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Article

Scaffolding the Tourist City. Informal Practices and the Making of Tourism in Porto

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Abstract

This article examines the everyday dynamics of informal activities in touristified urban environments through a qualitative case study of Porto, Portugal. It analyses how individuals providing tourism-related services perceive their role within informality, how they articulate their agency, and how their practices contribute to the everyday production of the tourist experience. The study shows that engagement in informal tourism work is shaped by intersecting legal, economic and organisational constraints that channel professional trajectories into unregulated or semi-recognised forms of labor. Individuals display significant agency through adaptive strategies, craft-based skills and relational networks that enable them to navigate surveillance, seasonality and spatial exclusion. In a context of rapid tourism expansion and still-evolving governance frameworks, we argue that these practices operate as a form of *urban tourism scaffolding*. Although situated in precarity and vulnerability, it produces structural effects on the urban tourism offer by filling gaps, organizing encounters and animating public space. By conceptualising informal tourism work as a processual and relational support structure rather than as marginal spontaneity or residual activity, the article highlights the need to reconsider informal labour as a constitutive element of the tourist city.

Keywords: informal economy; urban tourism; Porto

1. Introduction

Urban tourism has become a defining feature of contemporary cities, reshaping not only urban economies but also the socio-spatial and cultural life of host communities (Cheng et al., 2025; Gómez-Bruna et al., 2025; Grah et al., 2020; Mansilla & Milano, 2022; C. M. Rogerson, 2023). Porto (Portugal) exemplifies this transformation. The city has experienced sustained growth in international arrivals, accompanied by rapid touristification of its historic centre (Barbosa et al., 2023; Fernandes et al., 2023; Gusman et al., 2019; Sousa & Rodríguez-Barcón, 2021; Stevic et al., 2024). This expansion has been driven by increased accommodation capacity (Carvalho et al., 2019), the proliferation of tourism-oriented retail and services (Pinho & Marques, 2021) and intensified place marketing (Gusman et al., 2019; Isabel Mota et al., 2025). Yet, alongside this planned and institutionally promoted tourism system, a parallel set of informal economic activities operates at the margins of legality, while occupying central positions within the tourist experience.

Despite growing attention to informal tourism economies, existing research has predominantly focused either on individual livelihood strategies (Çakmak et al., 2018) or on policy debates around formalization (Floridi et al., 2020; Gallien & Boogaard, 2023; Gallien & van den Boogaard, 2023). Less attention has been paid to how informal practices collectively function as structural supports within tourist destinations, particularly in cities undergoing rapid tourism expansion (J. M. Rogerson & Rogerson, 2025a; Wang et al., 2023). Emerging studies on informal tourism entrepreneurship and the informal tourism economy thus represent a still limited but growing body of work that begins to foreground informality within wider entrepreneurial and destination ecosystems (Çakmak et al., 2019a; Damayanti et al., 2018a; Fourie et al., 2025a).

From this perspective, urban tourist destinations can be understood as complex assemblages (Briassoulis, 2017; DeLanda, 2006), in which heterogeneous actors and networks co-produce the urban tourism economy. Informal workers and activities are not merely residual or peripheral, but rather integral to the socio-spatial production of tourism, shaping both its material and affective dimensions. In the case of Porto, street vending, live music, artistic production, and unlicensed guiding exemplify how informal practices become embedded in the city's touristic fabric. Far from being marginal embellishments, they contribute to the city's atmosphere and experiential appeal (Barbosa et al., 2023; Klein & Bueno Carvajal, 2025), constituting an unplanned yet highly effective *infrastructure* that sustains and enriches Porto's urban tourism landscape.

Drawing on ethnographic research, this article examines how individuals are channelled into informal tourism work, how they perceive and legitimise their role in touristified urban contexts, and how they exercise agency under conditions of precarity through everyday practices and forms of collective organisation. By analysing the interplay between structural constraints, self-understandings and situated strategies, the study shows how informal tourism work is enacted and sustained in practice. Building on these insights, the article argues that such activities operate as a form of urban tourism *scaffolding*. A set of informal, contingent and relational supports that sustain and give substance to the everyday functioning and experiential appeal of the tourist city. Rather than a pathological residue of failed development, informal tourism work emerges as a constitutive element of contemporary urban tourism economies.

