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To cite this article: Vladimir Antchak, Valentina Gorchakova & Giulia Rossetti (2022): The value of events in times of uncertainty: insights from balcony performances in Italy during the COVID-19 lockdown, *Annals of Leisure Research*, DOI: [10.1080/11745398.2022.2046117](https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2022.2046117)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2022.2046117>



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Published online: 05 Mar 2022.



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# The value of events in times of uncertainty: insights from balcony performances in Italy during the COVID-19 lockdown

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## ABSTRACT

The paper explores the role and value of the so-called ‘balcony performances’ – community special events, organized during the first national lockdown in Italy in March-May 2020. Following the constructionist research paradigm, in-depth interviews were collected and analysed to understand how through engaging with special events, residents found ways to deal with uncertainty and distress during the time of lockdown. Balcony events allowed participants to connect with others at a distance, express and share their feelings and emotions and, eventually, transform fear and worry into hope and positivity. The paper reiterates the vital ritualistic role of events in community life and introduces a conceptual framework of the transformative power of events. The framework explains how during times of uncertainty, improvisational creativity within neighbourhoods, expressed in special events, can provide a platform for resilience building and community cohesion. The paper also puts forward a new perspective on residential balconies as event venues.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 October 2021  
Accepted 9 February 2022

## KEYWORDS

Balcony; COVID-19; events; Italy; leisure; lockdown; event experience

## Introduction

Following the global spread of the COVID-19 virus at the end of 2019 – the beginning of 2020, the World Health Organization declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020. As the number of cases outside China increased 13-fold, and the number of countries where the virus was spreading had tripled, on 11 March 2020 it was characterized as a pandemic (World Health Organization 2020).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in Italy occurred in the second half of February 2020, predominantly in the northern regions of the country. A total of 101,739 infected individuals were confirmed by 30 March 2020, of which 14,620 recovered or were discharged from hospital, 31,776 were hospitalized, and 11,591 people died (Megna 2020). Over a period of a few weeks, Italy became the first European COVID-19 hotspot with the largest number of confirmed cases. The first national lockdown in Italy began on 9 March and ended on 18 May 2020. The population was required to stay indoors for

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almost two and a half months. People were allowed to go out only for specific reasons, such as grocery shopping or emergencies.

This situation forced the cancellation or postponement of all live face-to-face leisure activities, including special events, that could not take place in an online format. Some events, such as cooking classes offered via the Airbnb platform, were moved online and proved to be able to deliver value to their participants by promoting social connection and stimulating an experience of virtual travel (Cenni and Vásquez 2020). Museums, art galleries, and other cultural institutions launched quizzes and games, and provided other educational materials online (Carlino et al. 2020). Outside, residents of several Italian cities and towns became known globally for their live performances and activities on the balconies of their homes, events that were organized without violating the lockdown restrictions. These events featured music, dance, singing, and clapping. Some of the performances were promoted by the Italian Government via TV and radio, while others were driven by individuals and communities. For example, in Florence, opera singer Maurizio Marchini sang Giacomo Puccini's aria 'Nessun Dorma' by from his balcony, while several DJs took their equipment to the balconies and played sets in the evening. Across the country, neighbourhoods came together to play music and sing, as well as to part take in flash mobs, such as shining lights out of their windows and from their balconies.

This collective expression of solidarity and unity through events on balconies during the challenging times of lockdown raises an interesting question about the value of public events and their contribution to community well-being. Special events are known as drivers of community engagement (Pernecky and Lück 2013). Events can facilitate bonding between people and create lasting memories (Jepson, Stadler, and Spencer 2019), which makes them an essential element of social cohesion (Richards 2015). Events are useful in creating moments of socialization and interaction, which contribute to the psychological and physiological well-being of participants and attendees (Jepson and Walters 2021).

For several decades, the experiential and transformative value of events has been 'an area of increasing academic interest' (Rust 2020, 1). The approach to the study of event experiences, however, has favoured the measurement and quantification of the diverse elements of experiences rather than to better understand the meaning of experiences themselves (Biaett and Richards 2020). The purpose of this paper is to explore the effects of special events on balconies during lockdown by applying a qualitative constructionist approach.

