

The Impact of Low-Cost Airlines on Tourist Preferences for Less Popular European Destinations: A Case Study.

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Thessaloniki, 31st of January 2026

Abstract

This paper investigates the way Low-Cost Carriers have had an impact on the way tourists in Europe choose which destination to visit. More specifically, this paper analyzes the examples of three now well-known European cities, Porto, Gdansk and Brussels-Charleroi, whose expanded airport network connectivity, enhanced by the presence of LCCs, has been synonymous with a surge in revenues derived from touristic activity in their region. The methodology is based in analyzing the cities' backgrounds, touristic mobility and urban development in order to assess whether and how the LCCs have shaped their image and popularity and how they have contributed to their touristic development and financial growth. The results of the three cities case study are discussed, followed by recommendations for policies to be implemented and thoughts for further reading and research. The aim of this paper is to delve into the LCCs influence on the 21st century tourism and aviation landscape and the way they can transform a destination's trajectory forever.

Key Words: LCCs (Low-Cost Carriers), Tourism, Network, Economic Growth, Travelers, Europe.

Table of Contents

<u>1.Introduction</u>	1
1.1 Purpose and Objectives of the Study.....	4
1.2 Methodology Overview.....	5
1.2.1. Research Approach and Rationale.....	5
1.2.2. Case Study Method and Strategy.....	6
<u>2.Literature Review</u>	7
2.1. Historical Development and Economic Context.....	7
2.2. Low Cost-Airlines and the Transformation of European Tourism.....	8
2.3 Expansion of Network and Accessibility Facilitations....	9
2.4 Consumer Behavior and Travel Decision-Making.....	12
<u>3.Methodology</u>	14
3.1 Justification for the Case-Study Method.....	16
3.2 Case Selection and Rationale.....	18
3.3. Data Analysis Procedure.....	19
<u>4.Detailed Case Studies</u>	20
4.1 Porto, Portugal.....	20
4.1.1 Structural Transformation of Porto’s Tourism System.....	20
4.1.2 Tourism Growth and Market Profile.....	23
4.1.3 Reconfiguration of Tourism Preferences.....	23
4.2 Gdańsk.....	25
4.2.1 Integration into European Mobility Networks.....	25

4.2.2 Impulsivity and Short-Horizon Decision-Making...	25
4.2.3 Price Sensitivity and Destination Substitutability...	26
4.3. Brussels-Charleroi.....	28
4.3.1 Brussels–Charleroi as an Airport-Led Tourism System.....	28
4.3.2. Accessibility, Perceived Effort and Getaway Tourism.....	29
4.3.3 Redistribution Effects and Limited Local Value Capture.....	30
4.4 Cross-Case Analysis: Economic and Social Impacts of LCC-Driven Tourism.....	31
4.4.1 Comparative Economic Outcomes.....	32
4.4.2. Employment and Sectoral Effects.....	33
4.4.3 Social Impacts with Urban Pressures.....	34
4.4.4. Institutional and Governmental Mediators.....	34
4.5 Vulnerabilities and Sustainability Challenges of LCC-Driven Tourism.....	35
4.5.1. Strategic Dependence and Network Volatility...	35
4.5.2 Environmental Sustainability Constraints.....	35
4.5.3 Strategic Implications for Destination Planning.....	36
<u>5.Impact of the Case Study and Interpretation of the Results.....</u>	<u>36</u>
5.1 Accessibility as a Systemic Impact.....	36
5.2 Behavioral Reconfiguration of Tourism	

Demand.....	37
5.3. Economic Impact and Conditional Value Creation..	38
5.4 Strategic, Social and Sustainability Implications.....	39
<u>6.Concerns, Policy Implications and Further Research.....</u>	<u>40</u>
6.1 Economic Opportunities and Risks.....	41
6.2 Destination Accessibility and Regional Competitiveness.....	43
6.3 Airport Economics & Local Development.....	43
6.4 Subsidies & Long-Term Economic Impact.....	44
6.5 Sustainability, Overtourism and Lessons for European Tourism Policy.....	45
<u>7.Conclusion, Research Limitations and Recommendations.....</u>	<u>46</u>
7.1. Recommendations For The Case Study Cities.....	48
7.2 Research Limitations.....	49
7.3 Final Reflection.....	51
<u>8. Declaration of the Use of Artificial Intelligence.....</u>	<u>51</u>
<u>9.List of References.....</u>	<u>52</u>

Table of Diagrams

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of low-cost airline impacts on secondary European destinations.....	15
Figure 2: Comparative Overview of the Three Case studies.....	20
Figure 3: Number of Passengers of Francisco Sa Carneiro Airport across Three Different Decades, according to Wikipedia.....	21
Figure 4: Gdansk Lech Walesa Airport Passenger Numbers by each Airline, according to Wikipedia.....	27
Figure 5: Tourism Expenditure Breakdown.....	32
Figure 6: Airport Passenger Numbers in Each of the Three Airports in 2014 and in 2024, according to Wikipedia.....	33
Figure 7: Economic Impact Allocation.....	39
Figure 8: Risk Exposure Allocation.....	42

1.Introduction

It is common knowledge that over the past three decades, the rise and proliferation of low-cost airlines (LCCs) have transformed Europe's aviation landscape, reshaping travel behaviors, regional connectivity, and tourist destination dynamics. Initially pioneered by companies such as Ryanair, easyJet, and Wizz Air, low-cost carriers leveraged cost-saving operational models, aggressive pricing strategies, and extensive network expansions, drastically and fundamentally democratizing air travel and making it accessible to broader parts of the population .According to Efthymiou and Christidis (2023), “by 2021, Ryanair operated from 84 bases and served 225 airports in 37 countries, offering over 2100 routes” (p.7). Moreover, the gradual rise of the internet and social media drastically increased the popularity of low-cost carriers, whose tickets can be booked via online platforms, applications and third-party sites, such as Skyscanner and eDreams, enabling consumers to book airplane tickets within minutes, without having to rely on a travel agency, as well as compare and contrast the prices of different carriers across the world. The tickets and be accessed and modified anytime and that’s what renders them appealing to the consumers, who regularly check on offers and discounts to fly to their favorite destinations. Subsequently, there are numerous European destinations (capitals, second largest cities and even towns with a population of 50.000) that have gained increased popularity due to the interest shown through their integration into an extended low-cost carrier network. In this context, new consumer behavior patterns have emerged which help explain the ever-increasing popularity of the LCCs and their establishment as the first choice of many budget tight travelers who are in search of a stress-free city break in a new and undiscovered destination.

It is an undeniable fact that the rapid expansion of social media has left an indelible footprint on the travel industry in the 21st century. Travelling nowadays has drastically changed while retaining its essential qualities, which consist in offering the travelers/consumers authentic and complete historical, cultural and gastronomic experiences, whether they travel for leisure or for business. Moreover, users of social media these days can share with their friends moments from their trips to different countries and exchange ideas and travel tips. In this context, consumers can get inspiration from their fellow social media friends and are apt to book trips that can be adjusted to a tight budget and can cater for the requirements of the most demanding travelers, Therefore, travelling these days has been extensively democratized, with

people of lower incomes being able to save up money in order to be able to explore the continent on a tight budget, even if this suggests that they can only afford trips to secondary destinations instead of major touristic hotspots, as secondary destinations can offer an authentic travel experience with nothing to envy from the major ones.

This specific case study will focus entirely on Europe. Europe is a relatively small continent with short distances and easy access to each country. With most of the EU members belonging to the Schengen Area, border controls have been abolished to more than 25 countries, meaning that interstate travelling and transportation of goods is more facilitated than ever before. Low Cost Carriers, especially Ryanair, the quintessential low cost carrier, have further shortened distances and have given European citizens the opportunity to discover their continent in a small budget. With Europe being a diverse continent, whose border crossing has been more effective and stress free than ever, due to the ever-increasing number of EU countries joining the Schengen scheme, its citizens are now exploring the continent more than ever before. According to Olipra (2021), Since 1999, after the expansion on the British and Irish markets, cheap airlines began the conquest of the whole of the European continent, increasing its market share each year. Market share of LCCs in Europe from increased 4,9% in 2001 to 36,3% of European seats in 2018, as cited in European Commission, 2011, p. 97; ANNA, 2018 (p.18857). The existence of Euro as a currency and the overall circulation of people and commodities around the continent gave the LCCs the opportunity to invest on the continent and fortify its airport connectivity for it to accommodate their transportation needs. Therefore, the LCCs operational efficiency is strongly attributed to its low cost services that enable them to target for high gross margin profits in order to ensure their durability and sustainability.

The rapid expansion of LCCs significantly impacted tourism patterns, particularly benefiting secondary cities and less popular European destinations, which historically lacked robust connections to major tourist source markets. Airports once considered peripheral or secondary, such as Porto's Francisco Sá Carneiro Airport, Poland's Gdańsk Lech Wałęsa Airport, and Belgium's Brussels-Charleroi Airport, experienced substantial growth in passenger numbers and tourism inflows as a direct result of low-cost airline entry (Olipra, 2012; Dobruszkes, 2013). The increased number of visitors that the LCCs connection has brought to these cities has catapulted them into popularity and visibility in the tourism sector and has worked as a catalyst for economic progress,

with a significant contribution to the countries' GDP per capita. The economic globalization of the 21st century through the cross-border movement of goods and services has left an indelible footprint on tourism, transforming it into one of the tertiary's sectors most prominent branches. The benefits of this economic growth can be reaped by all these countries whose airport connectivity has been synonymous with elimination of distances, convenient transportation of people and commodities and fostering of international relations. According to Statista, the global online travel market amassed a total of 650\$ billion dollars in revenue in 2024, a number that is expected to have increased dramatically by 2030 and the years to come. Tourism is undeniably one of the world's largest business products with an insurmountable interest shown by consumers all over the world, meaning that the LCCs' role and service has been gradually growing, constituting an inextricable part of the tourism industry's widespread expansion.

Despite their economic benefits, the implications of LCC expansion are multifaceted and nuanced. Destinations reliant on budget airlines face unique challenges, including managing tourism saturation, coping with seasonality, and ensuring economic sustainability amidst competitive market conditions and fluctuating airline strategies (Dennis, 2004; Dziejczak & Warnock Smith, 2016). Due to the tourism sector being a volatile one, dependent on many external factors, some people find themselves skeptical about whether investments on this sector have been profitable or not. Additionally, recent sustainability debates and policy developments, including considerations of short-haul flight restrictions and increased scrutiny over environmental impacts, present emerging challenges that further complicate the dynamics surrounding low-cost travel (Bontemps et al., 2024).

This thesis aims to critically explore how low-cost airlines influence tourist preferences and behaviors regarding less popular European destinations. Specifically, it investigates the extent to which these airlines shape visitor demographics, tourist spending patterns, and the broader economic and social development of selected secondary cities. Moreover, it illustrates the way the three cities have managed to utilize the LCCs connectivity to their advantage and the ROI this has had on their economic growth. By comparatively analyzing Porto, Gdańsk, and Brussels-Charleroi, this research will elucidate both commonalities and differences in LCC-driven tourism impacts across

distinct regional contexts, ultimately offering insights for policymakers, tourism authorities, and regional planners.

1.1. Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The primary purpose of this thesis is to examine the role of low-cost airlines (LCCs) in reshaping tourist preferences and tourism development patterns in less popular European destinations. Over the past two decades, the rapid expansion of low-cost carriers has significantly altered the geography of tourism in Europe by lowering travel costs, increasing connectivity, and enabling destinations outside traditional tourism circuits to attract international visitors. This study seeks to understand not only whether LCCs contribute to tourism growth, but how and why this growth occurs, particularly through changes in consumer behavior and perceived accessibility.

More specifically, the thesis aims to analyze the mechanisms through which LCCs influence destination choice, travel frequency, and tourist behavior. While existing literature confirms that low fares stimulate demand, fewer studies integrate airline economics with consumer behavior theory and destination development in a single analytical framework. This thesis addresses this gap by combining insights from air transport studies, tourism economics, and behavioral theory within a multiple case study design.

The study also seeks to contribute to ongoing academic and policy debates regarding the sustainability of LCC-driven tourism growth. Although low-cost airlines generate clear economic benefits—such as increased visitor numbers, employment, and hospitality investment—they may also create structural dependencies, environmental pressures, and uneven regional development. By examining Porto, Gdańsk, and Brussels–Charleroi, this thesis evaluates both the opportunities and vulnerabilities associated with reliance on LCC connectivity.

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- Investigate how low-cost airlines influence tourist preferences for secondary European destinations;

- Analyze and delve into changes in consumer behavior associated with low-cost air travel, including price sensitivity, impulse decision-making, and short-break tourism;
- Assess and examine the role of accessibility and direct connectivity in stimulating tourism growth in secondary cities;
- Compare and contrast the economic and social impacts of LCC-driven tourism across three case studies;
- Identify sustainability challenges and long-term risks linked to destination dependence on low-cost carriers.

Through these objectives, the thesis intends to provide a thorough and elaborate understanding of the role of LCCs as catalysts and driving forces of tourism transformation, innovation and development in Europe, as well as travel accessibility boosters even for less privileged people.

1.2. Methodology Overview

This thesis adopts a qualitative research design based on bibliographical analysis and a multiple case study approach. Instead of gathering primary data through surveys and interviews, the study relies exclusively on secondary data sources, including academic literature, policy reports, industry analyses and statistical evidence related to low-cost airlines and tourism development. This methodological choice is justified by the extensive availability of high-quality research on the topic and the exploratory nature of the research questions.

