Navigating Unsettling Intercultural Issues of Volunteer Tourism: A Synthetic Review

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Abstract

In light of the burgeoning research and operational facets of international volunteer tourism, a discernible surge in the engagement of global volunteers for cross-cultural interactions within Global South communities has become increasingly evident. However, global volunteers encounter formidable challenges during their transition into and engagement with the local host community, stemming from a conspicuous paucity of intercultural awareness. This predicament poses a substantial impediment to the aspirational objective of effectuating a beneficial and constructive impact on cross-cultural interaction with the host community. With an intercultural sensitivity lens, this synthetic review examines the major issues surrounding cross-cultural understanding and interactive learning as well as discusses potential mitigating strategies that nurture intercultural sensitivity, making transition and participation more effective for the well-being of the host community. The review suggests that cultural stereotyping, ethnocentric behaviors, self-fulfilling behaviors of volunteers, and the absence of meaningful local participation in co-production of knowledge in volunteer tourism appear to be key factors affecting meaningful cross-cultural interactions and ethical behaviors. The proposed strategies including pre-departure training and orientation as educational discipline, aimed at facilitating cross-cultural immersion, assimilation and interaction, seem to be neglected in practice of volunteering tourism. This oversight undermines the effectiveness of these crucial initiatives in achieving their intended outcomes.

Keywords: *volunteer tourism; cross-cultural understanding; collaborative partnership; adaptation; immersion; pre- departure training*

Introduction

With an exponential rise of international volunteer tourists' mobility in the last decade (Wearing et al., 2020), volunteer tourism has emerged as a widely embraced form of

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tourism. It is organized for those tourists who undertake vacations and also aspire to contribute through volunteering activities in their leisure time. This includes interacting and gaining insight into cross-cultures (Pompurová, 2018), experiential learning (Jamal et al., 2011), and contributing to material poverty and environmental conservation of the destination community (Wearing, 2001). Unlike conventional tourism, volunteer tourism is promoted as a 'novel' and 'innovative' travel experience in the Global South (Lyons & Wearing, 2008). It is considered "ethical tourism" (Sin, 2009) for mutual benefits and learning between volunteer tourists and the host (Park, 2018). Being an ethical journey, it aims to share cross-cultural knowledge and experiences for the well-being of the host community.

Considering the diverse objectives and purposes that drive international volunteer tourists, the prevailing discourses surrounding international volunteer tourism predominantly revolve around altruistic motivation, personal growth, the cultivation of cross-cultural awareness, and the enhancement of community well-being (Park et al., 2022; Han et al., 2019; Wearing et al., 2017). This discourse emphasizes the pivotal role played by cross-cultural interactions in fostering a meaningful and mutually enriching experience for both volunteers and the communities they engage with. Volunteer tourism, however, confronts the issues of intercultural sensitivity and adaptability within the cross-cultural environment in the Global South communities. This concern continues to exacerbate as interactive intercultural learning and exchanges are more often overlooked in the practice and research of volunteer tourism (Everingham, 2015). As a result, this phenomenon is predisposed to the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes (Park, 2018) and sustained inequality and colonial practices (Kadomskaia et al., 2020; Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2011; Palacios, 2010). The stereotyping coupled with the demonstrative effect (Lee, 2020; Guttentag, 2009) presents an arduous challenge to intercultural sensitivity, leading to misconceptions of cross-cultural values and practices. Contrary to anticipated positive outcomes of cross-cultural interaction, the misunderstanding inadvertently allows volunteer tourists to propagate ethnocentrism (Clark, 2021; Bennett, 1986). Influenced by cultural stereotypes and ethnocentric attitudes, volunteer tourists tend to have distorted motivations and intercultural misconstructions. This misleading motivation and misunderstanding influence unequal power dynamics in volunteer tourism (Steele & Scherrer, 2018). Consequently, these skewed perspectives culminate in misinterpreting the local cultural traditions and values that influence cross-cultural assimilation and adaptation (Thompson et al., 2020).

These challenges exert a substantial impact on the overarching purpose of promoting cross-cultural understanding in volunteer tourism. Intercultural sensitivity is a deeply embedded concept in volunteer tourism for immersive cross-cultural learning and mutuality (Sarwari & Abdul, 2017; Lough, 2011) and adaptation to cultural and

geographical environments (Viwatronnakit et al., 2019). The degree of cognizance concerning intercultural acumen coupled with adaptation and mutual interaction serves the core purpose of volunteer tourism: cross-cultural understanding and mutual sharing of knowledge. Given its importance, it is crucial to look at intercultural concerns through the prism of intercultural sensitivity to improve international volunteer tourism and its practices that foster cross-cultural understanding and community welfare.

