Neighborhood Resistance to Gentrification: The Case of Lavapiés in Madrid

Resistencias vecinales frente a la gentrificación: el caso de Lavapiés en Madrid

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamics of neighborhood resistance to gentrification in the historically diverse and working-class district of Lavapiés, Madrid. Unlike previous studies that focus predominantly on socio-economic displacement, this research examines how local communities actively contest urban transformation through street art and the occupation of public spaces. Using a qualitative methodology that combines ethnographic fieldwork, visual analysis, and semi-structured interviews, the study uncovers how artistic expressions and grassroots interventions reclaim urban agency and visibility. The research highlights the role of cultural resistance as a spatial and political strategy to resist neoliberal urban policies. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on *creative resistance* as a form of urban activism,

providing a nuanced understanding of how marginalized communities assert their right to the city. The findings contribute to broader urban studies discourse by integrating cultural practices into the analysis of anti-gentrification movements.

Keywords *Gentrification, Urban resistance, Street art, Public space, Right to the city*

RESUMEN
Este estudio examina las dinámicas de resistencia vecinal ante la gentrificación en el barrio histórico y multicultural de Lavapiés, en Madrid. A diferencia de investigaciones previas centradas principalmente en el desplazamiento socioeconómico, esta investigación analiza cómo las comunidades locales enfrentan activamente la transformación urbana mediante el arte callejero y la ocupación del espacio público. A través de una metodología cualitativa que combina trabajo de campo etnográfico, análisis visual y entrevistas semiestructuradas, se revela cómo las expresiones artísticas y las intervenciones comunitarias reclaman agencia urbana y visibilidad. La investigación subraya el papel de la resistencia cultural como estrategia espacial y política frente a las políticas urbanas neoliberales. La originalidad del estudio radica en su enfoque en la *resistencia creativa* como forma de activismo urbano, aportando una comprensión más matizada sobre cómo las comunidades marginadas ejercen su derecho a la ciudad. Los hallazgos enriquecen el debate en estudios urbanos al integrar prácticas culturales en el análisis de los movimientos contra la gentrificación.

Palabras clave *Gentrificación, Resistencia urbana, Arte callejero, Espacio público, Derecho a la ciudad*

A.   Introduction

Gentrification has become a defining feature of contemporary urban restructuring across global cities, involving the reinvestment of capital into disinvested neighborhoods and the subsequent transformation of their social, cultural, and symbolic landscapes (Smith, 1996; Lees, Slater, & Wyly, 2008). While early scholarship framed gentrification primarily as a class-based residential process, more recent work has emphasized its entanglement with neoliberal urban governance, tourism economies, and cultural branding strategies (Harvey, 2005; Zukin, 2010). These dynamics have intensified in inner-city areas where historical working-class and migrant communities

reside, making gentrification both a material and symbolic process that reshapes urban life.

In Southern Europe, and particularly in Spain, gentrification has followed a distinct trajectory shaped by late industrialization, high rates of homeownership, and strong familial welfare systems (Arbaci, 2008; Maloutas, 2012). Following the 2008 global financial crisis, Spanish cities experienced renewed urban restructuring driven by austerity policies, real estate financialization, and tourism-led development models (Janoschka, Sequera, & Salinas, 2014; López-Morales, Shin, & Lees, 2016). In Madrid, these dynamics have been especially visible in central neighborhoods, where public–private partnerships and short-term rental platforms have accelerated displacement pressures.

Lavapiés represents a paradigmatic case within this context. Historically characterized as a working-class, migrant, and multicultural neighborhood, Lavapiés has long functioned as an entry point for immigrant populations and as a space of informal economies and alternative cultural practices (Sequera & Nofre, 2018). In recent years, however, the neighborhood has become a target for real estate investment, cultural commodification, and touristic rebranding promoted by municipal policies and private actors (Colomb & Novy, 2017). These processes have redefined Lavapiés as a "creative" and "cosmopolitan" district, often marginalizing the very communities that produced its cultural vibrancy.

Much of the existing literature on gentrification in Madrid has focused on displacement, housing markets, and the political economy of urban change (Rodríguez & López, 2011; Martínez López, 2018). While these approaches are crucial, they tend to privilege macro-economic explanations and formal policy frameworks, leaving less room for analyzing everyday, cultural, and symbolic forms of resistance. As a result, the practices through which residents actively contest gentrification in their daily lives remain underexplored, particularly in Southern European contexts.

This study addresses this gap by focusing on creative urban activism in Lavapiés, examining how residents resist gentrification through street art, performative practices, and the occupation of public space. Drawing on critical urban theory, the analysis conceptualizes these practices not merely as aesthetic expressions but as political strategies that challenge dominant narratives of urban redevelopment (Lefebvre, 1996; Mitchell, 2003). Public space becomes a key arena in which power relations are negotiated and contested.