1.2.1. Research Approach and Rationale

The research approach is interpretive and elaborate, intending to make the readers understand the complex relationships between low-cost airline operations, consumer behavior and destination development. A qualitative strategy is particularly appropriate given that the thesis intends to explore and delve into processes, mechanisms and behavioral patterns rather than measure causal effects quantitatively, and, therefore, the study focuses on identifying and analyzing patterns, relationships and theoretical explanations that emerge across different geographical and institutional contexts.

Moreover, one can observe that bibliographical research serves as the foundation of the case study. A wide array of sources including peer-reviewed journal articles, European

Union policy documents, airport studies, tourism research, extracts from travelogues and blog articles provide the empirical and theoretical material essential to analyze the LCC impacts from multiple points of view and scopes. Thus, this approach allows for the triangulation of findings and guarantees analytical robustness without the constraints of time, cost and access linked to primary data collection.

1.2.2 Case Study Method and Strategy

The core methodological framework of the thesis is a multiple case study design, following established methodological principles outlined by Yin (2018) and Stake (1995). Case studies are particularly suitable for research questions that ask “how” and “why”, and for topics where contextual factors play a vital role. In addition, the impact of LCCs on tourism growth and evolution shows an incredible variation which depends on local economic structures, airport characteristics and policy foundations, whose complexity and intricacy make the model of case study necessary and suitable for analysis, exploration and further commentary on the field.

In order for the case study to be formulated, three destinations were chosen:

- Porto (Portugal): The picturesque Portuguese city of the North represents one of the most successful transformations into a top-tier city-break destination that can be massively attributed to LCC expansion.
- Gdansk (Poland): The coastal Polish city of historical importance, which boasts one of the Baltic Sea’s most prominent ports, depicts how low-cost connectivity reshaped tourism and mobility patterns in a post-socialist, peripheral region.
- Brussels-Charleroi (Belgium): This Belgian city showcases a perfect example of a heavily LCC-dependent airport model that has seen both a considerable growth as well as serious vulnerabilities.

Together, these three European destinations enable the readers to draw comparisons across three totally different geographical regions of Europe and capture a wide spectrum of LCC-driven tourism outcomes.

The analytical strategy connects the case studies with the five research propositions presented in Chapter 2. Each research question is addressed through a specific analytical subsection in Chapter 4, ensuring transparency and coherence between

research design and findings. The findings and the impact of the case study are thoroughly examined in chapter 5, in a way which leaves room for discussion, consideration and further thinking. Finally, the methodology chapter outlines the structure of the thesis and clarifies how each chapter contributes to answering the research propositions. By combining bibliographical research with a structure case study approach, the thesis offers a comprehensive and theoretically grounded examination of how low-cost airlines shape tourism development in secondary European destinations.

2.Literature Review

2.1.Historical Development and Economic Context

The emergence of low-cost carriers (LCCs) has drastically reshaped aviation markets by dramatically diminishing airfares and by rendering an array of destinations accessible to travelers. According to Olipra (2012), low cost carriers were inaugurated in 1971, with the creation of the South West Airlines in the USA in 1971. He says that in Europe, aviation acts as a driving force for economic prosperity and the integration process, with the first low cost carrier being Ryanair, founded in 1985 in Ireland. According to Olipra (2012) , the LCC's most basic traits are:

- focus on minimizing costs and maximizing efficiency,
- low costs are transferred to low tariffs for consumers,
- primarily a point to point service as opposed to the hub and spoke model, direct flights between regions,
- using mostly secondary and regional airports,
- operation of newer, cleaner and more efficient aircrafts

In his analysis, Olipra (2012) states that the LCC's revenue consists in converting costs into an additional source of income, for instance, by selling meals to customers, extra legroom in their seats, and stuff such as magazines, accessories and perfumes, sometimes in better prices than in actual retail stores. Bozogán and Hurná (2018) explain that "as with the FSC such as Emirates or Austrian Airlines, the typical holiday traveler has all the services included in the fare typically and does not need to worry about any additional payments for the services he expects. On the other hand, LCC offers mostly lower fares for customers who would like to travel light, but only the basic

transport fare is included in the price, and customer needs to pay additionally for services included in the fare of FSC” (p.117). The extra services and outlets provided by the LCCs contribute massively to their revenue’s increase and can make up for the revenue that was “lost” by the tickets being sold in prices lower than the FSCs’.

2.2 Low-Cost Airlines and the Transformation of European Tourism

The rise of low-cost carriers (LCCs) has had an incredible impact on the behavioral patterns of European travelers, making air travel a more accessible and spontaneous activity. Moreno-Izquierdo et al. (2015) narrate that “the development of the low-cost carriers, particularly in Europe, has given rise to a whole range of studies in which tourism has become an element of airlines’ strategies. In fact, as we have seen, low-cost carriers have the capacity to modify, in part, the flow of tourists to new markets; in this way, we can understand that tourism is a complementary element of the development of the air transport sector (p.270). Regarding Ryanair and Easyjet in particular, they state that “When comparing Ryanair and easyJet, we can observe different strategies in the markets studied. We can see that Ryanair generally has lower prices than its rival but penalizes those users who do not know how to optimize their purchase (p.270). Moreover, Malighetti et al. (2009), state that “Ryanair makes sure to provide “special offer” periods in which fares reach their lowest” (p.198), which is part of their aggressive marketing strategies that aim to boost demand for lesser-known destinations. Based on the above rationale, one research proposition is to delve into how do low-cost airlines influence tourist preferences for less popular European destinations (RP1).

It is an undeniable fact that low-cost air travel has also democratized tourism by expanding participation across income levels and age groups. This is validated by Gossling and Upham (2009), who characterize this phenomenon as a “democratization of mobility that satisfies emotional as well as economic needs—the sense of freedom, flexibility, and accessibility previously reserved for wealthier travelers.” In the meantime, Dobruszkes (2013) underlines that “ LCC passengers are highly price-sensitive and often make their travel decisions primarily on the basis of ticket cost rather than destination image”. This price-driven decision-making helps us explain the reason why secondary destinations such as Gdansk and Porto—which were once considered to

be peripheral and not primary—have seen a tremendous growth and evolution since gaining direct low-cost connectivity.

Costa et al. (2014) underscore that LCCs typically offer fares approximately 11% lower compared to traditional full-service airlines, challenging the aviation market by giving consumers the ability to plan their trip according to their estimated budget and their needs. One cannot doubt the fact that these economic fares, especially after the 2008 crisis, have enabled middle and lower-class citizens to trot across the continent and expand their horizons, catering also for the demand of trips of families with 4 members or more, which are usually more budget-tight and more complex to organize logistically.

2.3 Expansion of Network and Accessibility Facilitations

The rise of LCCs has had a profound influence on tourism patterns, contributing massively to the enhancement of the attractiveness and accessibility of less popular European destinations, in an attempt to rapidly expand their network. Dobruszkes (2013) says that the LCCs “have taken advantage of the new member-states that entered the EU in 2004 and 2007. They have also launched new services linking Europe and Morocco, following the open-sky agreement” (p.79). “The low-cost airlines have also increased or launched services to more remote destinations (e.g. the Canaries and northern Norway, or, marginally, to Cyprus and Tunisia), involving longer flights” (p.79). Moreover, LCCs usually target small airports to establish as their bases. Graham (2013) informs that “the airport-airline relationship will, of course, depend on the type of airport, particularly in terms of size and governance model. Small airports are rarely subject to formal economic regulations which may give them more flexibility when dealing with their LCC customers. The relationship may also be more complex if there is group management of different airports as implications for the whole group or airport system have to be considered” (p.73). Moreover, LCCs’ business strategy lies in searching for airports that were once of minor regional and strategic importance. As Dennis (2004) explains, “better prospects for low-cost carrier growth perhaps lie in spreading across Europe to develop previously untapped markets. Ryanair has been the major exponent of this strategy, developing new bases at Brussels South Charleroi, Frankfurt Hahn, Stockholm Skavsta and Milan Bergamo” (p.15). However, the LCCs

operate on primary airports as well. As Kazda et al. (2020) state, “whereas traditional LCC such as Ryanair or WizzAir are deliberately using secondary airports, airlines such as easyJet or Norwegian are also operating at the primary airports” (p.96).

It is also common knowledge that the growth of air transport is closely linked to globalization, higher incomes, and deregulation. “Airlines have given rise to a socioeconomic interconnection between different countries worldwide, especially in those activities with a high international component, such as tourism” (Moreno-Izquierdo et al., 2015, p. 263). That is, countries nowadays are more linked to each other than ever, eliminating every distance between each other and giving vent to the transportation of people, goods and services.

Similarly, Eastern European cities, notably Gdańsk, Poland’s biggest port and one of the Baltic sea’s most prominent hubs, fluctuated incredibly after the introduction of the LCCs in them. Olipra (2012) and Dobruszkes (2013) indicate how destinations that were once overlooked obtained popularity swiftly, lead first and foremost by low-cost carriers' strategic planning, acute marketing tactics and network growth. Local infrastructure ameliorations and a rising number of investments in tourism amenities further enhanced these cities’ attractiveness. The transformation of Gdańsk Lech Wałęsa Airport into a regional hub vividly illustrates the role of low-cost carriers (LCCs) in expanding tourism accessibility across Eastern Europe. Following the entry of Ryanair and Wizz Air in the early 2000s, passenger numbers rose exponentially, positioning Gdańsk as one of Poland’s fastest-growing airports. As Olipra (2012) notes, “Gdańsk Lech Wałęsa Airport has experienced exponential growth in passenger numbers, largely driven by the entry of low-cost carriers such as Ryanair and Wizz Air.” This is validated from data extracted from Wikipedia, where one can observe that in 2024, Wizz Air held the largest number of passengers served by the airport, with that of 2,745,300, followed by Ryanair with 2,138,000, meaning that the first two spots were occupied by LCCs, occupying together more than the 70% of passengers that flew to and from Lech Walesa Airport, even surpassing the flag carrier of Poland, LOT Polish Airlines, which occupied the third place with only 291.500 passengers (that is, the 4.33% of the total volume of passengers). Therefore, this growth not only stimulated inbound leisure travel, but also diversified mobility patterns, with many travelers visiting family and friends or opting for short-break tourism in a city that they have never visited before. Based on the above arguments, one research proposition is to

examine how do LCCs reshape consumer behavior and decision-making for short-haul leisure travel (RP2).

In Brussels-Charleroi, the presence of Ryanair and subsequent airlines reshaped regional tourism dynamics, turning a previously marginal airport into a bustling gateway for tourists visiting Belgium and surrounding areas. According to a report from Van Nieuwenhove (2014), “in 2012, air transport and airport activities generated € 5.6 billion in direct and indirect value added (i.e. 1.5 % of Belgian GDP) and employed 66,200 people in full-time equivalents (FTEs) either directly or indirectly (1.7 % of domestic employment)” and although “Brussels Airport is the country’s biggest airport in terms of passenger traffic, but has seen its leading position somewhat eroded by Charleroi, which with Ryanair has staged robust growth in the low-cost segment” (quoted in abstract). This reflects one of the primary takeovers of secondary airports across Europe, which utilized low fees and flexible regulations to attract carriers and build a network of consumers. Dennis (2004) says that Charleroi “is situated in a depressed region of Belgium, with an industrial heritage which has historically generated little air travel. It is however well placed geographically to attract traffic from other more populous and affluent areas nearby” (p.3), meaning that its accessibility attracted LCCs that wished to facilitate traffic in the area. Based on the rationale above, one research proposition is to examine how does LCC-related accessibility affect growth in secondary European cities (RP3).

Subsequently, Porto’s enormous growth in popularity and visibility, as well as its rampant transformation into a major European city-break destination was largely driven by LCC expansion. The opening of Francisco Sa Carneiro Airport (OPO), which is located 11 km northwest of the Clerigos Tower in the city centered, has been a strategic hub for Ryanair and easyJet and has placed Porto on the podium of Europe’s top-performing secondary cities, something validated by Costa et al. (2014), who underline that “Since the re-opening of Francisco Sá Carneiro Airport, Porto’s airport– after major works to extend its capacity and quality– the number of passengers processed and consequently the numbers of tourists visiting the city and region, more than doubled” (p.416).

2.4 Consumer Behavior and Travel Decision-Making

Understanding the behavioral dynamics of tourists using LCCs is crucial to assessing their broader economic impact. It is an undeniable fact that LCC tourists are usually attracted by low-cost airlines are typically budget-sensitive, favoring shorter stays and lower total spending per visit. As Davison and Ryley (2010) highlight, “the increasing market presence of low-cost airlines, following the liberalization of the European market, has provided consumer choice and released a latent demand for air travel” (p.1). They dedicate much of their time to thoroughly plan well ahead their trip and everything involved around it, such as daily excursions, guided tours and gastronomic experiences, in order for it to accommodate their estimated budget. Subsequently, LCC pricing is elastic for leisure demand and more stable for business routes. Delving into the two major LCCs operating in Europe, Ryanair and Easyjet, we may observe that Ryanair is usually considerably cheaper but more volatile and Easyjet offers higher but mostly more stable prices instead. “Ryanair generally has lower prices than its rival but penalizes those users who do not know how to optimize their purchase. EasyJet’s variability is much lower” (p.270). Passengers increasingly perceive air travel as routine. However, they are also price and value conscious, willing to use non-traditional carriers, routers and airports to get the best fares- including low-cost carriers to smaller or regional airports.

