

Article

Touristification Beyond Global Cities: The Atlantic Urban System as a Framework for Understanding Urban Change

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, touristification has become one of the most influential concepts for understanding the relationship between tourism and urban change. However, existing research remains strongly shaped by the experiences of large metropolitan areas and globally recognized tourist destinations, leaving intermediate urban contexts comparatively underexplored. This paper addresses this gap by examining the Atlantic Urban System of the north-western Iberian Peninsula as a framework for understanding touristification beyond dominant metropolitan paradigms. Drawing on debates on touristification, ordinary cities, intermediate urbanism, and regional development, the article argues that the polycentric structure, historical peripherality, and growing integration of this urban system create distinctive conditions shaping tourism-related urban change. Building on previous work on the Atlantic Urban Axis, the paper conceptualizes the Atlantic Urban System as a territorial configuration composed largely of interconnected intermediate cities and develops a framework for analysing touristification through five interrelated dimensions: territorial position, housing market structure, tourism development trajectories, urban governance, and urban form. Rather than proposing a new urban type, the article highlights the analytical value of examining tourism-related transformations within a specific territorial configuration and contributes to ongoing efforts to diversify the geographical foundations of urban theory.

Keywords: touristification; Atlantic Urban System; intermediate cities; urban tourism; urban change; urban morphology; polycentric urban systems



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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, touristification has become one of the most influential concepts for understanding contemporary urban change [1,2]. Initially developed in response to the rapid expansion of urban tourism and the proliferation of short-term rental platforms, the concept has been employed to explain a wide range of transformations affecting housing markets, commercial landscapes, public spaces, and everyday urban life [3–6]. The growing integration of tourism into urban development strategies has generated intense academic debates concerning displacement, housing affordability, socio-spatial inequalities, and the changing relationship between residents and visitors [7–9].

A substantial body of research has demonstrated how tourism increasingly operates as a driver of urban restructuring. Studies have documented the conversion of residential housing into tourist accommodation, the commercialization of public space, the transformation of neighborhood identities, and the emergence of new forms of exclusion associated

with visitor-oriented urban economies [10,11]. More recently, scholars have linked touristification to broader processes of platform urbanism, financialization, and rent extraction, highlighting the growing influence of digital platforms in shaping urban development trajectories [12–15].

Despite these advances, existing knowledge remains strongly shaped by a limited set of urban contexts. Much of the theoretical and empirical literature has focused on large metropolitan areas and internationally recognized tourist destinations such as Barcelona, Lisbon, Amsterdam, Venice, Berlin, and New York [16–19]. These cities have played a crucial role in identifying the mechanisms through which tourism contributes to urban transformation. However, their dominance within the literature has also contributed to the consolidation of what may be described as a metropolitan bias in touristification research.

This metropolitan bias reflects a broader tendency within urban studies to construct theoretical frameworks from the experiences of large and globally connected cities while paying comparatively less attention to smaller and intermediate urban contexts [20–22]. As a result, processes observed in major metropolitan areas are frequently assumed to be universally applicable despite significant variations in demographic dynamics, housing markets, economic structures, urban morphology, and governance arrangements. Yet the rapid geographical expansion of tourism across Europe suggests the need to question such assumptions.

Although research on touristification in intermediate cities remains comparatively limited, some studies have begun to explore tourism-related urban transformations beyond major metropolitan destinations. For example, ref. [23] examined the relationship between tourism gentrification and urban change in Porto, while [24] compared processes of touristification and social transformation in the historic centres of Porto and A Coruña. Such contributions suggest that tourism-related urban transformations are not confined to global cities while also revealing the limited attention that intermediate urban contexts have received within the broader touristification literature.

In recent years, tourism growth has increasingly extended beyond traditional metropolitan destinations towards a diverse range of intermediate cities. Across the European Atlantic façade, cities such as A Coruña, Santiago de Compostela, Braga, Porto, Cork, and Galway have experienced significant increases in visitor numbers, tourism-related investment, and short-term rental activity. Although these cities differ in size, institutional contexts, and development trajectories, they share a number of characteristics that distinguish them from the global cities that dominate touristification research. Their housing markets tend to be smaller and less diversified, their tourism expansion is generally more recent, and their urban economies often combine post-industrial restructuring with emerging visitor-oriented development strategies.

These characteristics raise important theoretical questions. Can conceptual frameworks developed from the experience of global tourist cities adequately explain urban transformations in intermediate urban contexts? Do the mechanisms linking tourism, housing, and urban change operate in similar ways across different urban scales? Or do intermediate cities require alternative analytical perspectives capable of capturing their specific trajectories and vulnerabilities?

The issue is therefore not simply that intermediate cities have received less scholarly attention. More fundamentally, existing conceptual frameworks have been developed primarily from the experience of large metropolitan destinations, where housing markets, governance capacities, tourism trajectories and urban structures differ substantially from those of intermediate cities. Applying these frameworks uncritically risks overlooking the specific mechanisms through which touristification unfolds in smaller and polycentric

urban systems. This creates the need for an analytical framework capable of accounting for these distinctive territorial and urban conditions.

This paper addresses these questions by exploring the Atlantic Urban System of the north-western Iberian Peninsula as a framework for understanding touristification beyond dominant metropolitan contexts. Rather than treating the cities that compose this urban system as scaled-down versions of larger metropolitan areas, the paper argues that their articulation within a polycentric and historically peripheral urban structure creates distinctive conditions through which touristification unfolds. These conditions emerge from particular combinations of housing market dynamics, regional positioning, urban morphology, governance arrangements, and development strategies. By bringing together debates on touristification, ordinary cities, intermediate urbanism, and regional development, the article seeks to contribute to a more geographically diverse and theoretically nuanced understanding of contemporary urban change.

Given the conceptual nature of this article, the proposed framework was developed through an integrative review of the literature rather than a systematic review. The literature was selected according to its theoretical relevance to touristification, intermediate cities, ordinary cities, polycentric urban systems, and regional development, combining seminal contributions with recent studies that have shaped these debates.

