

URBAN TOURISM AND GLOBAL CITIES: ANALYSIS OF SÃO PAULO FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MOBILITY

TURISMO URBANO E CIDADES GLOBAIS: ANÁLISE DE SÃO PAULO PELA ÓTICA DAS MOBILIDADES

TURISMO URBANO Y CIUDADES GLOBALES: ANÁLISIS DE SÃO PAULO DESDE LA PERSPECTIVA DE LA MOVILIDAD

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ABSTRACT:

Purpose – Urban tourism is one of the attributes of global cities due to its influence, visibility, and attraction for investors and consumers, including tourists. Based on this, the objective of this research was to identify and analyze how discourses and practices mobilize urban tourism within the logic of global cities.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative, descriptive-exploratory study involved: 1) bibliographic research on urban tourism and global cities; 2) documentary research on urban and tourism plans; 3) semi-structured interviews with key agents in urban and tourism management; and 4) on-site observation and recording during 16 “Vai de Roteiro” tours.

Findings – Regarding the results, the following stand out: 1) There is a mismatch in the characterization of tourism; while the Strategic Master Plan (PDE) of São Paulo associates it mainly with rural areas, the Municipal Tourism Plans (PLATUMs) and the “Vai de Roteiro” program prioritize a tourist imagery primarily linked to the central area; 2) The plurality of cultural options in São Paulo as a global city fosters the development of tourism off the beaten track; 3) The “Vai de Roteiro” program corroborates the discussion about residents who act as tourists; 4) Unlike the plans that present a traditional imagery of global cities, in tourism practices, greater variation is observed, as the PDE, the PLATUMs, and the “Vai de Roteiro” manifest the markers of global cities in dissonant ways, privileging the real estate market, presence in rankings, and urban landmarks, respectively.

Practical implications – The framework developed can be replicated in other cities and contexts. In addition to contributing to researchers in the field, the research is relevant for tourism planners and managers.

Originality/value – This work contributes to the advancement of research on urban tourism, especially in the context of the Global South, and, at the same time, provides elements of support for the public management of the activity based on concrete parameters.

Research limitations – The main limitation was conducting the bibliographic search solely in Scopus, which influenced the construction of the 10 global city markers.

Key-words: urban tourism; global cities; tourist mobility; off-the-beaten-track tourism.

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Resumo:

Objetivo – O turismo urbano é um dos atributos de cidades globais devido à influência, visibilidade e atração de investidores e consumidores, incluindo turistas. Partindo disso, o objetivo da pesquisa foi identificar e analisar como os discursos e as práticas mobilizam o turismo urbano pela lógica de cidades globais.

Desenho/metodologia/abordagem – De natureza qualitativa e com caráter descritivo-exploratório, foi realizada: 1) pesquisa bibliográfica sobre turismo urbano e cidades globais; 2) pesquisa documental em planos urbanísticos e turísticos; 3) entrevistas semiestruturadas com agentes-chave da gestão urbana e turística e; 4) observação e registro in loco em 16 tours do “Vai de Roteiro”.

Resultados – Em relação aos resultados, destaca-se: 1) Há um descompasso na caracterização do turismo, enquanto o Plano Diretor Estratégico (PDE) de São Paulo associa-o majoritariamente em áreas rurais, os Planos de Turismo Municipais (PLATUMs) e o “Vai de Roteiro” prevalecem o imaginário turístico atrelado principalmente à área central; 2) A pluralidade de opções culturais de São Paulo como cidade global proporciona o desenvolvimento do turismo off the beaten track; 3) O “Vai de Roteiro” corrobora a discussão sobre moradores que performam como turistas; 4) Diferentemente dos planos que apresentam imaginário tradicional de cidades globais, em práticas turísticas, percebe-se maior variação já que o PDE, os PLATUMs e o “Vai de Roteiro” manifestam os marcadores de cidades globais de maneiras dissonantes, privilegiando o mercado imobiliário, a presença em rankings e os marcos urbanos, consecutivamente.

Implicações práticas – O framework construído pode ser replicado em outras cidades e contextos. Além de contribuir com pesquisadoras da área, a pesquisa é relevante para planejadores e gestores de turismo.

Originalidade/valor – O trabalho contribui no avanço de pesquisas sobre turismo urbano, especialmente em contexto do Sul Global, e, ao mesmo tempo, proporciona elementos de suporte à gestão pública da atividade com base em parâmetros concretos.

Limitações da pesquisa – A principal limitação foi ter feito a busca bibliográfica somente no Scopus, o que influenciou a construção dos 10 marcadores de cidades globais.

Palavras-chave: turismo urbano; cidades globais; mobilidades turísticas; turismo off the beaten track.

RESUMEN:

Propósito: El turismo urbano es uno de los atributos de las ciudades globales debido a su influencia, visibilidad y atractivo para inversionistas y consumidores, incluidos los turistas. En este sentido, el objetivo de esta investigación fue identificar y analizar cómo los discursos y las prácticas movilizan el turismo urbano dentro de la lógica de las ciudades globales.

Diseño/metodología/enfoque – Este estudio cualitativo, descriptivo-exploratorio incluyó: (1) investigación bibliográfica sobre turismo urbano y ciudades globales; (2) investigación documental sobre planes urbanos y turísticos; (3) entrevistas semiestruturadas con agentes clave en la gestión urbana y turística; y (4) observación y registro in situ durante 16 recorridos de “Vai de Roteiro”.