Additionally, this type of consumer tendencies significantly shapes local tourism economies, introducing both opportunities and challenges. While increased visitor volumes boost overall economic activity, the lower individual spend per visitor may limit direct financial benefits for local businesses and destinations, requiring careful planning and policy considerations to maximize positive impacts. Furthermore, Vidovic and Steiner (2011) highlight that comprehending these consumer dynamics is crucial for crafting and implementing effective tourism strategies and marketing campaigns tailored specifically for budget-conscious travelers.

Besides, the rise and rampant expansion of LCCs has transformed consumer behavior, promoting price-sensitive travel patterns and more frequent weekend-long breaks. Olipra (2021) observes that the “opportunity of fast and cheap travels by airplane encourages people to fly.”(p.18867). This statement aligns completely with findings by Davison & Ryley (2010), who describe LCC passengers as budget-conscious, usually

favoring shorter stays and lower overall expenditure. Porta & Pantelaki (2025) confirm that LCC passengers spend significantly less than those using FSCs, emphasizing that this behavior is not solely driven by lower airfares.

Consumer behavior theory provides insight into how travelers respond to low-cost air travel opportunities. An interesting theory to mention is that of “The Theory of Planned Behavior” (Ajzen, 1991), which examines travel intentions through attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioral control. Both budget-friendly fares and straightforward booking procedures significantly boost perceived behavioral control, making travel appear more accessible and feasible. Consumers are prone to impulse bookings especially if the ticket prices are discounted, because they perceive them to be an opportunity that should not be missed. Moreover, passengers try to visualize their whole airport experience before booking their trip. As Kazda et al. (2020) reflect, “for passengers less congested airports are associated also with less processing time spent on departure and arrival because terminal buildings are smaller” (p.92). Also, “car parking is usually cheaper at smaller airports” (p.92), indicating that secondary airports, which are usually the basis of the LCCs, have been associated with small conveniences that facilitate the passengers’ travelling experience.

In this point, the concept of perceived or “chemical” distance (Verma et al., 2019) is particularly relevant. It suggests that travelers perceive destinations with direct flights as closer and more attractive, regardless of actual geographical distance. This theoretical lens is critical for understanding tourism growth in Porto and Gdańsk.

In the case of low-cost air travel, the attitude depicts the traveler’s assessment and perception of accessibility, convenience and flexibility; subjective norms demonstrate the effect of current trends on younger people (for instance, the normalization of cheap European getaways among young travelers); and perceived behavioral control is linked to the affirmation that travelling is possible, affordable and doable. Ajzen (1991) argues that perceived behavioral control strongly predicts behavior when opportunities or resources are constrained—precisely the context in which LCCs operate. Based on the arguments above, another research proposition to be examined is what economic and social impacts (RP4) result from LCC-driven tourism in Porto, Gdańsk, and Charleroi, and, to a further extend, what vulnerability and sustainability challenges arise from destination dependence on LCCs (RP5).

3.Methodology

This case study utilizes several interrelated theories and conceptual models that illustrate how low-cost airlines (LCCs) impact tourism flows, destination appeal and economic growth in lesser-known European destinations.

This case study is based on a qualitative, explanatory methodological orientation, informed by an interpretivist epistemological stance. This enables readers to immerse themselves in an analysis of the aviation and LCC landscape through a case study scope. The central objective of the study is not to establish statistical causality or predictive models, but to explain the mechanisms through which low-cost airlines shape tourist preferences, consumer behavior, and destination development in secondary European cities. Such mechanisms are placed in behavioral, economic and institutional contexts that demand interpretive analysis rather than numerical abstraction.

The study uses a theory-guided qualitative approach, in which existing theoretical frameworks give vent to the interpretation of empirical evidence , instead of being tested through hypothesis-driven models. According to Denzin & Lincoln (2018), a qualitative research is suitable for investigating social systems with independent actors and a variety in contexts. This approach is especially suitable for research questions that ask “how” and “why” rather than “how much”. The effect of low-cost airlines on tourism development includes separate procedures, such as airline network tactics, consumer decision-making, accessibility, and governance responses, which cannot be separately examined or restricted to single variables.

The interpretive orientation enables the study to delve into how tourists comprehend the concept of accessibility, how destinations react to current mobility motives, and the way policy frameworks align with airline strategies. An interpretive qualitative approach enables researchers to delve into socially constructed meanings and contexts that is not easy for them to be examined through a quantitative approach. (Creswell & Poth, 2016). It becomes clear that these phenomena are placed in a context that cannot be completely grasped through purely quantitative methods. The truth is, they are in demand of a theoretical interpretation, placed in a context that is enhanced by empirical evidence from already existing studies.

In addition, the qualitative study illustrates the investigative nature of this specific research. Although low-cost airlines have been the central point of interest for many studies, their influence on lesser-known destinations is still vaguely supported in terms of a thorough theoretical interpretation, especially when aspects such as accessibility, consumer behavior and touristic development are involved altogether. Therefore, it becomes evident that this study intends to compile fragmented pieces of literature into a coherent analytical narrative by utilizing a qualitative explanatory design.

Moreover, this orientation recognizes that tourism systems are dynamic and interrelated rather than fixed. Tourist behavior works in a responsive manner to pricing structures, accessibility changes, and social norms, meaning that the destinations need to adapt accordingly in terms of infrastructure, transportation and accommodation. A qualitative framework allows these relational dynamics to be investigated holistically, acknowledging their complexity rather than forcing excessive simplifications.

Therefore, this case study thesis relies mostly on secondary data, with a bibliographical research model being its main source of these data. Only a superficial examination of primary data, related to passenger numbers of each airport is conducted in this study, in order for readers to draw comparisons and interpret the data themselves. “Secondary data analysis is particularly appropriate when high-quality, peer-reviewed sources are available and when the research aims to compare phenomena across contexts (Saunders et al.,2019)”. Bibliographical research includes systematic identification, examination, selection, and analysis of existing academic literature, policy documents, and industry reports relevant to the research propositions.

This approach is justified for several reasons:

- Maturity of the field: The effects of low-cost airlines on tourism, consumer behavioral and regional development have been extensively studied across Europe. There is already a great body of expert-reviewed literature on the Internet.
- Comparative Scope: Bibliographical research allows for comparison across multiple geographical contexts without the logistical constraints of primary data collection.
- Theoretical integration: The study aims to integrate theories from tourism studies, behavioral economics and air transport research. Secondary literature

provides the necessary theoretical background for this integration to be achieved.

The data sources include academic journals in tourism and transport studies, European Union policy reports, airport development analyses, and empirical case studies focusing on Porto, Gdańsk, and Brussels–Charleroi. Webster & Watson (2002) support that a thorough literature-based approach includes recognizing patterns, explanations, mechanisms and causal relationships instead of just giving glimpses of previous studies.

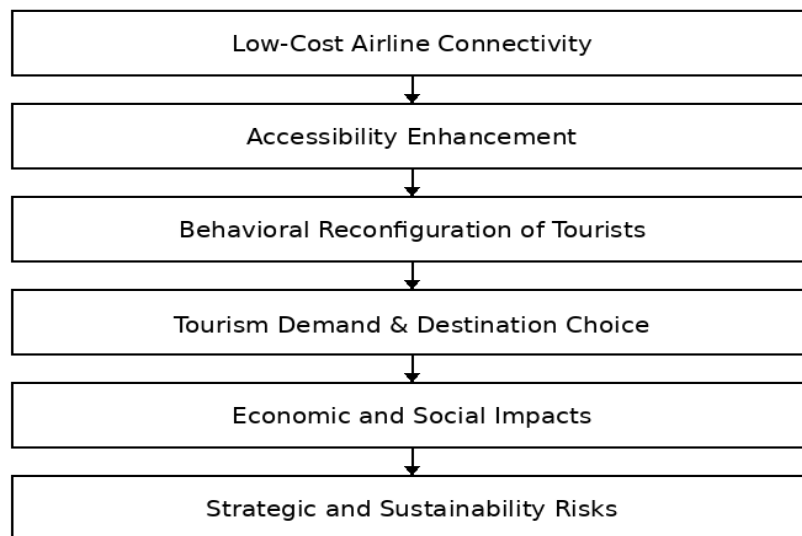


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of low-cost airline impacts on secondary European destinations

3.1. Justification for the Case Study Method

In spite of the fact that this thesis is reliant on literature, its structure renders it a multi-faceted case study that seeks to analyze and deep dive into three specific European destinations in order for the readers to comprehend the way their connectivity with other destinations through the presence of the LCCs has catapulted them into relevance. In this way, readers are able to give answers to any questions arising with “how” and “why” and when the phenomenon under investigation is embedded within its real-world context (Yin, 2018). Moreover, a case study methodology is of utmost importance in

cases where the scope of the research is to grasp complicated phenomena within their real-world context and when the boundaries between these phenomena and their context are opaque (Yin, 2018). The impact of low-cost airlines on tourism evolution consists in local economic structures, institutional arrangements, and spatial configurations, making case study logic especially suitable.

This study employs a comparative multiple case study design, in which each case is examined individually and then orderly compared across common analytical dimensions. This design enables both within-case analysis (to understand context-specific dynamics) and cross-case analysis (to identify common mechanisms and divergent outcomes).

The analytical logic of the case study design is theory-informed but inductively applied. Rather than experimenting with predefined hypotheses, the study utilizes frameworks, such as the destination accessibility theory, the consumer behavior theory, and airline economics– as interpretive lenses through which empirical evidence is investigated. It becomes evident that this enables theoretical concepts to guide the analysis without restricting it.

Each case study is analyzed according to the same core dimensions:

- accessibility and connectivity changes
- consumer behavior responses,
- tourism development outcomes
- economic social effects, and
- sustainability and vulnerability considerations

This analytical consistency enhances comparability while preserving sensitivity to local context.

Furthermore, the multiple case study design strengthens analytical generalization. While the findings are not statistically generalizable, they contribute to theory-building by demonstrating how similar mechanisms operate under different regional conditions.

Porto, Gdańsk, and Brussels–Charleroi thus function as analytical examples, illustrating broader patterns of LCC-driven tourism development in Europe.

Moreover, the case study philosophy is also inextricably linked to the research propositions. Each research proposition is addressed through specific case-based evidence, ensuring coherence between research design, analysis and conclusions. “Case study research emphasizes understanding phenomena within their specific contexts rather than isolating variables from their environments (Stake, 1995).

Low-cost airline impacts vary significantly depending on:

- airport characteristics,
- regional economic structures,
- tourism maturity, and
- governance and policy frameworks.

A case study approach allows these contextual factors to be examined holistically rather than treated as background noise (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

3.2 Case Selection and Rationale

Three case studies were selected:

Porto (Portugal): Porto constitutes a great instance of how an overlooked European city has been transformed into one of continent’s most demanded destinations, through the presence of the LCCs. The case allows examination of how LCCs influence tourist preferences, destination image, and urban tourism development. Porto leveraged its growing LCC network to attract European weekend tourists, boosting year-round visitation. In network-theory terms, Porto’s success reflects reduced “chemical distance” (Verma et al., 2019) and enhanced connectivity (Jiménez & Suau-Sánchez, 2020). The city’s accessibility index surged as Ryanair and easyJet introduced over 70 direct European connections, establishing Porto as a key node within the LCC route web and enabling its access by various European countries, massively contributing to its growth in popularity among European consumers.

Gdansk (Poland): The Polish city of Gdansk constitutes a perfect instance of how low-cost airlines reshape consumer behavior and mobility patters in a peripheral and post-

socialist context. The city is particularly relevant for studying impulsive travel, weekend-long tourism and the vital role of accessibility, the popularity and visibility of a destination that does not constitute neither the capital nor the second largest city of a country, especially in a country where its two largest cities have seen enormous touristic flows (Warsaw and Krakow). In addition, Gdansk became accessible to Western and Northern European markets such as the UK, Norway and Germany, facilitating cultural and heritage tourism. It is an undeniable fact that leisure tourists are in search of ease, convenience and stress-free procedures. Verma, Rebelo & Araújo (2019) demonstrate that “tourists prefer direct links” and that perceived, or “chemical,” distance often outweighs physical distance in shaping travel decisions. The introduction of direct low-cost flights to Gdańsk from major Western European cities significantly reduced these perceived barriers, integrating the Polish coast into Europe’s mainstream tourism network.

Brussels-Charleroi (Belgium): Charleroi exemplifies an airport-based development model, characterized by strong dependence on low-cost carriers. This case highlights both the benefits and vulnerabilities associated with LCC-driven tourism growth.

Together, these cases provide geographical diversity (Southern, Eastern, and Western Europe) and represent different stages and models of LCC integration.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

- The data analysis followed a thematic synthesis approach:
- Identification of recurring themes in the literature (accessibility, consumer behavior, economic impact, sustainability).
- Mapping of these themes onto the three case studies.
- Cross-case comparison to identify similarities and differences.
- Interpretation of findings in relation to the five research questions.

This approach ensures analytical transparency and consistency between the theoretical framework and empirical analysis.

4.Detailed Case Studies

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of three secondary European destinations that have experienced substantial tourism growth as a consequence of the nowadays omnipresent low-cost carrier (LCC) operations: Porto in Portugal, Gdansk in Poland and Charleroi in Belgium. Low-cost carriers tend to operate from the low-cost terminals of traditional airports or from smaller regional airports. Low-cost carriers in turn contribute to improving accessibility, the number of destinations available, and enable some destinations served by regional airports and their local economy to grow. These three destinations serve as spot-on examples of how the influence of LCC has left an indelible footprint upon their financial growth, infrastructure development, urban planification and cultural revitalization.

