

Article

# Analysis of Latin American Theme Parks in a Tourism Context

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**Abstract:** The main goal of this manuscript is to analyse Latin American theme parks as tourist attractions for stimulating future tourism demand after the pandemic crisis. The methodology used in this study is a set of qualitative and quantitative indicators for measuring the most visited Latin American parks from 2011 to 2022 and where they are localised to address the importance of the location of these theme parks and the cities in which they are operating. The results reveal that Latin American parks such as Six Flags Mexico, Beto Carrero World, Hopi Hari, La Feria de Chapultepec and Parque Xcaret are tourist attractions that promote and improve the tourism industry in Latin American cities, and their entertainment activities attract millions of visitors each year. One of the most important findings from this study is that the bus is the primary and most efficient (regarding travel time) mode of transportation in the cities analysed, as well as that there is a high correlation between the success of tourist attractions, their accessibility by plane and on land and their distance to Latin American cities. Moreover, this research constitutes an empirical illustration of the importance of theme parks in cities as tourist attractions and provides a new emerging contribution to the literature on the relationship between theme parks and the means of transportation at tourist destinations.

**Keywords:** theme parks; visitors; cities; location; public transport services; airports

## 1. Introduction

Latin American theme parks are not as well-known as North American, European, Asian and Pacific theme parks such as Disneyland, Universal Studios, Europa Park, Legoland, Chimelong Ocean Kingdom, Ocean Park and Nagashima Spa Land, but they have become an integral tourist attraction within the Latin American tourism industry, which attracts millions of visitors annually with the help of airports and airlines, public transport networks, accommodations and the wider population. Theme parks contribute significantly to the sustainability of destinations in numerous areas, including investments in infrastructures, tourism revenues, tax revenues, job creation and community sustenance [1]. Florido-Benítez [2] notes that film-induced tourism can be the perfect marketing tool to attract more tourists to theme parks through movies and the real or fictional characters represented in films such as Marvel, Minions, Avatar, Harry Potter and Disney. Thus, theme park operators are recommended to adopt marketing strategies to improve their brand image, as well as to increase the number visitors at parks and tourist destinations where they are located [3].

Most international tourists who book holidays in Latin American cities are drawn in by their tourist attractions like beaches, national parks, large resorts, historical monuments, tourism products and services at very cheap prices. Theme parks play an important role in the entertainment and tourism sectors of cities because they provide a financial and social impact (revenues, direct and indirect employment and local taxes) wherever they are located. Bodolica et al. [4] note that theme parks are considered one of the most popular entertainment destinations worldwide and are great revenue generators for the tourism and hospitality industries [5]. For instance, the theme park industry in Hong Kong represents an oligopoly market structure in which Ocean Park and Disneyland are in direct competition [6], but both parks provided more than 120 million visitors from 2012 to 2022, and these two parks helped to stimulate tourism demand in the city [7].



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This study is focused on the top 12 Latin American theme parks, as seen in Figure 1, because in the last 12 years (2020 not included) they have experienced a considerable growth in their number of visitors. In 2022, theme park attendance increased globally by an impressive 34% compared with the previous year. The most prestigious ranking of theme parks worldwide is based entirely on attendance [7,8]. Indeed, I selected these 12 theme parks because there are limited studies related to theme parks in the Latin American region. Latin American theme parks as a topic is not frequently researched by researchers, academics and organizations [9]. Conversely, there is a great deal of research on theme parks localised in North America, France, Asia and the Pacific regions [10,11].



**Figure 1.** Top 12 Latin American theme park locations by number of visitors (2011–2021). Author's own elaboration.

Theme parks and museums are linked to the future of tourist destinations, and they need to be supported by the close proximity of hotels, restaurants, public transport services, airports and a good supply of tourism in order to be accessible to a wider audience [12]. For this reason, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) have a good understanding of them and the benefits and opportunities that they bring to the cities [13]. For instance, some DMOs' marketing strategies and promotion campaigns through digital channels are focused on the theme park's location, and on marketing segments to improve and diversify the tourism supply and demand of cities. In this same line, Paiva [14] found that marketing strategies developed by the DMO of Peña city and Beto Carrero World Park improved the tourism supply and demand in the Brazilian region of Santa Catarina. Indeed, the theme park sector in Brazil continues to grow thanks to the Beto Carrero World and Hopi Hari theme parks, the latter of which is located 70 km from the city of Sao Paulo [15].

The theme park industry in Mexico is chaired by two large companies: one is a national company named Experiencias Xcaret and the other is the international company Six Flags Mexico, the latter being the most visited theme park in Latin America. The theme park industry in Latin America is a market with companies operating in oligopoly-like conditions [16]. The operational performance of a theme park depends on its region, weather

patterns, the number of days in the operating season, local demographics and income characteristics, its proximity to population centres and travel times from the city centre to the theme park [17]. One of the main goals of theme park operators is to provide recreational and educational services for international visitors and the native population [18].

There are no scientific studies in the context of the best Latin American theme parks that analyse the impact in terms of number of visitors, location, public transport, airports and native populations as factors crucial for the success of Latin American cities and for improving the future tourism industry, as well as promotion campaigns to stimulate tourism demand. Theme parks are concentrated within a small geographical area, and they need accommodations, restaurants and air and ground transport systems to attract visitors, as in the case of Shanghai Disney park and its resorts [19]. Public transport systems have considerably enhanced the development of US cities and their theme parks [20]. Additionally, theme park operators need to understand their competitiveness within a destination to increase their market share [6]. Liang and Li [21] claim that theme parks have attracted extensive scholarly attention within and outside the tourism literature, but a globalised vision remains lacking for theme park conceptualisation research and practice in the tourism industry context. Examination of theme parks is important for better developing tourist attractions, businesses and destinations [22].

In light of these research gaps, the main challenge of this paper is to analyse the top 12 Latin American theme parks as tourist attractions to stimulate tourism demand in the future and to examine theme parks in this region from 2011 to 2022, with the aim of enhancing theme parks' tourism supply and cities where these tourist attractions are located. It is important to highlight that the global financial crisis began in 2008, and the period of time (2011–2022) in this study was selected due the strong recovery of the large emerging economies such as Asia (8.1%) and Latin America (4.5%) in 2011, as well as the main issuing markets such as the US (2.6%) and European countries (1.7%) that visit Latin American countries [23].

