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Felix Elvis Otoo & Francis Eric Amuquandoh

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An investigation into the experiences of international volunteer tourists in Ghana

Felix Elvis Otoo* and Francis Eric Amuquandoh¹

Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana

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The expectation of a memorable experience is one of the elements that motivate volunteers to travel. Experience has however remained an elusive and complex phenomenon subject to multiple interpretations. There is a lack of common language to explain the volunteer tourist's experience. This study explores the experiences of volunteer tourists to Ghana using the Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE) theory. The results from a survey of 336 international volunteer tourists suggest that experiences are largely tied to social, cultural and tourism attributes of the destination. Such experiences may be positive or negative.

Keywords: experience; Ghana; memorable tourism experience; volunteer tourist

Introduction

Though a contemporary theme in tourism, Tomazos and Butler (2009) have stated that the idea of volunteering is a much older activity that involves a much wider field of endeavour than just the holiday aspect that is characteristic of the concept. Indeed, Hampton (2003) avers that the desire for young adults to travel and explore the world has, in itself, a long history dating back to, at least, the European Grand Tour in the eighteenth century and more recently, in the hippy overland trail of the 1960s. In recent times, volunteer tourism offers a range of experiences not available to other segments of the tourist market (Brown & Morrison, 2003).

The concept of experience has received a lot of attention in terms of definitions, models, aspects, characteristics and methods. For example, it has been researched as experiential (Arnould & Price, 1993), affective/emotional (Schmitt, 1999) and quality (Tian-Cole, Crompton, & Willson, 2002). Despite these approaches, experience still remains one of the most elusive areas in tourism research (Huang & Hsu, 2010; Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987). According to Den Breejen (2007), experience is a complex concept subject to multiple interpretations as a result of the influence of emotional, situational, practical and personal variables.

There are still research challenges related to discovering the actual experiences of volunteers at destinations. This is because the volunteer tourist remains a rare type of tourist who labours on holiday (Wearing, 2001). Although most volunteer travel involves a combination of travel and voluntary work, Tourism Research and Marketing (TRAM) (2008) observes that new forms of experiences such as making donations instead of working are emerging. Part of the recent growth in volunteer travel can be attributed to the variety of volunteer experiences, which makes a definition of this market more difficult.

*Corresponding author. Email: felixotoo@gmail.com

While literature (including Cohen, 1979; Le Bel, Sears, & Dube, 2004; Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1999) is replete with conceptualizations and measures of tourism experiences such as entertainment, escapism, aesthetics, education, arousal, novelty, interaction and stimulation, the assumption that experiences are positively memorable has contributed to the absence of a thorough understanding of the concept. This study proposes a more holistic approach to capturing the issues that create imprints on volunteer tourists' minds. Such issues may be positively or negatively memorable. There is a need to examine the entirety of the actual experiences accompanying volunteer travel. The principal objectives of this study therefore are to identify and explore the experiences of volunteer tourists in Ghana. Regarding its relevance, the study about volunteer tourists' experiences in Ghana is an important contribution for developing marketing strategies and packages for volunteers on holiday. The results can be used to identify and explore areas of volunteers' interest that are memorable, attractive, rewarding and sustainable. It would also provide in-depth information on the experiences of volunteer tourists for marketers to enhance their marketing activities. This study thus refocuses the discussion from how and why tourists search for volunteer experiences into an examination of their lived experiences.

Literature review

Tourist experience is one concept that is paradoxical in definition and has remained a contentious issue in academic literature. According to Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2007), tourist experience is a socially constructed term which connotes multiple interpretations from social, environmental and activity components of the overall experience. Jennings (2006) indicated that several writers have attempted to chronologically and temporally define the term "tourist experience". While Bigne and Andreu (2004) regard experience as events that engage individuals in a personal way, Smith (2003) defines experience as any sensation or knowledge acquisition resulting from a person's participation in activities. Craig-Smith and French (1994) identify three stages of experience as being anticipatory, experiential and reflective.

