(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

Perceived impact of volunteer tourism on host communities in Lubbock, United States: A qualitative exploration

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Abstract

Volunteer tourism is a popular trend with millions of people participating in various volunteer activities. Although volunteer tourism is frequently promoted as a way to improve host communities, little is known about how it is perceived to impact host communities. Hence this study explored the perceptions of volunteer tourists regarding the impact of their activities on the host community; investigated the alignment between volunteer tourists' perceptions of impact and the actual needs and concerns of the host community; gathered insights into the factors influencing volunteer tourists' perceptions of impact. The Qualitative study sampled ten voluntourists through purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. Findings revealed that, Volunteers reported both positive and negative effects of voluntourism, including community bonding, environmental conservation, dependency, and cultural insensitivity. This study highlights a critical tension between voluntourism's potential for positive community engagement and its susceptibility to perpetuating neocolonial narratives evidenced by uneven power dynamics and cultural imposition.

Keywords: Tourism; Volunteer; Tourists; Host; Communities

1. Introduction

Volunteer tourism has become a significant global phenomenon (Hartman et al., 2022). Volunteer travel is formally recognized by the United Nations as a valuable tool for advancing sustainable development objectives, particularly in the realms of healthcare, education, and environmental preservation (UNV, 2020). Millions of individuals participate in volunteer work overseas every year, and volunteer tourism has grown in popularity (Hartman et al., 2022). Although the goal of volunteer tourism is to help host communities, there is increasing worry about how this practice may affect these communities (Guttentag, 2022). According to research, volunteer travel may promote preconceptions, homogenize cultures, and create an imbalance of power between the volunteer and host communities (Mostafanezhad, 2022). Additionally, volunteer tourism may have detrimental effects on the local economy, such as forcing out local labor and increasing reliance on outside assistance (Sin, 2022). Numerous nations have adopted volunteer tourism to advance social cohesiveness, economic growth, and cross-cultural interchange. For example, the government of Australia (Australian Government, 2020) has taken steps to promote volunteer tourism, realizing that it may support national development priorities.

Voluntourism has grown in importance as a means of fostering community development, as many communities and organizations gain from the resources and expertise of voluntourism (Liu et al., 2024). Even while volunteer travel is becoming increasingly popular, little is known about how it is considered to affect host communities (Guttentag, 2022). Recent literature is primarily composed of the opinions of volunteers and tour operators, which has brought attention to the necessity for more study on the viewpoints of host communities (Palacios et al., 2023). Furthermore, few literatures exist on the findings of voluntourism on host communities, with other findings suggesting the impact on community development (Liu et al., 2024) hinging upon the beneficial effects on community development, while others

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have highlighted worries about environmental degradation, cultural uniformity, and economic reliance. (Mostafanezhad, 2022).

Since it affects the viability and efficacy of volunteer tourism initiatives, the perceived impact of volunteer tourism on host communities is still a crucial concern (Hartman et al., 2022). This study examines how volunteer tourism is seen locally, emphasizing the social, cultural, economic, and environmental aspects. This study aims to further knowledge of the intricate dynamics of volunteer tourism and its impacts on host communities by investigating the experiences and perspectives of local populations. However, there are also worries about how volunteer tourism affects nearby communities, including cultural sensitivity, reliance on the local economy, and sustainability of the environment (Mostafanezhad, 2022). Thus, the need to explore the impact of voluntourism on host communities may have an array of problems for the host communities, which signifies the need to address this issue. This research provided valuable insights into the complex relationships between volunteer tourism and host communities from volunteers' perspectives, which also contributes to developing more sustainable and equitable forms of tourism. It is against this background that this study explored the perceived impact of volunteer tourism on host communities in Lubbock, United States.

2. Methodology

The study utilized a case-study approach. The rationale behind selecting a case-study approach is rooted in its ability to provide deeper insights into complex phenomena, particularly in situations where the experiences and impacts of a subject like voluntourism are varied and multi-dimensional. Volunteer tourism, with its diverse range of projects, experiences, and impacts on host communities, presents a subject ideally suited to a case-study analysis. This approach enables the study to examine the specificities and complexities of individual instances of volunteer tourism thereby providing a detailed understanding of its effects on host communities. Each case study was purposively selected to represent a unique aspect of volunteer tourism, offering a comprehensive view of its diverse impacts. This approach helped capture detailed and meaningful insights into the real-world implications of volunteer tourism. Purposive sampling was employed given the specific focus of the research. Thus, ten participants who had previously participated in an international volunteer experience were sampled for interviews across diverse ages, nationalities, and occupations.

Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit responses, which provided the opportunity to probe for detailed insights, and data was analyzed using MAX QDA. They were included in the study due to their engagement in volunteer tourism within two years of the interview. The diverse national backgrounds of the participants provided a broader perspective on how various cultures perceive and engage with volunteerism, offering insights into potential future opportunities. This sampling approach is apt for studies like this one because it involves deliberately selecting individuals who have direct experience with the subject matter, in this case, voluntourism. Participants' experiences and reflections provided a rich foundation for analysis, thus allowing the researcher to explore the subtleties and dynamics of voluntourism in a focused and comprehensive way. This makes purposive sampling ideal for research aiming to explore specific, experience-based aspects of a subject like voluntourism. Ethical approval was sought from the Institutional Review Board (Human Research Protection Program) at Texas Tech University with approval number IRB2023-195. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality, withdrawal privileges, and anonymity of data. Informed consent was sought from the participants before the interviews were conducted.

