

# The student urban leisure sector: Towards commercial studentification?

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# **The student urban leisure sector: Towards commercial studentification?**

## **Keywords**

Commercial studentification, student city, leisure economy, student geographies, Lodz.

## **Abstract**

The case study of the student urban leisure sector in Lodz, Poland, presented in this paper encourages the reader to look at cities through the lens of the expansion of consumerism and higher education. While the mainstream of the literature dealing with students as an urban population covers accommodation issues, this paper focuses on the development of the leisure economy. To these ends, it looks at students as customers and workers of the leisure venues. The paper shows that in these venues, students are not just sizeable groups of customers but also employees. Therefore, the central areas of Lodz do not function solely as student playscapes but also as students' places of work. Moreover, in contrast to the insights from prior studentification research, in which students were frequently reported as unwanted neighbours, in the eyes of leisure providers in Lodz, students are often kind customers and hard-working employees. Therefore, this paper argues for the nuanced treatment of students in research on cities by including a broader spectrum of roles students have as actors of urban change. The paper ends with a methodological standpoint that research into students in cities may benefit from applying the perspective of commercial studentification.

# Introduction

The ongoing urban change is taking place in the context of many global phenomena, of which the rise in consumerism and the massification of higher education are of crucial importance for this paper. Both have spurred the emergence of a population of young consumers – students – in university cities worldwide and thus have led to these cities' multifaceted transformations. Indeed, the formation of 'student cities' seems too important to be ignored by scholars (Chatterton, 2010).

In the initial research into students as an urban population, much attention was paid to their leisure activities (Chatterton, 1999; Chatterton and Hollands, 2005; Hollands, 1995; Russo and Arias Sans, 2009). However, in tandem with the spectacular rise of the student accommodation market (Mulhearn and Franco, 2018), the gravity centre of the discussion on students' role in cities shifted towards the issues of 'studentification' (Smith, 2005). In this context, the impacts of students' residential clustering in particular neighbourhoods have been hotly debated, with particular focus on the conflicts between the student and non-student populations living next to each other (Hubbard, 2008; Sage et al., 2012; 2013). Although studentification research has substantially expanded our understanding of student-induced urban change, its predominant focus on accommodation issues (Calvo, 2018) narrows the scholarly debate on their roles in cities to that of tenants. However, more research about other social and economic roles of students in cities is still merited. For instance, some authors have demonstrated that they are the consumer group that is fuelling the growth of the leisure industry in cities (Chatterton, 2010; Collins, 2010; Calvo, 2018; Gant and Terry, 2017). Others, although not always with a specific urban focus, have implied that they are active participants of job markets, especially in relation to the service industry (Bahrainwala, 2020; Curtis and Lucas, 2001; Munro et al., 2009; Robotham, 2012; Rokita-Poskart, 2016).

Therefore, in this paper, I intend to return to the topic of the student leisure industry by profiling the student urban leisure sector in Lodz, Poland: its structure, spatialities, and student clientele

and staff. By doing this explorative study, I aim to reflect upon the current theorisations of students as actors of urban change. Following this viewpoint, the paper starts with a literature review devoted to the rise of ‘consumer cities’ and the emergence of ‘consumption-oriented student cities’, in particular. Next, it provides a brief description of Lodz and explains the data and methods employed in this study. Then, the results of a survey among students and interviews with informants from the student urban leisure sector are presented. Finally, the paper discusses the evidence from Lodz and connects it with the ongoing debate on students as actors of urban change. As a result, the paper encourages the reader to consider ‘commercial studentification’ as a new perspective to add to the corpus of the studentification research.

## **The literature**

### *The rise of the consumer city...*

Although cities have always been havens for pleasure-seekers, the connection between consumption and urban development has been strengthened even more in recent decades. Consequently, urban economies have been filled with several leisure industries, and there are several forces behind this phenomenon. On the one hand, it is an effect of the broader social change, namely the rise of the consumer society and its ‘need’ to consume (Jayne, 2006). On the other hand, especially in cities of the Global North, it is a response to the loss of the manufacturing base and an expression of urban restructuring towards the ‘new economy’ (Krätke, 2015). Therefore, leisure activities and the infrastructure associated with them, once marginalised in the urban development discourse (Lovatt and O’Connor, 1995), are now in the foreground of neoliberal urban policymaking, which is centred on creating ‘exciting’ cities where people can live, work and, above all, consume (Miles, 2012). The rationale behind such policies is based on the findings that consumer amenities, e.g. leisure venues, are now the key attractors of human capital to cities (Clark, 2011; Glaeser et al., 2001).

The rise of consumerism manifests itself spectacularly through the emergence of the new urban geographies of consumption. Among the many ways of describing them, one notable idea is that of 'urban playscapes' (Chatterton and Hollands, 2002). In essence, playscapes are areas of recreation and leisure in cities of the post-industrial age (Crivello, 2011). Many such areas have been shaped through the transformation of city centres and historic quarters that have declined, often using the 24-hour-city concept, which promotes night-time industries (Bromley et al., 2003; Calvo et al., 2017). However, the geographies of leisure in contemporary cities are heterogeneous. According to Chatterton and Hollands (2005), they take the form of mainstream, alternative or residual places, which differ in the actors who produce and consume them, as well as in their spatial locations. The mainstream, which are often branded and 'themed' places, capitalise on the purchasing power of affluent urbanites and concentrate in regenerated urban areas, especially city centres. Considered in this light, the alternative and residual places, used by bohemian groups or worse-off parts of urban society, seem to have no option other than to operate in peripheral, cheaper locations.

