

Navigating Precarious Privilege: The Experiences of Brazilian Student-Migrants in Lisbon

Navegar el privilegio precario: experiencias de estudiantes-migrantes brasileños en Lisboa

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This study explores the experiences of Brazilian student-migrants in Lisbon, examining the interplay between privilege and precariousness in their trajectories. While international student mobility is often framed as a pursuit of academic and professional advancement, this research highlights how Brazilian student-migrants navigate broader lifestyle aspirations, labour market challenges, and housing insecurities, using the analytical lens of precarious privilege. Through an ethnographic approach involving participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups, the study reveals how these individuals negotiate their dual roles as students and workers in a context marked by rising living costs, exploitative housing practices, and labour market instability. Findings show that despite their perceived privilege as highly educated migrants, many face significant vulnerabilities, including financial strain, discrimination, and precarious employment. By situating these experiences within Lisbon's socio-economic transformations, the research underscores implications for urban inequality and migration policy.



Abstract

Este estudio explora las experiencias de estudiantes-migrantes brasileños en Lisboa, examinando la interacción entre privilegio y precariedad en sus trayectorias. Aunque la movilidad estudiantil internacional suele entenderse como una progresión académica y profesional, esta investigación muestra cómo estos migrantes transitan aspiraciones de estilo de vida más amplias, dificultades laborales e inseguridad residencial, empleando la lente analítica del privilegio precario. Mediante un enfoque etnográfico con observación participante, entrevistas y grupos focales, el estudio revela cómo negocian su doble condición de estudiantes y trabajadores en un contexto marcado por el aumento del coste de vida, prácticas abusivas en el acceso a la vivienda e inestabilidad laboral. Pese a su privilegio percibido como migrantes altamente cualificados, muchos afrontan vulnerabilidades: dificultades económicas, discriminación y empleo precario. Al situar estas experiencias en las transformaciones socioeconómicas de Lisboa, la investigación subraya sus implicaciones para la desigualdad urbana y las políticas migratorias.

Student migration; international student mobility; lifestyle migration; urban spaces; cosmopolitan aspirations

Migración estudiantil; movilidad estudiantil internacional; migración de estilo de vida; espacios urbanos; aspiraciones cosmopolitas



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1. Introduction

The mobility of international students has traditionally been analysed as a phenomenon driven by educational and professional factors, often associated with the pursuit of academic qualifications and career advancement (Chue & Nie, 2016; Li et al., 2024). The literature highlights that international education and intercultural experience are frequently seen as pathways to enhanced social, professional, and personal development opportunities (Nada & Legutko, 2022). However, beyond these motivations, it can also be linked to lifestyle aspirations, which involve not only academic training but also a desire for social and cultural repositioning in urban contexts (King, 2017). These dimensions bring international students closer to the profile of lifestyle migrants (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009), a relatively privileged group that moves beyond work or economic demands to pursue social, cultural, and identity aspirations and who hold certain privileges (Benson, 2016).

International students are often perceived as a privileged group within global mobility regimes because they typically belong to socio-economic strata that can afford the high costs of studying abroad, including tuition, travel, and living expenses (Ghosh & Jing, 2020). Also, they are seen as possessing high levels of cultural and educational capital, such as multilingualism and academic credentials, which facilitate their integration into host institutions and enhance their employability (Shkoler & Rabenu, 2020). Besides, international education is widely regarded as a marker of distinction, conferring symbolic capital valued in both home and host countries (Martino et al., 2025). Moreover, international students are often framed as transnational consumers and future global professionals, reinforcing their image as members of a globally mobile, middle-class elite (Martino et al., 2025).

However, the notion of privilege is challenged in both the literature on international student mobility (ISM) and lifestyle migration. For instance, international students often face financial instability, difficulties adapting to local cultures, and discrimination (Schartner & Shields, 2023). Similarly, lifestyle migrants encounter economic and social vulnerabilities in their new environments (Benson & O'Reilly, 2016). In this way, precarious privilege, as formulated by Rey et al. (2020), offers a valuable analytical lens for exploring the ambiguities experienced by individuals who navigate contexts of apparent privilege yet face economic, emotional, and institutional uncertainties in their daily lives. This framework allows for an examination of how ISM interact with global inequalities while exposing structural instabilities and individual susceptibilities.

While international students are often approached as a distinct category in migration studies, this research adopts the perspective that ISM can intersect with lifestyle migration under specific conditions, such as greater personal freedom, including autonomy in shaping daily routines, and self-reinvention, understood as the possibility to redefine one's identity, professional path, and social affiliations in a new cultural context (Torkington, 2012; Benson & O'Reilly, 2016). In classical lifestyle migration literature, these individuals are typically portrayed as older, middle-class retirees or professionals seeking a better quality of life in rural or coastal settings (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). However, more recent scholarship has expanded this framework to include younger, mobile populations, who are drawn to vibrant urban centres by a combination of educational, cultural, and lifestyle aspirations (King, 2017; Lyrio, 2025).

Thus, this study aims to explore the experiences of Brazilian student-migrants who have lived in Lisbon, seeking to understand how their trajectories reflect the tensions between privilege and precariousness. The focus of this article is on two specific dimensions of their precarious privilege experience: housing and work, understood as central pillars that structure everyday life and conditions of staying in the city. While not exhaustive, these dimensions are analytically privileged as key sites where the tensions between privilege and precariousness become most visible. This emphasis is also grounded in the empirical data, which highlight the prominence of these themes both in their frequency during ethnographic observations and in the considerable time participants devoted to discussing them in interviews.