Street art, murals, and visual interventions in Lavapiés function as tools for reclaiming visibility and articulating counter-hegemonic discourses. Scholars have emphasized that street art can disrupt

commodified urban imaginaries by foregrounding alternative histories and collective identities (Iveson, 2010; Zukin, 2010). In gentrifying neighborhoods, such practices often serve to denounce displacement, expose speculative dynamics, and reaffirm the presence of marginalized communities (Shaw, 2015).

Beyond visual interventions, the occupation and everyday use of public space—through assemblies, festivals, and informal gatherings—constitute another layer of resistance. These practices resonate with de Certeau's (1984) notion of "tactics," whereby ordinary users subvert imposed spatial orders through lived practices. In Lavapiés, such forms of spatial appropriation challenge exclusionary redevelopment by asserting the right to remain, to use, and to define urban space collectively (Lefebvre, 1996).

Cultural resistance in Lavapiés also reshapes urban power relations by creating alternative networks of solidarity and political agency. Grassroots initiatives often intersect with broader housing movements in Madrid, linking cultural activism to struggles against evictions and rent increases (Martínez López, 2018; Sequera, 2020). These alliances demonstrate how cultural practices can operate as entry points for broader claims to urban citizenship and social justice.

Theoretically, this analysis contributes to urban studies and cultural geography by foregrounding resistance as an active, spatially embedded process rather than a reactive response to displacement. It aligns with calls to move beyond deterministic accounts of gentrification and to recognize the agency of marginalized urban residents (Lees et al., 2008; Shaw, 2015). By situating cultural practices at the center of urban संघर्ष, the study highlights the political significance of everyday creativity.

Empirically, the focus on Lavapiés enriches the literature with an in-depth Southern European case that complicates Anglo-American models of gentrification. Finally, the findings hold policy relevance by underscoring the need for inclusive urban planning and cultural governance frameworks that recognize grassroots cultural production as a legitimate form of urban participation rather than as a resource to be commodified (Colomb & Novy, 2017; Zukin, 2010).

B.   Literature Review
1.   *Theories of Gentrification*
The concept of gentrification was first introduced by Ruth Glass (1964) to describe the influx of middle-class residents into working-class neighborhoods in London, leading to social displacement and changes in the urban fabric. Since then, gentrification has evolved into a central analytical framework in urban studies, encompassing not only

residential change but also transformations in culture, consumption, and urban governance. Glass's original formulation emphasized the class dimensions of urban change, highlighting how reinvestment in inner-city neighborhoods often resulted in the marginalization of long-standing residents.

Building on this foundation, Neil Smith (1979, 1996) advanced a political-economic explanation through the rent gap theory, arguing that gentrification is driven by capital flows seeking to exploit disparities between actual and potential land values. From this perspective, gentrification is not a spontaneous cultural preference but a structural outcome of capitalist urban development. Smith's work redirected scholarly attention toward the role of developers, financial institutions, and the state in facilitating urban reinvestment.

Later scholarship expanded gentrification theory by incorporating social, cultural, and institutional dimensions. Lees (2000) and Lees, Slater, and Wyly (2008) argued for a more integrative approach that recognizes the interaction between capital, culture, and policy. This body of work emphasized that gentrification is not a uniform process but manifests differently across cities depending on historical, political, and spatial contexts.

The rise of neoliberal urbanism has further reshaped gentrification processes. Harvey (2005) conceptualized neoliberalism as a political project that privileges market-based solutions, entrepreneurial governance, and public–private partnerships. Within this framework, cities increasingly compete for investment, tourists, and creative industries, often using gentrification as a tool for urban regeneration and economic growth (Brenner & Theodore, 2002).

City branding and cultural-led regeneration have become key mechanisms through which neoliberal urbanism operates. Zukin (2010) demonstrated how authenticity, culture, and creativity are strategically mobilized to revalorize urban spaces, frequently leading to exclusionary outcomes. Cultural narratives play a crucial role in normalizing gentrification by framing it as urban "revitalization" rather than as a process of dispossession.

In Southern European cities, gentrification has followed a distinct trajectory shaped by welfare regimes, housing systems, and late industrialization. Arbaci (2008) and Maloutas (2012) noted that high rates of homeownership and strong family networks historically limited displacement pressures. However, these protective factors have weakened in recent decades due to financialization, tourism expansion, and austerity policies.

Spanish cities, particularly Madrid and Barcelona, have experienced intensified gentrification since the 2008 financial crisis.

Janoschka, Sequera, and Salinas (2014) argued that gentrification in Spain is closely linked to transnational capital, short-term rental platforms, and state-led urban restructuring. These dynamics have transformed central neighborhoods into spaces of consumption and spectacle, increasing housing precarity for vulnerable populations.

2. *Resistance to Gentrification*

Parallel to the expansion of gentrification studies, a substantial body of literature has examined resistance to gentrification. Early work focused on organized anti-gentrification movements, including tenant unions, housing cooperatives, and neighborhood associations that mobilize against displacement (Marcuse, 1985; Mayer, 2012). These movements often frame resistance in terms of housing rights, social justice, and redistribution.