In contrast to the initial allure of consumption as the driver of urban development, more recent perspectives provide a critical view of this phenomenon. First of all, the rise of consumerism seems to be yet another chapter in the ongoing story of the neoliberal commodification of urban life and space. Therefore, the consumption-driven spatial reorganisation of cities is said to establish new patterns of segregation. For instance, reinvented city centres often seem to be 'bastions' of particular cultural forms, from which marginal groups are excluded (Miles, 2012). Secondly, the transformation of these central areas into urban playscapes can follow a 'corporatisation' path due to the expansion of leisure venues operated by multinational companies. Thus, Chatterton and Hollands (2005) suggest that some urban areas of leisure can now be labelled 'Anywheresvilles', as they consist of the same branded, corporatised premises with no or weak linkages to the local *milieu*. Therefore, questions about the benefits and costs of the growth of the leisure economy for cities remain open.

*... and the emergence of the consumption-oriented student city*

At the same time, post-industrial restructuring has been marked by the growth of the knowledge economy (Florida, 1995; Moretti, 2013). The result is an expansion of the higher education sector, which is reflected by the remarkable growth of university enrolments and the consequent influx of young people to cities that host higher education institutions (HEIs) (Moos et al., 2019). However, although the principal aim of higher education massification is to boost economic growth through the creation of professionals, many cities realised that they could also profit from the presence of students before their graduation. Put briefly, the idea here is that students are a 'lucrative, sizable, and dependable consumer population' (Chatterton, 2010: 511), whose purchasing power and consumption patterns are potential boosters of urban economies (Anonymous, 2020a). Therefore, attracting, hosting, and finally retaining higher education students is nowadays an economic priority for many cities all over the world (França et al., n.d.; Sokołowicz, 2019).

The production of a so-called 'student city' is a multifaceted phenomenon as higher education students impact different sectors of urban economies and different urban spaces to a different extent (van den Berg and Russo, 2004). One of the many ways to think about students in cities is their role as the leading target group for the many leisure venues that operate there. In this respect, Chatterton (2010) suggests that we are now observing the growth of 'consumption-oriented student cities', in which numerous premises that cater to the student body emerge. Following his reasoning, pubs, bars, nightclubs, and fast food and retail outlets of predominantly student clientele can all together be labelled the 'student urban service sector'. Such venues enable students to crystallise their student identity, serving as a platform for their meetings and entertainment (Chatterton, 1999).

There are grounds to expect that the student urban service sector is dependent on HEIs' spatial frameworks, as they might impact the location of its constituent venues within the urban space. For example, student-oriented premises operate around campuses or along the major streets near

educational facilities (Adorean et al., 2020; Chatterton, 2010), and they also emerge in the neighbourhoods popular among students for residential purposes (Ackermann and Visser, 2016; Prada, 2019; Smith, 2005; Smith and Holt, 2007; Gu and Smith, 2020). However, student leisure also takes place elsewhere, e.g. it may be found in historic city centres (Calvo, 2018; Chatterton, 1999; Gant and Terry, 2017; Murzyn-Kupisz and Szmytkowska, 2015; Russo and Capel Tatjer, 2007).

Students' leisure seems to be Janus-faced when its effects for cities are considered. First of all, there is the question of who can access venues that are popular among students. Indeed, students' leisure consumption might spur the provision of consumer amenities that are also accessible to other inhabitants and tourists, such as music and gastronomic establishments, leading to the enhancement of a city's overall attractiveness (Goddard and Vallance, 2013; van den Berg and Russo, 2004). However, it has already been evidenced that the leisure venues where ('traditional') students socialise are often student-exclusive, limiting non-students' potential use of these venues by others (Chatterton, 1999). In a similar vein, there are some doubts about the trickle-down effect of students' expenditures for local businesses, because many students seem to prefer mainstream and branded premises operated by corporations, not strongly tied to the local economy (Chatterton and Hollands, 2005). Other reports show that higher education students are the clientele who keep residual, small businesses alive (Russo and Arias Sans, 2009).

In the debate over consumption-oriented student cities, attention focuses on students as customers. Researchers profile the reasons behind their choice of leisure venues and the role these places play in shaping their identities, as well as the strategies which premises develop to attract a student clientele (Calvo et al., 2017; Chatterton, 1999; Chatterton and Hollands, 2002; 2005). Nevertheless, there is a neglected story here. More precisely, the topic of students as workers within the student urban service sector is marginalised. This cognitive gap seems somewhat surprising since it has been already commented, although not always with a specific urban focus, that students nowadays often combine their educational duties with paid employment

(Bahrainwala, 2020; Dubet, 2006; Robotham, 2012; Rokita-Poskart, 2016). In the words of Curtis and Lucas (2001: 39), 'it is no longer appropriate to assume that being a student is a full-time occupation, except perhaps for a privileged few from high-income families'. Students seem to work mostly in the service industry (Munro et al., 2009). Therefore, it has already been suggested that their demand for leisure in cities might be partially met 'by themselves' through their work in this industry (Platje et al., 2016). Thus, it can be hypothesised that urban geographies shaped by the student urban service sector are not just areas of students' social life, but also the areas of their work. Following this line of reasoning, there is a need to merge the perspectives of students as consumers and students as workers to better facilitate the understanding of their roles in cities.

