

## Sports festivals as a gateway to leisure and tourism: A phenomenological analysis of lived experiences<sup>a</sup>

*Os festivais esportivos como porta de entrada para o lazer e o turismo:  
Uma análise fenomenológica das experiências vividas*

*Los festivales deportivos como puerta de entrada al ocio y al turismo:  
Un análisis fenomenológico de las experiencias vividas*

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### Abstract

#### Authors' Notes

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors have not declared any potential conflict of interest.

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**Objective:** Embedded within the broader system of "events," "festivals" stand out as social phenomena that can be part of diverse communities, extending their impact to individuals. Our focus has been specifically directed towards sports festivals, with a particular emphasis on the aspect of lived experiences. The objective of this study is to identify and examine the experiences of a cohort of adults who took part in a sports festival held in Austria in 2019, with a particular focus on exploring the leisure possibilities inherent in such events.

**Method:** In this study, we have employed a triangulation approach by cross-referencing qualitative data derived from various methodological sources, encompassing participant observation, phenomenological interviews, and visual methods.

**Originality/Relevance:** Sport has become a common leisure alternative, and combined with tourism, it has become the most popular leisure practice. After a scope review, recognizing the gap, this study seeks to integrate qualitative research—specifically a phenomenological approach—with a particular focus on the lived experience at a sports festival

**Main results:** Following the Phenomenological Analysis, we identified two salient units of meaning that are central to the objective of this article: A. "A great trip" and B. "Temporal Embodiment: Navigating Leisure Moments as a Communal and Individual Experience".

**Theoretical/methodological contributions:** This study reinforces the role of gymnastics festivals in human development by examining lived experiences and their transformative potential in diverse social groups. It aligns with Sustainable Development Goals, emphasizing well-being, education, and inclusion through non-competitive sporting experiences.

**Keywords:** festival, event, tourism, sport festival, experiences, phenomenology

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**Resumo**

**Objetivo:** Inseridos no sistema mais amplo de “eventos”, os “festivais” destacam-se como fenômenos sociais que podem fazer parte de diversas comunidades, estendendo o seu impacto aos indivíduos. O nosso foco tem sido direcionado especificamente para os festivais esportivos, com particular ênfase na vertente das experiências vividas. O objetivo deste estudo é identificar e examinar as experiências de um grupo de adultos que participaram num festival esportivo realizado na Áustria em 2019, com especial enfoque na exploração das possibilidades de lazer inerentes a tais eventos.

**Metodologia/Abordagem:** Neste estudo, empregamos uma abordagem de triangulação por meio do cruzamento de dados qualitativos derivados de diversas fontes metodológicas, abrangendo observação participante, entrevistas fenomenológicas e métodos visuais.

**Originalidade/Relevância:** O esporte tornou-se uma alternativa de lazer comum e, combinado com o turismo, tornou-se uma prática de lazer mais popular. Após uma revisão de literatura, reconhecendo a lacuna, este estudo buscou integrar a pesquisa qualitativa — especificamente uma abordagem fenomenológica — com foco particular na experiência vivida em um festival esportivo.

**Principais resultados:** Seguindo a Análise Fenomenológica, identificamos duas unidades de significado salientes e centrais para o objetivo deste artigo: A. “Uma grande viagem” e B. “Incorporação Temporal: Navegando em Momentos de Lazer como uma Experiência Comunal e Individual”.

**Contribuições:** Este estudo reforça o papel dos festivais de ginástica no desenvolvimento humano ao examinar as experiências vividas e seu potencial transformador em diversos grupos sociais. Ele se alinha aos Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável, enfatizando o bem-estar, a educação e a inclusão por meio de experiências esportivas não competitivas.

*Palavras-chave:* festival, evento, turismo, festival esportivo, experiências, fenomenologia

*Los festivales deportivos como puerta de entrada al ocio y al turismo:  
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**Resumen**

**Objetivo:** Insertados en el sistema más amplio de “eventos”, los “festivales” se destacan como fenómenos sociales que pueden formar parte de diferentes comunidades, extendiendo su impacto a los individuos. Nuestro enfoque se ha dirigido específicamente a los festivales deportivos, con especial énfasis en el aspecto de experiencias vividas. El objetivo de este estudio es identificar y examinar las experiencias de un grupo de adultos que participaron en un festival deportivo celebrado en Austria en 2019, con especial enfoque en explorar las posibilidades de ocio inherentes a dichos eventos.

**Metodología/Enfoque:** En este estudio, empleamos un enfoque de triangulación cruzando datos cualitativos derivados de diversas fuentes metodológicas, que abarcan la observación participante, entrevistas fenomenológicas y métodos visuales.