Theme parks are key attractions in the tourism industry and play an important role in generating tourism demand. These tourist attractions are the main motivators for tourism trips to many destinations like Los Angeles, Orlando, Paris and Tokyo, among others [24,25]. The consequences of theme park tourism are noteworthy from social, business and spatial perspectives. As stated by Antón-Clavé [26], theme parks promote the economic growth, productive diversification, tourism development and territorial valorisation of cities. Theme park development has become an important choice for tourism's spatial development in cities [27]. This article encourages researchers, scholars, academics, DMOs and theme park operators to move beyond current empirical confines and shape the future of theme parks and cities, and vice versa.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Theme Parks Help to Improve Cities' Economies and Tourism Activities

Theme parks are a popular form of entertainment and a fast-growing sector of tourism [22]. Milman [28] defines a theme park as a company that offers rides, shows, merchandise, food services and other forms of entertainment in a themed environment, but tourist attractions also improve tourism demand and tourists' experiences at cities [29]. Tourist attractions such as theme parks, museums, iconic bridges, cathedrals and mosques, amongst many others, are the pivotal elements of tourism development and motivate tourists to visit destinations [30,31]. Hence, theme parks make direct economic contributions to regional and national economies [32]. It would be difficult to imagine US tourism activities without the Disney and Universal theme parks, which attract millions of visitors from all over the world each year. For example, Disney and Universal parks are implementing new attractions with augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) to stay in tune with visitors' preferences and to encourage visitors to return [33,34]. International tourism is an export or tradeable good and a service that improves regional economies [35]. Foreign

and national visitors to a tourism destination spend money buying goods and services, creating economic impacts [36].

To explore new initiatives related to tourists' experiences between cities and their tourism activities such as at theme parks and museums, first, DMOs need to analyse tourists' preferences, and then design digital marketing campaigns that can improve the sustainability of the tourism industry in cities [37,38]. DMOs must monitor how residents and tourists acquire information through DMOs' websites and apps to improve cities' tourism supply at both their origin and destination [39]. However, residents who visit theme parks in their cities may rate the socio-economic and environmental impacts of tourism development differently than foreign tourists [40]. Residents also boost the tourism industry thanks to their visits to the city's tourist attractions and their tourism expenditures [41]. A tourist site is considered to generate a flow of expenditures on its own if it is attractive for most visitors and empowers the city's economy [42]. For instance, DMOs and tour operators jointly promote tourism campaigns with package holidays that include flights, hotels, theme parks, museums and restaurants to increase tourists' expenditures in cities such as Paris, Madrid, London, Tokyo, Los Angeles and Orlando, amongst many others. If the theme park operators can effectively differentiate themselves from their competitors through strategic integration with the accommodation providers and DMOs, the entire tourism supply chain would benefit from this vertical strategy [43].

## *2.2. Air and Ground Means of Transport Play an Important Role in Theme Parks and Cities' Tourism Supply*

Air connectivity and the proximity of large airports provide an added value for tourist attractions, because they provide accessibility, connectivity and frequent flights by airlines [12]. It is well accepted that air transport has remarkable effects on economic landscapes and a direct impact on the number of passenger arrivals at destinations [44]. In the case of large airports, these provide better air services than regional airports to passengers, including nonstop flights, more schedule options and cheaper fares, in order to visit the main capital cities worldwide and their tourist attractions [45]. In most cases, the theme parks tend to be located in capital cities. For example, if a tourist wants to visit Mexico City and the Six Flags Mexico theme park, s/he should book a flight arriving at the Benito Juarez Ciudad de Mexico airport because this airport is the most accessible in terms of time and space from the airport to the city centre or theme park (6 min). Air traffic demand in Latin America is expected to double over the next twenty years [46].

Figure 2 displays the concentration of the main Latin American cities' air traffic as measured by available seat kilometres (ASKs) in 2016 [47]. Brazil accounted for 28% of total air traffic, followed by Mexico comprising 22% and the rest of the countries accounting for 50% of the total. An ASK measure is a measure of an airline's carrying capacity to generate revenue, calculated by multiplying the available seats on any given aircraft by the number of kilometres flown on a given flight [48]. Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia and Chile together provide around 70% of the air traffic in Latin America [47]. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that most theme parks analysed in this study are located in these countries. Theme park operators need the best air accessibility and connectivity provided by commercial airlines and airports to attract international visitors. In the case of commercial airlines, Aeromexico is the most connected airline hub in Latin America, serving over 95 destinations [49].

Ground transport systems (e.g., subways, buses, trains, trams, taxis, ferry, electric bikes, scooters, etc.) at cities and theme parks help to move tourists and residents from one area to another in an efficient and affordable manner. Public transport systems improve the tourism supply and contribute to reduced air pollutant emissions in cities and their tourist attractions [50]. Public transport is an indispensable part of current intelligent transportation systems in cities, mitigating traffic congestion, improving the local economy and reducing climate change [51]. Every €1 of value created from public transport is linked to a further value creation of €4 in the total economy [52]. Mobility is an essential issue

for tourists visiting large cities, since it is a crucial factor for their comfort. In the case of Latin American countries, railways and bus transport systems are the main means of transport, but a lack of institutional frameworks and oversight by governments has often led to inefficient systems with poor quality and excessive informality [53]. In contrast to rural areas, Le-Klähn and Hall [54] suggest that sustainable transport development is important in rural areas and nature-based attractions to preserve the environment.



**Figure 2.** The concentration of the main Latin American cities' air traffic as measured by ASKs in 2016. Author's own elaboration from OAG [47].

Albalate and Bel [55] note that the transport supply of cities is primordial for tourists as they move around the city, visiting urban attractions, returning to their accommodation and so on. The provision of excellent access and mobility within a tourist attraction or city is an important factor in determining the attractiveness of a theme park or city and its brand image [56]. The capital cities of Shanghai, Stockholm, Berlin, Tokyo, Prague, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Singapore, Hong Kong, London, New York, Paris and Madrid offer the best public transport in the world [57]. From a sustainable city perspective, greater efforts are required by regional and national governments to improve residents' and tourists' mobility and the quality of public transport services in cities. In March 2020, Luxembourg made global headlines as it made all public transport free. That is, when in Luxembourg, you are encouraged to use public transport like the bus, train and tram, as they are completely free and efficient too. Luxembourg's public transport reaches most famous places and tourist attractions in the city so, without spending anything on local travel, residents and tourists will be able to see many places in an equitable, sustainable and efficient way. Cities with effective and extensive public transport networks are potentially more attractive to tourists [58].

