

**COMMODIFIED VOLUNTEER TOURISM
AND CONSUMER CULTURE: A CASE STUDY
FROM CUSCO, PERU**

Jane L. E. Godfrey

**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

**Management Discipline Group
University of Technology Sydney**

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL OWNERSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of student:

Date: 31 March 2016

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my late grandmother Heather McEwan Powell (1929-2013) who passed away shortly after I returned from collecting data in Peru.

Grandma, you were so proud of me and so disappointed when you realised you wouldn't see me graduate. Thank you for your unconditional support and your constant belief I could do whatever I put my mind to.

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Other presentations and publications

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As per the original application to the UTS Human Research Ethics Committee, following the submission of this thesis a brief industry report will also be prepared and shared with the case study organisation and any interested research participants.

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GLOSSARY

- Commodification*** To assign an economic or market value to something that would previously have been outside the market, that is, “the substitution of market for nonmarket services” (Posner, 2005, p. 129).
- Commodity*** “Any good or service produced in order to sell or otherwise exchange it for something else in the market system” (Johnson, 2000, p. 51).
- Consumer culture*** “Consumer-crazed societies” (Berger, 2010, p. 50) where most people “have a minimal relationship to production and distribution” and therefore “consumption provides the only arena left to us through which we might potentially forge a relationship with the world” (Miller, 2005, p. 16).
- Cusqueño*** A person from Cusco (feminine form = ‘Cusqueña’). Also used as an adjective to describe something as being ‘of Cusco’.
- Gringo*** A term previously used in Latin America to refer to Americans but often used more broadly to include any white and/or English-speaking foreigners (feminine form = ‘gringa’). The term is often derogatory but not always.
- Neoliberalism*** The re-assertion of classical liberalism that emphasises the rights of the individual against those of the state (Scott & Marshall, 2009) and promotes a free market with “as little governmental intervention in the economy as possible” (Greenwald, 1973, p. 397).
- Volunteer tourists*** “Tourists who... volunteer in an organized 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” (Wearing, 2001, p. 2).

ABSTRACT

While conventional mass tourism has been criticised for negatively impacting the host community, volunteer tourism has traditionally been portrayed as an altruistic alternative which allows tourists to access a more authentic tourism experience by ‘giving back’ to the host community. This view has provided a platform which has seen volunteer tourism become increasingly popular and profitable over the last decade. This thesis employs a case study of a commercial volunteer tourism organisation in Cusco, Peru to investigate the commodification of volunteer tourism through a consumer culture perspective. This study uses a grounded theory approach and is based on 15 weeks of participant observation in Cusco and in-depth interviews with 33 volunteer tourists and three staff members from the case study organisation.

Three key aspects of commodified volunteer tourism are explored, that is: the characteristics of commodified volunteer tourism, how volunteer tourists perceive commodified volunteer tourism, and how they consume it. 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 exchange with the host community. 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. This thesis contributes to the body of knowledge in this field by exploring both the theoretical and practical implications of the changing nature of volunteer tourism within consumer culture, and what this means for the volunteer tourists, the volunteer tourism organisation, and the host community.

