



Cultural Events as Symbolic Infrastructure: Repositioning African Destinations in the Global Tourism Imaginary

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Abstract: The paper reconceptualises episodic African tourism events such as carnivals and festivals through the lens of symbolic infrastructure. This has the capability of repositioning the destinations in the global tourism imaginary. Although much research on African festivals has received little attention, especially the available research has been more on African festivals, and their effect on the economy, visitor satisfaction, and community deliverables, yet little attention has been directed towards their effectiveness in forging the African representational position in the global tourism hierarchy. The concept of symbolic infrastructure is formulated by this review through the andragogy of the cultural political economy, post-colonial theory, symbolic capital, and soft power literature in elucidating the process through which carnivals operate as narrators working towards the production of symbolic capital, the spread of alternative imaginaries, and destination legitimacy. The paper proposes that African carnivals disrupt deep-rooted discourses of deficit that plague the continent with the vectors of poverty, crisis, and wildlife essentialism. These events develop cosmopolitan, creative, and modern identities, which mediate around epistemic marginalisation in tourism systems of knowledge through performative spectacle, mediated circulation, and aesthetic production. By changing the analytical perspective to the representational power, the paper adds to the discussions on tourism imaginaries and Global South agency and cultural sovereignty related to destination promotion. The carnival is

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consequently re-positioned as a strategic symbolic infrastructure that re-forms the visibility, legitimacy, and soft power of Africa in the global tourism governance.

Keywords: African festivals; carnivals; cultural events; event tourism; symbolic infrastructure

JEL Classification: M31; O1

1. Introduction

Destinations around the globe enter fierce competition, seeking visibility in the tourism industry, and their appeal is not based on infrastructure, price, or attractions but also on images (Makuzva & Hattingh, 2026; Tran, 2025). Tourism as an economy of representation essentially entails the consumption of places in a narrative way before being physically experienced (Sezerel & Tasdelen, 2016). The status of the African destinations in this symbolic marketplace has traditionally been vague and often fringe. Reductive imaginaries have continued to construct the African continent as a place that has been plagued by several challenges. Wildlife spectacle, abject poverty, crisis, instability, and humanitarian emergency are some of the elements of the global discourse of this continent that have been circulated via colonial travel writing, development discourse, and global news media (Baah-Acheamfour & Lamptey-George, 2024). These depictions have revealed that they are not able to convey the full diversity and liveliness of Africa. As a matter of fact, they are more inclined to shape the risk picture, investment trends, and tourism demand. This form of representation narrows the opportunities to recognize African cities and countries in the tourism ranking in the world (Irwin-Hunt, 2023). The modern tourist handouts even continue to be tied to the paradigms of essentialised safari guiding, even the contemporary destination marketing campaigns. Such campaigns do not have much room to emerge as the dominant frames of urban modernity, creative industries, and cosmopolitan identities. In this regard, the politics of visibility and legitimacy help one comprehend how tourism in Africa is on the rise.

In the last two decades, there has been an increased number of carnivals, festivals, and massive cultural celebrations in urban centres in Africa. Carnivals like Cape Town Carnival, Victoria Falls Carnival, the Lagos Carnival, the Zanzibar International Film Festival, and other events have become standard items on the city calendars. These have served as key events in drawing both domestic and international visitors as spectators, along with the mobilisation of economies of the creative sector (Hemmonsbeey et al., 2024; Batinoluho & Basera, 2022; Muresherwa

& Makgopa, 2025). The above cultural celebrations are gaining momentum in being supported by municipal authorities, tourism boards, and other private sponsors. The support of these events is mainly associated with the recognition of their ability to boost visitor spending, increase the exposure of media, and instil a sense of community pride. In line with this, empirical studies, especially research on economic impact, visitor satisfaction, community perceptions, and event management effectiveness, have correspondingly increased (see e.g., Hemmonsbey et al., 2024; Machisa et al., 2018; Snowball & Antrobus, 2021). Studies have continually established that tourism expenditure, the creation of employment opportunities, and enhanced social relationships are desired for the economy and society. These benefits have proved invaluable in justifying the state investment in the arts and culture and showing their inactive and quantifiable returns.