### 3. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches that are suitable to tackling theme parks as tourist attractions and examining the contexts in which theme parks are operating, their city's location and their tourism demand in terms of number of visitors. Latin American theme parks were chosen because these tourist attractions help to stimulate domestic and international tourism demand in tourist destinations [59–61]. Another reason why I examine Latin American theme parks is because most previous scientific studies are focused on Disney and Universal theme parks across the globe. Notwithstanding, this study gives us the opportunity to develop a new point of view in the relationship between theme park operators and cities in developing countries that want to improve the city's tourism supply and tourists' experiences. Theme parks are

the main motivators for tourism trips to cities, core elements of the tourism product and tourists' daily expenditures [62,63] and attract millions of visitors every year to cities.

#### Data Collection

To address the research objectives, I conducted this study in a city and theme park context to have a better global vision about the variables that were analysed. The methodology of this study provides theme park operators, DMOs and public and private transport networks with an opportunity to understand what indicators improve the interrelationship between theme parks and publish transport systems to make better financial/operational/economic decisions for operators and the city's future. Latin American cities are trying to stimulate international and domestic tourism demand through their most important theme parks. Latin America is one of the most unequal regions in the world in terms of income and social inequalities relating to gender, education, race and indigenous origin [64]. Data was collected using four steps and six indicators: location of the city, intermodal passenger transport, airport proximity, air and train accessibility and connectivity, high tourism demand and high concentration of population. This methodology has previously been replicated by Florido-Benítez [12] to assess the interrelationship between museums, air transport and cities. This manuscript therefore sets out to combine multi-source data to identify the link between the variables shown below.

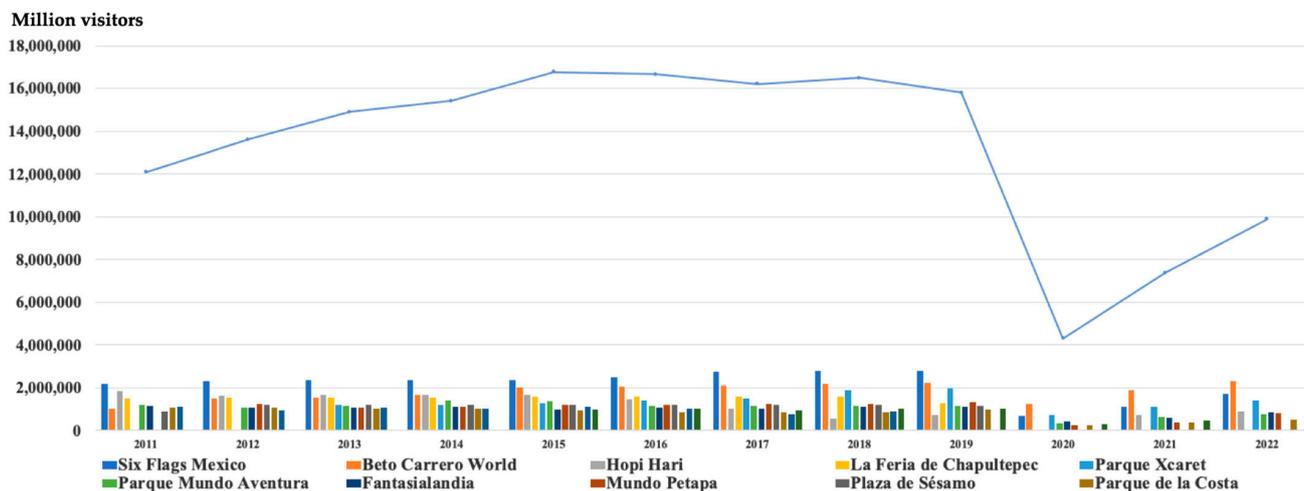
<sup>1</sup>. Data on Latin American theme parks and their number of visitors were extracted from Themed Entertainment Association (TEA/AECOM) [7,8]. Secondary data shows us the top 12 Latin American theme parks by number of visitors; this data is shown in Table 1 and Figure 3. Data on theme parks cover the period from 2011 to 2022. The number of visitors at these attractions can help to identify factors that play a role in consumers' selection of theme parks, visitors' emotions and which attractions are most visited [65], or develop marketing strategies to attract and retain future customers [66]. For example, Shanghai Disneyland opened in 2016, and this park has had a positive impact on the spatial network of urban tourism flows in the city, alleviating congestion in the Bund area [67], and improved considerably the hotel industry in cities near Shanghai [68].

**Table 1.** Top 12 Latin American theme parks by number of visitors from 2011 to 2021. Source: Author's own elaboration from [7].

Rank	Theme Park	Location	Total Visitors (2011–2022)	Total % (2011–2022)
1	Six Flags Mexico	Mexico City, Mexico	25,956,000	16.3%
2	Beto Carrero World	Peña (Santa Catarina), Brazil	21,880,000	13.7%
3	Hopi Hari	Sao Paulo, Brazil	13,914,321	8.7%
4	La Feria de Chapultepec	Mexico City, Mexico	13,798,000	8.6%
5	Parque Xcaret	Cancún, Mexico	13,687,000	8.6%
6	Parque Mundo Aventura	Bogotá, Colombia	12,606,000	7.9%
7	Fantasilandia	Santiago, Chile	11,680,000	7.3%
8	Mundo Petapa	Guatemala City, Guatemala	11,131,000	7.0%
9	Plaza de Sésamo	Monterrey, Mexico	10,523,000	6.6%
10	Parque de la Costa	Tigre, Argentina	9,958,000	6.2%
11	El Salitre Magico	Bogotá, Colombia	7,913,000	5.0%
12	Parque Nacional del Café	Quindío, Colombia	6,516,000	4.1%
	Total visitors		159,562,321	100.0%

<sup>2</sup> The location of theme parks in cities is very important to DMOs, hotels and OTAs to promote tourist attractions in cities. Indeed, travel distance is important for measuring origin-side tourism demand and destination attractiveness, and offers a new perspective on the driving forces of tourism [69]. The economic, touristic and social successes of cities and airports and their hinterlands have become increasingly based on their ability to create new attractions that demonstrate their dynamism [70–72]. Moreover, the airport's proximity and accessibility by plane, high-speed train, subway, monorail, buses and cars (understood as intermodal passenger transport and air and ground accessibility and connectivity) were

the main reasons why theme parks were built in the city of Orlando [73]. Likewise, the peculiarity of Latin American countries is that tourism development, transport infrastructures and the expansion of business centres are focused on the capital and large cities, and this has created a situation of inequality in terms of accessibility, connectivity and tourism development in the rest of their cities and towns [74,75]. This situation of inequality pertaining to these indicators increases the isodistance and isochrone measures in our study, as we will see next.