2. The Global-City Bias in Touristification Research

Since its emergence as a distinct field of inquiry, touristification research has generated a substantial body of knowledge on the relationship between tourism and urban change. Studies have documented the effects of tourism growth on housing affordability, neighbourhood transformation, commercial restructuring, public space conflicts, and socio-spatial inequalities across a variety of urban contexts [3,5,7,8]. This literature has significantly contributed to understanding how tourism increasingly functions as a mechanism of urban restructuring in contemporary cities.

However, despite its empirical diversity, touristification research remains characterized by a remarkable geographical concentration. Much of the field's conceptual development has emerged from the study of a relatively small group of global cities. These cases have become reference points for understanding the relationships between tourism, housing markets, displacement, and urban governance. The predominance of these cities is not accidental. They represent some of the most visible examples of tourism-related urban transformation and have provided valuable insights into the mechanisms through which tourism reshapes urban space. Yet their centrality within the literature raises broader questions concerning the geographical foundations of contemporary urban theory. As [22] argues, urban scholarship has frequently produced theoretical frameworks from a limited number of highly visible cities while treating other urban contexts as secondary sites for empirical validation rather than theoretical innovation [25]. Similar concerns have been raised by [26,27], who criticize the tendency to universalize concepts derived from specific urban experiences.

From this perspective, touristification research may be understood as reproducing a wider metropolitan bias within urban studies. Concepts such as overtourism, tourism gentrification, platform-induced displacement, and visitor-oriented urban restructuring have largely been theorized through the experiences of large metropolitan areas and globally connected tourist destinations. Implicitly or explicitly, these cities often function as archetypal models through which tourism-related urban change is interpreted elsewhere.

The problem is not that these cases have been studied extensively. Rather, the issue lies in the frequent assumption that the mechanisms identified within them operate similarly across diverse urban contexts. Such assumptions become increasingly problematic as

tourism expands into cities that differ substantially from global urban destinations in terms of scale, economic structure, housing market dynamics, governance capacities, and regional positioning.

Recent research suggests that tourism growth is no longer confined to major metropolitan centres. Across Europe, tourism-related investment, short-term rental activity, and visitor-oriented development strategies have increasingly reached medium-sized and intermediate cities. Yet these cities often remain theoretically underrepresented despite their growing importance within contemporary tourism geographies. As [21] observe in relation to small cities more generally, urban theory continues to privilege large metropolitan experiences while overlooking the distinctive trajectories of other urban forms.

This imbalance creates an important analytical gap. If touristification unfolds within urban environments characterized by smaller housing markets, different governance structures, lower levels of internationalization, and distinct regional relationships, then existing conceptual frameworks may only partially capture the processes at work. Rather than simply extending metropolitan models to new contexts, there is a need to examine whether alternative urban settings generate different forms, intensities, and consequences of touristification.

Addressing this challenge requires moving beyond the dominant focus on global urban destinations and engaging more seriously with the diversity of contemporary urban experiences. In this regard, intermediate cities offer a particularly promising site for theoretical development. Their growing exposure to tourism pressures, combined with their relative absence from mainstream touristification debates, provides an opportunity to rethink some of the assumptions that continue to shape the field.

3. Why Intermediate Cities Matter

Although the concept of the city has long occupied a central place within urban studies, not all cities have received equal scholarly attention. Research has traditionally focused on large metropolitan areas, global cities, and major urban agglomerations, often treating smaller and intermediate cities as secondary spaces whose primary relevance lies in illustrating broader urban processes. As a consequence, the diversity of urban experiences that exists beyond major metropolitan centres has frequently remained underexplored.

Over the last two decades, however, a growing body of scholarship has challenged this tendency. Research on ordinary cities, second cities, and intermediate urban centres has emphasized that urban theory cannot be constructed exclusively from the experiences of globally connected metropolitan areas [20,28]. Rather than viewing non-metropolitan cities as incomplete versions of larger urban centres, these perspectives argue that they possess distinctive development trajectories, institutional arrangements, and socio-spatial dynamics that deserve attention in their own right.

Intermediate cities occupy a particularly important position within this debate. Although definitions vary across national and institutional contexts, they are generally understood as urban centres that perform significant economic, political, and cultural functions within their regions while remaining outside the highest levels of the urban hierarchy [28,29]. Their importance stems not only from their demographic weight but also from their role as mediators between local territories and wider national or international networks. This growing recognition is also reflected in international policy agendas, where intermediate cities are increasingly regarded as strategic actors for promoting balanced territorial development, strengthening regional connectivity, and advancing more sustainable urbanization [30].

Several characteristics distinguish intermediate cities from the metropolitan contexts that dominate touristification research. First, their housing markets tend to be smaller,

less diversified, and more sensitive to external shocks. Changes in housing demand generated by tourism may therefore produce more immediate effects on affordability and residential availability than in larger metropolitan environments. Second, governance capacities are often more limited, reducing the ability of local administrations to regulate rapidly expanding tourism activities. Third, intermediate cities frequently combine multiple development strategies—including tourism, higher education, cultural promotion, and urban regeneration—within relatively constrained economic structures.

Beyond these structural characteristics, recent discussions surrounding the 15 min city have further reinforced the relevance of intermediate and compact urban environments by highlighting the importance of proximity, mixed land uses, and everyday accessibility for improving urban liveability and sustainability. Although the 15 min city has often been discussed in relation to large metropolitan areas, many of its underlying principles are already characteristic of numerous intermediate Atlantic cities, where compact urban forms and relatively short travel distances shape everyday urban life.

Recent studies have shown that tourism has become increasingly relevant within these urban contexts. Seeking new sources of economic growth, many intermediate cities have actively promoted tourism through heritage valorisation, cultural branding, event-led development, and place-marketing initiatives [31]. At the same time, digital platforms have reduced barriers to market entry, facilitating the rapid expansion of short-term rentals even in destinations that were previously peripheral to international tourism circuits [11,13].