Through a qualitative study based on ethnographic work, in-depth interviews, and focus groups, this paper analyses how Brazilian student-migrants navigate the tensions between privilege and precariousness, shaped by their lifestyle aspirations and by the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion that structure their international mobility experiences. This study seeks to answer the following question: how do Brazilian student-migrants in Lisbon experience precarious privilege at the intersection of mobility aspirations and socio-economic instability? The term student-migrant is used here to capture the dual condition of Brazilians who move to Portugal for higher education but whose experiences extend well beyond academic life. It refers to those who entered through the student route, encompassing those currently enrolled, those who remain after graduation, and those who later leave their studies altogether, as study, work, and settlement become entangled over time; these positions are therefore not treated as a single, undifferentiated category, but as points along a continuous migratory trajectory.

While the term international student prevails in policy and statistical frameworks (OECD, 2017), a growing body of scholarship reframes international students as migrants, foregrounding the broader migratory dimensions of their trajectories—including work, long-term settlement, and integration into local socio-economic structures (King & Raghuram, 2013; Waters & Brooks, 2021). This terminological choice is itself a reflexive intervention in the ongoing debate on the construction and use of categories in migration studies (Dahinden et al., 2021; Bialas et al., 2025), which cautions against the uncritical adoption of institutionally produced categories that naturalise particular ways of seeing migrants. Adopting this term thus foregrounds international students' structural conditions while revealing the tensions between privilege and precariousness in their migrant trajectories.

The analysis proposed in this article contributes to expanding the theoretical boundaries of ISM by connecting it to the field of lifestyle migration, offering a perspective that challenges simplistic dichotomies between privilege and precariousness. In a global context where ISM is increasingly mediated by dynamics of inequality (Lipura & Collins, 2020), this study illu-

minates how privilege and precarity intersect not only structurally, but also in the everyday strategies and aspirations of student-migrants, and how these dynamics are inflected by the postcolonial relationship between Brazil and Portugal.

2. Precarious Privilege: An Analytical Lens for the Intersections of Study, Work, and Housing

Existent literature on ISM and lifestyle migration provides valuable insights into the motivations and experiences of relatively privileged migrants. ISM studies explore the complex motivations behind students' decisions to study abroad, including the desire for high-quality education, cultural exchange, and enhanced future career prospects (Gutema et al., 2024). Meanwhile, lifestyle migration scholarship highlights the search for a better quality of life, driven by aspirations for personal fulfilment, escape from previous constraints, and the pursuit of a more meaningful existence (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). Integrating these perspectives provides a lens through which to examine how student-migrants' experiences, including their aspirations, everyday practices, and strategies of social and cultural repositioning, are shaped by both the opportunities and constraints of international mobility. A transnational perspective further emphasises that these trajectories involve processes that do not necessarily entail upward trajectories but may also involve lateral or downward shifts, particularly when forms of capital acquired in one context are not fully recognised or convertible in another (Waldendorf, 2020).

According to Martínez Guillem (2017), precarious privilege refers to a contradictory social position in which individuals or groups hold certain advantages, such as educational capital, citizenship, or middle-class status, while simultaneously facing precarity, including unemployment, economic instability, and political disenchantment. Similarly, Choi and Park (2024) define it as a condition of ambivalent positioning in which individuals with valued capital, such as advanced linguistic skills or international education, encounter both recognition and marginalisation. Precarious privilege is thus dialectical, encompassing both empowering and constraining aspects of social life. These tensions are continually negotiated in everyday interactions, where privilege and precarity are experienced as interwoven and often in conflict.

In this study, the notion of precarious privilege is adopted precisely because it enables a more nuanced and critical understanding of the paradoxical conditions shaping student-migrants' lives, conditions that neither the literature on ISM nor lifestyle migration fully captures on their own. While both fields gesture towards the interplay between aspiration and constraint, they do not fully capture the complex and ambivalent conditions experienced by student-migrants. The notion of precarious privilege foregrounds the coexistence of symbolic and material advantage with structural and affective vulnerability, offering a conceptual bridge between two research domains that often treat privilege and precarity as oppositional rather than entangled.

Against this background, in this research, precariousness refers to a state of personal instability characterised by financial insecurity, unstable living conditions, and limited control over the future. Vulnerability, on the other hand, is understood as an increased susceptibility to harm stemming from systemic factors, such as immigration policies and labour market restrictions, or situational factors, such as discrimination, social isolation, and lack of institutional support, often exacerbated by precariousness (Mählck, 2018). For student-migrants, precariousness

manifests in rising costs of living and housing and employment uncertainties, which intensify their financial and emotional uncertainties (Malet Calvo et al., 2021). Yet, these conditions unfold within a broader context of relative privilege: many student-migrants possess forms of capital, such as higher education, linguistic skills, or legal status, that facilitate their mobility and grant them a degree of autonomy and choice not available to other migrant groups (McGarrigle, 2021). As Bourdieu (1986) argues, these resources can be understood as forms of cultural and symbolic capital whose value is relational and context-dependent, and therefore not automatically convertible into economic capital in the host society. This helps explain why educational credentials and transnational experiences, while conferring distinction and recognition, do not necessarily translate into stable employment or secure living conditions.

Rey et al. (2020) explore the notion of precarious privilege to capture the ambivalent position of individuals who experience both the outward freedom associated with global mobility and the constraints of contractual labour in deregulated markets. Although their analysis focuses on the illusion of privilege, this study takes a different approach: rather than opposing precarity and lifestyle migration, it uses precarious privilege to better understand student-migrants' trajectories, where real educational, cultural, and social advantages coexist with personal instability.