The purpose of this synthetic review is to critically examine the intricacies of cross-cultural issues inherent in international volunteer tourism. This paper, therefore, aims to shed light on the challenges of cross-cultural interactions, highlighting strategies employed to address the concern of intercultural misconceptions, adaptability, and immersive learning from the intercultural sensitivity perspective. Initially, the review centers on challenges of intercultural understanding in the North and South mobility of volunteer tourism, and the subsequent sections of the review delve into examining the strategies utilized in resolving the articulated concern of intercultural sensitivity in the cross-cultural environment.

Structure and Methods

This literature review will offer an overview of international volunteer tourism in general and the dimension of intercultural sensitivity (Guttentag, 2009; Raymond & Hall, 2008;) in particular, utilizing the lens of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1986). Intercultural sensitivity, one of the central dimensions of cross-cultural understanding, is the core concept of intercultural communication. Cross-cultural communication is a different construct as it relates to making meaning of events (Bennett, 1986). Cross-cultural competency, which is defined as the capacity to communicate more effectively in cross-cultural environments and contexts (Bennett, 2004), is not the same as intercultural sensitivity. The critique, therefore, focuses on issues of intercultural sensitivity of volunteer tourism practices in the Global South communities.

Intercultural sensitivity is the ability to recognize and respond to major cultural differences (Hammer et al, 2003) and a behavioral pattern that recognizes differences and adapts to distinct cultural environments (Chen, 1997). It can be improved through appropriate pre-departure training sessions without direct exposure to different cultural environments (Pruegger & Rogers, 1994). They posit that individuals create their own 'cognitive and behavioral responses in two stages: ethnocentric stages and ethnorelative stages (Bennet,1986). While transiting into succeeding stages, people undergo a shift from having a worldview with fewer differences to recognizing a greater distinction during these stages (Holm et al., 2009). The review examines issues and implications of intercultural sensitivity in international volunteer tourism and then moves on to the strategies adopted to address those concerns.

Various procedures were employed to locate and analyze the extant literature. First of all, keywords, such as "volunteer tourism", "international volunteer tourism" and "voluntourism" were used in the databases. In the second phase of searches, more specific terms were entered into the search engines, for instance, "cross-cultural sensitivity," and "intercultural sensitivity". To locate the relevant articles for review, different databases including Google Scholar, Scopus, Sage, and JSTOR were utilized. Upon successful extraction of data and initial analysis, the references listed in each of the articles were also examined to identify relevant sources in which the snowball method was employed. This procedure was repeated until no more new items were identified. To be more inclusive, various topics and disciplines, such as tourism, sociology, leisure and recreation, anthropology, geography, and economics were included. Once the relevant papers were unearthed, they were assessed and analyzed for methodological rigor, content analysis, and theoretical frameworks.

In terms of exclusion and inclusion criteria, certain protocols were developed: articles that situate cross-cultural interaction in the Global North context were excluded as intercultural sensitivity between the North and the South is the primary focus of the review. Studies positioning volunteer tourism from destination communities were also excluded. The Global North-to-South direction of volunteer mobility with a focus on intercultural understanding was a key criterion for inclusion.

Results and Discussion

Volunteer Tourism and Intercultural Sensitivity

Volunteer tourism- as a form of alternative tourism (Ellis, 2003; Wearing, 2003; McGehee, 2002)- is a unique form of travel that fuses the elements of volunteering and travel activity. It is conceptualized as a type of alternative experience that goes beyond a visit through certain geographies (Wearing & Everingham, 2017). Its primary purpose is to foster cross-cultural interaction and mutual learning (Sarwari & Abdul, 2017; Wearing et al., 2017). This concept rose to prominence as a strategy to mitigate the impacts of unequal power relations, and unsustainable practices in the tourism industry (McLachlan & Binns, 2019; Keese, 2011).

