Volunteer tourism and its (mis)perceptions: A comparative analysis of tourist/host perceptions

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Abstract

It is imperative to ensure that the volunteer tourism sector is perceived in an accurate light to ensure that the tourists are signing up for what they are actually going to get, and to ensure that the hosts are aware of the industry that they may be entering. In order to ensure a profit maximising, long lasting and sustainable industry that delivers the intended benefits, it is important that the industry is portrayed accurately. At present this does not appear to be the case. This paper examines the perceptions of the volunteer tourism sector from both a Western tourists' perspective and a hosts' perspective and identifies three key research themes demonstrating substantial differences and the possibility of misperceptions of the industry: educational benefit, tourists living and working in the host community and the possible contribution to community development. Discussion of the limitations of definitional boundaries and associated sectors provides justification for the potential misperceptions of the industry. Through the use of 26 in-depth interviews, the study reveals a number of key concepts and highlights areas that warrant further research.

Introduction

Contemporary volunteer tourism, often referred to as voluntourism, has tended to suffer from a lack of differentiation from other forms of tourism or volunteering (Wearing, 2001), and despite being one of the major growth areas in contemporary tourism, remains largely indistinct and under-researched. Despite current literature demonstrating ample research into the motivations and experiences of volunteer tourism, this appears to be predominantly from the perspective of the tourist as opposed to the host. In addition, there appears to be little research into the way that the industry is perceived by both prospective volunteer tourists and host communities.

The way that something is generally defined plays an imperative role in the way that it is perceived. There appears to be no definitively accepted definition of volunteer tourism, consequently indicating the sector's possible misperceptions. In order to remain consistent

with much of the current literature surrounding this notion, Wearing's (2001) description of volunteer tourists is used as a foundation for understanding the concept within this paper. Volunteer tourism is therefore defined as

> Those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organised way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment. (p.1)

Consensus on the nature of volunteer tourism has yet to be achieved, partly due to the diversity of people it attracts but also due to the discourse around the

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concept (Ooi and Laing, 2010). It is this general lack of clarification of the experience that provides rationale for further examination into the way it is perceived and why.

John Locke (1689) once stated: 'The power of perception is that which we call understanding'.

It is this understanding that is fundamental in operating a sustainable and prosperous industry. By acquiring an in-depth understanding of volunteer tourism, substantial power is provided in that it can help enhance business potential and sustainability, and help the industry to flourish in its entirety. In an attempt to contribute to the successful future of the volunteer tourism industry, this paper draws upon findings from 26 in-depth interviews with a selection of prospective volunteer tourists and people from volunteer tourism host communities. The research compares the way that volunteer tourism is perceived and analyses similarities, disparities and emerging trends. Due to the size, scope and limited previous research, this study does not aim to produce definitive explanations, but provides an overview of the perceptions of volunteer tourism, whilst highlighting areas warranting additional research.

The location of volunteer tourism

Whilst having roots in travel and aid, volunteer tourism boomed in the late 20th century when international tourism and volunteer organisations experienced substantial growth (Novelli, 2005). The number of recorded volunteer tourism organisations has risen from approximately 100 in 1987 to 1300 in 2010 (McMillion, 1987; Volunteer Abroad, 2010) and has continued to grow since. In addition, perhaps the most contemporary way to attempt to measure the size and scope of volunteer tourism is using an online search engine, and when typing *volunteer abroad* into Google, 51,500,000 results are displayed (2013), thus indicating the size and extent of volunteer tourism.

Contemporary volunteer tourism has tended to suffer from a lack of differentiation from other tourism types. Rather, it is often in association with other forms of tourism such as eco-tourism, sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, backpacking tourism, gap year tourism, niche tourism, wildlife tourism, cultural tourism, education tourism, pro-poor tourism, agritourism and research tourism (Wearing, 2001). It is this lack of clarity of the term that potentially affects the way in which the industry is perceived. The array of associated terms could be viewed as positive; links with other tourism types helping to promote the industry and enhance understanding of what it entails. In contrast, it could be viewed as negative with volunteer tourism lacking its own individualism and originality,

potentially contributing to the lack of understanding of the sector.

The rise of neoliberalism appears to have influenced the development of the volunteer tourism industry. First, it has seen rise to greater freedom to develop organisations for business and the monetary benefits this entails (Benson and Wearing, 2012). Second, increased corporate social responsibility has resulted in organisations and their employees being more educated about volunteer tourism and wanting to participate (Wearing, 2001). Finally, and arguably most prominently, is the enhanced economic prosperity within host destinations (Gray and Campbell, 2007). Although some may argue that the benefits to hosts are often limited (e.g. Benson and Wearing, 2012; Guttentag, 2009; Matthews, 2008), it is the perceived benefit that is likely to have influenced rise to the development of this tourism sector, rather than the actual benefits, accentuating the value of examining the perceptions of volunteer tourism.

