

# **From Parades to Preservation**

Examining the Impact of Tourism on Aruba's Carnival Heritage

Suzanna Hope Palmer-Smith

S1115037

Master Thesis Tourism and Culture, Radboud University

dr. M.C.J. Verhoeven

dr. T.M.J. Sintobin

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## Abstract

Tourism is a vital and rapidly expanding global industry, significantly contributing to economic development and employment. Aruba, a Caribbean island, exemplifies this growth, with tourism becoming its largest industry post-1985. As Aruba endeavors to attract younger tourists through niche offerings, cultural tourism remains underdeveloped. This thesis examines the interplay between Aruba's tourism practices and its cultural heritage, focusing on Carnival—a central cultural event. The research addresses the extent to which Carnival has been commodified for tourism, its impact on authenticity, and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Utilizing a mixed-method approach, including a literature review, discourse analysis of promotional materials, and semi-structured interviews, this study explores Carnival's role in Aruba's tourism promotion. Findings reveal that while Carnival enhances Aruba's brand and appeals to tourists, there are concerns about cultural commodification. Locals generally view the promotional use of Carnival positively, yet there is apprehension about potential future commercialization.

The thesis underscores the need for a balanced approach that preserves Carnival's cultural integrity while leveraging its tourism potential. Strategies for maintaining authenticity and promoting sustainable cultural tourism are discussed. This research provides preliminary insights into the complex relationship between tourism and cultural heritage in Aruba, suggesting avenues for future exploration and policy development.

*Keywords: Aruba, carnival, commodification, cultural heritage, tourism*

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## INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a dynamic and multifaceted global industry, playing a pivotal role in the economic development of many countries. As one of the world's largest and fastest-growing economic sectors, tourism contributed 9.1% of the global GDP in 2023, and significantly impacted employment by directly and indirectly generating 330 million jobs worldwide.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, international tourist arrivals reached 1.5 billion globally, and though many countries are still recovering after the COVID-19 pandemic, 2023 saw an estimated 975 million tourists travelled internationally between January and September.<sup>2</sup> A full recovery of the industry is expected by 2024. These numbers demonstrate the sector's reach and importance. The rise of globalization, advancements in transportation, and the widespread use of digital technologies have made travel more accessible, fostering a growing desire among people to explore new destinations.

A crucial component in the competitive tourism landscape is destination branding. This strategic process involves creating a unique identity and image for a destination, whether this is a whole country or a specific region. By doing so destinations strive to establish themselves as attractive and distinguishable from others in the crowded marketplace. Strategic branding of destinations increasingly emphasizes the overall experience rather than individual attractions and promises quality and value. Effective destination branding can elevate a location's visibility, attract targeted demographics, and enhance visitor experiences.<sup>3</sup> A positive destination image is thus crucial for a successful marketing campaign, as it directly influences potential visitors'

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<sup>1</sup> World Travel & Tourism Council, "Economic Impact," April 16, 2024, <https://wttc.org/research/economic-impact>; Statista, "Travel and Tourism Employment Worldwide 2019-2034," June 13, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1268465/number-of-travel-and-tourism-jobs-worldwide/>.

<sup>2</sup> World Economic Forum and University of Surrey, "Travel & Tourism Development Index 2024: Insight Report May 2024," *World Economic Forum*, May 21, 2024, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/travel-tourism-development-index-2024/>.

<sup>3</sup> Metin Kozak and Nazmi Kozak, *Destination Marketing: An International Perspective* (Routledge, 2015).

decisions. Key elements of destination branding include developing a compelling narrative, leveraging culture and heritage, and consistently communicating the brand message across various platforms. The formation of a destination's image is thus multi-dimensional and highly dynamic and influenced by information from both formal and informal sources.<sup>4</sup>

Numerous successful destinations have used the power of branding to build strong identities that resonate with and attract visitors. Iconic examples include Las Vegas' "What Happens Here, Stays Here", New Zealand's "100% Pure New Zealand", and New York's "The City That Never Sleeps". These campaigns not only highlight unique attributes of each location, but also create specific emotions and desires, encouraging travellers to visit.

Aruba, located off the coast of Venezuela, has similarly established itself as a premier tourist destination with a strong brand identity. The island beckons travellers with its slogans, "One Happy Island", and the more recently introduced "The Aruba Effect". Like many other global destinations, Aruba has worked diligently to create a distinct brand, setting itself apart from other Caribbean locations. But unlike many other tourist hotspots, Aruba's tourism industry does not have a long history. It was chosen as a means for economic expansion following the closure of the Lago Oil refinery in 1985, which had previously dominated the island's economy. In 1986, the total annual tourists was 180,000,<sup>5</sup> although tourism had been growing steadily since the 1950s.<sup>6</sup> Since then, however, tourism numbers have grown exponentially, establishing tourism as the island's largest industry. In 2023 Aruba ranked 9<sup>th</sup> out of 28 Caribbean destinations for the total

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<sup>4</sup> Metin Kozak and Nazmi Kozak, *Destination Marketing: An International Perspective*.

<sup>5</sup> Rigoberto Haime Croes, "The Impact of Tourism on the Economy and Population of Small Islands : The Case of Aruba" (PhD dissertation, Universiteit Utrecht, 2007), 54, <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/bitstream/handle/1874/23369/full.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Evert Bongers, "Toerisme," *Historia Di Aruba*, accessed July 4, 2024, [http://www.historiadiaruba.aw/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=24&Itemid=39](http://www.historiadiaruba.aw/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=24&Itemid=39).

number of stop-over tourists, welcoming over 1.2 million visitors.<sup>7</sup> According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, in 2024 tourism accounted for 70.6% of Aruba's GDP and generated 88.4% of all employment, with predictions of an increase to 96.6% of all employment by 2034.<sup>8</sup> With a resident population just over 106,000 as of June 2024,<sup>9</sup> the impact of tourism permeates all aspects of Aruban life. Given the substantial reliance on the tourism industry, developing and maintaining a strong and attractive brand image is vital for Aruba's economic health.

A few years ago, Aruba tasked a consultancy with the creation of a plan to increase the economic value of Aruba's tourism by developing a niche product offer, so as to attract a younger audience to counteract their current ageing visitor demographic. The final plan involved twelve niche tourism products, including culinary, nautical, and medical. However, cultural tourism, a form of niche tourism which has been gaining popularity globally, was not included.

A specific definition for cultural tourism has not been agreed upon by academics, but the UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) broadly defines cultural tourism as "a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination".<sup>10</sup> This form of tourism is increasing in popularity for a multitude of reasons, including the desire for authentic experiences (local culture, lifestyles, traditions), sustainable travel (supporting local communities and preserving cultural heritage), the educational value of culture, and the opportunity for

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<sup>7</sup> "Caribbean Tourism Statistics," Tourism Analytics, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://tourismanalytics.com/caribbean-statistics.html>.

<sup>8</sup> World Travel & Tourism Council, "ARUBA 2024 Annual Research: Key Highlights," April 19, 2024, <https://researchhub.wttc.org/factsheets/Aruba>.

<sup>9</sup> "Aruba Population (2024)," Worldometer, accessed June 4, 2024, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/aruba-population/>.

<sup>10</sup> "Tourism and Culture," accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.unwto.org/tourism-and-culture>.

adventure through unique and off-the-beaten-path cultural activities.<sup>11</sup> While it may not be formalised in Aruba's most recent product development plan, the island is no stranger to using the local culture to entice tourists.

The year 2024 marked the 70<sup>th</sup> celebration of Carnival in Aruba, a festival deeply embedded in the island's cultural and national identity. Carnival has long been a central element of Aruba's outward identity and brand, particularly since the Aruba Tourism Authority (ATA), established by the Aruban government in 1986, became an independent organisation in 2011.<sup>12</sup> Carnival dancers welcoming travellers at the airports, hotels hosting Carnival shows, and even a brief summer Carnival event, all showcase Aruba's eagerness to share this aspect of their cultural heritage with visitors. A spokesperson from Aruba Tourism Authority noted that Carnival is the most important cultural event for the island and it's the way the Aruban population expresses themselves creatively. As a result, Carnival is one of the most important and iconic events for marketing purposes and is used to bring Aruba to the international audience.

The rapid rise of tourism in Aruba since the 1980s and the current emphasis on sustainable tourism in the context of many protests surrounding mass tourism globally, including in Aruba,<sup>13</sup> highlights the delicate balance between economic prosperity and cultural preservation. Using Carnival as a promotion of the island can be positive, as it has been shown that Carnival fosters social cohesion through community celebration and contributes to a sense of pride of place, ethnic

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<sup>11</sup> Greg Richards, "Cultural Tourism: A Review of Recent Research and Trends," *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management* 36 (September 2018): 12–21, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2018.03.005>.

<sup>12</sup> Aruba Tourism Authority, "Aruba Tourism," Aruba, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://www.aruba.com/us/our-island/history-and-culture/aruba-tourism>.

<sup>13</sup> Dizzanne Billy, "Locals in Aruba Protest Unsustainable Growth of Hotel and Tourism Industry," *Global Voices*, May 10, 2024, <https://globalvoices.org/2024/05/09/locals-in-aruba-protest-unsustainable-growth-of-hotel-and-tourism-industry/>.

identity, and a sense of belonging among locals and visitors alike.<sup>14</sup> However, the use of Carnival as a tourist product can have negative impacts as well. Commercialisation of the event can dilute the cultural significance, leading to a loss of authenticity and limiting the long term sustainability of the event. Additionally a focus on tourists could lead to discontent among locals and a greater strain on resources. Balancing the economic benefits of tourism with the preservation of cultural heritage is therefore crucial. While the use of Carnival in tourism promotion may be inevitable, it is essential to consider the long-term impacts on the island's cultural identity and community well-being.

This thesis will delve further into this topic, aiming to understand the interrelation between Aruba's tourism practices and its cultural heritage of Carnival. It will explore such aspects as promotion, authenticity, and preservation, providing a comprehensive analysis of how tourism currently influences one of Aruba's most significant cultural events.

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<sup>14</sup> Violet Cuffy, "Carnival Tourism," in *Special Interest Tourism: Concepts, Contexts and Cases* (CABI, 2017), 103, <https://doi.org/10.1079/9781780645667.0000>.

## Research questions

Little to no research has been conducted on the intersection of Aruba's cultural heritage, specifically its Carnival tradition, and tourism. Globally, there is a growing call to move away from mass tourism towards more sustainable forms of travel, with cultural heritage frequently cited as a valuable tool or attraction for tourism. While this approach may seem more desirable than mass tourism at first glance, the unmonitored and unmanaged use of cultural heritage for tourism can still have numerous drawbacks, primarily affecting local communities. With Aruba increasingly emphasising sustainability within its tourism sector, I wanted to understand how specific elements of cultural heritage are currently being used for tourism and whether sustainability are being integrated. The focus on Carnival is the result of numerous conversations with friends and family, during which the sentiment that Carnival is the only thing that remains purely for the locals, and not for tourists, repeatedly emerged. This claim prompted my desire to investigate and to determine whether this perception still holds true in a tourism economy that increasingly encourages the sharing of local culture with tourists in the name of sustainability. In this thesis, I seek to explore the impact of leveraging the Carnival cultural phenomenon for tourism on the local experience and the preservation of Carnival tradition. The central question addressed is:

To what extent has Aruba's cultural heritage of Carnival been commodified for tourists, in promotion and practice, and how does this influence the perceived authenticity and preservation of this heritage for local communities?

Given the lack of existing research on this topic, this thesis will adopt an exploratory approach and use a variety of methods to address several sub-questions that will provide insights into the central research question. These sub-questions are:

1. What insights can be drawn from existing literature about the use of Carnival for tourism promotion and the commodification of the event?
2. How is Aruba's Carnival represented in tourism promotion material, and what specific elements indicate commodification of this cultural heritage?
3. In what ways has the practice of celebrating Aruba's Carnival been altered or influenced by tourism, and what aspects demonstrate commodification?
4. How do locals perceive the authenticity of the Carnival in light of its use in promotion and practices aimed at tourists?
5. What strategies are being employed to maintain the authenticity of Carnival for local communities, and what more could be done?

## **Outline**

To provide a holistic approach to the research at hand, this thesis is divided into two main chapters. Chapter one constitutes the theoretical basis for the analysis of the interplay between Carnival in promotion and the authenticity and preservation of Carnival as cultural heritage, which will be further discussed in Chapter two. This chapter is divided into three parts, A, B, and C. Part A will provide important background information about the case study of Aruban Carnival. Part B, the literature review, offers an in-depth look at the current body of literature on cultural and heritage tourism in Aruba, commodification of Carnival, and the impacts of commodification of culture. This section aims not only to present the state of the art, but also the answer the first sub-

question, outlining the current relationship between Carnival, tourism, and commodification in Aruba. Part C discusses the main theories and concepts, forming the basis for further analysis. Chapter one thus covers all the essential concepts presented in the rest of this thesis and elucidates the context in which this research is placed.

Chapter two covers the empirical part of this research. For this case study, two data collection methods will be used: a discourse analysis and semi-structured interviews. In part I, sub-question two will be addressed, through a discourse analysis of promotional material. Part II will address sub-questions three and four, using data collected through semi-structured interviews. Part III will continue with the data from the semi-structured interviews and focus on answering sub-question five. In the conclusion, a summary of the findings and an answer to the main research question will be provided, along with discussing suggestions for future research on this topic and limitations.

Given the knowledge gap, this thesis may be viewed as a preliminary exploration of the topic and field, providing a stepping stone for more in depth analysis of this phenomenon in the future. With so much of Aruba's economy relying on tourism and the new trend towards sustainability, it is noteworthy to investigate whether something as central to Aruban life as Carnival can remain purely for local enjoyment. It is hoped that this research will draw a clearer picture of the complex relationship between tourism and daily life in Aruba while discussing how to ensure Carnival does not just become another tourist attraction.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research adopts a multi-method approach. This decision was driven by the lack of existing literature and research data on the specific case of Aruba's Carnival, making it unfeasible to rely solely on secondary literature.