The next section presents a review of relevant theoretical concepts and frameworks with the main emphasis on the multiple dimensions of event experiences. The research paradigm and design are then explained. Following this, the results of data analysis are presented and a new conceptual framework of the transformative power of events in times of uncertainty is discussed. The paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of the study and directions for future research.

## Literature review

### *Defining the event experience*

Special events can be viewed as leisure activities that contribute to subjective well-being (Newman, Tay, and Diener 2014). Participation in diverse leisure activities associated, for

example, with culture and arts positively affects attendees' lives (Wheatley and Bickerton 2017) and delivers a range of eudemonic and hedonic experiences that affect a person's sense of emotional and psychological well-being (Gorchakova and Hyde 2022; Rossetti 2021).

There appear to be multiple definitions of experience and what it means to experience a special event. Dewey (1938) defines experience as a human interaction with the environment. For Kuiper and Smit (2014), it is a psychological process of meaning creation and attaching emotions to products and services. This process involves specific emotional responses through the activation of emotions, or inner feelings, and their expression on a visible physical level. In the realm of events, Antchak and Ramsbottom (2020) discuss experience as an emotional encounter with the event content that affects one's perceptions, moods, and behaviour before, during, and after the event. Wood and Kenyon (2018, 176) argue that the event experience can be 'the catalyst that enables social interaction to go beyond the event time and place'. By creating opportunities to connect with others, events allow attendees to experience a sense of belonging, 'if only momentarily' (Glover 2021, 238).

The meaning of an event experience remains a major challenge in event studies (Biaett and Richards 2020). Generally, researchers have been concerned with attendee motivations and the economic impacts of events (Gursoy, Kim, and Uysal 2004). Different quantitative scales have been applied to measure the diverse dimensions of event experiences, including affective engagement, cognitive engagement, physical engagement, and experiencing newness (Geus, Richards, and Toepoel 2016; Richards 2020). Richards (2019) argues that, given the complexity and diversity of event experiences, one of the main challenges is to develop an effective measurement tool to grasp the meaning of memorable and meaningful event experiences. However, the main epistemological issue with any event experience measurement lies in the tendency to focus on quantity and potential over-simplification.

From the qualitative perspective of event experiences, the research focus has shifted towards longitudinal ethnographic studies (e.g. Brooks 2020), phenomenological inquiry (e.g. Moss, Whalley, and Elsmore 2020; Ziakas and Boukas 2014), and a wider application of sociology and cultural studies (e.g. Sterchele 2020). In addition, the topics of co-creation, generational differences, sexual orientation, and spectatorship have created opportunities for a diverse and robust agenda of event experience studies (Biaett and Richards 2020).

### ***Dimensions of event experience***

Events can be conceptualized as moments of extraordinary experiences that go beyond the routine of everyday life (Duerden et al. 2018). Duerden et al. (2018) cluster such experiences into three categories: memorable, meaningful, and transformative. A memorable experience emerges when objective experience can draw and hold attention and generate strong emotions. A meaningful experience produces subjective reactions and involves, apart from strong emotions, obtaining personally relevant insights. A transformative experience entails the conditions of the previous two categories and leads to changes in values, beliefs, or self-perceptions on a personal level.

Drawing on ritual studies, Collins (2004) produced the mutual-focus/emotional-entrainment model of interaction rituals that can be employed to explore the memorable experience at events (e.g. Sterchele 2020). According to Collins (2004), any interaction ritual includes four main conditions. These are:

- group assembly or bodily co-presence when two or more people affect each other by their physical presence in the same place;
- mutual focus of attention that refers to their attention upon an object or activity;
- a common emotional mood that is shared through collective emotional experience; and
- barrier to outsiders that refers to the sense of being included in a shared activity in opposition to those excluded from it.

As a result of performing an interaction ritual, group solidarity (feeling of membership), individual emotional energy (feeling of confidence, strength and enthusiasm), symbols of social relationship (gestures, visual icons, words), as well as standards of morality (sense of rightness) are generated. This happens when participants achieve a state of 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim [1912] 2008, 268) with its intensification of shared experience. The process of merging individual experiences into collective consciousness shows the liminal nature of any ritualistic practice (Sterchele 2020).