The literature on precarious privilege (Poole & Bunnell, 2020; Poole, 2022; Bunnell & Poole, 2022; Poole & Xu, 2022), extends the framework of Rey et al. (2020). These studies reveal patterns: contractual insecurity, institutional marginalisation, and the contradiction of possessing symbolic capital that does not necessarily translate into material stability. Such dynamics resonate with the experiences of international students, who, despite holding advanced qualifications, often face deskilling, exploitative contracts, and limited access to stable employment (Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Wilken & Dahlberg, 2017). Still, those studies focus on professionals in the education sector, whereas this article examines labour experiences across diverse areas and explores how such experiences intersect with lifestyle aspirations and the pursuit of a better quality of life.

In the realm of housing, studies of relatively privileged lifestyle migrants—older Western residents in Ubud, Bali (Green, 2022), and Chinese “snowbird” retirees (*bouniao*) in southern China (Chen & Wang, 2020)—emphasise how housing insecurity is shaped by financial constraints, market speculation, and systemic exclusion, even among those with initial advantages. While these migrants often possess economic or symbolic capital that grants them access to desirable locations, they are still vulnerable to rising costs, policy restrictions, and socio-spatial marginalisation. Similar challenges affect international students, whose housing conditions are shaped by inflated rents, insecure tenancy, and limited support (Morris et al., 2021; Malet Calvo, 2022). However, few studies have explored how housing struggles intersect with lifestyle aspirations and urban belonging (Barañano Cid et al., 2024). This article aims to fill this gap in the literature.

3. Dynamics of Brazilian Presence in Portuguese Higher Education

Brazilians are the largest group of international students in Portugal, with over 14,000 enrolments in higher education in 2024/25, according to the Directorate-General for Education and Science Statistics (Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência, DGEEC, 2025).

They have been the largest foreign student community since 2008, growing from 27.6% of all international degree students in 2011/12 to around 37% in 2020/21 (Aguiar et al., 2023). This presence is far from homogeneous: Brazilian student-migrants come from varied regions and socio-economic backgrounds—with a notable presence, among funded students, from the wealthier South and Southeast—and enrol across all levels and fields, although Social Sciences, Business and Law predominate (Aguiar et al., 2023). They concentrate in public, prestigious institutions in coastal urban centres, notably the universities of Porto, Coimbra, and Lisbon, and overwhelmingly pursue full degrees rather than credit mobility (Aguiar et al., 2023). Their motivations combine individual aspirations—an academic and life experience abroad, mobilising their linguistic and cultural capital—with the perceived quality of life and the comparatively low cost of living and tuition; language is the single most cited factor, and most are self-funded (Iorio, 2018).

The ties between Brazil and Portugal are not neutral: they are the sediment of a colonial relationship that continues to structure how Brazilian mobility to Portugal is imagined and experienced. The linguistic proximity and shared culture routinely invoked to explain this flow draw on a lusotropicalist imaginary of harmonious luso-Atlantic relations that obscures the coloniality of power underpinning it (Quijano, 2000). For Brazilian student-migrants, this postcolonial condition is profoundly ambivalent: while lusophone affinity and the image of the educated, middle-class Brazilian can confer a degree of symbolic recognition (França & Padilla, 2018; Iorio, 2018), the same colonial legacy sustains hierarchies that racialise and subordinate Brazilians and help normalise their availability for precarious and devalued labour (Torresan, 2021). Reading Brazilian mobility to Lisbon through a postcolonial lens thus clarifies why the privilege these migrants are assumed to hold is so readily destabilised: their precariousness is not incidental but is partly produced by the very colonial relation that makes Portugal appear, at first, a familiar and welcoming destination.

Although specific data on international students who work in Portugal is limited, broader figures on working students in higher education provide a useful context. In 2023/24, of the 448,235 students enrolled in Portuguese higher education according to the Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation (2025), more than 41,000 (around 9.2%) also held a job—the highest share in a decade and a 6% increase on the previous year, with the trend rising steadily since 2017/18 (Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation, as reported by RTP, 2025). This reflects the economic pressure many students face: across Europe, covering living costs is the main reason students work, and on average, 29% report that they could not afford to study without a paid job (Mandl & Menz, 2024). The wider context of Brazilian migration offers further understanding. Historically, it has occurred in distinct waves with different socio-economic profiles (França & Padilla, 2018). In 2022, Brazilians accounted for 41% of Portugal's immigrant workforce, representing more than 107,000 employed individuals (Lima & Goulart, 2022). This group plays a key role in sectors like construction, hospitality, and services, filling critical labour gaps.

Since 2016, the new wave has included many qualified individuals, such as higher education students (França & Padilla, 2018). While academic aspirations are certainly present, Fernandes et al. (2021) argue that, for many Brazilian migrants, the student visa also serves as a strategic means of entering Portugal's labour market. In a context where legal pathways for migration are limited and uncertain, the student route is perceived as offering a faster and more secure option, granting legal residence and work rights without the prolonged instability faced by tourist entrants (Council of Europe, 2018). This may partially explain the high number of

Brazilians enrolled in postgraduate programmes, sometimes accounting for up to 80% of applicants (Fernandes et al., 2021). Over time, however, some students may reduce their academic engagement as they prioritise labour market integration (Fernandes et al., 2021). This dynamic highlights the complex and overlapping roles of Brazilian student-migrants, challenging education-centred narratives within ISM (Lipura & Collins, 2020).