Hallazgos: En cuanto a los resultados, destacan los siguientes: (1) Existe una discrepancia en la caracterización del turismo; mientras que el Plan Maestro Estratégico (PDE) de São Paulo lo asocia principalmente con las zonas rurales, los Planes Municipales de Turismo (PLATUM) y el programa “Vai de Roteiro” priorizan una imagen turística vinculada principalmente al área central; (2) La pluralidad de opciones culturales en São Paulo como ciudad global fomenta el desarrollo del turismo fuera de las rutas turísticas habituales; (3) El programa “Vai de Roteiro” corrobora el debate sobre los residentes que actúan como turistas; (4) A diferencia de los planes que presentan una imagen tradicional de las ciudades globales, en las prácticas turísticas se observa una mayor variación, ya que el PDE, los PLATUM y el “Vai de Roteiro” manifiestan los marcadores de las ciudades globales de maneras disonantes, privilegiando el mercado inmobiliario, la presencia en los rankings y los hitos urbanos, respectivamente.

Implicaciones prácticas: El marco desarrollado puede replicarse en otras ciudades y contextos. Además de ser útil para los investigadores del sector, la investigación resulta relevante para los planificadores y gestores turísticos.

Originalidad/valor: Este trabajo contribuye al avance de la investigación sobre turismo urbano, especialmente en el contexto del Sur Global, y, al mismo tiempo, proporciona elementos de apoyo para la gestión pública de la actividad basados en parámetros concretos.

Limitaciones de la investigación: La principal limitación fue realizar la búsqueda bibliográfica exclusivamente en Scopus, lo que influyó en la construcción de los 10 marcadores de ciudades globales.

Palabras Clave: turismo urbano; ciudades globales; movilidad turística; turismo off the beaten track.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism, being an activity of the advanced tertiary sector, constitutes one of the attributes of some cities that have come to be called “global” (Bouchon, 2014; Canclini, 2003; Sassen, 1994). These cities exert special influence and visibility, attracting investors and consumers, including tourists. The urban context of global cities is influenced by the transition from an industrial economy to a service economy, a process directly influenced by globalization and the adaptation of cities to a set of guidelines, which consists of providing them with conditions to host companies, receive investments, have good communication and technology, as well as attract people with purchasing power - including tourists (Fix & Arantes, 2022).

In the literature, although there are references to both global cities (Castells & Borja, 1996; Law, 2000; Sassen, 1994) and world cities (Friedmann, 1986; Geddes, 1915; Hall, 1966; Shachar, 1983), we prefer to adopt the first option because it refers to economic and technological aspects, and not only cultural ones, with regard to globalization (Ortiz, 2003, p. 29).

Despite the debates and some disagreements regarding this categorization, more and more cities around the world are exhibiting such attributes, thus justifying a more detailed analysis of them, including in their interface with tourism, as argued by Clark (2016), Church and Frost (2004), Maitland and Newman (2009), Maxim (2017), and Morrison and Maxim (2023).

Tourism, in many urban contexts, plays a relevant role in the dynamics of city development, even if it is not directly focused on this activity (Fisher, 2019). Despite urban tourism's importance for the development of many cities – whether considered “global” or not – and its direct implications for city policy and management, this field remains marginalized in urban studies (Ashworth & Page, 2011, p. 13; Bellini & Pasquinelli, 2017).

On the one hand, studies on tourism that have addressed urban issues (especially in cities with global relevance) rarely discuss the flows and influences produced and experienced in certain metropolises around the world (Osmainchi, 2017; Ortiz, 2017; Soares, 2017). On the other hand, those who debate urban tourism – in research heavily focused on the segment's commercial characteristics – almost always base their approaches on generic issues, despite tourism as a prominent element, but poorly understood in its urban particularities (Costa, 2020; Page, 1995).

This topic is relevant insofar as public policies, through urban planning instruments – such as zoning and urban interventions, like the Urban Consortium Operations (OUC) and Urban Intervention Projects (PIU) in São Paulo – separate the formal city from the excluded city (Nery Jr., 2002), causing, reinforcing, or neglecting socio-spatial inequalities.

Based on these issues, this work starts from the following question: How does the logic of global cities manifest itself in discourses and practices of urban tourism in São Paulo? This work stems from previous research (Lago, 2025) and is qualitative in nature with a descriptive-exploratory character, utilizing bibliographic and documentary research, semi-structured interviews, and on-site observation and recording.

Despite the evident socio-spatial fragmentations of a large city in the Global South, São Paulo was chosen as the object of analysis because of attributes that qualify it as a manifestation of a global city: a strong presence of foreign companies (with regional headquarters in Latin America), an important air transport hub (São Paulo International Airport/GRU connects the city with more than 50 countries), and a broad presence of the tertiary sector in its economy - including, precisely, tourism (cultural, events, gastronomic, health, education) as a major driver of the urban economy.

The municipality of São Paulo alone - with more than 11.4 million inhabitants - accounts for 9.75% of Brazil's GDP (Gross Domestic Product) (IBGE, 2023). According to the Municipal Finance Department (2023), group 13 - which includes tourism - collected R\$ 422.74 million in 2022 in ISS (Service Tax), and according to the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA, In 2018, the sector employed 252,056 people in 2017 (PLATUM, 2024-2029, p. 55).

In this scenario, to understand how the elements of global cities manifest themselves through tourism in São Paulo, the research was guided by two analyses: official discourses – present in the Strategic Master Plan (PDE) of São Paulo (Municipal Law No. 17,975/23) and in the nine versions of the PLATUMs (Municipal Tourism Plan) – and tourism practices guided by the local public authorities – through the applied in situ study of 16 tourist routes of the “Vai de Roteiro”. While discourses are important for constructing and reproducing the social, practices sustain knowing and being in the world (Bispo, 2016, p. 173), both blend and complement each other when resulting in different outcomes in the construction of São Paulo's image.

The role of the PDE (Strategic Development Plan) is to organize, predict, and regulate activity in relation to instruments, uses, and spatialization, but it is only effective when it establishes priorities, explains how problems will be solved, and guides investment management (Villaça, 1998). PLATUM, on the other hand, is the main tourism instrument in São Paulo, even though it lacks legal effectiveness because it is not a law or decree. Meanwhile, “Vai de Roteiro” is a municipal initiative that aims, through guided and almost always free itineraries, to explore the tourism potential, encouraging residents and tourists to visit places considered tourist attractions by the public authorities.