**Originalidad/Relevancia:** El deporte se ha convertido en una alternativa de ocio común y, combinado con el turismo, se ha convertido en una práctica de ocio más popular. Luego de una revisión de la literatura, reconociendo la brecha, este estudio buscó integrar la investigación cualitativa—específicamente un enfoque fenomenológico— con un enfoque particular en la experiencia vivida de un festival deportivo.

**Principales resultados:** Siguiendo el Análisis Fenomenológico, identificamos dos unidades de significado que son destacadas y centrales para el objetivo de este artículo: A. “Un gran viaje” y B. “Encarnación temporal: Navegando los momentos de ocio como una experiencia comunitaria e individual”.

**Aportes:** Este estudio refuerza el papel de los festivales de gimnasia en el desarrollo humano al examinar las experiencias vividas y su potencial transformador en diversos grupos sociales. Se alinea con los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible, enfatizando el bienestar, la educación y la inclusión a través de experiencias deportivas no competitivas.

*Palabras claves:* fiesta, evento, turismo, festival deportivo, experiencias, fenomenología



## **Introduction**

Sports festivals, as large-scale events characterized by playfulness, physical expression, and collective engagement, offer a unique space where sport, leisure, and tourism intersect. Unlike conventional competitive sporting events, which prioritize rankings and performance metrics, sports festivals emphasize shared experiences, creativity, and cultural exchange, fostering an environment where movement transcends competition. This dynamic nature of festivals aligns with broader discussions in event studies, particularly regarding the transformative potential of such experiences. Given the increasing relevance of sports festivals in contemporary society, both as a leisure alternative and as a tool for social interaction and tourism development, it becomes imperative to explore the lived experiences of participants. This study, therefore, employs a phenomenological approach to investigate the experiences of adults who took part in the XVII World Gymnaestrada, one of the largest non-competitive gymnastics festivals in the world, with a particular focus on its leisure and tourism dimensions.

Events, characterized by a thematic focus, systematically arranged, and strategically scheduled within a predetermined timeframe, have a proclivity to provide avenues for non-routine experiences (Morgan, 2008). This escape from everyday existence, denoted as "liminoid" by scholars (Lamond and Moss, 2020; Lie, 2003; Turner, 1974), can elicit diverse emotional responses in participants (Pine and Gilmore, 2011). The study of these emotions holds significance in the realm of management research, as comprehending these motivational facets appears advantageous in their promotion (Armbrecht and Andersson, 2019; Biaett and Richards, 2020; Yazici, et al., 2016).

In the examination of experiences within the context of events, it is discernible that these experiences undergo refinement across cognitive, conative, and affective dimensions (Armbrecht and Andersson, 2019). Concerning the affective aspect, participants, motivated by the anticipation of pleasure, demonstrate an inclination to actively shape and augment their experiences with diverse intentions (Insch and Hoksbergen, 2016).

Biaett and Richards (2020) provide a noteworthy evaluation of discussions pertaining to "event experiences" held during the last decade of meetings organized by the Association for Research and Education in Tourism and Leisure (ATLAS), spanning from 2011 to 2019. The initial focus of these meetings was on updating and complementing studies, which predominantly centered on quantitative analyses. This emphasis resulted in gaps concerning social and personal experiences. Subsequently, recognizing these limitations, there was a discernible shift towards integrating both visitor and producer perspectives in research.



Consequently, qualitative research gained prominence, employing diverse methodologies such as ethnography, phenomenological research, interviews, focus groups, and observations (Biaett, 2015, 2018; Moss et al., 2019).

Richard and Marques (2016), for instance, underscored the significance of qualitative attention to aspects of experiences, aiming not only to gauge social impacts but also to measure the enduring effects of events. By the 2019 meeting, the discourse shifted towards an exploration of "how" these experiences have the potential to transform the lives of participants and organizers. In this context, assessments concentrated on affective and behavioral involvement in event participation (Biaett and Richards, 2020).

Conducting a literature review using the platforms *Leisuretourism.com* and *Hospitality and Tourism Index* within the tourism domain, Getz (2010) analyzed 432 articles focused on the theme of "festivals." The predominant themes that emerged from these studies were identified as "meanings and impacts on society," "festivals and tourism," and "festival management." Within the management sector, organizers exhibit concerns related to logistical arrangements, scheduling, and the diverse human interactions that influence participants. Publications addressing motivation, with a particular emphasis on systematic reviews, indicated that "escapism" emerges as a primary objective for individuals participating in these events. Lastly, it was observed that the literature dedicated to "sports festivals" is relatively sparse, with only one article providing insight into the consumer response to these events, particularly concerning sponsors.

In a more specific literature review, the authors examined studies published in Brazilian journals within the scope of Physical Education and Sport, using the term "sports festival" for the period between 2000 and 2020. Seventeen articles were identified, revealing concerns regarding the pedagogical approach to festival organization, the appreciation of participants, and attention to sports training aspects. Additionally, festivals emerged as a potential means of developing bodily practices associated with them. However, no studies explicitly defined or analyzed the inherent meanings of the compound terminology under investigation. In the Brazilian context, research on this topic appears to be scarce over the past two decades (Patricio, Mota, and Carbinatto, 2021).