## **Case study, data, and methods**

This paper focuses on the 'student urban leisure sector'. Therefore, it refers to the term of student urban service sector originally provided by Chatterton (2010) to label the premises that cater to students of higher education. However, regarding the potentially wide variety of businesses that constitute that sector, this research pays attention to pubs and cafés, music and night clubs, as well as cinemas, which are the premises that operate as a part of the leisure economy. Therefore, this study employs the narrower term of student urban leisure sector. On the one hand, premises of these types provide students with a place for social life, entertainment, and culture. On the other, they may also offer them job opportunities.

The research presented in this paper was conducted in Lodz (Łódź), the third most populous city in Poland, inhabited by 679,941 people (Statistics Poland, 2020). Lodz is usually featured as the Polish industrial city archetype and as 'Poland's Manchester' due to the significance of textile production for its rise in the 19th century (Kowalski et al., 2018). The city suffered a dramatic decline during Poland's transition from a socialist to a capitalist economy in the early 1990s. Although the consequences of intensive deindustrialisation of that time are still palpable in Lodz, the loss of the manufacturing base also started the process of the city's economic reinvention. One

of its most prominent signs is the remarkable growth of the higher education sector, which has been operating in Lodz since the 1940s (Sokołowicz, 2019). Its recent growth seems to be an effect of the entrepreneurial approach among the local HEIs, which successfully harnessed the Polish education boom of the 2000s (Anonymous, 2020b). Today, the city hosts approximately 45,000 full-time students at its six public HEIs, namely the University of Lodz (UŁ), the Technical University of Lodz (PŁ), the Medical University, the Art School, the Music School, and the Film School (Statistics Poland, 2020). However, although Lodz's role as a student city substantially increased, its retention of graduates requires further improvements (Sokołowicz, 2019).

Bearing in mind the purpose of this study, the intention was to investigate the leisure premises in Lodz that are actually popular among the student body. However, knowledge about which venues are popular among students from the many that operate in such a city remains tacit, because it is not evidenced in any publicly available sources of data. Therefore, the first research stage was to identify 'student' premises through a survey conducted in 2017 and 2018 among a sample of 1059 full-time domestic students enrolled in the six public HEIs listed above. The respondents were sampled by controlling two variables, namely how they were assigned to the HEIs' faculties (departments) and their level of education. Therefore, the sample reflected the student population structure as evidenced by the HEIs' offices. Consequently, it provided a representative group of students from various fields of education and with various lifestyles and everyday geographies. The survey participants completed individual, paper, self-completion questionnaires in front of the interviewers at the HEIs' facilities. The survey covered a wide range of questions relating to students as urban consumers, since it was a part of a wider research project (Anonymous, 2020a), but some questions were highly relevant for this paper. Specifically, the students were asked to provide the names of the leisure venues they visit at least once per month in each of three categories: pubs and cafés, music and night clubs, and cultural venues (e.g. cinemas). This approach allowed us to identify the premises that host student leisure in Lodz.

In 2019, at the second research stage, the identified leisure venues were visited by the surveyors to run paper-and-pencil interviews (PAPI) with their owners or staff. To avoid investigating venues that host students by chance, only the 77 premises that were reported by at least three students at the first research stage were chosen for the second stage. However, nine of them no longer existed, decreasing the number to 68. Ultimately, informants from 56 venues were interviewed, so the response rate was 82.3%. Most of the questions were close-ended, and the topics included the premises' history and current operations, and the clientele and staff, with a particular focus on students regarding the last two topics. Fifty-five of the interviewees positioned themselves as people with direct contact with the clientele; thus, their experiences were pertinent to reflect upon the students who use these premises.

The data gathered for this research were analysed in Excel, SPSS and qGIS. In the next sections, all statistics concerning the 56 venues are provided, along with a map showing the locations of the 77 premises originally chosen for the research.

## **Results**

### *What exactly is the student urban leisure sector in Lodz?*

Among the investigated venues, the most sizeable category, which consists of 36 premises, was pubs and cafés, i.e. places for social gatherings combined with the consumption of food and beverages. This was followed by 17 music and night clubs, and three cinemas. This structure was expected, as visiting pubs and cafés was found to be the typical venue-based consumption activity among Lodz students at the first research stage. At the same time, the limited number of cinemas that are popular reflects that these venues operate in Lodz mostly in the form of multiplexes, which have replaced the previous landscape of smaller, independent venues scattered across the city.

The key argument in the debate over student cities is that the rise of leisure venues resulted from the massification of higher education and the consequent influx of young consumers to these cities. The picture of the student urban leisure sector in Lodz shows that these two processes occurred simultaneously. Although two of the premises reported that they had been established in the early post-WW2 period, thus at the beginnings of Lodz as a university city, most started their operations quite recently. Indeed, they were established in the 2000s (14 premises) and the 2010s (28 premises), i.e., when enrolments in local HEIs started to grow, but also when Lodz's transition from a socialist and industrial economy to a capitalist and post-industrial one began to accelerate. However, it seems that the structure of the student urban leisure sector in Lodz is not only relatively new but also dynamic. This position is justified on the grounds that nine of the venues initially intended for interviews had already closed in the year spanning the first and the second research stages.