While such collective mobilizations are vital, scholars have critiqued the dominance of displacement-centered resistance frameworks. Davidson (2009) argued that an exclusive focus on residential displacement risks overlooking more subtle forms of exclusion, such as cultural displacement and the erosion of everyday practices. These processes may occur even when residents are not physically forced to leave.

In response, researchers have increasingly turned to the concept of everyday resistance to capture informal, routine, and less visible practices through which residents contest urban change. Drawing on Scott's (1985) notion of "everyday forms of resistance," urban scholars have examined how ordinary actions—such as informal use of public space or refusal to conform to new consumption norms—can challenge gentrification from below (Bayat, 2010).

Such practices are particularly relevant in marginalized neighborhoods where formal political participation may be limited. Everyday resistance allows residents to assert presence and belonging without engaging in overt confrontation, thereby sustaining alternative spatial meanings within gentrifying environments (Pinkster & Boterman, 2017).

3. *Culture, Space, and Urban Politics*

The relationship between culture, space, and urban politics has been central to critical urban theory. Lefebvre's (1996) concept of the "Right to the City" frames urban space as a collective resource shaped by social relations rather than merely by market forces. This right encompasses not only access to housing but also participation in the production and meaning of urban space.

Harvey (2008) further politicized the Right to the City by situating it within struggles against neoliberal urbanization. He argued that reclaiming urban space is fundamentally about challenging the concentration of power over urban development in the hands of elites. From this perspective, cultural practices become political acts when they contest dominant spatial logics.

Cultural production has increasingly been recognized as a form of political practice in urban contexts. Stevenson (2003) and Miles (2015) highlighted how art, performance, and cultural expression can articulate dissent and foster alternative urban imaginaries. These practices often operate outside institutional politics, making them accessible tools for marginalized groups.

Street art and graffiti occupy a particularly contested position within urban cultural politics. While often criminalized or co-opted by city branding strategies, scholars argue that they can function as forms of visual dissent that disrupt hegemonic representations of space (Iveson, 2010; Shaw, 2015). In gentrifying neighborhoods, street art frequently addresses themes of displacement, identity, and resistance.

Visual interventions in public space can reassert the presence of marginalized communities and challenge the symbolic domination of gentrified landscapes. By altering the visual economy of the city, street art contributes to what Mitchell (2003) describes as struggles over public space and urban visibility.

4. *Conceptual Gap*

Despite the extensive body of scholarship on gentrification, significant conceptual limitations remain in how resistance is theorized and operationalized. Much of the literature continues to privilege political-economic explanations centered on capital flows, housing markets, and displacement outcomes (Smith, 1996; Lees et al., 2008). While these approaches have been instrumental in exposing the structural drivers of urban inequality, they often treat resistance as a reactive or secondary phenomenon, primarily visible through formal collective action or policy-oriented struggles. As a result, everyday and culturally embedded forms of contestation are frequently overlooked or relegated to the margins of gentrification analysis.

A related limitation lies in the dominance of displacement-focused frameworks for understanding resistance. Although displacement is a critical consequence of gentrification, an exclusive emphasis on residential eviction risks obscuring more diffuse and symbolic forms of exclusion, such as cultural erasure, loss of social networks, and the transformation of everyday spatial practices (Davidson, 2009; Marcuse, 1985). These processes may occur long

before physical displacement takes place, shaping residents' sense of belonging and agency in ways that are not easily captured by conventional indicators. Consequently, resistance that seeks to preserve cultural presence or social meaning is often rendered analytically invisible.

Furthermore, gentrification studies have not sufficiently integrated spatial and symbolic dimensions of resistance into their conceptual frameworks. While scholars have acknowledged the importance of space in urban struggles, resistance is frequently analyzed in abstract political or economic terms rather than as a spatially enacted practice (Mitchell, 2003). Cultural interventions such as street art, performative occupations, and informal uses of public space are rarely theorized as strategic acts that actively reshape urban power relations. This gap limits our understanding of how space itself becomes a medium through which resistance is articulated and sustained.

The marginalization of cultural resistance is particularly evident in studies of city branding and cultural-led regeneration. Although research has demonstrated how culture is instrumentalized to promote gentrification (Zukin, 2010; Colomb & Novy, 2017), less attention has been paid to how grassroots cultural production can subvert or contest these processes. This imbalance reinforces a top-down view of culture as a tool of neoliberal governance, neglecting its potential as a bottom-up political resource. As a result, the agency of marginalized communities in shaping urban imaginaries remains under-theorized.

Finally, these conceptual shortcomings are especially pronounced in Southern European contexts, where informal practices, street-level sociability, and cultural expression play a central role in urban life (Arbaci, 2008; Maloutas, 2012). Existing models, largely developed in Anglo-American settings, do not fully capture the ways in which resistance unfolds through everyday cultural practices in cities such as Madrid. Addressing this gap requires an analytical framework that foregrounds cultural resistance as a spatial, symbolic, and political process, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of how urban contestation operates at the neighborhood scale.

C. Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualizes gentrification as a contested socio-spatial process produced through the interaction of economic restructuring, state intervention, cultural representation, and everyday social practices. Rather than treating gentrification as a unidirectional or deterministic outcome of market forces, the framework adopts a relational perspective that emphasizes conflict, negotiation, and

resistance as constitutive elements of urban transformation (Lefebvre, 1996; Smith, 1996; Lees et al., 2008). Gentrification is thus understood as an ongoing struggle over the production, appropriation, and meaning of urban space, in which multiple actors with unequal access to power participate.

Central to this framework is the recognition that gentrification operates simultaneously across material, spatial, and symbolic dimensions. Materially, it involves processes such as rising rents, real estate speculation, and changes in land use driven by capital investment and neoliberal urban policies (Harvey, 2005). Spatially, it entails the reorganization of public and private spaces, often through increased regulation, surveillance, and commodification. Symbolically, gentrification reshapes neighborhood identities through discourses of creativity, authenticity, and urban renaissance, which legitimize exclusionary forms of redevelopment and obscure their social costs (Zukin, 2010). These dimensions are analytically distinct yet mutually reinforcing.

Within this contested landscape, cultural resistance is conceptualized as a critical form of socio-spatial contestation that challenges both the material and symbolic logics of gentrification. Cultural resistance refers to a range of everyday and organized practices—such as street art, visual interventions, performative occupations, and informal uses of public space—through which residents contest dominant representations of space and assert alternative urban meanings. These practices are not treated as merely expressive or aesthetic, but as politically charged interventions embedded in specific spatial contexts (Mitchell, 2003; Iveson, 2010).

The first analytical dimension of cultural resistance is spatial reclamation. Through the appropriation and re-signification of public space, residents contest processes of enclosure, regulation, and commodification associated with gentrification. Acts such as mural production, collective gatherings, and the informal use of streets and squares reassert collective claims over urban space and disrupt its transformation into a site of consumption. Spatial reclamation thus operates as a form of embodied resistance that challenges who is entitled to occupy, use, and define urban space (Lefebvre, 1996; Harvey, 2008).

The second dimension conceptualizes cultural resistance as political communication. Cultural practices function as alternative modes of political expression that circulate counter-narratives about displacement, inequality, and urban injustice. Unlike formal political channels, these communicative practices are situated, accessible, and embedded in everyday urban life, enabling marginalized actors to

articulate dissent and make visible otherwise silenced experiences. By intervening in the visual and symbolic economy of the city, cultural resistance challenges dominant urban imaginaries and destabilizes hegemonic narratives of renewal and progress (Shaw, 2015; Zukin, 2010).

The third dimension concerns identity construction and collective subject formation. Cultural resistance contributes to the production of collective identities rooted in place, memory, and shared experience. In gentrifying neighborhoods, these identity practices counter processes of cultural erasure and homogenization by reaffirming local histories and multicultural presence. Identity construction is thus understood as both a symbolic and political process through which residents strengthen social cohesion and sustain collective capacity for resistance (Sequera & Nofre, 2018).

By linking cultural practices to urban agency, the framework advances a relational understanding of power in the city. Urban agency is not confined to formal political participation or institutional engagement but encompasses the capacity to influence spatial meanings, everyday practices, and representations of urban space. Cultural resistance expands the scope of agency by enabling marginalized residents to act upon the city despite structural constraints imposed by markets and governance regimes. In this sense, power is understood as relational and spatially embedded, emerging through everyday practices that contest dominant urban orders.

Overall, this conceptual framework integrates political-economic, spatial, and cultural perspectives to provide a holistic analytical lens for examining resistance to gentrification. By foregrounding cultural resistance as a form of socio-spatial agency, the framework addresses existing conceptual gaps in gentrification studies and offers a nuanced approach to understanding how power, culture, and space intersect in contested urban environments such as Lavapiés, Madrid.

D. Methodology

1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive case study research design to examine neighborhood resistance to gentrification through cultural practices in Lavapiés, Madrid. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate given the study's focus on meanings, practices, and lived experiences, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods alone. Interpretive methodologies allow for an in-depth understanding of how residents perceive, experience, and

contest gentrification in their everyday lives, as well as how cultural practices are embedded within specific socio-spatial contexts.

The case study approach enables a detailed and context-sensitive analysis of gentrification as a locally situated and contested process. Lavapiés was selected as a critical case due to its historical role as a working-class and migrant neighborhood, its intense exposure to real estate investment and tourism-driven transformation, and its long-standing traditions of grassroots activism and cultural expression. These characteristics make Lavapiés particularly well suited for examining the intersection of gentrification, culture, and resistance in a Southern European urban context.