In order to examine accuracy of perceptions of volunteer tourism it is important to be aware of its location within the tourism industry. Volunteer tourism is often described as a 'niche' market (Coghlan, 2006; Novelli, 2005; Wearing, 2001) and is principally situated in contrast to traditional mass tourism. However, with this sector rapidly emerging, it is crucial to note that such sources may soon become outdated. Figure 1 attempts to position volunteer tourism within the broader tourism industry; examining areas that may be classified as mass or niche tourism and areas amid.

There are many indications that volunteer tourism no longer falls definitively within the niche tourism sector. In addition to increasing numbers of volunteer tourists (McMillon, 2009), there are parallels between characteristics of volunteer tourism and mass tourism. This prevailing link further emphasises the industry's expansion. In addition, mass and niche tourism are typically at very different ends of the tourism spectrum, potentially confusing the tourist on volunteer tourism's location within the industry, and thus their overall perceptions of volunteer tourism.

Perceptions of volunteer tourism

As with multiple industries, particularly those falling within the mass tourism bracket, the expansion of volunteer tourism appears to be accompanied by negative impacts as well as positive, and this has been well recognised by academics of the field in recent years. Table 1 identifies three key themes within the current literature, whereby the positive and negative views to hosts are identified.

Positive views of volunteer tourism can be categorised into two distinct groupings: those that are
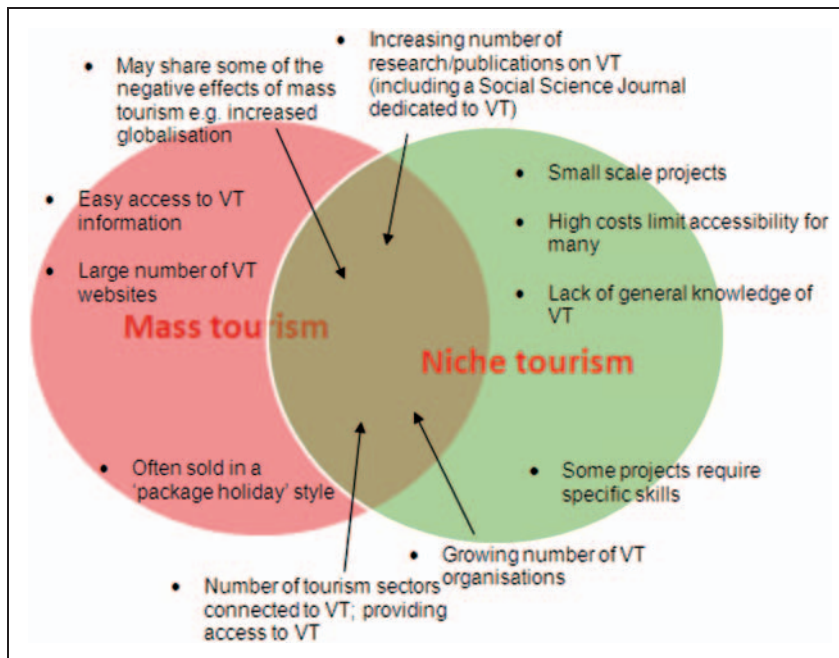
Figure 1. Connections between traditional mass and niche tourism. Volunteer tourism is represented here as VT. Source: Blackman and Benson, 2010; Brown, 2005; Coghlan, 2006; Daldeniz and Hampton, 2010; Gray and Campbell, 2007; McMillan, 2009; Novelli, 2005; Ooi and Laing, 2010; Original Volunteers, 2010; Tomazos and Butler, 2010; Wearing, 2001.

positive for the host, and those that are positive for the volunteer, with each category boasting benefits of equal quantity. However, negative impacts appear to be principally associated with hosts, thus indicating that volunteer tourism may be more beneficial for the tourist than the host. However, with little literature supporting these negative effects to date, it is likely that the tourist is oblivious to such impacts, signifying the potential perceptual romanticisation of volunteer tourism.

To exemplify this romanticisation, Said's (2003) work on imperialism can be examined: with claims that traditions of false and romanticised images of Asia and the Middle East (within which volunteer tourism often takes place) serve as justification for Western colonial and imperial ambitions. With many volunteer tourism organisations being owned or operated by Western pioneers, it could be viewed as invasion of host destinations, with the positive impacts on hosts potentially being outweighed by the negative impacts. In addition, volunteer tourists may be unaware of this romanticisation, believing that the hosts are largely benefited, which may not be reality. In effect, tourists are potentially provided with a 'staged experience' rather than an authentic one (MacCannell, 1973). In addition, Boorstin (1964) suggests that it is not the 'real' experience the tourist seeks, but rather the 'idea' of the real experience. Whether the tourist is looking for an entirely authentic experience or not, is not yet evident; however, existing literature does indicate the former.

