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Página web: www.ceconomia.unal.edu.co

Teléfono: (571)3165000 ext. 12308, AA. 055051, Bogotá D. C., Colombia

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URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE LIBERDADE JAPANESE NEIGHBOURHOOD AND THE CONFLUENCE OF EVENTS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF NIPPONOPHILIC CAPITAL IN SÃO PAULO

Rafael Dirques David Regis
Julio Cesar Valente Ferreira

Regis, R. D. D., & Ferreira, J. C. V. (2025). Urban transformations in the Liberdade Japanese neighbourhood and the confluence of events in the construction of Nipponophilic capital in São Paulo. *Cuadernos de Economía*, 44(96), 1275-1330.

R. D. D. Regis

Fluminense Federal University, Postgraduate Programme in Culture and Territorialities, Niterói (Brazil). Email: rafaelddregis@yahoo.com.br (corresponding author). Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8298-2973>

J. C. V. Ferreira

Federal Centre for Technological Education Celso Suckow da Fonseca, Postgraduate Programme in Ethnic-Racial Relations, Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Fluminense Federal University, Postgraduate Programme in Culture and Territorialities, Niterói (Brazil). Email: jcvferreira@hotmail.com. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9732-7939>

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Este artículo fue recibido el 10 de diciembre de 2024, ajustado el 21 de julio de 2025 y su publicación aprobada el 2 de septiembre de 2025.

This study analyses the urban and cultural transformation of São Paulo and its Liberdade neighborhood—home to the largest Japanese diaspora—through public policies and Japan-themed events such as Tanabata Matsuri, Anime Friends, and the Festival do Japão. It introduces the concept of Nipponophilic capital, integrating Bourdieu's forms of capital with theories of Disneyfication, tactics, and memory spaces. Drawing on literature review, fieldwork, and photographic analysis, the article examines how Japanese pop culture, tourism, and gentrification reshape Liberdade, highlighting its central role in São Paulo's identity and economy, positioning it as the main Japanese hub in the Americas and reinforcing its global image aligned with Japan's branding while revealing underlying tensions.

Keywords: Japanese pop culture; themed spaces; cultural events; urban intervention; symbolic economy.

JEL: O54, Z10, Z30, Z32.

Regis, R. D. D., & Ferreira, J. C. V. (2025). Las transformaciones urbanas en el barrio japonés de Liberdade y la confluencia de acontecimientos en la construcción del capital nipponófilo en São Paulo. *Cuadernos de Economía*, 44(96), 1275-1330.

Este estudio analiza la transformación urbana y cultural de São Paulo y su barrio de Liberdade —hogar de la mayor diáspora japonesa— a través de políticas públicas y eventos de temática japonesa como el Tanabata Matsuri, el Anime Friends y el Festival do Japão. Introduce el concepto de capital nipofílico, integrando las formas de capital de Bourdieu con las teorías de la disneyficación, las tácticas y los espacios de memoria. Basándose en la revisión de la literatura, el trabajo de campo y el análisis fotográfico, el artículo examina cómo la cultura pop japonesa, el turismo y la gentrificación están remodelando Liberdade, destacando su papel central en la identidad y la economía de São Paulo, posicionándolo como el principal centro japonés en América y reforzando su imagen global alineada con la marca de Japón, al tiempo que revela las tensiones subyacentes.

Palabras clave: cultura pop japonesa; espacios temáticos; eventos culturales; intervención urbana; economía simbólica.

JEL: O54, Z10, Z30, Z32.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in the global circulation of Japanese pop culture products and symbols, such as anime, manga, video games, cuisine, and visual aesthetics. This phenomenon is part of what scholars and Japanese policymakers have termed Cool Japan, a state-led strategy aimed at promoting Japan's cultural assets as vectors of geopolitical, economic, and symbolic influence (Condry, 2013; Galbraith, 2019; Japan's Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, 2024; Tamaki, 2019). In the Latin American context, Brazil—and more specifically the city of São Paulo—plays a central role in this process, not only because it is home to the largest Nikkei (Japanese descendent) community outside Japan (MOFA, 2023), but also because it has fostered an urban ecosystem conducive to the reception and local reconfiguration of these cultural expressions. Within this context, the *Liberdade* neighbourhood stands out as a key symbolic space for the consumption and thematisation of Japanese culture (Barone, 2021; Bocci, 2009; Nakagawa et al., 2011; Sakurai & Coelho, 2008).

This article examines the symbolic, urban, and economic mechanisms that frame the *Liberdade* neighbourhood as a themed territory associated with Japanese culture. Drawing from the intersection of urban anthropology, the symbolic economy, and cultural studies, it is argued that *Liberdade* cannot be understood merely as a traditional ethnic enclave, but rather as a space aesthetically and discursively reconstructed—one in which various forms of cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capital are activated, negotiated, and instrumentalised. To address this complexity, the article adopts the concept of Nipponophilic capital as its analytical axis—a hybrid form of economic, social, symbolic, and cultural capital accumulated by individuals, organisations, and territories that associate themselves—legitimately or strategically—with Japanese culture, its aesthetics, and values, leveraging the recent global ascent of the “Japan” brand and its corresponding pop culture (Brand Finance, 2023; Ipsos, 2022).

Methodologically, this study combines a narrative literature review with empirical observation and documentary analysis. Three annual events held in São Paulo were selected for their distinct ways of mobilising imaginaries regarding Japanese culture: Anime Friends, Tanabata Matsuri, and the Festival do Japão (Japan's Festival). The research draws on tourism and economic impact data produced by São Paulo Turismo (SPTuris), the municipal agency responsible for promoting tourism and events in the city. These data were complemented by fieldwork involving participant observation and photographic documentation of cultural practices. Nonetheless, several methodological limitations are acknowledged: the reliance on secondary data from public and private institutions with irregular collection intervals, the small number of events analysed, and the brief duration of field observation, limited to four days due to logistical constraints. Even so, the combination of methods and qualitative analysis enables the identification of relevant trends concerning urban thematisation (Gottdiener, 2001) and the circulation of

symbolic capital in São Paulo, which are giving rise to increasingly intense urban interventions.

In addition, the article seeks to engage critically with the debate on cultural clusters and the creative economy. Although *Liberdade* is frequently promoted as a cultural and ethnic hub and tourist destination in the city, its configuration does not meet the technical criteria to be classified as a cultural or creative cluster, as defined by Mommaas (2004), Stern and Seifert (2010), Coll-Martínez et al. (2019), and Liu et al. (2022). The neighbourhood is not included in the official “Creative District Sé/República” programme, despite the presence of cultural artifacts. These are not embedded in a formalised network geared towards endogenous cultural production, nor are there publicly available indicators demonstrating public or governmental interest in such a designation (Moretini, 2023). Instead, *Liberdade* functions as a themed and highly aestheticised consumption territory, whose image is extensively leveraged by both public and private actors as a commercial and touristic asset. The concept of Nipponophile capital is therefore proposed as an innovative analytical tool for interpreting this specificity.

Finally, the article outlines how *Liberdade* differs from other Japantowns (Japanese ethnic neighbourhoods) across the Americas, most of which are undergoing processes of erasure and/or displacement of Nikkei populations and their cultural traces, as seen in Los Angeles and San Francisco (Curwen, 2024; Jenks, 2008; Oda, 2012; Oda, 2014), or have become largely faded, as in the cases of Lima and Sacramento (Flores, 2005; Miyashiro Salas, 2019; Torres, 2022; Wildie, 2013).

In this regard, examining the *Liberdade* neighbourhood in São Paulo through the lens of Japanese cultural dissemination fills an important gap in the literature on ethnicity, urban culture, and the symbolic economy. *Liberdade*’s case challenges the erasure trends observed in other Japantowns, offering an analytical opportunity to understand how Nipponophile capital can be mobilised as a resource for urban branding, territorial identity formation, marketing, and the economy of thematisation.

METHODOLOGY

This analysis was developed using an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, encompassing fields such as human geography, urban studies, cultural studies, political economy, and tourism. This theoretical repertoire was constructed through a narrative literature review (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2016) of scholarly articles, news reports, government documents, and private sector publications, supported by the authors’ experience regarding the topics addressed—particularly within the field of East Asian studies—as well as a cultural photographic study conducted in the field to evoke memories related to the interventions, impacts, and dimensions of the events (Pereira & Nascimento, 2020).

Based on this theoretical construct, three events were selected according to criteria such as the number of participants, temporal alignment, and touristic relevance

grounded in symbolic and economic values associated with Japan: (i) Tanabata Matsuri, (ii) Anime Friends, and (iii) Festival do Japão. Although other events with strong pop culture appeal — both Western and Japanese — are held in São Paulo around the same period (such as Gamescom Latam, Retrocon, and Perifacon), their scales and cultural specificities differ significantly. The selected festivals focus explicitly on Japanese culture, each drawing more than 100,000 attendees per edition, and are consistently held during the month of July (Festival do Japão, 2023a; Portal Nippon Já, 2023; SPTuris, 2022a; SPTuris, 2022b; Yizima, 2023).

With that in mind, the fieldwork aimed to observe, document, and interpret the symbolic and material transformations of São Paulo's urban space during these large-scale cultural events centred on Japanese themes. The in-person portion of the field research was conducted between July 13 and 16, 2023, coinciding with the Anime Friends and Tanabata Matsuri festivals. The Festival do Japão was monitored remotely due to logistical constraints. When comparing the three events, the Festival do Japão presents the most conventional format, resembling that of a trade fair, where exhibitor organisations showcase their products alongside cultural performances aligned with the event's objectives. It is not a street festival nor is it designed to cater to a specific profile of visitor or consumer, and it is not held in an urban public space.

The fieldwork activities included:

- Systematic photographic documentation of urban and thematic interventions;
- Direct observation of audience behaviour, spatial appropriation, and the symbolic density of the environment;
- Field diary notes capturing qualitative impressions of the physical setting, cultural expressions, interactions among key stakeholders (merchants, associations, sponsors, public institutions), and crowd dynamics;
- Informal mapping of institutional presence, including actions undertaken by public authorities and private partners.

To guide the observation process, a structured protocol was developed based on five analytical dimensions: (i) aesthetic and architectural characteristics, (ii) material and symbolic uses of space, (iii) forms of capital mobilised (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic), (iv) cultural practices specific to each event, and (v) spatial markers of Japanese identity.

The materials collected were subsequently analysed in dialogue with the theoretical framework mobilised in the article —particularly the concepts of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital in Bourdieu (1986, 1989), the Disneyfication of space in Harvey (2005), strategy and tactics in Certeau (1998), and *lieu de mémoire* (memory space) in Nora (1993)— with the aim of identifying

how cultural events influence urban identity, the symbolic value of territory, and place-making processes.

As for the limitations of the methodological approach employed in this study, the short duration of in-person fieldwork (four days) is acknowledged. Additionally, the limited number of events analysed ($n = 3$) constrains the ability to draw broader inferences from a macroeconomic perspective on São Paulo's event tourism sector. Nevertheless, the objective of this research is not to establish statistical causal relationships, but rather to offer an exploratory interpretation of the role of cultural events in shaping a distinctive urban symbolic economy in São Paulo, which, notably, is transforming the city's branding and its corresponding tourism promotion strategy.

