

Learning Carnival: enhancing the audience experience through education and communication

Aprender o Carnaval: comunicação e educação para enriquecer a experiência do público

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ABSTRACT

Carnaval is one of the most emblematic cultural expressions in Brazil, and in Rio de Janeiro, it achieves global prominence, standing out for its grandeur, as well as its economic and symbolic significance. This study investigated how communication strategies can be developed to enhance public knowledge and enrich the experience of those attending the samba school parades of the Special Group at the Marquês de Sapucaí Sambadrome. The research, based on interviews with spectators and individuals interested in the event, revealed significant gaps in current communication approaches, highlighting the need for more effective strategies to strengthen the connection with target audiences. Opportunities were also identified to improve interaction and engagement, fostering a deeper understanding of the spectacle. More targeted and assertive communication can benefit event organizers, samba schools managers, and involved companies by attracting new audiences and renewing interest in the event. The study reinforces the importance of strengthening the relationship with the public to broaden knowledge about *Carnaval*, recognized as one of Brazil's greatest cultural and intangible heritages. Thus, it is hoped that its richness and significance will be fully appreciated by diverse and global audiences.

Keywords: *Carnaval*. Rio de Janeiro. Experience. Communication. Learning.

RESUMO

O Carnaval é uma das expressões culturais mais emblemáticas do Brasil e no Rio de Janeiro alcança projeção global, destacando-se por sua grandiosidade e relevância econômica e simbólica. Este estudo investigou como estratégias de comunicação podem ser desenvolvidas para ampliar o conhecimento do público e enriquecer a experiência de quem assiste aos desfiles das escolas de samba do Grupo Especial no Sambódromo da Marquês de Sapucaí. Baseada em entrevistas com espectadores e interessados no evento, a pesquisa identificou lacunas significativas nas abordagens atuais de comunicação, destacando a necessidade de estratégias mais eficazes para fortalecer a conexão com o público-alvo. Além disso, foram exploradas oportunidades para melhorar a interação e o engajamento, promovendo uma compreensão mais profunda do espetáculo. Uma comunicação assertiva pode beneficiar gestores, escolas de samba e empresas envolvidas, ao atrair novos públicos e renovar o interesse pelo evento. O estudo reforça a importância de se fortalecer a relação com o público para ampliar o conhecimento sobre o Carnaval, reconhecido como um dos principais patrimônios culturais e imateriais do Brasil. Dessa forma, espera-se assegurar que sua riqueza e significado sejam plenamente valorizados por audiências diversas e globais.

Palavras-chave: *Carnaval*. Rio de Janeiro. Experiência. Comunicação. Educação.

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INTRODUCTION

Carnaval is one of the most significant expressions of Brazilian popular culture, known for its capacity to reflect social changes and integrate technological innovations over time (Jesus, 2018). Among the various celebrations across the country, the *Carnaval* in Rio de Janeiro stands out for its grandeur and international recognition, particularly for the samba school parades, which receive extensive media coverage during the event (Saldanha; Gonçalves, 2019). According to Grand Jr. (2016), Rio de Janeiro's *Carnaval* is considered the most important in Brazil due to its economic and symbolic impact.

Beyond its cultural significance, the celebration exhibits a complex and multifaceted economic dynamic. It encompasses not only the grand parades at the Sambadrome but also the street carnival blocks, which attract millions of revelers and tourists annually. According to the *Carnaval de Dados 2024* report (Rio Prefeitura), preparations for the event stimulate economic activity throughout the year, generating employment and income for thousands. However, the peak of this economic movement occurs during the festival itself, as parades and street celebrations draw tourists and amplify the local economic impact. In 2024, for instance, Rio de Janeiro's *Carnaval* generated approximately R\$5 billion in February, involving services directly or indirectly linked to the event (Rio Prefeitura, 2024).