As mentioned in the outline, the literature review was conducted not simply to develop the state of art but also to understand the current relationship between the use of Carnival for promotion and the commodification of the event in Aruba. All of the literature used focuses on Aruba or other countries in the Caribbean, as I felt that comparisons with case studies outside this geographic region strayed too far from Aruba's unique history of Carnival and tourism. Over the course of two months, all literature referencing Carnival, Aruba, commodification, and/or tourism, using various spellings and combinations, was collected and scanned to determine its relevance. Searches were conducted on WorldCat (RUQuest), Google Scholar, and Archive.org. Additionally, reference lists from relevant articles as well as literature suggested by respondents were consulted throughout the research process.

To analyse how Carnival is being used in promotional content, a discourse analysis was conducted. This method reveals trends in narrative, language use and recurring themes, thereby painting a broader picture of the destination image being constructed. For this analysis, the text from thirteen different sources was analysed. The sources were selected after various of internet searches using key terms such as 'tourism,' 'Aruba', and 'Carnival', with different spellings and combinations. Sources with very brief text (under 20 words) or limited reference to Carnival were excluded. The final sources included:

- Websites: Aruba Gobierno, Aruba.com, Boardwalk Hotel, Paradera Park, Visit Aruba
- News Sites: Aruba Today (two separate news articles)

- Social Media Pages: Aruba Tourism Authority Facebook page, and five Instagram pages belonging to the Aruba Tourism Authority: arubabonbini, aruba.nl, aruba\_br, isola\_di\_aruba, arubatourismuk.

This constitutes a total of five websites, one news site, and seven social media pages. The analysis focuses on choice of language, word choice, and the main themes that were discussed.

To understand changes to Carnival, how Aruban locals perceive the influence of tourism on Carnival, and preservation strategies that are or should be in place, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Unlike structured interviews or surveys, semi-structured interviews offer greater flexibility in exploring the experiences and opinions of the respondents, allowing for more depth and complexity in the data received. This form of data collection was particularly important to me due to my own academic background in cultural anthropology, where interviews are a critical tool for gaining nuanced insights into cultural practices and perceptions. The interview guide, found in appendix A, was designed to encourage open conversation and to allow respondents to share broadly without having to restrict their responses to set topics. Therefore, the questions asked across all interviews differed slightly from each other, depending on the information provided by the respondents.

A total of ten interviews were conducted with twelve participants in English during the months of March, April, and May, just after the end of Carnival celebrations in Aruba. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 90 minutes and included both in-person and online interviews conducted on Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Participants were informed beforehand of the study's goals and data use and were given the opportunity to ask questions or raise concerns. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and the transcriptions were then coded using the software, Atlas.ti. For the interview data a thematic analysis was performed, and common themes, ideas and patterns were identified and analysed.

There were no predetermined codes; broader themes and common narratives emerged during the data analysis. However, before using Atlas.ti for digital coding, I immersed myself in all the transcripts and developed an initial set of codes. These codes were further categorised and used as a starting point for coding in Atlas.ti. The initial codes were: changes to Carnival, authenticity, commodification, identification, marketing & promotion, preservation. These codes were adjusted slightly during the coding process to accommodate a variety of sub-themes, but they served as the foundational framework for the analysis.

The respondents varied widely in age (23-75) and connection to the topic (tourist, government official, educator, etc.). Ensuring a diverse group of respondents was important to me due to the community nature of Aruba's Carnival and its enjoyment across all societal groups. However, all respondents have been fully anonymised in this thesis to protect their identities, considering the small population and niche focus on cultural heritage and Carnival in Aruba. In some cases, numbering has been used to maintain the referencing style, but I want to emphasise that all contributions were significant, despite the use of numbering.

## **CHAPTER 1. COMMODIFICATION, AUTHENTICITY AND CARNIVAL**

In order to gain a deeper understanding of Carnival in Aruba and its interplay with tourism, it is important to first provide an overview of where Carnival in Aruba originated from and what it entails. This will be discussed in Part A. However, I will emphasise that this research is not focused on an exhaustive study of Aruban Carnival itself, but rather on its representation in promotional material and the impact tourist involvement may have on the lived experience of Carnival for locals. Therefore, this background section will offer a brief overview for those unfamiliar with the event, rather than a comprehensive analysis. Part B will cover the literature review and aim to answer the first sub-question outlining the current relationship between Carnival, tourism, and commodification in Aruba. Finally, Part C will present the theoretical framework, synthesising insights from the literature to inform the analysis of Carnival's representation in promotional content and its effect on local experiences.

## PART A: BACKGROUND

Much of the development of Caribbean-based Carnivals can be credited to Trinidad and Brazil, where multifaceted festivals emerged from slavery as a form of rebellion against oppressive European colonialism.<sup>15</sup> In Trinidad in particular, Carnival became a powerful expression of resistance and cultural identity, as African and Indigenous populations adapted and transformed the European colonists festivities into their own. These celebrations trace their origins to Roman Catholic pre-Lenten celebrations, which have deep historical roots.

In Aruba, 2024 marked the 70th official edition of Carnival, though the celebration of Carnival on the island predates that starting date and has evolved significantly over time. The 1920s actually marked the first sign of Carnival celebrations on the island, with social clubs organising costumed parties. These were primarily European style balls for the elite, resembling debutant balls and costume parties celebrating seasonal festivities. Later, American workers from the Lago Oil Refinery in San Nicolas introduced their own Euro-American festivities, including Halloween, Christmas and Carnival events.<sup>16</sup> In the 1940s, as the Lago Oil Refinery grew in its success and expanded, more workers were recruited, primarily from English-speaking Caribbean islands, namely Jamaica, Guyana, and Trinidad. These workers brought their own Carnival traditions, including street celebrations. The first organised parade in San Nicolas celebrated the Allied victory in World War II. Concurrently, Carnival celebrations at the social clubs on the island were growing in popularity. Carnival Queen elections had become a staple event amongst these clubs, and the Tivoli social club was the first to organise a parade for this election.

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel J. Crowley and Errol Hill, “The Trinidad Carnival, Mandate for a National Theatre,” *Educational Theatre Journal* 24, no. 4 (December 1, 1972): 472, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3205954>.

<sup>16</sup> Victoria M. Razak, *Carnival in Aruba* (Cenda Publishing, 1998).

From 1954 to the mid-1960s native Arubans and the English-speaking community from San Nicolas collaborated to plan and produce a public Carnival for the whole island. Hosted by club Tivoli, the first island-wide parade took place in 1954, with a Carnival queen introduced in 1955, symbolising a unification of the different traditions.<sup>17</sup> Since 1957 there are two major parades on the island: one in San Nicolas and the other in Oranjestad, the capital.<sup>18</sup>

Today, Carnival in Aruba is a grand celebration that starts in January, although the official kick off is on the 11th of November at exactly 11:11am. This is known as fool's day and is widely used to mark the start of Carnival in many countries. The festivities begin around the start of January with the Fakkel (torch) parade and continue for almost two months and ending a few days prior to lent, mid to late February. Notable parades include:

- The Children's Parade: Children parade in colourful costumes, in a variety of themes
- The Lighting Parade: A nighttime parade with lights incorporated in costumes, floats, and roadpieces
- Jouvert Morning: An early morning (3AM to 9AM) party with live music
- The Grand Carnival Parade: This is the climax of Carnival, featuring the most elaborate costumes and vibrant performances

Additionally, there are other smaller events and parades, such as the recently added Sunset Parade. Participants can pay to join different Carnival groups, which provide costumes, food, and drink. The preparation for Carnival is extensive and costly, involving significant community effort, and participants spend many months and large sums of money meticulously decorating their costumes

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<sup>17</sup> Victoria M. Razak, *Carnival in Aruba*.

<sup>18</sup> Visit Aruba, "Aruba's Carnival History," accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.visitaruba.com/things-to-do/Carnival/arubas-Carnival-history/>.

with beads, sequins, rhinestones and multi-coloured feathers, matching the theme and story of their group. In 2024, each parade included about ten to fifteen Carnival groups, led by a band or DJ on a truck, with the largest group comprising up to 500-600 people each.

Carnival groups in turn are divided into smaller sections with slight theme and costume variance between them. The largest section is the massa, which consists of costumed Carnival-goers with or without a headpiece, then there's smaller sections with shoulder pieces of varying sizes, and finally there are sections with roadpieces. As the costumes and pieces get more elaborate, the number of participants in those sections become fewer. Finally there are also carosas (floats) on which the Queens dance. Carnival also features various elections, including Prince & Pancho (Prince & Jester) and Queens in the categories of kids, youths, and adults.

Side lining, watching and dancing from the sidelines, is a major event in itself, with people staking out spots along the route well in advance, or decorating a kavel (marked section along the route) allocated through a lottery system. Food, drink, shade, seats, are all vital for a good Carnival experience. The festivities culminate in the midnight burning of an effigy known as King Momo, symbolising the end of Carnival and the beginning of the Lenten season.

There is much more to the celebrations and the history than discussed here, but this should suffice as a brief introduction to the event.

## **PART B. LITERATURE REVIEW**

While not an entirely new topic of discussion, as previously stated, little to no research has been conducted on the potential impact of tourism on the cultural heritage of Carnival in Aruba. As a result, this literature review primarily focuses on literature that touches on various aspects of the question at hand, such as cultural and heritage tourism, commodification of Carnival, and impacts of commodification. Additionally, it aims to answer the first sub-question: What insights can be drawn from existing literature about the use of Carnival for tourism promotion and the commodification of the event?

### ***Research on Cultural and Heritage Tourism***

While there is substantial scientific research on cultural tourism and heritage tourism, little, if any, focuses on Aruba specifically. However, leveraging culture and heritage for a more diversified and sustainable destination brand has been explored by various authors. Razak and Cole, in their work ‘A Framework for Sustainable Tourism in Aruba’, argue that Aruba’s tourism product has become homogeneous, mass-tourism-oriented, and primarily targets a limited segment of the North American market.<sup>19</sup> They and others believe that Aruba has neglected opportunities for destination branding based on authentic cultural experience and other local attributes, which could provide a counterpoint to international chain hotel branding.<sup>20</sup> Their advice is to utilise Aruba’s cultural diversity to develop new tourism products, emphasising local culture.

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<sup>19</sup> Sam Cole and Victoria Razak, “A Framework for Sustainable Tourism in Aruba,” 2003, <https://archive.org/details/BNA-DIG-ARUBIANA-RAPPORT-1230/mode/2up>; Sam Cole and Victoria Razak, “How Far, and How Fast? Population, Culture, and Carrying Capacity in Aruba,” *Futures* 41, no. 6 (August 1, 2009): 414–25, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2008.11.013>.

<sup>20</sup> Cole and Razak, “A Framework for Sustainable Tourism in Aruba,” 4.

Murphy also argues for diversification as a solution to unsustainable tourism.<sup>21</sup> He suggests Aruba's cultural diversity and heritage should be highlighted in order to combat threats to tourism, such as increased taxation, competition, and insufficient funding. Razak further suggests that culture can and should be used to diversify the tourism economy. She notes that 'unique' attributes like architecture and historic celebrations, provide the destination a distinct advantage in the competitive Caribbean tourism market, and should thus be used as a resource.<sup>22</sup> Scher similarly discusses how cultural production in the Caribbean becomes a primary strategy for marketing professionals to eliminate 'substitutability', ensuring that their offering cannot be easily replaced by another.<sup>23</sup>

Murphy, along with Cole, Razak, and Scher, mentions culture in the context of the 'Aruba brand', stating that there is a risk of fewer return visits if the unique local culture is not embraced as a pull for visitors, because 'tourists want to experience more spirit/soul of a destination'.<sup>24</sup> Scher echoes this sentiment and adds that in order to avoid substitutability and 'to secure market viability', commodifying cultural forms is imperative and works to highlight the local uniqueness.<sup>25</sup> However, Scher also states that visitors expect a differentiated product, but what is recalled by visitors as 'appropriate and legitimate to a region' is shaped by both global factors as well as local history and tradition.<sup>26</sup> This indicates that the decision about what is 'authentic' to a region is judged and evaluated by external sources and not only by the destination itself.

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<sup>21</sup> Kevin Stephen Murphy, "An Exploratory Study of Global Issues Impacting the Future of Tourism in Aruba," *ARA Caribbean Journal of Tourism Research*, June 1, 2011, 5–18.

<sup>22</sup> Razak, "From Culture Areas to Ethnoscapes: An Application to Tourism Development."

<sup>23</sup> Philip W. Scher, "Heritage Tourism in the Caribbean: The Politics of Culture After Neoliberalism," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 30, no. 1 (2011): 7–20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1470-9856.2010.00451.x>.

<sup>24</sup> Murphy, "An Exploratory Study of Global Issues Impacting the Future of Tourism in Aruba," 12.

<sup>25</sup> Scher, "Heritage Tourism in the Caribbean: The Politics of Culture After Neoliberalism," 9.

<sup>26</sup> Scher, 8.

Authenticity, according to Green, means that genuineness is an attribute of the production, by a producer with certain ‘cultural characteristics’.<sup>27</sup> Many authors see authenticity as integral to cultural and heritage tourism, though not simply for the benefit of the tourist. Razak for instance emphasises that ‘one key purpose of heritage tourism [...] is to strengthen the cultural self-confidence of a community’.<sup>28</sup> Other authors agree, arguing that authenticity can stoke local pride, reference the character of the destination and serve as a filter for what cultural resources best reflect everyday practices.<sup>29</sup> However, authenticity is often vague, hard to assess, and challenging to implement. In Aruba, the non-static nature of local identity complicates a clear understanding of what constitutes ‘authentic Aruban’ culture. Often, authenticity focuses on tradition and past, but in a multicultural society, this version of authenticity is not fully representative. Instead, everyday culture, ‘as manifested by a multicultural society’ should also be part of the identity of Aruba, thus determining what is authentic.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Research on Commodification of Carnival for Tourism***

While the commodification of Carnival as a tool to attract tourists or to promote the destination internationally has not been studied in the context of Aruba, it has been explored in other case studies. For instance, in Trinidad and Tobago, Green argues that culture can serve as both a commodity and a source of national pride, echoing what was stated in the previous section,

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<sup>27</sup> Garth L. Green, “‘Come to Life’: Authenticity, Value, and the Carnival as Cultural Commodity in Trinidad and Tobago,” *Identities* 14, no. 1–2 (February 5, 2007): 206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10702890601102670>.