Yet the consequences of these transformations remain insufficiently understood. Existing frameworks have largely interpreted tourism-related urban change through concepts developed in large metropolitan settings, including tourism gentrification, overtourism, and platform urbanism. While these perspectives provide valuable insights, they do not necessarily capture the specific vulnerabilities and opportunities associated with intermediate urban environments. The relative scale of housing markets, the structure of local economies, and the intensity of tourism development may all shape touristification processes in distinctive ways.

This observation is particularly relevant in the European context, where numerous intermediate cities have experienced significant tourism growth during the last two decades. In many cases, tourism has emerged not as a dominant economic sector but as one component within broader urban development strategies. Consequently, tourism-related transformations often interact with processes of demographic change, post-industrial restructuring, regional competition, and housing market adjustment. Understanding these interactions requires analytical frameworks capable of moving beyond metropolitan assumptions and engaging with the diversity of contemporary urban trajectories.

For these reasons, intermediate cities should not be regarded merely as new empirical settings in which to test existing theories of touristification. Instead, they offer an opportunity to rethink some of the conceptual assumptions that continue to shape the field. By examining how tourism-related urban change unfolds outside major metropolitan destinations, researchers may gain a more nuanced understanding of the multiple forms that touristification can take across different urban contexts.

4. The Atlantic Urban System as a Distinct Territorial Context

The previous sections have argued that existing conceptual frameworks remains strongly influenced by experiences derived from large metropolitan areas and globally recognized tourist destinations. At the same time, urban contexts located outside major metropolitan centres have received comparatively limited attention despite their increasing exposure to tourism-related transformations. Building upon these observations, this paper proposes the Atlantic Urban System of the north-western Iberian Peninsula as a territorial

framework through which touristification can be examined beyond the dominant focus on global cities. Rather than understanding urban change exclusively through the experiences of major metropolitan destinations, the paper argues that the polycentric structure, historical peripherality, and growing integration of the Atlantic Urban System create distinctive conditions through which touristification unfolds.

Figure 1 illustrates the geographical location of the cities composing the proposed Atlantic Urban System within the north-western Iberian Peninsula, together with the metropolitan reference cities of Lisbon and Barcelona used for comparison throughout this article.

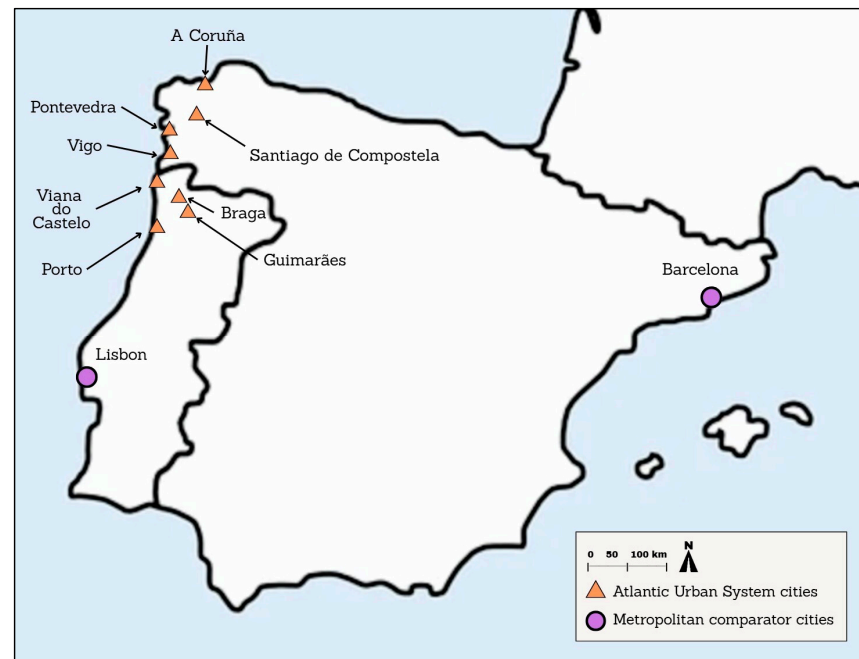


Figure 1. Location of the Atlantic Urban System cities in the north-western Iberian Peninsula.

The concept does not refer to a homogeneous urban type. Rather, it identifies a group of cities that share a particular combination of geographical location, urban scale, development trajectories, and contemporary tourism dynamics. Situated along the European Atlantic Arc, these cities occupy a distinctive position within the continent's urban system. While they vary considerably in demographic size, tourism intensity, economic specialization, transport connectivity, and urban morphology (Table 1), they nevertheless share conditions of relative peripherality in relation to Europe's major metropolitan cores and global urban centres.

Table 1. Socio-economic and tourism profile of the selected cities within the Atlantic Urban System.

City	Population (2025)	Annual Overnight Stays (2024)	Urban Economy
Porto	273.476	4481.649	Services/tourism
Braga	212.635	678.666	Services/university
Guimarães	165.554	384.984	Industry/heritage tourism
Viana do Castelo	92.860	356.111	Port/tourism
A Coruña	251.277	962.520	Services/port
Santiago de Compostela	100.842	1589.301	Tourism/university
Vigo	295.735	1000.208	Industry/port
Pontevedra	83.339	216.395	Administration/services

Note: Population corresponds to the resident municipal population (2025). Tourist flows are measured as annual overnight stays (2024). Due to differences in national statistical systems, overnight stays refer to hotel establishments in Galicia (IGE) and tourist accommodation establishments in Portugal (INE/PORDATA).

While the Atlantic Arc extends across several European regions, this article focuses specifically on the north-western Iberian Peninsula. This territorial configuration is selected not because it is representative of all Atlantic regions, but because it constitutes a particularly coherent example of an integrated and polycentric urban system composed largely of interconnected intermediate cities and their surrounding functional territories. As such, it provides an appropriate setting through which the analytical potential of the proposed framework can be explored.

The Atlantic Urban System is not proposed as a formal administrative or statistical regional category. Rather, it is conceived as an analytical framework that captures shared territorial, morphological, economic, and governance characteristics among predominantly intermediate cities of the north-western Iberian Peninsula.