On the other hand, the quantitative data analysed in this study were drawn from documents provided by public agencies responsible for tourism in the city of São Paulo (SPTuris) and by private organisations. In particular, secondary data were used from in-person surveys conducted by SPTuris in 2022 with 1,210 respondents at the Festival do Japão and 1,222 respondents at Anime Friends. These surveys were administered randomly and include indicators such as consumer behaviour, visitor profiles, and satisfaction levels. While these data provide valuable insights, a significant methodological limitation lies in the absence of historical series, as the municipal government did not conduct comparable surveys in previous or subsequent years.

LIBERDADE AS A JAPANESE NEIGHBOURHOOD

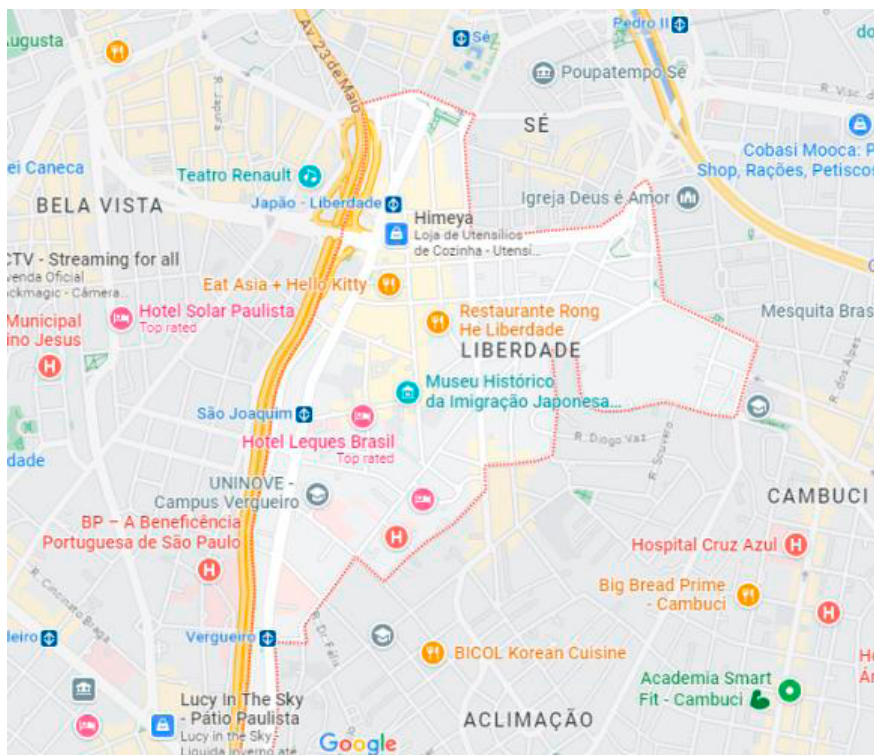
Initially, it is essential to territorially delineate the social space that constitutes the Liberdade neighbourhood, as indicated in Figure 1, with particular emphasis on the metro station “Japão-Liberdade” (translated as “Japan-Liberdade”) a controversial name change implemented in 2018 (Machado, 2018). This area is bounded by Praça João Mendes and Sé to the north, Avenida 23 de Maio to the west, the Cambuci neighbourhood to the east, and the Aclimação neighbourhood to the south.

Distinct from the Liberdade district —a much larger administrative area encompassing other neighbourhoods for municipal governance purposes— this study focuses specifically on the neighbourhood itself. It's within this smaller area that population flows and urban interventions occur, establishing its identity as the “Japanese neighbourhood”.

Before Liberdade became recognised in its material spatial substrate as São Paulo's Japantown, this territory, until the early 20th century, was predominantly marked by a Black population. For instance, Liberdade was home to the headquarters of the Frente Negra Brasileira (Brazilian Black Front) and the newspaper *A Voz da Raça*, as well as the first samba school in São Paulo, Lavapés (Barone, 2021). In fact, this occupation dates to the colonial period, during which the area's slave history was gradually erased architecturally, leaving only a few structures, such as the

Figure 1.

Map of neighbourhood of Liberdade



Source: Google Maps. Accessed on July 20, 2023.

Church of Santa Cruz das Almas dos Enforcados and the Chapel of Nossa Senhora dos Aflitos (Figure 2), which are in permanent dispute with the Japanese thematic of the neighbourhood. This dispute can be observed in Figure 2, where the chapel's road (Rua dos Aflitos) contrasts with the more recent Japanese pop culture theme of Liberdade. This chapel marks the site of the former slave cemetery and is an important site of memory and heritage for Black Brazilians.

This concept of territory aligns with the framework outlined by Souza (2013), which identifies territorial configurations as being shaped by power relations — how domination or influence prioritises a specific social space. With public and private urban interventions in the second half of the 20th century and various waves of immigration, particularly Japanese, the neighbourhood's ethnic makeup transformed. This shift was driven not only by demographic changes but also by the establishment of an architectural ensemble that creates a landscape experienced sensorially as Japanese (Souza, 2013). Thus, Liberdade has become a key neighbourhood for the Japanese-Brazilian community (Barone, 2021; Bocci, 2009).

Figure 2.

Chapel of Nossa Senhora dos Aflitos with the Japanese lights at the front (left), entrance of Rua dos Aflitos, highlighting how the Japanese pop culture and themed *Liberdade* are downplaying the aspect of the historical chapel (right) (July 16, 2023)



It is important to highlight that *Liberdade* represents a rare case among the so-called “Japantowns” in the Americas, where Japanese cultural heritage has not only been preserved throughout the 20th century but has also been continuously reinforced in the 21st century. The neighbourhood maintains an active circulation of audiences, practices, and events that renew its symbolic Japanese identity, even as this dynamism is shaped by political disputes, commodification, and urban tensions. Despite its contradictions, this symbolic and economic vitality is one of the key reasons why the São Paulo city government has been promoting the city as the “Japanese hub of the Americas” —a strategic positioning that sets it apart from other contexts across the continent.

In particular, following the end of large-scale migratory flows from Japan, many Japantowns across the Americas have experienced processes of decline or reconfiguration. Key contributing factors include historical erasure, political persecution, the loss of Nikkei population density, urban de-characterisation, and gentrification —phenomena that, to varying degrees, have dispersed ethnic communities and weakened the cultural role of these neighbourhoods.

This is exemplified by the Japantowns of San Francisco and Los Angeles, which endured intense government repression during the 1940s and 1950s, in the context of and following World War II, including forced removals, internment, and property confiscation. Today, both these neighbourhoods face intense real estate speculation, contributing to the ongoing closure of traditional establishments and the erosion of their historical and cultural memory (Jenks, 2008; Oda, 2012; Oda, 2014). In the 2000 census, for example, only 11% of residents in San Francisco's Japantown identified as ethnically Japanese, while the neighbouring Chinatown retained a population that was approximately 90% of Chinese origin (Oda, 2012). Since the 1990s, campaigns such as "Save Japantown" have attempted to counteract this cultural disappearance (Oda, 2012), culminating in the neighbourhood's designation in 2018 as one of San Francisco's creative districts. This designation aimed to support cultural preservation, urban renewal, and tourism promotion — though with limited impact (Mayor's Office of Housing and Community Development, 2022; Palacios, 2024).

In Los Angeles, the Little Tokyo neighbourhood was included in 2024 on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's list of "America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places," after recording the closure of more than 50 historic businesses between 2008 and 2023 (Curwen, 2024; Higashiyama, 2025). In response, community organisations have been developing resistance strategies —such as affordable housing projects, heritage preservation funds, and cultural promotion initiatives— though these efforts face significant structural limitations (Johnston, 2024). Despite the ongoing processes of erasure, demolition, and gentrification, the area remains one of Los Angeles' leading tourist destinations, attracting over 10 million visitors annually, and has increasingly turned to contemporary Japanese pop culture in an attempt of symbolic and economic revitalisation (Johnston, 2024).

Other contexts reveal an even more severe process of erasure. In Lima, the former Japantown in the Barrios Altos district was subjected to state policies of repression, expulsion, and denial of citizenship between the 1930s and 1950s, which led to the dispersal of the Japanese-Peruvian community and secondary migrations to the United States and Japan (Flores, 2005; Miyashiro Salas, 2019; Torres, 2022). Similarly, Sacramento's Japantown, located in the capital of California, was entirely dismantled in the postwar period due to racial tensions and exclusionary urban planning (Wildie, 2013).

In light of these examples, the trajectory of São Paulo's Liberdade neighbourhood stands out as a significant exception. In contrast to the cultural erosion observed in many other Nikkei enclaves across the Americas, Liberdade underwent a process of symbolic thematisation that transformed it into a cultural reference point for Japanese identity nationally. This transformation was neither immediate nor spontaneous. Between the 1950s and 1970s, Liberdade was regarded by local authorities merely as an ethnic commercial centre, receiving little political attention or structural investment —unlike the persecution experienced by other Japantowns in the Americas. The transformation of this social space began in 1974, when the

Liberdade Merchants Association (ACAL) —formed primarily by Japanese-Brazilians— collaborated with the São Paulo City Hall to implement the so-called “Plan for the Orientalisation of Liberdade” (Bocci, 2009). The objective was clear: to reconfigure the neighbourhood visually and symbolically as a “Little Tokyo” or officially recognised Japantown through the adoption of architectural elements, themed signage, and incentives for cultural tourism.

Following these reforms, Liberdade became consolidated in the city’s collective imagination as São Paulo’s primary Japanese space, crystallising a symbolic transformation that had begun in the 1940s with the growing institutional and commercial presence of the Japanese Brazilian community in the area. Therefore, unlike other Japantowns that underwent processes of erasure, persecution, community fragmentation, or symbolic reconfiguration, the Liberdade neighbourhood emerged as a unique case of continuity and expansion.

Figure 3.

Osaka City Torii Overpass (left), and facade of shops characterised architecturally as Japanese (right) – (July 16, 2023)



Source: Authors, Magalhães (2021), Mendes (2023).

In this context of symbolic transformation and urban thematisation, various interventions have been carried out from the 1970s to the present day, including the installation of Japanese-style lanterns replacing traditional streetlights, the placement of Japanese heraldry, and the construction of the Torii gate on Viaduto Cidade de Osaka, which has become a city landmark, as illustrated in Figure 3 (Barone, 2021; Bocci, 2009; Nakagawa et al., 2011). These transformations of the material spatial substrate (Souza, 2013) —understood here as substantive and positional changes rationally designed to alter the spatial configuration— include elements such as Livraria Sol (Sol Bookshop), the Japanese Immigration Museum, Praça da Liberdade (Liberdade Square), the Ginza Hotel/Condominium (named after a Tokyo neighbourhood), and the Oriental Garden. Collectively, these features further cement Liberdade as the territory described above.

In 2008, to commemorate the centenary of Japanese immigration to Brazil, the São Paulo municipal government launched the “Emperor’s Path” project (Nakagawa et al., 2011). This project included renovations to the neighbourhood’s public walkways and green spaces, the installation of additional Japanese Torii gates, and, most notably, the refurbishment of building and storefront façades to adopt a more distinctly “Japanese” character. The project was sponsored by Bradesco Bank, which even redesigned its own façade, as illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4.

Bradesco Bank in Liberdade: Before (2004) and After (2011)



Source: Nakagawa et al. (2011) and Du@rt (2011).