Patricio (2021) conducted a broader search for the term "sports festival" across four academic databases, covering the same period (2000–2020). The author identified 75 studies published in English, spanning diverse disciplines, including Physical Education and Sport, Business and related fields, Medicine, Tourism, Education, Ecology, Dentistry, Psychology,



and Sociology. As anticipated, the most prominent category was Physical Education and Sport, accounting for 33 studies. Notably, two complementary themes stood out: Management and Physical Education research grounded in sociological theoretical frameworks.

The findings highlight the scarcity of studies on sports festivals, with an even greater lack of research focusing on lived experiences, tourism, and leisure. This gap underscores the significance of addressing this topic in the present study.

Accordingly, our focus has been specifically directed towards sports festivals, with a particular emphasis on the aspect of lived experiences. As defined by Patricio (2021, p.49), these sports festivals are characterized as "events that bring together groups in a specific location, with a defined period and objectives, permeated by playfulness and involving bodily and/or sporting practice." The element of playfulness associated with the festival concept allows for a departure from a utilitarian perspective of sports, one that is solely focused on ranking.

One of the differences between competitive sporting events and sports festivals can be observed in the realm of gymnastics. In traditional championships, gymnasts prepare their routines based on a scoring code, with their execution, artistic and technical difficulty being evaluated. In contrast, gymnastics festivals—a type of sports festival—emphasize expressiveness and collectivity, as gymnasts come together to perform choreographed routines in a setting that celebrates movement. The primary motivation in these events is artistic performance for the audience, rather than competitive comparison among participants (Menegaldo and Bortoletto, 2020; Patricio et al., 2025).

Re-thinking the emphasis on rankings is consistent with findings in various studies (Barreiros et al., 2013; Böhme, 2011; Galatti, 2017) where festivals are recognized as integral components of long-term sports training. Participation in these festivals is considered part of the initiation process, contributes to high-performance training, and plays a role in the retirement process. In this context, the intrinsic value of the sporting practice takes precedence over mere placement or ranking considerations.

Sport has become a common leisure alternative and combined with tourism, has become the most popular leisure practice in the contemporary world (Bergarara et al., 2018). The intersection of these two themes has become an element of significant importance since associated with local development projects, it can give very interesting results (Bergarara et al., 2018). In mid-1966, the first definitions of sports tourism emerged, thanks to the British Central Council for Physical Recreation (Anthony, 1966). During the 1980s, attention focused on the economic benefits of this movement, and Gilbson predicted in 1998 that it would be a potential





area of development (Gilbson, 1998). Sports tourism for a long time was considered as traveling to witness sporting events; however, Hall (1992) suggested a division of sports tourism into two main types: a. traveling to watch sports and b. traveling to play sports. Through this division, we can also consider three different types of destinations: those that host a sporting event; those that offer the possibility of practicing; and those that offer some attraction related to sports (Bergarara et al., 2018).

Recognizing the identified gap, this study seeks to integrate qualitative research—specifically a phenomenological approach—with a particular focus on the lived experience at a sports festival. This study aimed to identify and analyze the experiences of a group of adults who participated in a sports festival held in Austria (World Gymnaestrada), with a particular emphasis on exploring the leisure opportunities inherent in such events. More broadly, the study seeks to advocate for and highlight the significance of participants' experiences in these types of sports festivals.

By shedding light on and documenting the multifaceted experiences within these spaces, this research seeks to provide valuable insights that can inform effective event organization by managers. Additionally, it emphasizes the need for attentive consideration of meaningful participant engagement on the part of professionals responsible for coordinating and overseeing participant groups. Through this approach, the study seeks to contribute to the enhancement of the overall quality and impact of sports festivals for both participants and organizers.

## **Methodology**

The methodology employed in this study involves exploratory actions designed to comprehensively investigate and understand the experiences of adults who participated in a sports festival in Austria in 2019, with a specific emphasis on leisure possibilities. The exploratory nature of the research allows for in-depth exploration and the discovery of insights in an open-ended manner. In this study, we have employed a triangulation approach by cross-referencing qualitative data derived from various methodological sources, encompassing participant observation, phenomenological interviews, and visual methods.



### *Context*

This study undertook the observation and description of the experiential aspects of a gymnastics group's participation in the XVI World Gymnaestrada (WG), a Gymnastics for All (GfA) festival organized by the International Gymnastics Federation (IGF). Established in 1953, WG is specifically oriented towards choreographic presentations without formal evaluations (FIG 2023; Paoliello et al., 2016). Taking place quadrennially, the official duration of the event spans seven days, during which each participating group is encouraged to engage in performances. The presentation formats are varied and include participation in the opening or closing ceremony, group presentations, performances on stages within the host city, large group presentations, national nights, and/or involvement in the FIG Gala, a gala night proposed by the Federation.

