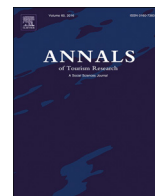


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## Annals of Tourism Research

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/annals](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/annals)

# Memorable tourism experiences and their consequences: An interaction ritual (IR) theory approach

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## ARTICLE INFO

Associate editor: Nancy McGehee

### Keywords:

Interaction rituals  
Emotional energy  
Shared memories  
Transformational tourism  
Event format  
Spin-off events

## ABSTRACT

Tourism experiences, memories thereof, and their consequences tend to be analysed separately, often focusing on the individual's perspective. This paper introduces Collins' (2004) interaction ritual (IR) theory to develop a micro-sociological interpretation of these phenomena as interconnected elements of IR chains. A longitudinal qualitative study of a multi-cultural festival held in Italy, the Mondiali Antirazzisti (Anti-racist World Cup), is used to show how emotional experiences and patterns of collective action are reproduced by the returning attendees in their home communities through the trans-local appropriation of the event's format. Findings lead to a revised model of IR chains to explain the trans-local dimension of transformational event tourism. The implications for wider application of IR theory within tourism are discussed.

## Introduction

Current tourism research acknowledges the importance of social interactions in generating 'the tourist moment' (Cary, 2004; Lehto, Luo, Miao, & Ghiselli, 2018), shaping post-trip memories (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017; Wood & Kenyon, 2018) and triggering individual and social change (Germann Molz, 2016; McGehee, 2002). Whilst this is often explored from a psychological perspective focused on the subjective experience and recollection of emotions (Campos, Mendes, Valle, & Scott, 2018), a growing number of studies are now more explicitly stressing the interrelation between affect, performativity and bodily interactions within tourism contexts (d'Hauterter, 2015).

This paper argues that Interaction Ritual (IR) theory, developed by sociologist Randall Collins (2004), has the potential to complement existing studies by emphasising the social construction of memorable tourism experiences and their transformative effects. This is demonstrated here by using IR theory to analyse an example of transformative event tourism, the Mondiali Antirazzisti (Antiracist World Cup). This is a left-wing multisport and multicultural festival held in Italy which merges leisure and politics (Sharpe, 2008) to enable social mixing, celebrate diversity and promote an anti-discrimination culture. By inspiring and motivating the civic engagement and activism of its attendees in their home communities, this festival promotes social change well beyond its limited spatial and temporal boundaries, and it does it mainly through the transformational journey experienced by its attendees.

IR theory is particularly suitable for this case study and complements other theoretical frameworks because of its micro-sociological focus that considers experiences, memories and meanings as socially constructed through direct and indirect interactions, rather than simply as individuals' psychological attributes. IR theory focuses on the mechanisms by which successful social interactions transform people's feelings into longer-term emotional energy, and how this energy is then circulated and regenerated through chains of further interactions that nourish relationships, mould identities and shape the social fabric. Despite its heuristic

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2019.102847>

Received 2 April 2019; Received in revised form 15 October 2019; Accepted 5 December 2019  
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potential, the IR theoretical framework remains underutilised within tourism research. This neglect is perhaps surprising given the growing focus on emotions as an emerging direction in tourism studies (Buda, d'Hauteserre, & Johnston, 2014; Cohen & Cohen, 2019) and the increasing interest in the relationship between emotions, memorable tourism experiences (Tung & Ritchie, 2011), their narrative recollections (Servidio & Ruffolo, 2016) and their consequences.

Whilst most studies of event tourism experience tend to focus rather synchronically on the individual and collective changes that happen within these liminal settings (Fairley & O'Brien, 2018; Foster & McCabe, 2015; Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015), more attention needs to be given to the longer-term impacts of these mobility encounters to study how changes are maintained and continue to evolve (Lean, 2009). Wilson, Arshed, Shaw, & Pret (2017, p. 195) note that the extant literature "rarely discusses the development of festivals over time and the wider networks in which festivals are embedded". Moreover, whilst many studies have focused on the collective benefits of events for the host communities and others have analysed the participants' experience from a personal development perspective, less attention has been given to the socio-cultural impacts that these events can have on the home communities that the attendees return to. This paper contributes by broadening the focus on community impacts both spatially and chronologically (Davies, 2015). The approach taken also addresses Deery, Jago, and Fredline's (2012) plea for more ethnographic investigations of tourism impacts that provide theoretical interpretations moving beyond their mere description. This is achieved by extending Collins' IR theory to analyse and explain the mobility of event formats, as meaningful patterns of collective action, through the attendees' post-event engagement and initiatives.

Drawing on narrative, observational and documentary data from a longitudinal qualitative study of the Mondiali Antirazzisti, this paper will analyse how emotionally charged IR chains of event tourism experiences and recollections can generate trans-local impacts and promote social change. More broadly, it will suggest how memorable tourism experiences and their consequences can be interpreted as part of IR chains that link together pre-travel interactions, shared tourism experiences, post-travel memory-sharing and subsequent behaviours and choices.

## Theoretical framework

### *Interaction ritual theory*

Collins' (2004) IR theory draws upon a long tradition of ritual studies, which represents a classical focus in anthropology and sociology (see Bell, 1992 for an in-depth discussion, which is beyond the scope of this paper). The two main influences informing Collins' approach are the works of Émile Durkheim (1912) and Erving Goffman (1967). Most of Durkheim's work was aimed at understanding what holds society together, i.e. how social solidarity is generated and maintained. He considered collective rituals as crucial mechanisms by which social values and standards of morality are reaffirmed, ultimately enabling the survival of society. Decades later, Goffman (1967) applied a similar approach to the micro-sociological level of everyday life to understand what holds situational interactions together. His work shows how our individual selves and reputations are dramaturgically produced through micro-rituals of deference and demeanour.

Whereas Durkheim and Goffman were mainly focused on explaining social order and stability, Collins' IR theory extends their interpretive frameworks to analyse the micro-sociological foundations of both social cohesion and social stratification, conflict and change. Despite their well-established status, IR theory and similar Durkheimian approaches have been rather neglected within tourism research. Among the few exceptions, Zuev and Picard (2015) apply IR theory to analyse the experience of Antarctic tourists focusing on their micro-interactions with symbolic objects, and (Gordon, 2013) uses Collins' theory to investigate nostalgia sport tourism and topophilia in American major league ballparks. Woosnam and Aleshinloye (2013) adopt a Durkheimian approach to study the development of emotional solidarity between tourists and local residents, whilst Wood and Kenyon (2018) engage with Collins' work in their analysis of the collective sharing, reproduction and reshaping of event-based emotional memories.