All these interventions have consolidated the perception and memory among São Paulo residents and Brazilians that Liberdade is a territory under Japanese influence, endowing it with symbolic capital. As a thematic neighbourhood with a high influx of tourists, it has become one of the main attractions in the São Paulo City Tourist Guide, thereby boosting the economic capital circulating in the area, particularly in the service sector, while highlighting the cultural confluence between Brazil and Japan. This perception is embraced by local merchants, even those without Japanese origins, as the neighbourhood also hosts other ethnic presences. These merchants sell products associated with both “traditional” and “pop” Japanese culture

and design their façades and storefronts with decorations that reinforce this collective imagination. These shops play a crucial role in shaping the neighbourhood's Nipponophilic identity (Santos & Cavenaghi, 2018; Santos, 2017).

In light of these elements, it is worth highlighting the critical analysis developed by Nakagawa et al. (2011), who introduce the concepts of *orientalisation* (“*orientalização*”) and *urban orientalism* (“*orientalidade*”) to explain the duality between the past and present of the Liberdade neighbourhood. According to the authors, *orientalism* represents the authentic cultural heritage built by Japanese immigrants and their descendants — including their businesses, traditions, and histories of resistance. In contrast, *orientalisation* refers to the more recent market-driven appropriation of this space (post-1974), in which cultural symbols and practices are re-signified as “made in Japan” commodities, detached from their original historical contexts and instrumentalised for economic purposes. A notable example highlighted by Nakagawa et al. (2011) is the torii located at the Cidade de Osaka overpass, depicted in Figure 3. In Japan, toriis are traditionally erected in sacred or religious sites, such as shrines, or in places marking the transition between the physical and spiritual realms. In Liberdade, however, they were constructed removed from their original spiritual context. Thus, this social space has increasingly been transformed into a stage for stereotyped and/or themed representations, where the indiscriminate reproduction of Japanese cultural icons often neglects the living memory of the Japanese Brazilian community that has fundamentally shaped the neighbourhood's identity.

Nakagawa et al. (2011) further emphasise that this process of *orientalisation* in Liberdade is not merely a matter of landscape transformation, but rather a complex phenomenon of cultural re-signification. The authors argue that the commodified appropriation of the Japanese imaginary gives rise to a form of “consumption Japan” — a superficial representation that privileges media-driven stereotypes (such as those found in anime and manga) at the expense of traditional cultural expressions maintained by the Japanese Brazilian community. This phenomenon has also been noted by Iwabuchi (2002), Condry (2013), Santos (2017), Diniz et al. (2022), and Ferreira et al. (2022), who point out that exported Japanese pop culture does not necessarily reflect the real Japan, but rather an artificial construct designed for mass consumption. This dynamic creates a persistent tension between, on the one hand, long-standing establishments from the 1940s to 1960s that preserve Nippon-centred cultural practices (such as stores selling tea ceremony utensils or bookstores specialising in Japanese literature), and, on the other hand, newer businesses that market a generic, decontextualised “Japaneseness” aimed at mass tourism. Interestingly, this process of *orientalisation* produces a paradox: while it consolidates the neighbourhood's image as a stronghold of Japanese culture, it simultaneously dilutes the most ancestral elements of that culture through its market-driven spectacularisation (Nakagawa et al., 2011).

The convergence of these processes has allowed for the establishment of a distinct “proper place” (Certeau, 1998), a site of enunciation where strategies—elaborations

based on rational projections of the forces acting within a given field—are defined for sustained capitalisation. In this context, the concept of monopolistic rent of space (Harvey, 2005) becomes pertinent. This concept describes how certain social spaces gain exponential increments in their use value due to specific characteristics that make them particularly attractive for monetary activities. For this article, the notion holds particular relevance by emphasising that capital accumulation is not limited to the productive aspects of the economy but is also heavily influenced by the strategic control of space through the proper place. This phenomenon manifests in urban and regional areas that become centres of wealth accumulation due to their central location, access to natural resources, developed infrastructure, or concentration of economic activities crucial to this purpose (Harvey, 2005).

Another concept proposed by Harvey (2005) adopted in this article is “landmarks of distinction”, which pertains to the material spatial substrate, specifically the built environment, with effects on modifying the possibilities of accruing economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capitals. This operation is shaped by concrete interventions in buildings with iconic characteristics, architectural developments, and gentrification policies. Such a space becomes aspirational, attracting demand not only for properties but also for a sense of belonging to a culturally and economically distinct collective, which becomes frequented and desired (Harvey, 2005). It is important to highlight that the concept of landmarks of distinction intersects with the concept of “places of memory” proposed by Nora (1993), activating the field of collective memory. In the process of reconfiguring the economic matrix of a social space, the strong inclusion of its symbolic elements also enhances local productive sectors by amplifying its use value through the collective memory that permeates the social space and the social relations established there (Ortiz, 1994).

Thus, the concept of symbolic economy, as discussed by Farias (2011), among others, represents a regime of practices where economy and culture act as structural and structuring elements of the dynamics of a public sphere capable of making values visible and rendering the invisible—emotions, affections, knowledge, and so on—tangible. This sphere is focused on the self-images of individuals, groups, and spaces in the exchange of information technologically made available. It allows for the construction of a systemic approach where the framework of information and communication, data, and indicators point to the robustness of certain productive forces, goods, and societal relations and hierarchies. This necessitates the formulation of public policies for tourism and creative economies, among others, to attract a variety of productive sectors that start with symbolic capital, projecting interventions in other social spaces beyond the place itself (in this case, the Liberdade neighbourhood).

Another aspect that involves the use of the space in question is the process of touristification of Liberdade as a Japanese-themed neighbourhood, which is already consolidated in the popular imagination and widely promoted. It is important to emphasise that the public administration of the city of São Paulo increasingly relies on the reproduction of this constructed fantasy of a cultural heritage that

does indeed exist and was built by an immigrant ethnic community, but is also highly induced artificially (Cavenaghi, 2018; Santos, 2017). To recognise this process, we turn to Barreto (2007), who defines tourism, within the field of symbolic economy, as a product of such magnitude that presupposes the existence of a contingent of people, called tourists, who travel outside their usual place of residence for a period of time to enjoy a series of services that are typically not utilised in their daily existence. Given the impossibility demonstrated by Barreto (2007) of defining tourism through more rigid boundary conditions, the assertion presented allows us to think about this process in the *Liberdade* neighbourhood, even enabling the inclusion of the approach known as micro-tourism (Zhao, 2022). This theoretical extension places all external movement towards the neighbourhood under the category of tourism, aligning with the goals of the urban interventions promoted in this social space.

More specifically, given the concentration of interventions in the material spatial substrate of the *Liberdade* neighbourhood to thematise it as a Japanese neighbourhood, it is essential to incorporate into the theoretical framework of this work the concept of “Disneyfication” (Harvey, 2005), which refers to the transformation of urban spaces into highly thematic environments focused on entertainment, similar to Disney theme parks, creating spaces with strong appeal for consumption. Disneyfied areas ultimately become destinations, generating excessive demand for properties and infrastructure, which, in turn, reinforces the monopolistic rent of the space. This includes micro-tourism, where local residents begin to view the neighbourhood they live in through a touristified lens, distinguishing it from mere places for random strolls or visits (Barreto, 2007). Due to the strong appeal to consumption generated in these areas, Disneyfication reveals a standardised process of entertainment, experienced with rising income levels in relation to the time spent and the investment required for such standardised adjustments (Matusitz & Palermo, 2014). In a tourism context, these areas become particularly valuable due to the influx of visitors. The combination of demand for properties and the construction of landmarks of distinction in Disneyfied areas contributes to the creation of a gentrifying cycle (Gottdiener, 2001; Harvey, 2005), where low-income communities are displaced to make way for commercial and tourist activities. In the case of the *Liberdade* neighbourhood, the progressive displacement of the Black population occurred, but not without resistance, continually fueled by public and private agents interested in the gentrification process.

Additionally, despite its strong symbolic charge and visual association with Japanese culture, the *Liberdade* neighbourhood cannot be classified as a cultural cluster in the strict sense proposed by urban and cultural policy frameworks. The concept of a cultural cluster is grounded in the idea of economic and industrial clusters, which entails the geographic concentration of interconnected enterprises, educational institutions, and cultural actors within a shared social space — facilitating collaboration, innovation, and development in the cultural sector, as well as urban renewal in neglected areas and the stimulation of creative

economy segments (Coll-Martínez et al., 2019; Fung & Erni, 2013; Liu et al., 2022; Mommaas, 2004; Stern & Seifert, 2010; Wang, 2012; White & Xu, 2012). The development of such cultural hubs typically involves government incentives, investments in specialised infrastructure, and the attraction of both local and international creative industries, fostering knowledge exchange and enhancing local cultural production.

The case of Liberdade also diverges significantly from models of culture-led urban regeneration. According to Chiu et al. (2019), Vassalli (2020), and Kanai and Ortega-Alcázar (2009), culture-led urban regeneration refers to the revitalisation of degraded urban areas through culture as a central axis, combining heritage preservation, economic dynamisation, and the activation of creative uses of space. This strategy often entails the adaptive reuse of underutilised historic buildings, transforming them into cultural and commercial hubs without completely stripping them of their original identity —though such efforts have been critiqued for their excessive commodification and limited community participation, as in the case of the Old House Cultural Movement in Taipei (Chiu et al., 2019).

This phenomenon, however, does not apply to the case of Liberdade in São Paulo. While culture-led urban regeneration typically arises in contexts of abandonment and decay, Liberdade has always maintained its status as a commercially active and densely populated neighbourhood. As such, recent interventions —such as orientalist thematisation, the installation of decorative elements (e.g., red lanterns), and the proliferation of pop culture tourism-oriented establishments— assume a performative rather than revitalising character. In this sense, what is occurring is not a process of regeneration, but rather the amplification of an existing thematic narrative, aimed at reinforcing tourism and consumption, with this connection not fully interconnected with the history and experience of the community residing there in the last decades (Nakagawa et al., 2011).

Moreover, the ongoing process in Liberdade cannot be fully compared to other urban renewal experiments in Latin America, such as Puerto Madero in Buenos Aires (Guevara, 2013), Monterrey (Rodríguez et al., 2020), or Medellín's culture parks (Franco, 2015), nor even to the aforementioned Japantown in San Francisco (Palacios, 2024). Unlike those cases, the transformation in Liberdade does not involve the revitalisation of degraded urban areas, preservation, the mitigation of urban violence, or the expansion of democratic access to cultural facilities and more equitable income distribution (Kanai & Ortega-Alcázar, 2009; Vassalli, 2020). Rather, it involves the thematisation and reinforcement of an already present cultural signifier in a neighbourhood that has been commercially vibrant and heavily frequented since the 1950s, with a robust and politically influential local merchants' association active since the 1970s (Bocci, 2009; Nakagawa et al., 2011). As such, the Liberdade case aligns more closely with the concept of Disneyfication (Harvey, 2005).

The most relevant parallel between these Latin American cases and the *Liberdade* neighbourhood lies in the promotion of tourism and the rebranding of neighbourhoods and cities resulting from these initiatives, which have helped reshape local urban imaginaries by replacing former identities with that of “creative cities” (Franco, 2015; Vassalli, 2020). However, in *Liberdade*’s case, this transformation is largely confined to an associative branding strategy linking Japanese culture to the city of São Paulo. It therefore aligns more closely with the concept of cultural marketing (Ramírez, 2007), akin to the cases of historic immigrant-founded towns in Brazil that have undergone processes of thematisation for tourism purposes, such as Gramado, Penedo, and Holambra (Azambuja & Mecca, 2017; Fagerlande, 2014; Fagerlande, 2015).