Through this paper, it is thus argued that the African carnivals are to be imagined as symbolic infrastructure. Such repeat institutionalised forms of cultural production produce symbolic capital and play a role in the re-writing of destination discourses of the global tourist imaginary (Bourdieu, 1986; Buscher et al., 2017). With a conceptualization of carnivals as infrastructure, the analysis takes away the attention to their transient quality and turns to their accumulative and formative effects. Traditionally, infrastructure has been understood as material infrastructures of transport, airports, communication, and digital connectivity through which economic flows go through (Makuzva & Hattingh, 2026). In contrast, symbolic infrastructure comprises systems that facilitate the generation, distribution, and storage of meaning and legitimacy (Gilman, 2024). Such symbolic systems can be as significant as the physical investments in the tourism industry, where the perception can be a more predictive meaning of the visitation (Salazar, 2011).

The main aim of the study is to redefine the concepts of African carnivals and cultural festivals as strategic symbolic structures that rebrand destinations on global tourism hierarchies (Stipanovic, 2018). Going beyond the conventional indicators of arrivals or spending, the paper explores the processes of how carnivals and festivals create symbolic capital and disrupt the hegemonic imaginaries of tourism to re-establish destination legitimacy and soft power. In an attempt to fulfil the objective of the study, the research pays specific attention to exploring how African destinations deal with the disruption or complication of deficit-based representations of cultural events such as carnivals. In addition, it determines the mechanisms by which symbolic production becomes reframed on a larger narrative scale, as well as

the degree to which the concentration of symbolic capital would promote the lessening of a symbolic deficit in the context of global tourism management.

To achieve the study's aims, one will have to shift away from the descriptive accounts regarding the growth of the festivals and commence the theoretically based study of representation, power, and legitimacy. Based on cultural political economy, symbolic capital theory, and postcolonial critique of knowledge production, this paper places cultural events in the context of more general discussions about Global South agency and narrative sovereignty (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015). The paper argues that cultural events such as carnivals and festivals are not marginal events that are added to the marketing of destinations. These are rather performative statements of modernity and creative competence that gain recognition in the long run. In addition, they perform what can be described as, through spectacle, repetition, and mediation-circulation, also described as performative destination sovereignty, which refers to the ability to situate control of narratives in the face of historically rooted hierarchies of representational ties (Duignan et al., 2022).

The paper addresses the tourism scholarship in three aspects in the context of foregrounding symbolic infrastructure. It enhances the research around the tourism of events by focusing on representational geopolitics instead of economic and managerial frameworks in the first place (Jackson & Dora, 2009). Second, it restructures African destinations as agents of meaning and not consumers of the world's discourses. Third, it also presents an analytical terminology, the symbolic deficit, the performative destination sovereignty, and the destination legitimacy accumulation, which allows taking a deeper look at how cultural events can drive global perceptions (Diez-Pisonero, 2025). This way, the paper addresses the demands of a greater number of theoretically inclined, decolonially mindful approaches to the study of tourism development in the Global South (Mowforth & Munt, 2015).

The argument advanced here is that the struggle over Africa's tourism future is inseparable from the struggle over how Africa is imagined. Carnivals and festivals, with all their aesthetic power and reiterative presence, operate as sites where that struggle is publicly staged. Having these interpretations of them as symbolic infrastructure opens an avenue to re-evaluating destination promotion, not as a technical marketing activity but as a highly political process of rewriting histories through narratives with an unequal global system.

2. Literature Review

Although there has been an increase in the literature on tourism events, an important aspect has not been theoretically addressed. This gap can be largely attributed to the symbolic and representational strength of cultural events in transforming the world's perceptions of the African destinations. It has been found that the African festivals continue to heavily rely on prevailing evaluation models involving economic determinism and managerial performance indexes (Stander et al., 2021; Viljoen & Kruger, 2025). An example of such cultural events are carnivals and festivals, whose evaluations are mostly based on the number of visitors, income, quality of operations, and stakeholder satisfaction (Getz & Page, 2016; Hemmonsbey et al., 2024; Wallace and Michopoulou, 2023). As important as these dimensions are, they run the risk of reducing complex cultural phenomena to calculative results and missing their contribution to the creation of meaning, prestige, and narrative authority. Nevertheless, tourism is not only an industry of exchanges and movement, but a space where destinations are competing for symbolic capital, legitimacy, and visibility. When global tourism hierarchies are perpetuated using images and imaginaries, then any event that creates extremely perceivable spectacles cannot be analytically reduced to an instrument of the economy.