### *Participants*

This research benefitted from the participation of 16 adults affiliated with a university extension group from Brazil, comprising twelve gymnasts (one male and eleven female) and four individuals in the role of visitors/spectators (one female and three male). The term "visitors/spectators" was used at the WG; however, it is applied here to denote individuals who actively engaged in collective activities during the festival, contributing through tasks such as assisting with group materials, capturing photographs, recording presentations, and undertaking other indispensable actions. We could easily call them "group staff". The participants were, on average, 35.9 years old. To safeguard the individual identities of each participant, pseudonyms are employed following the principle of preserving confidentiality and individuality.

### *Procedures*

Prior to initiating observations, interviews, or the analysis of social media data (as elaborated upon subsequently), a research meeting was conducted. During this session, all aspects of the research, including the intended actions and objectives, were elucidated to each of our collaborators, ensuring clear and transparent communication of the research intentions.



### *Participant observation*

The descriptions presented in the forthcoming discussion are based on observations conducted during the semester preceding the XVI World Gymnaestrada (WG), encompassing training sessions as well as observations made during the festival itself. The lead investigator participated with collaborators in diverse contexts, including meetings, travel, leisure activities, and presentations.

Throughout these interactions, detailed notes were diligently recorded to capture the participants' reflections on their experiences across the entire preparatory process. Typically, these notes were compiled post-meetings; however, certain instances were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed, contingent on the researcher's schedule. The pre-event observation phase comprised eleven weekly training sessions and six additional training sessions, accumulating to a total of 40 hours and 30 minutes of observed activities. The observation during the event commenced upon the team's arrival in the host city in Austria on July 6, 2019, and persisted until July 13, 2019.

### *In-depth interviews*

In adherence to a phenomenological approach inspired by Merleau-Ponty (2018), in-depth interviews were employed, incorporating the use of photos, videos, and/or artefacts as means to illuminate the lived experiences of participants. After presenting this methodological framework, participants were requested to bring objects, such as photos, videos, or any pertinent artefact, emblematic of their respective lived experiences, to the individual interviews.

The initial part of each interview involved inquiries such as "What did you bring to discuss your experience?" and "Can you elaborate on each of these objects?" Encouraged by these prompts, participants deliberated on the personal significance of the brought items. The interviews spanned approximately 45 minutes each, culminating in 12 hours of recorded material. Post-interview, transcriptions were conducted and subsequently condensed into concise texts. This condensed text was then presented to the participants for review and approval through a process known as Member Checking. This iterative step ensured that the representations captured in the text closely mirrored the participants' lived realities.





### *Visual method- social media*

Social Media (SM) platforms provide users with a virtual space to share content, including photos, videos, and messages spanning various topics, with a particular emphasis on personal life narratives (Snelson, 2016). For the purposes of this study, the focal SM platforms were Facebook and Instagram, given their prevalence among participants.

Between March and December 2019, an analysis was conducted on the videos and photos shared on the private social network profiles of each participant, with due authorization obtained through the Members' Consent Form. The content gathered consisted of posts related to the XVI WG, spanning reports, photos, training sessions, musical elements, testimonials, leisure moments, and tourism activities. These posts were captured in screenshot format, and subsequently, tables were created to organize the images, accompanied by descriptive information for each piece of content. In total, participants collectively shared 110 publications comprising photos and videos specifically related to the WG festival.

### *Critical friend*

To ensure that the data used in this study accurately reflected the ideas expressed during its collection, a critical friend was invited to follow the methods and steps (Stenhouse, 1975). The critical friend had more than ten years of experience at GfA as a trainer, researcher, and manager, having participated in the XIV, XV and XVI WG. The results were subjected to this review by a qualified researcher that included data collection and analysis methods, to ensure that objectivity and rigor were achieved (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This reviewer provided comments, which were taken into consideration by the researcher and confirmed that the desired objectivity was achieved.

### *Ethical aspects*

Each participant completed a comprehensive questionnaire that solicited general information, accompanied by the formal endorsement of the Informed Consent Form. The ethical procedures, including the content and implementation of the consent form, were sanctioned by the Ethics Committee of the University of São Paulo (Approval Number: 33299620.9.0000.5391).



### *Phenomenological analysis*

As both a theoretical foundation and a research methodology, we grounded this study in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2018), aiming to provide a descriptive account of the lived experiences of a group of adults at a sports festival. Our methodological approach embraced Phenomenological Analysis, characterized by the adoption of a "phenomenological attitude" throughout the research process. This entails maintaining a perspective aligned with the "natural attitude," allowing for the observation of situations inherent to the timeframe under investigation. Given the researchers' intrinsic involvement as part of the studied universe, this form of analysis was deemed essential and foundational.