A debatable issue concerning student leisure consumption is its effects on cities since it was found that some students socialise in branded premises operated by corporations, not rooted in the local *milieu*. However, the picture of the student urban leisure sector in Lodz has different characteristics. Firstly, considering the size of all the premises investigated, the student urban leisure sector in Lodz is constituted by 29 micro and 25 small firms (employing fewer than 10 and between 10 and 49 workers, respectively). Therefore, the student playscape of Lodz is shaped by independent venues that operate on a small scale. Secondly, as many as 45 of the businesses reported that they are based primarily in Lodz. Consequently, the student leisure sector in the city seems to have a very local face, so the hope that students' expenditures in these venues spur local development seems quite promising.

### *Where does the student urban leisure sector operate in Lodz?*

Mapping the original 77 venues that were mentioned shows that they cluster in four areas of Lodz's inner-city (Figure 1). Some smaller concentrations of student-attracting premises are present next to or within the campuses of the two largest HEIs, but also in the Manufaktura

commercial centre. However, the highest concentration of leisure venues popular among students can be found along Ulica Piotrkowska, the high street.

[Figure 1 near here]

Unsurprisingly, some of the leisure venues frequently visited by the student body operate within or next to the campuses of the two largest HEIs: the more popular venues are close to the Technical University of Lodz (PŁ) campus, while the less popular ones are visible next to the University of Lodz (UŁ) facilities. The student urban leisure sector in these two locations is dominated by local operators, but it is limited to just a handful of premises. Interestingly, two of them are the longest-running venues among those that were studied, having been established in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, they are both exemplars of the very beginnings of ‘student’ Lodz. They also illustrate that, through the decades, the social life of students, which perhaps initially concentrated around the HEIs’ facilities, has moved to the very centre of the city and flourished there.

In this regard, the emergence of the student urban leisure sector along Ulica Piotrkowska is particularly interesting. Piotrkowska is the historical axis of Lodz, spanning four kilometres. However, the concentration of the student urban leisure sector is mostly found in the northern, semi-pedestrianised course of 750 metres, between the intersections with Narutowicza and Zielona streets and Schillera Passage (Figure 2). During the city’s rapid growth in the 19th century, Piotrkowska became a linear central business district, hosting the most influential institutions of the bourgeoisie. The essential role of Piotrkowska was sustained in socialist times when the street was the city’s main retail area. Retail flourished there even more in the 1990s, during Poland’s transition from a socialist to a capitalist economy (Young and Kaczmarek, 2008) when it saw the opening of many flagship stores of multinational brands (Riley, 1997). However, the rising consumerism and the consequent construction of numerous modern shopping centres nearby led to the abandonment of Piotrkowska, initiating its decline (Fleming, 2012).

Piotrkowska's crisis peaked at the end of the 2000s, although for the inhabitants of Lodz, the street remained the jewel in the city's crown. It was at this time that the strategy for Piotrkowska's redevelopment was conceptualised by local academics, activists and businesspeople, and then implemented in the municipal policymaking (Boryczka, 2013). One idea behind the street's redevelopment was to enhance its already sizeable leisure industries. Indeed, nowadays, the street hosts a large share of Lodz's restaurants, bars, pubs, cafés, and clubs, most of which are run by local operators. Therefore, the popularity of Piotrkowska's venues among students can be perceived as part of the recent restructuring that the street has gone through.

[Figure 2 near here]

Another area of students' leisure in Lodz is Manufaktura, a commercial centre located at the north-western corner of the inner city. It is an example of a grand regeneration project fuelled by private capital. Twenty-five hectares of post-industrial brownfields were transformed into a 'festival marketplace', consisting of a large shopping centre, a museum of contemporary art, a luxury hotel, as well as numerous entertainment and gastronomic premises (Figure 3). Today, Manufaktura is the largest commercial centre in Poland and one of the largest in Europe by gross leasable area (Cudny, 2016). However, its establishment was one of the reasons for the exodus of retailers from Piotrkowska in the late 2000s. In the light of the gathered evidence, Manufaktura is a popular place for students' leisure activities, but not as much as Piotrkowska. Students are attracted here by the multiplex cinema and cafés located around the so-called 'market square'. However, most premises that operate here are international chains.

In essence, the geographical distribution of the student urban leisure sector in Lodz shows that the premises primarily span the city centre. Therefore, its geographies are disentangled from both the students' areas of education (with the exception of a few venues that operate in proximity to the campuses) and their areas of residence (evidenced in detail elsewhere: Jakóbczyk-Gryszkiewicz et al., 2014; Anonymous, n.d.).

## *What is the role of student-customers for the student urban leisure sector in Lodz?*

Prior studies emphasised that higher education students are consumers who fuel leisure venues' operations in the cities that host HEIs. To verify that view, the informants were asked to assess the share of students in their clientele. Some found approaching this question a challenge because their businesses do not calculate such a statistic. Despite that, their responses give an overall sense of the venues' 'studentness'. The results show that the premises differ considerably regarding this matter. For instance, in one venue, students constitute 98.0% of its customers, while in another, only 5.0%. However, most of the venues' estimations were placed on a continuum between these two extremes; the average share was 48.3%, while the median was 45.0%.

There is considerable variation in the estimated share of students-as-customers between the areas where the student urban leisure sector venues concentrate. Those that are within or close to the campuses are the leaders. Students are their dominant customer group since their assessed share exceeds 90.0%. In contrast, among the venues in Manufaktura, the estimated share does not usually reach 30.0%. Meanwhile, Piotrkowska functions as a patchwork that merges these two extremes. On the one hand, there are numerous venues that mainly host students since it is estimated that they make up 70.0% or more of their clientele. On the other hand, the street is also home to venues where this share is assessed at 30.0% or lower. Since the predominantly 'student' venues neighbour those of variegated clientele, it is hard to say that the entire Piotrkowska Street is a 'bubble' of students' leisure. Therefore, the point to make is that the consumer segregation of students and non-students occurs at the scale of individual premises rather than the entire street.