Tourism imaginary has become a popular idea within the field of critical tourism studies (Buscher et al., 2017; Gravari-Barbas & Graburn, 2023; Silvia et al., 2017). This is the understanding of the socially constructed aspect of destinations through the mediated representations that form expectations, desires, and power relationships. Imaginaries are a regulative mechanism, the bounds of what is perceived, desirable, and acceptable under the global tourism networks. In these circuits, the African destinations have been subject to what could be characterised as a symbolic lack, an under-accumulation of the globally recognised cultural prestige in comparison with that of the destinations in the Global North. Such a lack is not only a brand image issue but a component of Western urban modernity epistemic superiorities, where Western urban modernity is construed as cosmopolitan and innovative, and African urban spaces are peripheralised or exceptionalised. Within such an environment, cultural events can serve as more than entertainment and tourism sites; they can also work as an intervention in the global exchange of meaning.

Carnivals have been characterized by the unique aspects that make them analytically important. They are mass, massy, and extremely aestheticised cultural forms of

production that compress music, fashion, choreography, narrative, and visual art into mini-spectacles (Apeh, 2018). Carnivals are also renowned for enacting personas in front of local and global viewers, and usually, it involves a mixture of tradition and innovation in ways that destabilize fixed notions of culture (Agbo, 2024). Carnivals build up visibility through their recurrence every year, documentation by the media, and institutionalization, which create narrative continuity (Anderton, 2018). In addition, these events produce visual archives, which circulate through news media, social networks, and diasporic communities and enhance other versions of African cities as creative, youthful, and cosmopolitan (Bastian, 2012; Makgopa & Muresherwa, 2025). By doing so, they may contest widely held deficit-based discourse and a larger range of repertoires in the ways that Africa is visualized and perceived (African Studies Association of Africa, 2023).

Although these trends have occurred, theories of symbolic capital, cultural political economy, or postcolonial representation have been rarely explored to analyse the extended geopolitical effects of festivals by African event scholarship (Zango, 2023). A large part of the critiquing literature around festivalisation and urban competitiveness has been developed in the Global North in an attempt to understand how European cities employ mega-events and cultural festivals to rebrand themselves in the context of global city networks (Coulibaly et al., 2022). These reviews shed light on the way events are used as instruments of commercial entrepreneurialism and place-branding. Nevertheless, they seldom question the ways in which such similar processes take place in structurally unequal global systems in which destinations are faced with the issue of historical marginalisation (Hemmonsby & Tichaawa, 2019). The use of these orientations in applying them to African situations would lead to the reproduction of Eurocentric tendencies of the problem, which fail to reflect the unique representational struggles of the Global South destinations (Gwaravanda & Ndofirepi, 2021).

According to the literature, long economic determinism has defined the way scholars address African festivals. Policymakers and researchers often evaluate the success of these events mainly in terms of revenue collection and attendance rates (Stander et al., 2021; Hemmonsby et al., 2024; Viljoen & Kruger, 2025). Increasingly, academics assert that these events are better understood as symbolic infrastructure systems that enable the production and circulation of meaning rather than just physical or economic flows (Salazar, 2011). In this more perceptive sense, carnivals and festivals were not only pleasant activities to engage in but dynamic phenomena that unite visual art and fashion, musical entertainment, and performance in vibrant

spectacles that represent regional culture in a new way (Agbo, 2024; Apeh, 2018). Scholars are thus urged to move beyond the standardized measures of stakeholders' performance (Getz & Page, 2016) and explore the role of such events in the formation of new narratives about places. In addition, researchers can interrogate how cultural events function as catalysts to re-author destination narratives and accumulate symbolic capital.

The theory of symbolic capital pitched by Bourdieu (1986) offers a considerable framework to explain this transition. This theory holds that symbolic capital encompasses legitimacy, recognition, and prestige that a place or community may earn, potentially resulting in social or political power (Cammarota et al., 2024). Symbolic capital does not spread evenly in the tourism sector. Good imagery and representations of the African people are quite difficult to come by in most parts of Africa because they are discussed in a simple or crisis-focused manner. Conversely, Global North cities continue to enjoy years of good publicity and prestige (Omolade et al., 2025). African places can revive during carnivals to combat these old texts and create new, impactful visual documents of who they are and what they desire (Agbo, 2024; Bastian, 2012). By hosting such events regularly, people throughout the world will begin to think differently about these places. This will assist them in providing them with greater respect and credibility internationally.

