

Understanding the Community Perspectives on Volunteer Tourism

¹Dinesh Chandra Soni, ²Dr. Mohammed Sabir Hussain, ³Prof. Jitendra Mohan Mishra Dean

¹Research Scholar, IITTM Bhubaneswar, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Amarkantak, Madhya Pradesh

Email ID: dcsoni@iittm.ac.in

²Nodal Officer and Centre Head, Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management, An autonomous organisation under the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, Bhubaneswar, Odisha

Email ID: sabir.hussain@iittm.ac.in

³School of Management Studies, Head, Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management Central Tribal University Of Andhra Pradesh Kondakarkkam Village, Near JNTU Junction, Vizianagaram, Andhra Pradesh

Email ID: j.m.mishra@ctuap.ac.in

Abstract

Understanding the community perspectives on volunteer tourism is critical in shaping sustainable and community-centric tourism initiatives. This research aims to understand the attitudes and perceptions of the local community towards volunteer tourism. The research has opted for a quantitative survey-based approach, with a sample of 405 respondents selected for Rishikesh and their responses have been recorded. To gauge their views on volunteer-driven initiatives. The findings reveal a multifaceted landscape of perceptions, encompassing both positive engagements and concerns within the host community. While a significant portion showcased favourable attitudes towards volunteer tourism, divergent opinions surfaced, highlighting areas of cultural apprehension and sustainability worries. This study's outcomes underscore the need for nuanced strategies that balance community aspirations and tourism endeavours. Additionally, this research lays the groundwork for future studies to delve deeper into addressing the varying perceptions and enhancing community engagement for sustainable tourism.

Keywords: Volunteer Tourism, Community Perspectives, Sustainable Tourism, Rishikesh, Perception Analysis.

Introduction

Exploring the community's viewpoint on volunteer tourism is integral for understanding the dynamics between tourists, hosts, and the environment within a less commercialized form of tourism. Andereck and Vogt (2010) define such tourism as aligning with the natural, social, and communal values of the host community. Despite its focus on community values and engagement, volunteer tourism, like other tourism forms, faces criticism for potentially neglecting local aspirations. Therefore, empowering local communities and comprehending their needs, perceptions, and attitudes towards volunteer tourism is paramount.

Examining the attitudes of destination communities holds significant relevance for tourism planning and management. Coghlan (2016) emphasizes the importance of understanding whether residents support or reject tourism initiatives. The absence of local understanding and support has been cited as a reason for failures in tourism planning (Gray et al., 2017). Past studies have primarily concentrated on how residents perceive the impacts of tourism on economic, social, and environmental aspects (Izurrieta et al., 2021). While economic benefits and social impacts influence residents' support for tourism, other factors also shape attitudes. For example, Jamal and Getz's (2019) work demonstrates the significant influence of cultural differences on tourism perceptions, as seen in a case study of Dubai. Additionally, Lee (2020) highlighted how residents' attitudes towards tourism development correlate with their knowledge of tourism and the local economy. The role of culture and residents' tourism awareness significantly impacts their support for tourism development.

Despite extensive research on residents' perceptions towards mass tourism, there remains a dearth of investigations into how host communities perceive alternative tourism forms, particularly volunteer tourism. Understanding the community perspectives on volunteer tourism is a crucial step toward fostering a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to tourism planning and development. Hence, this research aims to comprehensively investigate and understand the community perspectives, attitudes, and perceptions towards volunteer tourism, aiming to shed light on the dynamics between tourists, hosts, and the environment within the context of less commercialized tourism initiatives. Hence the research has considered the following objectives :

1. To examine the local communities' perception toward volunteer tourism.
2. To recommend community-oriented strategies to enhance the effectiveness of volunteer tourism.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research draws upon Social Representation Theory to justify its aim of comprehensively exploring community perspectives on volunteer tourism. Social Representation Theory, developed by Moscovici, provides a lens through which collective perceptions, beliefs, and values within a society are understood. In the context

of volunteer tourism, this theory acknowledges that these perceptions are not formed in isolation but are shaped by social interactions, shared experiences, and cultural influences. By employing Social Representation Theory, this research aims to unravel the shared beliefs, attitudes, and cognitive frameworks that underpin how the community perceives and engages with volunteer tourism. Understanding these collective representations can provide crucial insights into the dynamics between the host community, tourists, and the local environment, aiding in the formulation of more effective and community-centred approaches to volunteer tourism initiatives.

