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Special issue on Disruption and resilience in post-pandemic volunteer tourism: Rethinking theory, contents and methods

The post-pandemic world offers the opportunity to develop a critical rethinking of the theoretical, conceptual, and methodological remit of volunteer tourism in the attempt to advance the practice and theory of the field. Through the application of inter- and multidisciplinary approaches, we called for insights into new ways of doing and experiencing volunteer tourism, which could shed light on its transformative possibilities. In particular we questioned how post-pandemic volunteer tourism intersected with the political, ecological, racial and human crises of our century. To this end, we interrogated whether the resilience of volunteer tourism in a post-pandemic world could be beneficial and inclusive for communities, environments, and societies, or instead if it remains rooted in the issues of inequality (Crossley, 2012), power (Simpson, 2004), dependency (Guttentag, 2009) and colonialism (Palacios, 2010), which are commonly experienced in volunteer tourism, thus perpetuating them. Moreover, we questioned whether new ways of conceptualising the field would enable researchers to move beyond its dichotomic understanding (Everingham, 2016), which has often been discussed in past literature, opening up more creative and disruptive ways of rethinking both the field and the industry of volunteer tourism.

Our special issue includes ten contributions on a variety of topics and global settings in the post-pandemic world of volunteer tourism. Accordingly, this special issue showcases a wide range of geopolitical contexts (China, Fiji, Peru, Cambodia, Israel, and Europe) and topics analysed from a multitude of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives.

The compilation of these studies shows the dynamic features of volunteer tourism which evolve in line with the geopolitical, economic, technological and ecological characteristics and changes of our time that have been accelerated and emphasised by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Accepted papers fall within three major categories of topics as analysed below, these include perspectives from non-Westerner volunteering settings, impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and relationships around power and dependency.

Multi-perspective insights of volunteer tourism in non-Westerner settings: tourists; residents and sending organisations

Four papers in this special issue focus on the Chinese context by approaching volunteer tourism through a consideration of different stakeholders, including sending organisations (Chen, Smith, & Schott, 2023), volunteers (Dong & Bavik, 2023) and residents (Lin, Wong, & Wu, 2023) and through the application of a range of theoretical frameworks, including self-determination and goal-setting theories; identity theory, and the situated focus theory of power.

In their paper, Lin et al. aim to understand how the environmental drivers influence the motivations of rising environmentalists with a focus on GenZ. In doing so, the authors advance theoretical knowledge on (green) volunteer tourism through the adoption of a motivation–goal attainment–

behavior model. Through the application of this model, the authors argue that green volunteering involvement could promote environmental advocacy and pro-environmental behaviours among (post-millennial) volunteer tourists. The theoretical perspective adopted in this study helps to advance knowledge on volunteer tourism in relation to its intersection to the environment. In developing the call for this special issue, we aimed to encourage contributions on how the current ways of doing volunteer tourism relate to the major crises of our time within the context of a post-pandemic world. Accordingly, Lin et al.'s study enables to reflect on the dynamics of green volunteer tourism emphasising the environmental behaviours of volunteers.

In the same geographical context, Dong and Bavik analyse the propensity of residents to volunteer based on their degree of power within the volunteer tourism landscape. In doing so, they adopt the situated focus theory of power, which helps to understand how the position and degree of power of stakeholders involved in the volunteer tourism sector shape their behaviours and (un)responsiveness to certain situations. In their study, Dong and Bavik, offer a reconsideration of power that moves away from traditional dichotomic understanding of the volunteer tourism industry and field. Instead, they argue how the flow and position of power of individuals in the volunteer tourism landscape could open up possibilities of (beneficial) prosocial behaviours.

Finally, focusing further on the context of China, Chen et al., shed light on another group of stakeholders that is sending organisations with a focus on the evolving character of the post-pandemic industry. Drawing from role identity theory, the study highlights the importance of understanding the individual roles of staff members in (Chinese) volunteer tourism sending organisations. These roles are impacted by the multiple social individual identities that a person has and by individuals' personal circumstances.

Overall, these theoretical and empirical contributions advance knowledge on volunteer tourism that develop and take places in non-Western settings shifting the focus away from more traditional forms of volunteer tourism between the Global North and the Global South. Additionally, in analysing the field of volunteer tourism from a variety of multidisciplinary approaches, the authors of this special issue have contributed important insights to the current trends and possible future trajectories of a dynamic field. Indeed, the past COVID-19 pandemic had important repercussions on the industry (such as ways of volunteering; stakeholders involved) and, we argue, it will be influenced by the (intersections) of the crises of our time, including wars, fragile democratic systems, climate change and the rise of artificial intelligence.

Multi-dimensional impacts of COVID-19 on volunteer tourism

In responding to our call, several authors examined different facets of the impacts of COVID-19 on the practice and field of volunteer tourism. To this end, both Kahana's (2023) study and Bajrami, Cimbajevi'c, Syromiatnikova, Petrovi'c, and Gaji'c's (2023) work draws on social science theoretical frameworks. Kahana uses pragmatic sociology to examine the seemingly conflicting dual roles of the volunteer tourist as both self-serving as a tourist and society-serving as a volunteer, termed the self-society duality. Kahana argues that the risk of infecting others during the COVID-19 pandemic has created an era where personal moral decisions are under deeper critical scrutiny by society. Additionally, the study uncovers the ways in which the volunteer tourists sought to behave and frame their behaviour in a 'moral' way to respond to post-pandemic (new) societal moral articulations.

Bajrami et al. extend the concern for public health by analysing volunteer tourism through the concept of psychological capital to investigate the mental health and well-being of volunteer tourists. Their findings identified new constructs for the theory of planned behaviour to moderate volunteers' intention to continue with their placement leading to longer term benefits for both the volunteer and the project.