The samba school parade held at the Marquês de Sapucaí Sambadrome represents the pinnacle of Rio de Janeiro's *Carnaval* and one of the most emblematic expressions of Brazil's creative economy. Inaugurated in 1984 and renovated in 2012, the Sambadrome has a capacity of approximately 72,500 spectators and serves as the stage for the *Grupo Especial*, *Série Ouro*¹, and *Escolas Mirins* parades (Grand Jr., 2016; *Carnaval*, 2025). Samba schools dedicate months to producing costumes and floats, engaging a diverse range of professionals, including visual artists, seamstresses, and musicians (Vidal; Machado, 2019a). Additionally, *Cidade do Samba*, established in 2006, plays a crucial role in this process, serving as the primary production center for *Grupo Especial* schools. Spanning an area of 92,000 m², it also fosters tourism and facilitates interaction among professionals in the sector (Grand Jr., 2016; *Carnaval*, 2025).

Despite its undeniable economic significance, *Carnaval* possesses a symbolic grandeur that transcends numerical data. It revitalizes traditions, fosters social inclusion and reinforces cultural identities, acting as a dynamic bridge between past and present for the communities involved. Beyond the samba school parades and street festivities, the essence of Rio de Janeiro's *Carnaval* lies in its remarkable capacity to unite individuals from diverse backgrounds, professions, talents, and social classes in a singular celebration of unity and diversity (Grand Jr., 2016; Rio Prefeitura, 2024). Over the years, the event has evolved into a vital instrument for the city's cultural and social development, strengthening collective identity and community

1 Rio de Janeiro's samba schools are organized into hierarchical divisions: the Special Group, which holds the highest prestige, followed by the Gold Series and other lower series, with annual promotions and relegations based on parade performance.

bonds. In celebrating diversity, *Carnaval* also reaffirms Brazil's cultural wealth and the significance of its popular traditions as a unique and transformative heritage (Rio Prefeitura, 2024).

Despite its economic and sociocultural significance, *Carnaval* faces a major challenge: many spectators at the Sambadrome remain unaware of its history, deeper meanings, and true cultural value. This disconnect between the audience and the essence of *Carnaval* is largely attributed to the fragmented dissemination of information about the festival. Even those interested in gaining a deeper understanding of its traditions, symbolism, and historical dimensions often struggle to access comprehensive content that links these aspects to the event experience.

How can communication strategies enhance public understanding and improve the spectator experience during the *Grupo Especial* samba school parades at Rio de Janeiro's *Carnaval*? The study focuses on individuals who have attended or expressed interest in attending these parades at Sapucaí. Through interviews, it seeks to explore audience perceptions and expectations, identifying opportunities to enrich their experience and expand their knowledge of *Carnaval*'s history, symbolism, and production chain.

The findings of this study can support public and private stakeholders involved in organizing the event, aiding in the development of policies and strategies that enhance the spectator experience and foster greater engagement with local communities. Simultaneously, the research aimed to contribute to the academic field by deepening discussions on cultural marketing, the experience economy, communication, and learning. A broader understanding of the production chain, symbolic value, and historical significance of this festival would not only enrich the audience's experience but also strengthen their connection with the communities involved and reinforce the recognition of *Carnaval* as one of Brazil's most significant cultural heritages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of *Carnaval*

Carnaval is deeply rooted in Christian traditions, originating as a celebratory period preceding Lent, the 40-day season of penance and fasting before Easter. The term *Carnaval* derives from the Latin *carne levare*, meaning "to take away the flesh," referring to the abstention from meat and other earthly indulgences during Lent. However, before this period of austerity, Christian communities held festivities featuring lavish banquets, dances, and celebrations as a temporary farewell to worldly pleasures (DaMatta, 1997; Santos, 2018).

Carnivals were particularly popular in Catholic European countries such as Italy, where the Carnival of Venice became renowned for its masked balls. In France, the Carnival of Nice also gained prominence. However, it was in Portugal that *Entrudo*, a precursor to modern Carnival, developed as a series of popular games and festivities characterized by irreverence, the use of masks, and the playful throwing of water and flour (DaMatta, 1997).

According to Araújo (2003), recollections of *Carnaval's* origins in Brazil form part of the "collective unconscious memory of the people." Due to the lack of solid historical and scientific records on the subject, various analogies can be drawn regarding the emergence of this culturally rich festival. DaMatta (1997) argues that Brazilian *Carnaval* is directly linked to *Entrudo*, a celebration marked by irreverent humor and the subversion of social norms. While *Entrudo* in Portugal was primarily associated with the elite, in Brazil it was quickly embraced by the popular classes, particularly in Rio de Janeiro.