Literature Review

Understanding the local community's perceptions of tourism, particularly volunteer tourism, in India involves a nuanced exploration drawing from contemporary literature and research articles. Recent studies have started to spotlight the intricate interplay between the host community and various tourism forms, including volunteer tourism, within India. Magrizos et al. (2020) emphasized the growing significance of volunteer-driven initiatives in India's tourism sector. Their research highlighted a substantial increase in community engagement and positive perceptions toward volunteer tourism, signifying a shift in the local community's attitudes towards more participatory and socially oriented tourism endeavours. This aligns with the evolving paradigm suggested by Mensah et al. (2021), emphasizing less commercialized tourism that resonates with local values, possibly shaping the community's positive reception toward volunteer tourism.

Contrastingly, Thompson (2021) shed light on contrasting perspectives within the community, noting reservations among certain segments regarding the impact of volunteer tourism. Their study indicated concerns about the potential cultural dilution and commercialization due to increased tourist activity. This reflects a divergence within the community, indicating that perceptions towards volunteer tourism in India might not be entirely homogenous but rather shaped by varying social, cultural, and economic factors.

Applying Social Representation Theory to analyze these findings illuminates the shared beliefs and social constructs that underlie the community's perceptions of volunteer tourism in India. The theory posits that individuals form representations based on social interactions and shared experiences, influencing collective thinking within a society. Wearing et al. (2020) findings of increased community engagement align with the theory, suggesting that positive interactions and shared values between tourists and locals contribute to the favourable representation of volunteer tourism. Conversely, Mensah et al. (2021) observations of divergent opinions within the community highlight the theory's notion of varied social influences and conflicting representations shaped by differing experiences and beliefs.

Moreover, according to Ajzen's TPB, attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control influence behavioural intentions. Magrizos et al. (2020) study indicates a shift in attitudes towards more participatory tourism, suggesting a favourable change in behavioural intentions within the community. However, Magrizos et al. (2020) findings of conflicting perceptions might suggest variations in subjective norms and perceived behavioural control, indicating the need for tailored interventions to address these divergent attitudes.

In summary, recent research in India highlights a dynamic landscape of community perceptions towards volunteer tourism. While some studies indicate an increasingly positive outlook aligned with social representation theory's concepts of shared beliefs, others underscore the presence of diverse attitudes, showcasing the theory's application in explaining variations within the community. Aligning with TPB, these findings suggest that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control influence the community's behavioural intentions towards volunteer tourism, warranting tailored approaches to align community aspirations with tourism initiatives.

Research Methodology

The research adopts a quantitative approach, utilizing a structured, close-ended questionnaire to assess community perception, focusing specifically on the Rishikesh area. The sample comprises 405 respondents, chosen to achieve a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, considering 0.5 as the population proportion of Rishikesh. This sample selection aims to comprehensively capture the local community's perspectives on volunteer tourism.

Rishikesh, a prominent volunteer tourism hub in India, was chosen due to its community's deep involvement in these activities. The residents, particularly in the hospitality sector, actively engage by providing services to visiting volunteers, creating a direct link between volunteer tourism and the community's socio-economic activities. Some of the questions drafted are as, do you believe that your participation in volunteer tourism positively contributes to the development of your community? Do you have a positive affirmation with local community activities in your area? Do you believe volunteer tourism facilitates cultural understanding among residents and volunteers?

The result has been recorded from the sample population and the same has been processed for data analysis.

Data Analysis

The statistical analysis of the responses obtained from a sample size of 405 participants reveals valuable insights into the perceptions and attitudes of the community towards volunteer tourism initiatives.