Volunteer tourists as an alternative to regular visitors utilize their free time in volunteering activities even though their primary purpose involves pursuing their daily routine of traveling (McGehee & Santos, 2005). Charitable projects, such as resource conservation, construction of infrastructures, providing educational and healthcare services to destination communities, are the primary domain of volunteer tourism. The underlying objective of volunteer tourism is to advance the ideas of mutual benefits and shared responsibilities with the destination communities (Raymond & Hall, 2008). Still, volunteer tourism as its primary purpose aims to promote cross-cultural interaction. This

participatory endeavor emphasizes the significance of approaching the cultural norms, belief systems, and practices of the destination community with sensitivity and respect. Cross-cultural exchanges and volunteering components of volunteer tourism (Brown, 2005) call for the cultivation of sensitivity as an essential element to ensure responsible interaction in the cross-cultural environment. This conscientious interaction equips volunteer tourists with the necessary tools to deal with issues inherent in volunteer tourism.

In this context, Hottola's (2004) contentious assertion is also important to look at the cross-cultural issues with an alternative perspective. He contends that the discourse surrounding intercultural shock and distress stemming from the absence of intercultural sensitivity is obsolete in this globalized world. His argument is grounded on the fact that the advancement of information technology including social and print media and the burgeoning pattern of migration has changed the outlook of tourism, providing travelers with access to cultural information. By adeptly mitigating the repercussions of cultural misunderstandings and sensitivities (Moufakkir, 2013; Hottola, 2004), this phenomenon has not only facilitated the proliferation of international tourism but has also fueled a surging trend in migration. This dual impact has served as a potent catalyst for the seamless dissemination of cultural information, effectively quelling the frequency of cross-cultural misunderstandings and problems of sensitivity (Moufakkir, 2013; Hottola, 2004).

Drawing this parallel is compelling and telling, and it is also based on some realities. Nevertheless, experiencing an unexperimented new cultural practices presents more different outlook than virtual information in volunteer tourism. Additionally, technology may not accurately and sufficiently present information on the culture and traditions. It extends beyond mere exposure to different cultural aspects through media and technology; it is all about experiencing immersion, adaptation, and mutual learning in cross-cultural environments (Lough, 2011; Foronda, 2008; Raymond & Hall, 2008;) in international volunteerism. Interacting with sensitivity on the ground and consuming media-fed information on different cultural groups are two different things in cross-cultural interaction. Intercultural sensitivity in volunteer tourism has the potential either to promote or impede cross-cultural interaction (Kirillova, et al., 2015). Embedded within the fabric of volunteer tourism, intercultural sensitivity urges volunteer tourists to refine their worldviews to recognize the unfamiliar facets of other cultures (Hammer et al., 2003).

This cross-cultural sensitivity typically involves knowledge, responsiveness, deference, and adaptation and encourages volunteers to adjust personal worldviews to understand other's perspectives (Foronda, 2008). These are essential qualities to nurture cross-

cultural sensitivity. In a more elaborative form, Chen (1997) posits three important elements: (1) understanding the diverse behavioral pattern one can adopt; (2) being receptive and open-minded towards the differences one comes across; and (3) the extent to which one shows adaptability in a new cultural environment. These explanations are critical to act and behave in a cross-cultural environment. In other words, it typically promotes effective and responsible interactions (Sarwari & Abdul, 2017), cross-cultural understanding (Kirrillova, et al., 2015), and improved cultural immersion (Lough, 2011). Delving deeper into these concepts reveals that volunteer tourism, at its essence, is built upon intercultural sensitivity, safeguarding against insensitivity towards a new culture. The lack of this essence creates ambiguity and contradictory situations for volunteers (Lyons, 2003). It potentially disorients them from their engagement. Intercultural sensitivity is, thus, key to immersive experience within different cultural environments (Kirrillova, et al., 2015). In addition, this unsettling concern intrinsic to intercultural sensitivity warrants more meticulous analysis.

Challenges of Intercultural Sensitivity
Cultivating intercultural sensitivity stands as a paramount priority within the realm of international volunteer tourism. However, critics have underlined several concerns arising from the intricate dynamics of cross-cultural interactions. Understanding these issues holds significance in ensuring a constructive and respectful volunteer tourism experience. Embedded within the context of volunteer tourism, intercultural sensitivity is intricately linked to challenges, such as stereotyping (Lee, 2020), ethnocentrism (Clark, 2021), and asymmetric power dynamics (Steele & Scherrer, 2018). Interactive intercultural learning and exchanges are more often neglected in volunteer tourism (Everingham, 2015). As a result, this phenomenon is predisposed to the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes (Park, 2018). The stereotype along with the demonstrative effect (Lee, 2020) inhibits the fundamental objective of nurturing cross-cultural understanding mutuality. This misunderstanding inadvertently enables international volunteers to propagate ethnocentric behaviors in their pursuit of intercultural gaze (Clark, 2021). Volunteer tourism influenced by cultural stereotypes and ethnocentric attitudes provides volunteers with distorted motivations for interactive learning. This unfair advantage contributes to the imbalance of power exercise in volunteer tourism (Steele & Scherrer, 2018). Consequently, these skewed perspectives of international volunteer tourists culminate in misinterpreting the local cultural traditions and values and further affect the processes of intercultural assimilation and sensitivity (Thompson et al., 2020).