Importantly, the Atlantic Urban System should not be understood simply as a network of individual cities. Rather, it comprises a broader functional territory in which intermediate urban centres are closely interconnected with peri-urban and rural areas through commuting, service provision, economic exchange, and mobility networks. These urban-rural interactions constitute an essential component of the system, shaping demographic dynamics, housing markets, tourism development and territorial accessibility. Consequently, touristification should be interpreted not only as an urban phenomenon confined to municipal boundaries, but as a process embedded within a wider regional and functional territorial context.

Compared with major metropolitan tourist destinations such as Barcelona and Lisbon, the cities examined within the Atlantic Urban System are characterised by substantially smaller demographic and spatial scales. While Barcelona (1.71 million inhabitants) and Lisbon (658,000 inhabitants) represent large metropolitan centres, the selected Atlantic cities range from approximately 83,000 to 296,000 inhabitants. At the same time, some cities—particularly Porto (16.39 overnight stays per inhabitant) and Santiago de Compostela (15.76)—display tourism intensities comparable to those of Barcelona (18.94) and Lisbon (17.94). This combination of relatively high tourism intensity within much smaller urban systems suggests that touristification may unfold through different dynamics than those typically observed in large metropolitan destinations.

The Atlantic Arc has long been recognized as a meaningful territorial space within European regional policy and cooperation frameworks [32,33]. Numerous initiatives have highlighted common challenges related to accessibility, demographic change, economic restructuring, territorial cohesion, and regional competitiveness across Atlantic regions. Yet urban studies have rarely considered how these shared territorial conditions might influence contemporary processes of urban transformation, including touristification. Similar macro-regional urban frameworks have also been explored in other European contexts, particularly in the Baltic region, where polycentric urban networks have been analysed as functional territorial systems. Likewise, other polycentric urban systems exist in Europe, such as the Rhine–Ruhr region in Germany and the Dutch Randstad. Unlike these highly urbanised and economically central regions, however, the Atlantic Urban System combines polycentricity with the predominance of intermediate cities, historical metropolitan peripherality, and a relatively recent incorporation into international tourism circuits.

Beyond regional policy debates, several authors have identified the emergence of increasingly integrated territorial and urban structures within the Atlantic façade of the Iberian Peninsula [32–35]. These contributions emphasize the growing importance of polycentricity, mobility, territorial integration, and cross-border cooperation in shaping a corridor of urban development extending across Galicia and Northern Portugal. Within this context, ref. [34] describes the formation of an Atlantic Urban Axis stretching from A Coruña to Porto, characterized by urban continuity, demographic concentration, functional

integration, and growing economic interdependence. Building on these insights, this paper conceptualizes the Atlantic Urban System not merely as a geographical area, but as a polycentric urban configuration whose territorial and institutional characteristics may shape contemporary processes of touristification. Building on previous work on the Atlantic Urban Axis and related debates on territorial integration and polycentric development within the north-western Iberian Peninsula, the Atlantic Urban System is proposed here as an analytical framework for understanding touristification beyond metropolitan contexts.

Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of the principal cities considered within the Atlantic Urban System, while Table 2 presents their main territorial and urban characteristics. Although these cities differ substantially in demographic size, tourism intensity, economic specialization, transport connectivity and urban morphology, they share a number of structural features that justify their consideration as a coherent territorial configuration. This diversity is precisely what makes the Atlantic Urban System an appropriate framework for examining touristification beyond dominant metropolitan contexts.

Table 2. Territorial and urban characteristics of the selected cities within the Atlantic Urban System.

City	Urban Role	Connectivity	Urban Profile
Porto	Metropolitan	INT AIR + HSR	Metropolitan hub; mature tourist destination
Braga	Intermediate city	M + R	Religious and cultural city
Guimarães	Intermediate city	M + R	UNESCO World Heritage city
Viana do Castelo	Intermediate city	P + R + M	Coastal city; maritime economy
A Coruña	Intermediate city	AIR + R + P	Regional port city; growing cruise tourism
Santiago de Compostela	Administrative capital	INT AIR + R	Pilgrimage city
Vigo	Metropolitan	AIR + R + P	Industrial city; emerging tourism
Pontevedra	Intermediate city	R + M	Pedestrian-oriented historic city

AIR = airport; INT AIR = international airport; HSR = high-speed rail; R = rail; M = motorway; P = port.

A defining characteristic of many cities composing the Atlantic Urban System is their position within development trajectories shaped by industrial decline, economic restructuring, and the search for new growth strategies. Throughout recent decades, local governments have increasingly turned towards culture, heritage, tourism, higher education, and urban branding as mechanisms for enhancing competitiveness and attracting investment. Tourism has therefore emerged not simply as an isolated economic activity but as part of broader strategies of urban repositioning within national and international networks.

Unlike many global tourist destinations, however, tourism expansion in these cities has often occurred relatively recently. In numerous cases, significant increases in visitor numbers, short-term rental activity, and tourism-oriented investment have been concentrated within the last two decades. This temporal dimension is important because it allows researchers to observe touristification processes at earlier stages of development than those typically documented in mature tourist destinations.

Housing markets constitute another critical dimension [30]. Compared with large metropolitan regions, intermediate cities generally possess smaller and less diversified housing systems [36,37]. As a result, relatively modest increases in tourism demand may generate significant effects on residential availability, rental prices, and housing affordability. Processes that might remain spatially concentrated within larger metropolitan areas can therefore acquire wider urban significance within smaller housing markets. The relationship between tourism and housing may consequently become visible earlier and more intensely than in larger urban contexts.

These characteristics suggest that cities within the Atlantic Urban System offer a valuable perspective from which to reconsider dominant assumptions within touristification research. Rather than representing simplified versions of global tourist cities, they constitute urban contexts where tourism interacts with distinct regional conditions, devel-

opment strategies, and housing market structures. Understanding these interactions may reveal mechanisms of urban change that remain partially obscured within studies focused primarily on metropolitan destinations.