**Figure 3.** Top 12 Latin American theme parks by number of visitors (2011–2022). Source: Author's own elaboration from [7]. Note: The La Feria de Chapultepec theme park was closed between 2020 and 2022, the El Salitre Magico and Plaza de Sésamo parks did not show 2020–2022 data and, for the Parque Nacional del Café Park, there is only data from 2015 to 2022.

Multinational enterprises mainly choose the location of theme parks by the ownership, location and internationalisation of a city. In this research, I calculated the time from an airport to the city centre through Google Maps [76] on 9 December 2022. I selected the centre of cities because most theme parks, restaurants and accommodations are located there. The connectivity and travel time measures are very common in tourism and transport industries [77]. For a fixed radius of travel distance, this study uses an area of 90 km (isodistances) and 1 h and 30 min time (isochrones) from the city centre to theme parks, airports and intermodal transport by public transport such as trains, subways, taxis and buses. The use of these two metrics is suited to study public transport in terms of distance and travel time [78]. To map and represent isodistance and isochrone measures in a spatial form, I used Iso4app software [79]. I note that the isodistance and isochrone measures and map depend on the city centre, the geography of a territory, public transport services, airports, tourist attractions, connectivity and transport infrastructures. For instance, the European Commission considered an airport's hinterland area to be a 100-km radius, or a one-hour driving time (by car) from the airport, and Florido-Benítez [70] uses 80 km or a 50-min driving time (by car) from the airport to the city centre. Bao [80] notes that regional theme parks cater to residents within a one-hour driving radius because around 75% of attendees live within 150 miles of a given location. Travel distance is important for measuring origin-side tourism demand and destination attractiveness [69]. Intermodal transportation options provide a high value on travel time for international visitors and the native population [81]; the cities of Paris, London, Madrid and Tokyo are each one such instance, because intermodal transport makes theme parks physically accessible to visitors. Public transport services are very important within cities because they help to reduce traffic congestion and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

<sup>3</sup> Tourism demand is frequently measured by visitor departures/arrivals/flows [69,82]. International tourist arrivals are the key indicator of tourism demand and the most popular proxy for tourism demand in the tourism literature. Tourist arrivals is an indicator which

helps to identify direct and indirect differences in the quality or quantity of tourism demand within a defined period of time at destinations, hotels and tourist attractions [83–85]. Most DMOs and companies pursue strategies to stimulate tourist arrivals even further [13,38,86]. Indeed, the quantification of tourism demand requires different indicators like the distance and tourism demand in origin-destination terms [87], or even measuring the accessibility of cities (space-time) by public transport (e.g., high-speed rail, train, buses, taxi, etc.) relative to the city centre from a tourism-demand point of view [88–90], especially in urban cities [91] where urban sprawl and population growth can give rise to transportation inefficiencies and traffic congestion [92].

4<sup>o</sup> A high concentration of the native population in urban cities is an added value to tourist attractions such as those in the cities of Mexico City, Monterrey, Sao Paulo, Cancún and Bogota because such populations like to visit theme parks, theatres, cinemas, restaurants, national parks and historical monuments. Very little attention has been paid to native populations as a variable or proxy that helps to develop the tourism industry in cities. For example, Camargo et al. [90] suggest that the native population helps to improve the sustainability of the tourism industry in urban cities. Cities need to promote domestic tourism through their native populations with the aim of enhancing the local economy [93]. In this study, I selected high concentration of population as a variable that influences the number of visitors at theme parks. TEA/AECOM [94] reported that the top 20 theme parks worldwide are influenced by domestic and international tourism demand, geographical location, transportation system and native population. For instance, US and Chinese theme parks are very focused on domestic tourism [95] and this commercial strategy improves their benefits and reduces external economic vulnerabilities. Domestic tourism must be promoted in tourist destinations that are not dependent on-air transport. Canh and Thanh [96] found that domestic tourism spending significantly contributes to the reduction of economic vulnerability, whereas international tourism has the opposite effect.

#### 4. Results of Research

##### *Latin American Theme Parks Improve the Tourism Industry in Cities*

The impact of economic globalization on Latin American cities is focused on labour markets and the configuration of urban spaces that accentuate economic insecurity and urban inequalities. Indirectly this situation isolates low-income populations, reducing public space in which they interact with the better-off population as private facilities for health, education and recreation spring up around the city [97]. Nevertheless, the tourism industry has promoted greater awareness on the part of national and local governments, DMOs, airports, stakeholders and citizens of the need for innovation in tourism products and services, public transport systems and transport infrastructures. In fact, cities must provide a well-developed infrastructure in terms of transportation and services like hub airports, high-speed train, intermodal transport networks, accommodations, restaurants, cafes and shops to improve the quality of life of their citizens and tourists' experiences and satisfaction. Table 1 and Figure 3 display the relevance of Latin American theme parks in terms of visitors in cities and their regional and local economies. Proof of this is seen at Six Flags Mexico (26 million visitors), La Feria de Chapultepec (13.8 million visitors), Parque Xcaret (13.6 million visitors) and the Plaza de Sésamo (10.5 million visitors) theme parks in Mexico, which jointly received nearly 61 million visitors from 2021 to 2022, thus reaching about the same number (64 million visitors) of international tourist arrivals that visited Italy in 2019 [98], a substantial figure for revitalizing and improving the local and regional economies of the cities of Mexico City, Cancún and Monterrey.