To begin with, international volunteers are often opposed to their stereotypes and privileges (Kipp et al., 2021). However, volunteer tourism practices continue to perpetuate the stereotypes that potentially reinforce misconceptions of the local cultural practices (Guttentag, 2009). Stereotype-driven misunderstandings often constrain

volunteers' perspectives, impeding their ability to adopt alternative viewpoints regarding local cultural values. Volunteer tourists are, therefore, encouraged to develop an understanding of the local cultural values and norms (Raymond & Hall, 2008). However, they argue that acquiring a comprehensive intercultural understanding within a short span of time is a formidable task. They insist that gaining a profound insight into intercultural traits demands sustained engagement and perseverance. The preconceived notion of volunteer tourists inadvertently fosters misunderstanding and uncertainty as well as engagement in undefined roles and responsibilities (Lyons, 2003) as their engagement with the local cultural groups is transitory. Under such circumstances, volunteers tend to impose their stereotypes (Park, 2018).

Next, there are negligible studies on cross-cultural interaction within volunteer tourism from ethnocentric perspectives. Few studies highlight the prevalence of the ethnocentric character of international volunteer tourism. Ethnocentrism, characterized by the inclination of individuals to perceive their own culture and ethnicity as superior, informs the actions and motivations of volunteer tourists. It represents the situation where the individual world remains unchallenged and is perceived as the central perspective governing all aspects of reality (Bennett, 1986). Defensively, individuals commonly resort to negative stereotyping and the presumption of cultural superiority (Kirillova et al., 2015). These attitudes can reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate misconceptions about the host community and its cultural values.

The discourses in international volunteering abound in the time factor to address the issues of outcomes resulting from stereotypes and ethnocentric positions. The theory of intercultural sensitivity states that the transition from the ethnocentric stage to the ethnorelative stage (Bennet,1986) needs to pass different stages of having a preconceived worldview to acknowledging a distinctive reality (Holm et al., 2009) to nurture intercultural sensitivity. In the volunteer tourism context, the theory maintains that the transitional phase in intercultural sensitivity is longer than expected and thus requires long-term interaction to nurture sensitivity. Supporting this assertion, a study of Priest et al. (2006) in Mexico demonstrates that short-term volunteering led to only temporary progress in ethnocentric behavior and perception. They suggest that short-term exposure to a new culture does not lead to greater understanding; however, it holds the potential when it is combined with context-friendly learning opportunities and direction. Similarly, Hill's (2013) study revealed that there was no discernible correlation between the duration of intercultural interaction and the level of ethnocentrism. Despite the paucity of research on ethnocentrism relating to volunteering, these two studies examine the relations between the passage of time and changes in ethnocentric attitudes. They illustrate that time is an irrelevant element.

Given the time constraint about ethnocentric attitudes in volunteer tourism, Ibrahim et al. (2020) postulate that volunteer tourists working in multicultural environments need to neutralize their ethnocentric and stereotyped values to capitalize on the learning opportunity. Their stance is founded on the belief that gaining insightful experiences far outweighs the conceded preconceived notions. This can be achieved even within a brief timeframe. This insightful learning can improve intercultural understanding. Recognizing the predominance of ethnocentrism in volunteer tourism, Kirillova et al. (2015) emphasize the importance of consistent and efficient mutual interaction in achieving this objective. Even a short period may produce justifiable results, but unwavering effort and proficient execution hold the key. Efficient planning and undeterred interaction may address the time constraint of ethnocentric behavior and unequal power.