Thus, the correlated approach between discourses and practices allows for greater effectiveness in the analysis of urban policies regarding tourism, as a point of reference for understanding how elements of a global city are promoted and reinforced. Ultimately, we assume that tourism can both benefit from and feed and reinforce São Paulo's status as a global city.

Based on the previous questions, the overall objective was to identify and analyze how discourses and practices mobilize urban tourism under the logic of global cities. To this end, after this introduction, the connections between tourism and the principles and projections of global cities, and the shift in mobility to analyze urban tourism, will be discussed from a theoretical point of view. Following this, the methodological procedures adopted in this research are presented. Then, the results section contains an analysis of São Paulo's positioning as a global city based on tourism discourses, both from interviews and plans, and the application and analysis of the global cities framework in tourism practices (Lago & Allis, 2023; Lago, 2025), through the route of 16 tours of the "Vai de Roteiro" program. Finally, the concluding remarks summarize the main findings regarding tourism development in São Paulo in the face of urban planning mechanisms and its configuration within the framework of global city markers from the perspective of mobility.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

In 1915, Patrick Geddes characterized New York as a world city because it was a "political and economic center" due to its connections with other cities. Hall (1966, p. 77) emphasizes that global cities concentrate a large part of the world's economic production because they are centers of mobility, professional talent, information, culture, and wealthy people. Such cities represent strategic points for organizing and articulating products and markets, as well as concentrating and accumulating international capital (Friedmann, 1986).

Global cities are key places in the organization of the world economy because they play a role as markets by hosting and managing transnational companies, telecommunications, products, and innovations (Sassen, 1994, p. 34). They constitute centers of command (because they are influential) and control (because they organize and concentrate the global economy) that act to govern financial activities and specialized services aimed at production (Idem, 1991). These functions are related to the export of financial and specialized services, the ability to intervene in the global concentration of power, and in the production of knowledge (Compans, 2005, p.37; Harvey, 1989a; Quijano, 2000).

Initially, alpha global cities were limited to London, New York, and Tokyo, due to their greater capacity for articulation than other cities. In this logic of centrality geography, São Paulo - and other cities that have not reached a higher stage in the ranking - are classified as beta. Other developing cities further down are considered gamma - such as La Paz in Bolivia, Valencia in Spain, and Orlando in the United States (GaWC, 2023).

Global cities, having undergone a process of deindustrialization, benefit from the interconnectedness of the globalized world by attracting new economic activities and often use tourism as a mechanism to regenerate post-industrial economies (Law, 2000; Law, 2002, p.31). Among other characteristics present in global cities are investments in education, professional training, development of information technology, efficient transportation systems, encouragement of foreign capital, incentives for entrepreneurship and innovation, and the combination of diverse economic sectors (Lago, 2025, p. 46).

Among the requirements for such classification, the attraction of international capital, concentration of headquarters, and multinational banks stand out (Friedmann & Wolff, 1982, p. 309). Furthermore, these cities have a great diversity of social groups (with a high percentage of immigrants), an intense pace of urban life, nightlife, ethnic and cultural diversity, centers of higher education and research, and large, state-of-the-art medical facilities (Gladstone & Fainstein, 2001, p. 25; Silva, 2004, p. 86). The vibrant cultural scene is a factor in global cities conveying vibrancy and *joie de vivre* (Kong, 2012).

Cities that do not concentrate the headquarters of companies tend to remain marginalized in the global economy (Sassen, 1991, p.19). The intention of urban administrators in promoting cities according to international models aims to attract financial resources and make the city more competitive in the global market (Arantes, 2012, p.25). However, by making only some parts of the city computerized and connected to financialization, the business sectors are privileged, contributing to the intensification of spatial exclusion, increased socioeconomic inequalities, and precariousness in the rest of the city (Ferreira, 2000, p.14; Fix, 2004, p.10; Iglecias, 1999, p.29-30).

The image of global cities attracts visibility, investment, and consumers (Vainer, 2013), including tourists, due to the multiplicity of spaces, practices, and experiences offered. The more globally connected they become, the more global cities consolidate themselves as financial centers, configuring themselves as "flow nodes" (Compans, 2009, p.128; Sánchez, 2010, p.51). Tourism, being one of these flows, is one of the requirements usually listed for cities to be treated as global (Canclini, 2003; Chang, 2000, p.819; Shachar, 1983).

It is common for global cities to have centers intended for tourist use, producing sectors predominantly oriented towards “tourist urbanization” (Mullins, 1992: 326). Images of the city’s tourist areas (“urban precincts”) are used by city marketing as a strategy to “sell the city” and commodify the consumption of urban space (Carlos, 2002, p.177; Sánchez, 2010, p.382). In this logic, tourism and leisure are stimulated by advertising as a way of consuming urban space (Sánchez, 2010, p. 382).

This logic of “selling the city,” for the consumption of certain spaces by selected groups, has become known as “urban entrepreneurship,” when cities take on the condition of commodities as they undergo urban revitalization, implementation of spectacular cultural facilities — almost always orchestrated by “star architecture” (Arantes, 2001, p. 147). - and the attraction and promotion of major international events (Harvey, 1989b). Both urban interventions and city marketing are mechanisms that point to directions for real estate investments and the attraction of a specific audience profile, and consequently, where the city’s images will be promoted, directly influencing urban tourism. Therefore, rather than referencing urban tourism as a process of tourist urbanization, it would be more appropriate to characterize it as a set of practices and ways of understanding the city (Allis, 2012, p. 44).

