**VOLUNTEERS’ EMBODIED EXPERIENCES AT A SPORT FESTIVAL**

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**ABSTRACT**

In this paper we argue that extant research in event studies on volunteering has predominantly been conducted through disembodied managerial lenses using formulaic conceptual frames. This has resulted in the neglect of more phenomenological approaches which explore volunteers’ lived experiences. Using the example of the 2018 Tall Ships festival in the provincial North East English city of Sunderland, we draw on embodiment theory to fill this gap in event management research. Utilising in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 31 local volunteers, our main findings are two-fold. First, they highlight the complexities and fluidity of local volunteers’ lived experiences of the festival which reflect a multitude of interrelated elements that are corporeal, emotional, and multisensory. Second, these embodied experiences, combined with knowledge of self and place, create fresh, vivid, and subjective meanings which collapse the past, present and future of post-industrial places riddled by economic decline. Our focus on the volunteer experience in the medium term after the event has occurred represents a distinctive timeline as it provides insights into how volunteers interpret, remember, and reconfigure their experience beyond initial euphoria and before long-term nostalgia.

**Keywords**: embodiment, phenomenology, volunteers, Sunderland, Tall Ships festival

1. **INTRODUCTION**

*I felt, I was really part of that, and I looked out at sea, out at the mouth of the river, and can just remember all of the sailing boats going out on that Saturday evening and feeling a bit depressed because they were going, that would be it. You know that feeling of joy was going to be somewhere else. But at least I’d been part of it* (Charles).

The phenomenological concept of embodiment has unearthed new possibilities for social scientists by challenging normative frameworks of knowledge production and consumption (Frazer & Waitt, 2016; Griffiths & Brown, 2017; Pritchard, 2007). Despite its personal nature, extant research on event volunteering considers the volunteer experience primarily through managerial lenses with a focus on motivations, organisational governance, or the perceived/actual benefits derived (Allen & Shaw, 2009; Holmes, Nichols, & Ralston, 2018; Nichols & Ralston, 2012; Rogalsky, Doherty & Paradis, 2016; Wilks, 2016). These approaches to volunteering disregard volunteers’ embodied experiences. In particular, the complex embodied ways in which volunteers (who are also often local hosts), experience a major sport festival is neglected. This is an important omission, as “lived experience, social practice, knowledge and feelings are always intrinsically corporeal and sensual” (Pons, 2003, p. 53) as is illustrated in the quote at the beginning of this paper by Charles, a volunteer at the 2018 Tall Ships Festival in Sunderland, UK.

Conceptualising volunteers’ experiences as lived and embodied allows for a fuller and richer understanding of volunteering. Indeed, Gellweiler, Wise, & Fletcher (2018) have argued that it is essential to understand sport event volunteer lived experiences “as this will lend further interpretation based on meanings and memories associated with the volunteer journey” (p.630). Such understanding, we contend is important for event organizers in order to engage and retain this vital workforce (Qi, Smith & Yeoman, 2018). It is widely accepted that volunteers play a central role in the success of sporting events by adding economic value through their unpaid labour (Solberg, 2003), and, according to Baum & Lockstone(2007, p. 29) volunteers provide the most “significant working contribution” to sporting events. Beyond this economic contribution, volunteerism is also important for the development of human and social capital and many volunteers are embedded in their local communities, reinforcing pride in place (Smith, 2012). However, extant research into the volunteer experience is dominated by managerialist perspectives which fail to adequately understand the embodied nature of these experiences. This paper thus seeks to address this gap in event studies by calling for greater focus on the complexities of the embodied experiences inherent in sport event volunteering.

In making this argument we draw on the phenomenological tradition of Merleau-Ponty (1962) who argued that “human beings are situated in the world” (Ehrich, 2005, p. 2) and that the sensuous body is a means of knowing and experiencing the world. This approach refutes any distinction among the visual, auditory, somatosensory, olfactory, and gustatory, instead recognising their interconnectedness. We use the concept of embodiment to mean “a process of experiencing, making sense, knowing through practise as a sensual human subject in the world” (Crouch, 2000, p. 68). Unfortunately, the body and the totality of its sensuality and emotionality tends to be written out of event volunteer accounts.

Using the example of a major sport festival - the 2018 Tall Ships race in Sunderland - we argue that the volunteer experience is shaped and understood by and through the sensuous and emotional body. We draw on volunteers’ personal memories in the medium term after the festival thereby providing valuable insights into the vivacity of their recollections. This is important as “memory is intimately intertwined with the body, emotions, and the senses” (Jones, 2011, p.3). In addition to our phenomenological approach, this paper makes two further contributions to the literature. First, explorations of volunteer experiences tend to focus on mega events in global cities, such as the London Olympics (Holmes et al., 2018; Wilks, 2016), Vancouver Winter Olympics (Kodama, Doherty & Popovic, 2013) or Glasgow Commonwealth Games (Tomazos & Luke, 2015). However, volunteer experiences at large ephemeral events in provincial post-industrial cities are underexplored. This leads to a double negation – not only are these cities traditionally excluded from national development projects and the role of major events in this context, but local volunteers’ lived experiences in these places is also rendered invisible. Second, published works rely on research conducted during or up to a few months after the event (Gellweiler, Fletcher & Wise, 2019), or more long term such as Fairley, Gardiner & Filo’s (2016) study of volunteers’ reflections 10 years after the Sydney Olympic Games. Little is known about how volunteers reflect on their experiences in the medium term - in our case, 18 months after the event. We were thus interested in medium term recollections and the precise period of 18 months was not deliberately selected but resulted from serendipity - the availability of resources and access to the volunteers required to conduct the research. Yet, this medium-term time frame is relevant as it provides insights into how volunteers interpret, remember, and reconfigure their experience beyond initial euphoria and before long term nostalgia. This focus on the intermediate post-event phase also acknowledges the presence of what Skirstad & Kristiansen (2017), deem the volunteer “life cycle” the ultimate stage of which (the outcomes) is far-reaching, complex and encompasses several phases each associated with diverse memories, emotions, and experiences. We contend that it is crucial to unpack the volunteer life cycle at specific moments during this extensive final stage and suggest that the extant literature has often ignored the intermediate stage despite it being as important as other stages. In the next section we provide a necessarily brief overview of the concept of embodiment.