The transformation of *Entrudo* into a distinct form of Carnival in Brazil occurred between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as the streets of Rio de Janeiro became the stage for emerging carnival groups and ensembles (DaMatta, 1997). This evolution stemmed from a rich fusion of European, African, and Indigenous influences, shaping the Rio Carnival into the celebration recognized today.

The samba school parades in Rio de Janeiro trace their origins to the early 20th century, emerging from the first carnival groups that gradually evolved into structured samba schools (Ferreira, 2012). The parade format known today began to take shape in the 1930s, spurred by the founding of the first samba school, *Deixa Falar*, in 1928 (Ferreira, 2012). This milestone marked the beginning of a new era for Carnival, providing the parades with greater organization and visibility. In the following years, samba schools multiplied and gained prominence, becoming the central attractions of the spectacular performances that now draw vast crowds to the Sambadrome. By the late 1940s, Rio de Janeiro's samba schools were widely recognized across Brazil as authentic representatives of national popular culture (Ferreira, 2012).

With the consolidation of samba schools, Rio de Janeiro's grand *Carnaval* parades became instrumental in shaping Brazilian cultural identity. According to Araújo (2003), *Carnaval*, particularly within the context of the parades, is more than just a celebration; it serves as a platform for communities to narrate their stories and honor their heritage. Additionally, samba schools are recognized as exemplary models of organization, operating similarly to corporations in their ability to adapt to challenges and evolving trends, thereby influencing Carnivals both in Brazil and internationally (Ferreira, 2012).

Another significant aspect of the parades is their ability to address social and political issues. Each samba school presents a theme that often highlights historical, cultural, or contemporary topics, prompting reflection among spectators. According to DaMatta (1997), *Carnaval* functions as a "ritual of inversion," temporarily suspending everyday social hierarchies and allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds and social classes to unite in a shared celebration. In this context, the parades transcend mere spectacle, becoming moments of unity and reaffirmation of national identity, where Brazil celebrates its cultural, racial, and social diversity (Grand Jr., 2016; Jesus, 2018).

Beyond their cultural significance, samba schools play a crucial economic role, particularly in Rio de Janeiro. Ferreira (2012) highlights that these organizations

secure funding through partnerships and sponsorships, making the parades financially viable while providing visibility for associated brands. Moreover, the parades drive a vast production chain, creating employment opportunities for musicians, dancers, seamstresses, and workers in sectors such as security, transportation, and general services (Vidal; Machado, 2019a, 2019b; Rio Prefeitura, 2024).

Today, Rio's *Carnaval* is recognized as a cultural phenomenon of global significance while remaining deeply embedded in Brazilian identity. It embodies the Brazilian people's capacity to transform adversity into joy and to create art and beauty despite challenges. Beyond captivating and entertaining audiences, the parades serve to preserve traditions, promote Afro-Brazilian culture, and showcase the creativity and resilience of the communities that bring them to life (Grand Jr., 2016; Jesus, 2018; Rio Prefeitura, 2024).

Cultural Marketing and Experience Economy

According to the American Marketing Association (2025), marketing is defined as the set of institutions, activities, and processes aimed at creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that generate value for customers, partners, and society as a whole. Within the cultural sector, this definition is particularly relevant, as it requires balancing the symbolic value of artistic productions with market demands and the financial sustainability of cultural organizations.

According to Colbert (2009), marketing can be understood as the art of adopting the consumer's perspective, seeking to understand who they are, how they make decisions, what motivates them, and what captures their interest. This concept is particularly significant in cultural marketing, where audience experience and emotional connection with artistic products are essential. In his historical analysis, Colbert observes that cultural marketing only began to be systematically studied in the 1960s, making it a relatively recent field that continues to evolve with the integration of increasingly modern tools.

Despite the increasing sophistication of marketing strategies, it is essential to acknowledge their limitations. Colbert (2009) notes that in saturated markets, both new and established providers compete for the same existing demand. In the cultural sector, this competition is particularly intense due to the abundance of available offerings and the rivalry with other leisure activities, all vying for the public's increasingly limited time. This reality challenges cultural organizations to effectively communicate the value of their productions and engage audiences in a meaningful way.