Collins' IR framework explains that the social fabric is constantly recreated, maintained and reshaped through chains of interactions. Each of these interactions can be interpreted as a ritual made of the elements and processes illustrated in Fig. 1, which become more evident in larger gatherings such as festivals and other collective events. The model outlined by Collins summarises and highlights the key element of the ritual process identified by Durkheim. Every time two or more people meet physically, direct their attention towards the same shared focus, and channel a common emotional mood towards the same objects, individual energies are catalysed and multiplied, thus further contributing to what Durkheim (1912) called collective effervescence. If the ritual is successful, the gradual rhythmic harmonisation of gestures transforms individual feelings into collective ones, and helps the participants to feel they are part of a moral community. This emotional entrainment generates solidarity within the group and emotional energy within the individuals.

This process of merging and blurring individualities into a collectivity shows the liminal dimension of rituals highlighted by anthropologist Victor Turner (1967). Despite their different backgrounds and belongings, people experiencing liminality together can feel part of a *communitas*, i.e. "a community or comity of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions" (Turner, 1967, p. 100). However, ritual liminality is ephemeral and tends to quickly crystallise into external boundaries, between insiders and outsiders, as well as internal stratification "between ritual leaders and ritual followers", as "some individuals are more privileged than others, by being closer to the centre of the ritual than others" (Collins, Id., p. 41).

The objects invested with the common attention and emotions become sacred for the participants as symbols of their unity. As Collins (Id., p. 38) puts it, "[t]he 'sort of electricity' that Durkheim metaphorically ascribes to the group in its state of heightened excitement is stored in batteries: one component of which is the symbol, and the other pole of which is the individual." Therefore, sacred objects are both an ingredient and an output of the ritual process. On the one hand, they provide a catalyst that helps the

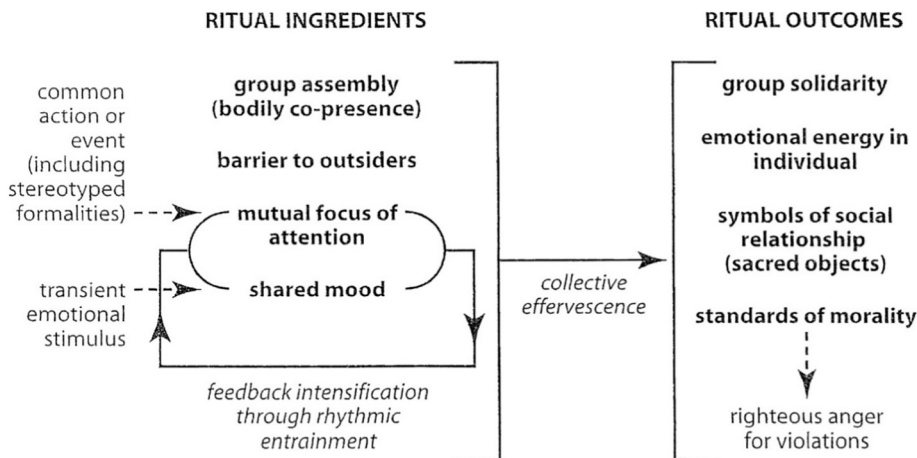


Fig. 1. Interaction ritual: the mutual-focus/emotional-entrainment model (Collins, 2004, p. 48).

participants to focus, merge and magnify their individual attention and emotions. On the other hand, they become a storage device for the emotional energy produced through the ritual, which can be taken away by the participants and re-used to repeat and relive the ritual experience later and elsewhere (either in a group or even individually). When this happens, “the symbols are circulating in a chain of self-reinforcing IRs” (Id., p. 95).

This not only applies to physical objects (from wedding rings to national flags, from pop stars to sport memorabilia) but also ideas, values, and liturgies (e.g. gestures, routines, and patterns of collective action) which the participants can identify with as symbols of their collective experience and emotional solidarity. Using the Mondiali Antirazzisti as an example, this paper argues that event formats can become sacred objects themselves by providing the members of a certain group with a clearly recognisable, symbolically meaningful repertoire of activities and collective actions that can be replicated in different places over time. Durkheim (1912) notes that such reiterations of the ritual process are actually necessary, since whilst sacred objects facilitate the recreation of emotional solidarity in subsequent rituals, they also need to be periodically recharged through IR chains in order to keep the group (and its values) alive.

Drawing on Goffman's work, Collins highlights how these mechanisms of emotional solidarity apply equally to small group settings, such as friendships and intimate relations. Therefore, he identifies two main circuits for the circulation of ritual symbols that prolongs group membership. The first circuit is the sacred objects generated by “emotionally entrained but otherwise anonymous crowds”, which “circulate from one mass gathering to another, and tend to fade in the interim” Collins (2004, p. 87). The other circuit is “the symbols of personal identities and reputations” circulated through micro-interaction rituals which are “generally of lesser momentary intensity than audience symbols but used so frequently and in self-reinforcing networks so as to permeate their participants' sense of reality” (ibid.). As this paper will show, transformational event tourism can be partly interpreted as a cross-over of symbols from one ritual circuit to the other (Fig. 2).

Whilst interaction ritual chains can often reproduce and maintain the *status quo*, they can also promote social change when they support and nourish groups that are engaged in social resistance, political activism and other transformational activities (Summers-Effler, 2002). This theoretical perspective could be applied to complement existing investigations of transformational tourism,

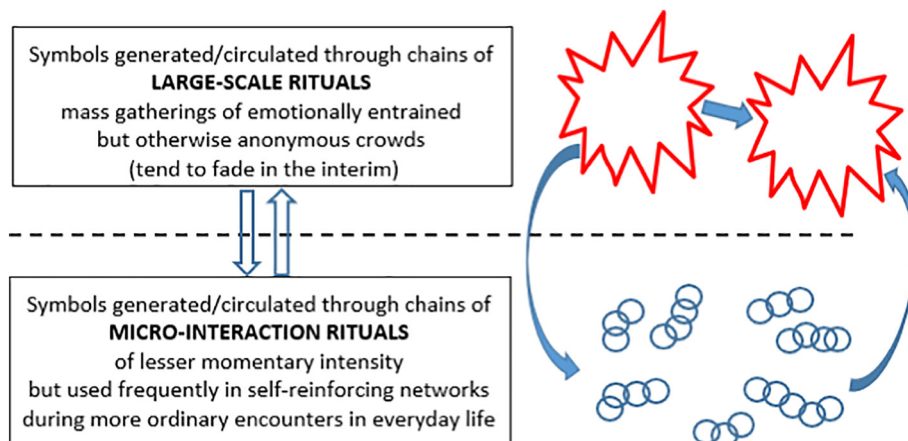


Fig. 2. Cross-over between the two main circuits of ritual symbols' circulation (author's elaboration based on Collins, 2004, p. 87).

activism mobilisation and social change promotion through events and celebration, as shown by the case in this paper (McGehee, Kline, & Knollenberg, 2014).

