

Commodified volunteer tourism and consumer culture: A case study from Cusco, Peru

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Goal and objectives of the dissertation

Goal

To explore the changing nature of the consumption of volunteer tourism using a consumer culture perspective and a case study of commodified volunteer tourism in Cusco, Peru.

Objectives

This thesis answers three main research questions: (1) what are the characteristics of commodified volunteer tourism, (2) how do volunteer tourists perceive commodified volunteer tourism, and (3) in what ways do volunteer tourists consume volunteer tourism? I describe in detail a form of highly-commodified volunteer tourism that, to date, had not been widely examined within the existing volunteer tourism literature. I explore how volunteer tourism has become a product to be 'consumed' within consumer culture and examine the practical and theoretical implications of this shift.

Methodology

This thesis employs a case study of a commercial volunteer tourism organisation in Cusco, Peru. It uses a grounded theory approach and is based on 15 weeks of participant observation in Cusco as well as in-depth interviews with 33 volunteer tourists and three staff members from the case study organisation.

Results

Most of the volunteer tourists lived in guesthouses with other volunteer tourists; they volunteered for only a few hours each day and for much of the rest of the time behaved in a similar fashion to mainstream tourists. These findings suggest that, in many ways, the volunteer tourists were focused on the tourism or hedonistic aspects of the volunteer tourism experience rather than the volunteering or altruistic components. The early volunteer tourism literature promoted volunteering as a means for tourists to access

a more authentic cultural experience. In contrast, the volunteer tourists at the case study site largely remained within an enclave or 'bubble' which saw them operate in parallel to, but separate from, the host community.

The commodification of volunteer tourism is associated with a shift towards a business model and a focus on the transactional nature of commercial volunteer tourism where volunteer tourists have become consumers who purchase a specific experience and therefore expect to 'get what they paid for'. Consumer culture centralises the volunteer tourists' sovereignty and can therefore lead to an increased emphasis on creating an experience which satisfies the wants of the volunteer tourists rather than meeting the needs of the host community.

Theoretical conclusions

The application of theories of consumer culture to explore how commodification has changed the nature of volunteer tourism

Within consumer culture, commodified volunteer tourism becomes just another product to be consumed. As a result, commodified volunteer tourism becomes a transactional exchange where the volunteer tourists 'purchase' a specific tourism experience. The focus therefore shifts to how to maximise the benefits to the volunteer tourists rather than how to aid the host community. Members of Generation Y are able to use the 'moral consumption' of volunteer tourism to access new forms of personal and social identity, for example, 'moral' tourist or global citizen.

The volunteer tourism enclave and the volunteer tourist gaze

The early literature suggested volunteer tourism would allow for a more reciprocal relationship between volunteer tourists and the host community. However, the case study examined in this thesis suggests this is no longer the case within commodified volunteer tourism. Instead, commodified volunteer tourists exist within an enclave separate from the host community. This enclave both affects and reflects the changing dynamics between volunteer tourists, the host community and

the volunteer tourism organisation. The host community is re-framed as the 'Other' and essentially becomes the backdrop to the volunteer tourism experience rather than an active participant. Closely connected to the volunteer tourist enclave is the 'volunteer tourist gaze'. Unlike early volunteer tourism research which suggested volunteer tourism provides an alternative gaze, in this thesis I suggest that the gaze (Urry & Larsen, 2011) created by contemporary commercial large-scale volunteer tourism reflects neo-colonial perspectives that tend to reinforce differences between volunteer tourists and the host community rather than similarities.

This thesis also makes the following contributions to the literature:

- A literature review situating commodified volunteer tourism as the latest step in a progression of alternative youth travel and international volunteering
- A matrix highlighting the heterogeneity of commodified volunteer tourists including length of stay and focus on tourism versus volunteering activities
- Highlighting potential risks to the host community associated with volunteer tourism, particularly with regards to medical volunteer tourists
- A discussion of commodified pre-packaged volunteer tourism as a form of packaged tourism associated with reducing the risks associated with international travel.

Practical application of the dissertation

Volunteer tourism organisations are required to navigate a fine line: the volunteer tourism product must be appealing to the volunteer tourists (that is, customers), while being 'difficult enough' so that once the volunteer tourists are in-country they feel they are needed and that the experience was worthwhile (that is, providing value for money). To do this, organisations need to establish a culture amongst volunteer tourists which focuses on volunteering rather than tourism activities. This may include having a

sign-in sheet to ensure volunteer tourists feel accountable.

Commercial volunteer tourism organisations are often criticised for focusing on the wants of the volunteer tourists rather than the needs of the host community. To some extent this is unavoidable since if the organisation stops attracting new volunteer tourists then it will no longer be a viable business. However, one of the main reasons volunteer tourists choose volunteer tourism rather than other forms of tourism is that they want to feel they have contributed. It is therefore in the organisation's best interests to ensure that the volunteer tourists are (or at least perceive they are) contributing to the host community.