Jameson (1991) claims that postmodernism is the dominant cultural logic of late capitalism, focussing on the differences between modern and postmodern periods. This is of particular relevance to volunteer tourism, with tourist-generating regions boasting postmodern societies, and many hosts with modern societies (Jameson, 1991) – the dominance of the former indicating potential negative impacts such as inequality between cultures, exploitation and potential lack of altruism. The use of the term holiday/vacation here also implies less altruistic motives than solely a volunteering experience, with a particular focus on the vacation element. There are a number of identified key motivations within the literature.

Motivations for undertaking volunteer tourism

Many academics have researched the specific motivations for undertaking a volunteer tourism trip (e.g. Brown, 2005; Dann, 2002; Grabowski and Wearing, 2008; Ooi and Laing, 2010; Stebbins and Graham, 2004; Wearing, 2001). Common motivations include cultural immersion, giving back and making a difference, seeking camaraderie, education, personal growth, curriculum vitae (CV) enhancement and taking a 'holiday with a difference'. Recent research has also demonstrated more contemporary motivations, such as wanting to achieve a feeling of 'heroism' (Tomazos and Butler, 2010) or wanting to volunteer because celebrities have

Table 1. Impacts of volunteer tourism.

Impact of volunteer tourism	Impact on the tourist	Impact on the host
Education	**Positive**: Opportunity to learn through experience and academic programmes, develop career prospects	**Positive**: Opportunity to learn from the tourists, enhanced local education through volunteers teachers and community workers **Negative:** Learning the culture of others resulting in changed society
Tourists living or working in host community	**Positive**: Develop new relationships, personal growth, experience a new destination, travel **Negative**: High costs often involved, lack of home comforts, experience not as expected	**Negative**: Reinforcements of conceptualisations of the 'other', rationalisations of poverty by tourists, instigations of cultural change
Possible contribution to community development	**Positive**: Being able to 'make a difference', feeling of being 'heroic', comparing themselves to celebrities that have undertaken volunteer tourism or similar relevant activities	**Positive**: Enhanced economic prosperity, specialists provided where needed **Negative**: Neglect of local's desires, unsatisfactory work and hindering of work progress, disruption of local economies

Based on: Blackman and Benson, 2010; Gray and Campbell, 2007; Guttentag, 2009; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006; McGehee and Andereck, 2009; McGehee and Santos, 2004; Mostafanezhad, 2013; Ooi and Laing, 2010; Raymond and Hall, 2008; Sin, 2009; Tomazos and Butler, 2010; Wearing, 2004.

promoted such activities through their own actions (Mostafanezhad, 2013). In addition to the motivations discussed, it is also worth noting that there are many external influences potentially affecting a person's motivation to participate in volunteer tourism; for example, it is very common now for people to partake in volunteer tourism as part of a compulsory element of an academic course, often referred to as service learning (Lyons and Wearing, 2012). Despite there being a wealth of research into the motivations for one wanting to undertake a volunteer tourism trip, there has been little regard paid to what may motivate the hosts for facilitating volunteer tourism. This is an area warranting further consideration.

Volunteer tourism can be associated with a post-Fordist shift in tourism, where Westerners desire something different from the usual holiday experience (Stoddart and Rogerson, 2004). From examination of the emergence of volunteer tourism it can be seen that motives are driven by increased affluence, better education, changes in philosophical viewpoints and the search for different forms of tourism. However, in order to fully understand travel motivation, a number of theories and scales (e.g. Alderfer, 1972; Dann, 1977; Herzberg et al., 1959; Maslow, 1954) have been developed and empirically tested. Maslow's (1954) hierarchy is arguably the most useful to this study, its simplistic nature allowing it to be adapted to help understand volunteer tourism

motivation. Maslow states that in order to reach the highest goal of motivation, one must first satisfy the essential needs, these being: physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem and self-actualisation.

Using Maslow's (1954) hierarchy as a foundation, there are a number of needs each potential volunteer tourist must have met in order to participate in volunteer tourism. Many volunteer tourists are likely to be from a high socio-economic class, with the ability to afford a volunteer tourism trip and take time away from work being key determinants. However, it is ironic that by taking part in volunteer tourism it is likely that the lower fulfilments in Maslow's hierarchy may no longer be met, with many of the physical and security needs potentially being unobtainable within the volunteer tourism environment.

The way in which the essential needs within Maslow's (1970) hierarchy are potentially no longer present once the tourist is undertaking volunteer activities suggests that their motivation may decline. It is important to determine whether potential tourists are aware of this; if they are not they may not be as motivated or productive as they initially aimed to be, and thus have a less overall benefit on the community, as discussed previously.

Motivations to participate in volunteer tourism can be largely categorised into two mindsets: volunteer and vacation minded (Brown, 2005). For a volunteer minded tourist, aspects such as giving back and

making a difference, education and cultural emersion may be dominant motives. At the other end of the spectrum, volunteer tourists falling within the vacation minded category may focus greatly on socialising and camaraderie and personal growth (Brown, 2005). However, it is important to note that some motives may not fall definitively within any one sector; for example, giving back and making a difference could be viewed as a selfish motive, rather than selfless due to the self-fulfilment it may provide.