However, questions can be raised about how the informants know that they serve students. Although this issue is less relevant for venues located on the campuses, it becomes more important in areas such as Piotrkowska and Manufaktura. Thus, the features and behaviours through which the operators recognise students among their clientele were also investigated. First of all, 52 respondents declared that they could identify the students among the people that visit their

premises. Secondly, as many as 45 informants stated that they identify students through the criterion of age, which suggests that youthfulness is an almost 'automatic' approximation of 'studentness'. However, this phenomenon might be a distinctive feature of Lodz since it is one of the fastest-ageing cities in Poland. Another popular method of recognising students among the clientele, declared by 23 respondents, is checking the 'student cards'. Every HEI in Poland issues such cards using a standardised template; thus, business owners often give students dedicated discounts on presentation of the cards at the cashier's desks. Furthermore, 21 respondents declared that they can recognise students by what they wear. Other options, such as students' lifestyles, language, and interests, were reported by a limited number of respondents.

[Figure 3 near here]

Finally, many voices in the flourishing debate over students as an urban population often emphasise the antagonistic relations between students and non-students. Such findings come mostly from the literature on studentified neighbourhoods, where students are perceived as unwanted neighbours (Smith, 2005; Sage et al., 2013). However, the perspective on students as customers might be different. The respondents were asked to describe the students who visit their premises using three adjectives of their own choice to reflect their experiences of hosting the student clientele. In total, the respondents provided 80 adjectives, and those used by at least two respondents are featured in the word cloud (Figure 3). Considered in this light, some informants perceived students as 'loud', 'crazy', 'fun-loving', 'talkative', and 'self-confident' customers, which, in particular contexts, might have negative connotations. However, the image of student clientele among the leisure operators in Lodz seems to be generally positive. The students were described predominantly as 'kind', 'calm' and 'well-mannered', but also as 'well-tempered', 'likeable', 'cultured' and 'easy-going' clients. Numerous adjectives relating to the nature of social relations were also encouraging: 'outgoing', 'friendly', 'sociable', 'polite' and 'communicative'. Finally, some of the adjectives referred to the students as economic individuals, labelling them 'thrifty' or 'poor', but also 'curious' and 'resolute'.

### *What is the role of student-workers for the student urban leisure sector in Lodz?*

The intention of this research was also to understand the relevance of student labour for the venues that constitute the student urban leisure sector. The evidence shows that students are employed in almost every premises investigated in the study, i.e. in 54 of the 56 venues. It is noteworthy that the share of students in the venues' staff is high, on average 60.4%, with a median of 60.0%. Therefore, the premises that constitute this sector in Lodz seem to be fuelled not just by the students' leisure but even more by their labour. Interestingly, the high share of students in the workforce applies to premises operating in all geographic areas that concentrate the student urban leisure sector in Lodz. All this implies that students who work in the leisure industry in Lodz serve not only their peers but also non-student customers.

It is therefore intriguing to discover what factors make employing the student body so attractive for the leisure industry in Lodz. The respondents do not consider their knowledge and experience to be important, with only seven informants finding them relevant. What is of crucial importance is the students' availability to work at any time, which was highlighted by as many as 42 respondents. Therefore, the relative freedom in time allocation, considered earlier as a driving force of students' leisure activities (Chatterton, 1999), now also seems to be relevant for their work. Another important factor is lower labour costs, which was declared by 27 respondents. Indeed, there is a popular form of contract in Poland (a contract of mandate) which favours students over non-students in labour costs since business owners are exempted from paying social security contributions when employing students. Consequently, the leisure industry in Lodz utilises students as flexible but rather low-paid workers, as suggested earlier by Curtis and Lucas (2001) and Munro et al. (2009). Therefore, it raises concerns about the precarity of student labour (Bahrainwala, 2020). Simultaneously, although the leisure industry in Lodz generally does not need students' professional expertise, it values their personalities, since this factor was relevant

for 27 respondents. Indeed, the way young workers behave, especially those who work front-of-house, is an important component that builds the venue's atmosphere (Farrugia et al., 2018).

Finally, the respondents were asked to describe their student staff using three adjectives in the same way as when describing students as customers. In total, the informants provided 66 adjectives, 29 of which were given by at least two respondents and are featured in the word cloud (Figure 3). There are solid grounds to say that the respondents appreciated students as employees, because the most common adjective was 'hard-working' (23 respondents). They were also described as 'diligent', 'energetic', 'ambitious', 'committed', 'loyal', 'reliable', 'punctual' and 'fair'. Thus, students seem to take their jobs seriously. Many of the adjectives relate to the key factor behind employing students in the leisure industry, as they were often described as 'available (for work at any time)'. Although knowledge and job experience are of little importance for hiring the students, in some venues, they were labelled 'creative' and 'smart' workers. Students are also perceived as 'outgoing', 'talkative', 'communicative', 'cultured', 'likeable', 'friendly', and 'amicable' people, and 'resilient' in stressful situations, which might favour employing them on the front line of service work. Finally, some of the features usually associated with 'youthfulness' were also mentioned: in some premises, the students were seen as 'funny', 'gregarious', or 'absent-minded' employees.