The article addresses these questions by bridging two theoretical traditions. From urban informality we consider an understanding of informal practices as dialectical relations between spaces conceived by policy and spaces lived through everyday practice (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1995; Roy, 2005). From tourism, we build parallels with heritage studies (Canclini, 2019; Novoa, 2023; Smith, 2006), so we may distinguish between *authorised tourism*, shaped by institutional planning, and *tourism from below*, generated by bottom-up, self-organised practices (Koens et al., 2018; Marschall, 2015). Bringing these literatures together permits a relational framing that moves beyond a simple formal/informal binary. This approach interprets informal activities in Porto as a contingent form of urban tourism scaffolding, through which everyday informal activities actively sustain and shape the tourist experience. Informal tourism activities not only coexist with but also reconfigure formalised tourism economies through tactics of survival, creativity and spatial appropriation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. On the Concept of Informality

The informal sector encompasses unregulated economic activities pursued outside formal institutions. Pioneering work by Keith Hart introduced the concept of the informal sector in the context of his study of the economic practices of rural migrants in Accra, Ghana (Hart, 1973). His analysis demonstrated that, despite structural constraints and the overarching influence of capitalist relations, most of these migrants participated in informal economic activities that possessed an autonomous capacity to generate income. In this sense, the informal labor sector would encompass unregulated economic activities pursued outside formal institutions. It refers to economic activities not officially regulated by the state but still possessing autonomous capacity for generating incomes. Hart's contribution also highlighted the coexistence of wage labour and self-employed informal occupations within the same urban milieu, anticipating later debates on hybrid livelihoods and multi-activity strategies in urban economies (Lindell, 2010)

Since Hart, three broad strands of interpretation have dominated literature. The dualist view treats informality as a separate, marginal sector that coexists with a formal economy; the structuralist view locates informal work in processes of capitalist restructuring and subordination; and the legalist or regulatory view locates the problem in excessive regulation and tenure regimes that push economic activity outside formal rules (Bourg et al., 1990; Castells & Portes, 1989; Centeno & Portes, 2006; Fagan & Pozo, 1998; Portes, 2003). These positions are not mutually exclusive, but they imply different policy responses. In this way, containment or welfare support in the dualist frame, structural

reform and labour protection in the structuralist frame, and deregulation/formalisation in the legalist account. More recent scholarship, tends to move beyond these rigid typologies, emphasising the porous boundaries between formal and informal economies and the extent to which firms and workers routinely operate across regulatory *grey zone* (Meagher, 2010, 2013, 2018)

From the 1980s onward scholars also noted a process of informalization in advanced economies, where fragmentation of employment and precaritization made informal or non-standard work a persistent feature rather than a temporary stage (Castells & Portes, 1989; Portes, 2003). At the same time international organisations developed operational definitions focused on coverage and legal protection. We may refer to the International Labour Organization (ILO) defining the informal economy in terms of units and employment relationships that are, in law or in practice, insufficiently covered by national labour legislation and social protection. This shift toward a protection-based definition marked a crucial move away from viewing informality as a sector and toward conceptualising it as a condition of work, applicable across both formal and informal enterprises (ILO, 2018).

Over the past two decades, scholarship on informality has expanded exponentially, cutting across a wide range of disciplines and thematic areas. This includes informal housing, informal land management, and informal planning, as well as political science, international relations, and cross-disciplinary studies that examine informal employment, politics, and governance (AlSayyad, 2025; Barsukova et al., 2018; Roy, 2005; Varriale, 2014; Zdeb, 2022). Within tourism studies specifically, informality has been examined through lenses such as everyday urbanism, street-level entrepreneurship, and socio-spatial inequalities in destinations marked by rapid visitor growth (Çakmak et al., 2018, 2019; Koens et al., 2018).

2.1.1. Informality in Urban Spaces

Urban informality has been approached through contrasting traditions. Early liberal approaches framed informality as entrepreneurial activity enabled by weak regulation, often portraying it as a space of opportunity and flexibility (Chen & Carré, 2020; Hart, 1973; Marx & Kelling, 2019; Roy, 2005). This perspective has been criticised for its normative assumptions and for overlooking how structural inequalities and power asymmetries are reproduced within informal settings. Critical urban scholarship has emphasised the role of the state in actively producing informality through selective regulation and enforcement (Heitzman, 2005; Yiftachel & Yakobi, 2003). From this view, informality is not a governance failure but a governing logic that generates uneven access to rights, recognition and urban space. While this approach foregrounds structural exclusion, it has been critiqued for underestimating the everyday agency of informal actors (Holston, 2021).

More recent work moves beyond this opposition by conceptualising informality as a spatial and relational process shaped through the interaction between regulation and everyday practice. Drawing on Lefebvre's (Lefebvre, 1991) theory of the production of space, informality is understood as emerging through the dialectic between conceived and lived space, where informal practices operate as tactical negotiations rather than fixed economic categories (De Certeau, 1984; Roy, 2005). This perspective is particularly relevant in tourist cities, where informal workers operate in highly visible and contested spaces, producing livelihoods while simultaneously shaping urban experience. It is this spatially situated understanding of informality that informs the analysis developed in this article.

2.2. Informality in Tourism Studies

Academic approaches to the informal tourism sector conceptualize informality through a dichotomous lens that contrasted it with formal economic structures, emphasizing its role in shaping the socioeconomic fabric of tourist destinations (Chau, 2025; J. M. Rogerson & Rogerson, 2025b; Wahnschafft, 1982). Over time, scholars refined this early definition and began to characterize informality in tourism as a constellation of actors operating outside formal organizational frameworks yet interacting with tourists in direct or indirect ways (Çakmak et al., 2018a, 2019b). A

recurrent point across this body of work is the clear conceptual boundary between informality and illegality. In this sense, informal activities are understood primarily by their lack of regulation rather than by illicit intent, thereby excluding overtly criminal practices from the scope of ITS analyses (UU Republik Indonesia et al., 2022; Wahnschafft, 1982).

