Come and make a real difference: Online marketing of the volunteering experience to Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the manner in which organizations that facilitate volunteering experiences (hereinafter, facilitators) to Zimbabwe frame, package and promote voluntourism. Through an analysis of the facilitators' websites, this study establishes *inter alia*, the forms, cost and duration of voluntourism experiences including the nature of organizations involved. In doing so, this study shifts attention to an important but oft-neglected aspect of voluntourism in the international tourism literature, that is, facilitators. Much more importantly, the paper documents and critically examines the narratives deployed by facilitators to entice potential volunteers. A common thread that runs through the facilitators' online representations is that voluntourism makes a 'real difference' to poverty-stricken 'others' and to animal welfare. Voluntourism is also presented as a 'win–win' phenomenon to a range of stakeholders including facilitators, volunteers, poor communities and wildlife. However, it was observed that this dominant framing of volunteerism may be challenged by, for example, travel bloggers' narratives and experiences and independent information searches by potential voluntourists. It is on this basis that this paper argues that facilitators need to present accurate, balanced and realistic descriptions as potential voluntourists have several online tools at their disposal to interrogate 'dominant' representations. Furthermore, it is important to realize that any mismatch between facilitators' representations and 'coal-face' experiences of volunteering will lead to post-purchase dissonance, bad 'electronic word of mouth' recommendations and other adverse 'bottom-line' effects. The paper further identifies several other managerial implications and future research priorities.

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1. Introduction

The term 'voluntourism' lacks a universally accepted definition but is generally taken to mean "the combination of leisure travel and voluntary work" (Barbieri, Santos, & Katsube, 2012: 509). This genre of tourism is widely acknowledged as a popular activity (Raymond & Hall, 2008; Wearing, 2001), a fast-growing segment (Lyons & Wearing, 2008; Wearing, 2001) and a new "poster child" of alternative tourism (Lyons & Wearing, 2008: 6). Alternative tourism is a collective term used to describe, arguably, small-scale tourism that is community led and driven, economically-viable and environmentally-friendly (Carter, 1994; Wearing, 2001). Put differently, alternative tourism is considered as a symbol of the tourism industry's response to the concept of sustainable development that was popularized by the WECD (1987). Sustainable development is a hotly contested concept that is commonly defined as "…development that meets the present generation's needs without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs" (WECD, 1987: 43). Seen in this light, alternative tourism is the antithesis of

conventional or mass tourism; a form of tourism that since the 1970s has attracted a lot of negative critiques because of its perceived adverse environmental, social, economic and political effects (Carter, 1994; Mowforth & Munt, 2008).

The growth in demand for voluntourism has been accompanied by a corresponding increase in the number and variety of organizations that facilitate volunteer experiences (Tomazos & Butler, 2010), hereinafter, facilitators. As Barbieri, Santos, and Katsube observe:

> …the growth in the provision of volunteer tourism opportunities has been considerable. Indeed, beyond the traditionally thought of organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Voluntary Service Overseas and the United Nations, there are currently countless other NGOs, charitable bodies and commercial tour operators that offer volunteer tourism opportunities (2012: 509).

Overarching this development, a steadily growing literature that seeks to understand the motivations and impacts of voluntourism on either the host communities or the voluntoured (e.g. Gray & Campbell, 2007; Guttentag, 2009; McGehee & Anderick, 2009) and on the voluntourists themselves (e.g. Lepp, 2009; Sin, 2009) has emerged. However, a review of the international tourism literature revealed that there has not been as much attempt to examine the facilitators of the

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volunteer experiences. To this end, this study is devoted to documenting and analyzing the nature of the facilitators to one developing country context namely, Zimbabwe. In doing so, the study builds upon Coglan's (2007) pioneering work that established that facilitators provide a range of projects that vary in location, size, purpose and sometimes, image. It is worth noting that Coglan's (2007) study primarily focused on how volunteer conservation tourism organizations' images affected the decisions and expectations of potential voluntourists. Specifically, Coglan's (2007) study assessed how such factors as brochures, organizational mission statements, past volunteer testimonies and promotional photographs could attract potential volunteers and influence their perceptions. Beyond Coglan's (2007) study, it appears that there has not been any in-depth profiling of facilitators.

This study also documents and critically examines the narratives deployed by facilitators to entice potential volunteers to destination Zimbabwe. Through the analysis of facilitators' online marketing representations and selected postings and blogs by voluntourists, the present study responds to several scholars' (e.g. Gray & Campbell, 2007; McGehee, 2007) calls for studies that enhance our understanding of how to develop enriching volunteer tourism experiences. Methodologically, this study draws upon the textual analysis of facilitators' and voluntourists' narratives as is discussed in more detail later on.

2. Literature review

It is beyond contestation that volunteer tourism has received growing attention in the international tourism literature (e.g. McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Sin, 2009; Wearing, 2001) particularly, in the past decade. Most of this literature perceives voluntourism as "the generic term [that] applies to those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that involve aiding or alleviating poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment", following Wearing's (2001: 1) popular definition as is the case with this present study.