Amidst cultural political economy, it becomes evident that the meaning and story associated with a place or event is not an incidental consequence but a requirement of the economic prosperity of a specific locale (Stoffelen, 2022). Advertisements, news, and social forums are places where people discuss a city or place. It directly influences the choices about who invests there and the number of tourists who visit there (Bianchi, 2017). Carnivals and festivals are thus venues where these meanings are created, interrogated, and delighted in. They render African cities fresh, imaginative, and colourful. However, not everybody receives a fair opportunity to compose these new stories. Tone is often prescribed by Western branding standards and worldwide demands, so that when African destinations define themselves against their own ideas, it becomes even more difficult (Jacob, 2025). These structural variations have prompted researchers such as Haferburg and Steinbrink (2017) and Diez-Pisonero (2025) to argue that festivalisation frameworks require reassessment. They claim that models developed in the Global North require modification to adapt to the context-specific history, representational issues, and persist consistent marginalisation manifested in different African situations.

Another vital dimension is brought to this debate through postcolonial and decolonial perspectives. These techniques emphasize how, over time, Africa was presented as an object of international discourse, often exoticized or simply termed as underdeveloped. This historical discourse contributes to the worth and perception of destinations (Niyonzima, 2024). Self-representation thus becomes more important as political action in the case of African destinations. Through the screening of festivals and carnivals, these places are asserting their identities and reclaiming the right to tell their stories rather than accepting the external narratives. According to Tucker and Akama (2009), cultural events such as the PANAFEST and the Calabar Carnival provide a means through which nations are allowed to own their own stories and enjoy their own narrative sovereignty. African cities and communities can challenge the concepts and thinking processes that have developed tourism through high-volume performances. These entertainment performances demonstrate a more creative and modern part of Africa that contradicts the notion that Africa remains behind, often perceived as shrouded in challenges (Weru & Njoroge, 2021). The latter makes cultural events the strategic weapons that destinations can use to write their own new stories in the hope that they will become known and respected in their own conditions (Aramayo, 2025).

Ultimately, synthesising these perspectives suggests that carnivals are not peripheral marketing exercises but are strategic geopolitical interventions (Chaddad, 2021). Thus, holding such celebrations in the city regularly keeps the momentum of the cultural status flowing and makes them significant elements of a greater symbolic system. African destinations are now increasingly being regarded in the literature as spaces where humans can create meaning and power, and not just as spaces where global narratives occur. This is because the technique emphasizes these symbolic and representational elements. In fact, it is a new approach to processes that makes us realize how cultural events can turn a place gradually more popular and highly regarded in the world. This impact is far greater than the number of visitors or the attempts to estimate income. Rather, it demonstrates the difficulty in receiving respect and acknowledgement within a system of the world that remains unjust and difficult to manoeuvre.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The proposition that is put forward in this paper is based on the fact that tourism, as a field, is fundamentally a struggle for symbols. This makes the destinations compete

over being recognized, legitimate, and having authority within a globally stratified system of representation (Dimitrov et al., 2017). In order to frame African carnivals as symbolic infrastructure, the study uses three main theoretical pillars that include the theory of symbolic capital developed by Bourdieu, cultural political economy, and postcolonial critique on representation, as well as knowledge production. These two views, in combination, make it possible to re-conceptualise carnivals in terms of cultures and driving forces of the economy. They also become viewed as institutionalized processes where the destinations are credited with enjoying prestige and adjust their positions in world tourism imaginations (Bourdieu, 1986).

The first concept of analytics framing developed by Bourdieu comes in the form of symbolic capital, an accumulation of recognition, honour, and legitimacy, which can be turned into other types of power (Bourdieu, 2018). In contrast to economic capital, symbolic capital works on the notion of perception and misidentification; indeed, that is why this type of capital is effective to the extent to which it is natural, warranted, and self-grounded (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013). Touristically, destinations, in this case, which possess large amounts of symbolic capital, such as Paris, New York, or Tokyo, can be used as a symbol of culture and the present globalised city to the world, whose authority can be deposited through repetition. On the other hand, important African destinations experience a relative lack of symbols, often framed in terms of reduction or crisis. As a form of periodical performance of aesthetic production, carnivals become the arena of production of symbolic capital and its exhibition. They use music, choreography, and performance to play out creativity and cosmopolitanism publicly, and any amount of recognition gained through performance increases way beyond the temporal event.