#### *Transformational journeys*

Travel-related changes and transformations can be studied from both the tourists' and the hosts' perspective (Filep, Laing, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2017; Reisinger, 2013). However, their conceptualisation entails a number of challenges (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018). Lean (2009) observes that the transformational potential of tourism has been studied rather disjointedly by focusing upon specific segments of the travel experience, such as study abroad, backpacking, religious tourism, ecotourism, developmental and volunteer tourism. Kay Smith and Diekmann (2017) note that ethical and altruistic forms of tourism can have a transformational potential for both the travellers and the hosts (McGehee et al., 2014; Salazar, 2010).

To some extent, transformative travel can be experienced individually by the tourist through the liminal nature of travelling, the challenges provided by the journey, and the separation from the usual everyday environment (White & White, 2004). However, most of the tourism-related transformational processes have a strong relational and social underpinning based on encounters and interactions (Lee & Woosnam, 2010). Event tourism is one of the main avenues for such potentially transformational encounters. This is because events provide peak moments that magnify the anticipation, expectations and intensity of the travel experience. They generate opportunities for strong and meaningful collective interactions and can become powerful catalysts for individual and social change for all participants (Páez, Rimé, Basabe, Włodarczyk, & Zumeta, 2015). These positive effects are particularly likely in the case of cause-related event volunteering (Welty Peachey, Cohen, Borland, & Lyras, 2011) or attending protests and other events promoted by a social movement (Lamond & Spracklen, 2017; McGehee et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, recent studies have noted that even when the potential for individual transformations is triggered by a travel experience, this often fails to materialise into tangible changes as these are not welcomed or supported within the social milieu of the returning tourist (Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2017; Lean, 2009). Therefore, research should pay more attention to what happens once the visitors return to their own local contexts and everyday lives (Lean, 2009; Wood & Kenyon, 2018).

#### *Trans-locality: beyond the host community*

A growing body of literature focuses on event augmentation and other social leveraging strategies (O'Brien, 2007; Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012) aimed at magnifying and extending the positive impacts of events on attendees and host communities (Taks, Chalip, & Green, 2015; Ziakas, 2016). Nonetheless, fewer scholars have looked more specifically at events' spill-over dynamics of geographic expansion beyond the host destination, for instance with regard to music festivals (Colombo & Richards, 2017), literature festivals (Podestà & Richards, 2018) and major sport events (Deccio & Baloglu, 2002; Smith, 2009).

Contributing to filling such a gap, this paper focuses on the processes that underpin events' *trans-locality*, which is defined here as *the ability to generate impacts and transformation at local levels mainly beyond the host destination*. Specifically, the analysis concentrates on the Mondiali Antirazzisti as an event with a high level of trans-locality potential. The festival affects the attendees' communities more than the local residents by inspiring the spontaneous reproduction of spin-off events. These are organised at the grassroots level 'by the people, for the people', as opposed to similar but commercially driven proliferations of other events' formats (e.g. Colombo & Richards, 2017).

Trans-locality is clearly a feature of those field-configuring events that "initiate cultural trends, create social networks, and allocate meaning to previously unfamiliar circumstances" (Lange, Power, & Suwala, 2014: 187). Numerous examples of these trans-local socio-cultural impacts can be found in the literature on the diffusion of social movements (Andrews & Biggs, 2006; della Porta & Mosca, 2010; Summers-Effler, 2002).

For instance, Daskalaki and Kokkinidis's (2017) recent analysis of solidarity events – e.g. assembly meetings, workshops and seminars – organised by Greek citizens and activists during the economic recession shows how these "resistance laboratories also become points of reference for those who want to establish their own alternative organizations" (Id., p. 1303) and highlights the importance "of members' mobility in the production of resistance" (Id., p. 1314).

The latter is also emphasised by Brown's (2011) ethnographic study of Fair Trade (FT) organisations. Most of the retail shop activists met by the author "began supporting the FT movement after being greatly impacted by a travel experience to a developing country" (id., p. 128). Therefore, many FT organisations "attempt to create similar extraordinary experiences for their store managers and owners by organising trips to visit the producers of FT coffee and handicrafts" (id., p. 130).

A further example is provided by Dufour's (2016:358) study of the World Social Forum (WSF) and how it generates spin-off events in the form of Local Social Forums. He found that Social Forums "as a specific form of collective action – spread from South to North as a direct result of activists willing to reproduce within their localities that which they had seen and experienced on a larger scale" (Dufour, 2016, p. 358). The format of the World Social Forum is replicated locally through a process of geographical appropriation operated by "individual activists who brought their WSF experiences back home" (Id., p. 359).

Two key factors emerging from these studies are *events attendees' agency* and *events' format mobility*. The latter involves the attempt to re-enact the original event experience that generated or magnified the initial enthusiasm, motivation and commitment – not only by travelling to similar events but also by reproducing, adapting and appropriating them locally. The former refers to the "active role of social movement activists as adopters and adapters of ideas coming from other movements or other places" (Della Porta & Mosca 2010:77). In the case of Local Social Forums, "leaders or innovators in the process were people who had experiences in larger WSF/ESF contexts and/or with cross-movement coalition building" (ibid.). Events trans-locality is therefore conveyed by those attendees

who act as ‘cultural pollinators’ contributing to cross-fertilisation through (among other initiatives) events’ format mobility, diffusion and local appropriation.