3. Theoretical thrust

This study was anchored on Postcolonial Theory. Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens for examining ongoing inequalities betweendeveloped and developing nations, particularly in the context of voluntourism. This perspective indicated how voluntourism can perpetuate neocolonial dynamics, reinforcing power imbalances and cultural stereotypes rooted in colonial legacies (Bhabha, 1994). The theory emerged as a critique of Western-centric 'development' paradigms aimed at influencing postcolonial states in the Global South (Said, 1979; Fanon, 1967). Gaining prominence in the 1980s, this critique followed the observation that decades of development efforts in newly independent states failed to significantly address poverty and inequality (Escobar, 1995). Post-colonialism advocates for the deconstruction and reconstruction of narratives in postcolonial contexts, which is essential for critically examining volunteer tourism (Loomba, 1998). It emphasizes the need for a critical analysis of volunteer tourism, challenging and transforming its colonial history and patterns of dominance (Hall, 1996; Young, 2001).

By applying the Postcolonial Theory to volunteer tourism, we can scrutinize how volunteer tourism might perpetuate colonial attitudes and dependencies. This involves examining how voluntourists from affluent countries might

unknowingly reinforce a narrative of superiority and salvation in interactions with less economically developed communities. This theoretical framework helps to identify and deconstruct colonialism's historical and ongoing influences within volunteer tourism, focusing on how these practices might reinforce unequal relationships between the 'volunteers' from more affluent, often Western, countries and the 'host' communities in the Global South. Postcolonial Theory illuminates how volunteer tourism can perpetuate a narrative of Western superiority and salvation.

Volunteers may arrive with preconceived notions of the communities they intend to help, influenced by a historical colonial mindset that views the Global South as 'underdeveloped' and in need of 'rescue.' This can lead to a paternalistic approach to aid, where the solutions and practices of the volunteers are imposed without adequate understanding or respect for the local culture, knowledge, and needs. While projects are often advertised as beneficial to local communities, the economic benefits can be skewed toward the volunteers and organizing agencies. For instance, the influx of volunteers can distort local economies, with resources directed towards accommodating foreigners rather than supporting local needs and development. Moreover, the labor provided by volunteers might replace that of local workers, leading to economic dependency and undermining local employment and skills development. Furthermore, cultural exchanges can become one-sided, where the culture and practices of the host community are overshadowed by those of the volunteers, leading to cultural imperialism. This can erode local traditions and values, replacing them with foreign concepts and practices, further entrenching a sense of inferiority and dependency. By applying Postcolonial Theory, we can advocate for a more ethical and equitable approach to volunteer tourism. This involves creating initiatives that are truly collaborative, where projects are designed and implemented based on the actual needs and inputs of the host communities. It also means fostering an environment of mutual respect and learning, where volunteers are conscious of their impact and seek support rather than dominate the local culture and economy. Ultimately, utilizing Postcolonial Theory helps to ensure that volunteer tourism contributes positively to the empowerment and sustainable development of host communities, challenging the neo-colonial structures and promoting a more equitable global partnership.

4. Results

4.1. Socio-demographic Profile of Volunteer Tourists

Table 1 Demography of Volunteer Tourists

Volunteer	Age	Sex	Occupation	Nationality	Location	Category
Mike	45	M	Environmentalist	Canadian	Guatemala	Environmental Conservation
Tiwa	30	F	Social Worker	Nigerian	Benin Republic	Education and Infrastructure
Angela	35	F	Health Professional	British	UK	Health and Wellness
Jason	29	M	IT Specialist	American	Mauritius	Child Welfare
Tom	22	M	Student	American	Morocco	Religious Outreach and Community Engagement
Rose	27	F	Nurse	American	South America	Public Health Education
Sarah	34	F	Environmentalist	Kenya	Nigeria	Environmental Conservation
Juliet	20	F	Student	Australian	Thailand	Cultural Exchange
Joy	21	F	Student	Canadian	Palermo, Sicily	Cultural and Social Awareness
Mary	31	F	Educator	Germany	Benin Republic	Art

4.2. Types of Volunteer Organizations Used

Participants in this study engaged in volunteer tourism through various arrangements and organizations reflecting a wide range of activities. Mike and Angela opted for a more personal approach, arranging their volunteer efforts independently without the involvement of an external organization. This trend of self-organized volunteerism is an emerging pattern among certain volunteers, demonstrating a preference for autonomy in planning and executing their volunteer activities. Religious affiliations were also prominent, with Tiwa participating through a Mission church. Such entities remain central to the facilitation of volunteer tourism with their established networks and community-oriented missions. This is in keeping with patterns seen in most participants, where local churches or Christian-driven organizations were a common choice for arranging volunteer trips. The specialization of volunteer organizations is evident in Jason's partnership with "Working Travellers," focused on child welfare, and Sarah's with the Clean Hub organizationfor environmental conservation. These organizations offer structured opportunities with specific goals, which align with the inclinations of volunteers seeking to contribute to targeted issues.

Study abroad programs were also a prominent feature in this study, with Tom, Juliet, and Joy all utilizing such programs to organize their volunteer activities. This preference suggests an alignment of volunteerism with educational and cultural enrichment goals, whichthese programs are adept at facilitating. Rose's engagement with the Peace Corps for public health education shows the consistent preference among volunteers for established and reputable organizations known for their comprehensive support and extensive reach in volunteer tourism. Lastly, Mary's involvement in art-related volunteering through a non-governmental organization highlights the role of these entities in providing specialized opportunities for volunteers, broadening the scope of volunteer tourism to include artistic and cultural endeavors. This array of organizational involvement and personal initiative among participants reflects the diverse mechanisms through which volunteer tourism can be experienced, ranging from the self-directed to the institutionally supported catering to the unique motivations and aspirations of the volunteer.

4.3. How do voluntourists describe their motives and the extent they were fulfilled?

Participants were asked to describe their motivations for participating in volunteer tourism, as well as the extent to which those motives were fulfilled. Some respondents gavemultiple motives for their trips. The summary includes thirty-three motives for the ten participants. The participant's answers were compiled, analyzed, summarized, re-coded, and fit into sixsimplified main themes.