1. **THE BODY IN RESEARCH**

The body, its feelings and interactions with other bodies has become an important focus for the social sciences (Griffiths & Brown, 2017), reflecting the ‘affective turn’ which values the spaces unearthed through bodily experiences (Anderson, 2012). Haldrup & Larsen (2006, p. 279) observe that “places and experiences are physically and poetically grasped and mediated through the sensuous body”. Interest in how the body produces and consumes places has not been the subject of significant conjecture within event studies. There are however a few exceptions – for example Cummings & Herborn (2015) focused on music festivals and argued that festival goers experiences at these events are embodied and this is a vital element in their identity formation, “affective social connections and the development of neo-tribal sociality” (p. 99); and Duffy & Mair (2018) examined a jazz festival in Australia and demonstrated how embodied engagement with this event can facilitate feelings of inclusion in a community. Due to the limited literature within event studies that draw on the concept of embodiment, we have turned to the related tourism and leisure literature where there is greater engagement with this concept, to inform this section of the discussion. Integral to this is Urry’s (1990) classic text on the tourist gaze which valorised ocularcentrism in tourists’ consumption of places. One of the early critiques of this approach, Veijola & Jokinen's (1994) ‘*The Body in Tourism*’, colourfully deconstructs how this conceptualisation silences the immersive nature of bodily experiences. Recognising the limitations of the visual in capturing the situated, active and expressive nature of the tourist experience led to a renewed focus on the sensuous body and even Urry, in subsequent publications (Urry & Larsen, 2011), admitted the problematics of such a narrow visual perspective.

Crouch (2000, p. 68) observes that “stopping and gazing at a ‘view’ is only a fragment of the way the material world is ‘engaged’ in practise” and numerous commentators note the importance of “being, doing, touching, and seeing rather than just seeing” (Cloke & Perkins, 1998, p. 189). The tourism literature has since acknowledged the value of senses beyond the visual in understanding human consumption and engagement with the world. As a result, vivid accounts are provided of the role of smell and sound in the construction of British tourists’ experiences in Spain (Andrews, 2005); the connection between the body and music in psychedelic raves in India (Saldanha, 2002); the role of sound in VW campervan tourists’ experiences (Wilson, Chambers & Johnson, 2019), whilst Potter (2008) reminds us of the need to be open to sensory modes beyond the Western centric five senses, with an analysis of the role of kinaesthesia in understanding movement in a British dance school. However, as Crouch & Desforges (2003, p. 7) note, recognizing the sensuous body and its interconnectedness “is not simply a case of ‘adding in ’other senses be this taste, touch, smell or sound” but considering the totality of the bodily experience.

The concept of embodiment has thus disrupted the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy. Merleau-Ponty (1962) identifies the importance of the totality of the bodily experience which makes the individual senses interconnected. As Crouch (2000, p. 68) notes “the world is not only ‘out there’ at a distance but surrounds the individual. It is touched and smelt and so on with all the senses working together. It is grasped multi-sensually.” Embodiment then considers as interrelated and intertwined the corporeal, sensate, affective and cognitive in consuming and producing an experience (Rakić & Chambers, 2012). Illustrating this new paradigm Urry & Larsen (2011, p. 15) reconceptualize the tourist gaze as one constituting “performative, embodied practices”. By bringing together the sensuous body and the rational mind, embodiment exposes us to new possibilities and multiple ways of knowing and experiencing. This is demonstrated by Johnston’s (2001) focus on marginalised gendered/ sexed and sexualized bodies in two gay pride events; Fox, Humberstone & Dubnewick’s (2014) account of a long distance bicycle tour of Hawaii, demonstrating how indigenous worldviews can disrupt dominant leisure frameworks; and Griffiths & Brown’s (2017) identification of the possibilities presented by embodied experiences to unsettle normative understandings of the host/guest relationship.