For this reason, the Atlantic Urban System should be understood not as a fixed territorial category but as an analytical framework that draws attention to a specific configuration of urban conditions. For the purposes of this article, it refers to a polycentric configuration of interconnected cities located within the Atlantic Arc of the north-western Iberian Peninsula, characterized by relative metropolitan peripherality, growing functional integration, compact urban structures, and increasing exposure to tourism-related transformations.

4.1. The Atlantic Urban Axis in the North-Western Iberian Peninsula

Urban development in Spain and Portugal has traditionally been analysed through separate national frameworks. As [34] notes, the urban systems of both countries evolved largely independently during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, reflecting distinct political trajectories, economic structures, and patterns of territorial organization. However, the processes of European integration and the progressive opening of the Spanish-Portuguese border have fostered new forms of interaction and spatial integration, particularly in the north-western corner of the Iberian Peninsula.

Building upon these transformations, ref. [34] identifies the emergence of an Atlantic Urban Axis extending from A Coruña to Porto. Complementary interpretations emphasizing the construction of an increasingly integrated Galicia–Northern Portugal urban region have also been developed by [38] and by [39], who highlight the growing articulation of urban networks and the consolidation of a more interconnected regional urban structure within the broader context of European integration. Rather than a single metropolitan region, this axis consists of a sequence of interconnected urban centres linked through transportation infrastructures, economic exchanges, demographic concentration, and increasing cross-border mobility. The author argues that this corridor constitutes one of the most dynamic spaces of urban development in the Iberian Peninsula, bringing together a network of cities that collectively exceed four million inhabitants and concentrate a significant share of economic activity in the region.

Subsequent research has reinforced this interpretation by highlighting the increasing functional integration of urban centres across Galicia and Northern Portugal. Studies have emphasized the role of transportation infrastructures, cross-border commuting, institutional cooperation, and growing patterns of mobility in consolidating a more articulated regional urban system [35,38,40]. Rather than being organized around a single dominant metropolitan centre, this space has evolved through the interaction of multiple cities performing complementary economic, administrative, educational, and cultural functions. Such characteristics have led several authors to describe the region as one of the most significant examples of polycentric urban development within the Atlantic façade of Europe.

While the notion of the Atlantic Urban Axis was originally developed to explain processes of territorial integration and urban growth, it also provides a useful territorial framework through which contemporary urban transformations may be examined. Rather than revisiting the characteristics of individual cities, the relevance of the Atlantic Urban Axis for this article lies in its capacity to conceptualize touristification within a polycentric urban system composed largely of interconnected intermediate cities.

4.2. Why the Atlantic Urban System?

The Atlantic Urban System offers more than a geographically bounded setting for the study of touristification. Its analytical relevance derives from a combination of territorial,

economic, and urban characteristics that distinguish it from both major metropolitan regions and isolated intermediate cities.

First, the Atlantic Urban System is not simply a collection of coastal cities. Building on the notion of the Atlantic Urban Axis proposed by [34], it can be understood as a polycentric network of interconnected urban centres linked through economic exchanges, transportation infrastructures, labour mobility, and increasing forms of cross-border cooperation. The significance of this configuration lies not only in the characteristics of individual cities but also in the relationships that connect them within a broader territorial framework.

Second, the system is characterized by a strongly polycentric structure [39]. Previous research has emphasized the growing integration of Galicia's urban areas and their evolution towards a more articulated regional urban system, reinforcing the relevance of polycentric perspectives for understanding contemporary territorial dynamics. Polycentricity is particularly relevant because it challenges the metropolitan assumptions that underpin much of the touristification literature. Polycentricity has also occupied a central place within European spatial planning, where it has been promoted as a strategy for achieving more balanced and territorially integrated patterns of development [41,42]. Existing research has largely examined tourism-related transformations in cities characterized by a dominant urban core, where economic activity, political power, cultural institutions, and tourism flows tend to be concentrated. By contrast, the Atlantic Urban System is organized through a network of interconnected cities that perform complementary functions and maintain strong territorial linkages. In such contexts, tourism development may not be concentrated within a single metropolitan centre but distributed across multiple urban nodes. This raises important questions regarding the spatial distribution of tourism-related investment, visitor flows, housing pressures, and urban restructuring processes. Consequently, a polycentric perspective offers an opportunity to examine touristification as a process that may operate across interconnected urban systems rather than solely within individual cities.

Third, the Atlantic Urban System is shaped by a history of relative peripherality within Europe. For much of the twentieth century, the north-western Iberian Peninsula occupied a position distant from the principal economic and political centres of the continent. However, processes of European integration, infrastructure development, and economic restructuring have progressively increased its connectivity and international visibility. Tourism has emerged as one of the mechanisms through which this territorial repositioning has taken place. This Atlantic condition is significant not simply because of geographical location, but because it reflects a shared historical trajectory characterized by relative metropolitan peripherality, strong maritime connections, export-oriented economies, and a long-standing dependence on external flows of people, goods, and capital. Previous research has also highlighted the long-standing Atlantic orientation of relations between Galicia and Northern Portugal, suggesting that contemporary processes of integration build upon historical patterns of exchange, cooperation, and interaction [43]. These characteristics distinguish many Atlantic cities from inland urban regions and help explain the particular ways in which tourism has become integrated into contemporary development strategies.

Finally, the Atlantic Urban System provides a particularly valuable context for examining touristification because many of its constituent cities combine relatively recent tourism growth with the characteristics of intermediate urban centres. Compared with the global cities that dominate existing literature, these urban environments generally possess smaller housing markets, more compact urban forms, and development trajectories that remain closely linked to broader processes of regional restructuring. As a result, tourism-related transformations may emerge through different pathways and generate distinct socio-spatial outcomes.