Therefore, although the *Liberdade* neighbourhood fulfils some of the criteria associated with cultural clusters or culture-led urban regeneration —such as being a themed space, undergoing limited revitalisation, stimulating tourism, and containing cultural artifacts— it does not meet the requirements to be formally classified under either category. The absence of a coherent public policy aimed at integration, cultural mapping, and the promotion of local cultural production restricts the neighbourhood’s function primarily to the commercial trade of goods and services, although it houses a significant amount of cultural equipment, such as one cinema (Cinema Sato) —specialised in East Asian films and commonly used as the venue for Japanese film premieres in Brazil; one museum (Historical Museum of Japanese Immigration in Brazil); three cultural centres (Centro Cultural São Paulo – CCSP, Centro Cultural Hiroshima do Brasil, and Espaço Cultural Bunkyo); one small public park (Jardim Oriental da *Liberdade*); four theatres (Teatro *Liberdade*, Teatro FECAP, Teatro Santo Agostinho, and the CCSP theatre); one major public square for events (Praça da *Liberdade*); and a new large-scale event venue currently under construction (Esplanada Oriental). Additionally, the neighbourhood is home to various educational and cultural businesses, including bookstores specialising in Japanese language and culture (Livraria Sol and Livraria Fonomag), as well as a range of Japanese language schools. That said, public interventions to date have largely focused on thematising the neighbourhood, strengthening the city’s branding, promoting street-level commerce, and developing tourist attractions —positioning *Liberdade* as a centre for cultural consumption and themed tourism, rather than as an integrated cultural production ecosystem.

In addition to all the considerations previously discussed, it is also important to note that the *Liberdade* neighbourhood has not been designated by the São Paulo city government as eligible to be classified as a district of cultural and creative production under the “Creative District” programme. This initiative is part of the city’s 2014 Strategic Master Plan, which aims to recognise and support areas with a high density of cultural producers, creative entrepreneurs, and cultural infrastructure (Moretini, 2023).

However, it is necessary to understand how the São Paulo municipal government defines “Creative Districts” and “Creative Economy Hubs.” In the Strategic Mas-

ter Plan of the Municipality of São Paulo (Prefeitura de São Paulo, 2014), the formation of Creative Economy Hubs is framed as part of a broader project to “expand the protection, articulation, and revitalisation of cultural, affective, and symbolic spaces of great importance to the memory, identity, and cultural life of São Paulo’s residents” (Prefeitura de São Paulo, 2014, p. 103). In this document, creative hubs are described as:

(...) territories designated for the promotion and development of economic activities that constitute the creative economy, understood as the cycle of creation, production, and distribution of tangible or intangible goods and services that use creativity, skill, and the talent of individuals or groups as primary inputs. These are knowledge-based economic activities capable of generating wealth, creating employment, and distributing income. (Author’s translation).

In this plan, only one creative hub is formally outlined, encompassing the neighbourhoods of Sé and República, explicitly excluding the Liberdade neighbourhood. The implementation of this hub has been fraught with a series of challenges, which are thoroughly examined by Moretini (2023). At no point in the plan—not even within the sections concerning cultural policy—is Liberdade mentioned. Furthermore, the document that outlines the intermediate revision of the Strategic Master Plan of the Municipality of São Paulo (Prefeitura de São Paulo, 2023) makes no reference to creative hubs or to the Liberdade neighbourhood whatsoever.

In the case of the Municipal Cultural Plan of São Paulo (SMC, 2016), it adopts a different perspective, acknowledging the pre-existence of creative territories (p. 223), which are:

“Neighbourhoods, cities, or regions that possess creative cultural potential capable of promoting integral and sustainable development by combining the preservation and promotion of their cultural and environmental values.” (Author’s translation).

We consider this conceptualisation to be shallow, particularly given that it is part of a sector-specific cultural plan, thereby reinforcing our hypothesis that the municipal government lacks effective planning for any constructed social space within the domain of the creative economy. Once again, the Liberdade neighbourhood is not mentioned at any point.

Finally, in the Municipal Economic Development Plan (Prefeitura de São Paulo, 2022), there are only brief references to the project for the formation of cultural districts (a term that has replaced the earlier “creative hubs” [*polos criativos*]), understood as part of a strategy to implement “an effective territorial economic activation policy, with the targeted identification of sectors and territories that already present potentialities” (Prefeitura de São Paulo, 2022, p. 132). However,

the plan lacks further elaboration on which specific spaces would undergo such transformation, as well as the criteria and procedures for implementation. It is worth noting that this plan does propose an increase in the number of cultural districts to be established—from one in the Strategic Master Plan of the Municipality of São Paulo (Prefeitura de São Paulo, 2014) to four—but without specifying where or how these districts would be configured.

Based on the work of Moretini (2023), it is understood that the Liberdade neighbourhood was neither mentioned nor considered by policymakers as a potential candidate for designation as a Creative District. This exclusion is attributed both to a lack of public sector interest—given that the possibility was not brought to public consultation—and to the limited official criteria established by the São Paulo city government, which prioritised the urban revitalisation of degraded areas already containing numerous active or deactivated cultural assets. Furthermore, Liberdade does not meet the parameters of this programme, as it is already a densely populated neighbourhood with substantial existing infrastructure, active cultural institutions, and a strong commercial profile. From the perspective of municipal authorities, Liberdade is perceived more as a tourist attraction and commercial zone than as a cultural production hub.

It can thus be affirmed that successive municipal administrations in São Paulo have shown little interest in mapping and officially establishing creative and cultural spaces across the city, or in fostering large-scale cultural production. In fact, there exists a cultural informational vacuum not only in Liberdade but throughout São Paulo when it comes to urban cultural spaces. Current initiatives are limited in scope, such as the Creative District programme, which was applied only in the Sé and República neighbourhoods and yielded unsatisfactory outcomes in terms of urban renewal, despite the relocation of cultural agents and producers to these areas (Moretini, 2023).

Crucial data—such as the number of cultural agents including artists, educators, and cultural producers by neighbourhood, which could serve as a basis for calculating the Cultural Asset Index (CAI), a key indicator of a region's cultural vitality (Stern & Seifert, 2010)—are entirely lacking for Liberdade. Such data have been partially mapped only for the Sé and República neighbourhoods, not for the city of São Paulo as a whole. Consequently, under the current conditions, it is not possible to draw any data-driven inferences regarding Liberdade's cultural infrastructure due to the absence of reliable quantitative information.

This lack of information and absence of successful case studies has resulted in São Paulo being excluded from the list of Brazilian Creative Cities recognised by UNESCO—unlike Brasília, Curitiba, Fortaleza, Belém, Paraty, Florianópolis, Belo Horizonte, João Pessoa, Campina Grande, Santos, Salvador, Recife, and Rio de Janeiro. In São Paulo, cultural interventions have been largely limited to the construction and renovation of cultural facilities that are disconnected from one another and from the socio-cultural realities of their respective neighbourhoods,

as well as to changes in zoning regulations and urban building codes (Moretini, 2023). This distinction is critical to understanding the limitations of São Paulo's position within the symbolic economy. While it is a space marked by aestheticisation and commodification, it is not structurally integrated into broader networks of creative labour, cultural policy, or long-term development, despite its latent potential for such integration.

Therefore, in the end, rather than functioning as a living ecosystem of artistic production, the Liberdade neighbourhood primarily operates as a themed commercial and tourist zone, where symbols of Japanese culture and its Nikkei community are mobilised for purposes of spectacle, consumption, and marketing.

RISE OF RECENT JAPANESE POP CULTURE AND ITS SPECIALISATION IN THE CITY OF SÃO PAULO

Japanese pop culture (J-Pop, manga, anime, VTubers, and games, among other products supported technologically by digital devices) began to be widely exported to the West from the 1990s onwards (Diniz et al., 2022; Ferreira et al., 2022; Iwabuchi, 2002; Regis et al., 2024), creating a new and distinct Western fan culture derived from Japan's otaku fan culture. This shift is reflected in the transformation of the symbolic capital associated with the consumption of this fan culture. In Japan, the term "otaku" originally refers to individuals deeply immersed in their hobbies, such as anime, games, and manga. In the West, however, the symbolic capital of this identity has evolved to denote simply a fan and consumer of Japanese pop culture (Azuma, 2009; Condry, 2013; Diniz et al., 2022; Ferreira et al., 2022; Galbraith, 2019; Iwabuchi, 2002; Regis et al., 2024; Santos, 2017). In Brazil, this fan culture has been reinterpreted, giving rise to a socially dynamic otaku culture in both physical and digital social spaces, which are distinct from its original Japanese counterpart (Monte, 2024; Santos, 2017). In particular, in the physical realm, the Liberdade neighbourhood has become the locus of socialisation and belonging for individuals connected to otaku culture in Brazil.

In this commercial and consumer context, Liberdade has emerged as a Latin American reference point for official and unofficial Japanese pop culture products, as illustrated in Figure 5. A significant influx of people visits the neighbourhood to socialise within their otaku tribes, shop for a variety of items, and seek Japanese cultural entertainment, making it a space for gathering, consumption, and socialisation. Throughout the year, this movement of people and consumption remains steady. However, during June and July, this flow intensifies due to the occurrence of major events, in terms of audience size, related to Japanese culture. Even when these events are not directly hosted in Liberdade, the neighbourhood experiences an increase in visitor activity as it becomes incorporated into tourist itineraries, regardless of their scale.

Figure 5.

Japanese pop culture products for sale in Liberdade: Dakimakuras (character body pillows) (left), and action figures (right) – (July 16, 2023)



To illustrate the commercial and consumer capacity of this expanding system, which began establishing itself as a symbolic economic framework in the early 21st century, by 2005, the revenue generated through licensing and marketing characters across other media and products (such as games, cosmetics, toys, art, action figures, and more) was ten times greater than that from the serialisation of anime itself (Condry, 2013), and this logic is currently being further reinforced by the increasing implementation of new products targeting otaku consumers, as well as by the growing use of UGC (User Generated Content) strategies surrounding their favourite franchises (Regis *et al.*, 2024), which takes advantage of fans' need for more narratives and cultural media to consume a variety of their favourite works, creating a participatory culture in which fans generate much of this unofficial parallel content derived from the original Japanese media, stimulating strong emotional connections with the media and its characters (Azuma, 2009; Diniz *et al.*, 2022; Galbraith, 2019; Regis *et al.*, 2024).

Thus, when it comes to street commerce, the Liberdade neighbourhood has seen notable growth in the opening of new franchises and stores specialising in products and experiences linked to Japanese pop culture. This trend includes both major retail chains specialising in anime-related merchandise, such as Akiba Station, which operates two locations in the neighbourhood, one of them spread across three floors, and official Japanese franchises that have chosen Liberdade as either their unique location in the Americas or their point of entry into the continent. Notable examples include the themed restaurants East Asia Hello Kitty and

Hello Kitty and Friends 2D, the only official Hello Kitty establishments in Latin America (Maria, 2023); the Cardcaptor Sakura Café, the only official venue dedicated to the franchise outside Japan (Garcia, 2025); and the Maid Café Chest of Wonders, which replicates the aesthetic and service style of Akihabara's maid cafés in Tokyo (Macedo, 2022), with Akihabara being recognised as the epicentre of Japanese otaku culture (Galbraith, 2019), explaining the inspiration of these stores. International franchises have also adapted to the neighbourhood's unique cultural landscape, as in the case of Liberdade's McDonald's (CNN Brasil, 2023a). These establishments and their themed designs are illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 6.