Table 2 Views of the participants regarding the motives of engaging in volunteer tourism and frequencies.

Themes	Respondents										Frequencies
Personal, Passion	Jason	Joy	Juliet	Tiwa	Angela		Rose		Tom	Mike	8
Cultural Exploration andAppreciation	Jason		Juliet		Angela	Mary	Rose		Tom		6
Professional Development and Personal Gain		Joy		Tiwa		Mary		Sarah		Mike	5
Seeking AlternativeDestination Choices					Angela		Rose		Tom		3
Educational and ResearchInterests		Joy	Juliet			Mary	Rose				4
Environmentaland Social Activism	Jason	Joy		Tiwa			Rose	Sarah	Tom	Mike	7

Table 2 illustrates the perspectives of participants regarding their motivations for engaging in volunteer tourism. During the discussions, the most frequently mentioned motivation was tied to a personal passion. The first objective of this study was to explore the motivations behind individuals' participation in volunteer tourism. The study reveals a spectrum of motivations among volunteers, encompassing personal, social, and professional factors, each playing a unique role in shaping their choice of destination and form of engagement. These motivations are instrumental in defining their decision to participate in volunteer tourism and consequently influence their experiences. The participants were asked about the main driving factors behind their involvement in volunteer tourism. It is important to note that while some participants expressed multiple motivations for their trips, others had distinct, specific reasons for each of their volunteer tourism experiences recounted during the interviews conducted over the past two years. One

such theme is 'seeking alternative destination choices' where participants were motivated by several factors to engage in volunteer tourism. This category included individuals looking to explore different countries or immerse themselves in unfamiliar cultures, seeking an alternative travel experience. It also encompassed those who volunteered to connect with local communities in their travel destinations, fostering awareness and igniting a passion for cultural exchange. Moreover, participants driven primarily by the motive of contributing to the well-being of others were categorized under 'personal passion.' This group consisted of individuals aiming to assist local communities through activities such as building construction or English teaching. The 'awareness-passion' category included participants whose primary motivation for the trip was to raise awareness and pursue their passion, particularly through Christian outreach. This reflected their dedication to spreading religious teachings and facilitating spiritual connections to help others. Lastly, 'career prospects for volunteers' included those who embarked on volunteer trips to utilize their skills in destinations beyond their own country, aligning their professional expertise with their career prospects and aspirations as volunteers.

The case of Mike, a young environmental enthusiast, exemplifies the motivation for 'alternative destination choices.' Drawn to volunteer tourism to gain exposure to distinct cultural perspectives on sustainability, his commitment to environmental conservation in Thailand made his journey a personal and meaningful venture, not just an act of altruism. Mike's motivation was deeply rooted in environmental conservation: *"My main motivation was rooted in my passion for environmental conservation."* This perfectly captures the central idea of voluntourism — a platform where personal interests align with broader global needs. Mike's involvement in voluntourism represented more than just participation; it served to integrate academic knowledge with practical real-world scenarios. Mike's expedition in Thailand extended beyond merely applying his environmental expertise; it also encompassed the assimilation and incorporation of Indigenous wisdom and customs into his experience. This element of voluntourism- the fusion of learning and doing is what sets it apart from other forms of tourism. This intensive exploration explores how communities around the world approach and integrate environmental conservation into their daily lives. His enthusiastic pursuit of diverse cultural perspectives on sustainability shows the importance of cross-cultural learning. Findings support research by Lee et al. (2023), whose study revealed that volunteer tourists have important motivations such as cultural immersion and exchange. The study's participants cherished the chance to discover other cultures and lifestyles. Furthermore, his experience in Guatemala, where he observed the connection between environmental sustainability and socio-economic realities, offered him a comprehensive understanding of global environmental challenges. This exposure to the complex dynamics of environmental issues in different socio-economic contexts enriched his understanding, showing the diverse nature of sustainability. Also, individual development and self-awareness as echoed by Yang and Song (2022), the desire for self-realization and personal development drives volunteer tourism. The study's participants expressed a sense of pride and success in their jobs, which aided their personal development. Mike expressed a desire to understand diverse cultural perspectives on sustainability and environmental *practices "Having studied environmental science, I was eager to apply my academic knowledge in real-world scenarios. More importantly, I wanted to understand and learn from the diverse cultural perspectives on sustainability and environmental practices."* The experience of engaging in voluntourism pointed out the critical role that personal passions play as a motivating factor. His engagement echoed his desire to apply academic knowledge in real-world contexts and to understand distinct cultural perspectives on sustainability. Moreover, Mike's experience in Guatemala provided him with a comprehensive perspective on global environmental challenges. This highlights the importance of cross-cultural learning and the practical application of theoretical knowledge. This supports the findings of Kim and Lee (2022), on the immersion and interchange of cultures for some volunteer tourists who go for leisure and escape from their regular schedules. Mike shared a profound experience in Guatemala. He said, *"Witnessing poverty firsthand and observing the interplay between environmental sustainability and socio-economic conditions was eye-opening."* He observed how poverty directly influences and intertwines with ecological practices, offering a real-life perspective on the challenges and interdependencies of these global issues. This experience highlighted the crucial need for sustainable solutions that address environmental and social factors.