In the period examined in this study, Six Flags Mexico was the most visited theme park in Latin American cities with 26 million visitors, as mentioned previously, followed by Beto Carrero World (21.8 million visitors), Hopi Hari (13.9 million visitors), La Feria de Chapultepec (13.8 million), Parque Xcaret (13.6 million), Parque Mundo Aventura (over 12 million visitors), Fantasilandia and Mundo Petapa parks (over 11 million visitors), Plaza de Sésamo (10.5 million visitors) and Parque de la Costa, El Salitre Mágico and

Parque Nacional del Cafés (each with under 10 million visitors) (see Table 1), all of which have improved and invigorated the hospitality and tourism industries in their cities and countries. Table 1 presents the top 12 Latin American theme parks, and most of them are situated in large cities, except Quindío and Tigre cities. Similarly, most cities have a high concentration of population and provide good accessibility and connectivity to theme parks.

In addition, Figure 3 presents the evolution of the number of visitors in Latin American theme parks, and most of them have experienced a steady growth from 2011 to 2019, except in 2020 where the COVID-19 pandemic had a direct impact on the number of visitors, which decreased by  $-66.8\%$  on average in these 12 theme parks, and a total of  $-72.7\%$ . The tourism industry was severely affected by measures regarding domestic travel in Latin American countries. Most countries imposed restrictions on domestic travel, including by mandating closures in touristic attractions, such as theme parks, natural parks and beaches. Nevertheless, in 2022, the number of people visiting the top 12 Latin American theme parks (not including Hopi Hari, Plaza de Sésamo and El Salitre Mágico) grew by  $29.5\%$  (2.5 million visitors) in comparison with the previous year. However, overall numbers were still  $-37.4\%$  (5.9 million visitors) lower than in 2019. Results show us that theme parks are an added value to cities because they attract millions of visitors and enhance the regional and local economies. As stated by Mulder [99], this crisis is an opportunity to increase the contribution of tourism in cities and promote sustainable and inclusive tourism in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for people with disabilities when they are on holidays [100].

The success of cities is tied to air and ground transport connectivity between origin and destination locations because airports and public transport services have a direct influence on tourists' perceptions and satisfaction and reduce travel time and costs for tourists when they are on holidays. Although sometimes the public interest does not necessarily benefit all parts of the public equally, Paget-Seekins and Tironi [101] note that public transport services provide benefits to society, especially in more efficient use of public infrastructure. Latin American cities are improving public transportation so that people can access all types of spaces. There is a need for innovative public transport networks and infrastructures in Latin American cities to cover tourists' and citizens' needs [102]. According to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the global demand for air travel remained strong in 2023, and commercial airlines in the Latin American region surpassed their pre-pandemic levels [103].

Table 2 shows descriptions of our variables of interest: the location of theme parks in the cities, the nearest airport to the city centre, time for public transport from the airport to the city centre (understood as air and ground accessibility, connectivity and intermodal node) and a high concentration of population. Regarding high tourism demand, this variable was previously presented in the subsection above. In terms of accessibility, transport between the airport and city centre and travel time, Mexico is the most efficient country in all terms, with three airports and public transport systems. This synergy means that many visitors stay in accommodations in the city centre and near tourist attractions to optimise their time while they are on holidays or business. In addition, our results indicated that the bus is the most efficient and used means of transport in most cities analysed (Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Guatemala), followed by the subway in Brazil and the train in Argentina. Our findings have consistently confirmed that Latin American cities are highly dependent on buses as a means of transport because there is a lack of investment in subways, trains and high-speed trains as means of transport and infrastructures. Latin American public transport services are focused on buses as a means of transport [59]. Findings reveal that all Latin American cities must invest in train and subway infrastructures to enhance the mobility of tourists and native populations, and that it will be an essential piece to structuring the territory and drawing it together. Falavigna and Hernández [104] found that in Latin American cities, public transport affordability is one of the main obstacles to mobility. Indeed, if citizens cannot access public transport, they must use motorcycles, walking, biking, or simply be immobile.

**Table 2.** Theme parks, cities, airports and public transport analysed. Source: Author's own elaboration from [76,79].

Country	Theme Park	Location of Theme Park	Airport Near City Centre	Time for Public Transport from Airport to City Centre	Population of City	
Mexico	Six Flags Mexico	Mexico City	Benito Juárez Ciudad de México airport (MEX)	MEX airport: Shuttle 6 min	9.2 million people	
	La Feria de Chapultepec	Mexico City				
	Parque Xcaret	Cancun	Cancun airport (CUN)	CUN airport: Bus 35 min		1 million people
	Plaza de Sésamo	Monterrey city	Monterrey airport (MTY)	MTY airport: Bus 1 h 15 min		1.1 million people
Colombia	Parque Mundo Aventura	Bogotá city	El Dorado airport (BOG)	BOG airport: Bus 7 min	11.3 million people	
	El Salitre Magico	Bogotá city				
	Parque Nacional del Café	Quindio city	El Dorado airport (BOG)	BOG airport: Bus 9 h		560 thousand people
Brazil	Beto Carrero World	Peña city (Santa Catarina)	Navegantes airport (NVT)	NVT airport: Taxi 10 min	7.3 million people	
	Hopi Hari	Sao Paulo	Sao Paulo-Guarulhos airport (GRU) Congonhas airport (CGH)	CGH airport: Subway 41 min GRU airport: Subway 1 h 13 min	12.3 million people	
Chile	Fantasilandia	Santiago city	Arturo Merino Benítez airport (AMB)	SCL airport: Bus 20 min	6.3 million people	
Guatemala	Mundo Petapa	Guatemala City	La Aurora airport (GUA)	GUA airport: Bus 14 min	3 million people	
Argentina	Parque de la Costa	Tigre city	San Fernando airport (FDO) Inter. Ministro Pistarini airport (EZE)	FDO airport: Train 27 min EZE airport: Train 2 h 38 min	290 thousand people	

Furthermore, most cities provide good air and ground accessibility in travel times from airports to city centres, or vice versa, except for the city of Quindio, which is located 9 h by bus from the city centre of Bogota. Most cities analysed in this research have airports and intermodal transport systems. Providing a good intermodal transport system favours good connectivity to tourist attractions in cities because visitors determine and plan their consumption inside of the theme park and tourist attractions, restaurants, accommodations and shopping localised in the city centre. I selected the most efficient means of transport by Google Maps. Notwithstanding, Congonhas airport in Brazil, and Ministro Pistarini airport in Argentina need to improve travel times by subway and train in order to provide a quality transport services to their population and international and national visitors. As seen in Table 2, the city of Sao Paulo is the most populated among the cities examined with 12.3 million people, followed by the city of Bogota with 11.3 million and Mexico City with 9.2 million, while the rest of the cities have under 8 million people. Tourist attractions and entertainment activities are visited by native populations and international tourists; in fact, most US and Asian theme parks are visited by native populations due to the proximity and accessibility of theme parks in terms of travel time [105].