 The growing body of studies, in recent times, highlights the increasing challenges of asymmetrical power dynamics in cross-cultural environments (Mensah et al., 2021; Steele & Scherrer, 2018). For example, Godfrey et al. (2020) found that volunteer tourists may impose their cultural norms and values which, in turn, overshadow the local cultures and traditions due to an imbalanced power structure. This enforcement of foreign cultural practices undermines the local cultural values and heritage. According to Wearing et al. (2013), volunteer tourists, especially gappers, fail to acknowledge their privileged position within significant power imbalance and unwittingly uphold neocolonial practices. It is, partly, the result of a cursory awareness of local culture and dualistic perspectives. Through the lens of a binary worldview and an overly simplistic perspective, their actions could inadvertently influence the local cultural norms (Smith et al., 2013). These dichotomous perspectives and privileged positions hinder the cultivation of immersive engagement with the local community, thereby impeding the ability to understand and embrace cross-cultural values for cross-cultural interaction.

Similarly, short-term assignment of volunteer tourism has also been problematic in developing cross-cultural understanding. The temporary involvement offers volunteer tourists a restricted window for cultural immersion, and it precludes them from acquiring a deeper level of local knowledge and insights (Lee & Zhang, 2020). The lack of immersive knowledge of local cultural practices could reinforce their unequal power and impose their values on the host cultural groups (Godfrey et al., 2020). As a result, they sacrifice the opportunity for an immersive experience, adaptive engagement, and mutual interaction with the host community; all of these constitute pivotal dimensions of volunteer tourism essential for cultivating mutual cross-cultural interaction and sensitivity.

Individual Factors Influencing Intercultural Sensitivity

Intercultural sensitivity in volunteer tourism remains a subject of contention as

it is inherently subjective in nature. For instance, Lee and Zhang (2020) argue that personality traits and commitment primarily make a difference in cultivating intercultural sensitivity Individual character is an abstract concept that differs from person to person. Depending upon their inherent character, volunteer tourist commits to enriching their cross-cultural sensitivity. A positive disposition with a sincere pledge supports volunteer tourists to augment cross-cultural understanding. The findings of Fan et al. (2022) indicated a strong correlation between the quality of engagement and extent of interaction within the volunteer tourism context and subsequent changes in intercultural sensitivity. It encompasses both favorable and adverse shifts. These recent studies highlight two things for improved cultural sensitivity: one emphasizes the time and energy one pledges to enhancing the cognitive level of intercultural sensitivity while the other underscores the quality of engagement, communication, and exchanges between international volunteer tourists and the host population. Intercultural sensitivity, therefore, necessitates both commitment and quality of interactions in a volunteer tourism-friendly environment—it generates a significant potential for mitigating the negative effects on intercultural insensitivity.

A privileged position influences the level of sensitivity in volunteer tourism. The privileged positions provide volunteer tourists with the chance to amass affluence and possessions. Showcasing these possessions within underprivileged communities presents an intricate challenge that impacts mutual intercultural understanding. This demonstration effect (Wall & Mathieson, 2006) is particularly reflected in cultural appropriation in the underprivileged host community. For example, the study of Lee (2020) in Mongolia also revealed that senior local citizens expressed serious concern about demonstration effects, especially on local youth– loss of the local cultural practice is their expressed apprehension. While this 'demonstration effect' may appeal to a few of the community members, it can ultimately have a sustained effect on the cultural norms and sensitivity of the host.

Similarly, Gascon's (2019) study demonstrates that the presence of international volunteers, their behavior, and cultural practices inside the local community domain may expedite the adoption of foreign culture. Experiencing the erosion of local cultural values under foreign influences is culturally a troubling phenomenon as it may potentially disrupt long-held cultural traditions across generations and exert pressure on the community fabric. Matthes (2016) considers this cultural appropriation "morally problematic." It is particularly a matter of concern for those in the Global South community. Furthermore, this "demonstration effect" impacts the outlook of the Global South communities. It leads to the misperception that their visitors are cultured, prosperous, well-informed, and technologically advanced, in contrast to visitors' perception of communities as traditionally underprivileged and lacking in technological

sophistication (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). This phenomenon is further exacerbated by the infiltration of culturally insensitive volunteer tourists and media that penetrate the personal spaces of residents (Butler, 1990). These assertions suggest that, despite volunteer tourism's stated goal of advancing mutuality in cross-cultural experience, significant negative effects prevail in interactive learning and sharing responsibilities.