2. *Data Collection Methods*

To capture the complexity of cultural resistance in Lavapiés, the study employs multiple qualitative data collection methods, combining ethnographic fieldwork, visual analysis, and semi-structured interviews. This multi-method approach allows for a rich and nuanced understanding of both practices and representations, as well as the perspectives of different actors involved in neighborhood life.

a. Ethnographic Fieldwork

Ethnographic fieldwork constituted a central component of the research design. Participant observation was conducted in streets, squares, community centers, and during neighborhood events, assemblies, and cultural activities. This method enabled the researcher to observe everyday interactions, spatial practices, and informal forms of resistance as they unfolded in situ. Attention was paid to how public space was used, regulated, and contested, as well as to the social dynamics among residents, activists, and visitors. The fieldwork was carried out over an extended period, allowing for repeated observations across different times of day and week, thereby capturing temporal variations in urban practices. Field notes documented observations, informal conversations, and reflexive insights, forming a key empirical foundation for the analysis.

b. Visual Analysis

Visual analysis was employed to document and interpret street art, murals, posters, stickers, and graffiti present in Lavapiés. These visual materials were systematically photographed and catalogued, with attention to their location, content, style, and spatial context. Visual interventions were treated not merely as aesthetic objects but as forms of symbolic communication embedded within broader struggles over space and meaning.

The analysis focused on recurring themes such as anti-gentrification messages, references to housing struggles, expressions of collective identity, and critiques of tourism and speculation. Changes over time, including removal, alteration, or replacement of visual materials, were also noted as indicators of ongoing contestation in public space.

c.   Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse range of participants, including long-term residents, migrants, housing activists, street artists, and local organizers. This method provided insight into individual experiences of gentrification, motivations behind cultural practices, and perceptions of neighborhood change and resistance. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy aimed at capturing diverse positionalities within the neighborhood. Snowball sampling was subsequently employed to reach participants embedded in activist and cultural networks. Interview guides covered themes such as experiences of urban change, meanings attributed to public space, forms of resistance, and perceptions of power and agency. Interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.   Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative and inductive process. Interview transcripts, field notes, and visual materials were coded thematically using qualitative data analysis techniques. Initial open coding identified recurring patterns and themes, which were then refined into broader analytical categories aligned with the conceptual framework, such as spatial reclamation, political communication, and identity construction.

Visual materials were analyzed using a visual semiotic approach, focusing on symbols, imagery, textual elements, and spatial placement. This analysis examined how visual interventions produced meaning and communicated resistance within the urban landscape. Triangulation across ethnographic observations, interview data, and visual analysis enhanced analytical depth and strengthened the credibility of the findings by cross-validating interpretations across multiple sources.

4.   Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were integral to all stages of the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, who were provided with clear information about the

research aims, methods, and intended use of data. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying details. Particular care was taken when working with politically vulnerable groups, including migrants and housing activists, for whom visibility may entail risk. Visual data were handled sensitively, especially when documenting politically charged messages or practices that could expose individuals or groups to harm.

5. *Methodological Limitations*

Despite its strengths, this study is subject to several methodological limitations. As a single case study, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable to all gentrifying neighborhoods. However, the aim is analytical generalization, whereby insights from Lavapiés contribute to broader theoretical debates on gentrification and cultural resistance.

Temporal limitations also apply, as the fieldwork captures neighborhood dynamics within a specific period and may not fully account for longer-term changes. Additionally, the interpretation of visual materials and ethnographic observations involves an element of subjectivity. To mitigate this, reflexive practices and triangulation were employed throughout the research process. Acknowledging these limitations enhances the transparency and rigor of the study.

E. Empirical Context: Lavapiés, Madrid
1. *Historical Development of Lavapiés*

Lavapiés is one of Madrid's oldest central neighborhoods and has historically functioned as a space of working-class residence, social marginality, and cultural diversity. Located just south of the historic city center, the area developed outside the medieval walls and long accommodated populations excluded from elite urban cores. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Lavapiés was characterized by dense housing, precarious living conditions, and a predominance of manual laborers, artisans, and service workers (Ringrose, 1983; Vicente, 2011). These structural conditions contributed to the neighborhood's enduring association with poverty and social exclusion within Madrid's urban hierarchy.

From the late twentieth century onward, Lavapiés became a major settlement area for international migrants, particularly from Latin America, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia. This influx was facilitated by relatively low housing costs, informal rental arrangements, and the availability of subdivided housing units (Sequera

& Nofre, 2018). As a result, Lavapiés emerged as one of Madrid's most multicultural neighborhoods, with a dense network of ethnic businesses, religious spaces, and transnational social ties shaping everyday urban life.

Informal economies have played a central role in the social and economic reproduction of the neighborhood. Street vending, small family-run shops, informal labor networks, and community-based support systems have historically compensated for limited access to formal employment and welfare resources (Arbaci, 2008). These practices not only provided livelihoods but also contributed to the production of a distinctive neighborhood culture rooted in mutual aid, spatial proximity, and everyday sociability.

Cultural diversity has thus been a defining feature of Lavapiés, shaping its public spaces, sensory landscape, and social interactions. Squares, streets, and bars have functioned as key sites of encounter and collective life, fostering a strong sense of place-based identity. At the same time, this diversity has often been racialized and stigmatized in public discourse, framing Lavapiés as both a space of cultural vibrancy and urban "problematicity" (Sequera, 2020).