<sup>28</sup> Razak, “From Culture Areas to Ethnoscapes: An Application to Tourism Development,” 199.

<sup>29</sup> Garth L. Green, “Marketing the Nation: Carnival and Tourism in Trinidad and Tobago,” *Critique of Anthropology* 22, no. 3 (September 1, 2002): 283–304, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275x02022003759>; Robertico Croes, Seung Hyun Lee, and Eric D. Olson, “Authenticity in Tourism in Small Island Destinations: A Local Perspective,” *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 11, no. 1–2 (June 1, 2013): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2012.759584>.

<sup>30</sup> Croes, Lee, and Olson, “Authenticity in Tourism in Small Island Destinations: A Local Perspective,” 15.

with public festivals like Carnival offering an occasion to make statements about national identity.<sup>31</sup> However, for Carnival to become a commodity, as Scher also discussed, it must first be objectified, which Green posits can stifle the innovation and creativity of the cultural form and practices in the name of cultural nationalism, which aims to establish a cohesive national culture.<sup>32</sup> Choices about what is deemed authentic and what is not can freeze the dynamic nature of national culture, praising some elements and condemning others.

This creates a tension between promoting cultural forms for tourism and maintaining cultural integrity and authenticity. In Trinidad and Tobago, as in Aruba, Carnival is still primarily consumed by the producers, the local population. Green argue that for both producers and consumers (tourists), Carnival may lose much of its perceived value if it appears to be solely for consumer enjoyment and thus commodified. This complicates Scher's argument that commodification can help establish uniqueness and authenticity, since it can both enhance or diminish the perceived uniqueness of a cultural product, and there is no clear distinction for when the line between the two is crossed.

Green highlights that while commodification of Trinidad and Tobago's Carnival does occur in promotion, the elements that are focused on varies. Educational sources emphasise the importance of Carnival as a unique cultural heritage, focusing on cultural capital, while international marketing campaigns primarily draw on other Carnivals from abroad to promote the image of Trinidad and Tobago's Carnival, focusing on the imagined and desired experience marketed to tourist, often feeding into stereotypes of Carnival and the Caribbean.<sup>33</sup> The challenges faced by Trinidad and Tobago in balancing the promotion of Carnival with maintaining its cultural

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<sup>31</sup> Green, "Marketing the Nation: Carnival and Tourism in Trinidad and Tobago."

<sup>32</sup> Green, "Come to Life': Authenticity, Value, and the Carnival as Cultural Commodity in Trinidad and Tobago."

<sup>33</sup> Green, 205.

integrity are highly relevant to Aruba. Aruba's Carnival has also evolved into a significant cultural event that attracts international attention, however, using Carnival as a promotional tool raises questions about its impact on the local experience and the preservation of Carnival traditions.

### ***Research on Impacts of Commodification of Culture***

The commodification of culture to attract tourists can significantly impact the local population. Gearing et al argue that “while the visitor is influenced by the contrast in culture observed in foreign countries or different section of his own country, the presence of visitors in a country also affects the living patterns of the host people.”, as cited in Giel's master thesis on the economic and the social impacts of the growth of international tourism on Aruba.<sup>34</sup> Scher notes that one way this impact becomes visible, is that members of the local population are often expected to become “ambassadors of goodwill”, implicitly tasked with “carrying out an ongoing performance of a nationally sanctioned self.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, the use of culture as a promotional tool by the state, often leads to commodification, turning the everyday lives of locals into performances for the tourism sector.<sup>36</sup> This feeds in to the argument by Green that public events such as Carnival can be used as a platform to establish a national identity.<sup>37</sup> This idea is further illustrated by Razak when she posits that Carnival, due to its occurring during tourist high season,

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<sup>34</sup> Charles E. Gearing, William W. Swart, and Turgut Var, *Planning for Tourism Development: Quantitative Approaches* (Praeger, 1967), 30., quoted in Ruben F. Giel, “A Study to Analyze the Economic and the Social Impact of the Growth of International Tourism on Aruba and Its Future Role in the Aruban Society” (MA Thesis, Florida International University, 1979).

<sup>35</sup> Scher, “Heritage Tourism in the Caribbean: The Politics of Culture After Neoliberalism,” 8.

<sup>36</sup> Scher, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Green, “Marketing the Nation: Carnival and Tourism in Trinidad and Tobago.”

becomes a spectacle of harmony and safety given the higher likelihood of disorder during this peak period, establishing Aruba and Arubans as safe and harmonious.<sup>38</sup>

Allen & Richardson note that Carnival has become part of the island's tourism offering and a reflection of the brand “One Happy Island”.<sup>39</sup> However, it has also become a time for locals to critique and challenge this brand, and identity, sparking discussions about language, politics, gender, and ethnicity. The luxurious image of Carnival has grown alongside its use for tourism promotion, as Aruba’s Carnival is promoted as one of the safest, most organised and luxurious Carnivals in the region. This has impacted the inclusiveness and accessibility of the event due to rising costs and costume requirements. According to Allen & Richardson, Carnival groups that aren’t able to cough up the finances to meet the standards of the luxurious event receive criticism, such as ‘Nan ta baha e nivel di nos Carnival’ (They bring down the quality of our Carnival) or ‘e ta hopi slordig’ (it is very messy/disorganised).<sup>40</sup> This shift diminishes traditional aspects of Carnival, reducing or eliminating certain folkloric and traditional groups that no longer align with the luxurious ‘One Happy Island’ show.<sup>41</sup>

Given the central role of culture and cultural heritage in national identity, local dissatisfaction with the unsustainable form that tourism has taken in Aruba is understandable. Excessive tourism, or over-tourism, reflects the exclusion of a destination’s community and agency to “co-determine its tourism development”.<sup>42</sup> In Aruba, Croes, Lee and Olson found in

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<sup>38</sup> Razak, “Carnival in Aruba: ‘A Feast of Yourself,’” 154.

<sup>39</sup> Rose Mary Allen and Gregory Richards, “Antilliaans Carnival in Viervoud,” in *Antilliaans Erfgoed: Toen En Nu* (Leiden University Press, 2021), 149–88.

<sup>40</sup> Allen and Richards, “Antilliaans Carnaval in Viervoud.” 159.

<sup>41</sup> Allen and Richards, 160.

<sup>42</sup> Ryan R. Peterson, “Over the Caribbean Top: Community Well-Being and Over-Tourism in Small Island Tourism Economies,” *International Journal of Community Well-Being* 6, no. 2 (November 5, 2020): 94, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42413-020-00094-3>.

their research a resentment toward the lack of inclusion of local voices in determining what aspect of Aruba should be exposed and promoted to tourists.<sup>43</sup> As a small island destination, not including local voices risks creating a disconnect from what the residents deem essentially Aruban, reducing support and satisfaction with the tourism sector. Their research showed a general belief, among locals they interviewed, that Aruba was losing its charm and authenticity, due to the influx of tourists and labour migrants for the hospitality sector.

This sentiment is echoed by Razak, who discusses that a goal of the Framework for Sustainable Tourism in Aruba is to “consciously Arubanise tourism to balance the existing American style of tourism product, and to counter the increasing Hispanification of the Island”, which has concerned tourists and natives in different ways.<sup>44</sup> For the tourists, Aruban culture differentiates the island from Latin American and Spanish Caribbean destinations, justifying the higher costs of visiting Aruba. For native Arubans, Razak argues, the presence of Spanish-speaking immigrants, who look similar but possess different language and cultural ethos, makes them feel that the Island is losing its distinctive Aruban identity. Razak also argues that including native Aruban symbols, such as the Papiamentu language, the old cunucu houses, local dances like the Aruban waltz and the tumba, as well as themes celebrating the island’s traditions, such as Casamento di Antanjo (old-time marriage) and Nos Cultura (our culture), during the Carnival parades, highlights the continuing loss of native traditions amidst rapid social and cultural changes.<sup>45</sup> Sponsorship of Carnival groups by cultural institutions aiming to educate the public

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<sup>43</sup> Croes, Lee, and Olson, “Authenticity in Tourism in Small Island Destinations: A Local Perspective.”

<sup>44</sup> Razak, “From Culture Areas to Ethnoscapes: An Application to Tourism Development,” 205.

<sup>45</sup> Razak, “Carnival in Aruba: ‘A Feast of Yourself,’” 151.

about the island's social history underscores the importance of preserving cultural heritage in the face of commodification.<sup>46</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, this chapter sought to answer: What insights can be drawn from existing literature about the use of Carnival for tourism promotion and the commodification of the event? The literature reviewed emphasises that overall, while using Carnival to promote tourism can help create or enhance a unique destination brand, it also presents significant concerns about maintaining cultural authenticity and integrity for the local population. Authors advocate for diversifying tourism offerings beyond mass-market appeal, emphasising Aruba's rich cultural diversity, currently underutilised in the tourism sector, to provide authentic tourist experiences and improve long term viability as a tourist destination. However, the commodification of Carnival poses risks by potentially freezing these very same cultural expressions and reducing authenticity to cater solely to tourist demands. This phenomenon can marginalise local cultural practices, turning them into mere performances for commercial gain, perpetuating a population who is tasked with upholding a manufactured image, as seen in the curated and luxurious "One Happy Island" image. Achieving a balance between leveraging Carnival's cultural heritage for economic benefit and preserving it for community well-being is delicate and complex. It requires inclusive tourism planning that values and integrates local voices and traditions. This approach is essential for fostering sustainable tourism development that benefits both tourists and the local community.

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<sup>46</sup> Razak, "Carnival in Aruba: 'A Feast of Yourself,'" 152.

## PART C. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This sections discusses the key concepts central to this thesis, laying a foundation for understanding the research topic and the context of the study. The concepts include: Cultural Heritage, Cultural Tourism (specifically Carnival), Commodification, and Authenticity. Additionally, two theories are included: the Tourist Gaze and Cultural Capital.

### *Cultural Heritage*

Heritage is a broad and complex concept, often defined by context. According to the dictionary, ‘heritage’ refers to ‘features belonging to the culture of a particular society, such as traditions, languages, or buildings, which were created in the past and still have historical importance’.<sup>47</sup> UNESCO splits heritage into two spheres: natural and cultural heritage. Cultural heritage is defined by UNESCO as the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or community that are inherited from previous generations, maintained in the present and preserved for the future.<sup>48</sup>

There is increasing interest in cultural heritage within tourism due to the possibility of offering unique experiences to tourists seeking new and differentiated experiences and aligning with the trend towards sustainable tourism.<sup>49</sup> However, Park emphasises the importance of heritage not just for tourism, but also for cultural and ethnic identity, playing a huge role in our everyday lives. She argues that heritage is ‘as an essential element of material culture... [and] serves as a symbolic medium through which identity is created, recreated and maintained.’<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> “Heritage,” in *Cambridge Dictionary*, June 12, 2024, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/heritage>.

<sup>48</sup> UNESCO, “World Heritage,” accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/world-heritage>.

<sup>49</sup> Hyung Yu Park, *Heritage Tourism* (Routledge, 2013).

<sup>50</sup> Park, *Heritage Tourism*, 98.

### *Cultural Tourism: Carnival*

Cultural tourism, as presented in the introduction, can be defined as ‘a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination’.<sup>51</sup> This broad term covers various forms, including Carnival tourism, which can be classified as special interest tourism (SIT). According to Cuffy, SIT is tourism with a distinct purpose, motivated by a unique interest or particular tourist activities in a destination. This kind of tourism demonstrates the ‘desire for authenticity and real experiences that offer [them] active identification with host communities in a non-exploitative manner’.<sup>52</sup>

Carnival celebrations reflect the diverse cultures of communities both locally and internationally, fostering tourist interaction with Carnival-goers and the host country. Carnival has also long been argued to signal a temporary suspension of regulatory forces, which offers participants an opportunity to transgress societal norms and conventions, in turn facilitating more genuine visitor-host integration than one usually sees outside of Carnival.<sup>53</sup> Increasingly, destinations use Carnival in their marketing to boost the local economy and spread tourism seasonally and geographically. While a large part of the Carnival tourism industry relies on Caribbean nationals with a desire to perpetuate their cultural heritage, Carnival is also frequently used in international destination promotion.<sup>54</sup> Using vibrant imagery of parades with bright colours, large feathers, rhinestones, celebrating participants, and with promotional language

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<sup>51</sup> “Tourism and Culture,” n.d., <https://www.unwto.org/tourism-and-culture>.

<sup>52</sup> Cuffy, “Carnival Tourism,” 97.

<sup>53</sup> Carmo Daun E Lorena, “Insights for the Analysis of the Festivities: Carnival Seen by Social Sciences,” *Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (2019): 51–67, <https://doi.org/10.21814/rlec.2110>.

<sup>54</sup> Philip W. Scher, *Carnival and the Formation of a Caribbean Transnation*, 2004.

peppered with adjectives that create enthusiasm, excitement, and emphasise authenticity, Carnival is a great tool through which to establish a unique and differentiated destination brand.