Taken together, these characteristics suggest that the Atlantic Urban System constitutes more than a regional context. It represents a distinctive territorial configuration through which the relationship between tourism and urban change can be examined beyond the metropolitan assumptions that continue to shape much of the touristification literature. The analytical value of the Atlantic Urban System lies not in the existence of a distinctive urban type, but in the existence of a distinctive territorial configuration characterized by polycentricity, historical peripherality, growing functional integration, and the increasing incorporation of intermediate cities into international tourism circuits. Together, these characteristics suggest that the Atlantic dimension should be understood not merely as a geographical designation but as a historically produced territorial condition that shapes contemporary urban development trajectories. From this perspective, the Atlantic dimension is not merely geographical but analytical, as it captures the interaction between polycentricity, historical peripherality, and emerging tourism development within a network of predominantly intermediate cities.

Although the present article is conceptual in nature, the cities included in the Atlantic Urban System already exhibit empirical patterns consistent with the proposed framework. As shown in Table 1, destinations such as Porto and Santiago de Compostela have reached tourism intensities comparable to those of major metropolitan destinations despite their much smaller demographic scale, while other cities, including A Coruña and Vigo, are experiencing more recent but rapidly growing tourism development. These differences illustrate the diversity of tourism trajectories within the system and support its value as a framework for future comparative empirical research.

5. Towards a Conceptual Framework for Understanding Touristification in the Atlantic Urban System

The preceding discussion has highlighted two limitations within existing touristification research. First, the field remains strongly influenced by theoretical frameworks derived from large metropolitan areas and globally recognized tourist destinations. Second, intermediate cities continue to occupy a relatively marginal position within contemporary debates despite their increasing exposure to tourism-related transformations. In response to these limitations, this section proposes a conceptual framework for examining touristification in cities composing the Atlantic Urban System. Rather than assuming that touristification unfolds uniformly across urban contexts, the framework presented here emphasizes the interaction between tourism growth and the specific structural conditions of intermediate urban environments. In particular, it identifies five interrelated dimensions that shape the development and consequences of touristification within cities composing the Atlantic Urban System: territorial position, housing market structure, tourism development trajectories, urban governance, and urban form and morphological structure (Figure 2).

These five dimensions emerged from the synthesis of the recurring themes identified throughout the literature reviewed in the preceding sections. Together, they represent the principal structural and territorial factors most consistently associated with touristification processes in intermediate urban contexts.

Rather than viewing touristification as a process driven solely by tourism growth, the framework emphasizes the interaction between territorial position, housing market structures, tourism development trajectories, governance arrangements, and urban form within the Atlantic Urban System.

The proposed framework is intended as an analytical tool to guide empirical research on touristification in intermediate cities. Each dimension can be operationalised using context-specific qualitative and quantitative indicators depending on the research objec-

tives and data availability. Rather than providing a fixed measurement protocol, the framework offers a flexible structure for systematically examining the multiple dimensions of touristification across different urban contexts.

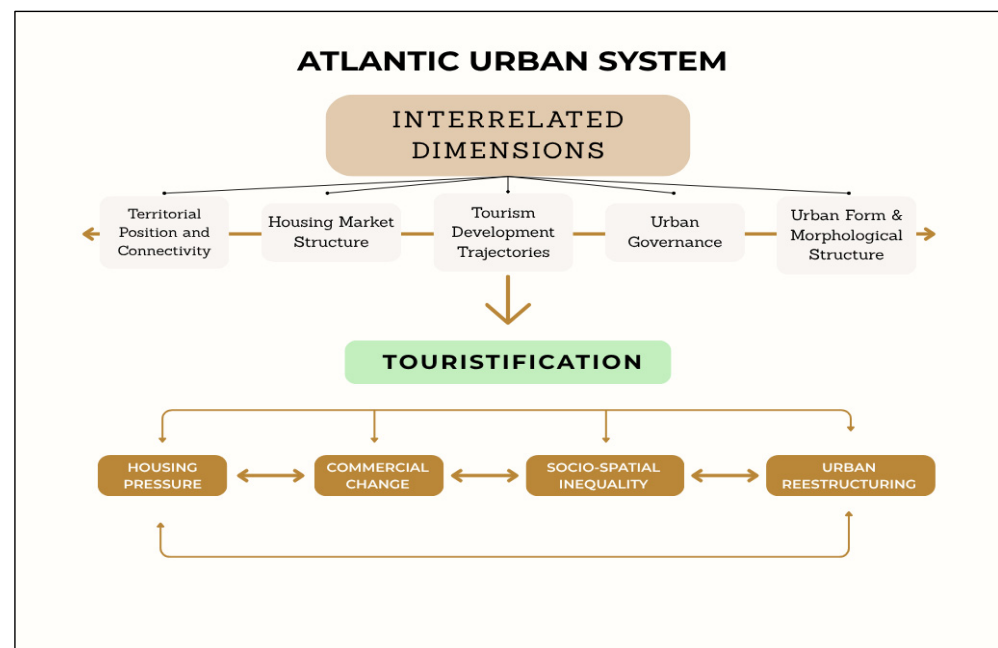


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework for Understanding Touristification in the Atlantic Urban System. Source: Author's own elaboration.

5.1. Territorial Position and Connectivity

The first dimension concerns the territorial location of intermediate cities within the Atlantic Urban System. Unlike major metropolitan centres, many Atlantic cities occupy relatively peripheral positions within broader economic and transportation networks. Such locations have historically limited their integration into dominant circuits of capital, tourism, and investment. However, improvements in connectivity, the expansion of low-cost air travel, digital booking platforms, and changing tourism preferences have increasingly incorporated these cities into wider tourism geographies.

This process generates new opportunities for economic development while simultaneously exposing local urban systems to external pressures. Tourism therefore becomes an important mechanism through which global flows are articulated with local urban conditions.

5.2. Housing Market Structure

The second dimension relates to housing market characteristics. Existing research has demonstrated that tourism-related accommodation, particularly short-term rentals, can reduce residential supply and intensify affordability pressures [44]. While these effects have been extensively documented in large metropolitan areas, they may acquire particular significance within intermediate cities.

Housing markets in intermediate urban contexts are often smaller, less diversified, and less capable of absorbing sudden increases in demand. Consequently, relatively limited expansions in tourism activity may produce disproportionate impacts on rental prices, housing availability, and residential stability. Touristification therefore operates not simply through absolute tourism intensity but through its relationship with the scale and structure of local housing systems.