New terms are emerging to describe the experience of volunteer tourists. While Urry (1990) introduce the term "tourist gaze", Cary (2004) also suggested "tourist moment" in place of experience. It could, therefore, be deduced from the above that volunteer tourists' experience is an overall measure of the tourist product encountered by the tourists. As averred by Sharpley and Stone (2011), it is what the tourist experiences. In essence, experience is what makes the volunteer tourism product.

Benson (2009) iterates the lack of common language in terms of what the volunteer tourism experience entails. This researcher identifies that the majority of organisations in the volunteer tourism industry use the term "expedition" to define the experience while others used "volunteer trips" and "travel experience" to describe the experience. According to Coghlan (2007), researchers describe the volunteer tourism experience as a form of serious leisure, with a focus on learning and contributing to a worthwhile course.

In more concise terms, Wearing and Neil (2000) describe three aspects of the volunteer tourism experience. First, the volunteer tourism experience is a personal experience that incorporates the perception that it is chosen for its difference and involves intrinsic motivation. Second, the experience can potentially benefit the participant's life, as well as that of the host community. Third, meaning is given to the experience through social interaction which may involve a renegotiation of the person's identity.

Literature on volunteer tourists' experiences almost incontrovertibly suggests that experiences are positively memorable (Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012). Zahra and McIntosh (2007) however observe that volunteer tourism literature remains somewhat silent on the negative aspects of volunteer tourists' experiences. More broadly, scholarly literature highlights issues of frustration experienced within volunteer organisations rather than concerning the volunteer (Arai, 2000; Ellis, 1997). Boakye (2010) has also alluded that the longer stay by volunteers in a destination makes them vulnerable as targets for victimisation. These studies connote that volunteer tourists' experiences can be good or bad, positive or negative.

There are a number of theoretical models within the literature on tourists' experience. For example, Cohen (1979) proposed five modes of tourist experiences, notably recreational, diversional, experiential, experimental and existential. Le Bel et al. (2004) also conceptualized tourism experience as sensory (or physical), social, emotional and intellectual. The main limitation of adapting such conceptualisation is that volunteer experiences vary from context and content within which they occur and from person to person. Oh et al. (2007) developed a measurement instrument that applies Pine and Gilmore's (1999) four experience economy variables (education, entertainment, aesthetics and escapism). Caru and Cova (2003) however critique the experience economy phenomenon for its lack of a tangible measure to capture its underlying dimensions. Again, the experience economy concept as used by Oh et al. (2007) appears to be focused on leisure tourism, neglecting specific forms of tourism like volunteer tourism, in which case the products are arguably not staged.

Theoretical framework

To aid an understanding of volunteer tourists' experiences, four constructs (involvement, knowledge, hedonism, and social and cultural interaction) in the Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE) conceptualization were considered. Kim et al. (2012) define MTE as a tourism experience positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred. Caution is however given to this definition as it assumes that experiences are only positively memorable.

Regarding involvement, Kim (2013) states that people remember experiences which are personally relevant and closely related to their interests. These experiences are based on the planning and on-site activities undertaken by the individual. In the planning stage of a tourism experience, people often visualize themselves as being actually involved in the activity. To volunteer tourists, involvement in activities is almost a constant in their experiences as volunteer work is an integral travel motivation (Wearing, 2001).

Knowledge on the other hand includes responses such as "exploratory", "obtained knowledge" and "learned a new culture". For example, many people travel in response to the urge to acquire new knowledge and understanding of the destinations they visit (particularly as this pertains to geography, history, language and culture). In a study that sought to understand the essence of MTEs, Tung and Ritchie (2011) found that intellectual development was one of the most significant components of MTEs. Knowledge in the MTEs is similar to education (Oh et al., 2007) and intellectual (Le Bel et al., 2004).