Restaurant Hello Kitty and Friends 2d, (b) Restaurant East Asia Hello Kitty, (c) Maid Café Chest of Wonders, (d) McDonald's Liberdade, (e) otaku culture store Akiba Station, (f) Café Cardcaptor Sakura



Source: (a) Maria (2023), (b) Authors (July 16, 2023), (c) Chestmaids (2024), (d) CNN Brasil (2023a), (e) Akiba Station (n/d), (f) Garcia (2025) and Anjos (2025).

These initiatives reveal the strong influence of Akihabara on Liberdade, through the importation of practices, aesthetics, and experiences that contribute to the increasing thematisation of the urban space —bringing it closer to the logic of Disneyfication (Harvey, 2005). It is also noteworthy that some of these franchises actively participate in the three events analysed in this study, thereby strengthening their ties to the neighbourhood's cultural and commercial ecosystem.

Analysing Japanese exports, in 2014, licensing and character merchandising revenues were 450% higher than revenues from animation licensing and distribution—\$900 million compared to \$200 million, respectively (METI, 2016). Domestically, in 2021, the top 100 characters in official merchandise generated total revenue of ¥663.1 billion (\$4.42 billion), while combined revenue from anime distribution across streaming platforms (¥154.3 billion or \$1.03 billion), physical media (¥66.2 billion or \$0.44 billion), cinema (¥60.2 billion or \$0.40 billion), and television (¥90.6 billion or \$0.60 billion) totalled ¥371.6 billion (\$2.47 billion) (AJA, 2023). In other words, revenue from merchandise tied to the most popular characters was 78% higher than revenue from the serialisation of the animation itself. Other recent data indicated that more than 50% of all Netflix users in the world watch Japanese anime regularly, with the platform investing more in licensing, production, localisation (dubbing) and distribution for more countries, including Brazil (Brzeski, 2025). Recently Disney announced at Anime Friends 2025 that they are investing in more anime for their catalogues in Brazil too, being the first time Disney is represented in the major anime event in Brazil (Pontes, 2025). These actions are in concordance with the information that was highlighted by Urbano and Araujo (2021) and Monte (2024), namely that the streaming services were essential to popularisation and massification of anime and Japanese pop culture in Brazil in the last 10 years, contributing to new cultural references for the youth.

Finally, further evidence of São Paulo's growing status as a consumer hub and event centre for Japanese pop culture is the increasingly frequent presence of major J-pop (Japanese pop) and J-rock (Japanese rock) concerts in the city over the past three years. Japanese bands and artists such as RADWIMPS, Babymetal, One Ok Rock, Flow, Sabbath, Acid Mothers Temple, and more recently the singer Ado have either performed or announced performances in São Paulo between 2023 and 2025 alone—a remarkable influx of Japanese artists that was rare in the previous decade, when appearances were sporadic at best.

It is worth noting that the international success of J-pop has been explicitly incorporated as an official objective in the most recent development plan of the Japanese government's Cool Japan policy (Japan's Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, 2024), framing this phenomenon as part of a broader, integrated soft power strategy. Another relevant point is that many of these concerts are sponsored and organised by the anime streaming platform Crunchyroll, which has partnered on performances such as those by RADWIMPS and Ado (Figure 7) (Crunchyroll, 2024a; Crunchyroll, 2024b). This reinforces the indication of a strong alliance

between global streaming companies and Japanese media and music industries in advancing this form of musical consumption in Brazil.

Figure 7.

Big shows of Japanese J-pop and J-rock artists in São Paulo between 2024 and 2025: Babymetal in 2024 (at left), RADWIMPS in 2024 (at centre), and Ado in 2025 (at right)



Source: EAlessan (2024); Bunkyo (2024); Crunchyroll (2024b).

THE STRENGTH OF EVENTS IN THE DIRECT AND INDIRECT TRANSFORMATIONS OF SOCIAL SPACE IN SÃO PAULO

Events function as strategic devices in the production of symbolic, cultural, and territorial value in contemporary cities. According to Getz (2008) and Attanasi et al. (2013), they act as engines of visibility and differentiation, capable of attracting temporary flows of people, reinforcing collective identities, and enhancing the recognition of a location as a tourist destination. In the case of São Paulo, the Festival do Japão, Tanabata Matsuri, and Anime Friends have become major fixtures on the city's annual cultural calendar, promoted by both public and private entities not only as cultural celebrations but also as tourism assets and tools for urban branding. Their high levels of attendance—including visitors from outside the city—and their direct and indirect economic impacts, such as increased local consumption and the activation of public and private spaces, attest to their strategic importance.

These three events can be classified as major events in the terms proposed by Oklobdžija (2015), as they exhibit characteristics such as large-scale attendance (over 100,000 people), substantial media coverage, institutional and logistical support from the state, and significant impacts on regional tourism. More than isolated occurrences, they mobilise networks of cultural production, fandoms, institutions, and transnational corporations—especially those connected to the otaku economy and the Cool Japan policy (Galbraith, 2019; Regis et al., 2024). In this context, São Paulo projects itself as a multicultural centre and asserts its position as the “Japanese hub of the Americas,” inserting itself into global circuits of circulation

for Japanese cultural goods and symbols. Here, Japanese culture moves beyond a purely ethnic or identity-based function and becomes an economic, political, social, and symbolic resource.

That said, increasingly globalised Japanese pop culture events (Severino et al., 2024) have become multifunctional spaces that articulate cultural production, tourism, and sociability. Scholars such as Yamato (2016), Simon et al. (2016), Severino and Silva (2023), Diniz et al. (2023), Severino et al. (2024), and Regis et al. (2024) argue that these events differ from other forms of tourism by offering experiences that go beyond immediate entertainment. They create affective environments highly tailored to the tastes, niches, and sub-niches within fan communities—ranging from fans of specific anime and manga to cosplayers and cosmakers (Barboza & Da Silva, 2013), VTubers (Virtual YouTubers), J-games, Otome Games, J-pop, J-rock, and Japanese language enthusiasts. These experiences are shaped by collective narratives, symbolic consumption, and participatory practices such as cosplay, fanart, and performance, which transform attendees into co-authors of the touristic experience. In this context, Japanese pop culture functions as a mediator of emotional bonds and a sense of belonging to transnational communities, fostering networks of recurrent and loyal tourism. The logic of consumption at these events extends beyond the mere acquisition of goods—it involves the sharing of values, lifestyles, and hybrid identities, thereby positioning such festivals within a cultural economy operating at the intersection of symbolic, affective, market-driven, and epistemic dimensions.

Investigating anime and gaming events in Malaysia, Yamato (2016) identifies a ritualistic and performative character, in which audience participation entails subjective and relational transformations. These events are experienced as spaces where conventional norms are suspended and values such as authenticity, aesthetic freedom, and community become central. This perspective is further developed by Severino et al. (2024), who understand Japanese pop culture events as platforms for cultural hybridisation and territorial activation—promoting not only consumption but also the symbolic re-signification of urban spaces. Embedded within soft power strategies linked to Japanese cultural diplomacy, these events contribute to the global expansion of the Cool Japan imaginary, anchoring identity meanings in local urban contexts.

From a tourism studies standpoint, these practices signal a theoretical shift from mass tourism to models of experiential, emotional, and co-produced tourism, in which visitors cease to be mere spectators and instead become active agents in the construction of meaning for the territories and events they attend (Severino & Silva, 2023; Severino et al., 2024; Simon et al., 2016; Yamato, 2016). This is particularly evident in one of the main attractions of anime conventions such as Anime Friends: The Artist's Alley, where independent artists sell a variety of fan-created artworks based on their favourite works to a wide public.

From a perspective that extends beyond the confines of the events themselves and their promotional functions, these festivals also play an active role in the thematisation of urban space. By performatively staging aesthetic elements of Japanese culture — such as lanterns, traditional costumes, food, music, and ritual practices — they construct a visual imaginary that contributes to the consolidation of spaces like Liberdade as symbolically “Japanese” territories. This logic aligns with the concept of Disneyfication as proposed by Harvey (2005), in which urban space is transformed into a standardised stage, aesthetically oriented towards consumption. In this process, events function as catalysts for symbolic experience, continually renewing the visual and affective repertoire associated with the neighbourhood and reinforcing its tourist and media-oriented functions (Ferreira, 2020).

From a geographical standpoint, events of this nature are understood by Santos (2014) not merely as phenomena that occupy space, but as occurrences that transform its structure and meaning. They are agents of territorial and identity reconfiguration, shaping the uses of public space and fostering the emergence of new social relations. In this light, the Festival do Japão, Tanabata Matsuri, and Anime Friends should be regarded as phenomena that not only activate temporary flows and practices but also leave lasting legacies in the symbolic and material organisation of the city. These events give rise to specific forms of urban sociability that articulate leisure, consumption, and collective belonging.

According to Attanasi et al. (2013), these lasting legacies can also be understood as the result of ephemeral social capital —a form of temporary yet intense social connection formed during cultural events, which can catalyse enduring collaborative networks even after the event has ended. In the case of São Paulo’s Liberdade neighbourhood and events such as Anime Friends, Festival do Japão, and Tanabata Matsuri, these occasions function as platforms for instant sociability, where fans, artists, entrepreneurs, and tourists form bonds based on shared interests in Japanese pop culture and its various sub-niches.

Though brief, these interactions strengthen the cohesion of specific communities —such as cosplay collectives (Barboza & Da Silva, 2013; Simon et al., 2016), specialty retailers (Lima, 2013; Severino et al., 2024), and content creators (Severino et al., 2024)— which continue to operate beyond the events themselves, through social media, collaborative projects, or subsequent festival editions. Combined with the neighbourhood’s ongoing thematisation, the annual recurrence of these gatherings gradually transforms initially ephemeral social capital into long-term adhesion, thereby consolidating Liberdade, in particular, as a reference hub for Japanese culture in Brazil for these communities.

These concepts applied to these events emphasise the interplay between time and space, illustrating how singular occurrences can have long-lasting and transformative impacts on geographic organisation and configuration. As temporary interventions, events can contribute to creating more inclusive and welcoming public spaces by configuring urban areas in the socio-spatial sense (Souza, 2013), often

building on previous developments. In the context of otaku culture, such connections are exponentially strengthened through the use of information technologies, amplifying the social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital of these places.

In this study, this process of Japanese cultural localisation reinforces the Japanese territoriality of the Liberdade neighbourhood. By combining the elements of place and territory within the same social space, urban friendliness becomes evident for those frequenting the area —urban friendliness referring to spaces designed for shared living. According to Fontes (2012), urban friendliness is a concept that denotes the quality of public spaces subject to temporary interventions, characterised by connections and interactions between people and space, in contrast to the individualism often seen in contemporary collective living.

Therefore, urban friendliness can be seen as an important legacy of the temporary interventions practiced in public spaces, which enhance the emergence of others, always aiming to configure a social space as the gathering of “pieces,” as coined by Magnani (2008), of more amicable collectives.

Such a device, when properly activated, enables new societal arrangements and worldviews, which are also reflected in reinforced or novel forms of consumption that intertwine leisure, business, and recreation (Farias, 2011), thereby configuring new cultural elaborations considered in their substantive and epistemological centrality. In alignment with Ortiz (1994), this process establishes new roles for the organisation and expression of cultural elaborations and references to collective identities, whether national or popular. This occurs because the state faces intense competition from other social forces in asserting primacy over the legitimisation of collective actions. This scenario directly impacts cultural production and fosters a sense of belonging that shapes multifaceted identities, characteristic of contemporary societies where late modernity emerges as a hermeneutic paradigm.