Considering the relevance that accessibility-based evaluations in cities may have not only for research but also for tourism and entertainment industries, Figure 4 presents six maps of isodistance (90 km) and isochrone measures (1 h and 30 min) from cities analysed in this research. These six maps present the distance (orange colour) and time (green colour) of proximity from city centre to theme parks and airports by public transport, allowing us to know how DMOs can design marketing strategies to stimulate tourism demand in space-time terms in cities. To identify the area that refers to the city centre, and therefore to the attractive zone, I identified the zones where the main tourist attractions are situated using Google Maps. Moreover, Iso4app software does not provide data or isodistance and isochrone measures from the cities of Sao Paulo, Peña, Santiago, Tigre and Buenos Aires. Using isodistance and isochrone measures for theme parks, city centres and airports, this study can contribute to improving the current knowledge of public transport systems in Latin American cities, and approaches to planning and policy, especially in those middle-sized cities or in those cities where no established accessibility indicators are available [106].

The city of Mexico City is the most accessible and competitive city of all, with its International Benito Juarez Ciudad de Mexico airport, commonly known as Mexico City airport, with the IATA [107] code of MEX, and the Six Flags Mexico and La Feria de Chapultepec theme parks are within the boundaries established (see Panel A of Figure 4). From the point of view of national and international visitors, this city has a competitive advantage in accessibility and concentration of theme parks, thanks to its public transport services, especially in shuttle buses as a means of transport and airports. The Mexico City airport is the most important in Mexico and received more than 36 million international and national arrival passengers in 2021 [108]. However, the city of Cancun in southeast Mexico was the most visited city in Latin America and the Caribbean region, with 6 million international visitors annually from 2017 to 2019. Not surprisingly, Cancun is also one of the fastest-growing destinations in the region. While the majority of the city's visitors are from the US, Canada and the UK [109], the Cancun International Airport (IATA: CUN) was the second most important and occupied in Mexico with 23 million international and national arrival passengers in 2021 [110]. This airport and Parque Xcaret are inside of boundaries established in this research, as Cancun city provides good accessibility and connectivity through its airport and intermodal transport system. In the context of the interrelationship between Parque Xcaret and Cancun city, the theme park is a first-order tourist attraction for the city and attracts more than 1 million visitors each year. Baker [111] considers that theme parks are used to distinguish places and cities, and they favour the brand image of the city and park, with its narrative storytelling and the company brand as a strategy in the marketing of destinations.



Figure 4. Cont.



Figure 4. Cont.



**Figure 4.** Maps of isodistance and isochrone measures for Latin American theme parks and cities. Source: Author’s own elaboration from [76,79]. Note: Iso4app software and Google Maps did not provide data or isodistance and isochrone measures from the cities of Sao Paulo, Peña, Santiago, Tigre and Buenos Aires.

Regarding the city of Monterrey in north-eastern Mexico, the Monterrey airport (IATA: MTY) contributes to improving air accessibility and connectivity to the city, but the bus, which is the primary mode of transportation, is not so efficient from the airport to the city centre, with its travel time of 1 h and 15 min, compared with cities like Mexico City and Cancun. Obviously, poor and deficient public transport services negatively affect the mobility of populations and tourists when they are on holidays; that is, it has a direct impact on tourists' experiences and satisfaction when they are visiting the tourist destination and its tourist attractions. In addition, the quality of life in Latin American cities is negatively affected by inefficient public transport systems and low levels of mobility [112]. The Monterrey airport and Plaza de Sésamo park are situated within the boundaries set in this study (see Panel A of Figure 4), and their locations and proximity to the city centre contribute to stimulating tourism demand and increasing the number of visits to tourist attractions like theme parks, theatres or historical monuments. Monterrey must improve management of the tourism transportation industry and its infrastructure to enhance the quality and efficiency of public transport services and the popularity of Monterrey's tourist attractions. In this study, I try to improve the tourism industry from the point of view of cities, populations and tourists. For this reason, I recommend that DMOs in Mexico, Cancun and Monterrey develop joint tourist packages that combine theme parks, sun and beach, national parks, historical monuments and gastronomy products and services, so these cities will tackle national and international tourism demand and supply with better marketing strategies and tourism promotion campaigns.

The city of Bogota in Colombia hosts the Parque Mundo Aventura, and is the sixth most visited in Latin America according to our study (2011–2022). The main gateway to Bogota city is El Dorado airport (IATA: BOG), which is the most important airport in Colombia and one of the main hubs for air traffic in the South American region. This hub airport and the El Salitre Magico and Parque Mundo Aventura parks are inside of the isodistance and isochrone measures laid down in this study (see Panel B of Figure 4). This city of Bogota has excellent connectivity by bus, with a travel time of 7 min from El Dorado airport to the city centre. Conversely, if tourists want to visit the Parque Nacional del Café in the city of Quindio from El Dorado airport, the travel time is 9 h by bus. Bus transport systems improve the territory's local (proximity to transit stops and routes) and regional (time, distance or monetary cost) accessibility [113], with the aim of potentiating destinations/opportunities/activities within a pre-defined travel time dictated by transportation links to tourist attractions. The Parque Nacional del Café is outside of the boundaries established in this research, as we can see in Panel B of Figure 4. Obviously, the public and private transport networks need to be considerably improved to reduce travel time and provide a better quality of transport services in cities. As the results show, it would be advisable to design cultural and touristic routes by DMOs and OTAs, which combine entertainment, leisure, relaxation, adventure and cultural activities in the cities of Bogota and Quindio. These cultural and tourist routes can be promoted as personalised tourist packages through digital channels like social media, TV, mobile marketing, digital newspapers and DMO official websites for Colombian cities to stimulate tourism demand.