These works illustrate how embodied practices can uncover new possibilities for disrupting dominant discourses and discursive hierarchies of knowledge and power (Fox et al., 2014; Pritchard, 2007). The possibilities of embodiment are further evidenced in its use to understand the interconnectedness of the bodily experience with the environment and technology. Notable examples include the tactile bodily movement of the mountaineer over Scottish hills uniting the senses and merging the body with the landscape (Lund, 2005); the role of sound in connecting the tourist to her/his campervan (Wilson *et al*., 2019); the walking boot in mediating the body with the terrain (Michael, 2000); and the interactive connection between a windsurfer and her/his equipment (Dant, 1998). The extant literature thus demonstrates “that material, cultural and social are not autonomous worlds, but intertwine and interact in all kinds of promiscuous combinations” (Haldrup & Larsen, 2006, p. 276). However, despite the recognition of the importance of embodiment in understanding how we produce and consume experiences, this approach has scarcely been used in event volunteering research as we demonstrate in the next section.

1. **EVENT VOLUNTEER RESEARCH**

The importance of volunteers to the successful staging of sporting events is well documented (Allen & Shaw, 2009; Gellweiler et al., 2019; Sadd, 2018). Scholarly interest overwhelmingly focuses on examining the motivations of volunteers (Dickson, Darcy, Edwards & Terwiel, 2015; Giannoulakis, Wang & Gray, 2007). Extant studies also identify numerous personal benefits of volunteering including increased employability (Nichols & Ralston, 2012); increased social connectivity (Rogerson, Nicholson, Reid & Sly, 2019); improved self-esteem (Kemp, 2002); development of new skills (Fairley et al., 2016); increased involvement in sport (Downward, Lumsdon & Ralston, 2005); and the development of a volunteer identity (Nichols & Ralston, 2012). In fact, the potential for transient events to develop a vibrant volunteering community is now a key component of an event legacy (Holmes et al., 2018; Koutrou, Pappous & Johnson, 2016). Studies such as Rogalsky et al. (2016) and Koutrou et al. (2016) have identified volunteer satisfaction with their experience as a key determinant in future propensity to volunteer.

Positivistic modes of enquiry dominate the event volunteering literature, typically relying on surveys to examine the influence of different variables on the volunteer experience and satisfaction (Dickson et al., 2015; Doherty, 2009; Downward et al., 2005). Such works although valuable, do not provide rich and in-depth understandings of the volunteer lived experience. However, a body of qualitative studies is emerging providing more personal and subjective accounts. Yet, these tend to be conceptualised through a legacy lens with a somewhat static framing based on four aspects: volunteer expectations, volunteer satisfaction, perceived/real outcomes, and recommendations for improving practices. Notable works in this context include the examination of volunteer governance and how this affects the volunteer experience (Holmes et al.,2018); Tomazos & Luke’s (2015) narrative enquiry of volunteers’ experience understood through their personal, past, present and anticipated future; the detailing of the benefits incurred by volunteers and the on-going nostalgia maintained through a legacy group (Fairley et al*.*, 2016); the exploration of the emotions experienced by volunteers on role exit - conceptualised as ‘bereaved beings’ (Gellweiler et al.,2019) and Wilks’ (2016) study which concludes that the experiences of volunteers at the London Olympics demonstrate what Stebbins (1982) terms ‘serious leisure’.

Interesting autoethnographic contributions are provided by Sadd (2018) and Kodama et al. (2013) through their personal reflective accounts of volunteering. Sadd (2018) outlines the shifting level of motivation experienced throughout volunteering, whilst Kodama et al. (2013) highlight the personal emotions and attachments formed while volunteering at the Vancouver Olympic Games. Although intimated, neither accounts delve into the totality of sensuous bodily experiences, concluding with a typical managerial focus on how to improve the volunteer experience. To date then volunteers’ lived experience is understood primarily through structured managerial lenses rather than the multitude of ways it is experienced through and by the sensate and emotional body. In other words, the complexity of the embodied ways in which humans engage and understand the world has been given little consideration in research on event volunteering although this is central to our appreciation of this practice. To illustrate this complexity, we conducted research with volunteers at the 2018 Tall Ships festival in Sunderland and the next section articulates the methodological underpinnings of our empirical investigation.

1. **METHODOLOGY**

The Tall Ships race is an annual event consisting of between 70-100 ships that aims to develop young people’s interest in sailing whilst promoting international friendship. The ships visit four European ports, which each arrange a programme of cultural activities for the crews and visitors. Host ports are selected by Sail Training International through a competitive bidding process, with bids assessed against specific logistical, technical, and support requirements. The Tall Ships race is highly prized, as it brings many benefits to host ports including increased exposure through national and international media, boosts to local revenue through tourism whilst also providing a range of opportunities for community involvement and entertainment (Sail Training International, 2020). In summer 2018 the race visited Sunderland, a city in the North East of England which has a proud maritime history as the largest ship building city in the world during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, with the closing of its shipyards in the 1980s, and a litany of unsuccessful regeneration projects, Sunderland is today poorer than many other post-industrial cities (Short & Tetlow, 2012). Sunderland City Council recruited 350 volunteers as ‘event makers’ to help with the organisation and running of the cultural programme (Sunderland City Council, no date).

As indicated earlier in this paper, the concept of embodiment is drawn from the philosophical approach of phenomenology which seeks to explore people’s lived experiences with phenomena, in this case, volunteering at a major sport festival. Phenomenology “expresses a concern with experience as lived, that is, as it is, was, or may have been experienced in the lived moment” (Adams & van Manen, 2017, p. 782), and as expressed by those who lived the experience. Given the interpretive nature of phenomenology it is appropriate to adopt a qualitative methodology in which it is accepted that “meanings are constructed by human beings in unique ways, depending on their context and personal frames of reference as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007, p. 614).