To exemplify the split motivation mindsets present in volunteer tourism tourists, studies have been undertaken into the value of the volunteer tourism experience to the tourist, and whether it is predominantly a selfless or a selfish act (Lepp, 2008; Ooi and Laing, 2010; Sin, 2009; Tomazos and Butler, 2008). Mustonen (2007) provides an intermediary into this controversial topic, stating that rather than each tourist simply fitting into either category, their motivations fluctuate between altruism and egotism, defined as *altruistic individualism* (Ooi and Laing, 2010), highlighting the roles of both altruism and ego-enhancement in volunteer tourism motivation. However, it is difficult to make accurate generalisations with the varying surrounding studies' subjective nature and the difficult measurement of altruism.

The irony of the relationship between work and leisure is also worth noting; with the two fields usually perceived as being contradicting areas of human activity (Uriely, 2001). This potentially separates motivation to take part in volunteer tourism from ordinary tourism motivation, signifying that much of the generic literature on tourist motivation is less valuable in this case.

Methodology

As examination of perceptions of volunteer tourism is a social study, the most appropriate epistemological approach for the research was interpretivism, which is consistent amongst other studies surrounding volunteer tourism (e.g. Brown, 2005; Coghlan, 2006; Gray and Campbell, 2007; McIntosh and Zahra, 2007; Sin, 2009). The anthropological and qualitative nature of the study meant that a qualitative approach was most suitable, allowing for the exploration of people's images, thoughts, feelings and meanings of the volunteer tourism phenomenon (Bryman, 2004). The study adopted the use of qualitative, semi-structured, in-depth interviews to enable the analysis of respondent perceptions.

Ooi and Laing (2010) state that one reason for the lack of consensus on the nature of volunteer tourism is the diversity in the people that take part in it. In order to help achieve a representative sample of potential volunteer, tourists respondents from a variety of demographic backgrounds were chosen. Respondents were identified through the use of a convenience sample, largely due to time restraints and accessibility. Although convenience samples are often criticised as being less representative than other sample types (Bryman, 2004), generalisability is limited, with each sample being unique.

The respondents consisted of 26 higher education tourism students from the researcher's place of work, seven of which were international students from Nepal with first-hand experience of volunteer tourism within their home environment and classified as hosts for the purpose of the research. The remaining participants were all prospective tourists from Britain (12), various African countries (2), India (3), Kosovo (1) and Hungary (1). Participant ages ranged from 18 to 34; five aged between 18 and 20, three aged between 25 and 30, four aged between 30 and 34 and the largest proportion of the sample were the 13 respondents aged between 20 and 25. The sample was made up of 11 males and 15 females. Seventeen respondents identified themselves as having had previous experience of volunteer tourism, whereas nine had no experience at all.

Being a convenience sample in the researcher's place of work, the chosen sample allowed feasible access should additional information or clarification have been required. It also meant that the interviewees felt comfortable and open during the interviews as they were familiar with the researcher, thus potentially providing better-quality data than if interviewed by a stranger. There was a possible risk of respondents feeling co-erced; however, care was taken to ensure they did not feel pressurised in any way. The diverse range of respondents limited the risk of the convenience sample being heavily biased. Coghlan (2006: 228) also used students for his study of volunteer tourism, supporting the use of such a sample here. His justification for the use of students being

> (i) as these students have an interest in travel or the natural environment ... this student sample could be used to emulate potential volunteer tourism expeditions; (ii) according to the principle of enduring involvement, individuals with a demonstrated interest in a subject ... are able to make informed judgements concerning that subject matter. (iii) these students represent a sub-group of the student population who most closely resemble the profiles of actual volunteer tourists.

The majority of volunteer tourists are aged 20–29 (Stoddart and Rogerson, 2004); therefore, the sample used is representative not only of potential

volunteer tourists but also the age that potential tourists may be planning or conducting research into their prospective trip.

An interview has been described as 'a conversation with a purpose' (Eyles and Smith, 1988), and the interviews undertaken largely followed this structure. The relaxed fluidity provided by interviews allowed for in-depth knowledge to be elicited in a way comfortable and convenient for both the respondent and the researcher, and thus aided in the extraction and analysis of valuable data (Sin, 2003).

One of the many advantages of adopting this approach is its sensitivity and people-orientation, allowing interviewees to construct their accounts of their experiences in their own words (Flowerdew and Martin, 2005). The semi-structured interviews adopted within the research allowed for this, enabling consistency between interviews by using similar wording and order, whilst providing flexibility for the interviewee (Bryman, 2004), not viable if adopting structured or unstructured interviews.