Empirical research identifies several core features of tourism informality, including self-employment, the absence of legally binding contracts, and minimal regulatory oversight (Çakmak et al., 2019b). These characteristics manifest in a diverse array of occupational profiles such as street vendors, hawkers, unregistered guides, souvenir producers, and informal transport operators. Actors who collectively sustain a significant proportion of tourism provision across many destinations (Damayanti et al., 2018(Satriawan, 2023)). In this sense, their presence often reflects structural labor market conditions and context-specific constraints rather than deliberate attempts to evade formalization.

In recent years, scholarship has increasingly moved beyond binary conceptualizations that frame informality in opposition to formality. Instead, some studies highlight the socio-cultural embeddedness of informal practices and the dynamic role they play within livelihood strategies (Cuini, 2022; Finn, 2024; Steiler & Nyirenda, 2021). Informal tourism actors often deploy improvisational and creative strategies to adapt to environmental, regulatory, and socio-economic disruptions (Biggs et al., 2012; Fourie et al., 2025b). These adaptive behaviours frequently produce complex relational dynamics, including forms of *coopetition*, a combination of cooperation and competition, both within the informal sector and between informal and formal tourism stakeholders (Damayanti et al., 2018; Jooss et al., 2023; Riquelme-Medina et al., 2022). Moreover, studies drawing on Bourdieusian concepts have illuminated the structuring effects of social capital, symbolic capital, and habitus in collaborative arrangements among informal actors (Bourdieu, 1986; Çakmak et al., 2018a; Charmes, 2017). Emerging analytical frameworks such as “dream capital” have further advanced understanding of how informal tourism entrepreneurs navigate aspirations, constraints, and divergent development pathways (Çakmak et al., 2019; Hernandez & Berardi, 2025; Kim et al., 2019).

3. Method

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Porto in 2025. Fieldwork combined participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews. From this experience, ethnographic visual material was collected, consisting of the compilation and systematic analysis of a total of 40 photographs documenting these activities across the city. This material enables an in-depth examination of mobile and evolving practices that shape and reconfigure the urban context (Klein & Bueno Carvajal, 2025). Observation took place in key tourist areas, including the historic centre, Ribeira, Rua das Flores, Jardim do Morro, and the approaches to the Luís I Bridge, sites characterised by high visitor flows and the presence of street-based economic activities. For this purpose, we engaged in repeated visits at different times of day and across seasons, noting the spatial organisation of activities, interactions between workers and tourists, and the strategies employed to navigate regulatory oversight.

Ethnographic methods are particularly suited to studying informal tourism economies due to their dynamic, mobile, and often hidden character (Seaton, 2002; Streule, 2020). Unlike formal tourism enterprises with fixed locations and documented operations, informal activities require direct observation of spatial practices, temporal rhythms, and embodied interactions that cannot be captured through surveys or secondary data. The urban tourism context further demands methodological approaches capable of attending to the contingent, relational, and situated nature of everyday economic practices (Pink, 2008; Vongvisitsin et al., 2024)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 participants representing a range of occupational profiles within the informal tourism economy. These included street vendors of food, beverages, and souvenirs, street musicians and visual artists, informal tour guides, and individuals combining informal tourism work with other income-generating activities. The sample also

incorporated expert informants, such as academics specialising in tourism and urban studies. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure diversity in terms of occupation, nationality, gender, and length of engagement in informal work.

Interviews explored participants' work histories, motivations, experiences of interaction with tourists, perceptions of regulation and enforcement, and views on the role their activities play in the city's tourism offer. Conversations were conducted primarily in Spanish and English, depending on participants' linguistic preferences. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English where necessary. The interview material was deputed, organized, and coded using ATLAS.ti 9.1.3.0, which supported the systematic management and qualitative analysis of the data. The software enabled the identification of recurring themes, relationships, and patterns relevant to the study's analytical framework.

3.1. Informal Activities Related to Tourism in Porto

Ethnographic fieldwork identified a diverse range of informal economic activities embedded within Porto's main tourist circuits. These activities were observed in areas characterised by high pedestrian traffic and intense tourist use, including the Cathedral square, Ribeira, Rua das Flores, Jardim do Morro and the access points to the Luís I Bridge. While their legal status varies, from partially licensed practices to entirely unregulated operations, all share two defining features. Their visibility within tourist spaces and their direct orientation toward visitors. The following typology outlines the main forms of informal tourism-related activity documented during fieldwork.

Street Vending

Street vending includes the sale of beverages, snacks and souvenirs in public spaces frequented by tourists. Vendors typically rely on minimal and highly adaptable items, such as coolers, portable tables or small stalls, and adjust their presence to peak tourist hours and seasonal flows. Some forms of vending take place in open public areas such as parks, viewpoints or pedestrian routes, while others occur at the thresholds between private and public space, including doorsteps or building entrances located along tourist paths.