Dimension	Porto	Gdansk	Brussels-Charleroi
Role of LCCs	Destination Activation	Behavioural Shift	Getaway Access
Tourism Type	City-Break	Short-Break	Redistribution
Dependency Level	Medium	Medium	High
Key Risk	Overtourism	Demand Volatility	Concentration Risk

Figure 2: Comparative Overview of the Three Case studies

4.1 Porto, Portugal: Tourist Preferences and Influence (RP1)

4.1.1 Structural Transformation of Porto's Tourism System

LCCs stimulated demand for new, secondary destinations, similar in scale to the rise of Mediterranean resorts in the 1960s (Forsyth, 2003). "The emergence of the LCCs has generated a change in the behavior of users, together with an interest in secondary destinations" (Moreno-Izquierdo et al., 2015, p.264). Nowadays, consumers opt for more economical destinations. It is an undeniable fact that not all travelers are able to

afford quintessential luxury destinations such as Dubai or Singapore. Casual city breaks to walkable European cities, which are usually off the radar, are more than preferred by European travelers who wish to add another country to their bucket list without straining their budget. To this point, Davison and Ryley (2010) highlight that low-cost airline users are mostly driven by the affordable prices and effective service rather than comfort or loyalty.

Historically overlooked and overshadowed by Lisbon as Portugal's main air hub, Porto's Francisco Sá Carneiro Airport primarily served domestic and a few European full service carrier routes until the middle of the 2000s decade. However, the turning point came in 2005 when Ryanair opened a base at Porto, later joined by easyJet in 2007 and Wizz Air in 2019. Ever since, Porto has turned into one of Europe's leading city break destinations, attracting hundreds of visitors from all over the continent. Costa et al. (2014) confirm these statements by explaining that "the arrival of low-cost airlines to Porto airport has opened the doors to European tourists" (p.416). The budget friendly ticket fares together with its Mediterranean climate, rich cuisine and culture, together with its distinctive Porto wine, make Porto one of Portugal's must visit places that should be included in everyone's bucket list. Most Western European countries offer affordable tickets to Porto, enhancing its accessibility and convenient transit from and to its airport.

Porto's emergence as a prominent European city-break hotspot is a perfect example of the way low-cost airline connectivity can drastically reshape and redirect tourism mobility in a secondary city. Prior to the mid-2000s, Porto's international tourism profile was limited and invisible, characterized by modest inbound flows and huge dependence on domestic tourism. In 2001, according to data derived from Wikipedia, 2,771,169 passengers flew to and from Oporto, with 15,930,000 passengers flying in 2024, a number that quintupled within almost 25 years. The expansion of low-cost airline services, especially those of Ryanair and easyJet, drastically changed the city's position within European tourism networks.

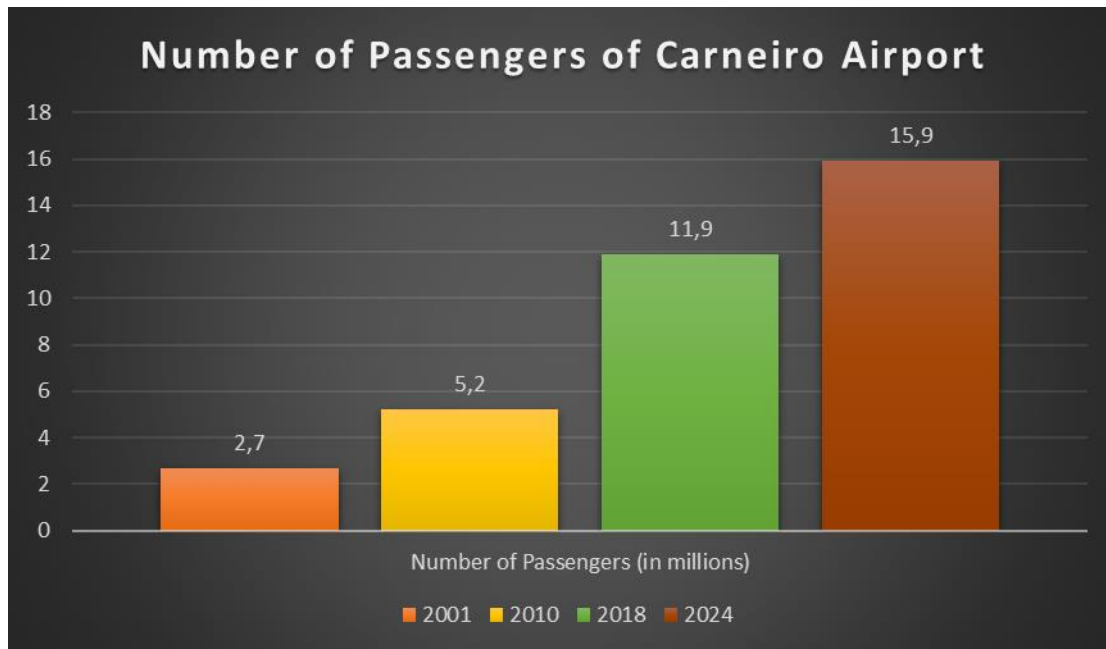


Figure 3: Number of Passengers of Francisco Sa Carneiro Airport across Three Different Decades according to Wikipedia

The rates are impressive. It is evident that the rise in number from 2010 to 2018 was the greatest one, from 5,2 million passengers in 2010 to 11,9 million ones in 2018. This can be attributed, first, to the expansion of the LCCs during the 2010s and a rise in number of their connections and, to a huge part, to the widespread expansion of social media in the 2010s, when people started actively sharing snapshots from their travel experiences with their social media friends, popularizing travelling.

From a structural perspective, low-cost airlines acted as accessibility mediators, incorporating Porto into a dense and complex network of short-haul routes that reduced both monetary and temporal travel costs. Empirical studies indicate that destinations experiencing such connectivity ameliorations often undergo rapid and significant tourism growth due to the expansion of their efficient market reach (Malighetti et al., 2009). In Porto’s case, increased accessibility coincided with rising international arrivals, diversification of tourist markets, and accelerated investment in tourism infrastructure.

Before LCC entry, annual passenger traffic stood at approximately 3.9 million (2004); by 2023, this figure had surged to over 13 million (ANA Aeroportos, 2024). Much of this growth is inextricably linked to LCC expansion, which introduced dozens of direct connections across Europe. The rampant expansion of social media has also played a

vital role in this enormous surge. It is an undeniable fact that social media allows people to share their travel experiences with their online friends, exchange trip ideas and get inspiration from others' trips. This has given rise to the popularity of travel content creators, online travel documentaries and blogs, with the demand for lesser-known destinations drastically increasing. The travelers' movement from one place to another has reached an all-time high frequency with unprecedented demand for airport connectivity across the continent. Therefore, the demand for a more effective connectivity between European destination is of utmost importance, which is one of the LCCs most prevalent missions: to eliminate distances between cities by facilitating the transport of people and goods between major hubs and secondary destinations.

4.1.2 Tourism Growth and Market Profile

According to Costa et al. (2014), the tourists visiting the city “are mostly from Spain, France, England, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Switzerland, and in the case of the markets of origin from outside Europe, the USA and Brazil take the lead. The main tourist activities during their visit are experiencing the gastronomy, enjoying the scenery, shopping, buying crafts and visiting monuments”. (p.425). The high frequency of flights gives place to spontaneous short visits, especially over weekends, in line with Destination Accessibility Theory. According to Olipra (2012), “59% of passengers of cheap airlines are people who are creating new demand, 71% of them declare that without cheap airlines they would not have travelled at all” (p.46). That means that the LCCs have made travelling accessible to a wide range of people and their contribution has been adamant in promoting lesser-known destinations and showing their history, food, culture and people.

4.1.3 Reconfiguration of Tourist Preferences

Olipra (2012) explicitly states that “low-cost airlines are significant for the development of weekend, city or short-break tourism and effect a radical expansion of potential destinations” (p.48). According to him again, “Reports indicate that the development of LCCs resulted in more frequent but shorter trips”, meaning that consumers may position quantity over quality, and that should not surprise us; opting for two low budget trips may be more economical than visiting a major city, like Paris. LCCS enable travelers to compare prices between the destinations served by the carriers and tailor their trip according to their budget. This has given rise to the surge of numerous hotels

and airbnbs that can cater for the demand of the tourists visiting each city, with this demand growing stronger every year, creating a whole new industry of hotels, restaurants and outlets, boosting the city's economy, presence and influence in the region. Porto is now one of the Iberian Peninsula's most sought after cities, posing in travelogues such as National Geographic, Lonely Planet and Taste Atlas. According to Kerry Walker from Lonely Planet, "straddling the mouth of the Douro River with elegant bridges and painted houses tripping up gentle hillsides, Porto has soared in popularity with travelers in recent years". Popular activities include drinking coffee in the Ribeira riverside district, visiting wine cellars to try the region's famous Douro wines and taking a tram ride to Foz do Douro.

It is an undeniable fact that tourist arrivals to Porto, as we have already seen, doubled within a decade, coinciding directly with Ryanair's route expansion. Regarding Porto, Costa et al. (2014) highlight that ".in recent years ,there has been a continuing and sustained growth in its tourism performance indicators and, in particular, for its international tourist arrivals" (p.414).However, as Porta and Pantelaki (2025), explain "air travelers spend approximately 18.4% more than those using other modes of transport, and LCCs' tourists are associated with significantly lower total tourism expenditure" (p.1). This does not mean that LCC travelers are not synonymous with a rise in revenue streams generated by tourists; it means that they probably require more streams of tourists to reach quite a considerable surge in revenue generated by such activities. This is supported by Costa et al.(2014), who state that "the growth of low-cost airlines as a core element of Porto airport's business has been gradual but incremental (p.417). In 2011, low cost carriers represented 33 per cent of total movements", showing that they are highly responsible for the crowds visiting the region and contributing to its development.

Consequently, the case of Porto is one of the most characteristic instances of how the effective connectivity of a LCC can reshape the dynamics of a secondary destination which for years had been overshadowed by the country's capital (Lisbon) and its coastal cities in the South (Alentejo, Portimão Faro) . "Porto airport has made a very significant contribution to the success and development of both the city and the region. (Costa et al, 2014 , p.425). Consequently, Porto's cultural, gastronomic, and urban attributes became central to its tourism appeal, once it became more accessible via its effective airport connectivity. National Geographic (2021) suggests that Porto is "easier to

navigate than its bigger sibling, Lisbon, and quickly garnering culinary accolades, it's no longer a city of the 'bishops and the bourgeois', as it was once known — it's a heart-singly vibrant place where food and wine take centre stage". With Portugal being one of the most popular Southern European countries and a prevalent touristic destination, Porto's emergence as a major destination choice is inextricably linked to the establishment of Francisco Sá Carneiro Airport (OPO) as one of Ryanair's and Easyjet's major hubs.

4.2 Gdańsk: Consumer Behavior and Decision Making (RP2)

4.2.1 Integration into European Mobility Networks

Gdańsk's tourism development trajectory showcases how low-cost airline connectivity redefines consumer behavior in peripheral regions. Historically restrained by limited international connectivity and poor promotion strategies, the city experienced increased integration into European mobility networks following the entry of LCCs, particularly Wizz Air and Ryanair (Olipra, 2012). These connections established Gdańsk as a viable destination for short leisure trips, especially from Scandinavia and Western Europe, with an ever-increasing popularity in other European markets as well. Being Poland's quintessential maritime city, its Hanseatic heritage is a cram of Polish, Germanic and Baltic influence in the region that shaped the city. Popular activities include strolling around Śródmieście district, visiting the National Maritime Museum and the island of Wyspa Spichrzów, which is connected to the rest of the city by bridges (Lonely Planet, 2012).

4.2.2 Impulsivity and Short-Horizon Decision-Making

One of the LCC's induced tourism characteristics is impulsiveness. Behavioral studies showcase that cheap fares in conjunction with straight-forward booking procedure, boost immediate purchasing patterns and diminish planning time (Vidović & Steiner, 2011). Gdańsk exhibits a high prevalence of weekend travel and short-notice bookings, consistent with this behavioral model. The city's walkable structure caters for a stress-free weekend getaway, enabling visitors to visit all the main sightseeings within walking distance.

In addition, Davison and Ryley (2010) pose an interesting argument, suggesting that low-cost travel marks a shift from duration based to frequency-based tourism consumption, favoring short-term frequent stays instead of longer and more sporadic ones. In this fast-paced world, where people do not have much money and resources under their disposal to travel, short-term travelling is the type of touristic activity most of them opt for, instead of opting for a longer, more budget-straining and more logistically complicated trip. Therefore, this behavioral shift can have various procedural and structural implications for cities, as it drastically redirects accommodation demand, aggravates seasonal patterns and requires revenue redistribution, among others.

4.2.3 Price Sensitivity and Destination Substitutability

It can be said that Gdansk's tourism mobility is inextricably linked to a high elasticity of prices that fluctuate depending on tourism demand. It becomes evident that Tourists visiting the city most frequently show poor destination loyalty, selecting Gdansk primarily due to favorable airline conditions. Mason (2001) suggests that such elasticity increases destination substitutability, rendering tourism flows more volatile and prone to airline pricing strategies.