## Context and methods

### *The Mondiali Antirazzisti*

The Mondiali Antirazzisti (Antiracist World Cup) is an intercultural festival and non-competitive multi-sport tournament – initiated in 1997 by the Italian left-wing sport-for-all body UISP (Unione Italiana Sport Per tutti) – which has become a hallmark event within the international antiracist movement FARE (Football Against Racism in Europe) (Totten 2015).

It began as a small football tournament between a few groups of rival football fans (ultras) to provide a relaxed and festive environment in which they could discuss the increasing violence and discrimination in the stadia and outside (Mondiali Antirazzisti, 2017). The event rapidly grew to attract fans groups from outside Italy and further evolved as groups of migrants, social and political activists, and other informal groups were gradually included by the organisers to enhance social mixing and celebrate diversity (ibid.). Other sports tournaments, as well as several cultural and social activities, were progressively added to the football programme, thus increasing the complexity of the event and attracting growing numbers of participants from dozens of countries all over Europe and beyond. In parallel, the term ‘anti-racism’ gradually became more broadly interpreted by organisers and participants to signify the rejection of any form of discrimination, from sexism to homophobia (ibid.).

Collective effervescence is spread across several points of this multifocal ritual (Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015) in which, besides playing a number of recreational sports, participants sleep alongside each other in the camping area, share meals (and beers) in the big restaurant-marquees, attend roundtables, workshops and book presentations, engage in political discussions, watch video-screenings, enjoy large-scale concerts, and spend most of the night bouncing and chanting with the ultras groups in the marquees (id.).

Started as a small gathering of a few dozen people, the event has rapidly grown to become a five-day festival with an overall estimated attendance of 6–8000 people from more than 30 countries (Mondiali Antirazzisti, 2017). In 21-year history the organisers have built positive relationships with four different host communities and attract participants from these local areas; however, the festival was mainly conceived to attract the large and diverse community of ‘non-local’ visitors who travel to the Mondiali Antirazzisti from outside the area (Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015, pp. 191–192).

### *Methods*

This paper is based on a longitudinal qualitative study of the Mondiali Antirazzisti, which unfolded during subsequent waves of formally funded fieldwork interwoven with periods of more informal, self-funded research (Neale, 2019). Primary data gathered between 2006 and 2013 through ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews were concurrently and subsequently integrated by the analysis of secondary sources.

Two interconnected phases of the study can be retrospectively identified (Fig. 3). The first, longer phase (2006–2015) was mostly focused on the evolution of the festival’s format and its ability to generate liminality through collective effervescence, facilitate inclusive social mixing, and celebrate diversity. The key findings were published in Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015 and are synthesised here below in paragraph 4.1 to provide the basis for the analysis developed in the following sections.

The second phase of the study (2015–present), which is discussed in this paper, was deeply rooted in the first one but shifted the attention to investigate the generation of spin-off events, once this emerged as an important transformational impact of the Mondiali Antirazzisti. A retrospective analysis of primary data previously generated, updated through the examination of secondary sources, facilitated the exploration of “dynamic processes through hindsight, a gaze backwards in time from the vantage point of the present day” (Neale, 2019, p.49). This perspective will underpin the theoretical interpretations presented in this paper.

The ethnographic fieldwork at the festival was conducted for four days in 2006, three days in both 2007 and 2008, one day in 2009, four in 2011, and one in 2012. The observation was guided by ‘sensitizing concepts’ (Blumer, 1969) based on the key features of the Durkheim/Collins’ model (Fig. 1). The attention was initially focused on elements such as: the evolving intensity of activity

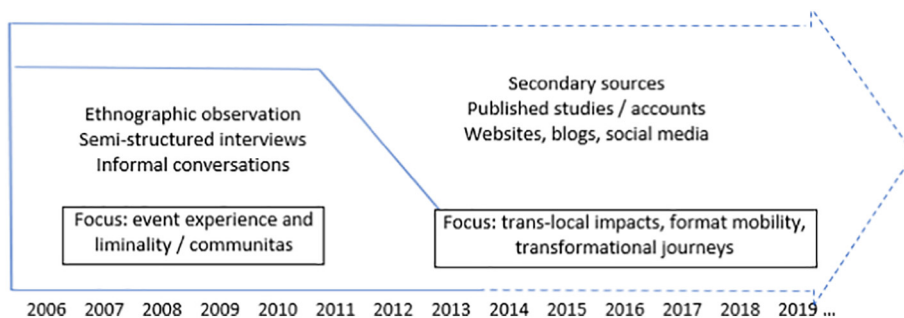


Fig. 3. Evolution of research focus and shifting balance of data sources.

participation across the event stages; the number and type of participants in the various activities; the spatial and temporal density/proximity of the foci of attention; the weight/centrality of each focus; and the partial deconstruction of sporting categorisations (see Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015, p. 186 for further details). Sustained fieldwork over the years made it also possible to witness critical turning points, in particular the event being moved to different locations between 2007 and 2011 (Id.).

Ethnographic observation was complemented by semi-structured interviews conducted during and after the tournament based on a 'stratified purposeful sampling strategy' (Patton, 2015, p. 272). The interviews focused on a limited range of information-rich cases, i.e. key informants (two tournament organisers, the president of UISP, two local administrators of one of the hosting municipality, and twenty-six subjects belonging to the different types of participant teams). Whenever possible, experienced participants were preferred, who were able to offer a longitudinal account of the event, notably in relation to the effects of event evolution on the attendees' experience.

Group belonging and self-representation was considered the salient identity level for this study. Therefore, other personal details about the respondents were only recorded when they emerged from the interview but not systematically gathered otherwise (and therefore not indicated in the interview quotes presented in this paper). This clearly poses a limitation to the present study, as an intersectional perspective would allow for a more nuanced analysis of the event experience and its consequences.

An indicative typology of participant groups (e.g. fans, social workers, activists, informal participants) was extrapolated from the event's website. Participants from different categories were initially approached (2006–2007) either through opportunistic sampling or through purposive snowballing. The attention was subsequently (2011) funnelled by moving from 'heterogeneity' to 'homogeneous sampling' (Patton, 2015, p. 268–269) in order to investigate how a specific category of participants (football fans) became gradually marginalised by the increased diversification of the event's format and attendees' demographics. A third set of interviews (2013) focused on one single, information-rich sub-case, i.e. a group returning to the event some years after winning the Mondiali Antirazzisti award in 2006.