In several locations, multiple vendors were observed operating simultaneously, offering similar products and contributing to a recognisable informal service environment. These activities are integrated into the range of amenities available to tourists, particularly in areas where visitors gather to rest, enjoy views or attend spontaneous performances. Food and beverage vending was frequently observed alongside other informal activities, such as street music, forming part of a broader leisure atmosphere in tourist hotspots.

Street Art

Street art encompasses visual practices such as painting, drawing and photography displayed and sold in public space. These activities vary in scale, material form and commercial orientation. Some artists present original works directly, while others offer reproductions or small, easily transportable items, including hand-painted magnets or prints, designed to appeal to short-term visitors.

Street artists were observed occupying walls, temporary displays or improvised exhibition surfaces, often adapting their work to spatial constraints and tourist circulation patterns. While the artistic styles and techniques differ, these practices share a reliance on public visibility and direct interaction with passers-by. In several cases, artists combined street-based selling with off-site production, such as studio work, resulting in hybrid arrangements that blur distinctions between informal and semi-formal activity.

Street Music

Street music constitutes a third category of informal tourism-related activity. Performances range from solo instrumentalists to vocal acts and typically take place in high-visibility locations such as pedestrian streets, riverfront areas or scenic viewpoints. Musical performances frequently coincide with peak tourist times, particularly in the late afternoon and evening, contributing to the atmosphere of leisure and sociability in these spaces.

A recent regulatory change has affected this category. Since late 2024, the municipality has introduced a licensing system based on a lottery for specific performance spots in designated tourist areas. While licensed musicians occupy authorised locations, unlicensed performers continue to operate in adjacent or non-designated spaces, maintaining a visible presence within the tourist landscape. As a result, both regulated and unregulated musical practices coexist spatially within the city.

Informal Tour Guiding

Informal tour guiding refers to unaccredited individuals leading walking tours or experiential routes through the historic centre. These activities are typically promoted through social media platforms, word of mouth or direct solicitation in tourist areas. During fieldwork, informal guides were most frequently observed near major transport nodes and heritage landmarks, such as São Bento Station and the Cathedral.

These tours often adopt flexible formats, including “free tours” based on tips or loosely structured walks framed around personal narratives or thematic experiences. Recent municipal efforts to regulate tour guiding through certification requirements have led some informal guides to modify how their activities are presented, shifting toward less explicitly touristic descriptions or experience-based formats.

4. Results

4.1. Determinants of Informality in Urban Tourism in Porto

Engagement in informal tourism-related work in Porto is shaped by a combination of structural labour market conditions, regulatory constraints and socio-cultural factors that channel workers into unregulated economic niches. The city’s post-industrial transformation and its increasing dependence on tourism have generated employment opportunities largely characterised by precarity, low wages and limited stability. For many cases, informal tourism work does not constitute a primary occupation but rather a complementary or adaptive strategy within broader livelihood arrangements. In this sense, a young Brazilian man combines his main occupation as a caregiver for an autistic child with informal food vending in the city’s main tourist areas. In other situations, street vending serves as a supplementary source of income, complementing revenues derived from pensions or other fixed benefits. This would be the case of a woman (63) who receives a pension of 490 euros and supplements it through her home-based beverage vending. These patterns indicate that informality is closely linked to income insufficiency and labour market fragmentation rather than to voluntary disengagement from formal employment.

The findings indicate that engagement in informal tourism work in Porto is shaped by a combination of bureaucratic constraints, labour market transformations and sociocultural factors that collectively channel workers into unregulated economic niches. Many participants describe a persistent legal ambiguity. While some hold licences for specific artistic activities, they lack authorisation to occupy public space, placing them in a position of partial compliance and continuous vulnerability to municipal enforcement. This regulatory vacuum creates a context in which informal activity is simultaneously tolerated, monitored and sanctioned, depending on shifting enforcement priorities, reflecting long-standing views of informality as structurally embedded in uneven labour regimes rather than a mere regulatory breach.

The interviews reveal a consistent pattern of informality across the different activities examined, evidenced through the absence of municipal licences, reliance on tacit rules, and the use of evasive strategies to navigate police oversight. Street artists in particular articulate that their work unfolds in a regulatory vacuum. As a French painter explains, “we do not have any permit from the municipality” adding that the group of artists “self-regulate and respect unwritten rules” to manage space and avoid conflict. This legal ambiguity is also acknowledged by Brazilian street vendors, who often possess a licence for the activity itself but not for the occupation of public space. One vendor notes: “What they don’t allow us is to sell in this place because we don’t have a licence for it”. These narratives reveal a fragmented regulatory regime in which activities may be formally acknowledged while their spatial enactment remains unauthorised, producing a condition of permanent negotiability rather than clear illegality.