The specific qualitative technique that we utilised was semi-structured interviews which is commonly used in phenomenological research (Adams & van Manen, 2017). Interviews provided the space for volunteers to tell their own stories and to talk about their experiences of the event. The interviews centred around the personal experiences of volunteers, their favourite memories, and the emotions they felt during the Tall Ships festival. To facilitate in depth responses participants were encouraged to tell any stories from their time volunteering. Specifically, participants were first asked a broad question – “What do you remember about your experiences at the Tall Ships festival”? This initial question was kept general to allow participants to get comfortable with the interview, to speak freely, and to open up space for more focused questions and prompts emerging from their initial responses. This was followed by more specific questions such as “What was your favourite memory of the event?”; Did you have any negative experiences at the event”? “How did you get on with the other volunteers? With the Tall Ships crew? With visitors to the festival”? “How did volunteering at the festival make you feel”? We also included prompts such as ‘Why did you feel that way?’, ‘What was the reason for that?’ to enable participants to elaborate on their responses. As with all work exploring memory, it is acknowledged that the volunteers’ memories, emotions, and feelings are not objective recollections but rather reconstructions from their present state (Lee & Kyle, 2012).

Each participant was asked to bring any photographs or memorabilia that signified their volunteering experience to the interview. Photographs and artifacts trigger memory and have the potential to unearth deeper responses than traditionally occurs with verbal utterances alone, whilst also empowering the participant to tell their stories on their own terms (Balomenou & Garrod, 2014; Scarles, 2011). After receiving ethical clearance from our university, we used a variety of methods to recruit participants for the study- specifically, we telephoned all the publicly listed volunteer organisations in Sunderland; placed posters at different venues around Sunderland explaining the nature of the research project and asking for research participants; and we contacted the volunteer manager for Sunderland City Council requesting that emails be sent to registered volunteers (‘event makers’), so that any interested participants could contact us directly for an interview.

From these sources 31 volunteers responded and all were interviewed. Interviews averaged about 1 hour and took place over a four-month period between November 2019 and February 2020 and were mainly conducted on the premises of the researchers’ university (19), with others taking place in local cafes (3), at the homes of research participants (3) and at a community centre (1). When it was not possible to meet in person interviews took place via Skype or telephone (5). All 31 research participants were White British and were either residents of Sunderland or nearby surrounding areas. Women outnumbered men (21 and 10 respectively) and all were overwhelmingly in the 50+ age category (26 participants). The volunteers performed several roles at the event from managerial to a variety of general positions (see Table 1 for profiles of research participants). Volunteers brought a variety of photographs and memorabilia (such as t-shirts, hats, newspaper clippings, and the event programme) to the interviews with many stating that the act of looking for them the night before the interview refreshed their memories of the event.

Table 1 here

All the interviews were conducted, digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author and the names of research participants were replaced with pseudonyms to preserve anonymity. While there is no prescribed or procedural technique associated with phenomenological research (Gellweiler et al, 2018) we drew on thematic analysis as enumerated by Braun & Clarke (2006) as we felt that this was the most appropriate way to organise and assess our findings in the context of the conceptual framework and the conversations with the research participants. This process involved six stages. In the first stage the transcripts were read multiple times by both authors to familiarise ourselves with the data. Secondly, each author then manually coded the data independently in an iterative process, drawing on issues emerging from the interview data and the conceptual framework of embodiment. Thirdly, both authors identified themes that had been derived from the codes. In the fourth stage, both authors convened to discuss the codes and the identified themes and through collaboration, negotiation and consensus identified three key themes which were believed to best capture the volunteers’ lived experiences. In the fifth stage we named our themes – these we described as ‘bodily feelings and performances’, ‘the fluidity of emotions’ and ‘the more-than-visual’. In the sixth and final stage we report on those themes that had been derived from the fifth stage –the discussion of each of the three themes is outlined in the following section.

1. **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**
   1. ***Bodily feelings and performances***

Crouch, Aronsson & Wahlström (2001, p. 259) observe that “we live places not only culturally, but bodily”. One of the overriding memories of the volunteers was the heavy burden on their bodies of traversing the multiple spaces of the 5-day event:

*I was so tired my legs were absolutely aching, I never walked so much in my life... But I think it was long enough really 5 days…Even though you see the good parts of it, I really had enough by the end...There was so much adrenalin I couldn’t even sleep in the night because I got so consumed with the role* (Olivia).

*I was absolutely shattered by the end of the evening shift, but it was really really good* (Amelia).

For these volunteers one of their most vivid memories emerged from the everyday repetitive practice of walking, which took a physical toll on and through their bodies. This was manifested in aching legs, painful feet, and the inability to sleep due to adrenaline. The sheer physicality of their roles as volunteers and the resultant strain on their bodies, was used not only to express how hard they worked during the event, but for some, this represented a badge of honour.