Likewise, relationship building is important for both volunteer tourists and the host community for mutual cultural interaction. However, specific volunteer objectives can significantly impede the establishment of meaningful relationships. For instance, the pursuit of "hedonistic pursuit" (O'Reilly, 2006) and the self-centric aspirations (Sin, 2009) run counter to the overarching ethos of volunteering. These motivations deviate from the objectives of fostering mutual understanding and learning in the volunteer tourism, thus presenting a daunting barrier to the cultivation of harmonious relationships and the development of intercultural sensitivity. Hedonic consumption in volunteer tourism can be defined as a 'multisensory and emotive aspect of consumer experience' (Malone et al., 2014, p. 2). While some studies of hedonistic volunteering have shown some positive effects on environmental conservation volunteering (Nisbett & Strzelecka, 2017) and improving intercultural understanding through the quality and frequency of mutual interaction (Kirillova et al., 2015), it constitutes a paradoxical endeavor within the realm of ethical travel (Buckley, 2012) as the pursuit of personal aspirations and self-fulfillment while engaging in volunteering to generate a positive influence on the community presents an inherent incongruity. The ethical practice of "mutual gaze" (Maoz, 2006) in volunteering is directly challenged by the idea of "self". The concept of mutual gaze promotes a reciprocal exchange of cultural ideas and experiences that improve intercultural understanding and relationships.

Strategies for Promoting Intercultural Sensitivity

In light of the mounting criticism directed towards volunteer tourism practices in the Global South, academics and practitioners have started responding to this criticism with strategies and alternative approaches to effectively address the ensuing challenges, with a specific emphasis on enhancing intercultural understanding. Wearing et al. (2017) underline the idea of partnership as a mitigating strategy and argue that volunteer tourism as a partnership between volunteers and destination communities is one of the effective win-win strategies. They affirm that through collaborative partnership, meaningful intercultural interactions are cultivated by challenging the current paradigm of volunteer tourism. The imperative lies in fostering a synergistic partnership among key stakeholders, a vital step towards ensuring the sustainability of volunteer tourism in general and intercultural understanding in particular (Eckardt et al., 2022). This further serves to prevent project failure (Dickey et al., 2020).

This approach extends beyond modernist development frameworks by avoiding the measurement of volunteer tourism under development assistance objectives and decommodified activities (Wearing et al., 2017). Ideally, collaborative partnership recognizes the values and practices of intercultural differences and promotes mutuality. Bowan and Dallam (2020) highlight the relevance of partnership in mutual learning and recognize the significance and strength of local community participation for positive change. The collaborative partnership in volunteer tourism necessitates a deliberate consideration of local priorities. It aims to foster a sustainable community and its well-being as sustainability is inherently interlinked with the mutual success of both volunteer tourists and the host communities (Lee & Zhang, 2020). More specifically, the sustainability of the collaborative partnership rests on capacity sharing, trust in people's knowledge, and co-creation of practices and critical consciousness through dialogue and interaction (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022).

Other crucial strategies highlighted for enhancing cross-cultural understanding include controlling the size of volunteer groups (McGehee & Andereck, 2009), matching the talents of the volunteers (Butcher & Smith, 2010), and promoting volunteer tourism as educational travel (Raymond & Hall, 2008). The synergistic partnership with decommodified volunteer activities supporting the local interest cumulatively nurtures intercultural understanding. As a strategy, the collaborative partnership is achieved when a particular program, such as orientation and training, is integrated into a more comprehensive approach to international volunteer tourism.

Pre-Departure Training and Orientation
In most circumstances in volunteer tourism, travelers experience cultural disorientation and struggle to assimilate within the local cultural groups. Ineffective pre-departure training is frequently attributed to the failure of cross-cultural adaption in the local cultural settings and the projects (Daher, 2019). It can serve as a protective barrier that offers a more nuanced opportunity of understanding the challenges volunteers may encounter. It includes essential components (Kalbarczyk et al., 2019), such as educating and sensitizing potential volunteer tourists on cultural differences, values, and belief systems. Enhanced cross-cultural sensitivity and ethical behavior facilitated by pre-planned training reinforce the smoother transition and adaptation process within the host cultural groups (Pouligny et al., 2007). Inadequate of such pre-trip training often results in negative consequences, particularly for the host community (Benntele, 2023). Its negative effects are reflected in cross-cultural interaction. Such training helps develop a sense of intercultural sensitivity and equips volunteers to resolve the issues despite their different worldviews. The findings of Kalbarczyk et al.'s (2019) study emphasize that such training programs need to be conducted in partnership with the local organizations that receive volunteers.

Similarly, pre-departure training offers essential resources and a foundational framework for an effective transition into a new cultural environment (Brion, 2020). This is a critical dimension for fostering intercultural interaction. With the essential structure and base in place, volunteers get easier passage to acclimatize to the new cultural environment (Schwartz et al., 2021). The effective adaptation is, thus, attributed to the access to resources volunteers receive in pre-trip training.