### ***Commodification***

Commodification refers to the ‘dominance of commodity exchange-value over a use-value’, signifying a consumer society where market relations overshadow social life.<sup>55</sup> In the context of tourism, it involves transforming cultural expressions, traditions, or identities into marketable and commercial attractions for tourist.<sup>56</sup> Market forces and political decisions drive the commodification process, and many view it as inseparable aspect of tourism as an economic force. Carvalho and Rodrigues argue that ‘to be successful in this market requires that places compete with one another to present (or sell) themselves, which is inherently a form of commodification’.<sup>57</sup>

Furthermore, the commodification process can impact the preservation of cultural heritage. While increased tourist interest might lead to greater economic investment in events like Carnival, it can also result in a homogenized version that caters to external tastes and preferences. This dynamic can marginalize the local community's role in maintaining and evolving their cultural practices. The challenge in this case study lies in balancing the economic benefits of tourism with the need to preserve the cultural capital that makes Aruba's Carnival unique and meaningful to its residents. Commodification and tourism are often discussed as if commodification is an inevitable aspect of tourism, neglecting the active decisions and behaviours that drive the commodification

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<sup>55</sup> Kevin Fox Gotham, “Marketing Mardi Gras: Commodification, Spectacle and the Political Economy of Tourism in New Orleans,” *Urban Studies* 39, no. 10 (September 1, 2002): 1737, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0042098022000002939>.

<sup>56</sup> Gotham, 1737.

<sup>57</sup> Luís Francisco Carvalho and João Rodrigues, “Are Markets Everywhere? Understanding Contemporary Processes of Commodification,” in *The Elgar Companion to Social Economics*, 2nd ed. (Elgar Online, 2008), 293–393, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781848442771.00027>.

of local cultures for tourists' benefit. As Appadurai states, all things, including cultural productions, can become commodities, 'at a certain phase in their careers and in a particular context'.<sup>58</sup> This view emphasizes that commodification is a process shaped by specific context and decisions rather than an inherent quality of cultural elements. Scher agrees with this and emphasises that an object or event in question can well be considered a commodity by one party, yet not by others. The focus should therefore be on the exchangeability, and the system of exchange. While Kaul argues that we can only speak of commodification if there is a direct monetary exchange between the producer and the tourist, Scher also includes exchange of recognition, or cultural capital (discussed later).<sup>59</sup>

Finally, an important argument Scher makes is that a commodity exchange, or the act of commodification, does not inherently delegitimise the cultural form, nor does it determine the meaning of this form for participants.

### ***Authenticity***

A discussion of commodification and cultural heritage would not be complete without addressing authenticity. Authenticity is complex, generally referring to a genuine or truthful representation. Due to its complexity "authenticity as a concept has come to be used simultaneously as measurement, representation, experience and feeling".<sup>60</sup> Many tourists engaging in cultural tourism desire authenticity, and genuineness, however, this search for authenticity most

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<sup>58</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 16–17.

<sup>59</sup> Adam R. Kaul, "The Limits of Commodification in Traditional Irish Music Sessions," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 3 (August 16, 2007): 703–19, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2007.00451.x>; Scher, *Carnival and the Formation of a Caribbean Transnation*, 15.

<sup>60</sup> Jillian M. Rickly-Boyd, "Authenticity & Aura: A Benjaminian Approach to Tourism," *Annals of Tourism Research* 39, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 284, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2011.05.003>.

often leads to commodification.<sup>61</sup> Local cultures are transformed into palatable and tourist-centric experiences to meet the demand and enjoyment of tourists. Wang puts forth the constructive nature of authenticity, arguing that, like culture, authenticity is not static, but rather is created and conducted through social processes and personal experiences.<sup>62</sup> It has been argued that authenticity does not exist without something deemed inauthentic; thus, for the sake of this research, commodified elements are seen as inauthentic, contrasting with non-commodified authentic elements. However, this can be argued to be a simplification of the concept and there are many more facets to authenticity, but due to the limited size of this research they will not be discussed here.

### ***Tourist gaze***

The theory of the ‘tourist gaze’ by John Urry, is instrumental in understanding how tourists perceive and interact with cultural heritage sites and events. Urry states that “places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different sense from those customarily encountered”.<sup>63</sup> This tourist gaze is constructed and perpetuated through various non-tourist practices such as film, newspapers, TV, magazines, and videos. These media shape consumers anticipation and expectations, as well as their understanding of cultural events, such as Aruba’s Carnival. The external construction of a cultural narrative can lead to the commodification of

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<sup>61</sup> Larry Dwyer, “Transnational Corporations and the Globalization of Tourism,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Tourism* (Wiley, 2014), 263.

<sup>62</sup> Ning Wang, “Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 26, no. 2 (April 1, 1999): 349–70, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0160-7383\(98\)00103-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0160-7383(98)00103-0).

<sup>63</sup> John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*, 2nd ed. (Sage Publications, 2002), 3.

events, tailoring them to meet the tourist's expectations rather than preserving their authentic cultural significance for local communities.

### ***Cultural capital***

The concept of cultural capital, introduced by Bourdieu, is another important lens through which to examine the commodification of Aruba's Carnival. Cultural capital refers to the non-economic social assets that promote social mobility, including education, intellect, style of speech, dress, or physical appearance.<sup>64</sup> In the context of tourism and cultural heritage, cultural capital can be understood as the value that cultural knowledge and participation hold with a community and how this value is perceived and exploited for the tourism market. In Aruba, Carnival embodies significant cultural capital for the local community, and represents traditions, social practices, and continuity. However, if or when this cultural event is commodified for tourism, the cultural capital becomes economic capital. This shift may change how Carnival is performed and perceived by both locals and tourists, prioritizing entertainment value over cultural significance, potentially diluting the event's authenticity. Conversely, Carnival may be more marketable due to the perceived cultural capital that tourists gain from participating in or witnessing the event.

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<sup>64</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

## CHAPTER 2. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

### I. PROMOTION OF CARNIVAL IN ARUBA

Aruba boasts a strong and recognisable international brand, with its “One Happy Island” identity being easily recalled and understood. Promotional efforts highlight various aspect of Aruban life, including local cuisine, nature, water sports, and linguistic diversity.

In tourism, promotion diverges slightly from the general commercial definition of increasing product or service sales. Instead, it focuses on a mix of activities aimed at attracting tourists, selling not just a place but also experiences and lifestyles.<sup>65</sup> The digital era has intensified competition between destinations, necessitating strong branding to achieve global success. This competition has led to destinations adopting globally recognised events and attractions, potentially homogenising and commodifying their unique identity.<sup>66</sup>

To address the first sub-question regarding the representation of Aruba’s Carnival in tourism promotion and the potential commodification of this cultural heritage, a discourse analysis of promotional materials was conducted. The subsequent discussion in this chapter presents the data and findings from this analysis.

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<sup>65</sup> Chron, “Tourism Promotion and Marketing,” March 5, 2019, <https://smallbusiness.chron.com/tourism-promotion-marketing-57157.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Nigel Morgan, “Problematizing Place Promotion and Commodification,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Tourism* (Wiley, 2014), 272.

## *Overview Of Promotional Platforms*

As outlined in the Methodology, a total of thirteen sources were analysed. All of these webpages and articles were online and accessible when they were last accessed on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

The sources analysed are:

- Websites: Aruba Gobierno, Aruba.com, Boardwalk Hotel, Paradera Park, Visit Aruba
- News Sites: Aruba Today (two separate news articles)
- Social Media Pages: Aruba Tourism Authority Facebook page, and five Instagram pages belonging to the Aruba Tourism Authority: arubabonbini, aruba.nl, aruba\_br, isola\_di\_aruba, arubatourismuk.

## *Analysis Of Promotional Content*

When analysing the digital content promoting Carnival to visitors, several main themes stand out, namely language choice, language use, tips and guides, and historical context. Each will be discussed in this section.

### **Language Choice: Targeting A Broader Audience**

With regards to the language choice in promotional content, a notable trend is the predominance of English and Dutch, with some content also available in Spanish. This use of language reflects the strategic effort to attract and appeal to a broad and international audience. The choice of these languages makes sense given the proportion of visitors from the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Latin America. However, there is inconsistency in language availability across different sources. For example, some websites, such as Aruba Gobierno and Paradera Park, provide information about Carnival on the Dutch version but not on

the English version of their webpage, while other sources offer content exclusively in English. Spanish content is predominantly found on social media. These languages are more widely spoken globally than the local language of Papiamentu, ensuring that promotional content reaches a larger audience and enhancing the reach of Aruba's marketing efforts. Though Papiamentu is integral to Aruba's culture and, for many, the Aruban identity, the inclusivity and accessibility of English, Dutch or Spanish reflects the broader strategy to integrate Aruba's Carnival into the global cultural context. This approach positions the event as welcoming for people with diverse linguistic backgrounds, rather than limiting it to those who speak Papiamentu.

This strategy highlights the tourism-oriented motives behind sharing Carnival with a global audience. The primary aim is to appeal to and attract foreign visitors and position Carnival as a major international attraction, potentially at the expense of its local cultural significance and community nature. An example of this tension is evident in a post on the Aruba Tourism Authority's (ATA) Facebook page. The page itself states that it is "dedicated to sharing all information about tourism with the local community" and features a post titled "Aruba Tourism Authority presents Carnival Documentary". While the text on this Facebook page is in Papiamentu, the documentary itself is in English. Here is a translated excerpt from the post:

'As a #TB (throwback) we are sharing the after-movie of the most spectacular time in Aruba, when we celebrated the 70<sup>th</sup> year of our *dushi* (lovely, nice) Carnival. A celebration that united the community at the start of 2024, and we hope unites us for many years more. Thanks to the organisers, participants, and all who contributed to another successful season of Carnival.'<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Aruba Tourism Authority, "Aruba Tourism Authority Ta Presenta **Carnival Documentary 2024** 🎬 Como...," April 4, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/oficinaditurismo/videos/1174325780658907/>. "Como un #TB nos ta comparti after-movie di e temporada di mas espectacular na Aruba, caminda a celebra 70 aña di nos dushi Carnival."

The documentary features interviews with local Carnival participants who share, in English, what Carnival is and what it means to them. An after-movie serves dual purposes: it can serve as a keepsake for locals and a tool for community building through the recognition of shared experiences, or it can cater to prospective attendees by showcasing the event and creating FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) by highlighting its uniqueness.<sup>68</sup> However, the choice of English for the after-movie suggests its creation is primarily intended for the potential visitors. While the post emphasises ‘our nice Carnival’ and ‘community celebration’, the use of English, rather than Papiamentu, for content about a significant local event is an interesting one. As opposed to reminiscing with locals, it indicates instead a focus on explaining Carnival to an international audience and showcasing what makes Aruba unique and worth visiting. This approach, while logical for an organisation focused on tourism, highlights the interconnected nature of the local culture, identity, and tourism in Aruba.

### **Language Use**

The language used in content promoting Carnival has been carefully crafted to maximise its appeal to potential visitors. During the analysis of the promotion material, five main approaches emerged: creating excitement and enthusiasm, using descriptive words to create a vivid picture, creating urgency and exclusivity, portraying community and inclusivity, and positioning Carnival

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Un celebracion cu a uni e comunidad na comienso di 2024, y lo keda uni nos pa hopi aña mas. Pabien na tur organisador, participante, y tur cu a contribui na un otro temporada exitoso di Carnival.”. Translated by author.

<sup>68</sup> Fabian Holt, “New Media, New Festival Worlds: Rethinking Cultural Events and Televisuality Through YouTube and the Tomorrowland Music Festival,” in *Music and the Broadcast Experience: Performance, Production, and Audiences* (Oxford Academic, 2016), 275–92, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199314706.002.0003>.

as part of a broader travel adventure. Each of these approaches will now be discussed in more detail.

The first approach is the use of language that create excitement and enthusiasm. The promotional materials are frequently peppered with phrases and adjectives that convey and create excitement, thrill and intrigue for the event. As a result, Carnival is positioned as an enticing and must-see spectacle. Despite a spokesperson for the ATA stating that they don't primarily market or promote Carnival to attract tourists to the island, and that instead the main objective is to bring Aruban culture to them,<sup>69</sup> most platforms use language designed to draw visitors in. Examples of this use of language include: "The most anticipated party is back, stay tuned, and don't miss a day of the Aruba Carnival 2024", "Ready for an unforgettable Carnival weekend?", and "You have not lived until you have experienced the spirit of Carnival as it is celebrated in Aruba!"<sup>70</sup> This suggests a deliberate effort to commodify the event by making it appealing to an international audience.

In addition to excitement, the promotional content uses rich, descriptive phrasing to paint a vivid picture of the celebration. Sensory-rich language can be very persuasive, engaging multiple senses, increasing the perceived authenticity, and allowing visitors to imagine themselves experiencing the festivities, building their expectations.<sup>71</sup> This approach creates a specific tourist gaze regarding Carnival, telling tourists what to expect, what emotions to feel, and how to interpret

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with an ATA spokesperson, Online, March 22, 2024.

<sup>70</sup> arubabonbini, "La fiesta más esperada está de regreso, prográmate, no te pierdas ningún día del Carnival de Aruba 2024. 🎉🎊; Te esperamos! 😊🥳 #Carnivalaruba #Carnival #Carnival70años #Carnival2024 #Aruba #ElEfectoAruba," *Instagram*, February 2, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C20rA97h8fi/>. Translated by author; aruba.nl, "Klaar voor een onvergetelijk Carnivalsweekend. En dat beleven wij op Aruba zo! Wie doet er mee? 🎉🎊," *Instagram*, February 2, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C21m5torpGK/>. Translated by author; Visit Aruba, "Aruba Carnival," accessed June 27, 2024, <https://www.visitaruba.com/things-to-do/events/Carnival/>.

<sup>71</sup> Giovanni Luca Cascio Rizzo et al., "How Sensory Language Shapes Influencer's Impact," *Journal of Consumer Research* 50, no. 4 (March 8, 2023): 810–25, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucad017>.

what they see. Examples of this type of language include: “An explosion of music and atmosphere”, “The most dazzling #weekend of the year starts today!”, “A colourful spectacle of culture and joy!”, and “The contagious music and impressive atmosphere await you to experience the most anticipated party of the Island”.<sup>72</sup> By shaping visitors’ expectations and experiences, this language commodifies Carnival, transforming it into a product to be consumed.