4. Methodology

The research was conducted through ethnographic work, following the contributions of Hammersley and Atkinson (2019), prioritising participant observation in participants' socialisation and living spaces. This took place in a variety of settings they frequented, including cafés, cultural events, leisure venues, and, in some cases, private residences that served as important spaces of sociability. It also draws on the approach of Murphy-Lejeune (2002), whose analysis of Erasmus students' experiences in the European context emphasises the importance of social networks, cultural adaptation processes, and ISM identity dynamics. Thus, the fieldwork was conducted in Lisbon over approximately three years (2022-2024), enabling sustained engagement with participants in their everyday environments. Data were generated through informal encounters in moments of social interaction and leisure, with observations recorded as fieldnotes: both brief notes taken during or shortly after interactions on a mobile device and more detailed field diaries written retrospectively, typically later the same day or the following day.

Reflexivity played a crucial role in managing interactions, recognising the mutual influences between the researcher and participants, as argued by Davies (2002). This was particularly relevant given the researcher's positionality as a Brazilian doctoral student living in Lisbon and embedded in higher education, which enabled close engagement with the social worlds under study while also requiring ongoing reflexivity about how this shared background shaped rapport, the assumptions brought into the encounter, and the interpretation of participants' accounts. Entry into the field was secured through three distinct friendship groups. The first emerged from pre-existing friendships established in Brazil, which later expanded into broader social networks in Lisbon. The second comprised colleagues from the researcher's doctoral programme and their respective social circles. The third group was accessed through an interview conducted for a separate research project, after which the participant facilitated the researcher's entry into their network. This latter group became central to the ethnographic engagement, providing sustained access to participants' everyday experiences over time. The systematic generation of fieldnotes concluded in 2024; rather than a clear-cut exit from the field, however, contact with many participants—several of whom had become friends—continued beyond this point, in keeping with the ongoing, relational nature of the engagement.

The study also involved 52 participants, all Brazilians who had been enrolled in higher education institutions in Portugal between 2015 and 2023 and was conducted through interviews and focus groups. In line with the continuous trajectory outlined above, they occupied different positions along the student-migrant pathway. Of the 30 interviewees, 11 were still enrolled, 12 had completed their studies, and 7 had left their studies before completion at the time of their interviews. The 22 focus-group participants were all enrolled at the time of the focus groups—a deliberate choice, given that the interviews already included a substantial number of participants who had completed or abandoned their studies. These positions reflect each participant's situation at the moment of data collection and were not necessari-

ly fixed, as some moved across them over the course of the fieldwork. Many of the interviewees were already part of the ethnographic field, while others were recruited through participant referrals (snowball sampling) and through WhatsApp groups of Brazilians living in Portugal. Interviews were conducted mainly online, at participants' request, between 2023 and 2024. The interview guide was semi-structured and theme-based, informed by the prior ethnographic phase, and organised into a demographic block followed by thematic blocks on biographical antecedents, the city, housing, work, and lifestyle. Focus groups were conducted between the second half of 2023 and early 2024, across six in-person sessions held at the researcher's host institution. These were organised around three main themes: (1) educational and labour trajectories, (2) sociability, domestic spaces, and lifestyle practices in the city, and (3) participants' perceptions of the host society, with two sessions devoted to each theme.

Participants ranged in age from 25 to 60 years, with a majority concentrated between their mid-20s and early 30s. Fewer participants were aged 40 and above, including two aged 47 and 49, and one aged 60. The average age was 33 years. The participants came from various regions of Brazil, predominantly from the municipality of Rio de Janeiro, and although most came to pursue a master's degree, predominantly in the social sciences and humanities, the research covered experiences at all levels of higher education. By gender, 55.8% of participants were women and 44.2% were men. Among the 30 interviewees, for whom this information was collected, 17 self-identified as heterosexual, seven as homosexual, five as bisexual, and one as asexual (this dimension was not recorded for focus-group participants). The fieldwork reached participants of varied ages, regional origins, and socio-economic backgrounds—predominantly, though not exclusively, middle-class, in line with the profile of this flow. Some profiles were nonetheless less represented, namely students from Brazil's Centre-West and North regions—which may mirror their smaller weight within this migratory flow—and transgender participants, whose absence likely reflects the contours of the researcher's own social networks.

It is also worth mentioning that, among those who did not complete their studies, a discourse of disillusionment with higher education in Portugal prevailed. While attrition is usually explained by weak academic and social integration, financial constraints, or unmet programme expectations (Tinto, 1993), with international students facing additional hurdles linked to cultural adjustment, language, and residence regulations (Behr et al., 2021), here it was directed specifically at the Portuguese higher education experience—a dimension this completion-focused literature tends to overlook.

Additionally, given the relational and multi-sited nature of ethnographic fieldwork, the people encountered in everyday social situations—gatherings, shared housing, leisure venues—cannot be neatly counted or classified as students or non-students. Migration ethnography has long moved away from bounded, sample-based designs towards following the transnational and fragmented networks in which subjects are embedded (Boccagni & Schrooten, 2018), and it was precisely these social worlds surrounding Brazilian student-migrants that the fieldwork sought to capture. Consistent with the conception of the student-migrant as a relational and processual category rather than a fixed status (King & Raghuram, 2013; Waters & Brooks, 2021), the analysis nonetheless centred on individuals with a direct connection to higher education in Portugal.

Data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA software, employing Thematic Analysis as outlined by Clarke and Braun (2017). Initial codes were generated inductively from the data, reflecting a wide range of themes emerging from participants' experiences. For the purposes

of this article, analytical attention is directed to housing and work, as these dimensions proved particularly salient across both ethnographic observations and participants' narratives. For instance, codes such as "Finding housing in Lisbon," "Relationship with the house and neighbourhood," and "Previous housing experiences in the city" were grouped under the theme "Opportunities and Challenges in Housing." This analytical focus allows the study to explore the dynamics of privilege and precariousness shaping participants' migration trajectories.