According to Kim (2013), hedonic (pleasure) components of tourism and leisure activities have long been investigated by researchers. People seek enjoyment while consuming tourism products (experiences). Duman and Mattila (2005) identified that hedonism is a major aspect of tourism experiences. Hedonism thus typifies the touristic aspect of volunteer travel.

With respect to social and cultural interaction, Ryan (1998) notes that tourism experiences are co-created by involving people in experience-based situations. Volunteer tourists seek unique experience and learn different cultures as they have a closer contact with the local people to learn how the local people live and interact with their environment. Researchers including Kim (2013), Tung and Ritchie (2011) and Mittelberg and Palgi (2011), in their separate studies, observed that experiencing local culture and norms makes travelling more memorable.

One major limitation of the MTE conceptualization is the assumption that experiences are “positively memorable”. The literature on volunteer tourism is however replete with examples of negative experiences encountered by volunteers (Arai, 2000; Boakye, 2010; Ellis, 1997; Zahra & McIntosh, 2007). The authors therefore include negative or adverse experience to capture such responses.

Methodology

Ghana with a total land mass of 238,537 km² is located on the Atlantic coast of West Africa. The country is surrounded by three francophone countries: Burkina Faso to the north, Cote d’Ivoire to the west and Togo to the east. Ghana is a multi-party democracy state with a population of 24.4 million. Since the 1980s, tourism has been adopted as an engine of growth with the vision of making the country the tourist hub of West Africa. Ghana has many tourism resources: pristine beaches, rain forests, festivals, local culture and historical resources such as castles and forts along her coast. Three of these monuments (Cape Coast Castle, Elmina Castle and Fort St. Jago) have been designated world heritage monuments by the UNESCO (Akyeampong, 2007).

Ghana has a long history of contacts with Europe and America through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. As an off-shoot of the trade, many African-Americans regard Ghana as one of their “roots” and therefore visit the country regularly in search of their “roots”. Additionally, they visit to experience the sites from where their ancestors were taken to the New World. With a variety of options available to choose from, Ghana provides all the requirements of the typical African volunteering experience.

The study was based on a random sample of 336 volunteer tourists in Ghana. In the absence of formal statistics on volunteer tourists and volunteer-based organisations, volunteers were randomly selected from 38 volunteer organizations across the country. A list of volunteers was obtained from these identified volunteer organisations and the simple random sampling technique employed to select 60% of volunteers from each of the organisations. For selected volunteers who were not within immediate reach, the questionnaires were given to their coordinators for delivery and subsequent collection. This approach helped to reach volunteers regardless of their location in Ghana.

This study draws from data collected through questionnaire administration from 4 July to 30 August 2012. Earlier works of Oh et al. (2007), Le Bel et al. (2004), Kim et al. (2012) and Benson (2009) guided the formulation of the instrument. The instrument consisted of three sections – trip characteristics, lived experiences and socio-demographic characteristics. The first section focused on travel characteristics such as previous volunteer exposure, length of stay and travel party. The second section covered the experiences of volunteer tourists in Ghana through the use of open-ended questions. The open-ended approach was based on suggestion by Wearing (2001) that the best way to solicit such responses was from the volunteer’s own words. It also guided against

predisposing respondents to issues identified in the literature. The third section dealing with socio-demographic characteristics of respondents sought data on country of origin, age, marital status and education.

The questionnaire was pretested on a sample of twenty volunteer tourists in Cape Coast. This town was selected because it is the leading tourist destination in Ghana. The pre-test helped the researchers to assess the viability of the instrument after which necessary modifications were made. The seasonality of the volunteer product made it crucial to capture the data at the peak season between June and September. The questionnaires were in English based on the assumption that most of these volunteer tourists can read and write English. Though 410 instruments were administered, only 336 were suitable for analyses. Data collected from the field were analysed using the Statistical Product for Service Solutions (SPSS, version 16). χ^2 -test was employed to test relationships between experiences and respondents' profile.