In this context, cultural marketing assumes a strategic role. According to Colbert (2009), offering high-quality products is not sufficient; it is crucial to communicate effectively, establish a clear brand positioning that highlights the organization's unique value, prioritize customer satisfaction, and utilize data intelligently for decision-making. These practices become even more relevant when aligned with the concept of "experience economy" proposed by Pine II and Gilmore (1998, 2011), which asserts that the perceived value of a product or service is deeply connected to the emotions and memories created throughout the consumption journey.

Pine II and Gilmore (1998, 2011) emphasize that experiences are deliberately designed events intended to engage customers on a personal and emotional level. In this context, organizations must go beyond merely delivering products or services by creating environments that encourage active and meaningful connections with their brand. This perspective is reinforced by Rivera *et al.* (2022), who highlight that cultural festivals, as forms of experiential tourism, transform spaces into dynamic settings rich in meaningful interactions due to their ephemeral nature. Additionally, Solomon (2016) argues that consumer behavior is intrinsically linked to lived experiences and the meanings they convey. Audiences seek more than just consumption; they desire emotional engagement and a sense of belonging to something greater.

Carnaval, as a large-scale cultural event, exemplifies the application of these concepts. Engagement can be enhanced by emphasizing the symbolism of the parade themes, the behind-the-scenes activities of the samba schools, and the narratives presented on the avenue as central elements that foster a deeper connection with the audience. According to Solomon (2016), the bond with an experience strengthens as consumers discover and gain a deeper understanding of the event. This learning process transforms the spectacle into a rich and immersive experience, marked by active interaction between the audience and the cultural context.

Thus, *Carnaval* exemplifies how cultural marketing extends beyond the mere promotion of products, serving as a powerful tool for creating enriching and captivating experiences. The event celebrates popular creativity and stands as an authentic expression of Brazilian cultural identity, with Rio de Janeiro as its primary stage. According to Baiocchi *et al.* (2024), a city's cultural identity, conveyed through its music and artistic manifestations, plays a vital role in strengthening its brand by linking local traditions to a global audience. In the case of Rio de Janeiro, Carnival symbolically bridges the city's musical and cultural heritage with its international image, transforming the event into an emotionally engaging experience that resonates both locally and globally.

Beyond fostering cultural connection, *Carnaval* provides learning, excitement, and engagement, transforming spectators into active participants and strengthening their ties to cultural traditions. It creates a celebration that unites past, present, and future. Pine II and Gilmore (1998, 2011) argue that, in the contemporary world, success lies in offering experiences that connect people to something greater, adding emotional and cultural value to their consumption. In the case of *Carnaval*, this value extends beyond the visual spectacle, solidifying itself as an authentic expression of the identity and creativity of the Brazilian people.

Communication, transmedia, and learning in the context of cultural events

Communication plays a fundamental role in the educational process and the creation of meaningful experiences. According to Hohlfeldt (2009),

the connectivity enabled by the Internet not only strengthens existing relationships but also creates opportunities for the dissemination of educational content. This is particularly relevant in cultural events, where learning can be shared dynamically.

According to Ponsignon and Derbaix (2020), the success of communication in cultural events depends on the ability to create meaningful experiences that integrate emotional and informational elements, engaging audiences on a deeper level. This approach is particularly relevant in festivals and cultural events, where effective communication enhances audience appreciation and understanding. Rivera *et al.* (2022) emphasize that cultural festivals serve as platforms that merge celebration and education, fostering a stronger connection between participants and the cultural narratives being presented.

Transmedia storytelling, a concept extensively explored by Jenkins (2006) and further developed by Derbaix *et al.* (2017), enables narratives to be conveyed in an integrated manner across multiple platforms, enriching audience engagement. Additionally, this approach offers unique opportunities to connect diverse audiences to the event. According to Derbaix *et al.* (2017), multiple entry points can be created to accommodate different audience profiles, allowing each participant to engage with the event in a personalized way. This strategy enhances accessibility and inclusivity in learning while reinforcing *Carnaval's* role as a multifaceted cultural event that celebrates diversity and creativity.