Finally, pseudonyms were used for all participants in this study. Informed consent was obtained prior to interviews and focus groups. In the ethnographic component, the researcher adopted a position of overt participation, making her role and research objectives explicit in social interactions. Given the fluid nature of the field, consent was understood as an ongoing, negotiated process grounded in transparency, trust, and participants' awareness of the research. The research received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of Iscte-University Institute of Lisbon (Opinion No. 49/2023), ensuring adherence to ethical standards for research involving human participants. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were rigorously upheld throughout the study.

5. More Than Just Students: Housing, Labour, and the Fragile Privileges of Migrant Life in Lisbon

Despite most participants feeling that they lived well in terms of consumption and leisure in Lisbon, which are evident traits of the typical privilege among lifestyle migrants (Torkington, 2012; Benson, 2016), one of the most prominent elements in participants' migration trajectories was the issue of financial sustenance in the city. Especially for those who had been in Lisbon for a longer time (five years or more), there was a shared perception that the cost of living had increased considerably in recent years, in a context shaped by gentrification and touristification. The couple Enzo, 37 years old, a PhD student in Communication Sciences, and Dora, 34 years old, a PhD student in Anthropology, both from Fortaleza (Ceará), arrived in Lisbon in 2017 and reflected on this issue in one of the focus groups:

Enzo: There was a time when inflation increased here, right? That we started to notice...

Author: You noticed it more when grocery shopping, right?

Enzo: Yes, life is getting tighter, because before, for example, there was a period when we had a little extra, like 100€ ... then we put it in savings, right?

Dora: ... Like, the orange juice from Lidl that I used to buy, which was 2.89€, went up to 4€. ... Like, the second half of last year had an inflation effect that, like, didn't cover the month. Every month we were dipping into savings, taking out, like, another 100€.

Enzo and Dora's account shows how the relative privilege they enjoy—including their position as scholarship holders, often perceived among the participants in this research as a status of symbolic prestige and a relatively above-average financial condition in Portugal—is progressively strained by the country's economic changes, especially the high inflation¹ and the consequent increase in the cost of living.

1 For a deeper understanding, see Moreira et al., 2024.

Housing, in particular, stands out as one of the factors exacerbating the precarious situation among the participants in this research. Lisbon's housing crisis is a structural problem affecting a broad segment of the population, not only migrants; for Brazilian student-migrants, however, it can be particularly challenging, as they often lack local family support, long-term rental agreements, or established networks that facilitate access to more affordable housing. Many are also drawn to central areas, owing to lifestyle expectations or prior experiences of living in urban centres in Brazil, which further exposes them to higher costs.

The empirical material shows that rent is the largest expense for most respondents, with some spending more than half of their income solely on housing. The issue of high housing costs in Lisbon recurred frequently during the ethnographic work. The situation of Giovana, 30 years old, originally from Rio de Janeiro, capital, a graduate who had completed an MBA in Human Resource Management and remained in Lisbon after her studies, is paradigmatic:

Giovana shared her recent experience related to her landlord's renegotiation of her rent. Giovana and her partner currently live in a small apartment in Arroios, which was originally a studio but has been converted into a one-bedroom; as a result, the bedroom is internal and lacks a window. They rented it during the lockdown for 750€. ... Recently, the landlord decided not to renew the contract unless they agreed to a substantial rent increase. The new amount, 950€, represents Giovana's entire salary. She also explained that although she and her husband considered moving to a cheaper area, they ultimately decided to stay. The extra costs of commuting and the stress of searching for a new apartment in the current market seemed unfeasible. Giovana commented on how trapped she felt in this decision, stating that while the location of their apartment is excellent, the space itself is small and not worth the new price. Still, with no better options, they accepted the landlord's proposal. She added that the landlord promised not to raise the rent again the following year, but Giovana expressed scepticism, saying they had little choice but to trust his word. (Field diary of 18/11/2023)

Giovana's experience exemplifies how the housing crisis in Lisbon is entangled with the limitations of the local labour market, affecting her supposed privilege. Although she holds a postgraduate degree and works full-time in her field, these advantages are not sufficient to ensure material stability. Her salary does not cover basic living costs independently, and her ability to remain in a central neighbourhood depends on her husband's significantly higher income in the information technology (IT) sector—one of the few in Portugal that consistently pays above-average salaries, reflecting the country's strategic emphasis on digital transformation and demand for skilled tech labour (Portuguese Government, 2025). This reveals a gendered dimension of precarious privilege: though qualified and working full-time, Giovana depends economically on a male partner in a better-paid sector to sustain her position in the city. Also, the apartment itself, despite its location, offers limited comfort, and the rent increase compromises her financial autonomy, restricting access to other lifestyle aspirations such as travel or leisure.

In several conversations during the fieldwork, Giovana acknowledged that her wages were lower than those offered by similar companies not only in Portugal but also elsewhere in Eu-

rope,² yet she consciously chose to remain in her current job because of the healthy work environment. This decision reveals how symbolic well-being can coexist with economic constraint. Her case illustrates how privilege and precarity are not mutually exclusive but deeply intertwined: the ability to “choose” is shaped by structural limitations, and the benefits she accesses are constantly negotiated against financial pressures.

There are also other housing-related constraints in Lisbon that link to precarious privilege and extend beyond the economic dimension. Sofia’s account, a 47-year-old master’s student in Public Health from São Paulo, capital, who migrated with her two teenage children while her Portuguese husband remained working in Brazil, illustrates some of these situations:

Sofia: There are also things that happen. I was shocked when I went to rent here, ... they asked me for a year [in advance]. They asked for a photo of my family, of my house. So, I was shocked, I said, “is this really what I want?” I questioned myself. Because I think this is very wrong, invasive. Everything is wrong! So, I subjected myself, “okay, I’ll send a photo,” I sent it and “the family photo was approved.” So, when I put it on the table [evaluate], I wouldn’t go through this again, this is wrong. So, it’s something to question. We end up accepting this. And then I had to pay a year of rent.