To enable comparison with the attendees' accounts, interviews and informal conversations with the organisers were similarly structured around their representations of the festival evolution, the reasons behind the various format changes, and their perceived impact with regard to the event's aims and the participants' experience.

Deductive qualitative analysis (Gilgun, 2019) was performed by "examining the data for illumination of predetermined sensitizing concepts or theoretical relationships" (Patton, 2015, p. 551). The manual coding of interview transcripts and conversational field notes was initially driven by the same concepts underpinning both the ethnographic observation and the interview guide (e.g. physical gatherings, foci of attention, common emotional mood, collective effervescence, emotional energy, sacred objects, group boundaries, and social mixing/*communitas*). This was combined with elements of thematic, structural and performative narrative analysis (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) to explore how and why the stories about the festival evolution were intertwined to the individual and collective biographies and self-representations of the participants.

Documentary material from secondary sources was triangulated with primary data to iteratively orientate fieldwork and interpretation, strengthen the analysis and enhance its validity (Patton, 2015). Interview accounts and online representations of the festival helped understand the meanings that organisers and participants associate to different features of the format under observation. On the other hand, the consistence between accounts and behaviours was monitored through the field observation.

With the gradual broadening of the research focus to explore impacts beyond the limited time and space of the festival (2013-onwards), the analysis of secondary material – in particular online and offline detailed evidence of spin-off events and initiatives undertaken by the attendees – became increasingly more important as a source of data collection (Fig. 3).

In the crowded public space of the Mondiali Antirazzisti, some practical and ethical issues had to be managed pragmatically. The researchers' identity and the purpose of the study were revealed to the organisers and the interviewees, though clearly this was not feasible for the whole of the festival's attendees. Access to the field, negotiated with the organisers, was facilitated by the inclusive ethos of the festival and the heterogeneity of the attendees. However, ethical sensitivity was required to avoid exploiting the generalised trust generated by the sense of *communitas* that permeates the festival. Moreover, the iterative character of this ethnographic and diachronic study means that, despite providing initial consent, participants might be "unlikely to have a sense of the cumulative power of the data they are providing and what it may reveal about them over time" (Neale, 2019, p. 79).

Therefore, particular care was taken when representing the qualitative findings in order to minimise the risk of generating tensions within or between participant groups, thus damaging reputations and relationships. Anonymity was protected by loosely indicating each informant based on their group membership and downplaying other personal characteristics. Whenever there was a considerable risk of this causing intra- or inter-group issues, it was chosen to prioritise confidentiality over the use of the information. Whilst this can potentially limit the accuracy and persuasiveness of the analysis, it was accepted as a necessary compromise (Neale, 2019; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The risk of downplaying controversial accounts and providing an unbalanced representation of the event was mitigated by the progressive shift towards desk research and the analysis of secondary sources in later stages of the study, which facilitated further reflexivity through data triangulation and negative cases analysis (Gilgun, 2019).

## Impactful tourism experiences as interaction ritual chains

### *The event format: a catalogue of symbolic repertoires*

This brief section is entirely based on Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015. It synthesises the main findings of the first part of the study, providing the basis for the analysis and discussion that will be articulated in the next sections of this paper (4.2 onwards).

Most features of the Mondiali Antirazzisti's format have both a practical and a symbolic significance (Richards, 2015; Ziakas &

Costa, 2012), since they both enable/encourage and represent/celebrate key values such as inclusion, diversity, pluralism and respect (Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015). Free entry and economic accessibility become symbols of equality and inclusivity for this alter-global gathering (Harvey, Horne, & Safai, 2009) that proposes alternative values within a polytopian context (Ziakas, 2016). A similar symbolic role is played by the blurred boundaries between organisers and participants (through volunteering and co-creation) and between players and spectators. In the first decade of the *Mondiali Antirazzisti*, external boundaries were also blurred through a colourful and joyful parade of all the heterogeneous participant through the host town to spread the event's ritual energy and generate emotional contagion (Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015, pp. 190–191). Diversity and social mixing within the event are enabled and symbolised by a range of organisational features, from encouraging the participation of ethnic-, age-, and gender-mixed teams, to increasing sporting diversity through additional, symbolically meaningful activities. (e.g. rugby for its fair-play ethos, and tchoukball to celebrate non-violence and equality).

The multi-focal format generated by a plurality of activities is maintained by preventing any of these from obscuring the others. As discussed in Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015, several adaptations have been gradually made to downplay the importance of the football tournament and stress its non-competitive nature. Self-refereed matches encourage ownership, responsibility and mutual respect. Several matches are played simultaneously on more than a dozen pitches alongside a range of other activities (e.g. sports, music, roundtables), rather than focusing thousands of participants' attention on one single match at a time charging it with excessive levels of collective effervescence (Id.). Semi-finals and finals are directly decided through penalty shoot-outs without playing the actual matches, thus linking victory to fortune and minimising its significance. As another important symbolic device, the most significant award presented at the end of the prize-giving ceremony is not the trophy for the winners of the sport tournaments, but the Antiracist Cup for the team who best upheld the spirit and ideals of the event during the entire year, challenging discrimination in its local context. Other important awards include the Fair Play Cup and the Kick Sexism Cup (*Mondiali Antirazzisti*, 2013). Friendliness, respect, and engagement – as opposed to sporting performance and achievement – are thus celebrated as sacred objects of the ritual.

These symbols are also celebrated through the Piazza Antirazzista [Antiracist Square], where the participant teams are invited to display a poster presentation showcasing the main anti-discrimination activities and initiatives they undertake in their own local communities (*Mondiali Antirazzisti*, n.d.). Whilst enabling the sharing/exchanging of good practices and providing inspiration for those groups that are not politically or socially active as yet, the Piazza Antirazzista has the important ritual function of celebrating, acknowledging and rewarding those who show commitment to the event's values through their everyday local engagement. As confirmed by McGehee et al.'s (2014, p.150) analysis of similar events, this sharing and celebration of each other's accomplishments has an evident impact “on the participants' individual and collective self-efficacy, the overall social capital of the group, and the rejuvenation of passion for their community development work.”