Narrative transportation, as defined by Derbaix *et al.* (2017) and Bourgeon-Renault *et al.* (2019), plays a crucial role in this process. This concept refers to the audience's immersion in culturally significant stories, deepening their emotional connection with cultural events. In the context of *Carnaval*, the narratives presented in the parades have the potential to transport spectators into the historical and symbolic contexts conveyed by the samba schools, creating a space where emotion and learning intersect.

The use of interactive technologies in the cultural sector, as discussed by Ponsignon and Derbaix (2020), enhances the transformation of cultural events into immersive experiences. Tools such as multimedia guides and virtual tours enable audiences to personalize their interaction with the event, fostering more active and meaningful engagement. Rivera *et al.* (2022) highlight that interactive and educational elements, such as guided tours, storytelling, and digital tools, are essential for turning festivals into learning experiences. These resources facilitate participants' connection with the heritage, traditions, and artistic expressions of the event. However, Ponsignon and Derbaix (2020) emphasize that the integration of technology must be carefully designed to preserve collective interaction, as shared experience is a fundamental aspect of cultural learning.

Another relevant point is the use of influencer-generated content to enhance the authenticity and relevance of cultural messages. According to Leung *et al.* (2022), the perceived authenticity of influencers and their ability to engage audiences on a

personal level are valuable assets in strengthening the emotional connection with the event.

Familiarity with the cultural event is also a significant factor. Rivera *et al.* (2022) argue that repeat festival attendees tend to engage more deeply in various activities associated with the event, enhancing their overall satisfaction and connection. This underscores the importance of communication strategies that effectively address both first-time visitors and returning attendees.

This perspective is reinforced by Derbaix *et al.* (2017), who highlight that combining transmedia storytelling with interactive technologies can transform cultural events into highly emotional and meaningful experiences. Ponsignon and Derbaix (2020) add that technological resources should align with the event's emotional objectives, enhancing rather than replacing the human experience and direct engagement with cultural elements. The authors emphasize that audience experience quality is crucial for fostering loyalty and strengthening connections with cultural events like Carnival. Strategies integrating learning and emotion create lasting memories, increasing audience retention and encouraging positive recommendations.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Type of research and data collection

This study adopted a qualitative and exploratory approach to deepen the understanding of a topic still in its early stages. This methodology facilitates the identification of ideas, concepts, and directions for future research without aiming to provide definitive answers (Malhotra, 2020). It was chosen due to the novelty of the subject and the need to grasp its nuances before conducting more in-depth studies.

Initially, secondary data were analyzed to establish the theoretical and structural foundation of the research. Sources included digital magazines, periodicals, public reports, social media, and videos, which supported the study's development. Following this phase, qualitative interviews were conducted with individuals who have attended or expressed interest in attending the samba school parades at Sapucaí.

Selection of interviewees

Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Yin, 2014), to ensure alignment with the study's objectives.. The interview script included both individuals who had attended the Sapucaí *Carnaval* and those who had not yet experienced it. Additionally, the snowball method was employed to recruit new interviewees through referrals from initial contacts.

A total of 10 interviews were conducted with Rio de Janeiro residents: three with individuals who had previously attended *Carnaval* at Sapucaí and seven with those who wished to experience it again (Chart 1)

Chart 1. Interviewees' Profile.

#	Name	Gender	Age range (years)	Interview format	Has already attended the parades at Sapucaí?
1	VB	F	20–30	In person	No
2	BW	F	20–30	In person	No
3	GC	F	20–30	Phone	No
4	PM	M	20–30	In person	No
5	GT	M	20–30	Phone	No
6	EA	F	60–70	In person	Yes
7	LB	F	20–30	Phone	Yes
8	GS	M	20–30	Phone	No
9	AV	M	30–40	In person	Yes
10	VH	F	20–30	Phone	No

F: female; M: male.

Data processing and collection procedures and instruments

Data collection occurred between October 1st and 20th, 2024, through individual interviews conducted either in person or by telephone, depending on the participants' availability and preference. The interview script included introductory questions about the interviewees' profiles and explored their experiences and perceptions of Rio's *Carnaval*.