A significant recent regulatory development has reshaped the conditions under which street musicians operate in Porto. The municipal government introduced a licensing lottery system in late 2024 for performance spots in designated tourist areas. Licensed musicians report mixed experiences. One licensed performer states: “I applied for the lottery. Got a Tuesday-Thursday slot on Rua das Flores 11am-7pm. I pay €2/day administrative fee. But now there’s ‘official’ designation, police know me, tourists see me as legitimate. It’s stability, but also constraint. I can’t deviate from slot, time, location”. This introduces a selective form of formalisation that confers legitimacy to some performers while leaving others in more precarious and contested positions (Yiftachel & Yakobi, 2003). Unlicensed musicians continue performing in unregulated areas (side streets, plazas outside lottery zones). Their rationale varies. One musician explains: “I tried lottery but was rejected. Now I play where there’s tourist flow but no official spots. Higher risk, police can move me, but also higher autonomy. I play what I want, where demand is highest”.

Cultural background also shapes orientations toward informality. Some street vendors described their activity as a normalised and legitimate economic practice, drawing on prior experiences in contexts where informal work is socially embedded. An artist explains some kind of his own informal art street studio, operating through subcontracting arrangements. A colleague helps him in the afternoons, and he attends his place (the sits where he stays surrounded by his paintings hanging on the walls) in the morning. This generates hybrid forms of semi-formal employment that reproduce informality even when organisational structures appear stable.

4.2. (Auto)perceived Working Conditions and Participation in Tourism Through Their Activities

Against a backdrop of legal ambiguity and constrained labour opportunities, interviewees articulate distinct interpretations of their working conditions and their position within Porto’s tourism economy. The narratives emerging from the interviews reveal that informal tourism workers consistently express a strong sense of legitimacy and self-recognition as essential contributors to the city’s tourism experience. Many draw explicit boundaries between their own practices and other forms of street commerce, emphasising identities rooted in artistry, professionalism and urban cultural contribution. Street artists, in particular, frame their work as integral to Porto’s urban landscape, describing themselves not merely as vendors but as creators who enrich the city’s aesthetic and experiential dimensions. This discourse of legitimacy frequently intersects with an entrepreneurial ethos, especially among some migrant vendors, who perceive their activity as a form of honest and dignified labour. Their narratives contrast their work with illicit street economies, thereby reinforcing a moral distinction that grants symbolic distance from criminalised forms of informality and operates as a form of symbolic boundary work through which tolerance and access are negotiated in highly touristified public space.

One street artist, for instance, rejects the idea that his labour is economically driven, stating that what motivates him is “a more human relationship,” and asserting that street art is “part of the city’s landscape.” Similarly, a Portuguese artist producing hand-painted magnets underscores her artistic identity over the commercial dimension of her activity: “I like what I do,” she explains, insisting that “selling art has nothing to do with selling drinks on the street.” Comparable moral distinctions also

emerge among food vendors, who frequently perceive their activity as more legitimate than alcohol sales. These hierarchies are reinforced by differentiated experiences of police intervention, with food vending described as attracting fewer reprimands than the sale of alcoholic beverages. Such distinctions underpin workers' claims that their practices constitute "honest work," clearly separated from both alcohol vending and illicit street economies.

These narratives, however, are marked by ambivalence. The same vendor admits: "There are days when my social battery runs low," signalling emotional fatigue associated with sustained tourist-facing interaction. This fatigue is further intensified by continuous exposure to police surveillance, which structures everyday working practices. Participants describe adopting tactical strategies, such as concealing goods, modifying their appearance or relying on peer warning systems, to avoid fines or confiscation. Perceived legitimacy thus emerges not only as a discursive claim but as something enacted through embodied, spatial and relational negotiations in public space.

Beyond economic motivations, several participants emphasise non-material drivers, presenting their work as embedded in human relations, creativity and emotional fulfilment. This self-perception coexists with a more ambivalent awareness that, within an increasingly touristified and commercialised environment, artistic production is often reduced to a souvenir commodity. Some workers acknowledge that the tourist market devalues their creations, converting them into consumable objects stripped of the artistic recognition they aspire to. Despite this perceived devaluation, artists do not generally frame themselves as competing directly with formal tourism businesses. Instead, they demonstrate a heightened sensitivity to spatial coexistence, adopting self-regulatory strategies such as occupying residual or abandoned spaces, peripheral locations, or aligning their presence with the temporal rhythms of nearby commercial closures. This tension between self-legitimation and market-driven devaluation is central to how informal workers interpret their role in the ongoing production of Porto's tourist city.

4.3. Agency and Strategies in Informal Tourism

Everyday Organization, Temporal Discipline and Autonomy

Building on these perceptions of legitimacy and belonging, participants describe a wide range of everyday practices through which they organise time, space and social relations in informal tourism work. Despite structural vulnerabilities, informal tourism workers demonstrate considerable agency, expressed through self-organisation, adaptive strategies and flexible time management, often drawing on everyday tactics and existing cultural or social resources to sustain visibility in central tourist areas (Bourdieu, 1986; De Certeau, 1984). Participants describe informal systems of coordination that regulate spatial distribution, scheduling and conflict avoidance, often grounded in tacit norms and mutual recognition. As a street painter explains, "we self-organise; no one tells us where to be or how to do it," highlighting his capacity to structure his own schedule. "I plan my working week so I can go climbing every Tuesday."