Liminality is a creative space with no structural hierarchical relations. A liminal zone in any ritual is transitional in nature. It is situated in between separation or detachment from routine and reintegration with a new status, skill, or experience (Van Gennep 1960). Within liminal spaces, the experience of *communitas*, which is a feeling of fellowship, can be obtained (Turner 1969). One of the critical requirements for achieving the state of *communitas* is co-creation of the experience by all involved in the process.

Co-creation, 'the opportunity to engage meaningfully in the process of creating and shaping the nature' of experiences (Mathis et al. 2016, 72), is intrinsic to the nature of events as they are driven by a collective experience. It is, therefore, not surprising that the role of 'others', or a social group, has been found to have a dominant effect on event attendees' emotions and memories (Neuhofer, Celuch, and To 2020; Wood and Kenyon 2018). Co-creation of experience can be active, wherein participants are involved in creating an experience, or passive, when they are absorbing an environment (Prebensen and Foss 2011). Both are valuable in their own way (Van Winkle and Bueddefeld 2016).

Such locally co-created events as, for example, street parties, which involve participants in the practices of preparing and sharing food, playing or listening to music, dancing or conversing, allow people to develop or reinforce a sense of community and belonging, and create shared experiences and neighbourhood values (Stevenson 2019). Creating collective memories and shared stories adds 'another layer' to the process of cultivating a sense of place (Stevenson 2019, 314). By promoting leisure and entertainment opportunities to local residents, special events can bring communities together, build social networks, and foster community cohesion and resilience (Rao 2001; Xie and Sinwald 2016).

Community resilience can be defined as 'the existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise' (Magis 2010, 402). Although

communities do not control the conditions that have affected them and led to stress or shock, they can build their resilience by finding ways to respond to some of those conditions (Berkes and Ross 2013). Derrett (2008, 120) argues that events as collaborative entities can facilitate the development of community resilience by providing participants with 'an opportunity to show what they can do', giving voice to locals, improving the well-being of residents, and providing a place to participate and take responsibility for performances and celebrations.

Social community events engage the senses and emotions of local people, promoting imagination, creativity, playfulness, and conviviality, and therefore, 'can be viewed as a practice of community wellbeing' (Stevenson 2021, 1784). Participation in a neighbourhood-centred event can lead to increased neighbourhood identification, which, in turn, has the effect of reducing loneliness and increasing social cohesion, while positively affecting individual and community health and well-being (Fong et al. 2021). Both positive emotions and positive relationships with others have a significant influence on well-being and satisfaction with life (Seligman 2011).

### *A balcony as an event place*

During the period of the COVID-19 lockdown in the Italian spring 2020, a home acquired the quality of a *safe place*. Staying at home for an extended time, as well as working from home, introduced a new dimension of the user-environment relationship; exterior zones, such as balconies, started to play a more pronounced role as they allowed visual and auditory socialization with neighbours and passers-by that had become unavailable during lockdown (Aydin and Sayar 2020). Zackas (2020, 83) argues that balconies assemble people who live in an urban neighbourhood around 'a common world of events, experiences and issues'. While lockdown affected many people's well-being (Svensson and Elntib 2021), individuals with accessible outdoor spaces, including balconies, experienced more positive emotions (Pouso et al. 2021). An urban balcony became 'the new socially as well as physically healthier public space to be' (Grigoriadou 2020, 2).

Architecturally, balconies possess a liminal status. The function of a balcony is to mediate between the interior and the exterior of the building. In his analysis of city rhythms, Lefebvre (2004) explores a balcony as a spatial mediator – keeping an observer away from the city street, but still facilitating immersion into the outside world with its unique sounds, rhythms, and relationships. As Cowan (2011, 721) argues, balconies are 'neither entirely part of a house, nor are they part of the street . . . Balconies were both places from which to observe and on which to be observed, and anyone who used a balcony was fully aware of this'. In addition, in countries with hot climates, a balcony is a space of openness and ventilation. The physical space of a balcony invites many kinds of temporal uses: it can serve as a place of leisure, as well as a place to dry laundry, shake rugs, or as a storage space (Aronis 2009). A balcony is a 'playful place with no clear sets of rules' (Aronis 2020, 2) where different performative acts may occur.

During the Italian lockdown, a balcony obtained a new status as an event venue, where planned and spontaneous events were organized and attended, including flash mobs, mass clapping, live music concerts, and dance parties. The choice of this space for community events was dictated by strict lockdown rules and the inability of the residents to meet face-to-face and testified to community resilience.