In terms of methods, both Bajrami et al. and Polus and Carr (2023) use 'COVID-friendly' methods meaning that they are not restricted by COVID-19 public health regulations. Bajrami et al. use a large-

scale survey of volunteer tourism participants from 15 different countries. Interestingly, 45% of their sample were domestic volunteer tourists. Polus and Carr used netnography, which the authors were forced to adopt after New Zealand implemented border closures at the start of the pandemic. Both approaches enabled the authors to go beyond the more typical in-depth case study investigations of extant volunteer tourism research (Wearing & McGehee, 2013) and to include participants in a wide range of projects from different source countries. Accordingly, these studies stimulate reflections about the role of in-person ethnographic methods in volunteer tourism research, both suggesting how we can do without them (i.e., questioning whether they are really necessary) and highlighting what we are missing without them (i.e., showing why they are still necessary).

Whilst Kahana, Bajrami et al., and Polus and Carr focused primarily on the traditional youth market for volunteer tourism, Balderas-Cejudo and Patterson's (2023) contribution to this special issue takes a different perspective. In fact, the authors uniquely argue for research on the baby-boomer demographic, observing that Western countries – the traditional source markets for volunteer tourism – all have ageing populations. Notably the papers mentioned in this section focused on the volunteers' experience and behaviour, with recommendations for sending and hosting organisations.

Volunteer tourism relationships: power and inequalities

A third area of contribution in this special issue addresses asymmetries, representations, and power dynamics in volunteer-beneficiary relationships.

Salvador-Almela (2023) explores these issues by analysing how global celebrities who serve as UNICEF's Goodwill Ambassadors represent their humanitarian trips via Instagram. Given humanitarian celebrities' significant power to influence the perspective and inspire the action of potential volunteer tourists, understanding and addressing the problematic aspects of their public representations has important implications. Salvador-Almela's analysis shows how social media can magnify the role of these celebrities in reproducing colonial and gender-based stereotypes in volunteer tourism. Notably, their social media images and messages tend to reproduce well-known problematic dynamics, such as the white saviour complex (Bandyopadhyay & Patil, 2017), the othering process, the humanitarian gaze (Mostafanezhad, 2013) and unequal North–South relationships (Vrasti, 2012). They also portray traditional gender roles whereby women and children are depicted as deprived victims in need of patriarchal help.

On the other hand, acknowledging that humanitarian celebrities' social media activity plays an important role in raising awareness of radical global inequalities, the author also discusses the need to introduce specific codes of conduct, image awareness training, and other measures to enhance the ethical quality of their actions and communications.

The paradoxes and tensions explored by Salvador-Almela are yet another powerful reminder that the complexity of power relationships in volunteer tourism cannot be captured by dichotomic representations and interpretations.

This is further highlighted by McLennan and Thomas-Maude's (2023) article based on qualitative fieldwork in Peru and Fiji. The authors analyse volunteer tourism initiatives that attempt to overcome the asymmetric nature of volunteer-hosts relationships by redefining them as a type of (more equitable) cultural exchange, rather than framing them within discourses of 'doing good', helping and development. McLennan and Thomas-Maude's study shows that although reframing volunteer tourism encounters as a form of cultural exchange has the potential to increase mutual understanding and respect, it also tends to hide the structural injustice and inequality that shape those relationships, thus further concealing and perpetuating them. The comparison between volunteer tourism programs in two very different settings adds nuance to the discussion by discussing how context-specific features can facilitate the reconfiguration of voluntourism as cultural exchange, but also showing that similar limitations and othering patterns can be observed, albeit in different forms.

A different perspective on power relationships is adopted by Tomazos and Murdy's (2023) contribution to this special issue. Here the authors use Action-Network Theory (ANT) to explore the

complexity of the volunteer tourism context through a holistic perspective that tries to go beyond the ethical and moral evaluation of its benefits and downsides. Through their fieldwork in a Cambodian children's home, the authors discuss the symbiotic relationship between the locals and volunteers, offering a critique of those perspectives that depict local stakeholders simply as passive recipients or even victims exploited by the volunteer tourism complex. The latter is analysed by Tomazos and Murdy as a microcosm that provides different actors with different opportunities to pursue their own interests while, in doing so, nourishing (whether intentionally or not) that very same microcosm in turn. In analysing how this network of interrelated and interdependent actions and 'actants' was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Tomazos and Murdy suggest that empowering the locals entails accepting their agency and resourcefulness to exploit volunteer tourism for their ends.

Whilst suggesting possible avenues to overcome the dichotomic understanding that often characterises the volunteer tourism literature, the contributions presented in this special issue remind us how challenging a deeper re-conceptualisation of the field still remains. Furthermore, they address the potential for theoretical and practical advancements to rethink the field of volunteer tourism through the intersections with economic, ecological and socio-political crises of the twenty-first century, which have been – to some extent - amplified by the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

In conclusion, our special issue has enabled us to facilitate academic and industry-relevant reflections on the meaning(s) and evolution of volunteer tourism in a post-pandemic world. Future trajectories should engage further with such (early) debates in a more radical, creative, and disruptive manner in a way that can reframe traditional considerations of the field. To this end, we advocate for future studies that adopt multi- and interdisciplinary approaches to capture holistic and not polarised understanding of volunteer tourism aligned with current ethical, political, ecological and economic demands. In doing so, we also emphasise the need to move away from Western, anthropocentric theoretical boundaries to embrace alternative (theoretical and methodological) ways of knowledge production in the context of volunteer tourism whereby nature and human beings are part of the same continuum.

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