

Academic Weekly Digest

School of Hospitality & Tourism Management



Cruel (im)mobilities and the Nearly Utopian Intimacies of Italian Migrant Personal Relationships

To date, research on visiting friends and relatives' tourism (VFR) has focused on visits as moments of mostly successful (re)connection that creates belonging and results in positive benefits like increased well-being and economic growth. There has been little research however on the darker side of VFR where visits lead to relationships diminishing. Dr Michael Humbracht, Prof Allan Williams and Prof Scott Cohen explored how for many migrants and their loved ones VFR is 'cruel', in that visits lead to hopeful yet uncomfortable forms of intimacy that contributes to reduced contact.

VFR tourism reveals a key affective dynamic of globalization: that hope and belonging do not always lead to positive social transformation but may actually inhibit change.

Dr Michael Humbracht, Prof Scott Cohen & Prof Allan Williams

VFR tourism has become important in relation to debates about globalization and increasing tourist and migrant mobilities that are said to contribute to the fragmentation of relationships. VFR researchers have argued, and rightly so, that visits are in fact evidence of how migrants use tourist mobilities to develop new intimacies and emotional styles that lead to meaningful global lives. In a new paper, however, we question whether emotional connection, intimacy and belonging always result in positive forms of global social transformation. To approach this question, we conducted international on-site interviews with Italian migrants in London and their friends and family in Italy. The paper finds that relationships develop strong affective intensities after migration yet maintaining relationships also provoked unsettling reflections about whether relationships at a distance are 'real'. These reflections then informed a sense that life courses and identities were moving in different directions, and ultimately led to reduced contact.



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“VFR tourism shows that even very negative experiences can create hopeful and comforting affects.
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Despite negative experiences, however, strong affective connections tended to produce hope about the authenticity of relationships and possibilities for further connection in the future. Drawing from theory on intimacy, we highlight how ‘cruel’ relations develop in that VFR can lead to strong connections yet also wishful thinking that inhibits creative social transformation. The study also raises questions about the limitations of viewing sustainable connections in an overly positive or negative light.

Further Reading:

Humbracht, M., Williams, A.M., & Cohen, S. (2022). Cruel (im)mobilities and the nearly utopian intimacies of Italian migrant personal relationships. *Global Networks*.

Link: bit.ly/3REfszN