The UN Tourism Board (UNWTO, 1994, p. 5) characterizes tourism based on the basic criterion of undertaking trips outside the usual residence, but this definition is incompatible with the nature of tourism because it has statistical and not terminological objectives (Noguero, 2010, p. 193; Pakman, 2014, p. 19). Urban tourism treated as a market segment is limited to analyses of the relationship between tourism production and consumption, “neglecting a closer look at the role of tourism in cities” (Allis, 2012: 53).

Especially in globalized cities, tourism typically becomes more diversified in terms of practices and territories (Lussault, 2004). The so-called “new urban tourism” represents alternative practices to post-Fordist tourism, along with off-the-beaten-track itineraries, and is a way to experience authentic experiences away from mass tourism venues (Maitland, 2019).

This research adopts the mobility turn as a way to mobilize tourism (Sheller & Urry, 2006); in other words, it consists of an approach to understanding what has been called the “dedifferentiation” between visitors and residents and everyday spaces of extraordinary places (Condevaux et al., 2016; Gale, 2009). In other words, dedifferentiation means making similar subjects who have similar spatial behaviors when appropriating spaces, regardless of geographic origin (Campodónico, 2015).

The mobilities shift allows us to analyze mobilities as contemporary phenomena, beyond an object of study; it is an approach, a theoretical framework, and a perspective (Singh et al., 2018). With regard to tourism, in addition to places having roles as centers of tourist consumption (places to play), places are metaphorically conceived and set in motion (places in play) (Urry, 1995, p.2), whether in discourses, plans, and images.

Tourism is a continuum of mobility that has a maximum degree of freedom depending on the conditions and motivations of the individual (Campodónico, 2015, p.9; Maitland, 2010). Like any mobility, tourism has become a fundamental part of everyday life (Russo, 2016, p.18). The “touristification of everyday life” occurs due to the difficulty in distinguishing the strange from the familiar and residents from visitors (Franklin, 2003; Gale, 2009).

Frequently, visitors and residents may have the same motivations, behaviors, and frequent the same places; thus, residents who behave like tourists in their own cities are categorized as if tourists (Ashworth & Page, 2011, p.1-2; Colomb & Novy, 2016). These tourists tend to have slower paces and be less selective about where to go when looking for peculiarities in the urban space (Duignan & Pappalepore, 2023; Maitland & Newman, 2009).

In this sense, the “tourist gaze” is directed towards representations and meanings when contemplating and consuming signs through landscapes (Lash & Urry, 1993; Kunz et al., 2022, p.27). Tourism is constituted from the gaze and performances (embodied practices) that allow subjects not only to consume, but to co-produce spaces (Edensor, 2001, p.71). The tourist’s gaze can represent a way of dedifferentiating (making similar) routine experiences from extraordinary ones (Urry, 1995). In this sense, spatial distance is relativized when analyzing the behavior of residents performing as tourists (Allis, 2014; Judd, 2003; Larsen, 2019; Stors, 2022).

Mentality and performance make it possible to transform monotonous and common places into seemingly spectacular and exotic places (Stors, 2022). Off-the-beaten-track tourism is a new trend in urban tourism, driven by tourists seeking authentic and ordinary experiences as a way to avoid mass tourism (Maitland & Newman, 2009; Maitland, 2019; Nilsson, 2020, p. 666). The development of this trend follows the so-called post-tourism, linked to: i) the diffusion of extraordinary areas to local and common areas, ii) the logic of inventing tourism in ordinary areas by consuming their particular character, and iii) the logic of reversing stigmas (Condevaux et al., 2016, p. 6).

Tourism driven by business, leisure, and urban culture is among the functions of global cities (Allis, 2012, p. 13). Tourism – through international hotel networks, large-scale events, shopping centers, and the number of arrivals – It is one of the sectors that indicate inclusion in the ranking of global cities. In comparison, São Paulo is one of the best-positioned cities in the Americas in the 2024 ICCA (International Congress and Convention Association) ranking, behind Montreal, Buenos Aires, and Rio de Janeiro.

In 2022, tourism in the city represented 2.3% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), equivalent to US\$5.74 billion, directly and indirectly employing 281,834 people, or 2.2% of the city's jobs (WTTC, 2023). In 2023, the city received approximately 12.2 million domestic tourists and 1.3 million foreign tourists (CIET, 2024). On average, domestic tourists stay 2.6 days, with 64.86% staying in hotels, and have an average expenditure of R\$422.07 per day (OTE, 2023).

But this scenario was very different just over 100 years ago. From 1900 to the 2000s, the population of the capital of São Paulo experienced an exponential increase from 240,000 to 10,426,384 inhabitants. Rapid population growth, the arrival of immigrants, and the development of transportation contributed to the formation of São Paulo. The city's urban planning was most influenced from 1930 onwards, with Prestes Maia's "Avenue Plan." One of the urban transformations of the plan was the encouragement of verticalization of the city and the creation of a radiocentric road system for automobiles (Severini & Nunes, 2022, p. 84).

The arrival of real estate developments and the lack of "aesthetic policing" in the 1950s led to financial, consumer, and entertainment centers replacing industries (Frúgoli Jr., 2000, p. 21; Toledo, 1981: 120). In the 1970s, with the departure of the financial sector from the city center, in addition to business travelers, leisure and various urban cultural manifestations gained strength (Allis, 2013, p.12).

With the support of the theoretical framework on global cities, tourism, and urban studies, under the paradigm of mobilities, the next section describes the methodological procedures adopted to carry out the empirical survey. Discussions on urban and tourism planning in São Paulo will be revisited in the results and discussions of the research on the discourses and practices of urban tourism.

METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative in nature, as it investigates the origin and relationships of concepts, as well as attempting to intuit consequences (Gibbs, 2008). Furthermore, it is descriptive in nature, as it seeks to describe the characteristics of a given phenomenon and the relationships between variables, and exploratory in nature, as it provides greater familiarity with the topic by making it more explicit, enabling the construction of hypotheses (Gerhardt & Silveira, 2009; Gil, 2018).