Likewise, Angela's motivation for engaging in volunteer tourism as her avenue for change was rooted in the belief that direct engagement and hands-on involvement could bring about real and sustainable improvements. Angela recognized that many women in struggling communities faced formidable challenges, from limited access to education and economic opportunities to gender-based violence and discrimination. She desired to actively engage in finding solutions rather than passively observing these issues. Her actions offer a clear illustration of how volunteer tourism can be a powerful platform for social activism and personal growth. She revealed, *"My motivation is from observing the struggles many women endure...There's a sense of hopelessness. This inspired me to reach out, to bridge that gap and help them feel empowered and understood."* Like many others drawn to this form of engagement, Angela's volunteer tourism experience is notable for its dual focus on women's health issues and the social challenges faced by women in the UK. Her journey began unexpectedly while she was in the UK as a tourist. She encountered and began to address women's health issues, which she compiled into informative content, marking the informal start of her volunteerism. This endeavor was motivated by her observations and empathy towards the struggles and fears experienced by many

women, leading to feelings of isolation and low self- esteem. Angela's projects were multifaceted, addressing not only physical health concerns such as HIV/AIDS but also the emotional and psychological well-being of women. She sought to create a supportive environment where women could openly share their experiences and challenges, a goal that aligns with her personal motivations fueled by witnessing the adversities women face daily. Her dedication to women's empowerment exemplifies a focused approach to volunteer tourism, where participants actively engage in causes they care about. Angela worked earnestly to tackle and reduce the factors that contribute to the challenges faced by women in these communities. Study participants expressed feeling renewed and revitalized following their volunteer tourism experience. Chen et al.'s (2024) research on social duty and altruism revealed that many volunteer tourists are driven by these two emotions. A desire to positively affect the community and give back was expressed by research participants. This approach is vital in volunteer tourism initiatives that aim to empower and uplift, as it tackles both immediate needs and long-term sustainability. Angela's experience in volunteer tourism is a reminder of the potential impact individuals can have when they commit to making a difference. Her journey demonstrates the power of empathy, initiative, and targeted action in addressing complex social issues. Angela's work made a significant impact on the lives of women in these communities, presenting the personal and societal benefits of volunteer tourism for worldwide empowerment and understanding. However, Angela's volunteer experience was not without challenges. She encountered language barriers and racism, which initially hindered her ability to connect with the local communities and posed logistical problems. Despite these hurdles, Angela's work had a meaningful impact on the communities she interacted with. By providing a platform for women to share and relate to one another's experiences, she contributed to breaking down barriers of silence and isolation. This aspect of her volunteer tourism met her personal motivations and expectations and brought about a positive change in the host communities' dynamics.

Jason's experience with voluntourism in Mauritius exemplifies how the motivations of volunteer tourists are fluid, evolving as they gain a deeper involvement and understanding. Initially planned as a short visit, Jason's stay was extended to three months due to a unique connection with the local community's challenges, particularly the plight of displaced children; he stated, "*Before visiting Mauritius, I had been planning the trip for quite a while. During my planning, I read about many displaced children in the southern part of Mauritius.*" This reflects an initial awareness that grew into a personal commitment. The transition from a planned short-term visit to an extended stay of three months shows the depth of his engagement. He became a part of the community's effort to improve the situation. This shift from a temporary visitor to a dedicated volunteer is a significant aspect of voluntourism, where deeper understanding often leads to longer and more meaningful engagements. Findings reflect studies on personal challenges and adventure by Li et al. (2022), where some volunteer travelers are driven by a desire for these kinds of experiences. The study's participants expressed how much they valued the chance to push themselves outside their comfort zones and in novel and strange settings. Accordingly, personal development and self-realization are a desire for volunteer travelers. Similarly, Yang and Song's (2022) study revealed that voluntourists expressed a sense of pride and success in their job, which aided their personal development. Jason's journey reflects a deeper motivation that transcends typical tourism. Jason's journey into volunteer tourism is shaped by his travels and the stark disparities he witnessed between wealth and poverty. He said, "*My motivation for volunteer tourism is rooted in my experiences as a traveler. Having visited various countries in Europe, Africa, and Asia, I have observed significant cultural disparities and economic inequalities between the rich and the poor. This awareness fuels my passion for traveling and contributing meaningfully to the communities in need.*" This suggests that his travels were focused on exploration and making a meaningful impact. According to Zhang et al. (2023), some volunteer travelers are motivated by a desire to enhance their employability and advance their professional development. Study participants said they acquired useful knowledge and expertise that they might use in their future employment. Personal challenge and adventure by Li et al. (2022) discovered that the desire for personal challenge and adventure motivates volunteer travelers. The study's participants expressed how much they valued the chance to push themselves outside their comfort zones and in novel and strange settings. The evolution of Jason's passion for volunteer tourism highlights the impact of heightened awareness of global disparities. His realization of the needs in Mauritius was a call to action. This disparity amplified his passion for contributing positively to communities in need. It demonstrates the potential transformative power of volunteer tourism, where individuals become deeply involved in causes and communities, leading to a profound personal and professional impact. Some participant's motives were influenced by environmental, educational, cultural, and childhood inspirations. Juliet participated in a school-organized volunteer trip to a rural school in Thailand, where she engaged with local children by distributing gifts and sharing cultural experiences. She stated, "*The school, especially my teachers, really encouraged us to participate.*" *Sarah* is an environmental activist driven by her Environmental Management degree and personal experiences with climate change and flooding. Sarah said "*I have learned about the daily harm caused to the environment by human activities, leading to climate change and its consequences like flooding, which I have personally experienced. This motivated me to seek out environmentally focused organizations.*" She actively contributes to environmental NGOs, notably in projects like Clean Hub Nigeria in Gwagwalada, Abuja, where she was instrumental in implementing biogas solutions to reduce reliance on firewood, and with Rich Flood in Abu Dhabi, providing relief and support in flood-prone areas. The study's participants cherished the chance to discover other cultures and lifestyles. Kim and Lee's (2022) study on escape

and relaxation discovered that a desire to unwind and escape from everyday life drives the motivation of certain volunteer visitors. Study participants expressed feeling renewed and revitalized following their volunteer tourism experience. Chen et al.'s (2024) study on social responsibility and altruism provides significant insight into the motivations of volunteer travelers. The research revealed that these individuals are largely driven by a strong sense of social responsibility and a deep commitment to altruism. Participants expressed a genuine desire to make a meaningful impact on the communities they serve and to contribute positively through their volunteer efforts. This aspiration to give back and effect positive change emerged as a central theme, demonstrating the importance of these values in motivating individuals to engage in volunteer travel.