Cultural political economy then elaborates this view by underlining that meaning-making is not a by-product but part of material consequences (Stoffelen, 2022). Since thematic destinations are being managed by means of discourse, investment, policy priorities, and tourist movements directly depend on the narration of such places. In this perspective, carnival circuits are processes of production and circulation and consumption of meaning that disseminate visual and affectual content in media networks. More importantly, these forces occur in an unequal world where some discourses are spread more successfully than others (Bianchi, 2017). A mode of cultural political economy (though dominated by multi-annualisation) that fails to acknowledge the inherent interrelation of the symbolic production process with structural relations of power and predominance of Western branding norms is afforded through the incorporation of carnivals into its analysis. Carnivals, therefore,

are places of struggle in which alternative histories of African urban modernity can be practiced, although they are coupled to the international flow of capital (Basak, 2021).

The further elaboration on epistemic hierarchies that define tourism knowledge within the postcolonial and decolonial scholarship foresees the epistemic hierarchies. Africa has historically become an object of the gaze (exotic), underdeveloped, or timeless in colonial travel texts and discourses of development (Kaputu, 2023). The named regimes of representation still limit the perception and appreciation of African destinations. According to postcolonial theory, observation cannot exist without power; in particular, the possibilities of a place are constrained by its image (Newell & Canessa, 2018). Carnivals in this sense can be taken as an expression of narrative sovereignty. They are spectacles where cities and nations define alternative identities and enact modernity and innovation to position deficit-based images in the background. As opposed to receiving externally applied frames passively, destinations actively create a form of counter-imaging that demands acknowledgment on their part through them (Zango, 2023).

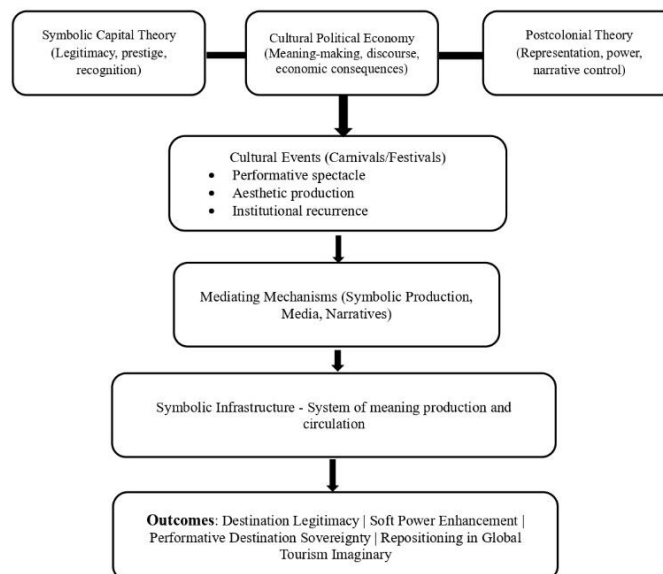


Figure 1. Cultural events as a symbolic infrastructure framework

Source: Authors' construction, based on literature

Figure 1 illustrates the integrated theoretical framework underpinning this study. Drawing on symbolic capital theory, cultural political economy, and postcolonial

perspectives, the framework conceptualises cultural events as mechanisms of symbolic production and circulation. Through mediated processes, these events function as symbolic infrastructure, enabling African destinations to accumulate legitimacy, exercise soft power, and reposition themselves within the global tourism imaginary.

The integration of these theoretical strands allows presenting symbolic infrastructure as a conclusive conceptual prism. While infrastructure is typically understood as the material foundation enabling exchange (Makuzva & Hattingh, 2026), the infrastructure of meaning is equally consequential in an industry predicated on perception. Symbolic infrastructure can be defined as institutionalised systems that facilitate the production and circulation of cultural prestige to produce and sustain (Gilman, 2024). Both with repetitive efficacy and media integration, carnivals are more likely to act as such systems. They represent recursive performances that build symbolic capital over the years, refilled steadily with depicting African cities at global tourism scales (Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa, 2019). It is a distinctive theoretical stance that moves beyond conventional economic paradigms of impact and complies with critical tourism arguments on imaginaries and Global South agency, in repositioning ideas of destination promotion as strategic political action of recognition.