## **Discussion**

### *Students' playscapes and beyond*

The evidence from Lodz shows that the student urban leisure sector developed in this city during its recent transition from a socialist and industrial economy to a capitalist and post-industrial one. The emergence of this sector can be viewed as one of the by-products of the growth in enrolments in the local HEIs. Nowadays, the student urban leisure sector in Lodz consists of numerous pubs, cafés, music and night clubs, and a few cinemas. A noteworthy fact is that this sector is constituted predominantly by micro, small and medium-sized companies operated by local entrepreneurs.

Therefore, the student leisure demand, which can often be labelled ‘exogenous’ regarding the consumption patterns of non-local students, is met by ‘endogenous’ economic entities, which are the businesses rooted in the local economic *milieu*. In these regards, there are grounds to think that students in Lodz are customers whose presence supports urban redevelopment through spurring local entrepreneurialism. Indeed, the example of Lodz thus shows that the corporatisation of the leisure industry in cities (Chatterton and Hollands, 2005) is not an unavoidable scenario.

As the study revealed, the leisure venues that are popular among the students in Lodz tend to cluster in urban space. The prominent area of such concentration is the very city centre, exemplified by the northern course of Ulica Piotrkowska, the high street. The mushrooming of venues that host students’ leisure takes place there with no reference to the locations of the HEIs or the students’ places of residence. Therefore, the view from Lodz fits the patterns identified by researchers in other cities (Calvo, 2018; Murzyn-Kupisz and Szmytkowska, 2015; Russo and Capel Tatjer, 2007). However, the local context seems to matter much. More precisely, Ulica Piotrkowska, the recently declining high street, is flourishing again as an arena of social life. Although there are certainly many factors behind this phenomenon (Boryczka 2013; Gałuszka, 2017), students, as customers of the leisure industry that operates there, play a vital role in the restructuring of Lodz’s high street. Indeed, the venues that constitute the student urban leisure sector did not displace the prior businesses that operated along Piotrkowska; rather, they filled the commercial void left after the decline of the prior retail outlets.

However, as this study shows, the role of students in such restructuring goes beyond their consumption. Indeed, for many premises that constitute the student urban leisure sector in Lodz, students are even more relevant as workers than as customers; thus, this finding confirms the prior comments on the changing nature of studenthood towards regular participation in the labour market (Bahrainwala, 2020; Curtis and Lucas, 2001; Dubet, 2006; Munro et al., 2009; Platje et al., 2016; Robotham, 2012; Rokita-Poskart, 2016). Moreover, it has a twofold relevance for the ongoing debate on students and the leisure economy in cities. First, from the students’ perspective,

the leisure industry in Lodz offers them not only entertainment, but also the job opportunities they need to live in a city of higher education. Consequently, the urban areas that are home to leisure venues popular among students should not be viewed solely as students' playscapes; they can also be considered students' 'workscapes', for lack of a better word. Secondly, from the perspective of non-students, they can enjoy the numerous leisure venues run based upon student labour. Therefore, by working for the leisure industry, students co-create the 'consumer' attractiveness of Lodz's inner-city.

Finally, in contrast to the prior research that reports the negative views on student-tenants (Hubbard, 2008; Sage et al., 2012; 2013), the evidenced perception of the informants from Lodz's leisure industry provides a different image of the student population. In brief, they view students generally as kind customers and hard-working employees, suggesting that the image of student populations in the current literature might be incomplete, and thus narrowed, due to the dominance of accommodation issues in the student-oriented research agenda.

All things considered, the presence of students in cities may not be limited to negative phenomena such as neighbourhood downgrading; it can also benefit cities by spurring their commercial (re)development. Therefore, students in cities should be viewed in a nuanced way, including the broader spectrum of their social and economic roles than merely their role of tenants, which is analysed predominantly.

### *Towards commercial studentification?*

The case study featured in this paper provokes questions about the usability of current theorisations in explaining the role of students in the ongoing urban change. The questions should be addressed specifically to studentification since it remains the most applied framework for research into students and their concentration in urban space. In short, due to its primary focus on housing (Calvo, 2018), studentification neglects commerce. That is not to say, however, that commercial issues are absent in the studentification debate, but in this framework, leisure or retail

venues are grounded in the 'neighbourhood premise'. In other words, their emergence and operations are considered and reported as an effect of students' residential concentration (Ackermann and Visser, 2016; Prada, 2019; Smith, 2005; Smith and Holt, 2007; Gu and Smith, 2020). However, as this paper demonstrates, in line with previous findings or suggestions (Calvo, 2018; Murzyn-Kupisz and Szmytkowska, 2015; Russo and Capel Tatjer, 2007), that it is not always the case. Furthermore, although it is potentially important for urban scholarship to consider students as customers and workers of the service industry, the current analytical lens of studentification does not allow for many questions about the roles students play in cities other than as tenants.

Nevertheless, the current limitations of studentification as a research framework do not necessarily mean that it should be contested. Instead, these limitations should nourish the debate on widening the conceptual lenses of studentification. This perspective seems promising due to the new developments in gentrification theory. More precisely, gentrification scholars have recently disentangled commercial gentrification from its 'classical' residential archetype (Kosta, 2019; Parker, 2018; Pastak et al., 2019; Tuttle, 2020; Zukin and Kosta, 2004). Put briefly, residential and commercial facets of gentrification are no longer considered axiomatically parallel to each other, so they might take place independently in different urban areas and transform them under different logics.