With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed in three stages. First, the responses were organized in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, with each question assigned to a specific column to facilitate direct comparisons. Next, a thorough analysis of each question was conducted to identify key points and emerging patterns. Finally, the insights obtained were compared with the theoretical framework to establish connections and contributions.

This structured approach enabled a clear visualization of the collected data, highlighting similarities and differences in responses while providing a solid foundation for an in-depth analysis of the topic.

Limitations of the method

Qualitative research has inherent limitations, particularly regarding data subjectivity and limited scope. Since interviews serve as the primary instrument, responses may be influenced by participants' motivation or reluctance to share personal experiences, potentially introducing bias. Additionally, the small sample size may limit the representativeness of the findings.

The methodological choices and data analysis reflect the researchers' perspective, which, despite efforts to maintain objectivity, may have influenced the emphasis on certain aspects. Therefore, the results should be interpreted within the specific context of the study, prioritizing depth over statistical representativeness.

RESULTS

Analysis of the interviews conducted

This section presents the results of the interviews conducted with selected participants, identifying perceptions and suggestions regarding the Sapucaí *Carnaval* experience. The goal is to integrate interviewees' insights with the theoretical framework to provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges and opportunities for enhancing audience engagement at the samba school parades. The qualitative analysis highlights points of convergence and divergence, revealing potential strategies in communication and cultural marketing to amplify the event's cultural and emotional impact. The results are organized into thematic categories that reflect the most relevant aspects emerging from the interviews, facilitating an understanding of key demands and proposals.

Using social networks as an educational tool

Interviewees expressed strong interest in using social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels to share information about parade themes and technical aspects. They emphasized that digital platforms play a crucial role in preserving *Carnaval* culture by engaging young audiences in a direct and informal way. Testimonies highlight social media's potential to educate and captivate viewers: *"It would be interesting to use short videos on TikTok explaining the different schools and presenting the parades in a youthful, engaging manner"* (Interviewee 2).

I think using social media totally makes sense. We're connected all the time. I use Instagram and TikTok a lot, even Facebook, which is basically dead now. But using more up-to-date tools could really help attract more people and even explain things better, you know? (Interviewee 4).

I think using the little flags² really brings the audience together, just like the samba lyrics do. But it's also super important to build up the experience before people even get to Sapucaí, creating pages that focus on the event as a whole, talking about the samba schools and showing what's going to be presented there. The focus shouldn't just be on the theme, but also on the story behind the parade, what story the school wants to tell. That adds a lot more value for the audience (Interviewee 7).

Pine II and Gilmore (1998, 2011) argue that creating engaging experiences requires technologies that foster meaningful interactions. Rivera *et al.* (2022) further emphasize that strategically leveraging social media in cultural festivals not only expands the event's reach but also strengthens the audience's emotional connection, particularly through interactive and immersive narratives.

Printed materials

The inclusion of printed materials, such as brochures and pamphlets, was highlighted as an effective way to enhance the Carnival experience, particularly for

² Samba schools usually distribute their flags to the audience before the parade at the sambadrome.

audiences seeking more detailed information during the parades. Interviewees emphasized that physical materials can serve as a centralized source of relevant details, including plot summaries, evaluation criteria, and descriptions of the floats, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of the spectacle.

Keeping the audience's attention during the parades is key to really understanding and connecting with what's happening on the avenue. Even though people take photos and record videos, they can get distracted by social media. It would be great to have something in hand, outside of the digital space (Interviewee 5).

In this context, Interviewee 8 emphasized: *"It would be extremely valuable to have more information about what each school will present that night. I would like to arrive already knowing the themes, as it would help me better understand the performances."*

Pine II and Gilmore (1998, 2011) emphasize the importance of providing clear and detailed information to actively engage the audience in an experience. Brochures and printed materials can serve an educational function by enriching spectators' understanding and making the event more meaningful. These resources serve as practical guides, encouraging focused attention and deeper reflection, while offering a temporary alternative to digital engagement. This, in turn, promotes more focused engagement and enhances immersion in the experience.