3. Research Methodology

This paper has used a desk-based research approach in conceptualising African carnivals as infrastructural representations. Such a method of research was to a significant extent very effective in rewriting stories about destinations by mapping symbolic capital construction theory across various academic disciplines. This desk-based study used a multi-phase search process using key academic databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR. The search string employed used the Boolean operators in liaising the thematic pillars of the core areas, and used search strings such as: 'African carnivals', OR 'festivals', 'cultural events', AND 'symbolic capital' OR 'imaginaries', AND 'destination legitimacy', OR 'postcolonialism'. Instead of concentrating on managerial performance measures (Getz & Page, 2016), the process of data appraisal covered the way the authors conceptualise the performative and representational, and referring to the cultural events' power. This theoretical summary, being carried out on a desktop level, allows researchers to understand the symbolic gap in the existing literature and suggests symbolic infrastructure as a remedial pinpoint conceptual viewpoint (Salazar, 2011).

As has been mentioned above, the research used thematic synthesis to combine the results of cultural political economy, the theory of capital according to Bourdieu, and the postcolonial criticisms. The approach helps the shift in narrating the festivals towards a theoretically informed analysis of the carnival as an institutionalised meaning system (Zango, 2023). With the generated secondary data synthesis under this framework, known as desk-based, the paper proves a strong foundation of the argument that carnivals make good strategic interventions within the world tourism hierarchy, which is geopolitical.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Africa on the Global Tourism Hierarchy: Dealing with the Symbolic Deficit

The reviewed literature shows that global tourism is structured around hard hierarchies of visibility and legitimacies, and African destinations can find themselves in uncertain positions (Salazar, 2011). Although some global North urban locations are being normalized as a stunning cultural capital, the African destination often faces the symbolic shortage, the state, when they are recognized mostly by a simplified map of disaster, destitution, wilderness, or instability (Avraham & Ketter, 2017; Bourdieu, 1986; Chirikure et al., 2021). This lack is reproduced via international media and risk discourses, which reduces the bandwidth of representation that the African cities are entitled to. Carnivals act as an object of interference in this structural difference by diversifying the repertoire of sensations about such destinations, and they no longer need to be taken into safari or untouched places, but they are places of urban modernity and innovative creativity (Tucker & Akama, 2009).

4.2. Festivalisation to Symbolic Strategy: Finding Legitimacy

As the global North scholarship appreciates the festivalisation of cities as an instrument to regenerate post-industrial urban areas (see e.g., Haferburg & Steinbrink, 2017), the desk-based synthesis indicates that, in Africa, the stake in the matter is an epistemic one. African Carnivals are not just about distinctions between already-legitimised cities, but about the building of legitimacy. According to the analysis, the events are context-based strategies of a symbolic character whose purpose is to reset the representational power (Zango, 2023). Carnivals are a means

of symbolic accumulation, because they can work at two levels: economic (expenditure) and epistemic (storytelling). Such an in-between role enables the African destinations to oppose deficit discourses and claim their representation in the world city networks (Mumbengegwi et al., 2024).

4.3. Urban Modernity Performance

The summary of the articles points out that carnivals are performative by their very design, concentrating artistic artefacts into extremely visible public presentations, creating contemporary culture (Noonan, 2022). These spectacles interfere with the unchanging images of Africa as eternal or as rural by stating changes due to technological change, prediction of a youth culture, and hybrid identities (Agbo, 2024; Apeh, 2018). Spectacle is both functional and efficient in creating emotional awareness that throws pride back in an outward form and re-acquires the city fragments and fragrances. Carnivals serve as spaces of urban modernity through storytelling and performing with their choreographed dance (Todd & Quinn, 2024). Such cultural spectacles are also legitimised in public, and they claim the contemporary relevance of African cities to the community of the world (Bastian, 2013).

4.4. The Circulation of Symbolic Capital

Festivals have been impacted by the digital space in the form of mediated circulation, where transient performances on the streets are re-packaged into visual archives. Spectacular imagery of choreographed floats and vibrant costumes travels through social media and diasporic networks, associated with specific cities and nations (Stoffelen, 2022). The global editions of these events are so frequent that they build awareness and make the events part of international cultural schedules. Although such pictures are still more commonly viewed in question through the global understandings of aesthetics, the overall impact of such shared images facilitates the regularisation of African urbanity. Due to this, it is useful in erasing the symbolic deficit due to the mass circulation of alternative meanings (Getz & Page, 2015; Salazar, 2011).