Performances on residential balconies is a relatively new topic in leisure and event studies. Considering the context and conditions under which such events were organized and attended in the Italian lockdown, research into this area can provide insights into the meanings and effects of events during challenging periods of individual and community life, the value of the event experience, and the power of community creativity, cohesion, and resilience. The next section introduces the research paradigm used in this study and describes the methods applied.

### **Research design**

This research is exploratory in nature. The aim of any exploratory research is to ‘develop and fill out as comprehensive and accurate a picture of the area of study as conditions allow’ (Blumer 1969, 42). The research is guided by constructionism, which is the view that ‘all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context’ (Crotty 1998, 42). As Crotty (1998) argues, meaning does not inhere in the object; it is constructed by human beings while being engaged with the world and interpreting it. The philosophical approach adopted in this research follows Greenwood’s (1994, 85) account that any social reality is ‘constructed and sustained by the observation of the social rules . . . . Social reality is, therefore, a function of shared meanings. It is constructed, sustained and reproduced through social life’.

The meaning of constructionism cannot be viewed as simply objective. Neither is it simply subjective. Searle (2006) introduces the notion of ontologically subjective but epistemically objective social facts. On the one hand, it is problematic to speak about the objective existence of such social phenomena as community engagement or sense of belonging or event experience. On the other, those phenomena are objective, because they are not matters of only individual opinion. Once created, social facts and attached meanings can be known and studied objectively (Pernecky 2016).

During the COVID-19 lockdown, a balcony was reimaged from a space that is simply an architectural extension and a conventional space to a place of performance and community engagement, where new forms of interaction were introduced and practised. Hence, new meanings of participating and experiencing were constructed and shared by everyone involved. The purpose of this research is to explore those meanings from a participant’s view of actions and the associated experiences, emotions, and outcomes that were generated by those actions. This research approach reflects the fundamental principles of symbolic interactionism. As a methodological perspective, symbolic interactionism directs a researcher to take the standpoint of those studied (Denzin 1978) and through dialogue understand their feelings, perceptions, and attitude towards others (Crotty 1998). Blumer (1969) proposes two main methodological modes for research that adopt the principles of symbolic interactionism. The first mode, *exploration*, refers to any ethically applicable procedure of data collection that can provide a clearer understanding of the phenomenon under study. In this research, qualitative interviewing was applied as a method of data collection as it provides an opportunity to explore through dialogue the emergence of new social meanings of event participation and experience during times of uncertainty and individual and community crises. Taylor

and Bogdan (1984) posit that in-depth interviewing facilitates learning about events and activities that a researcher is not able to observe directly. In such instances, an informant acts as the researcher's observer and reveals not only their own views, but also describes what happened and how others viewed and experienced the observable phenomenon.

In total, eight in-depth interviews with residents of several Italian cities and towns who either planned, participated in, or observed balcony events in March-May 2020 were conducted online via Microsoft Office Teams and Zoom (see Table 1). Interviewees were chosen based on a purposeful, criterion sampling approach (Patton 2002). The main criteria were that the person resided in Italy during lockdown in spring 2020 and that they participated in at least one balcony event at some point during lockdown. No further informants were targeted as a considerable number of insights emerged from the already conducted interviews. Normally, a small sample of in-depth interviews is sufficient for qualitative research that employs constructionist or phenomenological research paradigms (e.g. Ziakas and Boukas 2022).

A flexible interview guide was prepared around a number of pre-determined topics without any fixed wording or order (Minichiello 1995). The researchers were able to probe, explore, and ask additional questions to discover the constructed meanings around balcony performances in depth. Every interview included several core discussion topics about motivations, experiences, and perceived value. Interviews were conducted in Italian and Russian, then transcribed and translated into English.

The second mode of the methodology of symbolic interactionism is *inspection*, a focused examination of analytical elements constructed as a result of exploration. Based on the conducted interviews, several analytical elements and sub-elements were identified. Table 2 illustrates the process of *inspection* where the meaning of interview extracts was analytically summarized to construct epistemically objective knowledge about the social and transformative effects of events during the pandemic-induced social crisis and overall uncertainty in the society.