It has been argued that voluntourism has been spurred by the increasing popularity of the gap year (Daldeniz & Hampton, 2010) and young adults from the developed realm who seek to address various social ailments of modern day society and in the process construct and realize their own identities (Butcher & Smith, 2010). There are also observations that voluntourism can be an emotional and cathartic experience (Zahra & McIntosh, 2007) and that it may improve one's career prospects (Leigh, 2006) and encourage self-development that is manifested in changes in one's lifestyle and or personal values (Wearing, 2001). It should be noted, however, that while a range of benefits are touted by advocates of voluntourism there is increasing recognition that "…not every aspect of volunteer tourism is positive or desirable" (Barbieri et al., 2012: 510). To this end, one of the emerging concern has been the 'politics' of voluntourism, that is, reservations have been expressed regarding the distribution of benefits among the stakeholders (see e.g. Guttentag, 2009). Voluntourists have also been criticized for their superficial understanding of the causes of the poverty encountered in voluntoured environments and for failing to feel guilty and showing the desire to take action to resolve the observed poverty (e.g. Simpson, 2004).

Notwithstanding the above, the growth in facilitators of volunteer experiences has been phenomenal (Coglan, 2007) while "…popular regions for volunteer experiences are located in Africa and Central and South America" (Barbieri et al., 2012: 510). A review of the extant studies revealed that the above developments have not been matched by a corresponding increase in scholarly attention towards facilitators. This is somewhat surprising as facilitators are critical components of this burgeoning industry because their attitudes, values, actions and discursive practices constitute part of the volunteer experience. The few exceptions that have broached this subject include Wearing (2004) and Wearing, McDonald, and Ponting (2005) who explored the role of Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) in facilitating voluntourists and local communities' interactions.

In similar vein, another interesting exception is Barbieri et al. (2012) who examined the relationship between one facilitator's practices (i.e. Amaharo Tours; a Rwanda-based tour operating company) and voluntourists' lived experiences in Nyakinama, Rwanda. In their autoethnographic research, Barbieri et al. (2012) reveal the lived experiences of voluntourists highlighting both the intrinsic rewards obtained as well as frustrations experienced such as when the voluntourists were not assigned tasks or faced language barriers that affected the execution of their voluntary duties. From the "on-the ground observations" made through participant observation, Barbieri et al. (2012: 509) make several recommendations that are aimed at closing the gap between voluntourists' experiences and facilitators' practices. For example, the authors recommend monitoring potential and current voluntourists' attitudes, and the provision of language training and a carefully developed and facilitated structured work plan and tasks to enhance the intrinsic rewards obtained from voluntourism.

While Barbieri et al.'s (2012) study is instructive of the disjuncture that may exist between a facilitator's service delivery system and voluntourists' expectations and experiences, this study points to a related neglected area in the tourism literature. That is, there has not been as much attempt to understand how the online representations of the volunteer experience by facilitators are articulated and implicated in the lived experiences of voluntourists. Similarly, a review of the international literature also revealed that little focus has been invested in understanding how both existing and potential voluntourists view, interrogate and negotiate facilitators' online representations of the volunteer experience. This present study is poised to contribute to addressing these research gaps and omissions. It is further worth noting that while a growing body of predominantly case studies that focus on individual facilitators exist (e.g. Barbieri et al., 2012; Lepp, 2009), there have been limited studies that focus on a wider geographical context involving several online facilitators serving a whole country as is the case with this present study. It is the author's contention that efforts in this direction would, perhaps, help to unravel the emerging dynamics of this burgeoning tourism market that has attracted the imagination of several scholars, civil society, policy makers and the general public.

3. Methodology

The present research aimed to document and analyze online representations of the volunteer experience to Zimbabwe and to provide a profile of the facilitators. In pursuit of the above, an internet search was made of the facilitators on 5 December 2012. Thus, facilitators who went online after this chosen arbitrary date were excluded in this study. This was done in recognition of the fact that websites are continuously updated. Put differently, only the material that was available on the facilitators' websites on 5 December 2012 was analyzed in this study. Through a Google search of facilitators that market volunteer experiences to Zimbabwe, a total of 25 organizations were found. However, owing to the scarcity of comprehensive information on some of the facilitators' websites, a total of ten websites were chosen for detailed analysis. It is worth noting that some of the websites only showcased the name of the company and prices, without giving much detail that would enable meeting the set objectives of the study.

In this exploratory study, content analysis was used to describe and identify patterns in the facilitators' and voluntourists' narratives. Content analysis is a "technique for gathering and analyzing the content of text. The content refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or any message that can be communicated" (Neuman, 2003: 219). The ten selected facilitators' websites were content analyzed focusing on the type, duration and cost of the volunteer experiences offered as well as the geographic spread. The latter refers to whether the facilitator had a global outreach or in Barbieri et al. (2012: 510) phraseology, were "…powerhouse facilitators that provide opportunities in a variety of countries/regions". Other facilitators were classified as local signifying that they were owned by black and white