To mitigate potential biases arising from preconceived notions about experiences at the sports festival (WG), maintaining a degree of distance was deemed crucial, aligning with Sokolowskis (2014) assertion that this attitude is necessary to "contemplate what it means to be a participant in the world and how things present themselves to us" (p. 48).

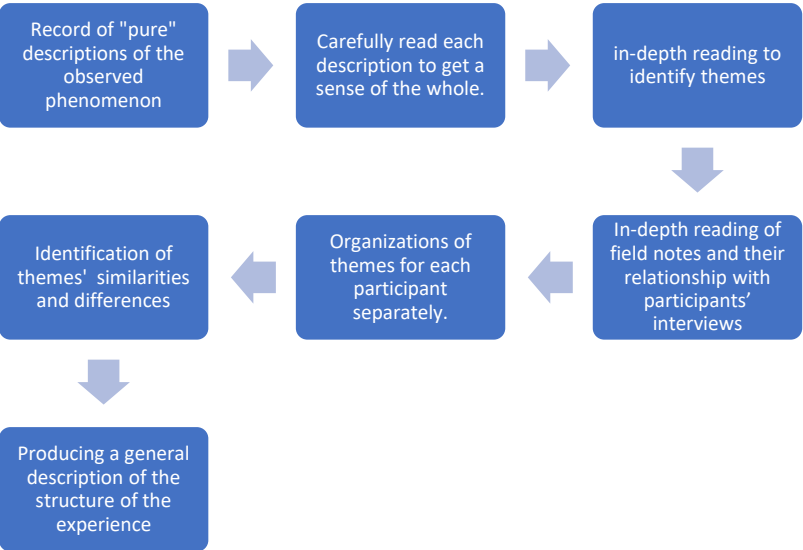
We considered those experiences that proved to be significant for each participant, what supported their participation in the festival and what made them reflect their exclusivity in the narrative. Also, for this reason, in addition to the interviews, we opted for another actions (observations and analyzes of SM), which provided us with different aspects of the same phenomenon. So, we adhere to the "triangulation" (Decrop, 2004) of this information and, supported by the phenomenological attitude, we identify the "units of meaning". These were grouped according to thematic similarities, bringing together in each speech what converged — a discourse, a published photo or a comment during the observations. However, we did not disregard the unitary meanings — which did not deal with something reported by others — as these also gave us important reflections.

Building on the analytical framework proposed by Giorgi (1985), the following procedural steps for all data we gathered were followed:



Figure 1.

*Phenomenological Analysis of This Study*



Source: The authors

**Results**

Following the Phenomenological Analysis, we identified two salient units of meaning that are central to the objective of this article:

- A. "A great trip": Given the Latin American background of the collaborators, participation in WG afforded them a significant journey to Europe, thereby constituting a noteworthy tourism experience.
- B. "Temporal Embodiment: Navigating Leisure Moments as a Communal and Individual Experience": The distinctive format of this festival facilitated specific instances of leisure, offering valuable opportunities for meaningful interpersonal engagement and shared quality time.

*A great trip*

As a starting point, we observed that the trip of this Brazilian group to the European continent promoted — in many of our interviewees — a good deal of satisfaction in participating in the World Gymnastics (WG) held in Austria:



**Akanni (visitor):** “Yeah... I chose the passport, because I think that, for us Latin Americans, going to Europe is very difficult. So, it's very expensive and... When I made the passport, when it was ready and I went to get it [...] I held it in my hand and it was a very feeling of... not of achievement, but of making a It was such a long journey that I didn't know if I would make it. And, it seems to me that, when Cecilia brought the idea to Gymnaestrada, it was in the sense of ‘look, let's implement it here, through this door’. So, it was a great trip, the gateway to which was Gymnaestrada”.

**Shakira (gymnast):** “If it weren't for Gymnaestrada I would have never traveled by plane, it was certainly a spark for me.

Participation in WG transcended the mere engagement in a gymnastics festival, evolving into a more profound and enriching experience. Several participants willingly consented to both the commitment and the financial investment, covering expenses such as airfare, event fees, and meals. Their motivation extended beyond the festival itself, driven by the allure of the journey—a rare opportunity to visit Europe. This aspiration was particularly evident in the expressions of some participants, who portrayed the WG as a pivotal pathway to realizing their long-held dream of traveling to Europe.

In addition to the narratives shared by the participants, our observations during the semester leading up to the festival unveiled a discernible undercurrent of “anxiety” within the group. The anticipation of the impending trip became a prevalent topic of discussion during periods of waiting or breaks, serving as a focal point of conversations. Collaborators who had previously encountered tourist situations in distant regions exchanged insights and information about their respective travel experiences, establishing a sense of camaraderie among those who were still in the preparatory phases.