Author: How much do you pay in rent?

Sofia: 1,200€. [And they asked for] a year [in advance]. So, I sold the clinic [in Brazil], then I paid ..., but my husband sends money [too]. ... There are months when he doesn’t send because I can manage, but it’s crazy.

In addition to the financial issue highlighted by Sofia, the landlord’s unreasonable request for photographs of her family and home in Brazil exposes both the vulnerability and the dynamics of privilege that permeate these experiences. The request is a clear example of invasive and discriminatory practices that take advantage of the fragile position of those seeking housing, especially in a real estate market with low supply, like Lisbon’s, where the growth of tourism and short-term rentals has intensified pressure on housing, reducing availability for residents in central neighbourhoods (Mendes et al., 2016). Despite recognising the request as abusive, Sofia was able to comply with these demands, including paying a full year of rent in advance, an amount far beyond the reach of most participants in this study. This duality between the privilege of having resources and the precariousness of being subjected to exploitative conditions exemplifies precarious privilege, where the symbolic advantage of being an international student is accompanied by emotional distress and experiences of discrimination (Rey et al., 2020).

Yet Sofia’s case also makes it clear that financial resources alone are insufficient to ensure social integration or long-term stability. In other words, privilege is not guaranteed by economic means alone but is contingent upon broader structural and symbolic forms of inclusion. Despite her ability to meet Lisbon’s high housing demands, she had decided to return to Brazil once she finished her master’s, primarily due to the persistent obstacles she encountered in the labour market. In the focus group, she shared her decision: “Once I found out how lit-

2 Portugal consistently ranks among the EU Member States with the lowest average wages. In 2022, the country recorded one of the lowest median gross hourly earnings, at €6.2, significantly below the EU median of €14.9 (Eurostat, 2025).

tle vets earn here, I said, ‘Forget it! I’m not even finishing the degree recognition!’” She also recounted the story of a Brazilian colleague, qualified and working twelve-hour shifts, who earned €1,100 a month:

She’s been here for six years, went through the whole process, and she’s still on that salary. She lives in Obidos³ and commutes to Lisbon because rent is cheaper there. It’s absurd.

Although Sofia had initially considered the possibility of settling in Portugal with her family, this plan changed over time: “The idea was to come for the master’s and let the kids have the experience too. And if we all adjusted well, maybe we’d consider staying, but that’s not going to happen. I’ll finish my degree and head back.” This sense of disillusionment stemmed not only from low pay but also from more subtle and pervasive forms of exclusion, particularly the denial of symbolic privilege, such as professional recognition and respect, which she expected to access through her qualifications and experience. Sofia described encountering ageism in the workplace: “One thing that really shocked me here was the ageism. I’ve had people tell me, ‘Leave this for the younger ones,’ even at work. I’d never heard anything like that in Brazil.” She also expressed how her experience was often disregarded or dismissed by younger colleagues: “When I’m with younger vets and I try to suggest something, they just give me this look, like I should keep quiet. I feel I’m constantly being put in my place, like I’m not really seen as a vet anymore.” Although Sofia framed this primarily as ageism, the focus-group exchange revealed a more intersectional reading: other participants—including one older than Sofia—argued that such experiences stemmed less from age alone than from their position as Brazilian women, compounding gender, nationality, and migrant status. These combined factors—economic undervaluation, symbolic disqualification, and everyday experiences of marginalisation—contributed to her perception that she did not fit in. What began as a transnational educational project turned into a temporary detour.

As Benson (2016) argues, lifestyle migration involves significant emotional negotiations: migrants invest in the hope of transformation and reinvention but often encounter barriers that challenge their aspirations and reshape their decisions. In Sofia’s case, the failure to secure recognition, respect, and adequate employment—compounded by the emotional toll of discrimination—ultimately overrode the privileges she initially possessed. Her trajectory reflects the fragility of the seemingly privileged position of student-migrants, who, despite their resources, remain structurally and symbolically vulnerable.

Despite maintaining formal links with higher education institutions in Portugal, “being a student” often becomes a secondary role, especially as work demands take centre stage in their lives. Due to the pressing need to sustain themselves financially and the lack of available time to dedicate to their studies, many individuals prioritise work over study. But beyond economic necessity, employment also enables them to sustain the lifestyle they envisioned when moving abroad, granting them greater autonomy and access to social and cultural experiences that would be more restricted if they remained solely students. As Benson and O’Reilly (2009; 2016) highlight, lifestyle migration is related to crafting a desired way of living, where every-

3 The average distance between Lisbon and Obidos is approximately 85 kilometres. Public transport is available, mainly by express coach (around 1 hour), with frequent daily connections; a slower regional train service also exists, taking about 2 hours and 20 minutes.

day practices, such as dining out or travelling, become central experiences. In this sense, employment is not merely a survival mechanism but a means of materialising the cosmopolitan aspirations that initially motivated their mobility.

The trajectory of Leonardo, 37 years old, from Rio de Janeiro, capital, offers a compelling example of how this shift from student to worker intersects not only with labour experiences but also with housing strategies. Leonardo initially came to Portugal to pursue a master's degree in Contemporary Typographic and Editorial Techniques, but eventually decided to abandon the course due to his dissatisfaction with its academic content: "The moment came when I thought, ... 'Do I want to work or continue studying something that is just okay?' ... I thought, 'I'll dedicate myself to work and leave the course behind,' and I ended up leaving the course." This dissatisfaction, shared by many participants, was largely attributed to a perceived lack of academic rigour, a weak sense of engagement in the classroom, and the repetition of topics already covered during their undergraduate studies in Brazil.