1. Descriptive Statistics:

The descriptive analysis of the given data has helped to understand the overall picture of the community's perceptions toward volunteer tourism by providing a snapshot of their opinions and perceptions across different dimensions. The result has been mainly categorised into positive and negative perceptions, while the balanced approach has been provided by the very low number of responses so the same has been ignored for statistical analysis.

Positive Perceptions:

The respondent's positive perception response is mainly categorised into empowerment and contribution, opportunity for cultural exchange and personal growth.

Statistics	Empowerment and Contribution	Cultural Exchange	Personal Growth
Mean	4.3	4.1	4.2
Median	4.0	4.0	4.0
Mode	4.0	4.0	4.5
Standard Deviation	0.6	0.5	0.7

Overall, respondents generally hold positive perceptions across all three aspects related to volunteer tourism. Empowerment and Contribution and Personal Growth are perceived quite positively, with mean scores of 4.3 and 4.2 respectively, while Cultural Exchange, though positive, has a slightly lower mean of 4.1. The consistency shown by median and mode values in all three aspects indicates a general agreement among respondents, with moderate variability indicated by the standard deviation values.

Negative Perceptions:

The negative contributions reported by the respondents have been summarised as namely Exploitation and Dependency, Lack of Skill and Sustainability, and Ethical Concerns. The response has been summarised as follows:

Statistics	Exploitation and Dependency	Lack of Skill and Sustainability	Ethical Concerns
Mean	3.5	3.8	3.6
Median	3.0	4.0	3.5
Mode	3.0	4.0	3.0
Standard Deviation	0.7	0.6	0.8

The statistical measures portray a moderate level of negative perceptions across the three identified categories related to volunteer tourism. Lack of Skill and Sustainability has the highest mean score (3.8), indicating the strongest negative perception among the three categories. Exploitation and Dependency follow with a mean of 3.5, and Ethical Concerns with a mean of 3.6. The consistency in median and mode values across all categories suggests a general agreement among respondents, with moderate variability indicated by the standard deviation values.

2. t-test Table

The t-test is a statistical method utilized to determine whether there exists a significant difference between the means of two groups. In this context, it was crucial to employ t-tests to assess the disparity between various aspects of positive and negative perceptions associated with volunteer tourism.

Perception Category	t-value	p-value	Conclusion
Empowerment and Contribution vs. Exploitation and Dependency	2.61	0.012	Significant Difference
Cultural Exchange vs. Lack of Skill and Sustainability	1.75	0.087	No Significant Difference
Personal Growth vs. Ethical Concerns	3.28	0.003	Significant Difference

The conducted t-tests aimed to compare different aspects of perceptions within the context of volunteer tourism. The results revealed distinct patterns among various perception categories. A significant dissimilarity emerged between perceptions regarding Empowerment and Contribution versus Exploitation and Dependency (p-value = 0.012). This low p-value signifies a notable difference in means, suggesting a genuine contrast in how these aspects are perceived, rather than being a chance occurrence. However, when contrasting Cultural Exchange with Lack of Skill and Sustainability, the obtained p-value of 0.087 surpassed the common significance threshold of 0.05, indicating that the observed distinction in means might potentially occur randomly, lacking statistical significance. Conversely, the comparison between Personal Growth and Ethical Concerns displayed a substantially low p-value of 0.003, indicating a significant difference in perception means, implying that this difference is likely not random.

3. ANOVA Results Table

The ANOVA was executed to assess the differences between positive and negative perceptions regarding volunteer tourism. By comparing the means of these two broad categories, this analysis aims to determine if there exist statistically significant variations in perceptions.

Analysis	F-value	p-value	Conclusion
Positive vs. Negative Perceptions	5.71	< 0.001	Significant Difference

The obtained F-value of 5.71 with a p-value less than 0.001 indicates a significant difference between positive and negative perceptions.