Therefore, the instance of Gdańsk is a vivid example of how low-cost airlines can help a lesser-known city reinvent itself as a considerable destination choice, despite low destination loyalty. In the early and mid 2000s, the major operating airline in the Polish airports was the Polish LOT, something validated by Ślusarczyk & Baryń (2016), who claim that in 2005 the largest market share had LOT (43.81%) (p.628). This changed incredibly with the arrival of Wizz Air and Ryanair, with an impressive surge in international arrivals in the next few years. According to findings from Ślusarczyk & Baryń (2016), "in 2014, the biggest share in the aviation market in Poland recorded Irish Ryanair, which handled more than 1/4 of all passengers" (p.628). Ten years later, examining data from Wikipedia related to passenger flows in Gdansk airport, we can observe that in 2024, Wizz Air held the largest number of passengers served by the airport, with that of 2,745,300, followed by Ryanair with 2,138,000, meaning that the first two spots were occupied by LCCs, occupying together more than the 70% of passengers that flew to and from Lech Walesa Airport, even surpassing the flag carrier

of Poland, LOT Polish Airlines, which occupied the third place with only 291.500 passengers (that is, the 4.33% of the total volume of passengers).

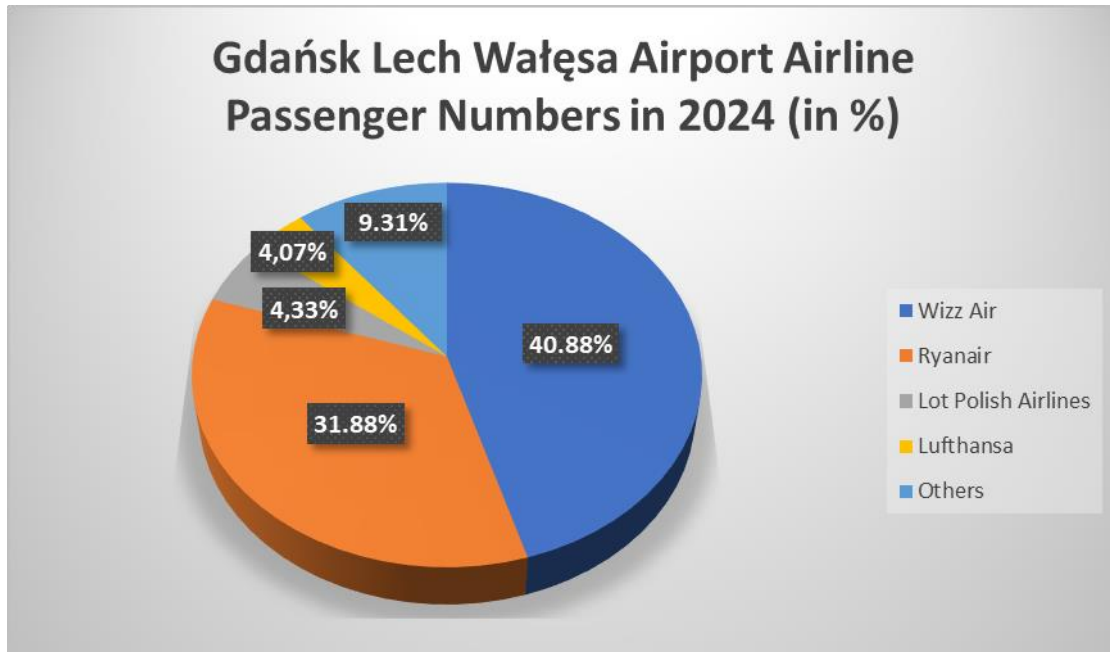


Figure 4: Gdansk Lech Walesa Airport Passenger Numbers by each Airline, according to Wikipedia

Beyond simple increases in tourism volume, the LCCs introduced new kinds of mobility, including VFR (that is, visiting friends and relatives) , short break recreation travel and seasonal flows. In Gdansk’s case, the Baltic port city reintroduced itself as an appealing weekend destination mostly for Scandinavian and British tourists, with many selecting it not because of popularity but because of opportunistic fare availability. Dobruszkes (2013) validates that “LCC passengers are highly price sensitive and often make their travel decisions primarily on the basis of ticket cost rather than destination image”. The inflation of the prices, especially after the COVID-19 era, has drastically changed the travel landscape, leading to the international recognition of lesser-known cities and their appearance in the possible travelers’ bucket list.

Economically, the city saw an incredible surge in employment and job opportunities, notable hospitality investment, and revitalization of the waterfront and Old Town. Nonetheless, Olipra (2012) warns that the Polish regional airport system remains heavily dependent on LCCs, raising concerns about long term vulnerability. This codependent relationship could seriously damage the city’s tourism, which has been traditionally overshadowed by the country’s two major cities, Warsaw and Krakow,

with the latter one attracting even more tourists than the capital itself. Gdansk's success, while impressive, is therefore structurally sensitive to shifts in Ryanair and Wizz Air strategic choices. This makes it crucial for the city to highlight its identity and all these features that distinguish it from the rest of the Polish cities, in order for it to present itself as a strong destination candidate that is not merely a last-minute choice for budget-tight consumers, but, is instead a notable cultural and historical hub of the country.

To conclude with, the case of Gdansk validates the affirmation that the presence and widespread promotion of low-cost carriers reshape the consumers' behavior by promoting impulsive travel and short-break tourism, making these behavioral dynamics an inextricable part of the LCC philosophy.

4.3 Brussels–Charleroi: Accessibility, Gateway Functions, and Tourism Growth (RP3)

4.3.1 Brussels–Charleroi as an Airport-Led Tourism System

Almost everybody is familiar with the fact that Brussels-Charleroi Airport constitutes quite a unique case in the European low-cost aviation landscape, due to its development trajectory being mostly airport led rather than destination led. Charleroi does not rank highly among the most visited cities in Belgium and can mostly be considered a transition point and a passageway to other major cities in the Benelux region: Antwerp, Ghent, Brussels, Brygge and Liege in Belgium, Amsterdam, the Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht in the Netherlands and Luxembourg city in Luxembourg are some of the most notable cities of the region that can easily and effectively accessed by Charleroi airport through an array of means of transport that have been established for this specific purpose. One of the most popular companies operating in that way is *Flibco* which offers airport shuttle connections to and from Charleroi, facilitating the travelers' experience by securing safe and convenient transportations. Charleroi's position as a getaway to other major cities is the reason why it is seriously overlooked by tourists. In stark contrast to Porto and Gdansk, where low-cost airline connectivity further enhanced already existing tourism assets, Charleroi's growth can be attributed to its function as a low-cost junction within a wider regional tourism system and the city has still not managed to present itself as a considerable touristic hotspot, for a variety of reasons (dull architecture, lack of sightseeing, lack of popularity).

Prior to the expansion of low-cost airline operations, Charleroi played a negligible role in Belgium's aviation infrastructure and development. The establishment of a low-cost carrier base carrier base, and specifically Ryanair, played a distinctive role in the transition of the airport's operational capacity and regional influence, by making it one of its most accessible airport bases, with more or less 115 connections to other European and Mediterranean destinations, as of 2026, as it is evidently seen on the airline's website. According to Van Nieuwenhove (2014), "Charleroi is the fastest growing Belgian airport in terms of passenger numbers: traffic surged by 276 % in the decade between 2003 and 2013" (p.51) , emphasizing that "its surging numbers are due to Ryanair" (p.9). This transformation depicts how low-cost airlines can convert peripheral infrastructure into strategically significant mobility hubs, even in the absence of strong intrinsic destination appeal.

From an analytical standpoint, Charleroi epitomizes a supply-driven accessibility model, where tourism flows are determined primarily by airline network decisions rather than destination demand. This model differs substantially from demand-driven tourism observed in more established urban destinations. Yet, it can still be a profitable touristic model that can contribute massively to a surge in revenue coming from touristic activity and sales in the region: not in the form of accommodation and hotels but, instead, in the form of transfers from and to Brussels and other cities, souvenir shops for last-minute purchases and 24-hour operating restaurants for passengers with long intervals between transit flights.

4.3.2. Accessibility, Perceived Effort and Getaway Tourism

Destination accessibility theory states that tourism development is reliant not only on physical connectivity but also on reductions in perceived effort, uncertainty and complexity associated with travel. In the case of Charleroi, low-cost airline connectivity substantially lowered these barriers, positioning the airport as a cost-efficient entry point to Belgium and neighboring regions.

In addition, Jimenez and Suau-Sanchez claim that such accessibility improvements enhance destination competitiveness by expanding the number of potential visitors and enabling flexible, short-haul travel. Charleroi's extensive low-cost route network facilitates inbound tourism flows to Brussels, Wallonia, and adjacent regions, effectively redistributing tourism spatially across the country.

Nevertheless, this gateway operation poses an important analytical distinction: Charleroi acts primarily as a point of entry, a transit point, rather than a tourism hotspot that could attract visitors in its own right. That is, the majority of inbound passengers use the airport to access Brussels or other Belgian cities, limiting the direct capture of tourism-related value by the immediate airport region. Charleroi has been traditionally overlooked by tourists, who do not engage in exploring its history, culture and gastronomy and opt for the most touristic cities of the region. Its industrial vibe, together with the sense of abandonment that prevails in the city and its uneven street layout, has not left much room for touristic infrastructure development and urban revitalization. This does not mean, however, that the city's importance and strategic position is negligible; it solely means that it is serving a completely different purpose than the two other cities of the case study.

4.3.3 Redistribution Effects and Limited Local Value Capture

It becomes clear that the Charleroi case strongly validates the argument that low-cost airlines usually redistribute tourism demand instead of causing entirely new tourism activity in the city itself. Dobruszkes (2013) states that LCC networks frequently reallocate passenger flows from primary hubs to secondary airports without essentially altering the final destination choice. The airport of Charleroi has all it takes to attract investors wishing to launch outlet-related activity in the region such as transfers, souvenirs and fast-food for travelers that use the city as their transit point, as it has been mentioned before.

In Charleroi, this redistribution effect becomes visible in several ways:

- Tourism expenditure is concentrated outside the airport's immediate surroundings and region.
- Hotels, apartments and other types of accommodation in the city are not nearly as much benefited as those in Brussels.
- The airport region remains economically dependent on aviation-related employment rather than diversified tourism development.

This pattern underscores the importance of differentiating between accessibility gains and destination development outcomes. While accessibility may increase passenger volumes, it does not automatically translate into sustained local tourism growth.

The Brussels-Charleroi case showcases that low-cost airline accessibility can catapult a city into tourism activity growth and economic development through gateway and redistribution effects. While the airport's connectivity works as a catalyst for Belgium's overall tourism accessibility, the benefits are still spatially uneven and inextricably linked to effective airline strategies. This finding shows the limits of accessibility-led tourism development in the absence of complementary destination-level assets and governance regulatory mechanisms.

Consequently, the Brussels-Charleroi case demonstrates that low-cost airline-related accessibility can stimulate tourism growth primarily through gateway and redistribution effects. While the airport's connectivity enhances Belgium's overall tourism accessibility, the benefits remain spatially uneven and highly contingent on airline strategy. This finding highlights the limits of accessibility-led tourism development in the absence of complementary destination-level assets and governance mechanisms.

4.4 Cross-Case Analysis: Economic and Social Impacts of LCC-Driven Tourism (RP4)

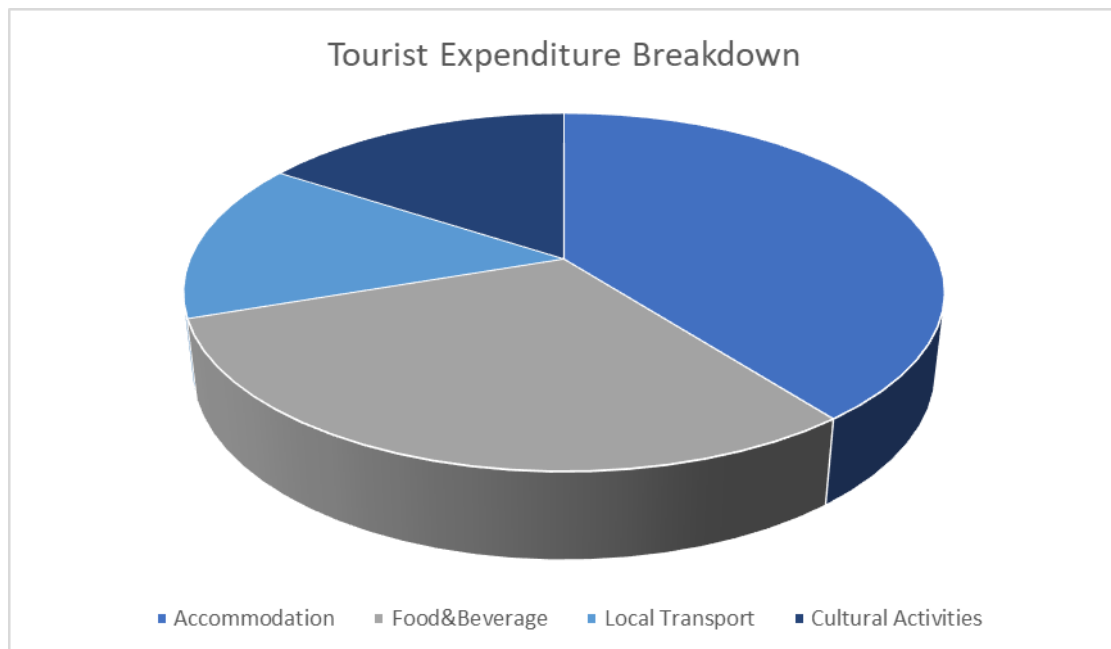


Figure 5: Tourism Expenditure Breakdown

4.4.1. Comparative Economic Outcomes

It is evidently seen that a cross-case comparison unveils that low-cost airline connectivity produces significant economic effects across all the three destinations, with the magnitude of these effects varying substantially. The first two cities, Porto and Gdansk, have seen remarkable growth and have exhibited destination-centered development that is surrounded by a striking number of increased overnight stays, investment in their hospitality infrastructure and services and urban spaces development and regeneration. In stark contrast to these, Charleroi's economic benefits are diffuse and mainly infrastructure-centered, concentrated around airport operations rather than destination-centered growth.