4.4. Perception of Volunteer Tourists regarding the Impact of their Activities on the Host Community

The study participants were asked for their views on the impact their volunteer efforts had on the communities. The summary includes forty-seven motives for the ten participants. The participants' answers were compiled, analyzed, summarized, re-coded, and fit into eight simplified main themes. Participants' perceptions regarding volunteer tourism's impact on the host community are reflected in Table 4.3, which outlines their viewpoints and the corresponding frequencies.

Table 3 The Impact of Volunteer Tourism on Host Communities and Frequencies

Themes	Respondents									Frequencies
Meaningful Connections	Jason	Joy		Tiwa	Mary	Rose		Tom	Mike	7
EnvironmentalSustainability		Joy		Tiwa	Mary		Sarah	Tom	Mike	6
Social Cohesionand CommunityEmpowerment	Jason		Juliet	Angela	Mary	Rose	Sarah	Tom		7
Job Creation	Jason			Angela	Mary	Rose			Mike	5
Exchange of Expertise andSkills	Jason	Joy	Juliet		Mary		Sarah	Tom		6
Overdependency				Tiwa		Rose		Tom		3
Financial andEconomic Implications	Jason	Joy	Juliet	Angela			Sarah		Mike	6
Health Improvements	Jason		Juliet	Tiwa	Mary	Rose		Tom	Mike	7

Volunteer tourists' perceptions of their contributions to host communities reveal the complex relationship between volunteerism and community development. The formation of meaningful connections stands out as an aspect of volunteer tourism, where relationships foster global solidarity and mutual respect. These interpersonal bonds provide volunteers with a deeperempathy and understanding of local lifestyles, challenges, and aspirations, enriching both the volunteers and the communities they serve. This analysis provides a critical lens through which the intricate dynamics of volunteer tourism and its potential to drive positive change within hostcommunities can be understood. Tom prioritizes building personal connections and engaging in cultural exchanges, asserting, "*There's a unique satisfaction in connecting with people from different backgrounds.*" His emphasis on cultural exchange reflects the theory of intercultural communication, which highlights the importance of understanding and interacting acrossdiverse cultural contexts. Tom reflects on his experiences, *"The most compelling part was the deep connections I made."* This points out the value of forging personal relationships with locals and engaging in meaningful exchanges where both parties share and listen. The emphasis on personal interaction underlines the profound impact of simple, heartfelt engagements, particularly in fostering mutual understanding and respect within the city's community dynamics. Tom's experiences highlight the significance of beyond-surface-level connections in creating rewarding and memorable volunteer tourism experiences.

While some participants acknowledge the creation of meaningful connections and the provision of employment opportunities, others express uncertainty about the overall impact. Juliet's comment, *"Yes, it felt like it went both ways, but overall, I think they liked having us as visitors"* illuminates the reciprocal nature of volunteer tourism. Her insight emphasizes the interplay between volunteers and host communities, presenting the experience as a complex yet

fundamentally mutual cultural exchange. This perspective reinforces the idea that, at its heart, volunteer tourism fosters a two-way street of benefits and learning, strengthening the bond between differing cultures. According to research by Lee et al. (2022), volunteer tourists thought their actions had a favorable effect on the host community, leading to advancements in infrastructure, healthcare, and education. According to research on cultural exchange and understanding conducted by Yang et al. (2022), volunteer tourists thought their actions contributed to developing mutual understanding and cultural exchange between the host community and themselves. The pressure volunteer tourists face to demonstrate tangible results is driven partly by the funding structure of organizations like the Peace Corps. Rose recognized the focus on tangible outcomes within volunteer programs, both for the organization's impact and the volunteers' career development. She explained, "*The expectation, generally, is that you should be actively doing something related to making a difference or starting a project.*"This reflects the common perspective within volunteer organizations that participants should be deeply involved in activities that yield tangible benefits for the community while simultaneously offering a platform for personal development. Zhang et al. (2023) study revealed that some volunteer travelers are driven by a desire to advance their employability and professional growth. Study participants said they acquired useful knowledge and expertise that they might use in their future employment. The dual-focus approach underlines the structured nature of such programs, where volunteers are encouraged to undertake projects that align with the community's needs and contribute to sustainable change. Moreover, these activities are designed to provide volunteers with experiential learning opportunities, enhancing their skills and increasing their employability. Rose's observation highlights the inherent pressure on volunteers to perform and produce outcomes that are beneficial on multiple levels - for the volunteer as an individual, their future career prospects, and most importantly, for the well-being and advancement of the host community. Thus, volunteer tourism fosters mutual growth between volunteers and their communities.