#### *Setting moral standards: motivation through celebration*

Whilst during the *Mondiali Antirazzisti* a plurality of ritual gatherings (e.g. sport matches, music gigs, workshops and roundtables) usually unfold simultaneously, the final prize-giving ceremony is a stand-alone ritual with no concurrent activities and it therefore catalyses the attention of most attendees. In IR terms, this generates a stronger attentive and emotional focus, which is perceived more intensely by those who are in the centre of the celebration. At that moment, indeed, they become sacred objects that are charged up by the collective energy of the whole group and are considered to represent its values (Collins, 2004, p. 36). This is exemplified by the words of a female member of *Republica Internationale* – a left-wing/anarchist football club based in Leeds, UK – who recalls the powerful experience of being awarded the Antiracist World Cup in 2006:

The setting was beautiful, with the steps and stage at the bottom, like an amphitheatre, and when we went on the podium to take up the trophy it was an unbelievably emotional thing, the whole crowd, being up there, everybody like... clapping... so when we came off I cried! It was really emotional to me because [...] to be told that our spirit showed abroad, at a big massive event like that, I was just overwhelmed.

The membership status of this group of participants is enhanced by their central position in a high-intensity ritual peak (Collins, 2004, p.116). However, the ritual mechanism also creates emotional congruity and pressure towards conformity, thus setting the moral standards to which the members of the group feel somehow compelled to adhere, and against which they evaluate themselves. This became evident in the case of *Republica Internationale*, who felt they did not fully deserve the award since at that time they were undergoing a period of internal crisis regarding their political identity and commitment (Totten, 2015). As confirmed by another female member of the team:

[T]here was a lot of feeling within *Republica* that we didn't fully deserve it, we felt they misunderstood us or they didn't really appreciate who we were, we're only this Sunday-league football team and everything else, so I just think it creates something within the club that made us want to live up to the reputation of what they felt we were as well. We were in tears; it was that emotional.

Such an ambivalent reaction shows (and somehow explains) both the morally constraining effects of a successful interaction ritual and its motivational power, emphasising the link between celebration, motivation and future engagement already highlighted by other studies of transformational tourism experience (McGehee et al., 2014). As exemplified by the same interviewee:

[...] Two of the people who organised that 2006 trip then decided that they would become joint-coordinators of our club the following year and they wanted to implement quite a lot of that stuff around the... we had a Fair Trade committee that was formed through that [...] and the Left Wing, that is a political debate once a month on different topics. That came from that kind of real... I suppose it's kind of inspirational, but... almost ashamed in the same way!

Although the sense of moral obligation and subsequent commitment tend to be more compelling for the prize recipients at the centre of the ritual, significant motivational effects are also experienced by more ordinary and peripheral attendees. A clear example is provided by the following comment (quoted in Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015, p. 193) by an Italian football fan from the Sampdoria Rude Boys and Girls, a group that regularly attends the festival:

In Genova, we put on our own tournament every year. We bring there ultras groups from other cities, friends of ours, together with other Sampdoria supporters from Genova, and migrants as well. Latinos, gangs, and the like, went to play with us and the ultras. Thus, the richness that we've learnt here at the Mondiali, we brought it home too. (...) it's a seed that was sown; afterwards, everyone made his own garden at his home. It surely taught many people here, the same way it taught us.

As clearly exemplified by this spin-off event, while boosting the participants' enthusiasm and their feeling of being part of a moral community, the Mondiali Antirazzisti also inspire many attendees by providing them with a template of symbolic repertoires to be replicated in their own local contexts.

#### *Event format mobility: revamping emotional energy through local adaptation*

According to Collins (2004, p. 107) individuals who have taken part in successful rituals want to reproduce and experience similar feelings of emotional energy again, and the latter "is carried across situations by symbols that have been charged up by emotional situations." As explained earlier in this paper, several organisational features of the Mondiali Antirazzisti – such as its multifocal structure, economic affordability, sport-based social mixing between diverse participants, and self-refereed matches with penalty shoot-out finals – are charged with moral significance as symbols of inclusivity, equality and respect (Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015). Therefore, their reproduction and re-enactment operated by some of the attendees in their own local communities enable the circulation of the group's symbols and values through the recollection and revamping of the emotional energy originally experienced at the Mondiali Antirazzisti.

A significant example of this process is the story of the Community Day started by the Sheffield-based group FURD (Football Unites, Racism Divides) after their two football teams got to the final of the Mondiali Antirazzisti in 1998:

Back home in Sharrow, then FURD youth worker Tom Collins had the bright idea of replaying the final at Bramall Lane [Sheffield United's stadium]. Once the club agreed, the concept of Community Day was born, involving small-sided games in four quarters of the pitch, Streetkick, plus stalls, displays, exhibitions, food and entertainment (...). (Johnson, 2009, pp. 126-127)

Gaining growing popularity in the local area, the FURD's Community Day clearly replicated the multi-ethnic and multi-focal format of the Mondiali Antirazzisti, multiplying the catalysts for collective effervescence, celebration of diversity and inclusive social change in the local community:

[O]ther entertainment often includes a clown, cheerleaders, DJs, rap crews and dancing displays and boxing exhibitions. Local community groups set up stalls and exhibitions and some specially chosen food stalls provide a taste of something different. The henna painting, hair braiding, beauty therapy, face painting, nail art and the Indian head massage are all extremely popular. (ibid.)

Whereas many local events try to replicate the format of the Mondiali Antirazzisti as closely as possible, others tend to creatively adapt it to the different local contexts. A paradigmatic example is the Mediterraneo Antirazzista, a multi-sited event organised by social workers and street educators in the degraded peripheries of the Sicilian city of Palermo and subsequently extended to other Italian cities. Once again, the initial process is very similar to other spin-off events: a number of people travel to the Mondiali Antirazzisti together as a group, experience high levels of emotional energy (particularly when feeling in the centre of the IR) and once back home they meet again to share memories and ideas about how to reproduce the same experience in (and for) their local community. This leads to the creation of a new event through the local adaptation of the original one (Andrews & Biggs, 2006; Dufour, 2016). As explained by one of the initiators of Mediterraneo Antirazzista, a social worker from Palermo:

[F]rom the beginning the welcoming here was amazing, so this also facilitated us a lot, it made us think, and when we came back to Palermo we said: "Why don't we do something similar too? Using sport, but contextualising it with reference to the path we are already following in Palermo by envisaging the involvement of peripheries, meeting centres, communities." [...] And that's how Mediterraneo Antirazzista was born in 2008.