Four methodological approaches were adopted to conduct the research, using the city of São Paulo as a case study: 1) bibliographic research on tourism and global cities; 2) documentary research, especially in the PDE (Municipal Law No. 17,975/23) and in the PLATUMs; 3) Semi-structured interviews with agents from: a) public management (SMTUR and PLANURB), b) public-private management (SPTuris), c) private management (SPCVB and M.M. Quarter - a third-party company of "Vai de Roteiro"), and d) eleven tour guides from "Vai de Roteiro"; and 4) on-site observation and recording during the 16 walking tours of "Vai de Roteiro", based on personal observation, tourist performance, and guide statements.

A search on Scopus using the string (TITLE ("global cit*") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (touris*)) resulted in 21 publications. After reading these works, 10 characteristics of global cities that stood out the most were consolidated – which we call markers. The markers were chosen based on what the international literature has pointed out as guiding elements in the interface between tourism and global cities.

Previous research (Lago & Allis, 2023; Lago & Allis, 2024; Lago, 2025) used the analytical framework of global cities, which is composed of 10 markers: i) Presence in rankings; ii) luxury market; iii) high-rise real estate market; iv) branding strategy and urban landmarks; v) appeal to information technology and pursuit of innovation; vi) architecture and cultural heritage buzz; vii) ethnic enclaves and entertainment; viii) sharing economy; ix) creative economy, arts and culture; and x) development sustainable. Therefore, we applied this framework to the PDE, in the nine versions of the PLATUMs (from 1999 to 2024-2029) and in 16 tourist routes of the "Vai de Roteiro".

This program is derived from the “Vai de São Paulo” action, from the City Hall of São Paulo, which promotes some market niches that can be practiced in the city, such as “Vai de Gastronomia”, “Vai de Cultura”, “Vai de Automobilismo”, and “Vai de Eventos”. It is worth mentioning that this program emerged as a project of SMTUR in October 2022 and was implemented in February 2023, being in effect since then. Its objective is to give visibility and explore the tourist potential of neighborhoods that contribute to economic, cultural and urban development (City Hall of São Paulo, 2024).

An action created by SMTUR for participants to carry out the 16 routes was the creation of the “Vai de Roteiro Passport”. The tour guides stamp it. The passport is given at the end of each itinerary, and upon completion, tourists receive a pin with the city’s logo. This is primarily an incentive for city residents to explore the itineraries, given the limited time visitors have at the destination.

The field observations were based on several ethnographic techniques, such as direct observation, written records (in the field notebook), and photographic records (Magnani et al., 2023, p. 241), conducted between March and October 2024. The interview scripts were approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Arts, Sciences, and Humanities of the University of São Paulo (EACH-USP), whose Informed Consent Forms were signed by the interviewees and kept confidential. Table 1 presents the agents from each sector interviewed and their respective identifications.

Table 1 - Agents interviewed by sector

Sectors	Agents	Interviewees
Public Management	Tourism Directorate of SMTUR	E1
	Urban Planning Coordination Office (PLANURB)	E2
	Tourism Project Management at SPTuris	E3
Private Management	Presidency of the SP Convention & Visitors Bureau	E4
	M.M. Quarter (outsourced company of “Vai de Roteiro”)	E5
“Vai de Roteiro” tour guides	11 tour guides from “Vai de Roteiro”	E6-E16

Source: Adapted from Lago (2025, p.23)

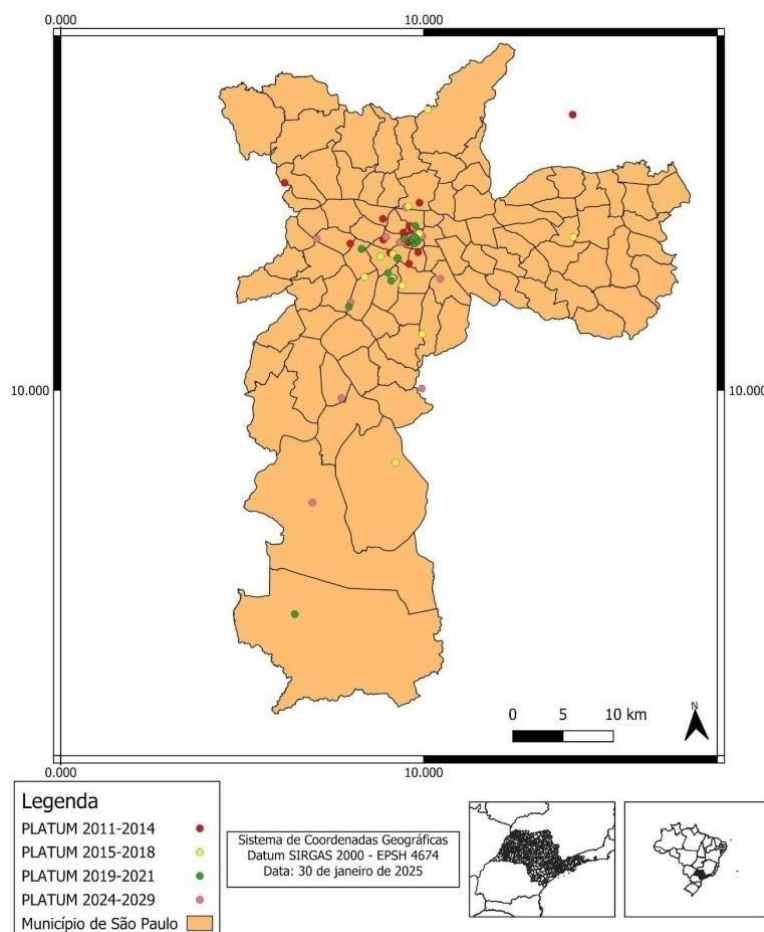
Furthermore, maps were produced to better visualize tourist mobility in São Paulo, especially regarding the spatial distribution of global city markers manifested in tourist itineraries.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An analysis of São Paulo’s positioning as a global city through tourism.