For Grace, walking in a part of the city triggered memories of her volunteering experience:

*Well I got a lot of blisters walking as they put a temporary road surface down into the docks to make it a bit more pleasant to walk around. But I must have had sand in grip as I got terrible blisters. So, every time I walk back to the civic centre, I think ‘oh the days I walked up there in absolute agony’ because it was hot as well. Not everyone got blisters, but a lot of people did because we did such long hours… it was a lot of walking, on the fit bit it was like 35 thousand, 40 thousand steps a day. If the weather had been bad, I don’t know what would have happened. I think people would have still come but wouldn’t have been the same* (Grace).

The blisters on Grace’s feet and the physical pain remain palpable long after the event. It was also not uncommon for volunteers to express contradictory emotions (Frazer & Waitt, 2016) and this clearly emerges in relation to the warm weather during the festival. As Grace previously indicated, the hot weather exacerbated the physical tiredness caused by walking between sites, but on the other hand, volunteers also welcomed the warm weather as it enticed visitors and created a special atmosphere. The warmth of the experience is thus both physical and emotional as is recounted by several volunteers like Rebecca:

*It was a really hot week. You can still imagine it on your skin. As we were outside all week, that’s something I can really remember. But also, when you go around smiling and other people smiling it is warmth inside as well* (Rebecca).

For Rebecca, the sheer physicality of the sun on her skin continued to resonate, and this was combined with feelings of warmth generated through euphoric recollections of happiness and connectedness to other bodies at the event.

The visibility of the body and of ‘being there’ emerged as volunteers commented on the importance of being identifiable by the captains of the ships and the visitors to the festival. The visibility of the volunteers’ bodies was enhanced through their uniforms, specifically the volunteer t-shirt:

*you are sticking out. But it’s good when you are at events that you have a t-shirt that people can recognise and especially if they are lost and they find somebody in the green t-shirt. And they go “oh that person there because there is a green t-shirt, I can see it* (Lucy).

The way in which the shared uniform increases visibility and creates a shared identity is widely noted in the literature (Allen & Shaw, 2009; Holmes et al., 2018; Kodama et al., 2013; Sadd, 2018; Wilks, 2016) and this is supported by our findings. However, our research demonstrated that more than this, the corporeal connection between the volunteer body and the uniform influenced how the volunteers’ navigated spaces and how they performed within these spaces:

*Because you are dressed in volunteer garb you can’t be off duty. I didn’t feel like I could wander around the place as a tourist with all this kit on* (Daniel).

*I think it’s the same as any uniform when you put it on there is a certain expectation of you so for that, it was put on your uniform and you knew that you had to smile all day. You wanted to give a good impression of Sunderland, even though I don’t live in Sunderland, that’s what you were volunteering to do, to give a good impression of Sunderland and the people of the North East* (Rebecca).

These excerpts indicate how wearing the uniforms resulted in the volunteers performing those informal rules of conduct expected of their roles. Rebecca emphasises how she would use her body to convey desirable meanings to the spectators about Sunderland and people of the North East, engaging in what Goffman (1990) terms ‘strategic impression management’. The uniforms thus controlled bodily performances.

Volunteer uniforms also categorise the body and influence mobilities. Specifically, the colour of the volunteer t-shirt either red, blue, or green (depending on the volunteer role), determined the degree of spatial access. The red and blue t-shirts (technical or liaison roles) typically provided access to the ships either directly or indirectly while the green t-shirts (general volunteer) usually resulted in volunteers being positioned in areas without direct access to the Tall Ships. The volunteers were acutely aware of the disparity in spatial access afforded to different colour t-shirts, resulting in an underlying sense of resentment:

*The blue people were getting more involved than we were. I didn’t go on any of the boats, I mean the blue t-shirts got to go on the boats, but we didn’t* (Jade).

*I think if they had the roles again a lot of people would want to go on the boats, rather than be on foot, there was a lot of perks on the boat, you got invited on the boat got to know them. So that sometimes went against the green* (Leah).

These excerpts highlight how the volunteer t-shirt was not simply a uniform but was entangled with deeper meaning relating to the spatial access it afforded. The significance of the volunteer t-shirt resonates with works such as Michael (2000) on the ‘walking boot’ or Barry (2019) on the ‘hiking bag’ which describes the power of non-human objects to enable or impede access by humans to certain environments. In our study, the colour of the volunteer t-shirt categorised volunteers into those who were only able to see the Tall Ships, and those who could touch and interact with the ships and the crew directly.

The desire ‘to do’ and ‘be part of’ rather than merely seeing is well documented within the tourism literature (Cloke & Perkins, 1998) and this is evidenced when one volunteer reflected on his favourite memory of the event:

*Without a doubt I met up with the captain of the Golden Lion. I was talking to him about my family and the River Wear and he just said, ‘do you want to come out on the Golden Lion?’ so we went out and sailed out of the Port. Lovely sunny day, the weather was absolutely fantastic. So, we were there in our shorts and t-shirts, as soon as we went out the pier it went freezing. Then we went sailing half an hour, then on the way back in the captain said, ‘would you like the sail?’ – sail back into the River Wear. Wow never going to forget that. I thought to myself that’s one thing no member of my family has ever done, going back hundreds of years, so that was a special moment. It was very kind of them* (Ryan).