Significant organisational features, such as the outreaching parade and the penalty shoot-outs to downplay competition, were clearly borrowed from the Mondiali's format. However, these elements were contextualised to encourage dynamics of resilience, participation and empowerment among marginalised urban groups through the re-appropriation of disused spaces, as explained by the same interviewee:

To this we added the initiatives in the neighbourhoods. So there was a parade that started from the velodrome at the end of the event and brought a couple of goalposts all the way to the ZEN [a huge council housing district characterised by deep architectural and social degradation] on a square that is not a square but an abandoned plot (...), we set up goalposts in that square and played the finals directly as a penalty shootout, like here at the Mondiali, and then we had a party. And the evening before we had had the antiracist party in Ballarò, in the centre of Palermo.

Through cooperation with groups of social workers and activists based in other Italian cities, this on-the-road approach was gradually extended over the years to other locations which are emblematic of some of the country's most degraded peripheries, such



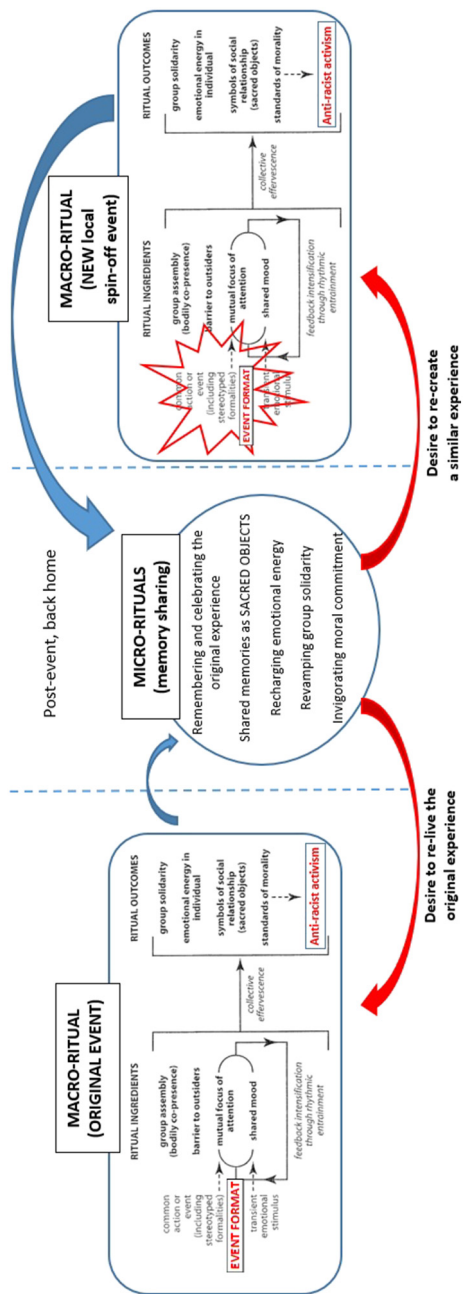


Fig. 4. IR theory – revised model (adapted from Collins, 2004).

as the infamous district of Scampia in Naples ([Mediterraneo Antirazzista Napoli, 2019](#)).

This case further exemplifies the processes by which the emotional energy, moral solidarity and symbolic repertoires generated by a main event (the Mondiali Antirazzisti) can be circulated and mobilised elsewhere into tangible social action, showing and enhancing the trans-locality of the original event itself.

#### *Theoretical implications: a revised IR model*

The analysis presented in this paper exemplifies and highlights the threefold collective dimension of transformational event tourism and memorable tourism experiences more broadly, as illustrated by the revised IR model in [Fig. 4](#).

Firstly, the seeds are sown through a collective ritual that generates rhythmic entrainment and emotional contagion, creates feelings of belonging, strengthens moral commitment, provides inspiration and (re)generates motivation.

Secondly, the resulting enthusiasm is sustained through the repeated micro-interaction rituals by which fellow attendees from the same local community recall and relive those emotions by sharing memories and narratives about the event once they return back home. In IR terms, the shared memories represent the sacred objects of these subsequent micro-rituals, which reaffirm both the participants' belonging to the whole community of the main event and their more specific bond as a local group of likeminded friends.

Thirdly, these people seek to re-experience the same collective effervescence either by returning to the original event in the future or by replicating its key features in local spin-off initiatives. This turns the event format itself – as a set of clearly recognisable and symbolically meaningful repertoires of activities – into a sacred object the attendees can identify with and which therefore represents their group belonging.

The memory sharing micro-rituals ([Fairley, Gibson, & Lamont, 2018](#); [Wood & Kenyon, 2018](#)) in the second stage of these IR-chains contribute to maintaining the transformational power of the event experience, which otherwise tends to fade away if the returning attendees lack collective support from relatives and friends who did not experience the same transformative journey themselves ([Kirillova et al., 2017](#); [Lean, 2009](#)). Sharing memories about the shared event experience not only retrieves and prolongs the emotional energy generated by the main event, thus reaffirming the moral commitment to its values; it also creates opportunities for sharing ideas about how to turn the enthusiasm and inspiration into tangible action, which can include the local re-enactment of spin-off events. The latter stage of the IR-chain generates the event's trans-locality through its format's mobility, diffusion and adaptation. Emotional energy, group values and symbols of belonging (including the event format) circulate back and forth across these stages of IR chains.

Some important limitations of this study must be acknowledged. Further insights could be discovered by adopting a more nuanced intersectional approach to explore how personal characteristics and backgrounds contribute to shape the participants' ritual engagement and collective identifications. Notably, the ideological characteristics of the festival inevitably affect the expressed views and behavioural patterns of both organisers and attendees, reproducing new insider/outsider boundaries. Whilst this is briefly discussed in [Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015](#), the impactful character of the expressed ideologies and political orientations needs to be investigated in more depth to understand how previous IR chains influence the festival's grounds, formulation of motivations, symbols and local adaptations.