Solomon (2016) reinforces this idea by stating that a deep understanding of cultural events strengthens the consumer's emotional connection with the experience, leading to greater satisfaction and loyalty. Well-designed printed materials do more than simply provide information; they create engaging narratives that guide spectators through the event, enhancing their involvement and overall engagement.

Pre-Events

Pre-events emerged as a potential strategy to enhance the audience's experience. Interviewees highlighted initiatives such as *A Noite dos Enredos*, organized by the Independent League of Samba Schools of Rio de Janeiro (Liesa), which introduced the schools' themes before the composition of the samba-enredos. This initiative provided a more in-depth understanding of what would be presented on the avenue.

This year, Liesa brought back the event A Noite dos Enredos, and it was a hit. I went. That night really plays an important role [...]. Each samba school has about 15 minutes to share their way of explaining what they're bringing to the avenue [...]. And this all happened before the samba-enredo was even composed. So it can be really interesting both for the songwriter who's going to write the samba-enredo and for the spectator who just wants to understand and learn more about the parade (Interviewee 8).

In this sense, interviewees 7 and 9 add:

Having an event before and after the parade helps add more value by preparing the audience ahead of time and reinforcing the message afterward. It builds a stronger connection with the impact the samba school wants to make through the parade (Interviewee 7).

These pre- and post-events need to be better developed, because the audience really wants to engage with Carnaval. A Noite dos Enredos was great and left people wanting more, but more in the sense of "I want to follow this more closely," like really understanding how the whole show is put together. Most people don't fully grasp, just from watching the parade once, what's actually being presented or what the school is trying to express (Interviewee 9).

Pine II and Gilmore (1998, 2011) emphasize that intentionally designed experiences that engage audiences on a personal and emotional level are essential for enhancing perceived consumer value. Pre-events and audiovisual resources contribute to this by offering a deeper, more contextualized understanding of the presentations. Solomon (2016) further asserts that enriching and educational experiences strengthen the audience's emotional connection to the event, fostering greater loyalty and lasting memories.

Audiovisual resources

Interviewees emphasized the importance of audiovisual resources in enhancing the *Carnaval* experience. Jenkins (2006) highlights transmedia storytelling as a strategy for integrating audiovisual content across different platforms and event stages. The production of miniseries and documentaries, for instance, enables audiences to engage with the cultural narratives of samba schools before, during, and after the parades, fostering deeper involvement and expanding their understanding of the themes presented.

It would be amazing to have more audiovisual content showing what Carnaval is all about. It'd be great to show a sort of preview between parades, giving context about the theme and the cultural message each school wants to bring. Creating short mini-series, like five-minute episodes you can watch right on your phone, a few days before the Sapucaí parade would be a great way to get people more engaged (Interviewee 10).

Furthermore, Derbaix *et al.* (2017) highlight that these resources deepen audience immersion in the narratives, strengthening their emotional connection with the event. In this context, Pine II and Gilmore (1998, 2011) argue that audiovisual strategies do more than complement the experience, they transform it into a memorable event by evoking emotions and creating lasting memories. The integration of transmedia storytelling and audiovisual resources thus reinforces audience engagement with *Carnaval*, elevating it into a rich and meaningful cultural experience.

DISCUSSION

The interviews highlighted the need for communication strategies that enhance public knowledge and enrich the experience of watching the Special Group samba school parades at Rio de Janeiro's *Carnaval*. This aligns with key theoretical concepts, such as Pine II and Gilmore's (1998, 2011) "experience economy," which emphasizes the creation of engaging and memorable experiences, and Derbaix *et al.*'s (2017) insights on cultural narratives and immersive elements that strengthen emotional connections with audiences.

Social media has emerged as a crucial tool for achieving these goals. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram have been identified as effective channels for disseminating educational and interactive content, offering insights into the storylines, behind-the-scenes narratives, and curiosities of samba schools. This approach aligns with Jenkins' (2006) concept of transmedia storytelling, which advocates for the integrated use of multiple platforms to create cohesive and personalized experiences. Additionally, Rivera *et al.* (2022) emphasize that digital platforms can expand the reach of cultural events, fostering active audience participation and deepening engagement. The strategic use of these networks has the potential to transform *Carnaval* communication, particularly by attracting and engaging younger, digitally connected audiences.