5.3. Tourism Development Trajectories

The third dimension concerns the temporal and developmental characteristics of tourism growth. Many cities within the Atlantic Urban System have entered international tourism circuits relatively recently compared with long-established urban destinations. Tourism expansion is frequently associated with broader strategies of urban repositioning that seek to attract visitors, investment, students, and skilled professionals.

Previous research on the Galicia–Northern Portugal Euroregion has highlighted the uneven geography of tourism development across the territory, with destinations such as Porto and Santiago de Compostela concentrating a significant share of tourism flows and visibility, while other urban centres remain more weakly integrated into international tourism circuits [45]. These differences suggest that touristification may emerge through distinct trajectories across the Atlantic Urban System.

This temporal dimension matters because it suggests that touristification may unfold differently during earlier stages of tourism development. Processes such as the conversion of residential housing into tourist accommodation, the commercialization of urban space, and the reconfiguration of neighbourhood identities may emerge before the levels of visitor concentration typically associated with overtourism. Intermediate cities therefore provide an opportunity to examine touristification as an evolving process rather than as a mature urban condition.

5.4. Urban Governance

The fourth dimension refers to governance arrangements and local policy responses. Municipal governments play a crucial role in shaping tourism development through planning regulations, housing policies, place-branding strategies, and tourism promotion initiatives. Yet governance capacities often differ substantially between metropolitan and intermediate cities.

Intermediate municipalities may possess fewer administrative resources, more limited regulatory capacities, and stronger dependencies on tourism-related economic growth. As a result, local governments frequently face tensions between promoting tourism as a development strategy and mitigating its social consequences. The management of these tensions constitutes a central component of contemporary touristification processes within intermediate urban contexts.

5.5. Urban Form and Morphological Structure

A fifth dimension that deserves greater attention within touristification research concerns urban form and urban morphology. While urban morphology has long been recognized as a key field for understanding the physical structure and spatial evolution of cities [46,47], existing studies of touristification have extensively examined housing markets, governance arrangements, and tourism development dynamics while paying comparatively less attention to the ways in which morphological characteristics shape tourism-related transformations.

Urban morphology influences how tourism activities are spatially distributed, how housing markets respond to changing demand, and how visitor-oriented functions interact with existing urban environments. Historic centres, street networks, building typologies, residential densities, and patterns of land use may all affect the intensity and visibility of touristification processes. Yet these factors often remain implicit within dominant explanations.

This issue is particularly relevant in many cities within the Atlantic Urban System. Unlike numerous metropolitan areas characterized by extensive urban expansion and highly differentiated housing markets, many Atlantic cities retain relatively compact urban structures, historically consolidated centres, and strong concentrations of cultural,

commercial, and residential activities within limited areas. Under such conditions, tourism-related pressures may become spatially concentrated and highly visible, even when visitor numbers remain comparatively modest in absolute terms.

The spatial concentration of tourist accommodation, hospitality activities, and visitor-oriented consumption within compact urban environments can intensify competition for residential space and accelerate functional transformations of central neighbourhoods. Consequently, the impacts of touristification may not depend solely on the scale of tourism growth but also on the capacity of urban form to absorb and redistribute tourism-related activities.

Recognizing the role of urban morphology also contributes to a more differentiated understanding of urban vulnerability. Similar levels of tourism growth may generate very different outcomes depending on the spatial organization of the city. Compact historic centres, constrained housing stocks, and highly centralized urban functions may amplify tourism-related pressures, whereas more dispersed urban structures may distribute these impacts across wider territories.

For this reason, urban form should be considered an integral component of any analytical framework seeking to explain touristification in intermediate cities. Rather than treating the built environment as a passive backdrop, future research should examine how morphological characteristics actively mediate the relationship between tourism growth, housing markets, and socio-spatial change.

5.6. Interactions and Outcomes

The framework proposed here emphasizes the interaction between these five dimensions rather than treating them as independent factors. Touristification emerges through the combination of territorial position, housing market structures, tourism development trajectories, governance arrangements, and urban form. Different configurations may produce different outcomes, including housing affordability pressures, residential displacement, commercial restructuring, changing patterns of public-space use, and broader forms of socio-spatial inequality.

From this perspective, cities composing the Atlantic Urban System should not be understood as a single urban type characterized by uniform trajectories. Rather, they represent a family of urban contexts that share certain structural conditions while exhibiting considerable local variation. The analytical value of the concept lies precisely in its capacity to identify common mechanisms without assuming identical outcomes.

Different combinations of these dimensions are likely to produce different forms and intensities of touristification. For example, cities characterised by compact urban forms, highly constrained housing markets, and rapid tourism growth may experience housing pressures and commercial change at relatively early stages of tourism development. Conversely, cities with more diversified housing markets, stronger governance capacities, or lower tourism intensity may experience more gradual or spatially uneven transformations. Understanding these different configurations highlights the need for comparative research capable of identifying how specific territorial contexts shape touristification outcomes.

By foregrounding these interactions, the framework contributes to ongoing efforts to diversify the geographical foundations of urban theory. It suggests that understanding contemporary touristification requires moving beyond metropolitan paradigms and paying greater attention to the distinctive urban conditions through which tourism-related transformations are produced.

6. Research Agenda: Studying Touristification Beyond Global Cities

The framework proposed in this article is intended as a starting point rather than a definitive model for understanding touristification in cities composing the Atlantic Urban

System. As a conceptual framework, its analytical utility should be assessed through future comparative empirical research across intermediate Atlantic cities. By highlighting the limitations of metropolitan-centred approaches and identifying the distinctive conditions of intermediate urban contexts, the framework opens several avenues for future research.