Cloke et al. (2004) describe an interview as a personal drama with a developing plot and script in outline and opportunity for improvisation; this was evident within the interviews undertaken. This metaphor emphasises that interviews allow for the examination of more than just words. Within the interviews undertaken for this study other areas were analysed including body language, tone of voice, number of pauses and familiarity with research materials. As the researcher was familiar with the usual behaviour of the respondents, a more accurate analysis was carried out and any false or inaccurate answers given could be identified, thus enhancing the value of the data collected.

Seale (2004) describes the importance of choosing an appropriate setting for the interviews and potential implications that can occur. Therefore, the interviews were conducted in a mutual and familiar environment for both the interviewer and the interviewee: the classroom. This was the most appropriate place as it was quiet, accessible and comfortable, with no disruptions. However, Sin's (2003) work on power dynamics and the potential implications that can occur emphasises that by situating the interviews within the classroom the student–lecturer relationship was more likely to be maintained. This could potentially have made the respondent feel intimidated and attempt to provide answers that they think the researcher may want to hear, potentially limiting the reliability of data collected. This was avoided by situating the interviews at one of the student desks, and a more relaxed and informal approach was taken than used whilst teaching.

The design of the interview is essential in obtaining quality and reliable data, and the subsequent value of the research (Sanchez, 1992). To ensure maximum quality, a pilot was undertaken, allowing for the identification of any weak areas and for techniques to be practised. The interview was designed so that it was not intimidating, with strategically worded questions allowing respondents to understand and feel comfortable. This was another benefit of knowing the respondents prior to the study. The interview commenced with funnelling questions to introduce the topic and 'conversation with a purpose' (Eyles and Smith, 1988) theme, and to avoid interrogation. Qualitative research relies largely on the skills of researcher (Jary and Jary, 1991); thus, the interview technique adopted a relaxed and informal approach throughout, allowing for optimal data extraction. Interviews were recorded and respondents could turn the recorder off should they wish to.

In practice, the chosen methodology worked well and given the time and resource constraints, there were no evident alterations needed. Respondents reacted well to all questions and appeared comfortable and confident with their answers. However, the empirical data gathered are not the objective truth but an experience of subjectivity (Sparkes, 1992) and the interpretivism of information; therefore, it was essential to be reflexive throughout the research process, not solely in areas of design or fieldwork but also in analysis and interpretation.

It has been argued that qualitative data can be unreliable, impressionistic and not objective (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; Punch, 1998). Therefore, care was taken to ensure that bias was limited and that reliability was maximised through a carefully selected research sample and methodology. Although the researcher's personal interpretation and conclusions surrounding subjective areas risk being evident within the data analysis (Cresswell, 2003), adequate time was allocated for data analysis to allow for in-depth examination and limit possibilities of the study becoming unrepresentative.

Data analysis was a nonmathematical analytical procedure involving examination of the meaning of words and actions. Due to the data set being relatively small, responses were counted and analysed by the researcher, and graphs were created by hand. Should a larger scale study have been undertaken, relevant computer software may have been utilised. Interviews were transcribed and relevant coding was adopted in preparation for analysis. Key themes were identified within the results and subsequently analysed. It was not possible to analyse every response given due to limited time and resources, and thus the research focussed on key themes and trends that occurred.

Results

Overall, the findings demonstrated that the way volunteer tourism is perceived by prospective tourists and hosts is not consistent. The research produced a large amount of relevant data, much of which supported the existing literature and the three key themes identified in Table 1. This paper therefore draws upon findings categorised by perceptions of educational benefit, the tourists living or working in the host community and the possible contribution to community development. For the purpose of the research, respondents have been coded below with T for tourist and H for host.

Perceived educational benefit of volunteer tourism

A number of perceived motivations for partaking in volunteer tourism were identified by both tourists and hosts and largely correlated with existing literature. However, the most prominent motivation recurring throughout the interviews was that of learning and education. Half of the respondents perceived the volunteer tourism experience as offering a substantial educational element, two-thirds of which were hosts.

Volunteer tourism hosts largely presented positive views regarding volunteer tourism and education, with six out of the seven respondents believing it has an educational benefit for both the tourist and the host.

> Volunteer tourism is about gaining knowledge, it's about give and take, giving some knowledge and taking some knowledge and learning about different cultures. (H1)

This was in general contrast to the tourists, with 12 of the 19 respondents perceiving the educational benefit is for the host only. Rationale for this may be due to the awareness of teaching being a popular volunteer tourism activity, with all of the prospective tourists interviewed paying reference to the host benefit through being taught by volunteers. Furthermore, with the sample consisting of students, it is likely that they would be more susceptible to noticing any educational benefit. This therefore provides additional explanation for the perceived association between volunteer tourism and education.