Notwithstanding the evident importance and pressing need for pre-departure training and orientation to foster cross-cultural interaction, there remains a notable dearth of substantial empirical inquiries delving into the potential implications of such preparatory measures, especially in volunteer tourism (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2019). Few studies have attempted to study its significance. For example, the studies of Schwartz (2019) and Kalbarczyk (2019) highlight the necessity of pre-departure training for volunteer tourists on potential local community and its cultural practices and values. This gap is rather unexpected since pre-trip training is vital to enable interactive cross-cultural volunteering (Piacitelli et al., 2013). The pre-trip orientation is indispensable for information and a basic understanding of contextual environment and culture of the destination community which eventually determines post-trip results (Niehaus & Rivera, 2016; Rockenbach et al., 2014).

Similarly, it educates and sensitizes volunteer tourists on local cultural sensitivity and values (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2019; Grabowski et al., 2016). Volunteers with informed knowledge and cultural awareness 'set the tone' for ethical behavior in the placement (Fechter & Hindman, 2011). Setting a tone with awareness places volunteer tourists in a comfortable position for insightful and mutually interactive cross-cultural understanding. This is the reason pre-departure training plays a significant part in this endeavor. McCaffery's (1986) recommendation for pre-departure training and orientation for volunteer tourist as an essential component in volunteer tourism remains still relevant. He asserts that cross-cultural training and orientations to volunteer tourists become ineffective if these trainings are not treated as educational discipline driven by the goal of producing constructive results from cross-cultural interaction. The pre-departure training conducive environment for cross-cultural interaction and prepares volunteers with the tools necessary for immersive learning and developing intercultural sensitivity.

Cross-cultural Immersion

On many occasions, the prospect of immersive cross-cultural interaction captivates the imagination of international volunteer tourists. However, they are often impelled predominantly by self-centric incentives including aspiration for cross-cultural immersion, the allure of experiencing new countries, or ambitions of enhancing personal growth and development (Proyrungroj, 2020). Some self-centric volunteers prefer shallow immersion as they aspire just to experience the cultures and geography

and attempt to circumvent the deeper immersion. Other volunteer tourists are willing to learn, appreciate cross-cultural understanding, and attempt to adapt through enhanced cross-cultural sensitivity. Unguided and self-motivated endeavor to assimilate into a new and complex cross-cultural environment allows volunteer tourists little impetus to nurture intercultural understanding.

Such an opportunity to experience diverse cultures provides volunteer tourists with the ability to foster intercultural awareness. Immersion in the local cultural environment promotes a deeper awareness of cultural practices which, consequently, improves cross-cultural understanding (Wearing, 2001). Inquisitiveness and the quest for knowledge new experiences, people, places, and cultural practices provide them with the prospect to immerse and interact with the local environment in a more meaningful way (Brown & Lehto, 2005). The immersive volunteering allows volunteer tourists to interact with mutual learning and facilitates the gradual assimilation within the local cultural groups. The attainment of this adaptation process occurs when volunteers undergo a stage of immersion, exposing them to anticipated shock, stress, and anxiety (Lough, 2011; Ogberg, 1960).

An affirmative intent to embed and learn the cross-cultural practice results in a deeper level of cross-cultural immersion. Volunteer tourism offers this immersive cross-cultural understanding in a new cultural environment (Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011; Wearing, 2001). It typically involves exchanging and sharing cross-cultural experiences and knowledge. In a more precise context, cross-cultural immersion inherent in volunteer tourism establishes a favorable milieu that nurtures the growth and development of both volunteer tourists and the host population. Volunteer scholars (Guttentag, 2009; McGehee, 2008) emphasize this positive socio-economic value linked to cross-cultural immersion. Their argument revolves around the short-term nature of volunteer tourism programs, suggesting that their immersive yet short-term engagement with the local host community is less likely to engender a cycle of dependency and antagonism within the local labor force. Cultural immersion is defined as a process of assimilation wherein volunteers interact, share, and recognize the intrinsic value of the local community (Everingham & Chassagne 2021). To accomplish this objective necessitates concentrated efforts to cultivate foundational understanding, consciousness, and a genuine appreciation for shared values and nuanced differences (Smolcic & Katunich, 2017). By truly valuing cultural differences in values and practices, volunteers can enhance the prospect of fostering intercultural sensitivity.