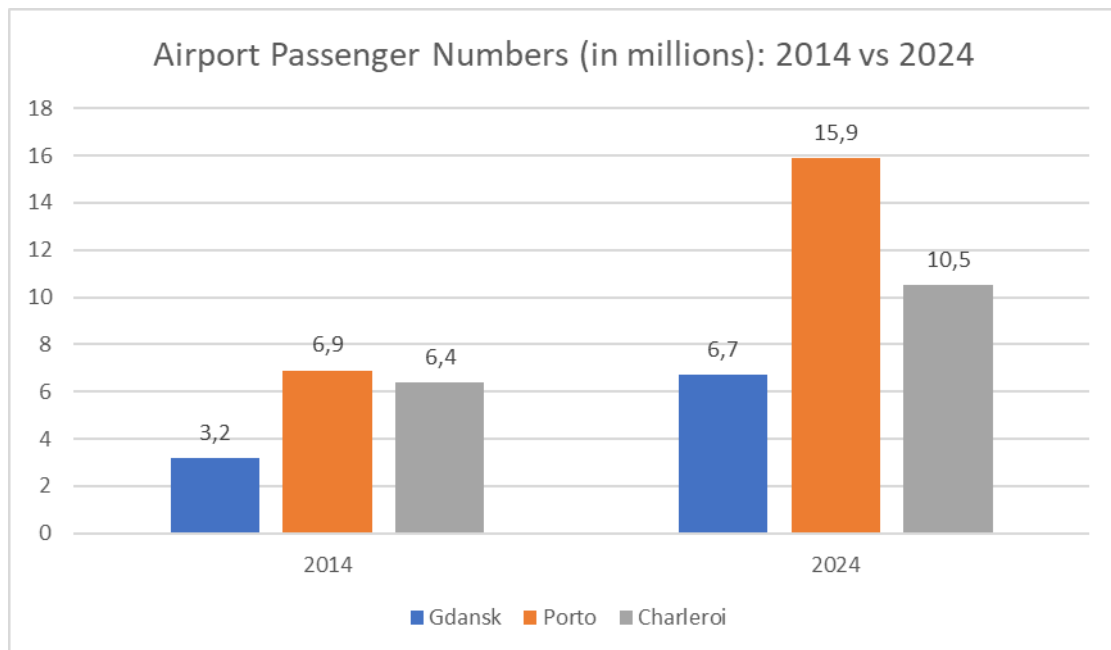


Figure 6: Airport Passenger Numbers in Each of the Three Airports in 2014 and in 2024, according to Wikipedia

The passenger volumes speak for themselves: comparing the numbers from two different years that have a decade gap, 2014 and 2024, we can observe an impressive surge in the passenger flows in all of the three airports: Gdansk saw an increase of 3,5 million passengers (from 3,2 to 6,7 in 2024), Charleroi saw an increase of 4,1 million passengers (from 6,4 in 2014 to 10,5 in 2024), with Porto marking the highest increase, with 9 million passengers (from 6,9 million in 2014 to 15,9 million in 2024).

These numbers can be justified, to a huge point, to the LCCs presence in these airports. However, we can see the difference in the way each destination uses this rise in passenger numbers to their advantage. Destinations such as Porto and Gdansk, that are already well-known among the European travelers and have already established experiential, urban and cultural assets, are more likely to utilize their increasing accessibility to their favor in order to boost their touristic development and present themselves as top-tier destination picks. According to BBC Travel, “there’s a dreamlike quality to Porto – a tumbledown, romantic city of medieval relics, soaring bell towers and stately beaux-arts buildings. Further afield, the wine country of Alto Douro contains some of Portugal’s most appealing countryside” (2012). Regarding the Polish city of Gdansk, it suggests that “it is a 1,000-year old port city with a dramatic history of war and insurrection and contrasting periods of trade and prosperity” (2017). These statements validate the affirmation that the two cities boost a strong and timeless historical and cultural relevance that contributed to their establishment as considerable touristic destinations whose relevance was further reinforced by the LCC connectivity. Where such assets are limited, as in Charleroi, economic gains remain constrained, meaning that Charleroi has historically been, and to a huge part still is, a “ghost” city.

4.4.2. Employment and Sectoral Effects

The way the LCCs expansion has impacted employment opportunities and job offers differs significantly in each case. In Porto and Gdansk, tourism growth has been synonymous with new job opportunities and has continuously boosted employment across multiple sectors, including accommodation, food services, cultural industries and urban services. These effects contributed to broader urban economic revitalization that has been synonymous with touristic development and surge in the number of people interested in working in the tourism sector of the cities.

In Charleroi, employment effects were more narrowly concentrated within airport-related services, reinforcing dependence on aviation activity rather than fostering diversified tourism employment. This suggests that the presence of the LCCs and their investment in this particular airport did not bring up major shifts in tourism mobility in the area, with no major investments in the HORECA industry of the city, restricting it in its role as a transit point to Brussels.

4.4.3 Social Impacts with Urban Pressures

Social impacts associated with LCC-driven tourism can be characterized as uneven across the three cases. Porto, which ranks first as the most successful tourism destination out of the three, with an impressive amount of tourism flow across the city, faces significant challenges related to gentrification, housing affordability and tourist congestion. Like many other European cities, the city struggles with inflated rent prices that can partially be attributed to a sudden surge in the number of houses transformed into Airbnbs to cater for the high touristic demand of the Portuguese city. According to data from Airroi.com, there are 8.433 active Airbnb listings in Porto, with an average daily rate of 137\$. The median annual revenue of 22.525\$ means that flats turned into Airbnbs is quite a profitable move that enables landowners to optimize their flat's profitability. These pressures reflect the intensity and spatial concentration of tourism demand within the historic urban core.

Gdansk experiences more moderate social effects, with seasonal congestion and quite a volatile demand that has still a long way to stabilize. Charleroi's social impacts are significantly limited, reflecting its weaker destination identity and lower tourism density.

4.4.4. Institutional and Governmental Mediators

The cross-case analysis underlines the role of governance in producing tourism outcomes from the LCCs' presence in each one of the three cities. Arising questions such as housing regulation, destination management and municipal planning strategies have a notable impact on how tourism development is absorbed and distributed and can determine whether a city can succeed touristically or not. Furthermore, local and municipal authorities need to establish a framework in which these cities can thrive and maximize their potential in order to attract visitors in a manner that can benefit them rather than exhausting their financial sources. Porto's challenges reflect the consequences of rapid tourism expansion in the absence of adequate regulatory frameworks. According to an article published on Bloomberg in 2024 by Sonja Wind, "like many cities, Porto, Portugal, is fighting to keep housing affordable for locals while serving the needs of a growing tourism industry", highlighting that "Airbnb and other home-sharing platforms have been blamed for exacerbating the housing crisis in many

cities”, confirming the existence of a problem that has plagued many touristic destinations for the past few years, working many times against their favor.

Therefore, the comparative analysis demonstrates that LCC-driven tourism generates substantial economic and benefits that vary in each destination. The challenge for each destination is to turn these benefits to their advantage in order to achieve sustainable development, financial prosperity and touristic growth.

4.5 Vulnerabilities and Sustainability Challenges of LCC-Driven Tourism (RP5)

4.5.1. Strategic Dependence and Network Volatility

It is a fact that low-cost airline networks are inherently flexible and profit-driven, enabling rapid route adjustments that can respond to the aviation market requirements. Although this flexibility is a major benefit for the airlines, it makes destinations more reliant on a limited number of carriers, rendering them, thus, more vulnerable. As Graham (2013) states, “many airports serving LCCs have experienced dramatic growth rates in passengers, but at the same time have had to respond and adapt to the characteristic volatile nature of such airlines. As a result in the USA, Europe and elsewhere, there have been substantial changes in the network and spatial distribution of short-haul air services and the role that airports now play” (p. 66).

Charleroi represents the most characteristic instance of heavy dependence on the LCCs’ presence, whose operations are mainly determined and controlled by Ryanair. Although Porto and Gdansk are significantly less dependent on such operations, they are pretty much exposed to network uncertainty and volatility due to the strategies implemented by the LCCs, which are prone to sudden network changes in case the demand for a destination is too low.

4.5.2 Environmental Sustainability Constraints

The development of low-cost short-haul travel raises fundamental environmental concerns. A rising flight frequency has aggravated carbon emissions, something that is contradictory to European climate objectives. As Alamettälä (2025) explains, “environmental concerns are a key driver of sustainability initiatives in the aviation

Industry” (p.21). From a policy perspective, secondary destinations rely on LCCs heightened exposure to future regulatory interventions, such as carbon pricing, flight restrictions, or subsidy limitations, showing that their sustainability is a multi-faceted action. Moreover, the author adds that “the EU’s regulatory environment is also ever-changing with sustainability goals and policy measures that can be liable to changes in the light of political, economic or technological factors’ (p.81), showing that a strong regulatory sustainability framework needs to be implemented, as it will be discussed in the following chapters.

4.5.3. Strategic Implications for Destination Planning

The findings suggest that sustainable tourism development requires diversification beyond low-cost airline connectivity. Destinations should:

- Reduce dependence on single carriers,
- Strengthen non-air accessibility,
- Diversify Tourism Products and markets, and
- Integrate Environmental Considerations into Tourism Planning

Therefore, this analysis confirms that although low-cost airlines have extended their accessibility and have given opportunities for tourism growth, at the same time they induce vulnerabilities associated with strategic dependence, policy uncertainty and environmental sustainability. It is thus, essential to address these challenges in order to secure the long-term durability and livability of such LCC-driven tourism models.

5.Impact of the Case Study and Interpretation of the Results

5.1 Accessibility as a Systemic Impact

Examining the three case studies, one can observe that low-cost airlines present themselves as key drivers of systemic accessibility transformation of the European tourism landscape and, subsequently, as a driving force of economic growth and stability. One of its first and foremost impacts is not just the diminishment of airfare levels, but rather the reconstruction of how destinations are positioned within networks

of mobility. This is achieved by providing travelers with frequent, efficient, direct and usually stress-free flights , with which the LCCs manage to reduce not only objective travel expenses, but also subjective barriers associated with time, complexity and uncertainty.

In addition, the case studies indicated that extended accessibility drastically changes the effective market reach of secondary destinations, incorporating them into competitive short-haul tourism circuits and boosting their popularity among European audiences. In Porto and Gdansk, accessibility operated as a mechanism of destination activation, enabling historically important and culturally rich cities to attract international demand, whereas Brussels-Charleroi depicts a gateway-based accessibility model, as it is an airport used mostly as a getaway to other destinations in the area rather than generating destination-based demand. Most passengers head to Brussels, but some of them may also get to French cities such as Paris and Lille or German ones such as Aachen, or even to Luxembourg, whose airport connectivity is not efficient enough, and can still be accessed from Belgium.

This distinction highlights a key analytical insight: it becomes clear that accessibility is essential, but it is not the only ingredient for touristic success. Although low-cost airline connectivity enlarges potential demand, its capacity to produce sustained local value and produce potential touristic hotspots depends on complementary destination characteristics and such external factors, such as administrative regulations, touristic policies and effective marketing and management strategies.

5.2 Behavioral Reconfiguration of Tourism Demand

It becomes evident that across the three case studies, tourism demand is surrounded by increased price sensitivity, restricted planning capacities and destination fluidity. Patterns such as short-break travel, impulsive booking behavior and flexible itineraries dominate the average LCC traveler's profile. Thus, this behavioral shift illustrates a wider transformation in tourism consumption, whereby travel becomes more frequent, opportunistic and elastic, and highly contingent on flight bargains.

From a systemic perspective, these behavioral fluctuations bring about ambivalent, and, somehow, controversial outcomes. From one part, they boost demand and visibility for lesser-known destinations but from the other, they increase demand volatility and render destinations more exposed towards fluctuations triggered by airline pricing strategies and network reconfigurations. Consequently, tourism development becomes more responsive towards external strategic decisions which are beyond the control of destination stakeholders.