Navegantes airport (IATA: NVT) is the nearest airport to the Beto Carrero World in the city of Peña of the Santa Catarina region in Brazil. This city provides good air and ground accessibility and connectivity through the Navegantes airport and taxi as a means of transport from the airport to the city centre, where travel time is 10 min according to Google Maps (see Panel C of Figure 4). On the other hand, Hopi Hari park situated in the city of Sao Paulo (Brazil) has excellent air accessibility and connectivity thanks to the Sao Paulo-Guarulhos airport (IATA: GRU) and the Congonhas (IATA: CGH) airport, all inside of the boundaries established in this research. However, the city of Sao Paulo needs to improve travel times by subway, train, bus and other means of transport. The subway is not so efficient as a means of transport from the airport to the Congonhas city centre, with a travel time of 41 min, and 1 h and 13 min from Sao Paulo-Guarulhos airport, when compared with cities such as Bogota, Guatemala City or Santiago. In addition,

DMOs of Peña and Sao Paulo cities and OTAs need to develop joint tourist packages that include theme parks, national parks, historical monuments and sun and beach activities to promote/diversify/universalize tourism products and services with a view to opening new markets, improving visitor reception and receiving visitors from a wider range of places of origin.

Fantasilandia park is located in Santiago, the capital city of Chile; this park attracts more than 1 million visitors each year and is one of the greatest tourist attractions of the city and country. The city has acceptable air and ground accessibility and connectivity by Arturo Merino Benítez airport (IATA: AMB), and the travel time is 20 min by bus from the airport to the city centre. The airport and theme park are within the boundaries set in this study (see Panel D of Figure 4). The findings of the research show a lack of means of transport and infrastructures in most Latin American cities, where the bus is the primary mode of transportation.

The city of Guatemala harbours the Mundo Petapa Park, which is the eighth most visited in Latin America and received 11 million visitors in the period analysed. La Aurora airport (IATA: GUA) is the nearest airport to the city centre if tourists want to visit Mundo Petapa and they can lodge at hotels in the city. The theme park and La Aurora airport are inside of the isodistance and isochrone measures laid down in this study. Moreover, this city provides good accessibility and connectivity from the airport to the city centre by bus with a travel time of 14 min (see Panel E of Figure 4).

The Parque de la Costa is located in the city of Tigre, north of Buenos Aires city. This theme park has an excellent geographical location in terms of air and ground accessibility and connectivity, thanks to the San Fernando (IATA: FDO) and International Ministro Pistarini (IATA: EZE) airports and its public transport system, particularly by train, with travel times of 27 min and 2 h and 38 min from the airports to the city centre of Tigre (see Panel F of Figure 4). Buenos Aires and Tigre cities are the only ones that provide the most efficient travel time by train as a means of transport according to Google Maps in this research. Indeed, the arrival of the railway around the mid-sixties facilitated the connection between Buenos Aires city and the rest of Argentina's cities. What that proves is that these two cities have a good public transport system, and they are not highly dependent on the bus as the main mode of transport. Furthermore, the San Fernando airport and Parque de la Costa are within the boundaries set in this study, although the Ministro Pistarini airport is not, as its location is outside of the isodistance and isochrone measures laid down for Peña city in this study.

Bertoncello and Iuso [114] indicate that tourism activities in Tigre city are directly related to Buenos Aires's tourism. Tourists who visit Tigre city come from the capital after coming to know the tourist destination of Buenos Aires. However, from a strategic marketing point of view, the DMOs of Tigre and Buenos Aires need to lay out joint marketing strategies and tourism promotion campaigns through digital channels to highlight the value of tourist attractions in their cities such theme parks, sun and beach, national parks and gastronomy, amongst many others. Actually, DMOs and OTAs should promote the geographic dispersion of tourist attractions as a great opportunity to motivate the maximum number of tourists to visit other cities in the country. According to The World Bank [115], international tourist arrivals had exponential growth in Latin America and the Caribbean region from 2011 to 2019.

It is no coincidence that most bed-places are located in the Latin American countries of this research (not included other regions) like Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala and Chile [116]. We also need to remember that the top 12 Latin American theme parks received 159 million visitors from 2011 to 2022, and these tourist attractions need to be supported by the proximity of accommodations, restaurants, public transport services, airports and a good tourism supply to be accessible to a wider audience, as mentioned at the beginning of this research. Additionally, Latin American countries have three factors that plays a key role in the success of parks: politics, economics and safety with positive and negative results [117]. Similarly, I agree that safety, economics and political

instabilities must be notably improved in the entire region of Latin America to improve the tourism industry and local economies. For instance, the lack of safety is a strong predictor of tourists avoiding some tourist destinations [118], reducing tourist arrivals, passenger fare receipts and expenditure of tourists [119]. Indeed, Cota [120] noted that political turbulence is one of the biggest obstacles to economic and tourism growth in the countries of Bolivia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Venezuela and Colombia.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The main goal of this research was to analyse the top 12 Latin American theme parks as tourist attractions to stimulate tourism demand in the future, with the aim of enhancing theme parks' tourism supply and the cities where these tourist attractions are operating. Latin American theme parks such as Six Flags Mexico, Beto Carrero World, Hopi Hari, La Feria de Chapultepec, Parque Xcaret and other parks examined in this research are tourist attractions that promote and improve the tourism industry in the cities where they are located because this entertainment activity attracts millions of national and international visitors each year to the theme parks and cities. Nevertheless, figures of the number of visitors to Latin American theme parks are far from those for US, European and Asian and Pacific theme parks, where the large entertainment companies are operating [8,26,121]. According to the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA), foreign tourism declined in the theme park sector as the cumulative result of the pandemic crisis, political instabilities, safety and high inflation rates in some Latin American countries [122,123].

For instance, the Six Flags Mexico, Beto Carrero World, Parque Mundo Aventura and Fantasilandia theme parks have each become an international representative of tourism promotion and the claims of their cities. However, the most important companies in the theme park industry like Walt Disney Parks and Resorts, Universal Parks and Resorts and Merlin Entertainments Group are not operating in Latin American countries. Latin America is a growing theme park market, yet the theme parks analysed are oriented toward the local markets in which they reside [124]. It is not implausible to suggest that new theme park resorts will be developed in Latin American countries due to the great interest shown by Disney and Universal [125].