In a similar vein, it seems possible to establish a commercial studentification lens by analogy to the commercial gentrification literature, since Smith (2005) originally conceptualised studentification in reference to gentrification. If this were done, the commercial and residential facets of studentification would become analytically disentangled, offering different phenomena to study. While residential studentification should keep its focus on student accommodation, since there are still relevant questions to be answered in this field (Nakazawa, 2017), its commercial counterpart might benefit the studentification debate by paying attention to students' leisure and work in the context of urban change. The close link between students' leisure and work should be

the focus of commercial studentification research from the very beginning since the experience of gentrification studies teaches us that the issue of labour should not be overlooked (Gourzis et al., 2019).

The rationale behind the commercial studentification proposal is twofold. First, its perspective may shed new light on the students-commerce nexus in cities. Second, it thus may help to describe, analyse and explain the multifaceted roles students have in urban change. As this paper demonstrated, these roles go beyond those of tenants and include those of customers and workers, among others. Therefore, the changes students bring to cities viewed in the residential and the commercial facets of studentification might vary. Collectively, establishing a commercial studentification lens can move forward the scholarly discussion about the ‘student cities’ (Chatterton, 2010; van den Berg and Russo, 2004).

In the light of this case study, commercial studentification may be initially described as a kind of urban change that results from the increase and physical concentration of commercial venues that constitute the student urban service sector, and which serve as places of students’ leisure and work. Consequently, the geographies of commercial studentification in cities may shape students’ playscapes and worksapes, both related to each other but not necessarily tied to the students’ geographies of education and residence. In Lodz, the label of commercial studentification seems to be appropriate for the processes observed along the part of Ulica Piotrkowska. However, as this example shows, commercial studentification may not necessarily lead to the transformation of an entire urban area into a ‘student bubble’, but it may be expressed by the creation of predominantly ‘student’ venues next to venues of more variegated clientele. That said, this particular feature might be specific to post-industrial cities like Lodz, which have been hosting student populations of considerable size for a relatively short time and are still shaping the intra-urban student geographies (Wattis, 2013; Anonymous, n.d.).

# Conclusions

The case study of the student urban leisure sector in Lodz presented in this paper encouraged the reader to look at urban economies and geographies through the lenses of the rise of consumerism and the massification of higher education. To these ends, it provided a slightly different conceptual approach to the mainstream literature that deals with student populations in cities and (residential) studentification in particular. Instead of looking into the issues of housing, this contribution focused on the leisure economy. Therefore, in contrast to seeing students as tenants, this paper investigated them as customers and workers. The evidence from Lodz suggests thinking about the recent decades of higher education expansion in cities not just as the emergence of sizeable populations of student-customers, but of student-workers as well. By playing both roles, students contribute to the reproduction of urban space through the expansion of the leisure industry. Therefore, by reflecting upon Lodz and finding inspiration in recent developments in gentrification theory, this paper ends with the methodological standpoint that research into students in cities may benefit from applying the commercial studentification perspective as a subset of studentification research.

However, the idea of commercial studentification that results from this research is of a preliminary nature, so it requires further efforts to gain conceptual clarity. Although the list of issues to address is certainly long, some seem crucial. First, a point for consideration is the range of commercial venues that constitute the student urban service sector, since their existence is a prerequisite for commercial studentification research. Therefore, although this paper examined pubs, cafés, clubs and cinemas, other types of leisure and retail venues might be included in future studies. Second, as the commercial gentrification debate shows, there is a need to find proper tools and measures to investigate this phenomenon (Kosta, 2019). Thus, the same issue will inevitably arise in any research into commercial studentification. Third, the potential relationship between commercial gentrification and commercial studentification deserves analytical attention. Fourth, the views on

students by local actors other than leisure providers should be investigated. Fifth, the concerns about the range and nature of the effects of commercial studentification for local communities (e.g. space homogenisation, businesses displacement, social segregation, social conflicts) and students themselves (e.g. precarity of work) remain open, despite some signs from this study that this process can be viewed positively. Finally, the concept of commercial studentification and the findings behind this proposal require verification in cities other than Lodz.

The last issue to arise is that the research presented in this paper was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic. Its impact on cities that depend on higher education and leisure industries is expected to be large, as they rely heavily on mobile youth. Indeed, students might have abandoned university cities, to some extent, due to the cancellation of face-to-face classes and the sudden rise of online teaching. Therefore, even beyond the lens of commercial studentification, future research should strive to gauge the consequences of the pandemic for these cities regarding students' leisure and labour. In particular, the question is whether the potential changes spurred by the pandemic will be temporary or permanent.