The establishment of Carnival as a spectacular, must-see event leads to the next approach, which is the use of language to create a sense of urgency and exclusivity. This strategy leverages FOMO and emphasizes the limited-time nature of the event, phrases such as “don’t miss a day” and “there’s still time to join this party”,<sup>73</sup> encourage potential visitors to act quickly to avoid missing out on a unique experience. This kind of language, predominantly phrasing found on the social media pages, can quite effectively drive engagement and bookings. More examples of this type of phrasing include: “Just stopping by to let you know that Carnival is coming and there's still time to enjoy this party in Aruba!”, “You have not lived until you have experienced the spirit of Carnival as it is celebrated in Aruba!”, and “It’s the highlight of the Caribbean Carnival season.

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<sup>72</sup> Aruba Tourism Authority, “Carnival Op Aruba,” Aruba, accessed June 27, 2024, <https://www.aruba.com/nl/ons-eiland/geschiedenis-en-cultuur/Carnival-op-Aruba>. “Een explosie van muziek en sfeer”. Translated by author; isola\_di\_aruba, “Inizia oggi il #weekend più sfavillante dell’anno!” *Instagram*, February 10, 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/p/C3KS9Jgpph\\_/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/C3KS9Jgpph_/?img_index=1). Translated by author; “Met Carnival Op Aruba Beleef Je Een Kleurrijk Spektakel Van Cultuur En Vreugde!,” Paradera Park Aruba, July 27, 2023, <https://paraderapark-aruba.com/nl/Carnival-op-Aruba/>. Translated by author; arubabonbini, “Celebra con nosotros la edición #70 del Carnival de Aruba 2024. La música contagiosa y ambiente impresionante te esperan para vivir la fiesta más esperada de la Isla. 🎉🎊,” *Instagram*, January 24, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C2dd7a2uoGE/>. Translated by author.

<sup>73</sup> Chris Hodkinson, “‘Fear of Missing Out’ (FOMO) Marketing Appeals: A Conceptual Model,” *Journal of Marketing Communications* 25, no. 1 (October 5, 2016): 65–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2016.1234504>.; arubabonbini, “La Fiesta Más Esperada Está de Regreso, Prográmate, No Te Pierdas Ningún Día Del Carnival de Aruba 2024. 🎉🎊 ¡Te Esperamos! 😊🎊.” Translated by author; aruba\_br, “Passando só pra avisar que o Carnival está chegando e ainda dá tempo de curtir essa festa em Aruba! 🎉🎊 AW,” *Instagram*, January 26, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C2k87aUPinU/>. Translated by author.

It's one of the most anticipated events in Aruba. It's something you really don't want to miss".<sup>74</sup> This strategy uses urgency to drive engagement and bookings, and implies commodification, as Carnival is positioned as a limited time offer rather than a cultural tradition.

Interestingly, the positioning of Carnival as exclusive, attributed to its limited duration during the tourist high season when booking accommodations is challenging, is balanced by language that emphasises community and inclusivity. Had Carnival been positioned predominantly as exclusive, this may well have been more off-putting for visitors and deterred them from visiting or participating. Instead, much of the language used highlights the sense of community and inclusivity, suggesting that Carnival does not only have to be watched from the sidelines but is also open to be participated in, and that everyone is welcomed. This inclusive language also helps establish that Aruba's cultural heritage is open to everyone and is not reserved for locals. A part of this inclusivity is also seen in the direct address used in many of the texts, which creates a personal connection with the reader. This is a conversational tone and results in making the described event come across as more inviting and accessible, as well as increasing the level of engagement of the text.<sup>75</sup> Examples of this use of language include: "Carnival is the biggest party of the year in Aruba - and you're invited!", "Aruba's Carnival is for everyone! Our ministers, members of Parliament and other VIPs also took part in the grand celebrations", and "celebrate

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<sup>74</sup> aruba\_br, "Passando só pra avisar que o Carnival está chegando e ainda dá tempo de curtir essa festa em Aruba! 🇦🇼," *Instagram*, January 26, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C2k87aUPinU/>. Translated by author; Visit Aruba, "Aruba Carnival.," Aruba Tourism Authority, "Carnival in Aruba," Aruba, accessed June 27, 2024, <https://www.aruba.com/us/our-island/history-and-culture/Carnival-in-aruba>.

<sup>75</sup> Mariapina Trunfio and Simona Rossi, "Conceptualising and Measuring Social Media Engagement: A Systematic Literature Review," *Italian Journal of Marketing* 2021, no. 3 (August 11, 2021): 267–92, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43039-021-00035-8>.

with us the great Carnival parade through Oranjestad”.<sup>76</sup> This inclusive language makes Carnival more marketable and accessible to a broader audience.

The final approach in the promotional content is framing Carnival as part of a broader travel adventure. Phrases that highlight experience, exploration or adventure can be very enticing for visitors, combining the Carnival experience with the overall motivation and excitement of exploring a new destination. This also reinforces the idea of Aruba offering unique and once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. Examples of this type of phrasing are: “Every day is a new adventure full of surprises and unforgettable moments that will make you feel more alive than ever”, “If you want to experience a colourful celebration unlike any other, visit the island during Aruba Carnival season and experience the bright spirits of our local community first hand”, and “This is one of the best ways to experience the island and its culture”.<sup>77</sup> In this way, Carnival is commodified by positioning it within the larger narrative of experience and adventure tourism, appealing to visitors’ desires for unique and memorable experiences.

### **Historical Context: Promoting Authenticity and Depth**

Another common trend in the promotional content is the emphasis on Carnival’s historic and cultural significance. Nearly all analysed pages referenced the event’s origins, evolution or

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<sup>76</sup> Aruba Tourism Authority, “Carnival Op Aruba.”. “Carnival is het grootste feest van het jaar op Aruba - en jij bent uitgenodigd!” Translated by author; Juan Luis Pinto, “Aruba’s Carnival is for everyone!,” *Aruba Today*, February 12, 2024, <https://www.arubatoday.com/Arubas-Carnival-is-for-everyone-our-ministers-members-of-parliament-and-other-vips-also-took-part-in-the-grand-celebrations>; arubabonbini, “Se acerca la 70 edición del Carnival de Aruba 2024, celebra con nosotros el gran desfile de Carnival por Oranjestad, la mayor fiesta del año en la Isla.” *Instagram*, January 2, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CInEtYwhlVW/>. Translated by author.

<sup>77</sup> arubabonbini, “Cada día es una nueva aventura llena de sorpresas y momentos inolvidables que te harán sentir más vivo que nunca.” *Instagram*, January 10, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C18A0uCP4S6/>. Translated by author; Aruba Tourism Authority, “Carnival in Aruba.”; Paradera Park, “Met Carnival Op Aruba Beleef Je Een Kleurrijk Spektakel Van Cultuur En Vreugde!”. “Dit is een van de beste manieren om het eiland en zijn cultuur te ervaren.”. Translated by author.

cultural importance, to varying degrees. For instance, the Aruba Gobierno website focuses solely on history and different elements of Carnival, while Boardwalk Aruba and Aruba.com include brief histories before highlighting contemporary aspects. This approach showcases the event's dynamic nature while emphasising its roots in Aruban cultural tradition. Examples include "Aruba's Carnival is dedicated to everyone, and it is a wonderful time that really brings everyone together on the streets to celebrate our culture and traditions!" and "In 2024, Aruba celebrated the 70th anniversary of its Carnival, a milestone marking seven decades of cultural heritage, colourful costumes and cherished memories".<sup>78</sup>

By highlighting the event's origins, evolution, and cultural significance, promotional content underscores the authenticity and depth of the Carnival experience, appealing to visitors seeking cultural authenticity and meaningful experiences. Understanding the significance of an event can foster long-term engagement, as visitors are more likely to develop a lasting interest in Aruba and its culture.<sup>79</sup> This is illustrated by statements like, "After reading, you will be ready to celebrate this Aruban tradition like a true local!"<sup>80</sup>

However, this emphasis on history and cultural significance also highlights the commodification of Carnival in the promotional content. By selectively presenting elements of Carnival as "authentic", a curated image of the "true" Carnival experience is created, tailored to attract tourists. This process simplifies the event, often omitting important aspects such as the political commentary prevalent in many early parades as well as negative aspects of Carnival.

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<sup>78</sup> Pinto, "Aruba's Carnival Is for Everyone!"; Aruba Tourism Authority, "Aruba Tourism Authority Ta Presenta **Carnival Documentary 2024** 🎉 Como..."

<sup>79</sup> Bob Mckercher and Hilary Du Cros, *Cultural Tourism: The Partnership Between Tourism and Cultural Heritage Management* (Routledge, 2012).

<sup>80</sup> Boardwalk Boutique Hotel Aruba, "Carnival in Aruba - the Ultimate Short Guide," Boardwalk Aruba, accessed June 27, 2024, <https://www.boardwalkaruba.com/en/blog/Carnival-aruba-ultimate-short-guide>.

Consequently, the event is packaged to fit the expectations and desires of tourists, shaping the tourist gaze and influencing how visitors interpret their experience.<sup>81</sup>

There are also strategic motives behind sharing this type of information with visitors, benefiting the Aruba brand. Sharing the history of the event conveys Aruba's pride and respect for its cultural heritage, enhancing its brand as a destination that values and celebrates its traditions. This also reassures the local population that their traditions are honoured and valued. Moreover, providing well-researched and grounded historical information distinguishes the promotional content from purely commercial or sensationalized content, potentially reducing the perceived commodification of the event. Using Carnival's historical and cultural origins in promotion also helps eliminate Aruba's "substitutability", as discussed by Scher.<sup>82</sup> Additionally Carvalho and Rodrigues argued, as discussed in the literature review, a destination even simply presenting itself is inherently a form of commodification.<sup>83</sup> Therefore the mere presence of promotion surrounding Carnival indicates its commodification.

This approach can thus contribute to the commodification of Carnival, while simultaneously strengthening Aruba's brand as a unique and culturally rich destination.

### **Enhancing Visitor Experience with Tips and Guides**

A number of the sources, specifically the hotels, included tips and guides for Carnival. The emphasis on detailed guidance demonstrates a commitment to enhancing the visitor experience.

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<sup>81</sup> W.H.M.S. Samarathunga and Li Cheng, "Tourist Gaze and Beyond: State of the Art," *Tourism Review* 76, no. 2 (December 31, 2020): 344–57, <https://doi.org/10.1108/tr-06-2020-0248>.

<sup>82</sup> Scher, "Heritage Tourism in the Caribbean: The Politics of Culture After Neoliberalism."

<sup>83</sup> Luís Francisco Carvalho and João Rodrigues, "Are Markets Everywhere? Understanding Contemporary Processes of Commodification," in *The Elgar Companion to Social Economics*, 2nd ed. (Elgar Online, 2008), 293–393, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781848442771.00027>.

By ensuring that visitors can navigate festivities smoothly, and avoid common pitfalls, the visitors' enjoyment of the event can be maximised. The personal and conversational tone used in these guides fosters a relatable and engaging connection, further enhancing the appeal of Carnival. Offering detailed and seemingly well-researched information helps establish the source as trustworthy and authoritative, perpetuating the image of Aruba as a place where personal attention and hospitality are integral to the experience. Respondents shared sentiments like, “we go back and back for that service”, but also “that service, that's the Arubian service, the care. [...] That's the mark of Arubian”, and “It's the hospitality, that's not fake. It's part of our DNA”.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, by highlighting the aspect of hospitality and care, it is not simply meeting the visitors' expectations but also affirming a part of Aruban identity and pride.

Believing that they are receiving honest, reliable, and unique information builds confidence among potential visitors and could even be a decisive factor in their decision to attend Carnival or book a stay at a particular accommodation. It can also position the source as a welcoming and authentic place, proudly sharing the island's unique history while encouraging others to participate. To readers, this feels like they are receiving exclusive insider information from a reliable source, increasing the persuasiveness and feeding into the idea of obtaining more cultural capital and further establishing the appeal of both the event and the source.<sup>85</sup>

However, this type of information makes the commodification of Carnival apparent. The involvement of hotels and resorts in marketing the event shows it positioned as a tourism product. The detailed itineraries and curated tips focus on convenience and consumer satisfaction, catering

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<sup>84</sup> Interview with a long-time visitor, Online, March 26, 2024; Interview with a teacher, Online, March 22nd, 2024; Interview with a cultural expert, Online, March 20, 2024.

<sup>85</sup> Taraneh Khazaei, Lu Xiao, and Robert Mercer, *Writing to Persuade: Analysis and Detection of Persuasive Discourse*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.9776/17022>.

to tourists' desire for streamlined and enjoyable events. This emphasis on aspects of Carnival that align with leisure and entertainment rather than a deep cultural immersion, can thus potentially overshadow the event's historic and cultural significance. The personal tone enhances relatability but also serves as a marketing tactic, capitalising on visitors desire to feel connected and informed, and creating a sense of exclusivity and insider knowledge. Carnival participation then becomes not simply a commodity offering entertainment but also an increase in cultural capital for the visitor.

Finally, the emphasis on hospitality and service further underscores this commodification process. By promoting the "Aruban service" and the island's distinctive care and attention, the guides align the cultural celebration with the broader tourism industry's goals of providing exceptional customer service and memorable experiences. This blend of cultural celebration and tourism service highlights the dual role of Carnival as both a significant cultural event and a marketable tourism asset.

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter looked at how Aruba's Carnival is represented in tourism promotion material, and what specific elements indicate commodification of this cultural heritage. Aruba's Carnival is prominently represented in tourism materials as an exciting, inclusive, and culturally rich event. Carnival is leveraged in promotional content to appeal to a diverse audience, utilizing language choice, historical depth, practical advice, and engaging messaging. Visitors are promised authentic and unforgettably experiences. Through combining tips and guides as well as historic information, sources establish themselves as reliable and by highlighting the cultural significance of Carnival

Aruba not only promote the event but also enhance the island's brand as a destination rich in tradition and celebration.