Although global cities are networked, they compete for top ranking positions based on flows (informational, technological, financial) and fixed assets (company headquarters, banks, research centers). When we asked respondents how they understood São Paulo’s position as a tourist destination and a global city, we created – using NVivo software – a word cloud with the main descriptive terms (Figure 1).

Figure 2 - Location of tourist imagery on the PLATUMS



Source: Own elaboration, with the aid of Qgis software (2025)

In general, it is possible to observe a large concentration of images more restricted to the center of São Paulo. The only point outside the municipality of São Paulo is Guarulhos Airport, in the 2011-2014 PLATUM. According to a previous analysis of the PLATUMs, tourism in São Paulo is seen and portrayed mainly from the imagery produced by the central areas and to a lesser extent by distant natural attractions, such as the Parelheiros and Cantareira Polo (Lago & Allis, 2024, p.77). Thus, the choice of images reinforces the imagery of places considered touristic by public management.

Urban planning both influences (especially cities in Latin America) and is influenced by global issues, which can compromise identity and make tourist experiences homogenized. We found that the 2023 Master Plan is not linked to tourism documents, but we noticed that the PLATUMs suggest a series of initiatives aimed at harmonizing initiatives in spatial distribution.

As previously stated, in a globalized world, it is increasingly common for the distinctions between the ordinary (daily life) and the extraordinary (tourism) to become blurred and imprecise. From reading the PLATUMs, we perceive the inference of attitudes among residents that resemble those of tourists, as they behave like tourists. This reinforces the blurring of the lines between subjects, as can be observed in the excerpt below:

Those who visit São Paulo are not conventional tourists - nor can they be easily distinguished from the local population (...) tourists in São Paulo behave like its residents, without cameras or contemplation, but in a hurry and in search of excellent services (PLATUM 2024-2029, p.32-84).

Most participants in the "Vai de Roteiro" program are citizens of São Paulo themselves, making it possible to characterize this demand as "resident-tourists" (Hoogendoorn & Hammett, 2021). Because it is a free municipal program, the population is encouraged to learn more about the city's history through the accounts of tour guides. In some on-site accounts, tourists were surprised by the possibility of practicing outdoor tourism, something they did not consider common.

Application of the framework in the discourses and practices of São Paulo

As described earlier, the framework was applied to the PDE (Strategic Development Plan) as an urban planning instrument, that is, each marker was researched to see if and how it appeared. We found that 4 of the 10 markers did not manifest themselves: “presence in rankings”, “luxury market”, “ethnic enclaves and entertainment”, and “sharing economy”. Although in general they are very common – and São Paulo is known to have some of them – perhaps here the public authorities are seeking to develop an alternative imaginary for tourism in São Paulo. The global city marker that manifested itself most was “high-rise real estate market”.

When applying the same framework to the PLATUMs, we noticed that some markers manifested themselves more than others, such as “presence in rankings”, “architecture and buzz of cultural heritage”, and “appeal to information technology and search for innovation”. The “sharing economy” marker only manifested itself in the last two plans, mentioning Airbnb and Uber as trends.

In the “Vai de Roteiro” study, the main marker of global cities that emerged was “branding strategies and urban landmarks.” Table 1 shows the convergences and divergences of these markers in both discourse and practice.

Table 1 - Global city markers in the discourses and practices of urban tourism

Markers	PDE	PLATUMs	Vai de Roteiro
Interconnection between discourses and practices			
Presence in rankings	∅	A destination for business, events, and research, with state-of-the-art infrastructure.	Mention of some of the coolest neighborhoods in the world (Vila Madalena and Bom Retiro), for offering entertainment, nightlife and gastronomic options.
Mercado de luxo	∅	World-class hotels and luxury shops.	Hotels, restaurants, pizzerias, and luxury shops.
Real estate market booming	Mixed use of buildings and encouragement of sustainability.	A large number of skyscrapers, a real estate market with varied styles, shapes, and sizes. And due to the deterioration of buildings in the city center and poor maintenance of facades.	The presence of tall buildings, buildings under construction, and buildings that stand out from the others due to their imposing presence (especially on Paulista Avenue, Centro Novo, and the Matarazzo Building).
Ethnic enclaves and entertainment	∅	Ethnic neighborhoods earn the city the title of “world gastronomic capital” due to the diversity of 65 ethnic groups. The variety of entertainment options (such as cinema and theater) is one of the city’s main attractions and meets international standards of quality.	Dance club, street cinema, theater and ethnic spaces.
Creative economy, arts and culture	Incentives for the creative industry, protection of quilombola areas and cultural assets.	One of its goals is to position São Paulo as a leisure and cultural destination. It boasts an extensive and often accessible cultural program, as seen in the Virada Cultural (Cultural Turnaround). It is considered the “capital of creative innovations”.	Cultural institutions, museums, historic mansions, shopping malls, and art galleries.
Dissonance between discourse and practice.			
Branding strategies and urban landmarks	Encouraging public enjoyment of squares and sports, leisure, cultural and urban furniture facilities.	It was a weakness to have a brand that represented the city’s identity. “Live it all” is the slogan that expresses the vibrant spirit of São Paulo and promotes the destination. It highlights urban landmarks such as churches, temples, and parks.	Squares, churches, fountains, sculptures, statues and busts.
Appeal to information technology and the pursuit of innovation	Technology can be used to aid in providing services to citizens, such as in education and sports facilities. The promotion of public spaces to encourage innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship is also encouraged.	São Paulo has innovation potential linked to its universities, transportation, events, and telecommunications services. As one of the world’s largest startup hubs, entrepreneurship is fostered.	IGraffiti, mosaics, and works of art - like in Vila Madalena.
Architecture and the buzz of cultural heritage	Cultural heritage of indigenous areas and properties.	Preservation of historical and cultural heritage through official listing and campaigns against graffiti and vandalism. The architecture shows the influence of immigrants.	Grafitos, mosaico e obras de arte, como na Vila Madalena.
Sharing economy	∅	A new business model for welcoming tourists.	Coworking spaces.
Sustainable development	Sustainable Development Goals, especially actions against climate change.	One of its goals is to develop a plan of sustainable initiatives, including support for green areas, parks, and ecotourism.	Parks, gardens and green areas.