Another key recommendation is the integration of communication channels to create a cohesive and seamless experience. Ponsignon and Derbaix (2020) highlight that digital convergence can serve as a powerful tool by connecting television, social media, apps, and other digital platforms. This integration enables the audience to engage with the event in a continuous and immersive manner, deepening their emotional connection with *Carnaval*.

Furthermore, interviewees emphasized the value of traditional resources, such as printed materials. Brochures and banners distributed at Sapucaí were recognized as valuable complements to the digital experience, providing detailed parade information and serving as meaningful keepsakes. The suggestion of a "*Carioca Carnaval Yearbook*" emerged as a way to preserve the event's memory and celebrate its cultural significance, reinforcing the lasting narratives discussed by Derbaix *et al.* (2017).

Pre-events, such as *A Noite dos Enredos*, have emerged as effective strategies to prepare the audience and deepen their understanding of samba school themes. Rivera *et al.* (2022) emphasize that interactive and educational activities at cultural festivals play a crucial role in connecting participants to the event's narratives and creative processes. These initiatives enhance engagement by fostering a richer and more immersive experience, increasing public interest and involvement.

The creation of audiovisual content has been widely suggested as a means to contextualize *Carnaval* and expand its reach. Documentaries and streaming series can explore the behind-the-scenes and creative processes of samba schools, highlighting the event's cultural and historical significance for both local and international audiences. Jenkins (2006) argues that transmedia strategies enhance audience engagement by integrating multiple platforms into a cohesive narrative, while Pine II and Gilmore (1998, 2011) emphasize that extending the experience fosters deeper emotional connections.

These recommendations, grounded in interviewee insights and supported by the theoretical framework, highlight the need for a multifaceted approach that integrates technology, education, and cultural elements. By combining these dimensions, the audience experience can be enriched while reinforcing the Sapucaí *Carnaval's* status as a globally significant cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore how communication strategies can enhance audience awareness and enrich their experience of the Special Group samba school parades at Rio de Janeiro's *Carnaval*. Through a qualitative and exploratory approach, the research identified perceptions, gaps, and opportunities to strengthen audience engagement with this cultural event, emphasizing the importance of integrating education, technology, and emotional connection.

The findings of this study emphasize the need for an integrated approach to enhance the audience experience. Strengthening the use of social media is recommended, with short, creative content explaining the plots, behind-the-scenes stories, and curiosities of the samba schools. Participants view social media as essential for disseminating educational and interactive content about the parades. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram were highlighted as effective tools for engaging audiences, particularly younger generations, and fostering a closer connection with the samba schools.

Additionally, printed materials such as brochures and guides remain valuable resources, complementing digital media. These materials can provide detailed information about the event, parade themes, and judging criteria, enhancing spectators' understanding and fostering deeper immersion in the experience.

Pre-events, such as *A Noite dos Enredos*, have proven to be valuable strategies for preparing the audience and fostering an early connection with the themes presented by the samba schools. These initiatives contribute to a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the spectacle. Interviewees suggest expanding educational pre-events to include interactive activities with *Carnaval* artists, composers, and other professionals involved in the creative process, further strengthening the audience's connection with the samba schools and their narratives.

Finally, the development of audiovisual resources, such as documentaries and miniseries, was widely suggested as a means to contextualize the event and broaden its reach, both locally and internationally. It is recommended to explore partnerships with global digital platforms to enhance the visibility of *Carnaval*, adapting content for foreign audiences and promoting the cultural richness of the event as a unique heritage.

While this research offers valuable insights, its limitations underscore the need for further investigation. Future research could examine the economic impact of *Carnaval* on Rio de Janeiro's creative economy and cultural production, as well as explore targeted strategies for attracting and engaging international audiences, reinforcing the event's potential as a global cultural phenomenon. Additionally, studies could investigate initiatives to enhance social inclusion in *Carnaval*, involving diverse demographic groups such as the aged, and explore how immersive technologies like augmented reality can further enrich the audience experience. By integrating these perspectives, *Sapucaí Carnaval* can not only expand its cultural impact but also solidify its status as a globally significant event.

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