The way that the hosts viewed the opportunity to learn from the tourists as positive, indicates a benefit of volunteer tourism, supporting literature in Table 1. However, the value of this education is questionable. With many developing destinations potentially falling

within the 'modern' era as opposed to the postmodern era within which Western tourists are situated (Jameson, 1991), it raises concerns. First, the benefit of hosts learning from Westerners is questionable, with issues such as loss of culture possibly arising (Sharpley and Telfer, 2002). With one of the dominant motives listed in the literature being cultural immersion, it would be likely that if the local culture was damaged, tourists would be less motivated to participate in volunteer tourism, and popularity would decline. In addition, volunteer tourism may raise concerns of power differences, feelings of inadequacy and resentment between the hosts of the 'developing world' and tourists from the 'developed world'. This is a very important topic that was not within the scope of this study but that warrants further research attention.

Although many respondents believed they would have a substantial educational impact on hosts (largely through working as a volunteer teacher), others posed a more negative outlook.

> If children are in a school where they are taught by volunteers, like where I worked, they will have somebody one week, somebody the next week, somebody the week after. They never really have a structure or a direction for their education. They will just be taught by random people, probably the same thing over and over again. (T1)

By having a positive pre-conceived perception that is not representative of the actual experience, tourists may feel falsified. This highlights concerns raised in the literature surrounding authenticity and is another research area warranting further attention being beyond the scope of this study. In addition, tourists may feel less motivated if the experience is not as expected, with their initial motivations potentially not fulfilled; for example, 'giving back and making a difference'. In relation to Maslow's (1954) needs hierarchy it is likely that tourists will no longer have fulfilled the lower needs to keep them motivated, such as feeling needed/wanted/recognised. This may result in less optimisation of volunteer duties, shortened trips and less-satisfied tourists. It could also affect the long-term success of the volunteer tourism industry.

The educational benefit of volunteer tourism is well documented throughout the literature and it is therefore surprising that the tourists interviewed for the research were largely unaware of the educational benefit that they may receive. This indicates that this benefit may not be sufficiently represented within marketing material, or that the prospective tourists are simply unaware of this potential benefit to the self.

Tourists living or working in the host community: Selfish or selfless perceptions?

'Volunteer tourism is give and take'. (H2)

This host's comment can be considered ironic because there appears to be, as identified in the literature, an unequal balance of positive and negative outcomes for the host and the tourist. However, in paradox, describing volunteer tourism as give and take implies its equality. If this is true, it could potentially eradicate concerns about whether volunteer tourism is a *selfish or a selfless* act (Lepp, 2008; Ooi and Laing, 2010; Sin, 2009; Tomazos and Butler, 2008), or whether tourists are *vacation or volunteer minded* (Brown, 2005), with the volunteer tourism experience being overall beneficial for both the tourist and host. In fact, it indicates *altruistic individualism* (Ooi and Laing, 2010).

However, initial perceptions of volunteer tourism show that most potential tourists see the experience as being a largely altruistic activity, with all but one of the respondents believing it is a selfless act with more benefit to the host than the tourist. When asked about this, prospective tourists were very positive; for example

Leisure and recreation's just sloping around, whereas in a volunteer situation you are generally set with a task, your time is not free for you, it's all about the people you are helping. (T2)

If they were vacation minded they would do what everyone else does and book a normal holiday, like mass tourism. But because they are volunteer minded they go there for that specific reason, to volunteer. (T3)

Potential tourists stated that they perceive volunteer tourism as an altruistic experience; however, observations made during the interviews indicated a perceived benefit for the tourist also. The way that prospective tourists indicated motives such as 'CV enhancement', 'to make themselves feel better' and 'to meet people', indicates awareness of the self-benefit, although they are not immediately perceived as being selfish. It was recognised that volunteering is not necessarily the main motive of volunteer tourism. This does not indicate that volunteer tourism is perceived as selfish, but implies the give and take element, supporting claims that it is a form of altruistic individualism (Ooi and Laing, 2010). However, the comments below contradict this.

Volunteering is not enough for them, they need other things in their life and they like to go on holiday too. (H3)

The tourist's main motive is not volunteering, this is their secondary aim, it's a CV builder etc, their main aim would be to go on holiday. (T4)

This indicates that tourists are perceived as being predominantly vacation minded, and that the volunteering element is not the most dominant motive. It is evident from the research results that hosts have a far more negative perception of volunteer tourism than tourists, and that altruism is not perceived as prominent within volunteer tourism tourist motivation by hosts. This indicates the possible misperception that prospective tourists may have of volunteer tourism.

Examined literature and prospective tourist perceptions prove that altruism is perceived to be a dominant, and important motive. However, host's perceptions provide a different view, whereby tourist motivations are not based around 'giving something back', but around learning, travelling and meeting people. This indicates that the way volunteer tourism is perceived by the tourists may not be accurate, again raising concerns of false advertising and ethics and emphasising misperceptions of the sector.