Source: Lago (2025 p.97-99)

Based on Table 1, we can see a connection between the discourses and tourism practices, especially regarding the strengthening of the different reasons that attract visibility and tourists. The markers “presence in rankings,” “luxury market,” “high-rise real estate market,” “ethnic enclaves and entertainment,” and “creative economy, arts, and culture” converged. However, the markers “branding strategies and urban landmarks,” “appeal to information technology and the search for innovation,” “architecture and the buzz of cultural heritage,” “sharing economy,” and “sustainable development” diverged. This means that these latter markers are more likely to be polysemous because they are not restricted to just one definition and have different meanings.

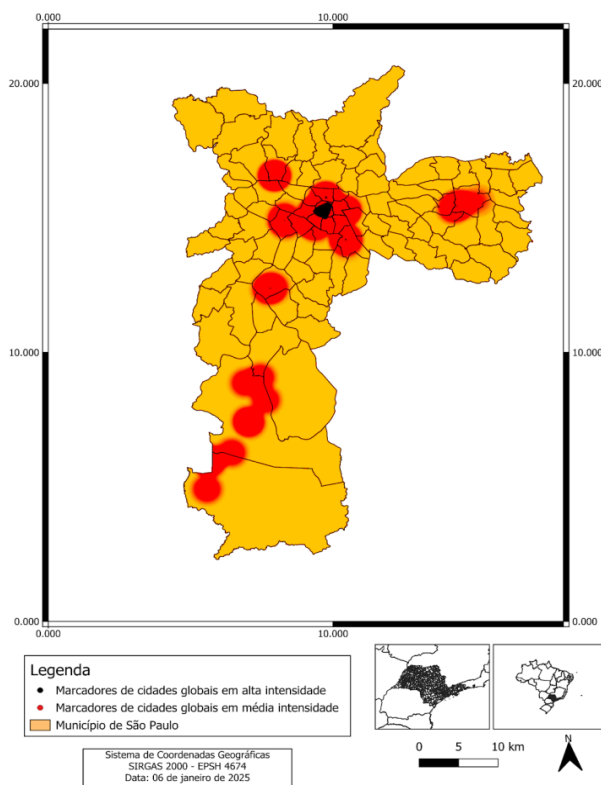
A disconnect was observed between the PLATUMs and “Vai de Roteiro” in the marker “luxury market,” which is restricted to Rua Oscar Freire in the PLATUMs and is spatialized in several places in “Vai de Roteiro.” While “branding strategies and urban landmarks” are related to both the São Paulo brand (PLATUM) and churches, fountains, and statues (“Vai de Roteiro”), “Appeal to information technology and the pursuit of innovation” referred to the city’s leadership as a cutting-edge destination (in speeches), but in practice it was only linked to a few facilities – such as interactive totems at the Jewish Museum, Santo Amaro Market, and Immigration Museum.

While in the PLATUMs, “architecture and the buzz of cultural heritage” referred to museums, in “Vai de Roteiro”, it was manifested in graffiti. Something similar occurs with the linking of the “sharing economy” to Uber and Airbnb in the plans and to coworking spaces in the itineraries. And finally, “sustainable development” was addressed by the large number of parks in the plans, but was only seen in small portions on-site.

Despite the markers “creative economy, arts and culture” and “architecture and cultural heritage buzz” manifesting themselves with great intensity in “Vai de Roteiro”, they were not so emphasized in the speeches. This represents that while the speeches associate tourism with more established aspects of global cities, such as skyscrapers and inclusion in rankings, through the practices, it is possible to observe greater flexibility in places where global cities are not clearly associated, such as churches and squares.

Of the 16 tours of “Vai de Roteiro”, seven are located in the center, and the other nine are distributed throughout other parts of the city. This indicates the possibility that city marketing campaigns (as seen in PLATUMs) are distanced from what is seen in off-the-beaten-track tourism. Furthermore, the program may constitute a measure of public management, even without being an intentional policy, to boost guided tourism in places that are not usually seen as touristy (such as Freguesia do Ó and Santo Amaro). Figure 3 illustrates the spatial distribution of markers in tourism practices in São Paulo.

Figure 3 - Concentration of markers in the “Vai de Roteiro” section.



Source: Author’s own elaboration, with the aid of QGIS software (2025)

According to Figure 3, although most of the identified markers are more heavily concentrated in the center, a large proportion of them are distributed in areas away from traditional tourist attractions (such as Avenida Paulista and Vila Madalena). An interesting finding is that the marker “branding strategies and urban landmarks” was the most prominent in three routes in the central area (Ed. Matarazzo, Triângulo Histórico, and Mercado Municipal) and in three routes in areas away from the center (Santo Amaro, Freguesia do Ó, and Museu do Ipiranga).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Global cities act as magnets and urban nodes that concentrate various interconnected flows. Cities become global when there is a propagation of flows (whether of subjects, capital, news), and the more they project themselves globally, the greater their capacity to attract travelers. However, at the same time that global cities are articulated, they are competing for the same resources to seek higher positions in rankings, based on criteria such as the number of visitors and events.

By identifying and analyzing how discourses and practices mobilize urban tourism through the logic of global cities, our first finding was that, in addition to the typical tourist areas endowed with urban icons, global cities tend to present a plurality of places and cultural options, making off-the-beaten-track tourism more likely to be carried out. This alternative format of practicing tourism corroborates the reversal of stigmas and greater approximation of tourists to mundane areas (Condevaux et al., 2016).