The application of the above-mentioned methodological tools revealed three main analytical elements associated with the value of balcony performances and event experiences. These are *Emotional uncertainty* that describes a national-wide context during the months of lockdown when most of the balcony events took place; *Togetherness* that explains the desirable state of unity and support delivered by balcony performances;

**Table 1.** Profile of interviewees.

Participant	Gender	Age	Area of residence	Nationality	Ways of participation
1.	Female	20s	Milan	Italian	Clapping, one-minute silence, singing
2.	Female	40s	Trento	Italian	Clapping, singing, greeting neighbours, shouting words of encouragement
3.	Female	30s	Turin	Italian	Flash mob, light performance, listening to music, singing, dancing, eating and having drinks with close neighbours
4.	Female	20s	Pescara	Italian	Clapping, singing
5.	Female	50s	Central Italy	Italian	Singing, listening to music, shouting words of encouragement
6.	Male	30s	Central Italy	Italian	Playing guitar
7.	Female	30s	Lazio Region	Russian (expat)	Dancing
8.	Female	30s	Milan	Russian (expat)	Playing piano, listening to music



**Table 2.** An illustration of the inspection process.

Interview extracts	Analytical sub-elements	Analytical elements
Work was gone and so were the networks of colleagues, friends, and more. Therefore, in my opinion, these events were essentially a moment of sharing and letting others know that we were all living the same experience, because sometimes when you are alone, you might think that you are the only one hurting – in other words, the classic thought, no one hurts like me	Sharing negative experience to feel support	Togetherness
We established a strong sense of belonging – in other words, the feeling of being a united country	Being united in challenging times	

and, finally, *Transformative power* which refers to the individual and community outcomes delivered by the performances. The following section introduces and analyses the analytical elements in detail. Throughout the section, quotes from interviews are used to support the analysis. Following ethics requirements, none of the interviewees' real names are used. Instead, each participant is given an individual code that consists of the capital letter P and a number, for example P1, P2, P3. The numbering follows the order introduced in Table 1.

## Findings

### *Emotional uncertainty*

Both the regional and national lockdowns in Italy disrupted everyday life and brought fear and uncertainty: 'there was also a lot of fear and people tended to stay home to avoid transmission ... especially because at the time, we didn't know anything about this virus, and it was really scary' (P2). It is worth noting, that before lockdown, there was significant resistance to the concept of lockdown, as there was lack of understanding of the severity of the situation. For instance, in Milan, a group 'We are against COVID' was created on Facebook and was active till 3–4 March. That group brought together musicians and performers on the premise that an illness could not stop music performance. Slogans were shared widely, including on social media, such as 'Milan is not stopping' and 'Lombardy is not stopping'. Therefore, when lockdown was eventually announced by the Government, 'Milan was a city that was scared ... I really witnessed, in the city itself, a moment of despair' (P1). Frequent appearances of the army and police patrolling city streets, the inability to leave one's house, to meet friends, family, or colleagues, the 'monotony of those days' (P4) significantly affected people's well-being: 'we were missing that sense of companionship and social interaction' (P3).

[Y]ou are locked in the house twenty-four hours a day, and if you set foot outside, people will judge you and make you feel uneasy, and you can't do it anyway because the law says that you can only leave your home for essential activities. (P2)

In those unusual and emotional circumstances, balcony performances started as a means to cope with the uncertainty and the disruption to peoples' everyday lives. Such events were viewed as 'a lifeline' (P3), 'a form of entertainment ... like a hymn to hope' (P1), or 'a way of saying we are alive ... a manifestation of unity against fear' (P8). The weather became warmer over the months of lockdown, a time when people would normally go

outside even more. However, as this was not possible, 'what was normally done outside the home was brought inside, or on the balcony' (P3).

To sum up, the analytical element 'Emotional uncertainty' sheds light on the individual and collective conditions that predetermined the need for the joint manifestation of solidarity on communal balconies. The liminal quality of a balcony provided both performers and attendees with a unique opportunity to share feelings of both fear and hope without leaving the comfort and safe zone of their homes.

### **Togetherness**

The data show that interacting and sharing concerns and hopes with others was one of the key driving social forces at balcony events. P3 explained that the events provided an opportunity 'to socialise for so many people who might have been alone'. P1 viewed balcony events as 'full of collaboration', while P4 recalled that those events were 'moments of sharing ... You could actually feel that we truly were all in the same situation'. Some interviewees joined the performances on balconies to 'know that I was not the only one to feel that way, because everyone else was there to remind me that we were all in the same situation' (P1) and if we 'work together as a group, as a community, we'll get through it' (P2).