**Field note (03/31/2019):** After the practical part was over, we sat down to have the traditional post-training picnic, a moment of relaxation, a moment in which we took the opportunity to talk about a variety of topics. Today, the main topic was the trip. Victória and Cibele, who have already participated in previous WGs, exchanged tips and shared some situations with the other members who had never traveled. Shakira was very apprehensive about what to take and how to wash and dry her used clothes. Alekena was very concerned about the size of her luggage, as many internal flights do not allow large suitcases.

**Field note (04/18/2019):** One of the topics discussed at the beginning of training was the news that we might have two free days at the event. A moment of great euphoria, especially in relation to tourism, knowing that they would be able to “be free” at some point. Each of the gymnasts started talking about what they would like to do during this “time of tourism”, among the most common wishes were: being able to drink beer; watch other choreographies; and get to know a neighboring country.

**Critical friend (03/31/2019):** I think this falls into a category of the event in the development of other skills, the organization of an event of this magnitude, allowing these people, they learn other things than just gymnastics, other things that don't just have to do with physical education, that have no relation to their bodies or choreographic composition — are “new learning” or “**context learning**”.



Discussions revolving around luggage, itineraries, tourist schedules, and saving tips became prominent topics during training sessions. These conversations, fueled by the collective anticipation of the upcoming trip, played a significant role in shaping the group dynamics. Within the context of constructive feedback (critical friend), discovered a novel dimension of learning. This form of "context learning" involved navigating the challenges and problem-solving inherent in the role of a tourist, aspects that were not part of their everyday actions until then.

Our collaborators not only demonstrated meticulous planning in their itineraries but also underwent a transformative process, discovering themselves in the role of travelers. This transformation was not merely a logistical exercise but acquired a profound emotional significance, embodying a poetic and meaningful journey. It became apparent that the trip, far from being solely a physical act of "moving," became intricately intertwined with the individuals' personalities, historical backgrounds, desires, and unique interpretations. The experience unfolded as a complex interplay of personal identity, historical context, and individual narratives.

The process of planning the trip marked the initiation of a dynamic and intentional movement for everyone, aligning with Merleau-Ponty's concept of intentionality (2018). Deliberate actions, such as analyzing maps and charting a course, evoked a sense of curiosity about the forthcoming discoveries and the act of "becoming a tourist". The intentions crafted by each participant served as catalysts for the unfolding of imaginative possibilities, creating spaces for anticipation and expectation.

The previously "empty" space characterized by a lack of knowledge and the absence of international travel experience, began to illuminate with a unique richness. The act of planning, imagining, and preparing for the journey transformed the unknown into a space filled with potential, unveiling a distinctive and personalized narrative for each participant.

Within the phenomenological framework, our embodied existence grants us agency in the world, and when our perception affords us a "spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible" (Merleau-Ponty, 2018, p. 337), our "motor intentions, unfolding, they receive the answers they expect from the world" (p. 337). In a parallel vein, the structured plans and information exchanges played a pivotal role in this experiential process within the realm of "tourism"; nevertheless, they did not completely circumvent the inherent unpredictability of circumstantial occurrences.



In moments of the unforeseen, an encounter with an experience never lived unfolded as a surprise. What had initially been a void for these traveling gymnasts sparked a necessity for learning. The shared tips, in this context, transformed into sources of inspiration, prompting a reevaluation and a distinctive engagement with the experience through a highly particularized perception.

During the interviews, when querying about the lived experience at the WG, several participants elucidated a blend of perceptions that intertwined their participation with the distinct opportunity for international travel, specifically the tourist aspect:

***Fiama (gymnast):** "I don't know, this first experience at the WG mixes a lot with a first experience of traveling abroad too. So, for me, it was very exciting. I think a lot of the things I would do differently have more to do with the fact that I think I would do it on any other trip, you know?"*

***Alekena (gymnast):** "It's an opportunity. For example, I had never left Brazil, so it was my first international trip! So, that made a lot of difference to me, it was really worth it... All the preparation for being able to travel, going abroad, a long plane trip, going to another country, getting to know another culture, the difficulty of the language. But I think we can see a sense of why this event is there in Europe, why it is well organized, the tradition of gymnastics. We understand the context and it is an opportunity. I think if it were in Brazil I wouldn't travel abroad either. So, this opportunity to travel, to see new places, was also super important for me, to be with the group, to get to know each other, a trip..."*

These observations are intricately linked to the reflections by Merleau-Ponty (2018), particularly in the latter part of his work, within "The Perceived World," with a heightened focus on point II: "Space." It is emphasized that the critical aspect for the direction of observation is not the body in its sheer existence as just another entity in a certain location, but rather, the body is conceived as a system of actions, positioning itself with relevance to what it engages in – "my body is there where it has something to do" (p. 336). The definition of the body is established through its tasks and contextual situations, encapsulating its identity within the dynamics of actions and engagements. In our natural attitude, the juxtaposition of one object beside another for the sole purpose of perceiving their objective relationships is transcended. Instead, what manifests is a continuous flow of experiences entwined with implicit implications, thereby mutually elucidating, and explaining one another.