Mike's experience illuminates a significant challenge in volunteer tourism: the initial mistrust or skepticism volunteers may face from host communities. He articulates this challenge by stating, *"Initially, there was a bit of hesitation from the community—understandably so. But as we worked alongside them and showed our respect for their ways of life, barriers started to break down."* This reflection underlines the importance of building trust and demonstrating genuine respect for local customs and practices. Mike's insight suggests that while initial reservations from the community are natural and consistent, respectful engagement and collaboration can gradually overcome these barriers, leading to more effective and harmonious volunteer contributions. Communities may harbor doubts about volunteers' true intentions and methods, influenced by various factors including past experiences with volunteers, cultural misunderstandings, or the portrayal of volunteer tourism in media and popular discourse. In Mike's experience, he acknowledged the initial skepticism from the host community and addressed it by adopting an approach marked by respect, collaboration, and cultural sensitivity. He made a concerted effort to work alongside local residents, valuing their traditional knowledge and methods, which gradually helped to dismantle the initial barriers and foster mutual trust. Mike reflects, *"It was an incredibly enriching experience. Seeing the direct impact of our reforestation efforts and observing the local community's growing awareness and involvement in environmental conservation was fulfilling."* This highlights the positive outcomes of his respectful approach: not only were tangible environmental improvements achieved but there was also a significant increase in the local community's engagement and interest in conservation efforts. Mike's strategy illustrates the potential for volunteer tourism to be mutually beneficial when approached with mindfulness and a genuine commitment to community collaboration. The reflections shared by participants regarding their involvement in a reforestation project as volunteer tourists demonstrate the significant and mutually beneficial effects of such initiatives. These projects positively impact both the volunteers, who experience personal growth and fulfillment, and the communities they serve, which benefit from the environmental and social improvements the volunteers bring. This sentiment aligns with the broader narrative in volunteer tourism research, emphasizing the potential for these engagements to foster meaningful change and mutual growth. The participant characterizes the experience as rewarding, showing a critical element of volunteer tourism. This is echoed by research on environmental conservation conducted by Zhang et al. (2024), who discovered that volunteer tourists thought their actions supported local environmental conservation initiatives, such as waste reduction and the preservation of natural resources. Social networks and connections: research by Choi et al. (2023), volunteer tourists believed that their actions assisted in developing social networks and connections between the host community and themselves. Similarly, Li et al. (2022) revealed that volunteer travelers felt that their experiences had resulted in personal development and change, which included heightened self-awareness and confidence. Mike's observation of the local community's growing engagement in environmental efforts highlights the influential role volunteer tourism can play in education and empowerment. Sharing his experiences, Mike recounts, "*While working on our reforestation project in Guatemala, I had a chance to chat with Eduardo, a local farmer. His story opened my eyes. He described how environmental changes, particularly deforestation, had profoundly affected his family's traditional way of life. It wasn't just the loss of trees; it was the erosion of a lifestyle passed down for generations. Eduardo noted how the younger generation was moving to cities, leaving behind their cultural roots and traditional farming methods.''* This reflection illustrates how volunteer tourism can facilitate a

meaningful exchange of knowledge and values, reinforcing the importance of environmental sustainability while respecting and learning from the wisdom of local traditions.

This suggests that well-organized volunteer projects can increase environmental consciousness and active participation among community members. The participant's experience in the reforestation volunteer tourism project shows the significant and enriching effects such endeavors can have for the volunteers and the host communities. Most striking is the participant's observation of theenthusiasm and curiosity of local children regarding nature and sustainability. This reflects volunteer tourism's influence on younger generations, instilling in them values of environmental stewardship and a sense of global interconnectedness. Mike's experience is proof of the potential of volunteer tourism to foster positive relationships and cultural understanding despite initial challenges. Volunteers can demonstrate their genuine commitment to the community's well-being by engaging in respectful and collaborative work, thereby gradually dispelling any doubts or skepticism. This process enhances the effectiveness of the volunteer efforts while contributing to a more meaningful and enriching experience for both the volunteersand the host community. Lee et al. (2022), opined that volunteer tourists believed that their actions supported infrastructural, healthcare, and educational advancements as well as community development. It emphasizes the necessity for volunteer tourism initiatives to prioritizecultural sensitivity and community engagement, ensuring that their contributions align with the host community's actual needs and perspectives. The participant's optimistic view on theimpact of volunteer tourism, stating "*I believe the positive impacts outweigh any negative ones,*" offers a perspective on the potential benefits of these initiatives for both volunteers and host communities. Some participant's observations reflect a sentiment often echoed in the volunteer tourism sector. Volunteer tourism often presents a complex interplay between perceived benefits and actual impacts on host communities. Mary optimistically views voluntourism, stating, *"I believe the positive impacts outweigh any negative ones. Actually, when I think about it, I don't really see a negative impact. It seems like a win-win situation for both sides. We benefit, and so do they. So, in my view, there is not really a negative impact."* This viewpoint reflects a widespread sentiment among volunteers, who often perceive their efforts as exclusively advantageous. Mary's comments demonstrate the belief in the reciprocal benefits of such initiatives, emphasizing the perceived mutual gain for both the volunteers and the communities they serve. Her perspective illuminates an important aspect of voluntourism: the prevailing optimism among participants about the positive change they can effect, suggesting that the advantages for all involved parties are clear and significant, with negligible downsides, if any.

Contrastingly, Sarah provides a more critical reflection on the effectiveness of volunteer efforts, noting, "*No, it didn't have a significant impact. Given the size of the community, with over six hundred people, our efforts did not substantially affect the local sellers. As I mentioned, we onlyreached a fraction of the community's population. So, in terms of broader impact, it was minimal."* Her insights serve to illuminate the inherent difficulties present in generating a tangible change within larger communities. This is primarily due to volunteer initiatives potentially reaching only a limited section of the overall population. Sarah's reflections prompt areevaluation of the scalability and general efficacy of such volunteer projects emphasizing the need for strategies that ensure a more widespread and significant impact, particularly in settings where the community size may dilute the effects of well-intentioned efforts. Rose introduces an additional dimension to the discussion, emphasizing the concrete skills and heightened awareness cultivated through volunteer initiatives: "*I did notice some changes, particularly in the enhanced awareness and skill level among the community members concerning health and safety, which can be directly attributed to our training programs."* Her observations imply that although achieving wide-reaching, transformative impacts poses a challenge, focused and well- directed interventions can lead to substantial improvements within communities. Rose's contribution illustrates the complexity of volunteer tourism, showcasing a variety of results that span from limited effects on the community to discernible progress in targeted domains. This array of viewpoints highlights the intricate nature of volunteer efforts, illustrating how they can lead to a spectrum of outcomes, from negligible community benefits to significant enhancementsin particular areas, such as health and safety education.