At this stage, the intention is to delve more comprehensively into the three previously mentioned events. We align with Latour’s (2012) perspective, which highlights that all our interactions with others are mediated through objects. Consequently, a relational product, or sociotechnical assemblage, emerges, incorporating both human and non-human actors and actants. To address the uncertainties inherent in scientific research – such as the nature of groups, actions, objects, and facts – Latour (2012) emphasises the importance of narratives. Regardless of the risks such writing may entail, as it reflects the perspective of the writer, these narratives foreground the act of description itself, a component often absent in the production of applied social and human sciences, constrained by word limits in their publications.

The text, therefore, becomes a mediator. In the context of this article, the collection of documents and photographs produced or gathered during and about the events under analysis does not aim to uncover a singular truth or objectivity. It is essential to acknowledge that the fabricated and artificial nature of these materials —constructed at a specific moment— does not signify a lack of objectivity but

rather represents reality as it was experienced and recorded by the researcher. This is not “just a story” or a collection of subjective observations noted in a field diary (Latour, 2012, p. 187). Instead, it resists abandoning the pursuit of accuracy, fidelity, interest, or objectivity. As Latour points out, a narrative that neglects to address the interplay between fact and interest renounces the attempt to translate the four sources of uncertainty he identifies: (i) Groups do not exist inherently but are constantly in formation; (ii) Action is not natural but assumed; (iii) Objects, not just humans, act; and (iv) it is crucial to confront the tension between matters of fact and matters of concern.

Thus, even within the constraints imposed by the word limit of the article, efforts were made to ensure that all steps in our analysis were carefully considered, including those related to the production of the description itself. What is often naturalised as “objective” is not merely a reified collection of concrete elements. According to Latour (2012), a return to empiricism offers a wealth of data that is not always fully explored in our research due to the pressures of analytical urgency.

Tanabata Matsuri

The Tanabata Matsuri, also known as the Star Festival, is an annual cultural event organised by the Cultural and Assistance Association of Liberdade (ACAL) with support from the São Paulo municipal government since 1979 (CNN Brasil, 2023b). It draws inspiration from its namesake festivals held in Japan every July since the year 700 (Brown & Brown, 2006). This festival holds significant symbolic and social capital for the Japanese-Brazilian community, primarily aiming to create a space for ethnic reaffirmation (Lima, 2013). Inspired by the traditional Japanese festival of the same name, the event aims to celebrate ancestral values, foster the integration of the Japanese Brazilian community, and preserve cultural practices rooted in Japanese heritage. With strong involvement from volunteers, local merchants, and cultural institutions, Tanabata Matsuri emphasises the symbolic and affective dimensions of Japanese legacy, establishing itself as a neighbourhood festival marked by rituals, traditional decorations, and artistic performances that evoke memory and identity (Brown & Brown, 2006; Lima, 2013).

As described by Brown and Brown (2006), the Tanabata Matsuri has its origins in a fusion of Japanese and Chinese traditions and is associated with the ancient Tanabata legend, which dates back to the Nara period (710–794) in Japan. It also incorporates Chinese influences through the “Qixi” legend, similarly known as the “Star Festival.” The central narrative features Orihime (the star Vega), daughter of the Sky God, and Hikoboshi (the star Altair), a humble cowherd, who fell in love. However, their union caused them to neglect their duties, angering the Sky God, who separated them across the Milky Way (Brown & Brown, 2006). Saddened by their separation, Orihime and Hikoboshi were allowed by the Sky God to meet only once a year, on the seventh night of the seventh lunar month, provided they responsibly fulfilled their tasks throughout the rest of the year (Brown & Brown, 2006).

During the festival, people write their wishes on colourful strips of paper known as Tanzaku and hang them on bamboo branches. In São Paulo's Tanabata Matsuri, this tradition has been adapted, with wishes being placed on various types of trees spread throughout the neighbourhood, as illustrated in Figure 8. Municipal employees distribute pens and colourful papers, enabling tourists, residents, and passersby to leave their wishes on the trees. This also allows individuals to read the wishes of others, fostering conversations around the trees and creating socio-spatial places of social connectivity. This practice reinforces the original Japanese objective of the festival: to emphasize the importance of love, hope, and human connection, and to inspire happiness and goodwill for oneself and others (Brown & Brown, 2006; Lima, 2013).

Figure 8.

“Tanzakus” at Liberdade’s Tanabata Matsuri 2023 – (July 16, 2023)



Additionally, the festival features parades, theatrical performances, dance shows, and Japanese musical presentations (both traditional and pop), which also take place in Praça da Liberdade, as shown in Figure 9. Figure 10 illustrates the large influx of attendees to the event, further exemplifying the abundance and vibrancy of decorative adornments.

The Tanabata Matsuri is a vibrant and festive celebration, during which the Liberdade neighbourhood is adorned with plants, lights, colourful banners, posters, globes, and silver stars. This transforms the socio-spatial landscape and reinforces Japanese identity ties (Figure 9). Considering the elements previously mentioned, this event contributes to the strategy of shaping this social space into a distinct place of Japanese enunciation (Certeau, 1998).

This set of temporary transformations plays a significant role in underpinning the Japanese-inspired urban conviviality, establishing the Liberdade neighbourhood as a territory of circulation and consolidation for Nipponophile capital —symbolic, social, cultural, and economic. Consequently, it configures the area as a place of encounter, socialisation, and rediscovery by both tourists and locals.

The 2023 Tanabata Matsuri attracted approximately 200,000 attendees over two days, according to ACAL (Portal Nippon Já, 2023; Yizima, 2023). The signifi-

Figure 9.

Tanabata Matsuri Performance Stage – (July 16, 2023)



cant influx of visitors caused considerable congestion, making movement through the neighbourhood's narrow streets challenging, particularly at major convergence points such as the Praça da Liberdade and the Viaduto Cidade de Osaka (Figure 11).

The festival's current grandeur is the result of ACAL's efforts, which did not directly involve municipal entities responsible for culture and tourism. Until the early 2010s, the event was managed by a modest team of 15 individuals. For instance, in 2012, ACAL estimated an audience of 10,000 people attending the festival (Lima, 2013). However, beginning in 2019, a narrative shift occurred, with the festival now being highlighted as the largest Japanese festival in the world outside Japan (CNN Brasil, 2023b; R7, 2022; VEJA São Paulo, 2022). This contrasts with earlier reports, which emphasised the festival's traditionality and exotic curiosity (G1 SP, 2015; G1 SP, 2017; Sá, 2007).

Finally, the festival's significant impact on commerce in the Liberdade neighbourhood is noteworthy. Various shops and restaurants benefit from the influx of visitors, particularly those seeking items related to Japanese, Korean, or Chinese pop and traditional cultures. These combined initiatives reinforce the transformation of Liberdade into a distinct and symbolic "oriental neighbourhood" within Brazil (Santos & Cavenaghi, 2018).

Anime Friends

Anime Friends is considered the largest anime (Japanese animation) event in Latin America, with an estimated audience of 120,000 people. Organised since 2003 by Yamato Comunicações e Eventos, a Brazilian company specialising in organising

Figure 10.

Street decorations during Tanabata Matsuri – (July 16, 2023)



events related to Japanese pop culture (Urbano, 2017), the event typically takes place in July, during the school holidays in Brazil, in São Paulo, a city with the highest concentration of anime fans in the country. It also draws many visitors to the Liberdade neighbourhood, a popular area for anime enthusiasts.

Its format is highly commercial, featuring ticket sales, corporate brand booths, merchandise from independent artists, international performances, and marketing activations. The audience is predominantly young (Simon et al., 2016; SPTuris, 2022a), and closely aligned with global trends in the consumption of Japanese

Figure 11.

Heavy flow of people at Liberty Square (left) and Osaka City Viaduct (right) – (July 16, 2023)



cultural products. The event functions as a platform of convergence between industry, fandom, and entertainment, operating within the logic of the creative economy and the commodification of cultural symbols. It attracts major media companies and hosts performances by Japanese artists (Anime Friends, 2025).

Focusing almost exclusively on Japanese pop culture (anime, manga, games, music, films, and other products), the event attracts media companies linked to this niche, such as Crunchyroll, the largest global streaming platform for anime, which has recently promoted the release of works with Brazilian Portuguese dubbing (Fraiha, 2023; Monte, 2024; Urbano & Araujo, 2021), as shown in Figure 12. The event also features publishers specialising in manga, such as Panini, New Pop, and JBC. Another highlight is the participation of independent producers and vendors of action figures, fanzines, fan art, and products for fans of Japanese pop culture, as illustrated in Figure 13.

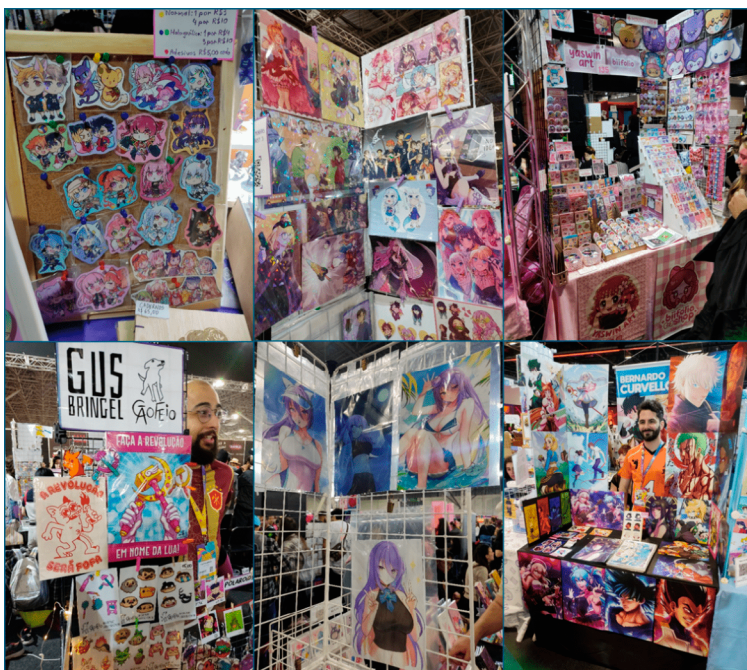
Additionally, Anime Friends offers a wide range of activities and attractions for participants, including: (i) Themed rooms for lectures, panels with voice actors, scriptwriters, and other anime industry professionals, as well as anime screenings; (ii) A Cosplay Space for cosplay exhibitions and contests (Figure 11); (iii) A product fair (Figure 14); (iv) Shows and performances featuring bands and Japanese singers, as well as cultural performances such as traditional Japanese dances, concluding each day with an “otaku” party (Figure 15); (v) Food areas offering

Figure 12.

Crunchyroll's presence on Anime Friends highlighting the Brazilian Portuguese dubs of its animes – (July 15, 2023)

**Figure 13.**

Otaku culture artist booths in at Artist's Alley during Anime Friends – (July 15, 2023)



a variety of Japanese and other Asian cuisine; (vi) Video game and card game tournaments; (vii) Booths from organisations and educational institutions focused on promoting Japanese culture and language, as well as opportunities to study in Japan, along with the presentation of new technologies, exemplified by a conversation with a virtual avatar about scholarships in Japan by Japan Foundation (Figure 16), marking the participation of Japanese public institutions in the event.

Figure 14.

Cosplaying at Anime Friends 2023 – (July 15, 2023)



Figure 15.