Additional understanding of the ritual process could also be obtained through a deeper focus on 'negative cases', e.g. those participants' experiences that show how and why the ritual can fail to produce social cohesion, emotional energy, moral commitment, and the desire to replicate the experience. Moreover, it must be noticed that the local reproduction of the Mondiali Antirazzisti's format does not necessarily translate into a reduction in racism and discrimination in the attendees' communities of origin. In fact, the actual success of the spin-off events and initiatives in tackling these problems can be very limited, ephemeral, impossible to measure, or difficult to prove. However, whilst further research is clearly needed to evaluate the extent of the actual impact of these spin-off activities, their very existence (and possible longevity) can be interpreted as tangible evidence of behavioural impacts of transformative travel, which is otherwise more difficult to observe. Moreover, these IR chains of local events keep the activists' groups alive, attract new members and give public visibility to their values, which is already a significant achievement in the current times of increasing xenophobia and discrimination ([Roth, 2018](#)).

Clearly, the support to local mobilisation through the generation of moral commitment becomes more evident in the case of successful cause-related events ([Brown, 2011](#); [McGehee et al., 2014](#)) Nonetheless, the same IR-chains mechanism can account for the reproduction/regeneration of participants' enthusiasm and the trans-local circulation/diffusion of more mundane socio-cultural items, such as specific sport subcultures and belonging ([Fairley & O'Brien, 2018](#); [Green & Chalip, 1998](#)), or even of exclusivist/extremist values and worldviews ([Owens, Cunningham, & Ward, 2015](#)).

The application of IR theory is therefore not limited to the reproduction of only enjoyable moments and positive emotions. This interpretive framework can also explain how negative event experiences can drain emotional energy away from some attendees, inhibiting their motivation/mobilisation and ultimately generating negative change ([Segura, Attali, & Magee, 2017](#)). Furthermore, IR chains can build on unpleasant feelings such as anger, fear, sadness or grief, as long as the events are successful in celebrating and reaffirming the bond between the members of a certain group (e.g. vigils, remembrance days and other memorial events).

Finally, IR theory can be fruitfully applied to other forms of transformational tourism. For instance, the meaningful encounters experienced by volunteer tourists ([McGehee, 2002](#)) can be interpreted as emotionally intense IRs that create moral solidarity. This can subsequently turn into political activism, civic engagement and charity work if it is sustained and reinforced over time through supportive IR chains (often with like-minded people who shared similar experiences).

## Conclusions

The IR chains framework, identified here, can be extended to analyse the interactional underpinnings of any form of memorable tourism experience, and in particular the interplay between emotional experience, memory recollection/sharing, and post-travel consequences. Each link in the IR-chain can be interpreted as the production, circulation and regeneration of emotional energy, including when the latter is built on 'negative' emotions (Cave & Buda, 2018).

The implications of the findings are threefold. Firstly, the IR framework helps to explain how both pre-travel expectations and tourism experiences are grounded in (and magnified by) social interaction, thus complementing and extending previous studies (Campos et al., 2018; Lehto et al., 2018). This social dimension is also amplified by real-time sharing of tourism experiences through social media (Jansson, 2018; Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013; Simons, 2018). Tweets, photos and blog posts become the sacred objects of these IR chains that turn even individual travel into a collective/social experience. This celebrates and reaffirms both the interpersonal ties with friends and relatives left back home and the bond with people, places and cultures encountered during the journey (although social media can also distract the tourist from other meaningful interactions during the trip, as noted by Tribe & Mkono, 2017).

Secondly, tourism experiences become memorable through those post-travel interactions by which shared memories and meanings are socially constructed (Fairley et al., 2018; Wood & Kenyon, 2018). Alongside stories posted on social media (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017) and anecdotes told to friends and families, also souvenirs and memorabilia (Cave & Buda, 2018) become sacred objects charged with the symbolic meaning created through IRs during the trip. Acting as 'storage devices', they enable the returning travellers to take home, retrieve, reproduce and to some extent prolong – both through individual 'worship' and collective sharing – the emotional entrainment generated by the original experience. This IR mechanism is similarly reproduced when we return from a trip and try to cook a typical dish from the visited destination, or go out for a meal based on that specific food/cuisine. Again, this reproduction of the original experience – that celebrates and symbolises a bond with the visited place, culture and people – can be enacted either individually or together with fellow returnees, and can be extended by sharing it with friends/relatives who did not participate in the trip.

Thirdly, these IR chains have an impact on future behaviour and decisions. A memorable experience can lead to revisiting the same location or attending the same event again (Fairley et al., 2018; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). However, this is not necessarily the case as it depends on what sacred objects are celebrated in the post-trip micro-rituals of recollection and memory sharing. For instance, when 'novelty' is the main sacred object being cherished (Cary, 2004; Tung & Ritchie, 2011) the returning tourists will try to re-engage that type of emotional experience by travelling to new destinations. Similarly, when the sacred object is the sense of belonging to a community of like-minded travellers or event attendees (Morgan & Xu, 2009), returning to the same destination is not always necessary since those IRs and the related emotional energy can be re-ignited either by travelling together elsewhere or by creating spin-off events such as the ones analysed in this paper.

This study has a number of implications for the event and tourism industry. Artificial intelligence could be used to recreate the experience of being in the centre of the ritual focus. For instance, guided tours of empty sport venues can be turned into immersive experiences through augmented reality devices reproducing the surrounding crowd from an athletes' perspective. This could apply to many tourist destinations to extend over time the collective effervescence generated by specific events (e.g. the Palio di Siena or the Pamplona Bull Run), thus enabling visitors to experience part of that emotional energy even when the event is not taking place. Heritage tourism can also increase its application of AI immersive technologies to tap into the effervescence of collective events from the past. IR theory also has lessons for experiential marketing to further strengthen and refine the use of memorabilia as sacred objects in order to extend the emotional energy generated by group belonging. Group participation could be specifically supported by offering opportunities to capture group experiences, proposing tailored narratives, and providing online and offline platforms and initiatives for their circulation and sharing.

To conclude, based on the findings from this study it is recommended that IR theory is more widely applied within research on memorable tourism experience, transformational tourism and event impacts research. The revised theoretical model presented here contextualises this theory to tourism and includes the addition of memory micro-rituals as the missing link in the chain that creates relived, adapted, and impactful macro-rituals.

## Declarations of competing interest

None.

## Acknowledgments

Earlier stages of this study were funded by the University of Padua, Italy (grant no. CPDA054924) and part of the subsequent fieldwork was supported by the Leverhulme Trust (grant no. VF-2011-012). I am deeply indebted to Dorina Buda, Elisa Burrai, Chris Cooper and Emma Wood, as well as the anonymous reviewers, for their valuable comments and suggestions.

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