However, this flexibility does not imply the absence of routine. Most participants describe highly regular weekly schedules, typically working on a daily basis with only one or two rest days. This self-imposed organisational discipline underscores the centrality of informal tourism work as a necessary component of monthly income, even in the absence of direct managerial supervision. Weather conditions further modulate working time, with vendors extending their working hours on days with favourable temperatures, in some cases reaching ten-hour shifts. Such autonomy also extends to spatial negotiation, since artists deliberately choose locations that "do not obstruct formal commercial activity."

Collective Agency, Coopetition and Negotiated Order

Among mobile street vendors, these networks function as protective communities that share information about police presence, coordinate selling strategies and fix market prices. Such practices illustrate that informality does not equate to disorder. Rather, it produces its own institutional logic

aimed at sustaining livelihoods and reducing uncertainty. A street vendor explains how they warn one another when the police are approaching. In such situations, she puts away the most valuable items, so that the police confiscate only those goods that generate less profit.

At the same time, these relations are marked by ambivalence. While participants emphasise mutual support and collective alert systems, they also note that increasing numbers of vendors intensify competition, generating tensions and occasional conflict. As one vendor observes, cooperation and rivalry coexist, reflecting a fragile balance between collective protection and individual economic survival. Workers also mobilise informal tourism work instrumentally, using it to finance formal education, improve language skills or bridge periods of unemployment, framing it as a transitional or complementary strategy within broader life trajectories.

Vendors similarly mobilise their skills and linguistic resources to maximise visibility among tourists. One Brazilian vendor explains that he strategically uses his command of Spanish “to sell my product to Spanish-speaking tourists,” and sets his own schedule, working “every day except Tuesdays and Thursdays.” However, agency is not only individual but collective. Vendors often engage in cooperative practices to stabilise competition, suggesting forms of co-competition that sustain fragile market positions despite regulatory uncertainty. “We usually reach agreements; we fix the same prices and organise ourselves,” the vendor reports. Yet these same dynamics carry limits; increased competition is perceived as a threat: “They don’t like when more people come; they see it as competition and conflicts happen.”

Street artists employed informally by artistic studios also describe flexible conditions. One Portuguese artist notes that even when working for a company, she “feels free to decide how many hours she works,” and exercises selectivity in her interactions with tourists, saying she ignores customers who attempt to undervalue her work. Local authorities in Gaia implicitly reinforce this autonomy through selective non-enforcement. As one officer explained, intervening at that moment would be unfeasible: “We would have to fine eight or nine of them, and right now we can’t do that.”

Unlicensed musicians continue performing in unregulated areas. Some emphasize seasonal flexibility: “During high season (May-September), I can play daily and make €40-60/day tips. October-April, tourist flow is too low to sustain it. So I play informal work other months. The lottery system doesn’t recognize seasonality: “[...] if I get a spot, I’d have to use it year-round, even when there’s no profit”. The introduction of formalization (licensing lottery) illuminates how state regulation reshapes informal spatial ordering. Previously, musicians self-organized through tacit norms (avoiding overcrowding, respecting established performers’ territories, managing conflict through informal negotiation). Formalization attempts to systematize this through official allocation, creating winners/licensed (increased security but decreased flexibility) and losers/unlicensed (continued precarity but preserved autonomy).

Structural Constraints, Precarity and Embodied Limits of Agency

However, these expressions of agency are constrained by persistent precariousness and demanding physical and emotional working conditions. Income variability is a common concern, with earnings often tied to donation-based remuneration or narrow profit margins that require continuous sales volume. Seasonal fluctuations and adverse weather conditions directly affect income, while daily exposure to noise, uncomfortable postures or long periods standing contribute to health risks. Competition over limited tourist traffic intensifies these pressures, occasionally generating interpersonal conflict and, in some cases, physical aggression. Emotional strain is also prevalent: workers report fatigue, anxiety and a sense of social exhaustion associated with constant interpersonal engagement in public space.

A final layer of complexity emerges from hybrid forms of formalisation, such as the obligation to issue digital receipts (“recibos verdes”) when using electronic payment methods, positioning workers in a paradoxical space where they are simultaneously informal in their practice yet tax-liable in their transactions. While income may be partially formalised, the activity itself remains spatially unauthorised, as workers lack a legally recognised place from which to operate. These overlapping

pressures (precarity, competition, physical risk and partial formalization) shape the conditions under which labour agency is enacted, revealing an everyday struggle to balance autonomy with vulnerability in a touristified urban economy.