This vivid memory by Ryan conveyed his embodied, lived experience at the event. That is, the corporeality of the changing temperature on his skin, his emotional connections with the ship (captaining the ship), his family and the place (the River Wear), all combined into a feeling of *jouissance* and euphoria. Haldrup & Larsen (2006: 286) describe the necessity of bridging “the gap between, rather than separating, the material and the immaterial, the concrete and the metaphorical, the dreamed-of and the lived-in orders of reality”. Ryan’s reflections support such an understanding, demonstrating how volunteering is experienced and remembered throughout the sensuous and emotional body. Moreover, this narrative illustrates the value of the experiences that volunteering opens-up that go beyond the direct volunteer tasks. That is, for a fleeting moment, Ryan was able to engage in a leisure experience while performing his volunteer duties. Kodama et al., (2013, p. 88) note “very little, if anything, has been examined or written about volunteers’ leisure time during a major sport event”. Ryan’s account suggests that ‘leisure’ and ‘volunteering’ time were sometimes blurred during the event.

* 1. ***The fluidity of emotions***

The heightened emotions of volunteers were frequently entangled with their feelings about self and place (Sunderland). The personal excitement of volunteers entering the liminal space of an event and their subsequent feelings of loss on completion are well documented within the literature (Fairley et al*.*, 2016; Tomazos & Luke, 2015), and the results of our study support such conclusions. Gellwieler et al., (2019) refer to volunteers on exit from their role as ‘bereaved beings’ which certainly captures volunteers’ emotional investment in their role. However, beyond personal emotions volunteers in our study frequently linked their personal feelings to their perception of Sunderland as evident in their recounting of their emotions during and after the festival:

*Really excited because at that time when the first one came, was just a buzz about it all… just the general feeling of happiness I quite like the feeling of happiness. You don’t often get the feeling of happiness in Sunderland. It has been going through a bad time* (Charles).

*The river for that 4 or 5 days was buzzing, and it was brilliant to see, the city was full of people from all over the world. It was just a great place to be and then it was like everybody just went. Then it went back to being the way it used to be, and you just think oh, it’s just like a void was left and it was a shame. When I stood watching them all leave, I felt a little bit emotional actually when they disappeared. It was just such a great event to be part of and I will not forget it* (Callum).

A strong sense of place is thus intimately intertwined with volunteers’ emotional engagement with the festival, which is not evident in similar studies. Bromley-Davenport, MacLeavy & Manley (2019, p. 803-804) in their analysis of politics in Sunderland note how economic stagnation has led to a segment of the working class population feeling left behind, with residents describing a “ghost town” and being nostalgic for the bygone era “when Sunderland used to have a buzz about town”. The heightened emotions experienced by volunteers perhaps demonstrated that the festival had tapped into an imagined or real prosperous past for Sunderland. The feeling that the city was enlivened, indicated how volunteers felt the festival disrupted their everyday reality of life in the city. The feelings of loss when the Tall Ships left reflected not only volunteers personal emotional state, but also a sadness for Sunderland reverting to its post-industrial reality.

The interrelatedness between emotions linked to person and place further emerge when volunteers discuss the pride they felt. The personal pride felt by volunteers after an event is identified by several authors including Wilks, (2016), and Kodama et al., (2013). However, in our study volunteers also felt a sense of pride in Sunderland for successfully organising and hosting such a large and prestigious event:

*I think for me was just pride of being a Wearsider[[1]](#footnote-1) to think that this is my home city and that they got the Tall Ships. And all these people coming from all these different countries and all the Tall Ships that came in, it was ‘this is my hometown, and this is what we can do* (Sarah).

*So much pride for the whole of Sunderland. So much pride that we had managed to bring this huge big event to Sunderland really* (Abbie).

Throughout these reflections the volunteers’ express pride in the success of the event, as it demonstrated that the city could organise an event of international standing and could welcome international visitors. Rakić & Chambers (2012) note how international visitation to tourist sites may result in increased local pride, and in a similar way, volunteers felt pride that the Tall Ships and such a large number of visitors had been attracted to Sunderland. Comments that the festival “put Sunderland on the map” is particularly pertinent and there was overriding sadness throughout the interviews about Sunderland’s diminished status since its post-industrial decline. Whereas volunteering at mega events such as the London Olympic Games stimulated feelings of national pride (Sadd, 2018; Wilks, 2016), the Tall Ships race, as an international event, instigated a distinctively local pride in the city of Sunderland.

The data shows that volunteers took direct action to maintain their memories and routine actions triggered the recall of experiences. Photographs were an important way in which experiences were captured. The ease of digital photography resulted in volunteers taking many photographs, whilst those who did not have time to take photographs, had access to the multitude of shared photos in social media groups. The positive emotions and prestige in recollecting the experience of volunteering to friends and colleagues is documented in the literature (Fairley et al., 2016; Kodama et al., 2013). In line with this, the participants in this study expressed joy in talking about their experience and sharing their photographs and memorabilia with other volunteers, friends, and family. The photographs facilitated the construction of a volunteer identity, but more importantly, they were a personal means of preserving memories. To maintain these memories, several volunteers took the time to print photographs and put them into photo albums as demonstrated by Abbie below:

*I want it to look at them I don’t want it to be up in the cloud somewhere I want to be able to keep them. I want to look through them. I want to remember. You know what I mean even when I’m old maybe mobile phones don’t even exist by then* (Abbie).