In essence, our reflection centers on the notion that participation in the WG catalyzed a progression towards engaging in diverse experiences. Attending the event involved travel, and in the endeavor to comprehend and articulate this experience, the profound dimension of the tourism experience was equally unveiled and emphasized.





*Temporal Embodiment: Navigating Leisure Moments as a Communal and Individual Experience*

It is noteworthy that the organization and conceptualization of the WG align with the principles inherent to sports festivals, as previously delineated (Patricio, 2021) and adhere to the distinctive characteristics of Gymnastics for All (GfA). Drawing upon the Motor Praxiology theory formulated by Pierre Parlebás, Menegaldo and Bortoleto (2020) assert that GfA qualifies as a sociomotive practice, denoting an activity undertaken within a group setting. Furthermore, they underscore that the absence of predefined gestural codes within GfA creates opportunities for the amalgamation of its elements, encompassing spaces, implements (materials), and diverse practitioners. These attributes appear to foster and intensify the encounters between individuals and their shared corporeal experiences during the lived experience.

Phenomenology underscores our inherently relational nature as human beings, emphasizing our constant connection to others or external entities. Merleau-Ponty (2018) further contributes to this understanding by asserting that experience transcends mere individual corporeality, it is fundamentally intercorporeal. In other words, our individual subjectivity and interpersonal connections involve a dynamic interplay of responsiveness, expression, and otherness that extends beyond the boundaries separating self and others. This intercorporeal relationship, as elucidated by Dolezal (2017), shapes our mode of existence, constituting the very essence of our being.

Sport does not align with the characteristics of a solitary activity, as asserted by Kunz (1994). Unlike various bodily practices that can also be solitary, sports offer opportunities for a diverse range of encounters, including interactions with fellow practitioners/athletes, instructors/teachers, managers, and/or the public. However, despite the potential for individual engagement, sports are acknowledged as effective promoters of social sentiments. Notably, sentiments such as solidarity, friendship, cooperation, and collaboration serve as reminders of human development and contribute to fostering a shared vision of the common good (Ozoliņš and Stolz, 2013).

Like many events, WG offers intervals without commitments to presentations or the festival itself. These periods, commonly referred to as "free time," were marked by our observations of diverse groups from various nationalities engaging in activities such as games, handstand competitions (to determine who could sustain an inverted position for the longest duration), groups exchanging dance choreographies, collective acrobatics demonstrations in



open spaces, games, and situations that, irrespective of the language spoken, fostered communal leisure.

**Zoe (gymnast):** *“Oh! I danced everywhere possible, right? (laughing) I think everything! Even in the bathroom brushing your teeth. But we danced in bars, there were parties on the street. So, I also danced, I danced at the event itself, I danced while the others were doing choreography, I got into the mood....”*

**Figure 2.**

*Visual Method – Playing Gymnastics During Free Time*



**Source:** Data collected for research.

The festival atmosphere (Trigg, 2020) facilitated the sharing of emotions with varying intensities. A notable instance occurred on the first day of the festival, when the group’s scheduled commitment to the event was canceled due to a storm. Instead, they gathered in a bar in the city downtown, describing it during our interviews as a “disengaged” moment. This transition to a different space induced a celebratory state:

**Jordan (gymnast):** *“On the first day! And it was fun dancing and the DJ playing Brazilian music. But the most fun thing was that several countries came together out of nowhere and started dancing out of nowhere and we left there enjoying the party like that... So, that went well... I think for me it was a highlight of the event.”*

**Akanni (visitor):** *“We sat down, ordered some things, etc... Brazilian music started playing, our group took over the space, and then it filled up [...] And, suddenly, I found myself in there from the bar in a mix of sensations, because... I was in a land that wasn't mine, seeing people I didn't know from different places too and... Suddenly, I saw that the bar had been taken over by my culture, that It was something that was completely unexpected.”*



**Cecilia (gymnast):** “The Sunday bar, because... Wow! I can't even qualify it, because it was so cool, so beautiful, that... anyway [...] But it's the spirit, the atmosphere of the event. At the bar, when people arrived, different nationalities, dancing... There's more to this, right? These are things that are not predictable. 'Look! We're going to have a meeting with all nationalities in this bar here...' No! It's very spontaneous!”

**Cibele (gymnast):** “Ah! A moment that really stood out was us in that bar (laughing) So, there was the highlight for everyone... The place for everyone to interact, let loose and play, and dance and have fun.”