4.5. Carnivals As Soft Power and Performative Destination Sovereignty

The study establishes carnivals as important soft power tools used in building international friendship and cultural appeal (Pramanik & Islam, 2025). These events offset accounts of dependency and instability through the demonstration of cultural confidence and organisational competence. The result of this is what the paper calls ‘performative destination sovereignty’, which can be defined as the ability of a destination to exert narrative control over its perception and representation (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015). African countries refuse to accept foreign articulatory through created themes and local agency, reclaiming their right to make meaningful choices that re-place them as active contributors to the world order of tourism (Tucker & Akama, 2009; Zango, 2023).

4.6. Breaking the Stalemate of Representations.

The discussions created by the studies showed that carnivals serve as an anti-spectacle to the worldwide crisis-induced imagery popular in the media. Carnivals such as the Cape Town Carnival, the Calabar, and the Cape Town Minstrels are perceived to be substituting the provincial and perennial image with tropes of the high-functioning, creative centres of the city, especially in terms of urban dynamism, technological hybridity, and fashion place (Agbo, 2024; Apeh, 2018). These events increase the bandwidth but representational sense, making it necessary to sacrifice the exclusively safari narratives and offer what is available in most African cities. These cities are therefore introduced as the players of global modernity.

4.7. The Processes of Narrative Reframing

Symbolic production has been reviewed in terms of processes that enable its translation into wider narrative retraining. The desk methodology recognizes the relevance of mediated circulation and institutional recurrence as two strong ways. With the help of social media and news networks across the globe, narrative reframing takes place when temporary street shows are inscribed into a more extensive visual archive (Bastian, 2013; Swart et al., 2017). With the repeated production of these spectacular images every year, they are buried in the imaginary of global tourism. Based on this, it ultimately transitions destinations out of a crisis condition into a culture vital condition (Stoffelen, 2022).

4.8. Reducing Symbolic Deficit in Global Governance

The analysis suggests that carnivals function as soft power instruments that build reputational capital (Pavković et al., 2021). By demonstrating creative competence and organisational sophistication on a massive scale, these destinations earn destination legitimacy (Salazar, 2011). This legitimacy allows African nations to exert performative destination sovereignty, asserting narrative control and demanding recognition as equal partners in the global tourism economy, rather than passive recipients of Western branding norms (Tucker & Akama, 2009; Zango, 2023).

4.9. The Future of African Symbolic Infrastructure

This paper has argued that African carnivals are far more than episodic cultural celebrations. They are further viewed as strategic symbolic infrastructures capable of re-authoring the continent's position within the global tourism hierarchy. By moving beyond traditional economic determinism, the study demonstrates that these events serve as institutionalised systems for the production, circulation, and accumulation of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Salazar, 2012). Through the analysis of literature, it is evident that carnivals serve as a critical corrective to the symbolic deficit. The promotion of cultural events can thus be used to correct the historical marginalisation and crisis-driven narratives that have long constrained African destination imaginaries (Swart et al., 2017).

In alignment with previous studies, the paper views carnivals as disruptors of the deficit-based representations. Of note is the role of cultural events in staging urban modernity and creative innovation, thereby expanding the 'representational bandwidth' of African cities (Agbo, 2024). In addition, the study notes that the process of narrative reframing undertaken by carnivals is driven by mediated circulation and the creation of 'visual archives' that normalise images of African vibrancy across global digital networks (Bastian, 2013). Similarly, the accumulation of symbolic capital facilitates a shift in global tourism governance by establishing destination legitimacy and enabling performative destination sovereignty (Zango, 2023). In short, cultural events help shape destinations' narratives, particularly within the historically unequal global order (Tucker & Akama, 2009).

Ultimately, the struggle over Africa's tourism future is a struggle over recognition. By conceptualising carnivals as symbolic infrastructure, this study contributes a new

analytical vocabulary to tourism scholarship, cantering Global South agency and decolonial knowledge production. For policymakers and destination marketers, the implication is clear. Cultural events should be invested in not only for their immediate revenue but also for their long-term capacity to generate soft power and reputational capital (Pavković et al., 2021; Žilič Fišer & Kožuh, 2019). As African cities continue to grow as creative hubs, carnivals will remain at the forefront of a deeply political process of reimagining the continent on its terms. Table 1 summarises the key conceptual findings emerging from thematic synthesis.