It seems evident that some volunteers like Abbie preferred the materiality of the printed photograph over its immaterial digital version as this enabled them to take more time to remember their experiences. The act of printing and organising the photographs in this digital age demonstrates that the experience was worth remembering and a significant moment in their lives.

Several volunteers noted that now that the initial euphoria of the event had passed, they did not actively access their memories as much as before, but there continued to be triggers for these memories. These included the event memorabilia, from the volunteer garments to the event programme (see Figures 1-4).

Figures 1-4 here

Volunteers valued their memorabilia as it ensured the maintenance of memories and positive feelings associated with the event. Alexandra described wearing the volunteer hat and Natasha wearing the volunteer t-shirt:

*When I put it on, I remember, it takes me back to that time which was a good experience in my life. So, when I wear it, I feel good* (Alexandra).

*I think it reminds me of what actually was quite a special event, it’s a sort of feel good factor* (Natasha).

For both Alexandra and Natasha, the tactile connection with these garments’ folds space-time evoking positive memories and emotions. To other volunteers whilst not wearing the garments, seeing them in the wardrobe everyday triggered memories of the experience. Crouch & Desforges (2003, p. 11) observe that “memory, like space, can be temporalized and can re-invigorate what one is doing ‘now’” and it certainly appeared that the garments triggered positive emotions in the volunteers.

Memories of the event were also triggered during everyday activities such as meeting with other people who volunteered at the festival. Fairley et al*.*, (2016) note how after the Sydney Olympics a ‘spirit of Sydney group’ formed organically which provided the opportunity for volunteers to share stories and information among themselves. No formal Tall Ships group had yet been formed, but volunteers remained in contact via social media, and continued to meet during other volunteer activities which provide dopportunities to share stories and memories. In addition, volunteers noted how specific geographical areas of the city also triggered memories of the event:

*If I’m walking along the coast I often look back and you can imagine the Mir coming out, or one of the Dutch ships coming out, and just thinking back that you actually helped that* (Ethan).

*Occasionally, I will look down over the bridge and think well 2 years ago it was full of ships… Occasionally I ride by back across the bridge and you look at the point where the tightrope walked across the bridge and you think yeah. Yeah it is, it’s good you occasionally get a bit of a flash back* (Callum).

For both Ethan and Callum spaces within the city triggered personal memories allowing certain moments to be mentally replayed thus highlighting the role of imagination in preserving memories and emotions. One important trigger for memory identified throughout the interview process were the Tall Ships signs located in strategic places in the city (Figure 5). Typifying volunteer reflections Olivia, referring to the sign commented *“when you see it in black and white, you think oh yeah”* suggesting that it was the continued material presence of the sign that triggered her memories of the event.

Figure 5 here

These signs, as material objects, represented deliberate acts by Sunderland City Council to commemorate the hosting of the Tall Ships race, linking the present to the past, and serving to trigger memories and emotional connections to the event and to the city.

* 1. ***The more-than-visual***

The visual is clearly important for volunteers when referring to the sight of the ships and crowds. However, volunteers also remembered the noise of horns and sea shanties, the smell of food and the sea, the feel of the sun on the skin, and the taste of beer. The volunteer experience is thus constructed through the range of senses that capture the bodily experience of ‘being in’ the festival. Charles described one of his most vivid memories:

*Clearly the smell of the sea which I find it invigorating. I’m not a good swimmer and seasick, but that was certainly invigorating* (Charles).

The ability of external stimuli to affect the body in such a way indicates the importance of the role of senses beyond the visual and the totality of embodied experiences as remembered by the volunteers. Moreover, emerging from the responses is how the senses are not experienced in isolation, but work together, to form what many of the volunteers referred to as a ‘carnival atmosphere’. Resonating with how Urry & Larsen (2011, p. 22) describe bodies being “corporeally alive” when “sensually other to everyday routines”, the multi-sensuous nature of the festival experience emerges when Olivia reflected:

*I wouldn’t say there is one specific thing that reminds me of that. It was more just kind of there was that much going on. You were kind of looking at everything. I suppose your senses are heightened. The smells and the tastes* (Olivia).

This demonstrated how multisensory experiences are given greater meaning through volunteers’ subjective interpretation of events. Crouch (2000, p.66) argues that places are “encountered ‘with both feet’ and mixed with mental and imaginative evidence”.

1. **CONCLUSION**

In this paper we have demonstrated how volunteers’ experience of sport festivals is embodied in three interrelated aspects - corporeal, emotional, and multi-sensual. These highlight the complex nature of embodiment and while we utilised thematic analysis and presented the themes separately, our study demonstrated that these are blurred and do not represent distinct, mutually exclusive categories. Indeed, we do not suggest that the boundaries among them are impenetrable as the nature of embodiment requires that one dismiss the existence of any distinction between what is corporeal (of the body), what is emotional, and what is multi-sensual. We have suggested that the volunteer experience is constructed through a complex array of interconnected senses, which, combined with knowledge of self and place, creates new and subjective meanings. The most vivid memories are given meaning through the folding together of the past, present and future of Sunderland as a post-industrial place. These memories continue to resonate within volunteer bodies in the medium term after the Tall Ships festival demonstrating the significant impact of this event on the consciousness of the volunteers. Moreover, the material and cognitive triggers from the festival reconstitute the emotions from the event in the everyday lives of the volunteers.