It is from the shift in mobilities that we support the argument that it is possible to practice tourism in the city where users reside. As explained regarding dedifferentiation, more important than the spatial distance traveled is the gaze and performances of tourists. This substantiates that places to play are not restricted only to tourist enclaves, through the realization of tourist practices in places that deviate from the obvious.

The “Vai de Roteiro” program reinforces that off-the-beaten-track tourism happens in places that are not usually associated with the tourist imaginary. Furthermore, through this program, we analyze São Paulo’s positioning as a global city by making this concept less abstract. The second argument we can infer is that “Vai de Roteiro” encourages residents to adopt the role of tourists in their own city, which we call resident-tourists, by promoting incentives (such as the passport and PIN).

The shift in mobility allows for more flexible definitions (such as that of UN Tourism) by considering tourists as those who adopt a gaze of strangeness and curiosity in their behavior. The “tourist gaze” was adopted to observe unique elements that could go unnoticed in tourist itineraries. The way one looks at things interferes with tourist performances due to the slower pace and the choice of what one contemplates. The differentiation between tourist and resident becomes more disguised in cosmopolitan cities, where any visitor can behave like a resident and any resident can engage in tourist practices.

Our third finding is that although urban planning instruments show the intention to develop tourism in areas dispersed from the center, the main actions are more concentrated in central areas. The promotion of natural areas away from the center by the PDE (Strategic Development Plan) may be an indication of an intention opposite to most legislation that addresses tourism in non-dispersed areas. We have seen that plans tend to relate tourism to areas more typically linked to the imaginary of globalization, and practices occur more distributed throughout the territory.

Although there is a mismatch between the PDE and tourism policies, both are more forceful in concentrating tourism, especially in regions where there are — intentions or direction — of greater real estate investments in the city. Although the “Vai de Roteiro” program concentrates most of the global city markers in the central region, some markers have manifested themselves in places far from the center, such as Freguesia do Ó and Parelheiros.

It is important to clarify how the guidelines will be implemented, and especially how they will be articulated with the PLATUMs. With regard to the markers, the PDE presents them in a diluted manner, without identifying which places the plan is referring to in relation to the incentive for the cultural industry, preservation of buildings, and indigenous areas. Although the “Vai de Roteiro” program does not intend to promote São Paulo in the traditional mold of a global city, it is possible to observe global issues through it. Thus, this program provides different qualifiers in various parts of the city, because the itineraries do not only occur in the traditional areas articulated with imaginaries and practices of globalized tourism.

Our fourth finding is that while the most predominant marker in the PDE (Strategic Development Plan) is “high-rise real estate market,” in the PLATUMs it is “presence in rankings,” and in “Vai de Roteiro” it is “branding strategies and urban land-

marks.” With this, we realize that the PDE adhered to the traditional concept of global cities by relating high technologies and innovation with real estate market investments. And tourism planning seeks to position São Paulo in global rankings. We note that “Vai de Roteiro” especially privileges urban landmarks by highlighting local particularities.

Discourses precede practices by mobilizing the desire to promote São Paulo as a global city. We realize that while the discourses are more tied to the traditional concept of global cities, the practices show a greater expansion of markers, especially in places not directly associated with global cities, such as squares and churches. However, there are intentions in the discourse that, in the practice of the studied itineraries, were not noticed or highlighted, as is the case with research infrastructures, telephone services, and entrepreneurship.

Tourism has a great influence on promoting São Paulo as a global city, even if perhaps the managers and planners of the plans did not have this explicit intention. As for the PLATUMs, these plans prioritize places in the city in cosmopolitan areas, linked to the imagery of a global city, such as on Paulista Avenue. This may be an indication that city marketing masks socio-spatial problems by privileging images of globalized places with tourism potential. The highlighted central areas create a mismatch with other areas of the city, leading to criticism that globalization has not reached São Paulo to the same extent, but only some neighborhoods.

Business, events, cultural heritage, entertainment, and consequently tourism contribute to São Paulo being a global city. The city, being a reference in Latin America, is a paradoxical global city insofar as it is promoted as cosmopolitan for attracting people and investments, while official discourses conceal social inequalities. In this way, urban tourism contributes to the positioning of a global city insofar as it attracts recognition and flows, and the reverse is also true.

The framework served as a parameter to analyze the main aspects of global cities in association with tourism, and its main contribution is its replicability. São Paulo, being a city of the Global South, presents idiosyncrasies in mobilizing discourses and practices of urban tourism, highlighting its tourist potential, reinforcing imaginaries, and masking social problems.

One of the limitations of the research was using only the Scopus platform to create the framework, despite it being one of the world’s leading search engines, which may have resulted in a generalizing approach in the construction of the 10 global city markers in the literature.

In the empirical field, for future research, it is suggested: 1) the unfolding of the proposed framework for other contexts, including ascertaining its applicability in other cities. In addition, it is relevant to identify the intention of public management in tourism development to know where investments will be directed, and therefore, 2) it is important to analyze whether and how the PDE guidelines materialize in Budget Guidelines Laws or Annual Budget Laws, and whether the PLATUMs goals have legal value when they become decrees, ordinances, or laws. Finally, 3) to analyze opinions regarding the dual role that tourists may play, it is recommended to interview the participants of “Vai de Roteiro”. These and other proposals can serve to develop new research projects, expanding the debates on tourism and cities, especially in the context of urbanization in the Global South.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

The survey data is in the body of the survey.

The research data can be requested from the authors

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Andressa Silva do Lago: Research design, literature review, data collection and analysis, discussion of results, and writing of the original manuscript.

Thiago Allis: Support in research design, supervision of data analysis, discussion of results, critical review, and editing of the final version of the article.