However, three key elements hold the potentiality for adverse consequences: (1) representing poverty and underdevelopment as prevailing occurrences, (2) exerting undue influence on local culture, and (3) providing limited and inadequate opportunities for meaningful interaction. These circumstances inevitably result in cross-cultural misunderstanding (Guttentag, 2011; Sin, 2009). In the context of the volunteer tourism industry, these reasons stand as undeniable realities.

Nevertheless, deeper cross-cultural immersion can mitigate unintentional intercultural misinterpretation. It is, therefore, paramount to promote and encourage the practices of intercultural immersion in the volunteer tourism industry, thereby improving the quality of cross-cultural encounters (Ference & Bell, 2004). Immersion in volunteering plays a pivotal role in cultivating cross-cultural interaction, promoting empathetic perspectives, and contextual insight, and challenging the assumptions of volunteers. In the end, these immersive processes foster intercultural sensitivity. Such immersion not only aligns with the fundamental objective of volunteer tourism by transcending mere experiential engagement but also serves as a conduit for structured cross-cultural interaction (Raymond & Hall, 2008). Structured pre-departure training with educational purposes facilitates immersive intercultural learning in a cross-cultural environment.

Conclusion

Set within the context of cultural sensitivity in volunteer tourism, this review offers crucial insights into the central concerns surrounding intercultural dynamics for seamless cross-cultural assimilation, immersion, and mutual interaction with the destination communities. The review underscores the critical impact of cultural stereotyping, ethnocentric behaviors, volunteers' self-centric behaviors, and the lack of meaningful local participation in volunteer tourism programs as key determinants shaping cultural sensitivity. Furthermore, the absence of effective pre-departure training and orientation for volunteers regarding local cultural values and practices, coupled with evident absence of local voices in co-creating knowledge, is conspicuously apparent. These deficiencies pose significant challenges to fostering meaningful cross-cultural interactions. Recognizing and understanding the cultural sensitivity of host communities is paramount for both international volunteers and organizations aiming to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of volunteering practices. This understanding is pivotal for facilitating the smooth assimilation and adaptation of volunteers within and meaningful contribution to grassroots communities

To address these complex challenges of intercultural sensitivity inherent in volunteer tourism practices, various strategies have been proposed, including positioning pre-departure training as an educational discipline and fostering collaborative partnerships in the co-creation of volunteer tourism experiences and knowledge. Nevertheless, empirical evidence indicates a conspicuous gap between these suggested strategies and their implementation in practice. Despite their potential to enhance the effectiveness of volunteer tourism, these recommended approaches appear to be consistently overlooked or underutilized in the practice, necessitating a closer examination of the factors contributing to this disjunction between theory and application.

The cultural sensitivity framework posits that volunteer tourists necessitate an extended period to cultivate intercultural sensitivity. However, empirical evidence reveals an absence of correlation between the duration of time spent volunteering and the development of cultural sensitivity, challenging the relevance of temporal factors. Instead, the evidence underscores the imperative for volunteer tourists to counteract ethnocentric and stereotyped values as a means to reinforce intercultural sensitivity. This paradigm shift not only dispels the notion of a time-dependent progression but also highlights the pivotal role of mitigating preconceived biases in fostering an environment conducive to profound and insightful cross-cultural learning opportunities.

For the meaningful volunteer tourism practice, the challenges posed by intercultural sensitivity are undeniable, and various strategies have been proposed to address them. It is essential to acknowledge, however, that this review, while insightful, is not exhaustive in its analysis. Certain cultural nuances and regional cultural values and practices may not have been fully explored due to constraints within the existing literature. Future research endeavors should delve more deeply into exploring the opinions and experiences of grassroots communities belonging to diverse regional cultural groups. This exploration should extend to devising effective strategies aimed at mitigating the impact of cultural insensitivity in the volunteer tourism. The significance of this inquiry transcends the boundaries of volunteer tourism as it contributes substantively to the broader discourse on intercultural competence and cross-cultural understanding, both in research and the practical implementation of volunteer tourism initiatives. This comprehensive review sheds light on the intricate yet symbiotic relationship between volunteer tourism and cross-cultural sensitivity. It accentuates the necessity for further investigations into local cultural insights, particularly from the perspectives of diverse grassroots communities of the Global South. Additionally, it emphasizes the urgency of developing programs that conscientiously consider local cultural values and interests. This approach is pivotal for optimizing the meaningful and positive outcomes of international volunteer tourism initiatives.

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