However, there is a clear element of commodification in the promotional content. Carnival is portrayed not just as cultural heritage and a local event, but as a consumable experience, and one that can increase visitors' cultural capital. The use of language that creates excitement and urgency, vivid descriptions, as well as inclusivity, turn Carnival into a consumable product, shape visitors' expectations and make the event accessible to a broad audience. Additionally framing Carnival as part of a broader travel experience, as well as highlighting its unique historic context, integrate the event into the larger tourism product and tailor the narrative to attract tourists.

All of this underscores Aruba's efforts to appeal to the international market, aligning Carnival with broader tourism objectives. While local involvement is acknowledged, the emphasis remains on attracting international tourists by aligning with familiar tropes of major Carnival celebrations. In essence, while Aruba's promotional strategy effectively uses Carnival to avoid substitutability and attract visitors, it also reflects broader trends of commodification of the island for tourism. The island's Carnival thus serves both as a cultural highlight and a marketable asset, integrating local traditions into the global tourist gaze to enhance Aruba's appeal and visibility.

## II. TOURISM IMPACTING CARNIVAL

With Carnival prominently featured in promotional content aimed at attracting visitors to Aruba, one might expect tourism to have had an influence on the celebration of Carnival itself. This chapter delves into two sub-questions: “In what ways has the practice of celebrating Aruba’s Carnival been altered or influenced by tourism, and what aspects demonstrate commodification?” and, “How do locals perceive the authenticity of the Carnival in light of its use in promotion and practices aimed at tourists?”. To explore these questions, I draw insights from the conducted interviews.

### *The Perception of Tourism*

Before focusing on answering the sub-questions, I will first provide a brief overview of how tourism in Aruba is perceived by my respondents. Given that tourism accounts for 70.6% of Aruba’s GDP and generates 88.4% of all the island’s employment,<sup>86</sup> all respondents acknowledged its significance to daily life on the island. In this sense, tourism was generally perceived as neutral to positive, with some emphasising its essential role to the local economy “It’s an income, right? How else are we going to live?”<sup>87</sup>, while others highlighted the deep integration of tourism in Aruba’s identity and culture: “Our tourism history is part of our culture”.<sup>88</sup>

However, there was a common concern that tourism often steers visitors towards sanitised, tourist-friendly areas that meet the tourist gaze, rather than toward authentic cultural experiences. Locals and tourists alike expressed concern that mainstream tourism neglects authentic Aruban

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<sup>86</sup> World Travel & Tourism Council, “ARUBA 2024 Annual Research: Key Highlights.”

<sup>87</sup> Interview with a university professor, University of Aruba, Online, April 2, 2024.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with a cultural expert, Online, March 20, 2024.

culture in favour of familiar comforts and services. As a one local put it, “I think a lot of it has been fabricated to their liking. They go to a hotel, and they can get their language spoken, their American standards met. But I don't think unless you go outside of the norm of what tourists usually do [that] you would get much of the authenticity”.<sup>89</sup> This emphasis on the American tourist reflects their dominance in the visitor market of Aruba, but the statement applied to all tourists. A long-time repeat visitor echoed this statement, noting that other tourists miss out on authentic Aruban culture by not venturing beyond high-end resorts: “I think they're losing a big part of their vacation by not experiencing the local culture, you know, or by just going to the high-end and staying on their property”.<sup>90</sup>

Respondents lamented the commodification of Aruba to suit tourist preferences, noting that while efforts are being made to attract a more culturally curious visitor, significant change is slow. As one respondent stated, “I think there are strides being made to promote [culture] a bit more, to diversify [our] tourism, beyond just a beach and sun. [On islands] any small change sometimes takes years, but I think we can definitely promote [culture] a bit more”.<sup>91</sup> There is optimism, however, that evolving tourist demographics might present new opportunities to showcase Aruba’s unique heritage more authentically. One respondent expressed this and said: “I would say the profile of the tourist is changing and it gives us an opportunity. [...] to feed our cultural development and culture”.<sup>92</sup> However, genuine engagement with local culture was believed to occur during repeat rather than first time visits, where deeper connections can develop beyond the confines of the local resorts. One respondent stated, “so in the first instance what brings people to

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<sup>89</sup> Interview with an Aruban local abroad #1, In-person, May 2, 2024.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with a long-time visitor, Online, March 26, 2024.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with a tour guide, Online, March 28, 2024.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with a university professor, University of Aruba, Online, April 2, 2024.

the islands is the natural heritage, slowly but surely, because Aruba has a very high number of repeat guests, on your second and third visit, you're more curious about the island culture and history".<sup>93</sup>

Moreover, respondents voiced concerns about the rapid growth of tourism outpacing infrastructure and community input. As one respondent noted, "of course we were always a tourist island but right now it's too much, Aruba is getting smaller and smaller, and the demand of every sector is getting bigger and bigger. A lot of things change for tourists and locals, like the beach, the traffic, real estate demand. Everything changed."<sup>94</sup> As another shared, "When you were growing up, you felt that you could go anywhere. But the more you grow up, you notice a type of segregation. Like, this [area] is only catered towards tourists, and locals, yeah sorry. And it feels like as soon as they build a big hotel, they're pushing us, the locals, out".<sup>95</sup> They highlighted the need for sustainable tourism development that respects Aruba's identity and environment, calling for well-considered limits on growth, in order to preserve the island's character and quality of life for residents, "there has to be rules. There has to be a decision that this is the limit where we feel like this is still Aruba".<sup>96</sup> Another asked, "When or where does it stop, you know, where is it enough? Because we don't see it".<sup>97</sup>

The general consensus is that while tourism is vital for Aruba's economy and identity, the rush to cater to tourists demands risks diluting the island's authenticity and results in commodification. Even the Aruba brand, "One Happy Island", though easily recognisable, was seen as an example of prioritising tourist desires over local identity, "I understand why they chose

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<sup>93</sup> Interview with a cultural expert, Online, March 20, 2024.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Aruban local #1, In-person, April 9, 2024.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Aruban local abroad #2, In-person, April 9, 2024.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Aruban local abroad #2, In-person, April 9, 2024.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Aruban local #1, In-person, April 9, 2024.

that slogan, but it's also setting this expectation. [Tourists] expect that they arrive on our land and that everyone is smiling and happy that they're there. Which is the generally true, but there is a lot more to us than that”, and “I think [the slogan] is flattening out the complexity on the island”.<sup>98</sup> This reflects the broader issue of the tourist gaze, where locals feel that the needs and expectations of tourists shape the presentation and experience of local culture.

### ***Promotion, Changes & Authenticity***

Using Carnival in promotion for Aruba was not seen by respondents as an issue, especially as most viewed Carnival as a core part of Aruban identity and culture, and therefore felt that using it in promotion highlights positive and the authentic aspects of Aruba that may be missing in a lot of tourist centric communication. One respondent said that Carnival could “definitely be promotion if you combine it with the tourism market, [because it’s] something very special, that the island can show as part of the island culture”.<sup>99</sup>

Due to Carnival being so intertwined with Aruban identity and requiring considerable community effort to organise, most respondents did not feel that the promotion of Carnival itself has had an impact on the authenticity of the event. As stated before, the prominence of tourism on the island means that people are rather pragmatic about what kind of compromises or actions are required to keep the economy strong. Promoting Carnival was seen as an opportunity for the island to move away from more mass tourism forms, which are by and large the stimulus for much of the commodification of the island. By taking some focus away from the high-rise resorts and local

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<sup>98</sup> Interview with Aruban local abroad #1, In-person, May 2, 2024; Interview with a cultural expert, Online, March 20, 2024.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with a cultural expert, Online, March 20, 2024.

nature, and instead shifting it to cultural heritage, Aruba may have the opportunity to let tourist hotspots to breathe a bit and spread tourism across the island, in part by attracting different tourist segments than before.

The use of the term tourist was also not entirely consistent, as some used it to refer to the Arubans abroad, who would be traveling “home”, as well as visitors disconnected from Aruba, while others excluded Arubans from the definition. Regardless of who the definition included, all respondents I spoke with recognised the attraction that Carnival can be for visitors to the island, and they had also all seen and met visitors who had watched or participated in the event. However, few of the individuals I spoke to believed that Carnival was a main attraction for travel to the island for non-Aruban travellers. The balmy weather during the winter months and the sun, sea, and sand combination were noted as more important pull factors.

When asked about changes to Carnival, most respondents noted its increased commercialisation. Carnival has evolved into a significant financial commitment, with costs increasing every year. Participants attributed this trend to Carnival’s growing scale and complexity, driven by groups and organisers striving to outdo previous years. While some view this as primarily profit-driven, as one respondent lamented, “now everything about money and winning titles, not creativity or community”,<sup>100</sup> it’s more accurately categorised as commercialisation rather than outright commodification, according to Kaul’s distinction that true commodification requires direct monetary transactions between producers and tourists.<sup>101</sup> The luxurious aspect of Aruba’s Carnival owe much to the increased commercialisation, which is an aspect a number of respondents appreciated. Some justified the trend rather pragmatically,

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<sup>100</sup> Interview with a teacher, Online, March 22, 2024.

<sup>101</sup> Adam R. Kaul, “The Limits of Commodification in Traditional Irish Music Sessions,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 3 (August 16, 2007): 703–19, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2007.00451.x>.

asserting, “you can't survive if you don't commercialise [Carnival]. You got bills to pay”.<sup>102</sup> However there are instances when financial transactions do occur between producers and tourists—as seen with entities like the Aruban Tourism Carnival Group or hotels hosting Carnival events—in which case we very much do see a level of commodification. Moreover, the increasing commercialisation can be said to make the promotion of Carnival and possible cultural capital to be gained more apparent. Following Scher’s reasoning, which links the exchange of cultural capital to commodification, or even Carvalho and Rodrigues’s argument, it can be argued that the promotion of Carnival to tourists can be seen as commodification. While it is evident that Carnival is commercialized and, to some extent, commodified, whether this is positive or negative depends on one’s perspective.

### *Two perspectives*

When respondents were asked about changes which they believed might result from tourist involvement with Carnival, two distinct perspectives emerged. The first perspective viewed tourist participation as a benefit, seeing it as an opportunity to expand the tourism market and shift away from the mass tourism practices that Aruba has predominantly used until now. The second perspective, however, saw tourist participation as a threat to authenticity and local ownership of Carnival. While this summary simplifies the issue, it highlights the contrasting views regarding the commercialisation and commodification of the Carnival heritage.

Those who viewed tourist participation in Carnival more positively often reported that it is a good way to promote the Aruban identity, as well as creating local interest in Carnival. As one respondent noted about the reception of a new tourist Carnival group: “this year some locals were

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<sup>102</sup> Interview with a university professor, University of Aruba, Online, April 2, 2024.

like, hey, look at those tourists participating. You know, it got the eyebrows up high. Like ‘hmm, interesting. Hey, that's cute. Hey, look at those tourists dancing’”.<sup>103</sup> They, and others, also mentioned that in this way it could perhaps create more interest and enthusiasm locally, in a way, having visitors involved. Another respondent emphasized that tourist participation can help by familiarizing visitors with Aruban culture, potentially encouraging them to visit more frequently and at different times of the year, thus diversifying and boosting the economy, as put forth in the literature review. The respondent said: “I think it helps 'cause then [tourists] might like Aruba. They know how the culture is, what the vibe is and they would want to come to Aruba instead of only to Carnival”.<sup>104</sup>

The joy and excitement locals derive from sharing their culture and seeing others experience it were also highlighted. One respondent mentioned, “I think it's really fun because you get to see them experience something completely different, that they probably have never experienced in their life”.<sup>105</sup> Another added “we connect [tourists] to some of the Carnival groups so they can participate. It's a fantastic experience and you know Aruba's a very safe island also, so you feel safe joining something like that”.<sup>106</sup> Respondents also took pride in sharing information about Carnival events and history with interested tourists, with one noting, “so [the tourists] actually ask like, what's the history and why is this being celebrated? So, it's nice that some want to know the history and then they will pass it along to other friends. So it also brings people to Aruba”.<sup>107</sup> Tourist involvement also connects to the community aspect of Carnival emphasizing inclusivity for all kinds of people, whether local or not. One respondent stated about Carnival,

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<sup>103</sup> Interview with a teacher, Online, March 22, 2024.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Aruban local abroad #3, Online, April 12, 2024.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Aruban local #2, Online, April 17, 2024.

<sup>106</sup> Interview with a cultural expert, Online, March 20, 2024.

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Aruban local abroad #3, Online, April 12, 2024.

“and I like how they didn't make it exclusive. So that, just because you're not from Aruba, doesn't mean you can't join”.<sup>108</sup> Another mentioned, “[Carnival is] open for everybody and if we start to exclude people it's like, you never know where it ends”.<sup>109</sup> The general sentiment appeared to be ‘the more the merrier’.

Despite this positive outlook, respondents acknowledged that the rigorous and costly preparation for Carnival will likely deter extensive tourist participation. Most believed that tourists would prefer to watch rather than actively participate due to the demanding nature of the events. As one respondent humorously put it, “an hour is enough! Because [local] people are fucking tough. It's a whole day in the sun! So, tourists are not prepared for that, they're going, you know, with their handbags. Maybe sunblock and that's it”.<sup>110</sup> For context, parades usually last anywhere from 5 to 8 hours, sometimes longer if there are delays.

Another reason behind the positive view on tourist participation and interest in Carnival is that it presents an economic opportunity for Aruba to explore a new type of tourism. As highlighted in the literature review, involving tourists in cultural activities, such as Carnival, could diversify Aruba's tourism offerings and create new revenue streams. One respondent mentioned that a Carnival group aimed at tourists wasn't a project for personal gain but rather “it's about the opportunity to let Aruba be a new destination”.<sup>111</sup>

The general consensus among those who viewed tourist participation positively is encapsulated in the sentiment, “I would just say let more people come because it's good for us”.<sup>112</sup> There is a recognition that tourism is changing, with people increasingly wanting to be “more part

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<sup>108</sup> Interview with Aruban local abroad #3, Online, April 12, 2024.