2. *Contemporary Urban Transformation*

Since the early 2000s, Lavapiés has been subject to intensified urban transformation driven by municipal regeneration policies and market-led redevelopment. Public interventions aimed at improving infrastructure, renovating housing stock, and enhancing public space have been justified through discourses of urban renewal and social integration (Vicente, 2011). While these policies have addressed long-standing material deficiencies, they have also laid the groundwork for capital reinvestment and rising property values.

Tourism has emerged as a major driver of neighborhood change. Lavapiés' central location, cultural diversity, and proximity to major cultural institutions have made it increasingly attractive to visitors seeking "authentic" urban experiences. The rapid expansion of short-term rental platforms has significantly reduced the availability of long-term housing, contributing to rent increases and housing insecurity for residents (Gil & Sequera, 2020). These dynamics have intensified since the post-2008 economic recovery, aligning with Madrid's broader shift toward a tourism-oriented urban economy.

Real estate speculation has further accelerated gentrification pressures in the neighborhood. Investment funds and private developers have increasingly targeted Lavapiés' aging housing stock for renovation and resale, often displacing low-income tenants through legal and informal mechanisms (Rodríguez & López, 2011). These

material processes are accompanied by symbolic upgrading, whereby the neighborhood is rebranded as a creative, bohemian, and cosmopolitan district. Cultural institutions, art spaces, and curated events play a central role in this reimagining, selectively appropriating local diversity while marginalizing existing communities (Zukin, 2010).

Together, these transformations have repositioned Lavapiés within Madrid's urban landscape, shifting it from a stigmatized inner-city area to a site of cultural consumption and investment. However, this transition remains deeply contested, as long-term residents, migrants, and activists continue to resist displacement and symbolic erasure through everyday practices and cultural interventions. Understanding this empirical context is essential for situating the forms of resistance examined in this study.

F. Findings

1. Street Art as Political Expression

Street art emerged as a prominent medium for articulating political critique and contesting gentrification in Lavapiés. Visual interventions—including murals, graffiti, and posters—frequently conveyed anti-gentrification narratives, highlighting the impacts of rising rents, real estate speculation, and social displacement (Iveson, 2010; Shaw, 2015). Slogans and imagery directly critiqued property developers and municipal policies, framing gentrification as a structural rather than individual problem.

A distinctive feature of these interventions was their use of multilingual and inclusive symbolism. Artworks often incorporated Spanish, Arabic, English, and other languages, reflecting the multicultural composition of the neighborhood and signaling an inclusive urban citizenship (Sequera & Nofre, 2018). Symbols such as intertwined hands, maps, and collective motifs reinforced solidarity and connected local struggles to global urban justice discourses. In this way, street art functioned not only as an aesthetic practice but as a form of political communication, transmitting messages that challenged dominant narratives of urban renewal (Mitchell, 2003; Zukin, 2010).

Furthermore, the visual critique of real estate capitalism extended beyond explicit slogans. Murals and graffiti employed metaphorical imagery, such as cages, rising towers, or "ghost neighborhoods," to represent displacement, alienation, and the erasure of community life. These symbolic forms of resistance made abstract processes of gentrification tangible, allowing residents to claim agency in shaping public discourse and contesting spatial inequalities.

2. *Occupation and Reappropriation of Public Space*

Resistance in Lavapiés also manifested through the occupation and reappropriation of public space. Informal gatherings, assemblies, and performative actions—including street performances, music events, and community workshops—transformed squares and streets into sites of social and political engagement. These practices challenged the privatization and commodification of urban space, asserting collective rights to inhabit and use the city (Lefebvre, 1996; Harvey, 2008).

Temporality and repetition were central strategies in these spatial interventions. Regular weekly gatherings, recurrent cultural events, and temporary installations disrupted the spatial routines imposed by commercial or tourism-oriented urban planning. By embedding resistance in recurring practices, residents reinforced the neighborhood's social cohesion while resisting the displacement of everyday life by speculative or consumption-driven urban change (Mitchell, 2003).

Public space occupation also served as a site for knowledge exchange and network-building among diverse residents. Through these practices, marginalized groups—including migrants and low-income households—asserted visibility, negotiated collective norms, and reaffirmed their stake in the urban landscape, creating a living, performative alternative to the top-down rebranding of the neighborhood.

3. *Cultural Resistance and Collective Identity*

Cultural practices in Lavapiés contributed to the construction and reinforcement of collective identity. By engaging in shared artistic production and spatial occupation, residents strengthened neighborhood belonging and fostered a sense of shared history and experience. Murals, performances, and communal events celebrated local histories, commemorated migrant experiences, and highlighted social struggles, thereby anchoring identity in place-based practices (Sequera, 2020; Zukin, 2010).

Visibility of marginalized voices was another key outcome of these cultural practices. Street art and public performances amplified the perspectives of residents often excluded from formal decision-making processes, creating counter-narratives to official urban branding and promotional campaigns. These practices resisted homogenizing representations of Lavapiés as a "bohemian" or "tourist-friendly" district, instead foregrounding the social and political realities of long-term residents (Shaw, 2015; Iveson, 2010).