The findings indicate that Latin American theme parks will continue to increase their number of visitors, as the top 12 theme parks grew by 16% from 2011 to 2019, and for this reason, national and local governments must invest in public transport systems and infrastructures to improve the mobility of visitors and populations [126]. Our results also confirm the findings of previous studies on the role of public transport services during tourists' experiences and satisfaction at theme parks and tourist destinations [127–129] because these tourist attractions are inseparable from the Latin American cities examined. Cities like Mexico City, Cancun, Monterrey, Bogotá, Berlin, Quindío, Santiago and Guatemala City have buses as their main means of transport for travelling around the city and tourist attractions. This demonstrates a lack of other means of transport like high-speed rail, trains or subways and transport infrastructures. Vecchio et al. [106] revealed that Latin American cities are highly geographically and socio-economically unequal, and mobility is at the same time a cause and an effect of such structural imbalances.

Another important finding revealed in this research is that these six variables: location of the city, intermodal public transport, airport proximity, air and ground accessibility and connectivity, tourism demand and a high population are crucial for the success of Latin American cities examined in terms of tourism demand and supply. Studies carried out by Florido-Benítez [12,130] revealed that intermodal public transport, airport proximity and air and ground accessibility increase the number of visitors at US museums and contribute to improving the national development of tourism [131]. This study suggests the high influence of these six variables in the development of tourism in Latin American cities, which includes theme parks to stimulate domestic and international tourism demand. For instance, DMOs and OTAs must design tourist packages that combine means of transport, accommodations and tourist attractions to increase the overall cost tourist. Theme parks

require a complementary quality supply of accommodations, restaurants and effective public transport networks to satisfy tourists' needs when they visit the city and tourist attractions. Theme park operators can have an influence on the social context of theme park visits by offering family, student or group visit packages [132].

To synthesize results, the present research constitutes an empirical illustration of the importance of theme parks in the Latin American cities where they operate. While the bus is the primary and most efficient (regarding travel time) mode of transportation in the cities analysed, results revealed that there is a high correlation between tourist attractions and the air and ground accessibility and connectivity in Latin American cities. Furthermore, isodistance and isochrone measures and studies must be developed by DMOs and local and national governments to manage more efficiently the public transport systems and airports, with the aim of providing the best air and ground accessibility and connectivity to cities and tourist attractions, because offering an excellent transport service for populations and tourists is imperative and not a condition in the national strategic plans of governments. The main challenges for most theme parks are the spread of visitors throughout the year, week and day [133]. The value and relevance of this study lies in the way it brings better solutions to theme park operators, airports and public transport systems, to enhance their tourism supply. Actually, there are not studies that provide a practical approach and framework for identifying and analysing the relationship between theme parks and air and ground means of transport, especially in the Latin American region.

In this study, I look for the best suggestions for improving Latin American theme parks and the tourism industry regardless of ideological and political implications, which could undermine the objectivity of this research. For instance, Latin American governments must invest in upgrading their air and ground transport services and infrastructures to enhance the accessibility of cities and tourist attractions. Large theme parks require intensive investment; in fact, air and ground accessibility is primordial to stimulate demand at theme parks and cities where they are located [21]. I recommend that Latin American theme park operators promote their new rides with AR and VR technologies through digital channels and social media to increase the number of visitors and benefits, as well as empower their brand image. To do this, it is important for theme park operators to develop marketing strategies focused on national and international visitors' preferences and motivations, to promote their tourism campaigns more effectively. For instance, international tourists like to visit different tourist attractions across the country, thus it would be interesting for DMOs, theme operators and tour operators to jointly design tourist packages that include flights, theme parks, national parks, hotels, restaurants, customised services and experiences and specialised tour guides to improve their tourism supply. Moreover, theme park operators should offer new services and discounts for people with disabilities to improve the universal accessibility and inclusion of this group at these tourist attractions.

Our study also highlights a number of theoretical implications for researchers and academics. First, there are not Disney and Universal theme parks in the region of Latin America. In this region, theme parks are small and modest compared to American, European and Asian ones. Latin American parks are limited in size and capacity, and most of them are not supported by great economic budgets [134]. Therefore, Latin American theme parks cannot be analysed on the same terms as American, Europe and Asian theme parks. Second, this study helps to understand better the relationship between theme parks, air and ground transport networks and cities in Latin America. Third, and finally, most theme parks analysed in this research are located in capital cities due to their favourable geographical situation, to attract millions of visitors. Pereira and Dantas [134] note that Beto Carrero World park was built in Peña City due to the proximity of the Navegantes airport, the centre of city, beaches and numbers of hotels and restaurants as well as a high population density.

It is worth noting the limitations of this study, which need to be considered in future studies. Latin American theme parks do not provide information about their number of visitors or their nationalities, gender, age, education and classification as students or

teachers, amongst many other things in their official websites, especially during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. This a great mistake by theme park operators because this relevant information would help researchers, DMOs and operators measure the number of international and national visitors, and help them to design specific tourist packages for international visitors. While our research used qualitative and quantitative indicators, the absence of primary data hindered our ability to develop research questions related to visitors' experiences and satisfaction; therefore, the lack of primary data through surveys, interviews and other data-collection methods was another limitation that must be considered in this study. In addition, some countries like Brazil, Chile and Argentina do not allow software like ArcGIS (<https://www.arcgis.com/index.html>, accessed on 19 December 2023) and Iso4app to provide information related to isodistance and isochrone measures, and this is another limitation resulting in the examination of secondary data. However, I would like to thank Themed Entertainment Association for its information related to theme parks and numbers of visitors by country and region.

I recommend some directions for future research. First, there is a need to evaluate the efficacy of public transport systems in Latin American, US, European and Asian and Pacific cities, and tourist attractions in terms of space-time and travel time by means of transport. Furthermore, it would be interesting to identify the main risks and socioeconomic weaknesses of public transport networks and infrastructures in Latin American capital cities, so governments can invest in social and economic infrastructures and environmental improvements. By applying these enhancements, large entertainment companies like Disney, Universal or Merlin Entertainments could operate in some of Latin America's capital cities.

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