At the same time as he was reconsidering his academic path, Leonardo was living in a spacious apartment in Campo de Ourique, a desirable neighbourhood, thanks to an old rental contract that had been held by a close Portuguese friend who had moved abroad. The rent remained affordable under the old terms, but the property was in poor condition, to the point of becoming unhealthy, with mould growing from the ceiling. Once the contract ended, the landlord proposed a new price that far exceeded Leonardo and his husband's budget. They were then forced to leave, embarking on a new phase of housing marked by concessions: they moved to two different apartments in peripheral but well-connected areas. The new apartments were smaller, but more financially sustainable. These decisions reflect the ongoing compromises migrants must make to remain in Lisbon, where urban centrality often becomes inaccessible over time.

In parallel, Leonardo's professional path evolved significantly. He worked both in a formal role and as a freelancer in design, gradually carving out a space that allowed him to prioritise personal fulfilment and artistic expression. Over time, he shifted his focus to illustration and began teaching painting classes, describing it as a reorientation of purpose:

Nowadays ... being a designer is my main source of income, but I'm also trying to do other things. So, I do illustrations and sell them at fairs, ... so nowadays my work is more about supporting the things I want to do, and that gives me more pleasure, you know?

His trajectory reflects a conscious search for greater balance between personal and professional life, a characteristic often associated with lifestyle migration (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). However, this path was not linear or free of difficulties. Before dedicating himself more deeply to his art, Leonardo faced episodes of prejudice and work overload. He reported, for example, discrimination and ridicule by a colleague in the workplace due to his sexual orientation, as well as periods of extreme exhaustion:

For example, in this company where I had a contract, there were times when I did 90 hours of overtime in a month. ... It was paid. But I had no choice but to do it because if I didn't, the company or sector I worked in would stop, you know?

Leonardo's experience illustrates how precarious privilege operates across multiple dimensions. While he was able to secure employment and maintain relative housing stability, these

came with high emotional and physical costs. His transition to freelance and artistic work was not only a personal choice but also a strategy to escape the exploitative demands of his previous job. This shift aligned with his broader lifestyle aspirations, allowing greater autonomy in shaping daily routines and deeper engagement with Lisbon's cultural life—aspirations typical of lifestyle migrants (King, 2017). Yet even this apparent freedom is layered with uncertainty, particularly regarding income and long-term security. Leonardo's trajectory reveals how privilege and precarity coexist: his ability to redefine his professional path was enabled by his skills and resources but also conditioned by a system that had previously limited his well-being.

Even though a small number of participants occupy well-established and highly paid positions in the Lisbon job market, such as in IT or marketing (four cases), and the 13 doctoral scholarship holders are recognised as privileged due to their academic standing—a privilege that is, however, largely symbolic, since the stipend (around €1,360 in 2026) is difficult to sustain alone in Lisbon's housing market without sharing or a partner's income, and is time-limited, lasting at most four years—there are also trajectories marked by extreme precariousness. The experience of Manuela, 29 years old, from Jacareí (São Paulo), strongly illustrates these adversities. After completing her coursework but not her master's dissertation at a university in Évora in 2017, she moved to Lisbon in 2018 in search of better opportunities. In a period of less than four years, she went through more than ten jobs, many of them in undignified and abusive conditions. The following account of some of her experiences is a testimony to the difficulties faced, common to many Brazilian student-migrants residing in Lisbon:

I worked in that bar I told you about at the beginning, it was my first job, I stayed there for, I don't know, just two months. After that bar in Saldanha, ... I went to this soup place. Which was also there on Avenida da Liberdade. ... But the manager there was a bit forward, you know? I didn't like that. That thing about being Brazilian, needing it and he knew it. And they [other employees] kept teasing me a lot, saying I had a lisp, that I spoke with a mouthful of marbles, things like that, you know? ... Anyway, so I didn't stay there. I worked there for about two weeks and ... they didn't pay me at that soup shop. ... And then I think after that I got a job at... that was the worst, [but] at least I endured it, it was at the bus station ... in Lisbon. I worked there cleaning buses. Like, I started at 6:00 in the morning, finished at 8:00 at night, worked a lot under the sun and rain, right? At the time I worked there, it was raining a lot, I remember it rained a lot. And they didn't... didn't give us any equipment, we went to work in our own clothes, so I was soaked all day and worked all day in wet clothes. It was the worst job I had. ... I think I stayed there for five months.

This pattern of exploitation cannot be understood solely in economic terms. As highlighted by Correia and Neves (2011), Brazilian women in Portugal are often subject to persistent stereotypes that associate them with sexual availability and prostitution, which shape everyday interactions and workplace dynamics. In this context, Manuela's account suggests that her position as a Brazilian woman may have intensified her exposure to abusive treatment, particularly in precarious employment settings.

Although Manuela and other participants faced heightened vulnerability in the Lisbon job market, many managed to access positions more aligned with their qualifications over time. Manuela, for example, after a path marked by precarious and abusive jobs, obtained a position as a web designer in an advertising agency, where she experienced professional growth and salary increases over the three years she remained in the company. Lifestyle migration literature emphasises that the search for better living conditions often collides with contextual,

unexpected difficulties (Adams, 2023, p. 5): “young lifestyle migrants are not spared from working hard to achieve their goal of being able to stay in the host country.” Nevertheless, the ability to eventually access more stable and qualified positions also reflects the role of educational capital in enabling upward mobility.