Through this cultural production, residents effectively linked identity construction to spatial practice. Neighborhood identity was not only represented symbolically but enacted through occupation, performance, and participation, demonstrating that cultural resistance operates simultaneously as an expressive, spatial, and political phenomenon.

4.   Limits and Contradictions

Despite its vitality, cultural resistance in Lavapiés faces important limits and contradictions. One notable challenge is the co-optation of street art and public events by tourism and commercial actors. Murals and graffiti initially created as critical interventions are sometimes incorporated into guided tours, promotional campaigns, or branding initiatives, diluting their oppositional meaning and converting them into consumable urban spectacles (Zukin, 2010; Gil & Sequera, 2020).

Additionally, tensions arise between the goals of resistance and the pressures of commodification. While public performances and art projects strengthen community cohesion and visibility, they can inadvertently attract real estate investment or gentrifying audiences, accelerating processes they initially sought to contest. These contradictions highlight the complex dynamics between grassroots cultural agency and structural forces of neoliberal urbanism, demonstrating that resistance is always situated within broader political-economic constraints (Harvey, 2005; Mitchell, 2003).

Overall, the findings illustrate that cultural resistance in Lavapiés is multidimensional, combining visual, performative, and spatial strategies to contest gentrification. At the same time, these practices are not fully insulated from market appropriation or symbolic co-optation, revealing both the potential and the fragility of neighborhood-based urban activism.

G.   Discussion
1.   Cultural Resistance as Urban Agency

The findings of this study underscore the centrality of cultural resistance as a form of urban agency that challenges conventional narratives of residents as passive victims of gentrification. Traditional analyses of displacement often frame residents as powerless objects of market-driven or policy-led urban transformations, emphasizing loss, vulnerability, and exclusion (Lees et al., 2008; Smith, 1996). The evidence from Lavapiés, however, highlights how residents actively contest spatial and symbolic dispossession, deploying cultural practices to assert claims to the city, communicate dissent, and create alternative urban imaginaries.

By producing street art, organizing public gatherings, and performing in communal spaces, residents enact forms of agency that are both political and creative. These interventions demonstrate that agency is not solely located in formal political processes or institutional channels but is embedded in everyday practices and the micro-politics of urban life (Mitchell, 2003; Shaw, 2015). Cultural resistance allows marginalized groups—including migrants, low-income households, and long-term residents—to articulate counter-narratives, render their experiences visible, and challenge the legitimacy of neoliberal urban interventions. In this sense, resistance is both performative and strategic, producing tangible spatial and symbolic effects while reinforcing collective capacities for action.

Moreover, cultural resistance as urban agency destabilizes the dichotomy between structural constraint and individual autonomy. Residents are neither fully constrained by market forces nor fully free to shape urban change; rather, they operate within complex, relational systems of power where small acts of creativity, visibility, and occupation can accumulate into meaningful social and political leverage (Harvey, 2008; Lefebvre, 1996). This reframing moves the discourse beyond victimhood and positions residents as active participants in the production, appropriation, and contestation of urban space.

2. *Spatial Politics of Gentrification*

The case of Lavapiés illustrates that public space functions as a primary arena in which gentrification is both enacted and contested. Streets, squares, and communal spaces are not neutral containers but socially and politically charged sites where competing claims to the city are negotiated. The occupation of these spaces through assemblies, performances, and street art reveals how cultural practices can materially and symbolically resist processes of enclosure, privatization, and commodification (Lefebvre, 1996; Iveson, 2010).

Cultural practices reshape urban meaning by producing alternative narratives that challenge the homogenizing discourses of urban regeneration and city branding. Through visual, performative, and participatory interventions, residents contest the symbolic redefinition of Lavapiés as a "creative" or "tourist-friendly" neighborhood, foregrounding histories of social struggle, multicultural life, and collective belonging (Zukin, 2010; Sequera, 2020). In this way, public space becomes both a stage for political expression and a medium through which power relations are articulated and contested. The temporality and repetition of these practices—through recurring gatherings, murals, and cultural events—reinforce their visibility and

legitimize claims to urban presence, demonstrating that spatial politics are ongoing, iterative, and deeply embedded in daily life.

The spatial politics evident in Lavapiés also highlight the relational nature of urban power. Control over space is not absolute but negotiated through social practices, symbolic representation, and material occupation. Even small-scale interventions, such as a mural or a temporary gathering, can disrupt dominant spatial orders and assert alternative norms for neighborhood life. This aligns with Lefebvre's (1996) notion that the production of space is inseparable from social struggle, emphasizing that resistance is simultaneously spatial, cultural, and political.