5.3. Economic Impact and Conditional Value Creation

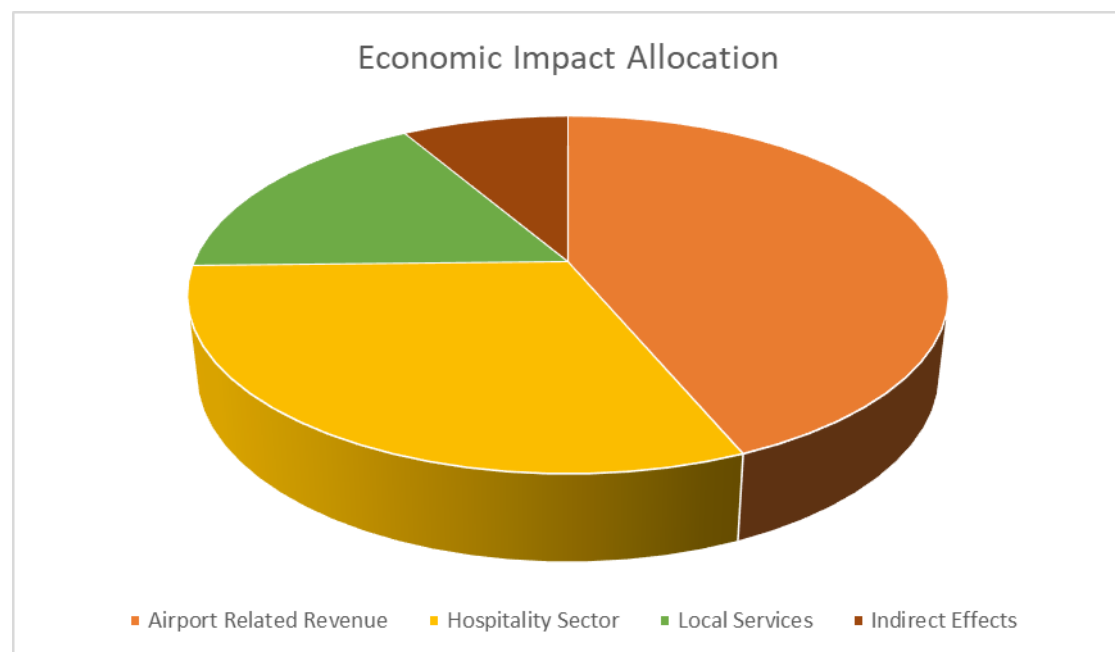


Figure 7: Economic Impact Allocation

It becomes clear that the economic impact of LCCs on secondary destinations is of utmost importance, but it is mostly highly conditional and subtle to external factors. Our case studies indicate that boosted accessibility and visitor flows do not automatically bring about uniform economic benefits, but, instead, value creation is heavily dependent on the ability of destinations to absorb, retain, and circulate tourism expenditure within the local economy and turn it to their advantage to generate attractive tourism products. As Berster et al. (2017) declare, “the commercial success of LCCs has caused traditional network carriers to reconsider their business model and adopt more features of LCCs, i.e. reduce costs in order to be more competitive and

regain market penetration” (p.17), highlighting as well that “LCC services attract more and more passengers so that FSNCs adapt their business models and offer low fare like services on a growing number of routes in response to the proliferation of LCCs and in direct competition with LCCs” (p.18), heralding that the LCC connectivity will encompass more cities in the future, which will be able to reap the benefits of the touristic activity generated by the LCCs.

Through the case studies one can observe that in Porto and Gdansk, LCC-driven tourism gave vent to diversified revenue streams, employment growth, and urban regeneration, which were synonymous with social and financial prosperity. As Olipra (2021) depicts, New tourists attracted by cheap flights facilitate increase of demand for local products and services and thus contribute to the growth and development of tourism market at these destinations” (p.18867). These cases reflect the way accessibility can work as a driving force for destination-led economic growth when it is combined with cultural, urban and experiential outlets.

On the other hand, Brussels-Charleroi showcases an infrastructure-centered impact pattern, in which economic benefits are translated into airport operations and related services, such as transfers, with a negligible amount of economic, structural and evolutionary impact on the city itself. The city of Charleroi remains one of the least touristic and less visible ones in the region, despite the airport's rampant network expansion and continuous growth. This divergence highlights the necessity of distinguishing between traffic growth and value capture. While low-cost airlines increase passenger volumes, the distribution of economic benefits is still uneven and remains susceptible to local structural conditions.

5.4 Strategic, Social and Sustainability Implications

The abstract synthesis of the case studies unveils that LCC-driven tourism generates considerable strategic, social and sustainability implications. From a strategic scope, heavy reliance on low-cost airline connectivity and network expansion aggravates the exposure to dangers linked to network volatility, concentration risk and revenue instability, making destinations more vulnerable to adversities. Subsequently, the competitive nature of low-cost route trajectories in which destinations are incorporated

increase their susceptibility to airline strategic shifts and network fluctuations, as destination connections are constantly changing, especially if they are not profitable enough.

Speaking of social implications, throughout the case study, one can observe how and to what extent each city has been impacted by the rapid expansion of their LCC network. First and foremost, Porto, the Portuguese capital of the North has seen an incredible surge of problems related to housing affordability, gentrification and overcrowded spaces. Gdansk shows more moderate social effects, while Charleroi's limited destination role constrains tourism-related social externalities.

Through the prism of sustainability concerns, the expansion of short-haul low-cost travel raises concerns related to environmental impact, fiscal sustainability of incentive schemes and long-term destination resilience. The findings suggest that without strategic governance and policy coordination, accessibility advantages risk evolving into structural fragilities. Alamettälä (2025) suggests that “as sustainability driven cost increases directly impact operational expenses, ticket pricing, and competitive positioning, airlines must adopt strategic adaptations to remain profitable while fulfilling regulatory mandates” (p.77).

It becomes, thus, clear, that the long-term footprint of low-cost airlines on secondary destinations is neither inherently negative nor positive, but contingent upon governance regulations, destination assets and strategic planning. This synthesis provides the conceptual foundation for the conclusions and policy implications presented in the final chapter.

6. Concerns, Policy Implications and Further Research

The thorough analysis and examination of Porto, Gdansk and Brussels-Charleroi indicate the transformative and crucial role that low-cost carriers play in forging tourism development in Europe and boosting the tertiary sector of its countries-members. By applying the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3, it becomes clear that while LCCs stimulate demand, enhance accessibility, increase the streams of revenue generated by tourism and contribute to regional development, they also trigger

vulnerabilities linked to sustainability, economic dependency and regulatory pressures. Subsequently, this chapter addresses these issues in detail and draws up policy implications relevant to regional governments, airport authorities and the broader tourism industry.

The evolution of LCC airport strategies carries significant implications for tourism policy. Secondary airports, once claimed to be the engines of regional development (Dennis, 2004; Olipra, 2012), now face challenges of underutilization and overcapacity. Jimenez & Suau-Sanchez (2020) note that “there is the belief among industry experts that LCCs will focus on the larger markets.... And reduce their activity in the smaller airports” (p.9). This creates risks for regions heavily dependent on subsidies to maintain LCC services (Bontemps, Martini & Porta, 2024). In addition, it intensifies competition between airports and regions, raising concerns of inefficiency and operational setbacks.

From a sustainability perspective, the shift toward larger airports may align better with climate objectives, since consolidating traffic at hubs reduces the necessity for subsidies and can leverage intermodal transport connectivity. Nevertheless, as Jimenez & Suau-Sanchez (2020) warn, the shift of LCC growth towards primary airports “has left available capacity at many smaller secondary and regional airports” (p.10), potentially stranding infrastructure investments made over the last two decades. Graham (2013) warns that “raising charges and getting the LCC to commit to the airport in the long-term may have the effect of encouraging these LCC to go elsewhere, particularly if there is no consensus about the level of investment needed” (p.67). Thus, policymakers are tortured with a specific dilemma: how to reform or adapt secondary airports in an era when LCC strategies are constantly shifting and evolving, and how to prevent regional tourism wars over limited routes.

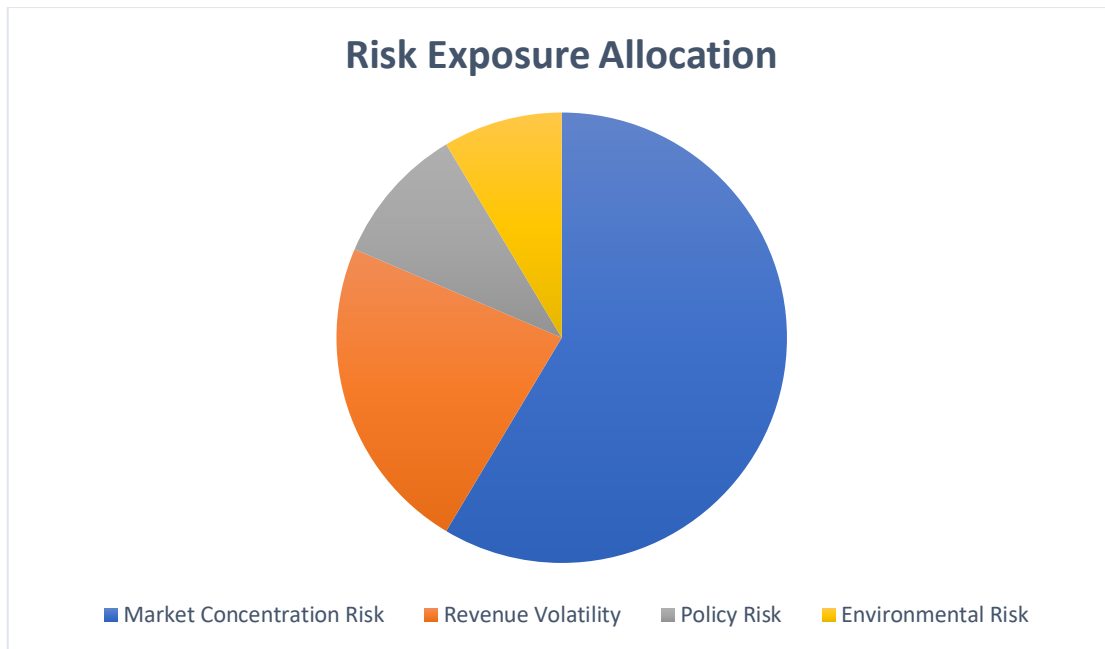


Figure 8: Risk Exposure Allocation

6.1. Economic Opportunities and Risks

It is an undeniable fact that LCCs have proven to be powerful engines of economic growth in the so-called secondary destinations. LCCs have been crucial in advertising these destinations and ameliorating their image to consumers that are not familiar with them and are not well-travelled. “Low-cost airlines try to increase their revenues also thanks to marketing fees paid by regions where they fly” (Olipra, 2012, p. 41). This makes it a win-win situation both for the LCC and the destination served by them, with obvious economic benefits to both.

For instance, in Porto and Gdansk, the significant and noticeable fare reductions caused an unprecedented touristic demand in the cities which contributed massively to the growth of inbound tourism there. Therefore, this enormous demand has played a key role in the reinforcement of various sectors of the local economy with visible benefits in the hospitality, gastronomy and cultural sectors. Simultaneously, Charleroi’s transformation from a marginal airport of negligible strategic importance into one of Europe’s busiest LCC airports reflects the economic potential of regional airports and their influence in the region that they represent, demonstrating that economic growth and prosperity can be brought up by implementing a strategic and sustainable plan.

Nonetheless, economic dependency on a single carrier or a small set of airlines can have a detrimental impact on the airport's operations, posing significant risks. Efthimiou and Christidis (2023) highlight that the dependence of an airport or a region on a specific airline can therefore be a main concern and that the base of a Low-Cost Carrier or Full-Service Network Carriers tends to induce additional travel demand, but may also lead to a high market concentration for the airline that operates the base. This asymmetry of bargaining power entails that airlines can negotiate favorable airport fees and subsidies, locking destinations into dependency cycles and making them numb towards making decisions under their jurisdiction.

Subsequently, in order for airports to operate appropriately and be able to reap the benefits of their increased connectivity, certain policies need to be established and implemented consistently. Airports and regional governments and authorities should seriously consider diversifying their carrier base and invest in long-term partnerships with multiple airlines to mitigate the risk of being overly dependent to certain ones and prevent them from monopolizing the airport's connections. Thus, two policy frameworks can be implemented:

- Centralized (uniform subsidy across regions) -> more effective, increases flows in all regions.
- Decentralized (one region funds subsidies)-> creates spillover effects (winners and losers).

“Our simulations show that subsidies to LCCs are effective in stimulating tourism and that a centralized regime is more effective than a decentralized one.” (Bontemps et al., 2024).

6.2. Destination Accessibility and Regional Competitiveness

The case studies confirm the centrality and importance of the destination accessibility theory (Jimenez, 2020). First and foremost, Porto and Gdansk, saw incredible structural tourism growth as direct LCC connections eliminated an array of distance barriers, transforming them into some of the most mainstream and sought-after city-break destinations in Europe. Nonetheless, Charleroi presents another intricate dynamic, due to the fact that while it is characterized by an enormous connectivity, the benefits can be reaped locally and not only regionally. (Bontemps et al, 2024).

An important question is: Will LCCs destinations come to a place where they will be able to replace traditional destinations (e.g. Mediterranean resorts and hotspots, such as Cyclades and Crete in Greece, Sardegna and Sicily in Italy, Malta, Ibiza and Mallorca in Spain and Algarve in Portugal)? To some extent yes, but popular Mediterranean resorts accessed by major airports will continue having their momentum. Secondary destinations can still present themselves as strong competitors that can conquer a good part of the tourism market share. As Dennis (2004) states, “Ryanair and easyJet have both adopted a strategy of rapid expansion as they need to move quickly from being a marginal extra source of business for airports and third party suppliers of services to being major players that these organizations can’t then do without” (p.20).