Table 1. Summary of key findings on cultural events as symbolic infrastructure

Analytical theme	Key finding or insights	Mechanism identified	Implication for African destinations
Symbolic deficit in global tourism	African destinations are positioned lower in global tourism hierarchies due to deficit-based representations (poverty, crisis, wilderness).	Dominance of global media narratives and historical colonial discourse	Necessitates strategic interventions to reshape global perceptions and improve destination legitimacy.
Carnivals as symbolic interventions	Cultural events disrupt negative imaginaries and introduce alternative narratives of creativity and modernity.	Performative spectacle and narrative production.	Positions African cities as cosmopolitan, innovative, and globally relevant destinations.
From festivalisation to symbolic strategy	Unlike the Global North, African festivals are not only for urban regeneration but for epistemic repositioning.	Dual function: economic (tourism revenue) + symbolic (storytelling).	Enables destinations to use cultural events to actively construct and control their global image.
Performance of urban modernity	Carnivals showcase youth culture, hybridity, and technological advancement.	Choreographed performances, artistic expression, and aesthetic display.	Challenges static and rural stereotypes of Africa, reinforcing modern urban identities.

Circulation of symbolic capital	Festival imagery extends beyond the event through digital and media circulation.	Social media, global news, diasporic networks, and visual archives.	Builds long-term symbolic capital and increases global visibility of African destinations.
Soft power and destination sovereignty	Cultural events function as instruments of soft power and narrative control.	Cultural diplomacy, local agency, thematic storytelling.	Enables 'performative destination sovereignty' and strengthens positioning.
Narrative reframing processes	Repeated events and media dissemination gradually shift global tourism imaginaries.	Institutional recurrence and mediated circulation.	Transforms Africa's image from crisis-based to culturally vibrant and dynamic
Reduction of symbolic deficit	Accumulated symbolic capital enhances destination legitimacy in global tourism governance.	Recognition through consistent representation and global exposure.	Position African destinations as equal participants in the global tourism system.
Carnivals as strategic infrastructure	Cultural events operate as long-term systems of meaning production rather than one-off events.	Institutionalisation, repetition, and symbolic accumulation.	Justifies sustained investment in cultural events beyond economic returns.

Source: Authors' construction based on the study findings

5. Conclusions, Practical Implications, and Future Research

This paper reconceptualised African cultural events, focusing on carnivals. In this study, carnivals are theorised as a symbolic infrastructure that shapes how destinations are imagined, legitimised, and positioned within the global tourism hierarchy. The study moved beyond the dominant economic and managerial evaluations, demonstrating that these events function as institutionalised systems of meaning production. As a result, carnivals accumulate symbolic capital, disrupt deficit-based narratives, and enable African destinations to assert performative

destination sovereignty. By synthesising insights from cultural political economy, symbolic capital theory, and postcolonial perspectives, the paper establishes that the struggle for Africa's tourism competitiveness is fundamentally a struggle over representation, visibility, and narrative control.

5.1. Practical Implications

For policymakers and destination marketers, the study findings suggest a need to reposition cultural events as long-term strategic investments. In fact, these events should not be pursued as short-term revenue generators. Governments and tourism authorities should prioritise sustained funding and institutional continuity. These authorities should also place emphasis on global media amplification of festivals to maximise symbolic capital accumulation. Event organisers should deliberately curate narratives that foreground urban modernity, creativity, and innovation. At the same time, they should leverage digital platforms to extend the reach of event imagery beyond temporal boundaries. Furthermore, integrating cultural events into national branding strategies can enhance international perception, attract investment, and visitors (Sibiya et al., 2023). Importantly, the involvement of locals must remain central to ensure authenticity and avoid the reproduction of externally imposed narratives.

5.2. Future Research Agenda

Given the conceptual nature of this study, future research should empirically test the proposed relationships between cultural events, symbolic capital, and destination legitimacy. Quantitative and mixed-method studies could measure how exposure to festival imagery influences tourist perceptions, travel intentions, and investment confidence. Longitudinal research could also be pursued to examine how recurring cultural events contribute to the gradual repositioning of destinations over time. In sum, recognising cultural events as symbolic infrastructure offers a powerful lens for rethinking tourism development in Africa.

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