3. *Implications for Gentrification Theory*

The evidence from Lavapiés suggests important theoretical implications for understanding gentrification and urban resistance. First, it calls for the integration of cultural practices into frameworks of resistance, moving beyond displacement-centered analyses. While economic and policy-oriented approaches have provided critical insights into the material dimensions of gentrification, they often underplay the symbolic, performative, and creative strategies through which communities contest urban change (Shaw, 2015; Mitchell, 2003). Recognizing cultural resistance as a legitimate and impactful form of agency expands the analytical scope of gentrification theory to include symbolic, aesthetic, and spatial dimensions.

Second, this study prompts a rethinking of power, visibility, and scale in urban struggles. Resistance is not limited to formal institutions or large-scale mobilizations; it can occur at micro-scales through visual interventions, neighborhood gatherings, and performative acts that influence public perception, social cohesion, and the politics of space. These practices illuminate the relationality of power: it is enacted, contested, and reproduced through everyday social and spatial interactions, rather than residing solely in institutions or market forces (Harvey, 2005; Lefebvre, 1996).

Finally, integrating cultural practices into gentrification analysis challenges the dominance of "top-down" narratives in urban studies. By foregrounding the agency of marginalized residents and the political significance of cultural expression, scholars can better account for the contested, multi-dimensional, and context-specific nature of gentrification. This perspective also has normative implications for urban governance and planning: policies that recognize, support, and protect community-based cultural practices may mitigate displacement pressures, sustain neighborhood identity, and promote inclusive urban development.

Here's a fully formulated and expanded **Conclusion section** in academic style, integrating your points with critical reflection and scholarly discourse:

H.   Conclusion

1.   *Summary of Key Findings*

This study has highlighted the central role of cultural practices as effective strategies of resistance against gentrification in Lavapiés, Madrid. Through street art, murals, and the occupation of public spaces, residents actively contest processes of displacement, real estate speculation, and symbolic rebranding. These practices serve not only as expressions of dissent but also as mechanisms for reclaiming the right to the city, reinforcing neighborhood identity, and asserting collective urban agency (Mitchell, 2003; Lefebvre, 1996). The findings demonstrate that resistance is multidimensional, encompassing aesthetic, spatial, and political dimensions, and that even micro-scale interventions can produce significant social and symbolic impact (Sequera, 2020; Shaw, 2015).

Street art functions as a visual and linguistic critique of neoliberal urbanization, employing multilingual and inclusive symbolism to represent the neighborhood's multicultural composition and to amplify marginalized voices. Similarly, the occupation of public spaces—through assemblies, performances, and recurring community events—transforms streets and squares into arenas of social negotiation and political engagement, challenging both physical and symbolic forms of exclusion. Together, these practices demonstrate that residents are not passive victims but active participants shaping the socio-spatial production of urban life.

2.   *Theoretical Contributions*

The study contributes to theory by bridging urban studies, cultural geography, and political activism. By situating cultural practices within frameworks of urban resistance, it advances a cultural reading of anti-gentrification movements, emphasizing the symbolic, performative, and spatial dimensions often overlooked in traditional economic or displacement-focused analyses (Harvey, 2008; Zukin, 2010).

The research demonstrates that resistance operates simultaneously at multiple scales—micro, neighborhood, and citywide—highlighting the relationality of urban power and the significance of everyday practices in shaping urban dynamics. Moreover, it provides empirical support for Lefebvre's (1996) conception of the production of

space as inherently political and contested, showing how marginalized communities enact agency through both material and symbolic interventions. These insights extend gentrification theory by integrating cultural production, identity formation, and spatial claims into models of urban struggle, offering a more holistic understanding of resistance in contemporary cities.

3. Policy Implications

The findings carry significant policy implications. Urban governance should recognize and support grassroots cultural practices as legitimate forms of community agency. Policies that protect public spaces for collective use, encourage participatory cultural initiatives, and safeguard residents against speculative pressures can strengthen social cohesion, preserve neighborhood identity, and mitigate displacement (Mitchell, 2003; Harvey, 2005).

Inclusive urban planning should move beyond top-down regeneration frameworks, incorporating mechanisms that amplify local voices, particularly those of marginalized or migrant communities. By integrating cultural, symbolic, and spatial dimensions of neighborhood life into policy design, municipal authorities can foster urban environments that are not only economically dynamic but socially just and culturally vibrant.

4. Future Research Directions

This study opens several avenues for future research. Comparative studies across cities could illuminate how cultural resistance manifests under different political, economic, and cultural contexts, providing insights into the generalizability of findings (Lees et al., 2008). Longitudinal analyses are also needed to assess the sustainability and evolution of cultural resistance over time, particularly in neighborhoods undergoing rapid gentrification cycles.

Additionally, future research could explore the digital and transnational dimensions of urban activism, including the role of social media, online networks, and global solidarity movements in amplifying local struggles. Such studies would expand our understanding of how urban communities mobilize cultural, spatial, and political strategies to contest gentrification in an increasingly interconnected and mediated urban landscape.

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All authors declared that this work is original and has never been published in any form and in any media, nor is it under consideration for publication in any journal, and all sources cited in this work refer to the basic standards of scientific citation.

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