However, drawing accurate conclusions about the perceived altruistic motives one may have is accompanied by difficulties. First, defining altruist behaviour is largely subjective, with no clear, precise criteria to meet in order to be classified altruistic. Also, just because a person has some motives that are self-centred does not necessarily mean that they have no altruistic motives; for example, is it not possible for a person who is 'vacation minded' to be altruistic? There is a substantial amount of literature on volunteer tourismbased around altruism; however, this is susceptible to deep flaws as a result of lack of clarity and precision defining the term altruism.

Possible contribution to community development: The unknown problems of volunteer tourism

Despite its positive reputation, a number of negative perceptions of volunteer tourism were identified within the study, predominantly by the hosts. Potential tourists that believed there were negative aspects all had prior volunteer experience. Tourists without volunteer experience believed there were no negative impacts, indicating naivety and lack of research. Almost all negative impacts perceived were associated with the host, rather than the tourist. This does correlate with the literature, with the only negativity to the tourist mentioned (during three interviews) being 'cost'. This suggests that prospective tourists think more about the hosts than themselves, indicating their potential altruistic motives/perceptions.

A common negative impact perceived was cultural change as a result of Western intervention within communities.

> The tourists are following a Western culture, and the locals copy them, they are neglecting their own culture, that's a major thing. (H4)

This negative impact was identified by both hosts and experienced volunteer tourists. This provides some clarification to previous discussion regarding cultural change. According to one respondent, hosts are aware of this change and consider it to be a negative thing. However, some portray it more positively.

> Volunteer tourism can play an important role in changing society . . . in our society lots of people are operating for a good cause. They get to go on a holiday and teach too. So they are giving something back to our country and people can learn from them, it's related with the change. (H2)

Alongside cultural change, concerns were also raised with regard to the long-term benefits to the locals. Experienced tourists were clearly aware of the possible negative effects of volunteer tourism, and cynical thoughts surrounding this were shared by three-quarters of potential tourists. This demonstrates an awareness of the possible negative impacts of volunteer tourism and indicates the need for organisations and marketers to ensure that the volunteer experience is honestly and ethically advertised in order to maximise business potential and satisfied custom.

Amongst the hosts, the main perceived negative impact of volunteer tourism identified was sex tourism. One respondent explained

> Back in my home country it used to come up in the newspaper and on the TV that people would volunteer and sexually abuse children, those that are working in the orphanage and that. You can't tell what their real motive is, they may be coming for volunteering or they may be taking advantage. It happens all the time. (H6)

This negative effect was of particular concern, as it has not been identified within the previous literature. All hosts identifying this trend were from Asia, indicating that this problem may be continent wide as opposed to worldwide. With sex tourism being prominent within parts of Asia there is a possible link here and this warrants further research.

Views of the volunteer tourism experience and perceived motivations largely resembled that of a hero, correlating with research by Tomazos and Butler (2010), with qualities such as nobility, courage and strength regularly emerging from the interviews. This was particularly seen amongst prospective tourists, with 18 of the 19 respondents indicating some form of heroic actions; for example, 'poverty alleviation' or 'giving them a better life'. This can be built on by the work of Tomazos and Butler (2010), associating volunteer tourism with Campbell's 'Hero's journey'. Additional future research into this would be beneficial in understanding the motives further.

This further supports the previous argument, whereby prospective tourists may be sold an experience other than what they are expecting. By believing (albeit indirectly) that they will perform some form of heroic actions during the volunteer experience it is possible that in fact they are able to help less than they initially thought they would, thus indicating lack of actual awareness of the negative impacts of volunteer tourism discussed above. Alternatively, if locals believe volunteer tourists are to perform acts of heroism, they are demonstrating a rather utopian view and may be disappointed with what they receive.

In addition to perceptions indicating heroism within volunteer tourism, many respondents also describe celebrities with reference to volunteering. Supporting Mostafanezhad's (2013) research, celebrities were mentioned during 10 interviews, both by tourists and hosts.

> Volunteering didn't really exist before but I think it's emerging because celebrities do it so people copy them. (T5)

Respondents associating volunteer tourism with celebrities shared some common identifying factors. They were all aged below 25, with no previous volunteer experience. Their perceptions are likely to be based around televised or internet publicity. One reason could be that young people are often more celebrity-conscious than older people. However, there was no apparent difference between views of potential tourists and hosts regarding celebrities, perhaps as a result of the global nature of celebritism, thus overcoming the geographic and development differences between tourists and hosts and providing them with similar perceptions of volunteer tourism.

The association of volunteer tourism with celebrities and heroism again indicates potential misportrayal of the notion. By televising a volunteer tourism experience, it is likely to have been aestheticised. This is a good example of the potential romanticisation of volunteer tourism, as discussed in the literature, and is likely to provide one with an unrepresentative and idealistic perception of the sector.