Our findings provide new insights into the lived experiences of event volunteers which we argued has to date been overwhelmingly framed through disembodied managerial lenses – relying on formulaic constructs of volunteer motivations, expectations and satisfaction. Embodiment has advanced debates in tourism and leisure studies by bringing the “thinking, emotional, and active body” into how places are constructed and consumed (Rakić and Chambers 2012, p. 1629) but has been used to a much lesser extent in event studies. This paper sought to expand the understanding of the relevance of embodiment for events by highlighting the multiple ways that the body shapes and is shaped through the volunteer lived experience.

The value of our research lies in our application of a phenomenological approach to understand the embodied experiences of volunteers at a major sporting event in the medium-term post event period. This approach is important in three respects. First, in the context of event studies it provides an alternative methodology which is currently under-utilised in the field, but which can more fully unpack the volunteer experience as embodied – that is, as corporeal, emotional and multi-sensual. This study has thus moved the event studies literature forward from considering volunteering at events as an ‘out of the ordinary activity’ in a ‘liminal space’, to recognising value in the quotidian practices of the body and its connection with place through which experiences are constructed and unfold. Importantly, we have demonstrated that volunteers’ lived, embodied experiences are not fleeting or transient but remain alive in the memories of volunteers even after the event has been held. The second contribution of this study is that it can inform sport public policy in terms of the development of social legacy programmes. Such programmes can consider how to harness the power of volunteers’ embodied experiences for the vivification of place, especially in those locales which have suffered post-industrial decline. Third, the study can be of value to sport event organizers of recurring events as it facilitates a richer understanding of volunteers’ lived experiences which can be leveraged to enhance recruitment strategies. Indeed, we have indicated the vital role that volunteers play in major sporting events.

Our findings resonate beyond this case by bringing to the fore the complex embodied ways in which local volunteers consume and construct their experience in the context of large-scale ephemeral events aimed at attracting tourists. As such, our approach can be adopted by other researchers who seek to understand lived experiences through the lens of phenomenology at a multitude of events/festivals and this constitutes an area for further research. There are undoubtedly several other areas for future research including more qualitative longitudinal analyses which can capture the changes in volunteers’ embodied experiences over the long term; explorations of how the psychological concept of affect can be applied to develop deeper understandings of volunteers’ emotional experiences in the context of other peripatetic events; and finally, the majority of the volunteers who participated in our study were over 50 years old, female and all were White British (which is perhaps reflective of the demographics of the city of Sunderland) so future studies could focus on the embodied experiences of younger volunteers with a range of gendered identities and also people from other racial and ethnic backgrounds in other geographical locales.

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**Table 1.**

**Profile of research participants**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Pseudonym** | **Age** | **Volunteer Role at Festival** | **Gender** |
| Lucy | 30s | Managerial | F |
| Olivia | 30s | Managerial | F |
| Daniel | 60 | General (Meet and Greet) | M |
| Lily | 60s | Ship Liaison Officer | F |
| Amber | 60s | General (Meet and Greet) | F |
| Ryan | 50s | Ship Liaison Officer | M |
| Zoe | 60s | Managerial | F |
| Sarah | 50s | Street pastors | F |
| Jasmine | 20s | On ship | F |
| Caitlin | 40s | General (Meet and Greet) | F |
| Mia | 50s | Managerial | F |
| Leah | 40s | Managerial | F |
| Alexandra | 60s | General (public relations) | F |
| Jade | 60s | Ship Liaison Officer | F |
| Connor | 60s | Ship Liaison Officer | M |
| Natasha | 50s | Ship Liaison Officer | F |
| Abbie | 50s | Administrative | F |
| Rebecca | 60s | Entertainment team | F |
| Jake | 50s | Entertainment team | M |
| Charles | 60s | Technical Liaison Officer | M |
| Alice | 60s | Managerial | F |
| Edward | 60s | Technical liaison officer | M |
| Ethan | 50s | General (Meet and Greet) | M |
| Nicole | 60s | General (Meet and Greet) | F |
| Lauren | 60s | General (Meet and Greet) | F |
| Kieran | 50s | Ship Liaison Officer | M |
| Callum | 50s | Entertainment Team | M |
| Holly | 60s | General (Meet and Greet) | F |
| Robert | 60s | Technical Liaison Officer | M |
| Amelia | 60s | General (Meet and Greet) | F |
| Grace | 50s | Ship Liaison Officer | F |

**FIGURE 1**

General volunteer t-shirt – photo by Author 1

A picture containing person, green, indoor, young

Description automatically generated

**FIGURE 2**

Photo album created by volunteer – Photo by Author 1

A close up of a piece of paper

Description automatically generated

**FIGURE 3**

Volunteering bag given to all volunteers – Photo by Author 1

A picture containing indoor, green, bag, suitcase

Description automatically generated

**FIGURE 4**

Ship Liaison Officer Volunteer T-Shit – Photo by Author 1

![A person in a blue shirt

Description automatically generated]()

**FIGURE 5**

Tall Ships sign on one of the roads leading into Sunderland – Photo by Author 1

A blue and white sign

Description automatically generated

1. The River Wear flows through the city of Sunderland and hence those from Sunderland are sometimes referred to as Wearsiders. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)