Anime Friends 2023 Otaku Show and Party – (July 15, 2023)



Figure 16.
Chatting with a VTuber (Virtual YouTuber) about scholarships in Japan – (July 15, 2023)



Anime Friends has become a gathering point for Japanese pop culture in Latin America, where Japanese artists, who rarely tour outside the Global North, perform in Latin America. However, according to data from the São Paulo City Tourism Department, most of the event’s audience in the 2022 edition came from the São Paulo metropolitan area (SPTuris, 2022a), as shown in Table 1, with an estimated audience of 90,000. In 2023, this number increased to 120,000 attendees, a rise also attributed to the more acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic passing.

Table 1.
Anime Friends 2022 Audience Origin

Origin	%
São Paulo city	58.5%
São Paulo metropolitan region	22.3%
Countryside of São Paulo state	14.7%
Other states of Brazil	4.3%
Other countries	0.2%

Source: SPTuris (2022a).

On the other hand, in their analysis of Anime Friends 2011, Simon et al. (2016) had already demonstrated that, even in the early 2010s —when the event was significantly smaller but already arena based— it functioned as a focal point for niche cultural tourism. It attracted tens of thousands of visitors with strong emotional and identity-based engagement, who regarded the event as a space of freedom for socialising within their affinity groups. The study revealed that 71% of the 2011 Anime Friends audience resided outside the São Paulo metropolitan region, with 27% coming from the interior of São Paulo State and 44% from other states, particularly Paraná, Minas Gerais, and Rio de Janeiro, neighbouring states that still

lack major specialised events. This data indicates a significant pattern of regional and interstate mobility driven by the event.

Moreover, approximately 60% of respondents reported having attended previous editions, pointing to a logic of repeat visitation and audience loyalty. The economic impact was already notable: around 89% of visitors declared expenditures on food, transportation, and merchandise in the vicinity of the event, in addition to seeking out attractions in the city of São Paulo. One hypothesis for the decrease in the proportion of non-local attendees at the 2022 edition of Anime Friends, according to SPTuris (2022a), is the increased popularisation of the event among São Paulo residents and the emergence of similar events in other states that now partially meet local fan demand. Nevertheless, Anime Friends remains to this day one of Brazil’s premier anime events at the national level, with 150,000 attendants in 2025 (Fiore, 2025).

The SPTuris’ report highlights other additional information about the event: Instagram was the primary platform used to promote the event, the average expenditure of attendees at the event was R\$ 186.88, and tourists who attended the event spent an average of R\$ 563.72 in the city during their stay. They also engaged in various other activities, with a focus on gastronomy and shopping, as shown in Table 2. Furthermore, 94.3% of the audience intended to return for the 2023 edition (SPTuris, 2022a).

Table 2.
Other activities of tourists in São Paulo besides Anime Friends

Type of activity	%
Gastronomy	70.8%
Shopping	33.3%
Visiting friends/relatives	30.6%
Nightlife/bars	27.8%
Parks/green areas	22.2%
Theatre/movies/concerts	11.1%
Museums	8.3%
Business/events	8.3%
Other (to buy games at Paulista Ave.)	1.4%
None – just came for the event	0.0%

Source: SPTuris (2022a).

Finally, the report highlights an economic impact of R\$ 9.7 million in the city, based on the estimated 90,000 attendees at the event and their previously mentioned average spending in the city (SPTuris, 2022a). It’s important to note that the City of São Paulo supports the event, as shown in Figure 17, with the slogan “Vai de Anime? Vai de São Paulo” (translated as “Going to Anime? Go to São Paulo”), both in its organisation and execution, as well as in the tourism promotions during the month of July, the school holiday period in Brazil

Figure 17.

Support from the City of São Paulo to Anime Friends (“Going to Anime? Go to São Paulo!”) – (July 15, 2023)



Festival do Japão

The week before Anime Friends, the Japan Festival takes place, as shown in Figure 18, the largest Japanese Culture event in São Paulo, organised by Kenren (Federation of Associations of Japanese Provinces in Brazil) since 1998. Its aim is to promote Japanese culture and pass on traditions and cultural knowledge to new generations (Lima, 2013; SPTuris, 2022b). In 2013, the event attracted an estimated audience of 200,000 people (Lima, 2013), with 182,000 attendees in the 2022 edition, the first after the pandemic (SPTuris, 2022b), and 185,000 in the 2023 edition, which took place between July 7 and 9 (Festival do Japão, 2023a).

The Japan Festival is an event that has been professionally managed for many years, with a much greater focus on technology and even on marketing and commercial aspects, receiving sponsorship and support from several Japanese companies. It is widely recognised as the main event for the Japanese community in Brazil (Lima, 2013). Additionally, the Japan Festival boasts a more extensive and efficient infrastructure, both in terms of physical facilities and financial backing from sponsors, which significantly increases its reach and justifies its undisputed title, contrasting with the Tanabata Matsuri, which has a much more cultural and community-oriented aspect and is on its way to professionalisation (Lima, 2013).

Unlike Anime Friends, which focuses almost exclusively on pop culture, the Japan Festival aims to showcase both traditional Japanese culture, such as the tea ceremony, and new products and technologies from that country, while also giving space to pop culture. In the 2023 edition, the cosplay championship, #FJTAON, and Akibaspace stood out, being areas for the commercialisation and leisure involving these items (Festival do Japão, 2023a; 2023b). The latter refers to the Akihabara district in Tokyo, a famous area for the sale of otaku pop culture (Galbraith, 2019).

The festival is sponsored by Bradesco through the Cultural Incentive Law, as well as the Ministry of Culture and the Government of the State of São Paulo, through

Figure 18.

Japanese Torii at the 21th Japan Festival 2018



Source: Estela (2018).

the Secretariat of Culture and Creative Economy. It also receives sponsorship from several Japanese companies such as Toyota, Honda, Nissan, Yamaha, Mr. Jeff, Mitsubishi Corporation, Mitsubishi Electric, Aisin, Alfa Alimentos, Sakura Nakaya, Kikkoman, Hinomoto, SMC, Sumitomo Chemical, Niterra, Towa, Yakult, Panasonic, Julio Okubo, Biore, Longway, Castella, and E-Japan (Festival do Japão, 2022a), as shown in the image example in Figure 19.

As highlighted, the involvement of various companies results in an event with much more robust infrastructure and promotional capacity. Its publicity goes beyond social media (with Instagram standing out) and word of mouth (SPTuris, 2022b), as seen with Anime Friends and Tanabata Matsuri, to include radio, television commercials, and news outlets (Lima, 2013).

According to SPTuris (2022b), the Festival do Japão in 2022 also saw the majority of participants coming from the São Paulo metropolitan area, as illustrated in Table 3. The average expenditure per person at the event was R\$ 134.92, while spending in the city during the event days averaged R\$ 406.32. Additionally, 95% of respondents stated they would return for the 2023 edition, and 38% reported it was their first time attending the festival. The economic impact on the city in 2022 was estimated at R\$ 10.1 million, which was considered excellent by the São Paulo City Hall (SPTuris, 2022b).

Figure 19.

Japanese companies participating in the Festival do Japão



Source: QG do Automóvel (2022), Mundo Cosplayer (2022).

Table 3.

Festival do Japão 2022 Audience Origin

Origin	%
São Paulo city	64.3%
São Paulo metropolitan region	22.0%
Countryside of São Paulo state	11.2%
Other states of Brazil	2.3%
Other countries	0.2%

Source: SPTuris (2022b).

Finally, the more commercial and technological nature of the festival is also reflected in the post-event activities of its attendees in the city, with shopping being the primary activity, followed closely by gastronomy, as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4.

Other activities of tourists in São Paulo besides Festival do Japão.

Type of activity	%
Shopping	60.0%
Gastronomy	55.0%
Visiting friends/relatives	30.0%
Tours	22.5%
Nightlife/bars	20.0%
Museums	20.0%
None – just came for the event	17.5%
Theatre/movies/concerts	12.5%
Business/events	12.5%

(Continued)

Type of activity	%
Parks/green areas	12.5%
Others (soccer match)	5.0%

Source: SPTuris (2022b).

Lastly, as demonstrated by Lima (2013), the Festival do Japão is a highly market-oriented event, serving as a platform for various companies to showcase the future of Japan and the relations between Brazil and Japan. Moreover, it is a strategically significant event for the government, aiming to attract future Japanese investments in Brazil, particularly in the state of São Paulo.

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE AND BRANDING

The commercial, cultural, and tourism success (notably including what is termed micro-tourism) of these Japanese-themed festivals in São Paulo demonstrates consistent growth in terms of audience engagement. As outlined in the descriptions of the events in the preceding sections of this study, there is an unequivocal connection with the rise of Japanese pop culture in recent decades. This includes both mass-market products such as anime and manga (Monte; 2024; Santos, 2017; Urbano, 2017; Urbano & Araujo, 2021) and more niche and recent phenomena in massification like VTubers (Diniz et al., 2022; Ferreira et al., 2022; Regis, 2021; Regis et al., 2024).

These factors, combined with the establishment of a reinterpreted Japanese-themed territory by social actors since the mid-20th century, have strengthened São Paulo’s position as the ideal social space for events underpinned by Nipponophile capital. This context has also fostered a strategic adjustment of the scheduling for the three major events analysed in this article. Table 5 illustrates that, in recent years, significant efforts have been made to ensure that the events’ dates no longer overlap, thereby expanding the promotional calendar. This adjustment has enhanced exposure and alignment with the audience, media outlets, and investors, maximising their impact.

Table 5.

Dates of the main events linked to Japanese culture in the city of São Paulo (MM/DD format) in the last seven years, always in July

Event /Date	2017	2018	2019	2022	2023	2024	2025
Tanabata Matsuri	07/15 – 07/16	07/28 – 07/29	07/13 – 07/14	07/09 – 07/10	07/15 – 07/16	07/06 – 07/07	07/05 – 07/06
Anime Friends	07/07 – 07/09	07/06 – 07/09	07/12 – 07/14	07/08 – 07/10	07/13 – 07/16	07/18 – 07/21	07/03 – 07/06

(Continued)

Event /Date	2017	2018	2019	2022	2023	2024	2025
Festival do Japão	07/07 – 07/09	07/20 – 07/22	07/05 – 07/07	07/15 – 07/17	07/07 – 07/09	07/12 – 07/14	07/11 – 07/13

Moreover, the “Japan” branding has seen significant growth in recent years. The nation’s brand value has risen considerably, placing it among the most valuable national brands globally. According to the consultancy Brand Finance (2023), Japan ranks fifth worldwide, and according to Ipsos (2022), it was the second most valuable national branding globally, trailing only Germany and ahead of the United States. This enhanced valuation has been significantly driven by the global popularisation of Japanese pop culture, which aligns with the objectives of the Cool Japan state policy initiatives (Galbraith, 2019; Tamaki, 2019).

São Paulo leverages the rising prominence of Japanese culture in its branding strategy for national and international promotion. This is evident in the findings of Santos and Cavenaghi (2018), who analysed São Paulo’s official tourist guide and highlighted the importance of the Liberdade neighbourhood as a must-visit attraction.

In this context, further urban interventions are planned for the city, including the creation of “The Largest Oriental Esplanade in the World”: a 12,000 m² cultural corridor and event space to be constructed between the viaducts of Avenida Liberdade and Rua Conselheiro Furtado, above the Evaristo Comolatti Road Complex, to be called “Esplanada Oriental”. As illustrated in Figure 17, a public tender for its construction has already been announced. This space for large-scale events addresses a longstanding demand from local merchants and cultural associations, aiming to establish a new landmark for the city (Mengue, 2022). The proposed landscape-architectural model is explicitly inspired by Japanese aesthetics, as depicted in Figure 20.