5. Discussion

Informality as a Structural Scaffolding in the Making of the Tourist City in Porto

The findings show that informal tourism work in Porto contribute to what might be described as a form of urban tourism scaffolding. Rather than merely coexisting with formal tourism economies, these practices actively shape the sensory, affective and relational dimensions of the tourist experience. Their activities contribute to the rhythmic organisation of public space, filling temporal and spatial gaps left by formal services, and producing relational environments in which encounters, performances and micro-transactions continuously unfold. From this perspective, informal tourism activities operate as a relational support structure that is improvised, fragile and uneven, but nonetheless temporarily indispensable to the ways in which Porto is experienced and reproduced as a tourist destination.

This informal scaffolding refers to a relational, performative and everyday arrangement through which tourism is made operational in urban space. It is constituted through repeated practices, spatial routines and embodied interactions that sustain tourist circulation, organise temporal rhythms and enable encounters across the city. This structure is distributed rather than centralised, contingent rather than permanent, and largely unrecognised by formal planning frameworks, yet it remains fundamental to the continuous production of the tourist experience. The bottom-up character of its organization expresses that it emerges from self-organised practices that respond pragmatically to regulatory gaps, tourist demand and spatial opportunity. Informality, in this sense, describes a mode of coordination and spatial production rather than a residual condition, revealing how the tourist city is actively assembled through overlapping formal and informal logics. This conceptualisation extends existing frameworks by foregrounding temporality and processual character where infrastructure studies emphasise material permanence (Bryson et al., 2023), by specifying support functions where assemblage theory describes co-production (DeLanda, 2006), and by examining mutual constitution where binary approaches distinguish authorised from unauthorised tourism (Koens et al., 2018). Table 1 clarifies these analytical distinctions:

Table 1. Scaffolding as an analytical concept.

Concept	Key contribution	What scaffolding adds
Infrastructure (Bryson et al., 2023)	Material systems and citizen-led solutions	Temporality and contingency during tourism expansion phases
Assemblage (DeLanda, 2006)	Heterogeneous actors co-producing tourism economies	Specific support function and asymmetric structural dependence
Tourism from below (Koens et al., 2018)	Bottom-up practices challenging institutional narratives	Mutual constitution beyond formal/informal binaries

This informal scaffolding-oriented reading also complicates binary distinctions between “authorised” and “unauthorised” tourism (Canclini, 2019; Hammond, 2018; Robertson, 2012; Smith, 2006). While institutional actors promote curated narratives of heritage and urban culture, informal workers generate alternative routes, atmospheres and forms of conviviality that reframe how visitors inhabit the city. Rather than occupying a separate sphere, informal practices intersect formal circuits through spatial proximity, shared audiences and overlapping temporalities. The ethnographic cases show that tourists often perceive informal workers as “part of the scene” or as embodiments of local authenticity, even when their legal status is ambiguous. Informality thus co-produces the affective economy of the destination, embedding tourism within everyday social relations, neighbourhood histories and transnational trajectories that rarely appear in official marketing

The structural support role of informal tourism work is simultaneously material, relational and regulatory. Materially, informal workers contribute artefacts, performances and micro-spaces that punctuate key tourist corridors and shape how visitors move, linger and interact with the urban landscape. The preparation and sale of locally recognised food products often presented in artisanal forms and occasionally accompanied by music, reinforces sensory associations with local gastronomy and place-based authenticity. Relationally, informal workers act as intermediaries between tourists and the city, offering directions, stories and situated knowledge that extend beyond the scope of formal tourist services. Regulatively, the tacit norms and informal agreements described by participants, regarding pitch locations, rotational use of space or acceptable levels of noise and visibility, constitute a form of shadow governance that organises everyday interactions in crowded tourist spaces.

Informal Tourism Scaffolding as Contingent, Situated and Processual

Understanding informal tourism activities as a form of scaffolding also requires conceiving them as contingent, situated and dynamic, rather than as a stable or fully consolidated system. This bottom-up structure emerges through everyday practices that respond flexibly to changing tourist flows, regulatory conditions and urban transformations. As such, it should be understood not as a finished configuration, but as an *infrastructure* in the making, continuously adjusted through practice, negotiation and improvisation (Çakmak et al., 2018b; Wood, 2014). This contingency is further reinforced by the disjunction between partial fiscal formalisation and the absence of legally recognised spaces of operation, rendering informal tourism work spatially unstable, mobile and repeatedly provisional.

This processual character becomes particularly visible when read in relation to the Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model originally proposed by Butler (1980) and subsequently refined in more dynamic and non-linear terms (Albaladejo et al., 2020; Butler, 2025; Singh, 2021). Porto's rapid tourism expansion over the last decade suggests that the city currently occupies an early to intermediate position between the stages of involvement and development, characterised by accelerating demand, increasing international visibility and still-evolving regulatory frameworks. In such phases, tourism provision is often only partially institutionalised, leaving room for local actors to supply services, atmospheres and experiences that precede or exceed formal planning (Gore et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2016; Marsiglio & Tolotti, 2024; Petrevska & Collins-Kreiner, 2017).