First, further empirical work is needed to assess whether touristification operates through similar mechanisms across different Atlantic cities. Existing studies have largely concentrated on major metropolitan destinations, leaving significant gaps in our understanding of how tourism-related transformations unfold in smaller urban contexts. Comparative research involving cities such as A Coruña, Santiago de Compostela, Porto, Braga, Cork, Galway, Brest, or other Atlantic urban centres could provide valuable insights into the diversity of touristification trajectories within the region.

Second, future studies should examine the relationship between tourism growth and housing market structures in intermediate cities. While research conducted in large metropolitan areas has demonstrated clear links between short-term rentals, housing affordability pressures, and residential displacement, less is known about how these processes operate in smaller and less diversified housing markets. Comparative analyses may reveal whether intermediate cities experience distinct forms of housing pressure or whether existing metropolitan models remain applicable.

Third, greater attention should be paid to temporal dynamics. Many Atlantic urban centres have experienced tourism growth relatively recently, offering opportunities to investigate the early stages of touristification. Longitudinal research could help identify how tourism-related transformations emerge, intensify, and potentially become institutionalized over time. Such studies would contribute to understanding touristification as a process rather than a static condition.

Fourth, the governance dimension deserves further exploration. The capacity of local governments to regulate tourism, manage housing pressures, and balance economic development objectives with social sustainability remains uneven across different urban contexts. Future research should investigate how institutional arrangements, planning cultures, and policy choices shape touristification outcomes in intermediate cities.

Fifth, the framework invites a broader reconsideration of scale within touristification research. Rather than assuming that concepts developed in global cities can be universally applied, scholars should explore how urban scale influences the intensity, visibility, and consequences of tourism-related transformations. A related question concerns the role of urban structure. Existing touristification research has largely been developed through the study of metropolitan regions dominated by a single major urban centre. By contrast, the Atlantic Urban System is characterized by a polycentric configuration composed of interconnected cities of different sizes. Future research should therefore explore whether touristification operates differently in polycentric urban systems than in metropolitan regions. Particular attention should be paid to the ways in which tourism-related pressures, housing market dynamics, and visitor flows are distributed across interconnected urban centres rather than concentrated within a single dominant city.

Finally, the concept of Atlantic Urban System should itself be regarded as an open analytical proposition. Future research may refine, challenge, or expand the framework by incorporating additional variables such as urban morphology, demographic change, regional development trajectories, mobility systems, or cultural heritage. Such work would not only enhance understanding of tourism-related urban change but also contribute to wider debates concerning the geographical foundations of urban theory.

Rather than simply extending existing theories of touristification to a new geographical setting, this article argues that the Atlantic Urban System constitutes a distinctive territorial configuration from which new conceptual insights into tourism-related urban change can

be developed. In this sense, the paper contributes not only by proposing a context-specific analytical framework for examining touristification in intermediate and polycentric urban systems, but also by complementing the metropolitan-centred perspectives that continue to dominate the literature.

7. Conclusions

Over the last two decades, touristification has become one of the most influential concepts for understanding the relationship between tourism and urban change. However, despite the growing sophistication of the field, much of the existing literature continues to be shaped by the experiences of a relatively limited number of large metropolitan areas and globally recognized tourist destinations. While these cases have generated valuable insights into the mechanisms through which tourism transforms urban environments, their dominance has also contributed to the consolidation of metropolitan assumptions that may not adequately capture the diversity of contemporary urban experiences.

This paper has argued that intermediate cities constitute an important but still under-explored terrain for touristification research. Rather than viewing these urban contexts as simplified versions of larger metropolitan centres, the article has highlighted the distinctive conditions through which tourism-related transformations unfold within smaller housing markets, more constrained governance structures, and different regional development trajectories. In this regard, intermediate cities should not be understood merely as additional empirical settings but as potential sources of theoretical innovation capable of enriching contemporary debates on tourism and urban change.

Building on these insights, the article has proposed the Atlantic Urban System of the north-western Iberian Peninsula as a framework for examining touristification beyond global cities. Drawing upon previous work on the Atlantic Urban Axis and broader debates surrounding the European Atlantic Arc, the paper has conceptualized this urban system as a polycentric and historically peripheral territorial configuration composed largely of interconnected intermediate cities. The analytical value of this framework lies not in the identification of a distinctive urban type, but in the recognition of a distinctive territorial context through which tourism-related transformations may be interpreted.

The conceptual framework developed here emphasizes the interaction between territorial position, housing market structure, tourism development trajectories, governance arrangements, and urban form. Together, these dimensions provide a basis for understanding how touristification may emerge, evolve, and generate socio-spatial consequences in urban environments that differ substantially from the metropolitan destinations that dominate existing research. Particular attention has been given to the role of urban morphology and polycentric territorial structures, dimensions that remain comparatively underdeveloped within current touristification scholarship.

The purpose of this article has not been to offer a definitive explanation of touristification within the Atlantic Urban System. Rather, it has sought to establish a conceptual foundation for future research and to encourage greater geographical diversity within urban tourism studies. By moving beyond metropolitan paradigms and engaging more directly with the experiences of intermediate cities, researchers may develop more nuanced and context-sensitive understandings of how tourism reshapes contemporary urban environments. Although the framework has been developed through the example of the north-western Iberian Peninsula, similar analytical approaches could be explored in other polycentric intermediate urban systems where tourism is becoming an increasingly important driver of urban change. In doing so, the study contributes not only to debates on touristification, but also to wider discussions concerning the geographical foundations

of urban theory and the need to diversify the urban contexts from which concepts and explanations are produced.

Accordingly, the framework should not be interpreted as universally applicable to all intermediate urban systems but as a context-specific analytical proposal whose transferability should be assessed through comparative research in other polycentric regions.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the framework may also assist local policymakers and urban planners in identifying urban conditions that increase vulnerability to tourism-related pressures before they become entrenched. By recognising the interaction between housing markets, governance, urban form, and territorial position, local authorities may be better equipped to design context-sensitive tourism and housing policies. More broadly, the framework encourages planning approaches that acknowledge the specific characteristics of intermediate and polycentric urban systems rather than relying exclusively on metropolitan models, thereby contributing to more context-sensitive approaches to tourism governance and urban development.

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