One of the most popular performance genres on balconies was playing and listening to music, singing, and dancing together. P8 recalled playing the piano on her balcony and neighbours joining in with a saxophone and a guitar: 'I did that with pleasure. I started playing Red Hot Chili Peppers – this was picked up by someone else, four houses apart. I don't know who it was, I don't think they knew it was me who was playing either'. Other residents joined those who were playing musical instruments by, for example, hitting saucepans in rhythm with the music. Some would turn the radio or recordings on full volume. Such shared sessions were described by interviewees as 'live experience', 'self-expression', 'active citizen participation', or 'a way to help and encourage'. For professional musicians and dancers, balcony events at that time became the only available opportunity to perform in front of an audience. For example, P7, a professional dancer, had performances scheduled in April. Those were cancelled, but, together with her dancing duet partner, they decided to perform dances on the terrace and rooftop of their houses. Similarly, P6, a professional musician, reflected on the experience saying that, from the second day, 'I was one of the participants ... almost the protagonist ... with the guitar [for] five-ten minutes ... [It] was a ritual'.

The repertoire of music that was played during balcony events was diverse, including famous compositions from the 60's, the Italian national anthem, and such popular songs as *Vinceró*, *Volare*, *Azzurro*, *Tosca*, and *Nel Blu Dipinto di Blu* – songs that reinforced a feeling of cultural identity and national unity. Recordings of other songs were played – songs with lyrics that transmitted positivity and a general, everything-will-be-alright message. Sometimes performances had a vibe of a concert – in particular, when participants sang along and flicked on their lighters (P2).

The feeling of unity and *being together* that emerged as a result of engagement with balcony performances provided a platform for developing a sense of community and patriotism: 'you actually saw all these people outside on their balconies, families with several members and families that you had never seen before appearing at the

window or the balcony. Sharing this experience made us feel a little closer' (P5). Several interviewees mentioned that they developed a sense of being part of a nation and established a strong sense of belonging.

Overall, the events on balconies were able to offer residents a much needed platform for socialization and interaction. The collectively constructed state of togetherness became a psychological panacea for uncertainty and isolation. It catalysed a sense of shared experience and unity. The feeling of being together and facing difficulties as an emotionally united community was therapeutic for many residents and to some extent delivered an extra-ordinary transformative experience.

### ***Transformative experience***

The transformative value of balcony events was most noticeable in terms of a positive temporal change in emotions and a new attitude towards neighbours and neighbourhoods. Two analytical sub-elements are analysed in the following sub-sections. These are *From fear to hope* and *Neighbourhood bonding*.

#### ***From fear to hope***

Balcony performances were remembered by interviewees as 'little moments of positivity' (P4), the 'carefree' (P3) and 'moving' (P8) moments that 'lifted the spirits' (P7). For P2, those events were associated with fear as much as with the enthusiasm and courage 'in saying let's support each other and we'll get through it'. P1 recalled that during those events, 'you were actually having fun'. P2 echoed the above comments: 'people were having a moment of euphoria. Hearing people singing, hearing people transmitting some real emotions in that particular moment was indeed a moment of fun'.

The events were driven by participants' need for hope; therefore, performances not only included positive and reassuring songs, but appeared to have incentivised participants to shout out slogans, such as 'Go Milan', 'Go Italy', 'We'll Make It', 'We'll Get Back Up'. According to P1, these slogans may have been even more important for the participants than the songs. After the events 'when you went back in, you felt more optimistic, more confident in the hope that it would all end and that you would get through it' (P5).

#### ***Neighbourhood bonding***

One of the main positive effects of balcony events was connecting more with neighbours, who started to feel less like strangers (P2). When referring to bonding with neighbours during balcony performances, interviewees commented that those events led residents 'to consider the neighbourhood more as a group of people rather than a group of homes' (P5). The shared experience of participation strengthened relationships, and 'gave us the opportunity to get to know each other better in the neighbourhood' (P6).