An efficient policy to be taken into consideration is for regional planners to align airport development with destination branding. Porto successfully marketed itself as a cultural and gastronomic hub, ensuring that accessibility gains translated into city-centered benefits, positioning itself as a remarkable and valid Portuguese alternative to Lisbon, attracting much of its tourists. In contrast, Charleroi has struggled to capture sufficient spillovers, showing that accessibility without strong local branding risks leaving most benefits to neighboring destinations, as it has been steadily overshadowed by other Belgian cities.

6.3 Airport Economics & Local Development

Secondary airports have emerged as key facilitators of LCC growth. Dzedzic & Warnock-Smith (2016) argue that their lower operational costs and spare capacity make them attractive to LCCs, generating substantial regional benefits in terms of jobs, revenues, and visitor inflows. Regarding how the financial landscape has changed after the LCCs’ takeover, Williams and Baláz (2009) add that “ the impacts are evident in potentially increased flows of labor migrants, tacit knowledge, business travel, inward investment, and mobile markets (especially tourism) (p.687), proving that LCCs can indeed spur drastic changes in a city’s job market and economy. The Charleroi case, nevertheless, represents a whole other dynamic, as while the airports’ mobility is growing bigger and presents enormous economic development, the city has historically attracted little travelling mobility (Dennis,2004), with its airport reaping most of the benefits of the LCC connectivity instead of the city itself.

Policy implication: Effective regional development strategies should aim for a more efficient connectivity between the airports and the city centers. This can be achieved by various ways, such as efficient ground means of transportation, such as metro, tram and bus, urban development and infrastructure strategies and interventions. Airports, and especially major ones that act as hubs and give access to numerous destinations, should be characterized by an effective transportation system that can enable their high mobility and the transportation of people, goods and commodities. Charleroi's example, thus, illustrates that without such an efficient integration strategy, airports are posed under a serious risk of operating merely as transit points without perspectives for regional touristic growth.

6.4. Subsidies & Long-Term Economic Impact

It is an undeniable fact that LCC expansion is often reliant on public subsidies or preferential agreements with airports. Bontemps et al. (2024) highlight how subsidies in Italy significantly boosted LCC entry and regional tourism, but raised questions about sustainability and market distortion. Furthermore, the Charleroi case reflects similar setbacks, with the Ryanair-Charleroi agreement being extensively scrutinized by EU (2006). Graham (2013) confirms this by stating that “the debate within Europe as regards airport subsidies came to a head with the Brussels Charleroi case when there was a detailed examination by the European Commission of the 15 year deal that Ryanair had negotiated with the Walloon regional government that owned Charleroi airport as cited by Barbot, 2006. It concluded that some aspects of the incentives provided by the airport were state aid that was incompatible with EU competition policy as cited by Graham, 2008. (Ryanair has now actually won its appeal against this ruling)” (p.73).

As LCCs are particularly strong in the USA and the EU, and tend to have saturated the short-haul market, they will increasingly rely on the long-haul market for future growth. Nonetheless, LCCs have yet to demonstrate their ability to capture the long-haul market. As Williams and Balaz (2009) state, “the duration of impacts is also variable but it is contended that the comparative advantages of individual regions in terms of inward investment could be expected to decline relatively quickly over the medium term due to competition from other regions and the hypermobility of international

capital” (p.687). The volatile and competitive nature of the tourism industry makes the distribution of the revenue derived from it sometimes uneven , making it uncertain whether it can have long-term economic impact. However, as Costa et al. (2014) state, “even in times of economic crisis and social unrest, tourism operators and decision makers should not restrain innovation and creativity, as these are key to a successful destination, and may trigger traveler intentions to return to a destination” (p.426).

6.5 Sustainability, Overtourism and Lessons for European Tourism Policy

The environmental and social sustainability of LCC-driven tourism is a topic of hot debate that raises lots of points to be discussed. First, Porto faces overtourism pressures in historic districts, such as Ribeira, raising concerns over housing displacement and cultural authenticity. Gdansk struggles to combat seasonality, with infrastructure stretched during summer peaks but underutilized in winter (Olipra, 2012). Moreover, Charleroi has to deal with the challenge of ensuring subsidies and airport expansion alignment with the EU climate commitments and policies.

Despite the fact that the LCCs claim to be sustainable enough and compliant with environmental policies, with newer aircrafts and mobility mostly to secondary airports, they can still be held accountable for a rise in CO₂ emissions. As it has already been analyzed here, LCCs usually create new and unprecedented demand for flights, something that is inextricably linked to a swell in the percentage of CO₂ emissions. This is confirmed by Olipra, who says that “If there were no low-cost flights, 51% of LCC passengers would either use more sustainable means of transport or not travel at all” (Olipra, 2012, p. 54). In order for air contamination, CO₂ emissions and such phenomena to be eradicated, “the European Union (EU) has put in place several regulatory frameworks in order to address the environmental impacts of aviation. Policies such as the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) and the Renewable Energy Directive are meant to reduce CO₂ emissions and promote the use of renewable energy sources in aviation. These measures are part of a wider effort to ensure that aviation can sustainably operate in a carbon constrained global economy and meet wider climate objectives (Alamettälä, 2025, p.22). In addition, climate change friendly policies may involve carbon-offset programs or eco-leivies for LCC passengers, to help the growth of the tourism and aviation industries come to terms with the EU environmental

regulations and targets for 2030. Alamettälä (2025) ensures that these strategies help the LCCs “address environmental risks, develop stakeholder trust, and enhance corporate reputation” (p.22), and, thus, come to terms with the EU environmental policies.

To end with, it becomes that the LCCs’ modus operandi stimulates an unprecedented demand that would not otherwise exist, increasing the aviation industry’s carbon footprint, something that indicates that LCCs not only redistribute demand but they are also responsible for additional emissions-intensive trips. Yet, as Costa et al. (2014) state, “airport infrastructures may play a decisive role in the development of tourism regions, as has been the case of Porto Airport in the North of Portugal” (p.427). They underline that “given this perspective, it is important to adopt a strategic perspective so as to foster the expansion of airports, as tourism growth engines of the regions” (p.427), confirming that airport networking expansion, rises in passenger numbers and tourism development should become synonymous with sustainability and prosperity.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude with, this thesis analyzed the impact of low-cost carriers (LCCs) on tourist preferences for less popular European destinations, with a special focus on three totally different European destinations: Porto in Portugal, Gdansk in Poland and Charleroi in Belgium. These three destinations, although completely divergent one from the other, share the same story: all of them have been impacted in a transformational way from the LCCs’ presence and investment in their network expansion and connectivity and have seen an unprecedented growth in interest and mobility in them. No one can deny the fact that Porto and Gdansk are some of the most valid choices for short-break travel in Europe, offering an array of places of interest and cultural experiences for visitors. On the other side, Charleroi is Brussel’s alternative to its main airport, Zaventem, which is mostly utilized by major airlines, and has now become one of the Benelux Region’s most significant key transit points to other cities in the region.

This thesis leads us to the following conclusions:

The LCCs democratize travel and boost demand: As Williams and Baláž (2009) state, “the growth of LCCs has effectively redrawn the map of accessibility and travel costs

across Europe” (p.688). The entry of LCCs produced substantial fare reductions, which in turn stimulated demand even from price-sensitive travelers. In Porto and Gdansk, this effect tripled or even quadrupled passenger volumes, while in Charleroi, LCCs enabled travelers to skip Brussels Airport’s higher fares and taxes.

Accessibility mobilizes competitiveness: In alignment with the Destination Accessibility Theory (Jimenez, 2020), Porto and Gdansk transformed from peripheral markets into mainstream city-break destinations thanks to direct LCC connections. On the other hand, the case of Charleroi showcases that accessibility alone is not enough; without strong local branding, most benefits may be reaped by the other regions around.

Price elasticity forges market adaptability: Efthymiou and Christidis (2023) indicate that tourism demand in LCC markets can be characterized by high elasticity. Porto has partly mitigated this risk by promoting and investing massively in its cultural, historical and gastronomic branding, while Gdansk and Charleroi are plagued by vulnerabilities related to constant fare fluctuations and airline route strategies. This has made it crucial for the destinations to sharpen their adaptability to such conditions and reinvent themselves to be able to accommodate the tourism market’s trends and needs.

Tourist behavior varies across destinations: While LCC passengers are often budget-oriented, bundled fares have casually appealed to mid-range travelers in Porto and Gdansk. Nonetheless, Charleroi’s passenger base continues to prioritize prices above everything else, leading to limited local spending.

Policy and sustainability challenges are taking over: One of the LCCs biggest challenges is to come to terms with the EU policies for more sustainable environmental practices. As Alamettälä (2025) suggests, “in the context of the European Union’s increasingly stringent environmental regulations, LCCs’ lean operational structures and flexibility could enable them to mitigate the financial burden of sustainability-related costs more effectively than traditional network carriers” (p.53).

To sum up, the stories of these three destinations unveil their *common denominator*: all of the three ones are living examples of the LCCs influential role that validates their role as driving forces of tourism development. What diversifies them, is that the benefits of this influence on them are unevenly distributed and possibly fragile, unless smart strategies and policies are tailored and implemented.

7.1. Recommendations For The Case Study Cities

There are for sure some strategies that all the three cities could possibly implement in order to use the presence of LCCs to their advantage while curbing their rampant expansion.

1) Porto:

- Tourism Management: Apply measures to alleviate overtourism in heritage districts, such as time-staggered entry, visitor caps, entry fees in historical areas during rush hours or alternative tourism dispersal strategies.
- Market Diversification: Widen the promotion of conference, wine and gastronomy tourism to attract higher-budget visitors who show less price sensitivity (Malighetti et al., 2025).
- Environmental Sustainability: Consider eco-levies on short haul LCC flights, with revenues redistributed into sustainable mobility, more efficient and eco-friendly means of transport and cultural preservation programs.

2) Gdańsk:

- Seasonality Reduction: Launch and promote campaigns for off-season cultural events (e.g., winter festivals, heritage exhibitions) in order to develop tourism activity beyond summer peaks (Olipra, 2012).
- Carrier Diversification: Diminish dependence on Wizz Air and Ryanair by offering incentives for other airlines to operate routes in the city (Dobruszkes, 2013).
- Infrastructure Development: Upgrade and local transport and heritage sites to handle high summer demand without straining the already existing transport system

3) Brussels-Charleroi

- Local Value Capture: Project and promote Charleroi as a complete cultural destination on its own right (e.g. urban art, city parks, industrial heritage), rather than a mere access point to Brussels.
- Subsidy Reform: Revisit agreements with Ryanair to ensure compliance with EU state aid rules and more robust financial stability (Charleroi case, 2006).

- Regional Integration: Boost and increase the number of ground transport links to equally distribute passengers across Wallonia and strengthen regional development.

7.2. Research Limitations

In spite of its analytical depth and systemic approach, this case study is subject to many limitations that should not be ignored when examining its findings.

First and foremost, the research draws almost exclusively from secondary data. Although this approach is appropriate for comparisons and theoretical integration, it prevents the readers from capturing real-time tourist perceptions and motivations. The absence of primary data, such as interviews, surveys and questionnaires entails that consumer behaviours and patterns are analysed through existing studies instead of being directly observed.

Moreover, the thesis utilizes a qualitative, case study-based methodology, concentrating on the three already mentioned destinations. Despite the fact that this form is suitable for an in-depth analysis of the context, the findings can not be applied to all European destinations. Instead, they may sometimes overgeneralize, depicting patterns and mechanisms that could be applied to similar cases. Due to the increasing number of destinations integrated into the LCC network, it is logical that each new destination has its own unique traits that need to be examined. This makes it crucial for the readers to have critical thinking in order to be able to assimilate the findings of the study and assess where they can be applied or not.

In addition, the analysis highlights the role of low-cost airlines as a driving force of accessibility and tourism development. Other contributing factors, such as macroeconomic conditions, recessions, destination marketing strategies, pandemics or geopolitical incidents are considered but not investigated thoroughly. Consequently, causal relationships should better be interpreted as intertwined processes rather than isolated effects.

Finally, the study lays emphasis mostly on short-to medium-term impacts of low-cost airline networking. Long-term environmental, social and economic impacts, especially those associated with climate changes and structural tourism dependency require further examination and an holistic reading approach. Acknowledging these limitations

does not underestimate the study's findings but, instead, enables the readers to understand all the parameters that should be taken into consideration when examining these cases.

7.3. Final Reflection

The evidence from Porto, Gdansk and Charleroi highlights that LCCs are both a blessing and a curse for secondary destinations that want to present themselves as strong competitors against major ones and establish a name of their own in order to attract possible travelers/consumers. They render destinations more accessible than the past, they contribute massively to the country's GDP growth and boost the destinations' popularity visibility across the world. Nevertheless, they may hide risks of overly dependency, uneven benefit distribution and non-compliance to environmental policies and regulations.

Thus, the biggest challenge for Europe is to work towards establishing a policy that will sustain the inclusivity and dynamism of LCC-based tourism while addressing the long-term economic and environmental risks. If this materializes effectively and strategically, secondary cities will be able to reap the numerous benefits of LCC-driven tourism while maintaining their history, culture, gastronomy, environment and, subsequently, all those traits that make them diverse and unique among other cities of the world.

8. Declaration of the Use of Artificial Intelligence and Assistive Technologies in the Preparation of this Thesis

Artificial intelligence tools (ChatGPT) were used in a limited and supportive manner during the preparation of this thesis, primarily for language refinement, grammar checking, and improving clarity of expression. No artificial intelligence system was used to generate original research content, data, analysis, or conclusions. The author takes full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and originality of this work.

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