With the public tender already scheduled for June 2025, the city government estimates a cost of R\$ 338 million Brazilian reais for the construction of the Esplanada Oriental, including a six-story annex building intended for events and conventions. This investment will be carried out through a public-private partnership, in which the concessionaire will be responsible for organising events in the area as well as maintaining the facilities. The municipality expects that this initiative will not only increase the visitor capacity of the Liberdade neighbourhood — whose narrow streets are increasingly overcrowded — but will also transform the area into a new hub for major events, similar to what has already occurred on Avenida Paulista, another major attraction and iconic landmark of São Paulo. Furthermore, the project aims to permanently reinforce the symbolic and institutional connection between São Paulo and Japan (CNN Brasil, 2025; Prefeitura de São Paulo, 2025). It is worth noting that, despite these future interventions, there are still no plans to designate Liberdade as a creative district or similar entity, reinforcing the argument that these public and private investments are primarily aimed at tourism attraction and spatial thematisation, as previously discussed.

Figure 20.
Location of the future “Oriental Esplanade” of São Paulo



Source: Mengue (2022).

THE CONCEPT OF NIPPONOPHILE CAPITAL AS A BASIS FOR ANALYSING THE SPATIAL TRANSFORMATIONS BROUGHT ABOUT BY THE CONSUMPTION OF JAPANESE CULTURE

All of these dynamics of power, spread, and influence and materialise through the generation, accumulation, and management of various forms of capital, delineated into four types, synthesising the contributions of Bourdieu (1986; 1989). First, economic capital refers to the sum of material and financial resources available. Second, cultural capital arises from lived practices and significant practices, which may be institutionalised, embodied, or acquired. Third, social capital represents the network of social relationships an agent possesses. Finally, symbolic capital relates to recognition, expressed through non-monetary valuation. On the other hand, in connection, we observe: (i) the spatial transformation of the Liberdade neighbourhood, which has followed principles aligned with the concept of Disneyfication of space, as proposed by Harvey (2005); (ii) the strategic actions of private actors —particularly the ACAL (Liberdade Merchants Association)— in seeking to establish the neighbourhood as a site of enunciation for Japaneseness and in employing tactics to attract public investment, in line with the concepts of strategy and tactics defined by Certeau (1998); and (iii) the reinforcement of Japanese cultural elements aimed at transforming Liberdade into a *lieu de mémoire* of Japanese heritage, a notion formulated by Nora (1993).

Based on this theoretical framework, we propose the concept of “Nipponophile capital” as a hybrid and thematised form of economic, social, symbolic, and cultural capital accumulated by individuals, organisations, and territories that associate themselves —either legitimately or strategically— with Japanese culture, particularly by capitalising on its global ascent and popularisation. In the case of the Liberdade neighborhood and the events analysed, this capital manifests in the capacity to mobilise Japanese signs, practices, and aesthetics as sources of social and market value. It can be activated by event organisers, commercial establishments, cultural institutions, and even public authorities as a touristic and marketing asset, even when not tied to endogenous cultural production.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1986; 1989) typology, as illustrated in Table 6, Nipponophile capital materialises, for example, as embodied cultural capital (individuals with deep knowledge of Japanese culture, such as cosplayers, artists, and fans of Japanese pop culture), social capital (networks among Japanese Brazilian associations, cultural enterprises, and fan communities (Regis et al., 2024), often formed during the events themselves (Attanasi et al., 2013), and symbolic capital (the prestige associated with occupying a space culturally recognised as “Japanese” or with cultural authority). These forms of capital are effectively converted into economic capital, as evidenced by the popularisation of such events, increased tourism, rising commercial revenues, growth of fanbase, and the strengthening of the branding and market-

ing of both the neighbourhood and the city. In this context, Liberdade functions as a site of contestation and legitimisation for these forms of capital, even if it does not operate as a creative production cluster in the canonical sense.

That said, Nipponophile capital can be understood as a form of social energy that has intensified alongside the expansion of Japanese cultural exports in recent decades — a movement that accelerated during the 2010s, transforming the “Japan” brand into something “cool” and highly valued. Particularly popular among the youth, this movement has formed large groups of fans and consumers who are highly engaged regarding various Japanese cultural products, due to the emotional-affective nature of these cultural products, enhancing a latent consumption and tourism capacity that can transform markets and territories (Condry, 2013; Galbraith, 2019; Regis et al., 2024; Santos, 2017; Urbano, 2017; Urbano & Araujo, 2021).

This consumption-driven, economic, cultural, social, and symbolic force has produced both cultural and infrastructural transformations —especially in São Paulo, where the strong native presence of Japanese culture is further amplified by the city’s role as the largest urban and consumer market in the country. Moreover, the preservation and promotion of Japanese heritage in the Liberdade neighbourhood, as well as its thematisation and orientalised since the 1970s (Nakagawa et al., 2011), have gradually contributed to the symbolic association between São Paulo and Japan in the collective imagination, particularly among consumers of Japanese pop culture. This is reinforced by the exclusivity of Japanese products and their derivatives, which until recently could only be found in Liberdade, and whose demand has continued to grow with the accelerated expansion of Japanese pop media in Brazil, especially through streaming platforms (Monte, 2024; Urbano & Araujo, 2021).

Although it is not yet fully coordinated among the public institutions, associations, companies, and networks that mobilise it for their own promotional or territorial purposes, Nipponophile capital is increasingly shaping the infrastructure, culture, and image of the city of São Paulo. Both the state and the public are progressively reimagining Liberdade as the Japanese space of Brazil —perhaps even of the Americas— thereby consolidating both São Paulo and the neighbourhood as idealised sites for mass, themed consumption of (pop) Japanese culture. This has resulted in growing infrastructure investments aimed at reinforcing this vision of the locality —and potentially the city itself— as illustrated by projects such as the forthcoming Esplanada Oriental.

CONCLUSIONS

The conceptual proposal of Nipponophilic capital offers a distinctive perspective for discussions in urban, economic, and cultural studies by articulating Bourdieu’s theory of capital with contemporary phenomena such as the globalisation of Japanese pop culture, the otaku economy, and affective and event-based tourism. This theoretical synthesis allows for an understanding of how Japanese cultural signs

Table 6.
Types of capital to describe Nipponophile capital

Types of Capital	Definition	Indicators in the case of São Paulo	Empirical examples
Economic	Financial and material resources that can be converted into money.	Event revenue; increased local consumption; private investment in stores and storefronts; attracting investment to the Liberdade neighbourhood.	Average spending per visitor at events; estimated impact of R\$9.7 to R\$10.1 million (SPTuris, 2022a; SPTuris, 2022b); redevelopment sponsored by the city government and private associations (Bocci, 2009; Nakagawa <i>et al.</i> , 2011); increase in tourism; expansion of Japanese franchises in Liberdade (Garcia, 2025; Maria, 2023); increasing orientalised of Liberdade (Nakagawa <i>et al.</i> , 2011); greater frequency of shows by Japanese artists in São Paulo.
Cultural	Knowledge, skills, traditions, languages, and cultural assets. Can be institutionalised (diplo-mas), incorporated (habits), or objectified (assets).	Transmission of Japanese traditions; practice of cosplay; consumption and propagation of Japanese pop culture and its values; presence of temples and museums.	Tanabata Matsuri consolidated as a São Paulo tradition (Lima, 2013); Japanese language bookstores and schools; Japanese pop culture naturalised and valorised in Brazil (Urbano & Araujo, 2021); Attraction of Japanese artists to events in São Paulo.
Social	Network of relationships and social connections that enables exchanges, collaborations and access.	Relationship between associations (ACAL, Bunkyo), entrepreneurs, public authorities and sponsoring companies; otaku fan networks.	Joint organisation of events; coordination between events and brands such as Crunchyroll, Disney, Netflix, and Panini (Pontes, 2025); relationships between companies in the Japanese industrial and media complex and the city of São Paulo; use of the city as a meeting place for fans (Simon <i>et al.</i> , 2016).
Symbolic	Recognition, prestige and socially perceived distinction — generally resulting from the conversion of other capitals.	Recognition of Liberdade as an official “Japantown” and tourist destination; visibility in tourist guides; political use of Japanese identity; “Japan” branding associated with São Paulo and Liberdade.	The subway station was renamed Japan-Liberdade; slogans included “Largest Japanese festival outside of Japan”; Japanese culture was featured in city hall materials; the slogan: “Going to Anime? Go to São Paulo”.

are mobilised, accumulated, and converted into prestige, income, and symbolic authority by diverse actors in urban contexts beyond Japan's national borders. By linking cultural practices to dynamics of territorial branding and themed consumption, the concept provides a robust analytical lens through which to examine the growing significance of East Asian transnational cultures in reshaping cities and constructing new urban imaginaries.

Driven by urban interventions and events, the growing association between the city of São Paulo and Japan may also be interpreted through the lens of the theory of monopoly rent from themed space. This theory highlights the economic advantages such symbolic processes bring to cities and to specific economic groups by attracting tourists and promoting the consumption of themed spaces, along with the deliberate reinterpretation of spatial meanings.

It is also crucial to note, though not fully explored within the scope of this study, that such reinterpretation is not without contestation and conflict. Associations and groups advocating for Afro-Brazilian causes have denounced the erasure of Black memory in this region and are actively engaged in historical reparative actions, particularly concerning material heritage in the Liberdade neighbourhood. These interethnic frictions challenge the project of constructing a territorial site of enunciation centred on Japaneseness in Liberdade, despite the fact that a predominantly Nippon-centric imaginary continues to prevail in this locality.

It is nonetheless evident that São Paulo is undergoing an increasingly rapid transformation into the Japanese hub of the Americas, offering the closest possible experience to Japan—or at least a Japanese Brazilian experience—outside of the East Asian country itself. This positioning seeks to capitalise on the meteoric commercial rise of Japan's cultural industries over the past few decades. Within this context, São Paulo has identified a significant competitive advantage for its urban brand in the arenas of tourism, exhibitions, and both national and international imaginaries, leveraging large-scale Japan-themed events to establish itself as the continent's leading Japanese cultural hub. Targeting, in particular, the consumer-driven otaku culture, the city facilitates a significant flow of capital—reflecting the global economic impact of this cultural segment, which generates billions of dollars worldwide.

This process creates economic opportunities and cultural intersections, driven by the growing participation, engagement, and identification of Brazilian youth with Japanese pop culture. However, the full potential of this reinterpretation remains unrealised due to the limited role of the public sector, which hampers the opportunities emerging from the creative economy. The absence of a cohesive plan to transform Liberdade into a creative hub or Japanese cultural cluster dissipates its possibilities. Throughout this study, it became evident that all the necessary actors are already present and active, leveraging economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. What remains lacking, however, is a vision on the part of the municipal

government to perceive this ecosystem not merely through the lens of tourism, but as the foundation for a more synergistic model of urban development.

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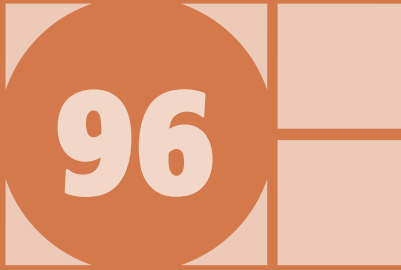
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