Mary, Sarah, and Rose collectively illustrate the complexity of evaluating the success andsustainability of volunteer initiatives, highlighting the importance of critically assessing both the intentions behind and the outcomes of such endeavors. These assessments of volunteer tourism experience highlight a critical aspect of such initiatives – the challenge of achieving a significant impact in larger communities. This perspective offers an important counterpoint to the often-optimistic narratives surrounding volunteer tourism and the need to critically evaluate the scale and effectiveness of these efforts. The participant's observation, "*No, it didn't have a significant impact.*" reflects a common dilemma in volunteer tourism: the difficulty in making a substantial difference within a limited time and with limited resources, especially in larger communities. Considering the sincere intentions and dedication of volunteers, itbecomes apparent that in certain communities the magnitude of challenges is so substantial thatvolunteer efforts may not suffice to instigate widespread and substantial transformations. Furthermore, Sarah's statement that "*Given the size of the community, with over 600 people, our efforts didn't affect the local sellers.*" shows the imperative to tailor volunteer

activities to the community's scale and requirements. This reflects the crucial balance between aiding and respecting the existing economic ecosystem of the areas served.

Understanding the limitations of what can be achieved is crucial for both the volunteers and the host communities to have a realistic understanding of the potential outcomes of such initiatives. The specific examples provided by participants highlight tangible positive outcomes of their volunteer activities. Mary stated that *"A parent told us that her son stopped hurting animals and other kidsbecause of our program. Many children discovered their ability to draw and paint, which brought them joy. We made an impact with the MPAPE project."* The mention of a child in the host community who stopped hurting animals and other kids because of their program signifies the social and behavioral impact such initiatives can have. This is consistent with Kim et al. (2023) research, whose study found that volunteer tourists thought their actions helped the host community become more environmentally conscious and educated. According to Zhang et al. (2024), volunteer tourists thought their work promoted social justice by lessening inequality and advancing human rights. The fact that many children discovered their ability to draw, and paint indicates the cultural and educational enrichment that volunteer tourism can offer. These activities provide immediate employment and contribute to the long-term personal development of individuals within the community. The reference to the MPAPE project further exemplifies the tangible impacts that well-organized volunteer tourism projects can yield. When these initiativesalign with community needs and are carried out through collaborative efforts, they can substantially enhance various local aspects, including the environment, education, and social conditions. Economically, the impact of volunteer tourism extends beyond immediatejob creation, stimulating local economies through increased spending, support for local entrepreneurship, and investments in community projects. This economic infusion is vital in enhancing the community's financial stability and long-term development prospects.

The exchange of expertise and skills between volunteers and host communities embodiesa reciprocal learning process, enriching both parties through the sharing of knowledge, cultural practices, and innovative solutions to local challenges. Participant's experiences are consistent with Yang et al. (2022), findings which revealed that, volunteer tourists thought their actions contributed to the preservation of cultural heritage places and customs in the host community. Accordingly, volunteer travelers believed that their actions contributed to their growth in terms of skills, confidence, and self-awareness Li et al.'s, (2022). On a similar note, Jason's volunteer workin Mauritius showcases the significant benefits of volunteer tourism to host communities, particularly in tackling urgent issues such as homelessness and poverty. He recounts, *"In Mauritius, there were numerous homeless encampments in the area I stayed. Manypeople, especially children, lived there. This situation often led them to resort to petty theft like pickpocketing for survival. By moving these kids to reliable housing and ensuring their basic needs were met, we not only helped them but also positively impacted the broader community. These changes helped reduce crime and created a more stable environment."* The situation described paints a vivid picture of the challenges faced by some communities. His involvement in moving these children to reliable housing and ensuring their basic needs were met is proof of the potential for volunteer tourism to effect meaningful change. The broader impact of these efforts extended beyond just helping the individuals directly involved. This initiative reduced crime rates and nurtured a more secure community environment through stable housing and addressing fundamental needs. This experience in Mauritius shows the immediate and long-term economic impacts such initiatives can have on host communities. His observation about the future benefits of educating children highlights a crucial aspect of sustainable development in volunteer tourism, as he pointed out that *"Getting those kids into school – in 5 to 10 years, manyof them will start working, which will contribute to the country's economic growth."* This statement captures the chain reaction effect in volunteer tourism, where immediate actions such as educational initiatives can have far-reaching economic implications. This captures the findings of Lee et al. (2022) that educating children in volunteer tourism programs can have long-term economic benefits, including increased economic growth and development. Yang et al. (2022) found that educational initiatives in volunteer tourism can have a chain reaction effect, leading to far-reaching economic implications, including increased employment and income generation. Educating children in volunteer tourism programs is crucial for sustainable development, as it can lead to increased economic growth, reduced poverty, and improved health outcomes Kim et al. (2023). Zhang et al. (2024) found that educating children in volunteer tourism programs can develop human capital, including increased skills and knowledge, contributing to economic growth and development.

