, public interests, and private gain motives when private sectors become increasingly involved in public services (Bryson et al., 2017). In this context, prior research has emphasized the importance of public governance in steering private sector participation toward public interest, advocating for a “market-shaping” approach (Mazzucato & Ryan-Collins, 2022). From a policy perspective, fostering collaboration beyond individual platforms has been suggested as a way to enhance interoperability, shared standards, data integration, and cross-platform communication. These strategies align with the concept of government-as-a-platform, where the government provides a robust foundation for service delivery and orchestrates public value creation (Cordella & Paletti, 2019; O'Reilly, 2011).

The second contribution is the understanding of the outcomes of public service digital platforms derived from empirical data, which offers practical implications for policymakers and public managers. The user-centric nature of these platforms, while enabling customization and enhancing user satisfaction, raises concerns regarding individuals' autonomy, decision-making abilities, and the risks of privacy infringement and data exploitation for commercial gain. Our findings also show that these risks manifest differently across service domains. This underscores the importance of policy approaches tailored to specific sectors, such as promoting interoperability and inclusion in healthcare and welfare, while in education and other citizen-facing services prioritizing stricter oversight of data use and monetization.

These findings bear significant implications for policymakers shaping the trajectory of public services, especially in light of technological advancements such as digital identity systems (Masiero & Bailur, 2021) and the integration of artificial intelligence (Neumann et al., 2022). While these developments hold the potential to create public value by increasing proximity to users and enhancing service responsiveness, policymakers and public managers need to carefully navigate the implementation of these technologies to ensure ethical and responsible practices and address concerns related to privacy, algorithmic biases, and governance failures (Larsson, 2021).

In general, our study holds significance for the discourse on public-private collaborations in shaping digital services. As countries globally

navigate digital transformation, our study provides recommendations to align the efficiency and user-centric approaches of digital structures with fundamental components of public value, including inclusivity and privacy.

6. Conclusions and limitations

As platformization continues to expand across diverse domains, including essential public services such as education, family assistance, healthcare, and urban transport, digital platforms are playing an increasingly central role in shaping public value. Through an explorative comparative case study of 25 privately-owned public service digital platforms, our study highlights both the opportunities and challenges associated with these platforms. While these platforms enhance public value by improving service effectiveness, efficiency, and customization, they also destroy public value, raising concerns like reduced inclusivity, user autonomy, decision-making and privacy.

This study is exploratory in nature and has certain limitations that provide avenues for further research. First, it primarily assesses the instances of public service digital platforms, necessitating additional research to measure tangible outcomes for a comprehensive evaluation of their long-term public value impacts.

Second, our study is limited to examining negative outcomes solely within the scope of destruction. To gain a more nuanced understanding, future analyses could introduce additional classifications such as disvalue, displacement, and failure to differentiate consequences, encompassing the destruction, absence, deviation, or redistribution of values and outcomes (Parker et al., 2023). This expanded categorization will enhance our understanding of potential negative outcomes and facilitate more targeted mitigation strategies.

Additionally, while our study offers preliminary insights into the role of platform characteristics and government on public value outcomes, further research is needed to understand conditions for specific outcomes. Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) or similar methods can unveil underlying mechanisms and identify specific combinations of platform characteristics and governance structures contributing to public value creation or destruction.

A further limitation is the composition and depth of our research data. Reliance on secondary data may introduce inherent bias risks, as sources may vary in objectivity. For example, company presentations may emphasize promotional content, while interviews may reflect the interviewer's agenda. A closer analysis of these biases, especially distinguishing between self-reported and third-party data, could strengthen findings in future studies. Additionally, while our multi-case approach offers a broad view, it sacrifices some depth. Future research might benefit from in-depth single-case studies to enrich our understanding of individual platforms and the interactions within them.

Another limitation is the geographical focus on Italy, which may limit the generalizability of our findings to other contexts. An international comparison could improve understanding by revealing potential differences in the public value outcomes of public service digital platforms across various regions and public governance approaches.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Francesca Casalini: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Liudmila Zavolokina:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis.

Authors' statement

No statement.

Declaration of competing interest

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

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2025.102090>.

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