Results

Profiling the respondents, it emerged that nearly two-thirds were females (69.3%). The age of the respondents ranged from 14 to 56. Regarding their marital status, an overwhelming majority of them were single (93.2%). Volunteers between the ages of 20 and 29 dominated the age category (49.7%). This was followed by volunteers below the age of 20. Approximately 66% of the respondents had attained tertiary education while 17% had high school education. There were also volunteers who had post graduate education (14%). Only few volunteers had basic education (3.2%). Nearly three-quarters of the volunteers (67.9%) were students. Europe contributed nearly half (49.7%) of the volunteers to Ghana while America contributed 38.1%.

Closely related to respondents' socio-demographic characteristics is their past volunteer travel exposure. The results indicated that approximately 52% of the respondents had no previous volunteer exposure. For those who had ever been involved in a volunteer tourism project, more than two-thirds had a single experience. Only 4.2% of the respondents indicated that they had more than two previous volunteer tourism experiences.

Experiences of volunteers in Ghana

Volunteer tourists are likely to have different social, cultural, educational and professional understandings of the term "experience". Experiences reported by volunteer tourists to Ghana were either positive or negative. On the whole, 86.5% of the volunteers mentioned that they had some sort of positive memorable experiences in the country. However, nearly 14% of the respondents indicated that they had negative experiences in the country. Specifically, five broad categories of experiences were identified (Table 1). The results indicate that more volunteers had social (26%), travel/recreational (23%), work (19%) and cultural (19%) experiences. The narrowest category was those who recounted having negative experiences in Ghana (14%).

Social experiences suggest as used in this study implies volunteers who recounted encountering the social lifestyle of Ghana. Volunteering in Ghana thus equips individual with the social skills and habits necessary for participating within their own societies. These experiences are related to meeting and interacting with new people and learning the social norms prevailing in the local communities. Travel and recreational experience

Table 1. Experiences of volunteer tourists in Ghana.

Experience domain	Examples of volunteers' experience	Frequency	Percent	Total (%)
Social experience	Friendly interaction	118	78.7	25.6
	Meeting new people	32	21.3	
Travel/recreational elements	Visiting attractions/travelling	87	64.9	22.8
	Enjoy the scenery	39	29.1	
Work experience	Enjoy taxi/trotro ride	8	6.0	19.2
	Education of community	66	58.4	
	Career exposure/experience	24	21.2	
Cultural experience	Helping with projects	23	20.4	18.9
	Learning new culture	51	46.0	
	Trying out new food	41	36.9	
	Learning music and dance	12	10.8	
Negative experience	Learning new language	7	6.3	13.5
	Harassment/theft	32	40.5	
	Poor social facilities	13	16.5	
	Difficult travel conditions	9	11.4	
	Use of substandard facilities	9	11.4	
	Falling ill/malaria	5	6.3	
	Undue lateness	5	6.3	
	Witnessed unpleasant event	4	5.1	
Difficult working conditions	2	2.5		
Total		587 ^a		100.0

^aFrequency exceeds 336 because of multiple responses.

refers to the hedonic and leisure aspects of volunteer tourism. The second experience, travel and recreational experiences were memorable to volunteers who appeared to have consumed the tourism attributes of Ghana. This includes visiting attractions, beaches or engaged in some form of outdoor leisure activity. Work experiences refer to issues that arose from actual participation in volunteer work. Work experiences were recounted by volunteers whose memorable experiences involved offering labour to their host communities or organizations. Work experiences were recounted by volunteers who worked in orphanages, creating public awareness or help to undertake some project in the community they volunteered. Cultural experience was common to volunteers who recounted some form of cultural learning in the host communities. Volunteers regard cultural experiences as something that borders on the art and heritage of the country. Such instances included observing or partaking in, rituals, festival cuisine, dance or music.