<sup>109</sup> Interview with Aruban local #1, In-person, April 9, 2024.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Aruban local abroad #2, In-person, April 9, 2024.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with a teacher, Online, March 22, 2024.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with a university professor, University of Aruba, Online, April 2, 2024.

of the experience”, because they want to “participate in making costumes or making music”.<sup>113</sup> Carnival can attract more visitors and, in turn, offer Aruba new economic opportunities and creative entrepreneurship possibilities. However, despite the potential economic benefits and overall positive sentiment, there is a strong emphasis that attracting tourists is not the primary goal of Carnival. As one respondent stated, “Carnival brings a lot of tourists, but inherently that's not the goal of Carnival. I feel like that a lot of people don't see that as the goal. No, it's something purely for the community, for the natives to be able to celebrate”.<sup>114</sup> The overarching sentiment is that Carnival is a good way to highlight Aruban culture, and provide new economic opportunities, but that should remain a community-focused celebration, with economic benefits from tourism being a welcome but secondary outcome.

On the other hand, those who believe that tourist participation could diminish the authenticity of Carnival fear the event would almost certainly become overrun and that organisers and the local government would cater more to tourists than locals. This concern cannot be seen as separate from Aruba's rapid tourism growth and the consequent commercialisation and commodification of much of the island. One respondent expressed, “I don't see that there is a stop to implementing [the tourist's] wants and needs”.<sup>115</sup> This reflects a broader anxiety about the seemingly uncontrolled growth of tourism on the island, where many locals feel that their voices are not adequately heard or considered in development plans.

Regarding Carnival, these concerns are evident in statements like, “[Tourists] participate in Carnival, they're going to want to come back next year and then it's just going to become a thing. Then the Aruban government will see that people are participating and they'll just call more,

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<sup>113</sup> Interview with a cultural expert, Online, March 20, 2024.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Aruban local #2, Online, April 17, 2024.

<sup>115</sup> Interview with Aruban local abroad #1, In-person, May 2, 2024.

because the Aruban government just wants to make money”.<sup>116</sup> The fear and resistance toward tourist participation are logical, as commodification in tourism involves transforming culturally significant events or practices into commodities. If tourists were to participate in Carnival, the best-case scenario, according to some respondents would be in separate groups. Otherwise, “if they [host an event] for the tourists and all the locals, it's going to lose its meaning”.<sup>117</sup> Attempting to balance both tourist desires and local interests would be challenging within the current structure of Carnival celebrations. This contrasts with a suggestion from a respondent who viewed tourist participation more positively, feeling that “it would be a lot more fun if tourists joined the other parades with the locals instead of just having a group with other tourists”.<sup>118</sup> They felt that it would be a better experience for the tourist as they would be less isolated, and meet more locals, in that way once again highlighting Aruban culture.

Beyond the feeling of losing control of their own heritage and island, there is a fear that local ownership of this cultural practice will be revoked once it is commodified. By framing Carnival as open and welcoming to all, there is a risk that it shapes the tourist gaze and creates a sense of entitlement. Rather than viewing themselves as guests, tourists may feel a sense of ownership or right to participate. One respondent articulated this fear, stating that Carnival “should just be appreciated from a distance, leaving it to locals. You can appreciate a culture; you can appreciate how authentic something is. Don't go and try to make it your own”.<sup>119</sup> They added, “if one [tourist] joins next year, they'll join again. They'll invite their friends. Then those friends will bring friends from other places and then it just becomes their thing, not ours”.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Interview with Aruban local abroad #1, In-person, May 2, 2024.

<sup>117</sup> Interview with Aruban local #1, In-person, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

<sup>118</sup> Interview with Aruban local #2, Online, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with Aruban local abroad #1, In-person, May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024.

<sup>120</sup> Interview with Aruban local abroad #1, In-person, May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024.

This frustration is understandable, especially considering how much of the island has changed for the sake of tourism. For example, the emptying out of the Main Street in Oranjestad due to the creation of a touristic tramline and a larger shopping area in Noord, has been a significant concern to the livelihoods for locals in the area. Efforts are being made to revive the area, but its decline was largely driven by development focused on tourist convenience.

While these two perspectives may seem opposing and do highlight two different views on commodification of cultural heritage, I want to argue that, in the case of Aruba's Carnival, they are actually two sides of the same coin. As one respondent aptly put it, "I think in a sense [tourism] can be beneficial [to cultural heritage] as long as you make it beneficial, but [cultural heritage] should not be subservient to the tourism industry, and we should absolutely not Disneyfy the local authentic island experience".<sup>121</sup> The biggest fear is that Carnival would change fundamentally for tourists' sake, rather than for local enjoyment. Some believe that the inherent cultural and community elements of Carnival protect it from becoming (too) commodified, while others stress the need for active efforts to prevent tourism from impacting Carnival further.

Those who view tourist participation positively highlight the community nature of Carnival and their own joy in sharing it with other locals and tourists. They believe that tourist participation in Carnival can aid Aruba in moving away from homogenous mass tourism while developing more local involvement and investment in Carnival, ensuring its long term continuation. Conversely, those with a negative view fear that increased tourist participation would lead to greater commodification and loss of local input, making Carnival unrecognisable. However, both groups agree on the need to preserve Carnival for local enjoyment while also recognising the necessity of

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<sup>121</sup> Interview with a cultural expert, Online, March 20, 2024.

maintaining and diversifying tourism. As one respondent summarised, “You still have to promote the island in some ways because it's an income for most of the island. Right? So, killing it completely means killing the island. But the thing is, they have to be controlling it”.<sup>122</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

This chapter explored how tourism has influenced the celebration of Aruba’s Carnival and examined any impacts on its authenticity, addressing the two sub-questions: “In what ways has the practice of celebrating Aruba’s Carnival been altered or influenced by tourism, and what aspects demonstrate commodification?”, and “How do locals perceive the authenticity of the Carnival in light of its use in promotion and practices aimed at tourists?”. Despite the acknowledgement that tourism is integral to Aruba and local livelihoods, there was a general concern that mainstream tourism often neglects authentic cultural experiences in favour of familiar comforts. Respondents noted that this has resulted in a lot of the island becoming commodified for visitors. Using Carnival in promotional content, however, was generally seen positively, as it highlights an essential aspect of Aruban culture. Most respondents felt that Carnival’s authenticity remained intact despite its use in tourism promotion and there was scepticism about Carnival participation as the primary motivator for tourists.

Some respondents believed that tourist participation in Carnival could foster greater interest and enthusiasm for Carnival locally. It was viewed as an opportunity to showcase Aruban identity and culture, enhancing the island’s appeal beyond the typical mass tourism model, and leading to more economic opportunities. Conversely, others feared that increased tourist

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<sup>122</sup> Interview with Aruban local #1, In-person, April 9, 2024.

participation could lead to the commodification of Carnival, undermining its authenticity. There was a concern that the event could become tailored to tourists' preferences, mirroring broader anxieties about uncontrolled tourism growth on the island. The potential loss of ownership and cultural significance of Carnival was a significant worry.

Both positive and negative perspectives on tourist participation in Carnival highlight the need to preserve the event's authenticity while leveraging its cultural significance to attract a more discerning type of tourist. The overarching sentiment is that Carnival should not be subservient to the tourism industry, and efforts should be made to ensure it remains a genuine local celebration.

### III. PRESERVATION

In this final chapter, I address the last sub-question: What strategies are being employed to maintain the authenticity of Carnival for local communities, and what more could be done? As discussed earlier, Carnival is deeply embedded in Aruban identity and culture, making its preservation crucial in the face of fears regarding the loss of authenticity and the risk of commodification.

When discussing strategies to maintain authenticity, the approaches suggested in this chapter primarily focus on preserving cultural heritage. According to UNESCO, cultural heritage preservation “encompasses the protection, conservation, and management of cultural heritage, which includes tangible heritage [...] as well as intangible heritage [...]. The goal is to ensure that these cultural expressions and artifacts are preserved in a way that respects their authenticity and integrity, allowing them to be appreciated and understood by future generations.”<sup>123</sup> The challenge for Aruba lies in maintaining Carnival’s local significance without reducing it to a mere tourist attraction, thereby ensuring its continuation for future generations.

Tourism and culture are not opposing forces here; they can coexist, provided that cultural integrity is not sacrificed for tourism, and that the island is not ‘Disneyfied’. As discussed in the literature review, the definition of authenticity varies, but in the case of Aruba it can be agreed that authenticity is not solely rooted in the past, emphasising historical traditions, and is instead a result of everyday practices.<sup>124</sup> This is especially important for Carnival, as, for a cultural practice to endure over time, it must be allowed to evolve naturally and not be developed solely for outside audiences.

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<sup>123</sup> UNESCO, Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003

<sup>124</sup> Croes, Lee, and Olson, “Authenticity in Tourism in Small Island Destinations: A Local Perspective.”

Aruba has the opportunity to develop a form of tourism that benefits locals and supports cultural reinvestment by focusing on the local culture and heritage. As noted in the previous chapter, according to respondents, the current use of Carnival in promoting Aruba has not significantly impacted the strength or authenticity of the local tradition, and tourist impact on Carnival has not been noticeable. However, there is still a lingering concern that this tradition could be impacted in the future.

It is therefore essential to manage the relationship between culture and tourism carefully, ensuring that tourism development does not compromise cultural authenticity and heritage. This chapter explores these issues by first examining the threats to preservation of Carnival as cultural heritage and then examining existing measures and strategies to preserve the authenticity of Carnival in the context of tourism.

### **Threats to Preservation**

While many feel that commodification of Carnival doesn't currently appear to be a pressing issue, as already discussed, the larger trend in Aruba of commodifying the island and services to meet the tourists' does set a concerning precedent. When discussing threats to the Carnival celebrations in Aruba, a key point that came up is that it is not inherently tourism that threatens Carnival, but rather economically driven actions by local authorities and a lack of active cultural planning and management. As one respondent noted when discussing the lack of cultural management, "Your mitigation [of tourism impacts] and plan should be more about culture [...] But that's the whole problem, we do not engage in dialogue sufficiently".<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Interview with a university professor, University of Aruba, Online, April 2, 2024.

Due to the rapid growth of tourism and changing demographics, many aspects of Aruban life and culture have changed, including the speed of life, density on the island, and the loss of natural resources. It is therefore not hard to imagine that if left unchecked, Carnival as cultural heritage may face a similar outcome. As one local noted, “I feel unfortunately a lot of focus on the island is always on tourism and a lot of things are being done with the purpose of attracting more tourists”.<sup>126</sup>

The primary threat to the preservation and continuation of Carnival is the commodification for international tourists, leading to a loss of cultural heritage. This concern was frequently raised by respondents during interviews, as touched on in the previous chapter. The fear of losing of cultural heritage is not unique to Carnival but extends to Aruban culture in general. Locals often feel that decisions made about tourism investments favour tourists over the local community. In such a context it is understandable that seeing tourists develop an interest in Carnival can bring up the same fears. This concern is captured in the sentiment: “We’re losing our sense of island, of paradise. We're losing it”.<sup>127</sup> Another respondent remarked, “Where is our essence? Because our essence was never big hotels. It was the island itself”.<sup>128</sup>

Beyond commodification, another reason for the potential loss of Carnival’s authenticity is the lack of focus on active cultural maintenance. While many Arubans express a desire to maintain their culture, there is a perceived lack of action. As one respondent said, “The problem is not that we are using [Carnival] for tourism. The problem is that we don't think about how we are going to maintain it. Because you have to maintain things. You can't come up and say we're

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<sup>126</sup> Interview with Aruban local #2, Online, April 17, 2024.

<sup>127</sup> Interview with Aruban local #1, In-person, April 9, 2024.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with Aruban local abroad #2, In-person, April 9, 2024.

losing our culture when you don't maintain it".<sup>129</sup> This perceived inaction heightens the fear amongst some of losing Carnival, underscoring the need stems for strong, established traditions and proactive preservation efforts.

Inadequate education around Carnival is another significant threat. Most respondents reported receiving very little, if any, education on Carnival, its history, or its cultural significance. One respondent noted, "I do think there should be more light shed on the history of Carnival. It's important for its cultural heritage and tradition. I feel like you should know why it's a tradition".<sup>130</sup> This lack of education diminishes the cultural understanding and appreciation among locals, which can weaken the tradition over time, especially in combination with commodification of the event. Interestingly, in the previous chapter, when the positive and negative views on tourist participation in Carnival were discussed, those who primarily pointed out positives were also more likely to report feeling educated about Carnival and its history. While those who expressed a more negative view also reported a greater lack of education around Carnival, and a desire for more knowledge. While there was variation, this still reinforces the benefits of education around Carnival to community participation and continuation of the event.

A final threat is the emphasis on tourist-focused information. Much of the available information about Carnival is aimed at tourists rather than locals. Information is shared in English, Dutch, and Spanish, with little in Papiamentu, Aruba's native language. Few locals were of aware of any organisations or venues where they could learn more about Carnival. Many have had to make a conscious effort as adults to understand and appreciate Carnival due to the lack of information provided during their childhood. One respondent pointed out that there appears to be

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<sup>129</sup> Interview with a university professor, University of Aruba, Online, April 2, 2024.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Aruban local #2, Online, April 17, 2024.

a privileging of tourists over locals when it comes to education on Aruban cultural heritage, “Tourists participating or being drawn to Carnival is not what would cause problems, [the problem is] tourists being taught about Carnival, whereas locals are not taught those things”.<sup>131</sup>

## **Preserving and Reinvigorating**

Having discussed the threats to the preservation of Carnival, we will now explore what is currently being done to counteract these threats and what more can be done to prevent the commodification of this cultural event.