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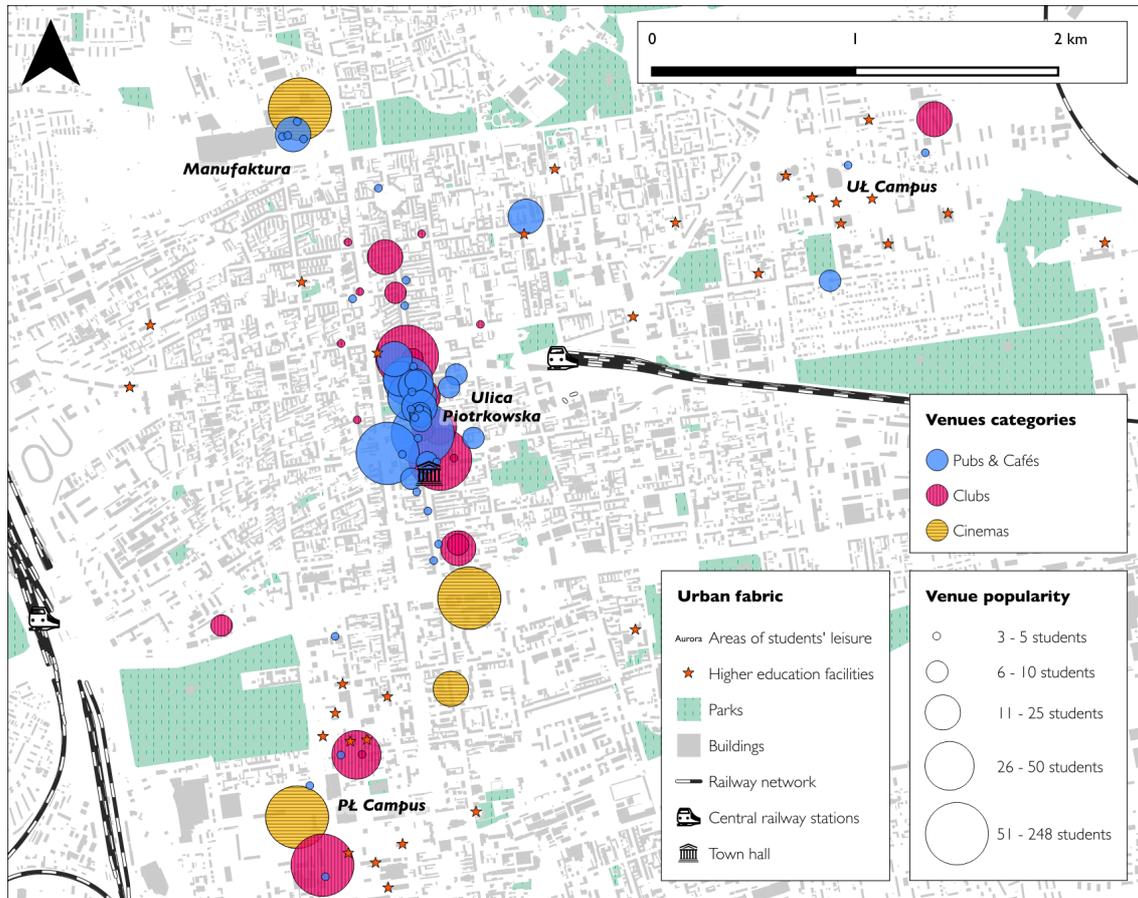
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Figure 1. Geographies of the student urban leisure sector in Lodz



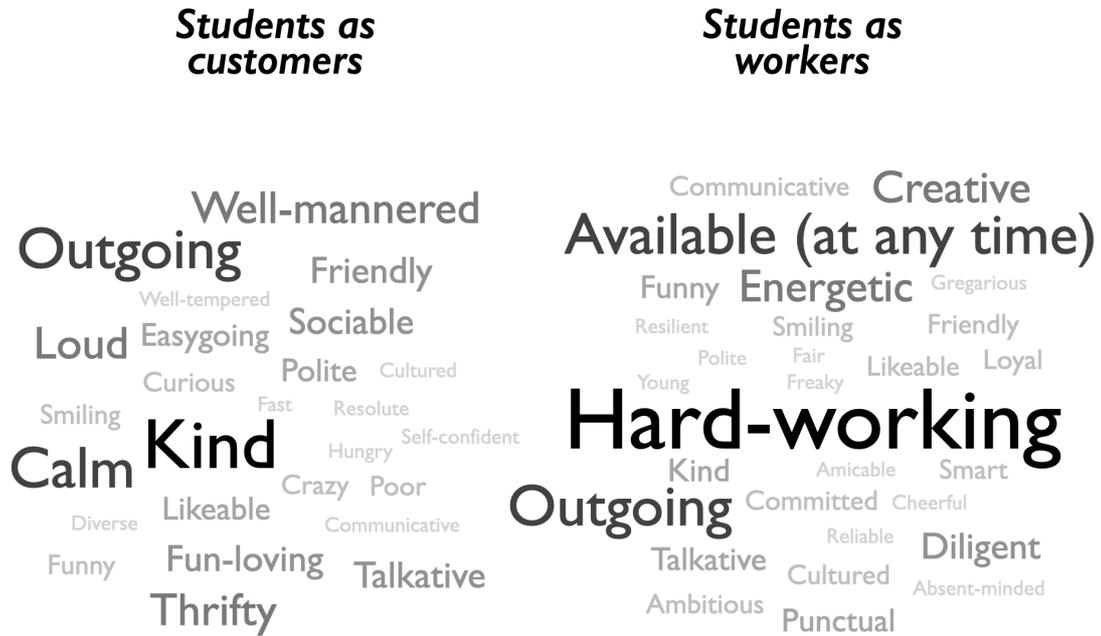
Source: Own elaboration. Note: The symbol size relates to the venue's popularity revealed in the survey among the students in the first research stage.

Figure 2. A fragment of the northern, semi-pedestrianised course of Ulica Piotrkowska, which demonstrates the highest concentration of the student urban leisure sector



Source: Author, 2020.

Figure 3. Adjectives used by the informants to describe the students as customers and workers



Source: Own elaboration. Note: The larger the font size and the darker the colour, the more respondents provided that particular adjective.