Moreover, Jason highlighted the economic impact of his volunteer group by saying, *"Our group of 40 volunteer tourists significantly boosted the local economy."* This illustrates the several ways in which volunteer groups can benefit host communities, ranging from enhancing the lives of individuals to strengthening the economic well-being of the area. The surge in hotel occupancy and flourishing local businesses are typical benefits of volunteer tourism. When the volunteer group patronized local shops, restaurants, and markets, a significant increase in customer flow and sales was observed, enhancing business for local entrepreneurs. This boost in business activity improved the economic prospects of local entrepreneurs while contributing to creating a vibrant and bustling atmosphere that appealed to tourists and residents. Mike's involvement in a reforestation initiative demonstrates the tangible positive impacts of volunteer tourism on local

employment and skills enhancement. He explains, *"Our reforestation project directly contributed to local employment. We hired local farmers and laborers for the planting of trees, which provided them with an additional income source."* This strategy promoted environmental goals and provided local residents with additional income opportunities, demonstrating the project's dual benefits for both community development and ecosystem restoration. Yang et al. (2022) found that reforestation projects in volunteer tourism can effectively restore ecosystems and promote biodiversity. Kim et al. (2023) found that reforestation projects in volunteer tourism can have dual benefits for community development and ecosystem restoration, aligning with sustainable development goals. Zhang et al. (2024) found that engaging residents in reforestation projects in volunteer tourism can increase their sense of ownership and responsibility for environmental conservation. For instance, the employment of local individuals in projects like Mike's helps build skills and capacities that can be leveraged for future economic activities. This is especially pertinent in communities where traditional forms of employment are being supplemented or replaced by opportunities linked to tourism and environmental conservation.

Additionally, the training sessions on sustainable practices organized by the participants are indicative of the capacity-building aspect of volunteer tourism. This training promotes long-term sustainable practices within the community. The emphasis on local employment in volunteer tourism initiatives aligns with the principles of sustainable tourism, which advocate for the inclusion and benefit of local communities in tourism activities. This approach ensures that the economic benefits of tourism do not bypass the local population but instead contribute to improving their livelihoods and well-being. Lee et al. (2022) found that volunteer tourism initiatives that prioritize local employment align with the principles of sustainable tourism, which emphasize the importance of involving local communities in tourism activities. More so, volunteer tourism initiatives that focus on local employment can contribute to the economic benefits of tourism being retained within the local community rather than bypassing it Yang et al. (2022). Kim et al. (2023) revealed that volunteer tourism initiatives prioritizing local employment can lead to improved livelihoods and well-being for local communities, aligning with the sustainable tourism principle of improving the quality of life for local people. Zhang et al. (2024) note that tourism initiatives that involve local employment can foster community engagement and participation in tourism activities, leading to a sense of ownership and responsibility among residents. Joy emphasized the importance of volunteers collaborating closely with local organizations to gain more insight into community challenges. She pointed out the necessity for structured guidance and mentorship for novice international travelers, helping them manage the intricacies of travel. Rose's suggestion emphasizes the importance of volunteers spending an extended period, specifically two years, within the host community before undertaking significant projects. This approach ensures a deeper understanding of local needs and cultural nuances, potentially leading to more impactful and relevant initiatives. Findings consistent with Lee et al. (2022) study found that volunteers could create more successful initiatives and had a deeper awareness of the requirements of the host community if they stayed there for at least two years. Yang et al. (2022) revealed that, volunteers who lived in the host community for longer could better comprehend cultural quirks and modify their initiatives. According to Kim et al. (2023), volunteers who lived in the host community for a minimum of two years were better able to create projects that had a more significant impact and were in line with community requirements. However, long-term volunteers were able to develop trust with the local population and lead to more effective project outcomes, Zhang et al. (2024). Sarah emphasized the crucial importance of transparency in funding volunteer initiatives. She recognized the significant financial backing these projects often receive and stressed the need for clear communication about how those funds are utilized. By advocating for accountability, she aimed to ensure that resources are used effectively and directed toward meeting the true needs of the community.

5. Conclusion

In relation to the first objective, this study focused on exploring the motivations behind an individual's participation in volunteer tourism. First, this study illuminated the range of motivations for engaging in volunteer tourism, from personal passion and educational interest to cultural exploration and professional development. Participants expressed a variety of reasons for choosing their specific volunteer tourism activities, reflecting a blend of personal, social, and professional factors. Secondly, the results highlighted six distinct motivations for participating in volunteer tourism: personal passion, educational interest, cultural exploration, professional development, seeking alternative destination choices, and environmental and social activism. The study confirmed the diversity of volunteer tourism activities, which showed that participants engage in these experiences for multifaceted reasons. Also, the research uncovered that the typical duration of a volunteer tourism trip is influenced by the volunteers' underlying motivations with most trips lasting around one month. Thus, allowing volunteers to immerse themselves in the local culture through activities like visiting markets and historical sites.

Lastly, the participant's experiences were usually facilitated by diverse types of volunteer tourism organizations, which significantly shaped their journeys. Only a minority of participants ventured into volunteer tourism independently,

without the structure provided by an organization. The motivations ranging from personal passion to environmental activism indicate a complex interplay between individual desires and the broader objectives of volunteer tourism, emphasizing the need for alignment between volunteer efforts and host community needs for mutually beneficial outcomes.

The study also uncovered participants' perceptions of their volunteer tourism's impact on host communities, focusing on factors such as creating meaningful connections and contributing to environmental sustainability. The study revealed that 'Meaningful Connection' and 'Environmental Sustainability' were among the top impacts noted by participants. Interestingly, this study indicated that the participantsperceived the formation of meaningful connections as more significant than contributing to environmental sustainability, suggesting that volunteer tourism's impacts on host communities are multifaceted. If a volunteer seeks to integrate leisure activities with impactful contributions, a volunteer holiday that harmonizes pleasurable endeavors with meaningful community engagement can effectively fulfill both aspirations. Volunteer tourism presents opportunities for deep cultural immersion and meaningful community impact. However, this study highlights the need for ongoing efforts to address racial prejudices and enhance cross-cultural understanding. The findings advocate for volunteer tourism practices that contribute positively to host communities and promote respect, inclusivity, and equitable interactions between volunteers and locals. This approach will help ensure that volunteer tourism continues to differentiate itself from other forms of tourism by fostering authentic, respectful, and impactful engagements.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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