When considering celebrities and heroism in relation to discussions regarding selfish/selfless and

vacation/volunteer-minded motives there was a distinct irony evident. Many celebrities undertake such work as a method of enhancing their image/publicity, thus indicating selfish motives, similar to those with motivations of 'CV enhancement'. This is in contrast to the 'heroic' perception many have of celebrities, and thus of volunteer tourism in this case. This can be linked back to discussions regarding altruism, further emphasising that although volunteer tourism may be perceived as altruistic, there are likely to be other agendas not immediately apparent.

However, some experienced respondents had different views

> Volunteer tourism should mean you take your expertise and use it in other countries but that doesn't really happen . . . people go out and plant a tree or something and think they're helping but in reality they're not, more often than not the locals could do this themselves and in fact they are a hindrance, not a help. (T4)

> Sometimes it might be beneficial in the short term, but in the long term it might not be benefiting the local community or project. . .you might think you're doing something good but when you are finished working in that community they will just be back to normal. So it's not a permanent thing. (T6)

These statements were taken from volunteers with first-hand experience of volunteer tourism. However, this was not a wide-spread view across prospective tourists as the general perception was that volunteer tourism is primarily positive. Many inexperienced prospective tourists appear to be unaware of the potential negative impacts that were identified by some hosts and experienced tourists, and again presents the possibility of the misperceptions of the industry.

A lack of understanding

As identified within the literature, volunteer tourism lacks definitional clarity and has many ambiguous links with other forms of tourism. This research has demonstrated that this is coupled by the ambigious and varied perceptions of the industry by both host populations and prospective tourists. The research has correlated with the literature, in that all respondents identified connections or similarities between volunteer tourism and other forms of tourism, and this could be a contributing factor to the lack of consistency of the way that volunteer tourism is perceived. Although perceptions between prospective tourists and hosts differed in many ways, the lack of definitive understanding of the concept was evident amongst most respondents, proven by their current knowledge and understanding.

Those that were confident with their knowledge of volunteer tourism had substantial prior experience.

There was a distinct similarity identified within the research between volunteer tourism and a package holiday, thus emphasising the links between the volunteer tourism sector and mass tourism demonstrated in Figure 1. This similarity was noted by six respondents. As the students predominantly studied tourism-based subjects, and had experienced traditional package holidays, this knowledge base could provide some rationale for this connection. Volunteer tourism could be viewed as being in the early stages of its lifestyle and thus mature similarly to mass tourism with traditional package holidays being an outcome of this. With this resemblance in mind, respondents are likely to have similar expectations for volunteer tourism as they would for a package holiday, thus impacting on their perceptions of the industry.

Conclusion

John Locke (1689) once stated: 'The power of perception is that which we call understanding'.

This paper has highlighted the perceptual ambiguities of the volunteer tourism sector by prospective tourists and hosts. There is a distinct lack of clarity in the way that the sector is perceived, and a likely reason for this is ambiguous nature of the industry itself. With a lack of clear definition and blurred boundaries between volunteer tourism and other forms of tourism, it is no wonder that the sector has been subjected to a range of perceptions, and potentially misperceptions.

It can be seen that education is a widely recognised benefit of volunteer tourism; however, to whom this is expected to benefit varies between respondents. With education being seen as one of the key benefits to the tourist, it is surprising that this is not more widely recognised by inexperienced, prospective tourists. It could be recommended that marketers promote this benefit more widely to help attract more business.

Many initially perceived tourists that work and live in the host community as a positive impact; however, this research has revealed that many have a more balanced view of volunteer tourism, identifying potential merits and downfalls. Many have begun to question the motives of the volunteers themselves and whether they are motivated for selfish or selfless reasons, and many hosts and experienced volunteer tourists believe that altruism is not the primary motivation.

The contribution to community development has been identified as another key issue within the research, with varying views demonstrated between tourists and hosts. It was this concept that teased out some of the most interesting data that call for urgent

additional research. This includes the possible sex exploitation occurring within the volunteer tourism industry and those that may be volunteering in the hope of feeling 'heroic' or to copy celebrities. There has been little regard paid to these three issues to date and this study has opened the door for additional research into these.

It is imperative to ensure that the volunteer tourism sector is perceived in an accurate light to ensure that the tourists are signing up for what they are actually going to get, and to ensure that the hosts are aware of the industry that they may be entering. In order to ensure a profit maximising, long lasting and sustainable industry that delivers the intended benefits, it is important that the industry is portrayed accurately. At present this does not appear to be the case, with such differing views of the industry as a whole demonstrated throughout this research.

This study has proved that there are many different perceptions of the volunteer tourism industry, some of which will inevitably be more accurate than others, and highlights many areas warranting additional research. Due to the size, scope and limited previous research, the research does not aim to produce definitive explanations for all of the issues raised, but it does provide adequate insight into the way that the sector is perceived and some possible reasoning for this. Overall, the study is beneficial to many stakeholders of volunteer tourism including future volunteer tourists, volunteer tourism hosts, facilitating organisations and academics, and provides sufficient foundation for further research into this field.

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