**Iris (gymnast):** “Another thing that was too much for me was that day at the bar. Which was also on the first day... Yeah. But how beautiful it was to see everyone in the same vibe, people who didn't know what they were singing there, but they were in the same vibe, dancing and wanted to learn our stuff (laughing)”

The critical friend highlighted that this moment was unplanned, not included in the festival schedule, and certainly not part of the group's pre-existing commitments. As Cecília articulated, it was a spontaneous occurrence—a leisurely interlude that fostered unscripted exchanges.

**Figure 3.**

*Visual Method – Leisure Time*



**Source:** Data collected for research.



Looking at posts on social media, one of the collaborators recalled in November (four months after the festival), the photo taken after they left the bar, describing it as one of the “*happiest days of their life*”. The intensity of this festive experience was recalled several times in random conversations during meetings after the trip, as a “highlight” or “unforgettable” day of the WG.

Jordan, one of the gymnasts, remarked that the experience of establishing a connection with a stranger stood out as a pivotal aspect of his participation. He noted that this change in attitude had a transformative impact on certain aspects of his routine personal life. Despite identifying himself as a more reserved individual, he came to recognize that being open to others could yield unique and enriching moments. Akanni also acknowledged the significance of such exchanges in her daily life, where routine had inadvertently taken precedence. For her, the encounter went beyond mere togetherness; it encompassed collaborative creation, thought, planning, and action. This underscored the inherent necessity of frequent communal experiences, as highlighted by Moreira (2019).

From this perspective, Saura and Zimmermann's study (2021) states the value of "doing it together" as a sensitizing and motivating factor within various traditional communities—a sentiment also observed in festivals and celebrations.

Zoe, in contrast to her past experiences, particularly within competitive environments, found it unusual that individuals at the festival exhibited empathy and friendship. She attributed this behavior to the absence of institutional competition, as participants were present with the sole objective of coming together. This departure from the norm held considerable significance for her, shaping the festival experience into what she deemed "the best event of my life."

***Zoe (gymnast):** “what struck me most about the event was this relationship we have with people from other countries. It's an event that I've never seen like this... I've participated in several dance events, where people from outside come and everything. But there isn't this connection, this pleasant thing to experience, to exchange things. Our! I thought this was incredible. I really liked it. It was the best event of my life! There's a lot of that. And no one is there to compete. Because many events I go to are competitions. So, people look at you dirty, with this air of competition. I'm not much of that. But there everyone was friends with everyone, it seemed like we had known each other for a long time, in reality. We met people and danced together or, in short, there was a lot of culture together and that's really cool.”*

### *Final considerations*

Public spaces can foster encounters with others (Arendt, 2020), and in festivals, these encounters in the mentioned activities (playing, dancing, exercising, etc.) during 'free time' can promote empathy, empowerment, and the appropriation of bodily knowledge established in this





relationship with the world (Saura and Zimmermann, 2021). When these relationships occur in harmony with shared affection, many feelings are generated, and perceptual intensity is revealed, or, as Merleau-Ponty himself (2018) comments, what touched us the most becomes evident!

Thus, we can overcome the touristy glimpse that our collaborators presented to us. In a moment of transition—from the natural attitude to the phenomenological attitude—we move away from the unease that haunted us: 'Is the experience at the WG magnificent because people travel to Europe?' to delve into the realization that the flow of experiences is sequential: sports, or bodily practices, lead us to events, and these present a universe apart to be unveiled, to be lived. It is not possible to separate each experience of a sports festival, as we separate the seed from an orange. The understanding of the body-event relationship permeates the whole. Each perception is unique and directed toward the meaning we seek with each act. It is desirable to 'present oneself' or to 'compete.' But it is also desirable (and very much so) to break from routine, travel, socialize, and explore new places. If the choice were solely the body in action, we might venture to say that the WG might not be the chosen option.

This study contributes to growing evidence on the role of gymnastics festivals in human development (Corrêa, 2022; Lopes, 2020; Menegaldo, 2022; Oliveira, 2023; Patrício, 2021; Patrício et al., 2025; Silva, 2020; Wichmann, 2014). In Brazil, academic efforts emphasize gymnastics in developmental contexts, particularly through the discipline of *Gymnastics for All* and its connection with festivals. Our research group aims to deepen this field by expanding studies on lived experiences at sports festivals, including diverse social groups to better understand their transformative potential.

Furthermore, this research aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being), Goal 4 (Quality Education), and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Gymnastics festivals foster physical activity, social inclusion, and cultural exchange, reinforcing the value of non-competitive sporting experiences. Moving forward, we advocate for interdisciplinary collaborations and longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impacts of participation in such events. Given the demands of qualitative research, expanding methodological approaches and participant diversity remains relevant for a more comprehensive understanding of these experiences.



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