Balcony events appear to have allowed people to express themselves and their feelings in ways that would not have been possible under other circumstances, for example, when meeting someone in person. P8 reflected that 'after those events, you see that there are many talented and kind people, there are people who want to help, want to share, people who are patriots'. Through that moment of sharing with and within the neighbourhood, participants could connect and learn more about their neighbours: 'You learn more about

other people that you wouldn't be able to learn otherwise because everyone "closes off". The door would be closed to you' (P8).

It is evident that for some people, the perception towards neighbours changed: 'you realised how many people actually lived around you that you had never noticed before, and in the end, it felt as if we knew each other' (P5). People got to know their neighbours better and started feeling a true sense of community, 'whether it was only our building, our neighbourhood, our street or block, it did bring a greater awareness and sociability' (P3).

Interestingly, in some instances, post-event relationships were developed further and led to true 'balcony friendships':

There was an elderly lady, who saw us having lunch on the balcony – she lives in the building across from us – now every time she sees us on the balcony, she stops from across the street and yells to ask us how we are doing. We share a lot of things with her. We never met in person, always and only from the balcony. (P3)

Overall, the transformative value of residential balcony performances in Italy during the COVID-19 lockdown was the alleviation of negative emotions that stemmed from the uncertainty and disruption to everyday lives, as well as in 'meeting' the people in the neighbourhood and establishing cross-balcony connections with them.

## Discussion and conclusion

This research aimed to explore the role and value of balcony performances during the COVID-19 lockdown in the cities and towns of Italy. The analytical elements constructed through in-depth interviews and analysis revealed an interesting perspective on the role of events and event experiences during challenging periods in individual and community life. Emotional uncertainty triggered by the uncontrollable spread of the virus, and the government restrictions that were introduced in response to this, caused the formation of a social vacuum characterized by isolation, feelings of fear, and overall insecurity. This vacuum, however, activated a psychological need to get together and face uncertainty by supporting and encouraging one another. The results of this research reiterate further that events can have a transformative experiential value for attendees (Brownett 2018) and their well-being in particular (Gorchakova and Hyde 2022; Rossetti 2021). Through engaging in the process of co-creation, i.e. shaping their individual experiences (Mathis et al. 2016), at balcony events, people were able to connect, express and share their emotions, and alleviate the feelings of insecurity and loneliness that were experienced during the time of social isolation. The role of 'others' in this experience proved crucial, as demonstrated by previous studies (Neuhofer, Celuch, and To 2020; Wood and Kenyon 2018). The co-creation experience appears to have been equally valuable regardless of whether participants engaged in an active or a passive type of interaction (Prebensen and Foss 2011; Van Winkle and Bueddefeld 2016).

Special events organized on residential balconies provided an ideal place to perform and participate in collective 'rituals'. Lehtovuori (2010) introduced the notion of an 'event potential', which is the likelihood that event planners choose a particular space, and that the audience finds it good, interesting, and engaging. The event potential of a space is inclusive and temporal; it is not a property but a leap that is produced in a

game-like societal process (Lehtovuori 2010, 187). The event potential of a residential balcony appears to have been very high during the pandemic. The 'in-betweenness' of a balcony space provided local residents with a unique opportunity to join their neighbours and take part in different activities together without violating strict lockdown rules.

Interestingly, performances on residential balconies that emerged as sporadically organized events met the characteristics of Collins' (2004) interaction rituals. Co-presence was achieved by assemblage on residential balconies; the mood that was shared revolved around the fear of the virus and hope that life would return to the way it used to be; and the common goal was community support and unity in the face of adversity. There is also a requirement for interaction rituals to be performed within a liminal space that unites all those taking part in the ritual and separates outsiders. The findings of the research show that a balcony can be conceived of as a new type of modern urban ritual space with a fluid liminal component, flowing from one household to another. This fluidity provides an opportunity to engage wider groups of people from close and remote neighbourhoods in performance activities.

Following Collins's (2004) theory of interaction rituals, this research indicates that group solidarity was transmitted through co-creation of joint performative activities, be it a spontaneous music concert in the neighbourhood or a planned action, for instance, mass clapping. Emotional energy manifested itself in the feeling of hope and renewed confidence, community strength, and enthusiasm, despite the difficulties faced by the residents. Shared symbols included both material (e.g. national flags and banners) and non-material (e.g. songs) elements. The sense of morality and rightness was represented by obedience to lockdown rules, respect of neighbours and the willingness to support them, and in an overall sense of pride.