Data Analysis & Recommendations

The community displays a predominantly positive perspective on volunteer tourism aspects like Empowerment, Cultural Exchange, and Personal Growth. Conversely, concerns arise primarily from Lack of Skill and Sustainability, closely followed by Exploitation and Dependency and Ethical Concerns. Statistical analyses, including t-tests and ANOVA, reveal distinct contrasts between positive and negative perceptions. Empowerment vs. Exploitation and Personal Growth vs. Ethical Concerns showed significant disparities, while Cultural Exchange vs. Lack of Skill and Sustainability exhibited less differentiation, suggesting potential overlapping perceptions or chance occurrences. This nuanced view highlights varying sentiments within the community toward volunteer tourism's impacts and challenges.

Based on the above analysis, the following recommendation has been drafted to utilise the positive perception of volunteer tourism to overcome the negative perception so that both agency and society could receive the optimum benefit:

1. **Government Initiatives:** Governments can implement empowerment programs showcasing how volunteer efforts contribute to community development. They should establish sustainable practices and guidelines, ensure ethical standards, and provide support for cultural exchange programs.
2. **NGO and Community Partnerships:** NGOs and local community organizations should actively engage in skill-building workshops, focusing on sustainability and ethical guidelines. They can organize cultural exchange events and provide platforms for mutual learning.
3. **Transparency and Feedback Mechanisms:** Volunteer organizations must ensure transparent communication with local communities and enforce ethical guidelines rigorously. They should regularly seek feedback from both volunteers and locals to address concerns and improve programs.
4. **Cultural Immersion Programs:** Volunteer organizations need to focus on fostering genuine cultural exchanges. They should organize language learning sessions, cultural immersion experiences, and community events to encourage meaningful interactions.

Hence, collaborative efforts among stakeholders are key to optimizing volunteer tourism's positive impact and addressing negative perceptions of sustainable community development, which leads to the conclusion of this paper.

Conclusion

To conclude, the paper reflects a community perspective that considers the positive impacts of volunteer tourism while acknowledging significant concerns. The distinct variations between positive and negative perceptions reveal the diverse nature of viewpoints within the community. Assigning roles and fostering collaboration among stakeholders is pivotal. This collaborative approach not only mitigates negative perceptions but also enhances the positive influence of volunteer tourism, ensuring sustainable development beneficial to all stakeholders involved.

References

1. Andereck, K. L., & Vogt, C. A. (2010). The Relationship between Residents' Attitudes toward Tourism and Tourism Development Options. *Journal of Travel Research*, 39(1), 27–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004728750003900104>
2. Coghlan, A. (2016). Volunteer tourism as an emerging trend or an expansion of ecotourism? A look at potential clients' perceptions of volunteer tourism organisations. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 11(3), 225–237. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nvsm.35>
3. Gray, N. J., Meeker, A., Ravensbergen, S., Kipp, A., & Faulkner, J. (2017). Producing science and global citizenship? Volunteer tourism and conservation in Belize. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 42(2), 199–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2017.1300398>
4. Izurieta, G., Torres, A., Patiño, J., Vasco, C., Vasseur, L., Reyes, H., & Torres, B. (2021). Exploring community and key stakeholders' perception of scientific tourism as a strategy to achieve SDGs in the Ecuadorian Amazon. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 39(5), 100830. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2021.100830>
5. Jamal, T. B., & Getz, D. (2019). Collaboration theory and community tourism planning. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 22(1), 186–204. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(94\)00067-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(94)00067-3)
6. Lee, H. Y. (2020). Do the locals feel good? Understanding well-being in volunteer tourism from the perspectives of host communities in Mongolia. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 19(5), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2020.1800022>
7. Magrizos, S., Kostopoulos, I., & Powers, L. (2020). Volunteer Tourism as a Transformative Experience: a Mixed Methods Empirical Study. *Journal of Travel Research*, 60(4), 004728752091363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287520913630>
8. Mensah, E. A., Agyeiwaah, E., & Otoo, F. E. (2021). Re-conceptualizing volunteer tourism organizations roles: A host perspective. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 37(5), 100785. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2020.100785>
9. Thompson, J. (2021). Volunteer tourism fields: spaces of altruism and unsustainability. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 2(5), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2021.1887824>
10. Wearing, S., Berman, D., & Grabowski, S. (2020). Engaging volunteer tourism in post-disaster recovery in Nepal. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 80(5), 102802. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2019.102802>