### **Current preservation efforts**

#### *Inclusion of traditional elements*

While an event can remain authentic without strictly adhering to historical accuracy, traditional and historic elements are important symbols and reminders of the event’s roots. This is particularly true for Carnival. Although many new, modern additions have been incorporated into Carnival, respondents emphasized the desire to include more traditional elements again. One suggestion was to move away from the current LED screens that introduce Carnival groups on the leading vehicle, and instead revert to the 3D letters on a road piece. Another example of reintroducing traditional elements was the inclusion of steelpan during the 2024 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Carnival. The steelpan is an instrument that has been played on the island since at least the 1940s and was commonly used in parades of previous decades. The Aruba Invaders, the oldest steelband on the island, were asked by the ATA and Go Cultura (a local cultural organisation) to

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<sup>131</sup> Interview with a university professor, University of Aruba, Online, April 2, 2024.

lead the four main parades: Lighting Parade in Oranjestad, Parada di Luz San Nicolas, Grand Parade San Nicolas, and Grand Parade Oranjestad.<sup>132</sup> This project (re)introduced locals and newcomers to the unique sound of the steelpan, as well as giving some on the sideline an opportunity to play the instruments. Additionally, an information page about the history of the instrument was set up and linked to a QR code for easy access.<sup>133</sup>

### *Documentation*

Documentation plays a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage. In 2023, the Coleccion Aruba portal was launched as the online documentary heritage portal for Aruba. This project is the result of a collaboration between the Aruban National Archive, the national library, and UNOCA (Union of Cultural Organisations in Aruba), among others, with the aim of digitizing the history, culture, and heritage of Aruba.<sup>134</sup> The platform hosts a wealth of photos, videos, and texts about previous Carnival celebrations, dating back to the 1950s. A search for the term ‘Carnival’ yields 3455 results, while ‘Carnival’ produces 4145 results.

In 2024, a comprehensive two-part book about the history of Carnival, written by Friedrich van der Hans, will be published. This book, a culmination of seven years of research, will provide detailed information on many aspects of Carnival, including music, bands, and parades.

Additionally, there are social media pages and websites dedicated to sharing information about Carnival, which were mentioned as particularly valuable, especially by the younger

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<sup>132</sup> Caribisch Netwerk, “Oudste Steelband Van Aruba Schittert Tijdens Carnival,” February 13, 2024, <https://caribischnetwerk.ntr.nl/2024/02/13/oudste-steelband-van-Aruba-schittert-tijdens-Carnival/>.

<sup>133</sup> “Aruba’s Steelpan History,” accessed June 27, 2024, <https://www.aruba.com/us/our-island/history-and-culture/steelpan-history>.

<sup>134</sup> Coleccion Aruba, “About Us,” accessed June 27, 2024, <https://coleccion.aw/pages/en/about-us/>.

respondents with whom I spoke. Most of these pages are not exclusively focused on Aruban Carnival, but still include information that pertains to the island's celebrations. An example mentioned is knowyourcaribbean on Instagram. Finally, although the promotional content discussed in Chapter 2, Part I can be said to commodify or contribute to the commodification of Carnival, it also contributes to the documentation and preservation of Carnival, especially when the platforms offer insights into the history and significance of Carnival. This duality underlines the fact that commodification of culture is not a black and white discussion, and different perspectives are always at play.

### *Cultural Institutions & Education*

The Carnival Euphoria exhibition, also referred to as a 'laboratory, opened its doors in 2020 in the Museum of Industry. It offers a space for locals and tourists alike to learn about Carnival and the processes involved in creating the annual event. It also serves as a creative space for local Carnival groups to explore ideas for costumes and themes. Though it is currently promoted as an exhibition and laboratory space, the plan is to develop it into a full museum in the near future.

According to respondents, Carnival events are also being reintroduced into the school curriculum to ensure young people get involved. Activities such as school jump-ups, or costume creation are designed to engage students and foster a deeper connection to the tradition, and through this, the Aruban identity.

## **Recommendations for Preservation**

There were quite a number of methods suggested by respondents to improve the preservation of Carnival in Aruba, in light of the island's commodification. The most prevalent will be highlighted in this section. While many of these approaches may already be in place, this was not mentioned by respondents, further highlighting the need to disseminate information more clearly and involve the local population more in preservation efforts.

### *Emphasising Language*

Language plays a crucial role in the continuation of cultural heritage. The preservation of and education in Papiamentu has been a significant topic of discussion in Aruba for many years. Historically, due to the colonial influence of the Netherlands, Dutch was the language of education and the official language on the island. However, since 2003, Papiamentu has been recognized as an official language on the island and is estimated to be spoken by roughly 75% of the population.<sup>135</sup> Papiamentu, alongside Caribbean English has been a mainstay in Carnival music for many years. Despite the presence of English and other Caribbean influences, it is important to ensure that Carnival remains centred around Papiamentu, fostering a sense of local pride and ownership. As one respondent noted, “[Papiamentu] is something that most songs are written in and are written by people who belong to specific Carnival groups, so it is just something that we take pride in.”<sup>136</sup> Therefore, the use of Papiamentu should be emphasised in all Carnival-related events and publications. While translations in English, Dutch, and Spanish are useful, primary

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<sup>135</sup> Aruba Tourist Channel, “Discovering Aruba’s Linguistic Gems: Papiamentu and Beyond!” June 4, 2023, <https://arubatouristchannel.com/blog/2023/06/04/discovering-arubas-linguistic-gems-papiamentu-and-beyond/>.

<sup>136</sup> Interview with Aruban local abroad #1, In-person, May 2, 2024.

content should be in Papiamentu to ensure locals feel a deep connection to the material and event. In video content where Papiamentu is not preferred, subtitles in Papiamentu may offer a suitable compromise.

### *Focus on Local Music and Arts*

Ensuring that music and artistic expressions related to Carnival remain rooted in local traditions is essential. Encouraging local artists to create and perform in Papiamentu and focusing on themes that resonate with the local community can help maintain authenticity. Although local traditions are still prevalent, many respondents pointed out that songs and performed pieces used to relate more closely to the local community than they do now. This change, though more likely due to generational changes and influences from abroad than tourism, was mentioned by respondents who expressed a desire to reinvigorate this aspect of Carnival.

### *Cultural Education*

As touched on before, the lack of education around Carnival in schools is a significant issue that needs to be addressed for the preservation of Carnival. Some respondents mentioned a slow movement towards reintegrating this more in the education calendar and curricula, but demographic and societal shift due to migration and commodification impact this process. Integrating Carnival's history and cultural significance into the school curriculum is essential. There is a significant gap in formal education about Carnival, and addressing this can foster a stronger sense of identity and appreciation from a young age. One respondent noted, "I think in the education there should be more community building towards Carnival. Putting all the

students effort into it that. I think that speaks a lot”.<sup>137</sup> Another shared, “of course you have people that still vocalise the history of Carnival, but that's a very small group of people. I feel like a lot of kids grow up knowing that carnival is a tradition, and that a lot of people find it important, but what about it is important, there should be more light shed on that”.<sup>138</sup>

### *Tourist Education and Involvement*

While tourists can easily find information about Carnival, it is essential to provide context that fosters respect and understanding. Sharing information about the meaning and history of Carnival with tourists can create respect and understanding. Developing tourist-specific events that use elements of Carnival but keep the main celebrations for locals is one approach that was suggested. Creating events that allow tourists to experience elements of Carnival without diluting main celebrations for locals can include showcases, educational tours, and interactive workshops that highlight different elements of Carnival and its significance. Providing balanced information that educates tourists about the cultural importance of Carnival can be done through brochures, guided tours, and informative sessions that emphasize respect for the local traditions.

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion, preserving Carnival is important for maintaining the Aruban identity amidst growing tourism pressures and commodification of the island. Strategies currently employed to preserve the event focus on both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, ensuring that Carnival evolves organically without succumbing to commercial pressures. Initiatives such as the inclusion

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<sup>137</sup> Interview with Aruban local abroad #2, In-person, April 9, 2024.

<sup>138</sup> Interview with Aruban local #2, Online, April 17, 2024.

of traditional elements like steelpan music, educational efforts through exhibitions and school programs, and comprehensive documentation are steps in the right direction. However, challenges persist. Issues like inadequate cultural education among locals and a focus on tourist-oriented information exacerbate these challenges. Respondents highlight the need for more proactive cultural management and stronger educational initiatives, particularly in integrating Carnival's significance into the school curriculum. Moving forward, recommendations to strengthen preservation efforts should thus include deeper community engagement through better education about this cultural heritage and the continuing use of Papiamentu. These efforts can support local pride and ensure that Carnival retains its authenticity amidst future tourism growth.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored the complex relationship between tourism and the celebration of Aruba's Carnival, and aimed to fill a knowledge gap through the focus on how tourism influences the authenticity and commodification of this cultural heritage. The central research question asked: To what extent has Aruba's cultural heritage of Carnival been commodified for tourists, in promotion and practice, and how does this influence the perceived authenticity and preservation of this heritage for local communities? This is an, as of yet, unresearched topic, and so an exploratory approach was used. Through a mixed-method research approach including literature review, discourse analysis of promotional materials, and semi-structured interviews, several insights have been uncovered.

The findings from the literature review highlight that while using Carnival to promote tourism can help create or enhance a unique destination brand, it also presents significant concerns about maintaining cultural authenticity and integrity for the local population. Authors advocate for diversifying tourism offerings beyond mass-market appeal, emphasising Aruba's rich cultural diversity, currently underutilised in the tourism sector, to provide authentic tourist experiences and improve long term viability as a tourist destination. However, the possible commodification of Carnival poses risks by potentially freezing these very same cultural expressions and reducing authenticity to cater solely to tourist demands. Inclusive planning and integrating local voices is important.

The analysis of the promotional content indicate that Aruba's Carnival has been adeptly integrated into tourism promotion, where it is portrayed as an exciting, inclusive, and culturally rich event. This strategic integration serves dual purposes: showcasing Aruban culture on a global stage and attracting tourists by offering a unique cultural experience. Commodification, as defined

by Scher to include exchange of cultural capital, or by Carvalho and Rodrigues as promotion of a destination, can indeed be spoken of. The promotional content leverages vivid descriptions, historical depth, and engaging messaging to create an appealing image of Carnival, promising visitors an authentic and unforgettable experience and calling for their presence. However, respondents generally viewed this integration positively, recognizing the potential to enhance local appreciation for Carnival while drawing international attention. Additionally, many believed that this commodification in promotional content did not (yet) translate to commodification of the actual physical event, and that the authenticity of Carnival remained intact. The possibility to enhance the island's appeal and diversify its tourism model beyond traditional mass tourism was highlighted, as it could provide locals with more creative and economic opportunities, as well as a potential for more investment in cultural heritage.

Despite these positive perspectives, there are underlying concerns about the future commodification of Carnival. The commodification process, characterized by turning cultural expressions into consumable products for tourists, poses significant risks. Increased tourist engagement might lead to adjustments that prioritize tourist expectations over preserving the event's cultural essence. The concern is that a tourism focus would result in standardization and commercialization of Carnival, diluting its cultural essence and making it more of a spectacle for tourists than a meaningful cultural celebration for locals. Respondents additionally expressed fears that unchecked tourism growth in Aruba more generally could commercialize local traditions, reducing them to mere spectacles devoid of their deeper cultural meanings.

These findings underscore the importance of a balanced approach. Achieving a delicate balance between preserving Carnival's authenticity and leveraging its cultural significance for economic benefit requires careful management and strategic initiatives. Despite the positive

outlook on the current state of Carnival, challenges persist. These include insufficient cultural education among locals and a focus on tourist-oriented information that may overshadow the event's true cultural significance. Respondents highlighted the need for more proactive cultural management and stronger educational initiatives. Creating tourist-specific events could also ensure the cultural heritage is not impacted greatly by 'for profit' tourist activity. Additionally, maintaining Papiamentu as a primary language of expression within Carnival was also discussed as crucial for preserving its cultural authenticity. Finally, the promotion of Carnival should continue to emphasize its historical and cultural contexts, ensuring that narratives surrounding the festival are accurate and reflective of its significance.

In conclusion, Aruba's Carnival faces a dual challenge: maintaining its cultural integrity amidst tourism pressures and leveraging its cultural heritage for sustainable economic development. By implementing thoughtful strategies and fostering active community engagement, Aruba can effectively preserve and promote the vibrant cultural legacy of Carnival while responsibly embracing tourism opportunities. This balance is essential for ensuring that Carnival remains a cherished local celebration, deeply rooted in Aruban culture, and continues to be a source of pride for future generations.

### **Future Research**

Future research could explore the long-term impacts of tourism on cultural heritage and its preservation in Aruba. Comparative studies with other Caribbean islands would provide valuable insights. Investigating the role of Carnival in nation-building, especially in the context of the recent publication "Caribbean Cultural Heritage and the Nation," could be particularly revealing. Additionally, studying the development and implementation of policies aimed at preserving

cultural heritage amid tourism growth could yield practical recommendations for policymakers. Conducting ethnographic research to gain deeper insights into local perceptions of Carnival's authenticity and commodification through immersive fieldwork and participatory observation would further enrich understanding.

### **Limitations**

This study faced several limitations, including a lack of available research on Aruba's Carnival, absence of fieldwork for direct observations, and a limited number of respondents. These factors, combined with Aruba's unique tourism situation and history, may affect the generalizability of the results. However, the insights gathered still provide a valuable starting point for understanding tourism's impact on Aruba's cultural heritage.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview Guide

Note: The interview guide as shown below was the basic format of the topic list that was used for each interview. However, depending on the respondents history, occupation, or answers, different topics were discussed with each respondent. These did not differ greatly per respondent. The two italicised concepts linked to my theoretical framework and were reminders for myself.

xx.xx.2024 @ 00:00

Location of Interview – Master Thesis Palmer-Smith  
Tourism & Carnival Aruba

- Participants personal background
- Personal relation to Carnival
  - Identity
  - Changes
- General tourism on the island
  - How do you feel about it?
  - Commodification
  - Promotion of tourism
    - Cultural heritage
- Impact of tourism on Carnival
  - How do you feel about it?
  - Are there any fears?
  - Impact on *genuineness / authenticity*