It is clear that during a time of uncertainty, when internal or external negative forces are perceived as an almost existential threat to the community, events are capable of creating stability and confidence and a state of togetherness by facilitating emotional engagement and solidarity. Togetherness is an essential condition for experiencing fellowship and camaraderie, when new values and meanings are developed and shared. Taking into consideration the co-creative nature of events, their value is appreciated in terms of both personal and collective experiences. Every event participant goes through the self-identification process, wherein they join a group and develop and maintain a sense of shared identity and affinity with the collective ideas and ideals



**Figure 1.** The transformative power of events in times of uncertainty.

(Gorchakova and Hyde 2022). The transformative power of special events on balconies manifested itself in improvisational creativity, cohesion, and resilience (Figure 1).

Collective performances on Italian balconies represent an interesting example of improvisational creativity, where the emphasis shifted from innovative business solutions and monetization towards performative expressiveness of the community. Whereas the conventional approach to creativity is based on innovation, which is characterized by its products and their commercialized value, improvisation can be comprehended and valued by its processes. Improvisational creativity is 'always in the making, rather than ready-made' (Ingold and Hallam 2007, 3). It is temporal and can be seen as an onward propulsion of life (Ingold and Hallam 2007). In this new reading, creativity refers to inseparable performative engagement with the resources that surround creative actors. Improvisations with music, singing, and other performances on the residential balconies and the experience of being part of such improvisations paved the way to the development of a collective sense of belonging and community cohesion.

The findings of the research reiterate the results of previous studies (Fong et al. 2021; Stevenson 2021) that small-scale neighbourhood events that allow residents to engage in dancing, playing, and listening to music, and the preparation and sharing of food, can nurture a sense of place and community well-being. In Italy during the pandemic, these activities facilitated the development of community cohesion. Community cohesion entails a common vision, a sense of belonging, and a strong and positive relationship between people of different backgrounds (Cantle 2008; Flint and Robinson 2008). During the first peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy, community cohesion played the role of a 'double stress-barrier' that helped people cope with health anxiety and stress during lockdown (Svensson and Elntib 2021, 802). As a result, resilience was cultivated on the level of neighbourhoods and wider urban communities. This research reiterates the argumentation by Derrett (2008) that events are capable of facilitating community resilience and demonstrates that during the uncertain times of a crisis, communities can consolidate their efforts in a form of collective pre-arranged or spontaneous gatherings to find 'a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance' (Norris et al. 2008, 131).

In terms of theoretical contribution, this paper further develops an ever-growing theorization of the experiential value of special events. Thus, the research introduces a new conceptual framework that emphasizes the transformative power of events as mediators of community solidarity and group unity. Also, a new genre of community events has been introduced. Balcony events are an emerging phenomenon that deserves attention and additional scholarly exploration. The findings re-emphasize the ritualist nature of community events and their role in channelling the emotional energy of a community and transforming individual negative emotions into collective feelings of confidence, enthusiasm, strength, and resilience. Practically, the result of the research can be used by urban policy makers and local community organizations to foster neighbourhood engagement. Involving residents in the co-creation of small-scale, locally generated grass-roots projects can contribute to a sense of belonging, community cohesion, and inclusivity.

Several limitations of this research should be highlighted. Each of the limitations suggests a direction for future research in this new area of leisure and event studies. First, the research was of a qualitative nature. The purpose was to interpret socially

constructed meanings of the value that balcony events offered to participants and attendees. Future research could focus on a more holistic approach and also engage with quantitative data to explore, for example, the effect of such performances on a large population of participants. Second, the sampling in this research was focused only on those who either organized or attended a balcony event. It would be interesting to explore the opinions and perceptions of those residents who did not participate, their reasons, and their overall attitude towards such performances. Finally, the research was focused only on one geographical territory – urban locations in Italy. However, events and other special balcony activities were organized in other countries, including France, Spain, and the Netherlands. It would be useful to conduct a comparative study and explore differences and peculiarities between several cases.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Matthew Lamb, the author of the book *Around the World in 80 Events*, for inspiration to start this research project.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by University of Derby [grant number: Early Career Researchers Development Fund].

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