Volunteer tourism organisations need to set higher expectations for their volunteer tourists, or, at the very least, clear and explicit expectations, for example, stipulating the hours volunteer tourists are expected to be at their project, what specific tasks they are expected to perform, and who to ask for help if required. There was some suggestion from the volunteer tourists that if expectations from the case study organisation had been higher (for example, penalties for not showing up to their volunteering project) then the volunteer tourists would have made more of an effort. Volunteer tourists may interpret low expectations to mean they are not truly needed by the volunteer tourism projects and as a result they may 'slack off' and subsequently not feel they have contributed as much to the host community as they expected.

Organisations should consider implementing minimum language requirements and/or including regular language lessons as part of the programme. Being able to communicate in the local language would increase what the volunteer tourists are able to do which would likely increase their perceived contribution to the host community. Improved language skills would also allow volunteer tourists to communicate and interact more with the host community, potentially allowing the volunteer tourists to move beyond the confines of the volunteer tourist enclave.

Content of the dissertation

Abstract of Chapter 1

Volunteer tourism has become increasingly popular in recent years and, subsequently, has become increasingly commercialised and commodified. This thesis uses a consumer culture perspective to explore how this increasing commodification has changed the very nature of volunteer tourism. I examine three key aspects of commodified volunteer tourism: what the characteristics of commodified volunteer tourism are, how volunteer tourists perceive commodified volunteer tourism, and how they consume it. These are addressed using a case study from Cusco, Peru. Chapter 1 contextualises the research study, describes the research questions and approach, and outlines the thesis structure.

Abstract of Chapter 2

Volunteer tourism has become increasingly commercialised and commodified in the last two decades (Tomazos & Butler, 2012). In this chapter I review the relevant literature and provide a theoretical context and background to the study. Chapter 2 consists of three sections: first I define and describe volunteer tourism, next I review some of the common criticisms of volunteer tourism, and finally I examine the commodification of volunteer tourism within neoliberal consumer culture.

Abstract of Chapter 3

In Chapter 3 I describe the research methodology and methods. I outline my research approach including my own relevant epistemological and ontological viewpoints and describe the research framework used. I describe the data collection methods including interviews and participant observation and introduce the case study organisation and research participants. Finally, I describe how the data were analysed and explore my own personal reflexivity with regards to data collection and analysis.

Abstract of Chapter 4

Chapter 4 addresses the first half of the first research question by describing the

characteristics of commodified volunteer tourism. I present the research findings to describe how the case study organisation was structured, what the volunteer tourists did at the various volunteer tourism projects, and what the volunteer tourists' daily routines looked like in Cusco. This chapter is largely a descriptive presentation of findings to provide context for the following chapters (Chapters 5-7) which include more in-depth discussion.

Abstract of Chapter 5

Volunteer tourism involves more than just volunteering (Tomazos & Butler, 2012). Chapter 5 addresses the second half of the first research question by discussing what the volunteer tourists do when not volunteering, and highlighting the differences between volunteering with the case study organisation (that is, a large commercial packaged volunteer tourism programme) and volunteering as described in the traditional volunteer tourism literature (for example, Wearing, 2001).

Abstract of Chapter 6

Chapter 6 addresses the second research question, that is, how the volunteer tourists perceived the commodified volunteer tourism experience, including the relationship between the volunteer tourists and the host community. I examine the volunteer tourists' perceptions of, and interactions with, the host community, and explore both the positive and negative impacts the volunteer tourists believed they had made (or not made) to the host community. While this chapter discusses the interactions between the volunteer tourists and the host community, this is done from the volunteer tourists' perspective only.

Abstract of Chapter 7

In Chapter 7 I address the third research question and discuss the ways volunteer tourists consume volunteer tourism. First, I explore ways in which commodified volunteer tourism is similar to other forms of packaged tourism, and thus how it can be framed as an 'introduction' to volunteer tourism or a means of mitigating some of the risks associated with

volunteer tourism in a developing country. Second, I discuss the personal and professional benefits the volunteer tourists believed they gained from their volunteer tourism experiences. Third, I discuss the ways in which volunteer tourists treat commodified volunteer tourism as a commodity to be consumed, and what this means to the volunteer tourism experience.

Abstract of Chapter 8

This thesis explores the phenomenon of volunteer tourism and how it has evolved from an alternative, small-scale travel option offered mainly by non-governmental organisations, to a highly profitable niche market within mainstream tourism. In the final chapter, I reflect on how this thesis has addressed the research aim and research questions, highlight the theoretical contributions made, suggest practical implications of the research findings, and make recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with observations on the juxtaposition between the morality often associated with volunteer tourism, and the framing within this thesis of commodified volunteer tourism as 'just another tourism product'.

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