From this perspective, informal practices does not merely fill gaps left by formal tourism development, but actively shapes the trajectory of the destination itself. As tourism intensifies and governance frameworks evolve, this scaffolding is likely to transform: some activities may formalise, others may be displaced or reconfigured, and new forms of informality may emerge in response to saturation, regulation or market shifts. This aligns with more recent interpretations of the TALC that emphasise multiple cycles, non-linear trajectories and the coexistence of different development logics within the same destination (Baum, 1998; Hell & Petrić, 2021; Rodrigo et al., 2023).

Informal Tourism Workers as Embedded Entrepreneurs

Conceiving informal tourism activities as contingent and processual foregrounds how informal actors participate actively in the ongoing production of the tourist city. A key finding is that interviewees do not describe themselves as external to this structure but as embedded within it, displaying a reflexive awareness of their contribution to Porto's aesthetic and experiential economy. This self-perception resonates with research on informal tourism entrepreneurs that highlights how actors mobilise economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital to position themselves within the tourism field, rather than merely operating at its margins (Çakmak et al., 2018, 2019). Artists, in particular, emphasise that their presence helps "differentiate Porto from other tourist destinations," framing street art as a symbolic asset that contributes to place branding and the affective distinctiveness of the city (Crespi-Vallbona & Mascarilla-Miró, 2021).

For vendors, the stall itself often operates as both a commercial and symbolic space. Much like formal retail environments, these micro-spaces structure interaction without requiring proactive selling, as tourists approach, observe and initiate engagement on their own terms. Research on cultural and tourism-oriented commercial spaces suggests that spatial design, material aesthetics and embodied presence play a key role in shaping visitors' emotions, perceptions of authenticity and participatory engagement (Liu et al., 2016). In this sense, informal selling practices contribute to the staging of the tourist experience through everyday scenographies that blur the boundaries between commerce, performance and placemaking.

These practices also point to the existence of a shared entrepreneurial ecosystem operating within informality. Rather than isolated individualism, informal tourism work unfolds through relational arrangements characterised by both cooperation and competition. Studies on informal tourism economies describe such dynamics as forms of co-opetition, where actors coordinate prices, share information and negotiate spatial arrangements while simultaneously competing for customers and visibility (Christian M., 2018; Damayanti et al., 2018b; J. M. Rogerson & Rogerson, 2025b). This coexistence of collective regulation and individual strategy underscores how informal entrepreneurship functions as a situated economic system with its own rules, norms and hierarchies.

Ethnographic encounters further illustrate how informal workers may themselves become part of the consumable tourist experience. Interactions such as those involving elderly vendors selling beverages from their homes near major tourist routes demonstrate how workers are incorporated into tourists' affective narratives of authenticity. Requests for photographs and expressions of exaggerated affection reveal dynamics in which intimacy, spectacle and commerce intertwine, often through paternalistic or exoticising gestures. As previous studies on traditional markets and street vending suggest, authenticity is not produced solely through objects or performances, but through embodied social relations that position vendors as emblematic figures within the tourist imaginary and as active agents of placemaking (Saad, 2022; Truong, 2018).

6. Conclusions

This study contributes to debates on urban tourism and informality by examining how everyday informal practices participate in the ongoing production of the tourist city. Focusing on Porto, the analysis shows that informal tourism work is not adequately understood as marginal, residual or merely compensatory. Instead, it operates as a set of situated practices that sustain, enable and give substance to the everyday functioning of tourism, particularly in contexts characterised by rapid growth and partial institutionalisation.

By foregrounding workers' perceptions, practices and strategies, the article demonstrates that informal tourism activities are shaped by intersecting legal, economic and organisational constraints, while simultaneously expressing significant forms of agency. Informal workers actively organise time, space and interaction through adaptive routines, relational networks and tactical negotiations that allow tourism to operate beyond the limits of formal planning and regulation. These findings complicate binary distinctions between formal and informal tourism, showing how both spheres are deeply entangled in practice.

Conceptually, the article advances the notion of urban tourism scaffolding to capture the provisional, contingent and processual character of these arrangements. Unlike consolidated infrastructure, scaffolding refers to forms of support that are not designed as systems, yet produce stabilising effects by filling gaps, organising encounters and animating public space. This perspective highlights how informal practices sustain tourism precisely through their flexibility, responsiveness and embeddedness in everyday urban life, without assuming permanence or full recognition.

Situating this argument within Porto's recent tourism trajectory further underlines the temporal dimension of informal tourism work. In destinations that are still consolidating, informal actors often play a central role in shaping atmospheres, rhythms and visitor experiences, while remaining exposed to selective regulation and displacement. Informality thus emerges as both enabling and

precarious, contributing to the vitality of the tourist city while being structurally vulnerable within it.

The findings invite a reconsideration of how tourism governance approaches informality. Rather than treating informal tourism work primarily as a regulatory problem, policies may benefit from acknowledging its role in sustaining the everyday functioning of tourism and engaging more directly with workers' lived realities. Future research could extend this analysis through longitudinal and comparative approaches, examining how forms of tourism scaffolding evolve as destinations mature and how processes of formalisation, displacement or adaptation redistribute risks and opportunities within urban tourism economies.

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