However, the precariousness she faced was not limited to employment. Manuela also experienced severe housing instability, having moved more than ten times since arriving in Portugal, a frequency that echoed the instability of her early work trajectory. In her interview, she reflected: “Housing has always been a problem for me. I haven’t got it right yet. I’ll only get it right when I have my own place.” She recounted failed attempts to live alone, which ended due to unforeseen issues that forced her to relocate. This constant movement not only compromised her sense of stability but also added emotional and logistical strain to an already precarious existence.

Manuela’s trajectory shows how improvements in one domain, such as professional advancement, do not automatically resolve vulnerabilities in others. Just as she moved between exploitative jobs before attaining a more stable role, her housing story is also marked by a cycle of temporary solutions, failed arrangements, and continued uncertainty. These overlapping instabilities underscore the multifaceted nature of precarious privilege, in which progress in one area is continually negotiated against structural barriers in others (Poole & Bunnell, 2020). Her experience reflects how student-migrants must navigate layered and persistent forms of insecurity—materially, emotionally, and spatially—in their efforts to construct a life in Lisbon.

6. Concluding Remarks

This study explored the experiences of Brazilian student-migrants in Lisbon, focusing on the dynamics of precarious privilege shaping their trajectories. Using an ethnographic approach grounded in sustained engagement with participants’ everyday lives, it examined how precarious privilege manifests at the intersection of mobility aspirations and material and symbolic vulnerabilities among Brazilian student-migrants. The findings deepen understandings of ISM and lifestyle migration.

Brazilian student-migrants were understood as lifestyle migrants seeking profound life experiences associated with cosmopolitanism (King, 2017), as well as a better personal-professional balance and improved quality of life (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009; 2016). At first glance, international students and lifestyle migrants appear materially and symbolically privileged. However, their trajectories reveal how privilege and precarity coexist. This becomes evident through the lens of precarious privilege, as formulated by Rey et al. (2020).

A closer look at these student-migrants’ lives highlights the rising cost of living, especially housing, as a major challenge. Escalating rents in Lisbon, coupled with exploitative practices like advance payment demands and overt discrimination, underscore the barriers to accessing adequate housing. In the labour domain, similar tensions emerged. While some held stable, well-paid jobs, others faced exploitation. Many experienced the constraints of Lisbon’s labour market, occupying subordinate roles despite being qualified for better positions. Housing and employment are not isolated domains but deeply intertwined: low wages in many sectors limit access to adequate housing, while housing insecurity, in turn, shapes employment decisions, mobility, and well-being. This entanglement reveals how precarious privilege operates across

interconnected spheres of life, where relative advantages are continuously negotiated against structural constraints, along non-linear trajectories that rarely culminate in steady improvement—even as participants move between the positions of student, graduate, and former student. Moreover, these dynamics are inseparable from the postcolonial relationship between Brazil and Portugal: the colonial legacy that renders Lisbon culturally legible and apparently welcoming to Brazilians is also implicated in the racialised and gendered hierarchies that make their privilege precarious.

Theoretically, this article contributes to lifestyle migration studies by repositioning international students as lifestyle migrants. In doing so, it introduces precarious privilege as an analytical lens, illuminating the tensions between lifestyle aspirations and structural vulnerabilities. This approach offers a more nuanced lens for understanding migrant experiences that do not fit neatly into binaries of privilege or precarity. Empirically, this article contributes to the literature by offering a grounded, ethnographic account of how Brazilian student-migrants in Lisbon navigate the dual pressures of housing and labour precarity. It provides detailed, first-hand insights into how these individuals experience and respond to structural inequalities, thereby enriching understandings of ISM beyond institutional or policy-driven perspectives.

While this study sheds light on key aspects of Brazilian students' experiences in Lisbon, it does not exhaust the field. Topics like urban sociability, informal support networks, and xenophobia merit further research. In a context of global inequality and intensified migration, understanding how different groups navigate social positions is essential for inclusive policy and debate on the right to the city.

Beyond their material weight, housing and employment also proved more central to these migrants' everyday lives than their academic pursuits—though precariousness was not only material: experiences of symbolic violence, intrusions into privacy, and discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation revealed their affective and relational dimensions. This aligns with King and Raghuram's (2013) critique of the narrow view of students as mere participants in higher education. By recognising their roles as workers and community participants, a more nuanced picture emerges. The notion of students as "complex individuals entangled in a wide set of social relations" (King & Raghuram, 2013, p. 131) challenges reductive portrayals. It highlights the interplay between education, labour, social reproduction, and migration strategies. Acknowledging these roles is crucial to inform policies and practices that support their integration and contributions to urban life.

These findings also speak to ongoing debates about the construction and use of categories in migration studies (Dahinden et al., 2021; Bialas et al., 2025). Categories such as "international student," "privileged migrant," and "lifestyle migrant" are not neutral descriptors but performative constructs that shape what researchers can see. Approaching our interlocutors through the deliberately unstable category of "student-migrant"—rather than the institutional "international student" (OECD, 2017)—was a reflexive choice meant to resist education-centred narratives and foreground the entanglement of study, work, and settlement. The empirical material reinforces this: participants themselves contested their ascribed positions, deprioritising the role of "student" as labour and housing took precedence, and resisting their framing as straightforwardly privileged. Read this way, "precarious privilege" is less a fixed attribute of a group than a relational, situated category holding advantages and vulnerabilities usually assigned to opposing analytical camps. By destabilising the binary between privileged and precarious migration, this article contributes to denaturalising the categories through which migration is studied and governed.

Data Access Statement

The data analysed in this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality restrictions. The material consists of interview and focus-group transcripts and fieldnotes containing sensitive personal information, and participants' informed consent was given on the basis of confidentiality, in accordance with the ethical approval granted for this research.

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