Volunteers' experiences by socio-demographic characteristics

As a socially constructed term, experience is subject to multiple interpretations from social, cultural, travel and recreational viewpoints. χ^2 statistics was used in assessing the association between volunteers' experience and their socio-demographic characteristics as presented in Table 2. The test revealed that no significant association existed between volunteers' experience and sex ($p = 0.109$). Slightly more males were involved in social related experiences (32%) than females (25%). Equally, about 26% of males mentioned having travel and recreational related experiences as against 22% of females. The females

Table 2. Experiences of volunteers by socio-demographic characteristics.

Background characteristics	Experiences					χ^2 Statistic (<i>p</i> -value)
	Work (%)	Social (%)	Cultural (%)	Travel and recreational (%)	Negative (%)	
Gender						
Male	20.3	31.8	14.9	25.7	7.3	0.109
Female	20.3	24.7	19.7	21.6	13.7	
Age						
< 20	24.2	25.2	17.6	20.7	12.3	0.362
20–29	16.6	27.7	19.0	26.0	10.7	
30 plus	21.2	30.3	18.2	12.1	18.2	
Marital status						
Married	17.9	23.1	28.2	17.9	12.9	0.552
Unmarried	20.5	27.0	17.5	23.2	11.8	
Highest education						
Basic	11.1	22.2	27.8	16.7	22.2	0.315
High school	33.3	22.7	13.6	21.2	9.2	
College/ university	18.7	28.5	17.7	23.6	11.5	
Post graduate	18.3	23.2	23.2	22.0	13.3	
Place of origin						
Africa	14.3	21.4	35.7	14.3	14.3	0.532
Europe	19.4	29.6	16.6	23.3	11.1	
America	22.4	21.4	18.9	23.5	13.8	
Asia	11.1	36.1	25.0	19.4	8.3	
Oceania	35.7	28.6	7.1	21.4	7.1	

Note: Significant at $p \leq 0.05$.

were, however, observed to have more of cultural (20%) and negative (14%) experiences than males (15% and 7.3% respectively) (Table 2).

Similarly, no significant association was found between volunteer tourists' experience and age ($p = 0.362$). It was observed that the social experiences expressed by volunteers seemed to increase with age (<20 = 25%, 20–29 = 28%, 30 plus = 30%). Volunteers between the ages of 20 and 29 expressed more travel and recreational experiences (26% and 19% respectively) than those less than 20 years (20%) and above 30 years (17.5%). Younger volunteers (<20 years) appeared to have more work related experiences than those above 30 years. Conversely, social experiences were higher among volunteers above 29 years.

Again, no significant association was noted between volunteers experience and marital status ($p = 0.552$). However, social (27%), work (21%) and travel (23%) experiences were more prevalent among single volunteer tourists than their married counterparts (23%, 18% and 18%, respectively). Contrarily, cultural (28%) and negative (13%) experiences were popular among married volunteer tourists in Ghana.

There was no significant relationship in the experiences of volunteers and their educational attainment ($p = 0.315$). Social, travel and recreational experiences were noted to be popular among respondents who had college/university level education. In contrast, work experiences were most noted among high school volunteers (33%). It was also observed that though volunteers with basic level education encountered more cultural experiences, they also had more negative experiences (22%). Travel and recreational experiences within the country were common among college/university volunteers (24%).

As with the above, a significant relationship was not established between respondents' experiences and their place of origin ($p = 0.532$). However, the study revealed that work-related experiences (36%) and social experiences (29%) were dominant among volunteers from Oceania while volunteers from Asia experienced more social (36%) and cultural (25%) encounters. American volunteers were more oriented towards social (22.4%) and travel and recreational experiences (24%). Those from Europe mentioned having more of social encounters (30%). For volunteer tourists from Africa, culture was top among their experiences.

Volunteers' experiences by travel characteristics

In further exploring the experiences of volunteer tourists, the χ^2 -test was performed in terms of volunteer tourists' experiences and travel-related characteristic of the participants. Statistically significant associations were observed among the experiences of volunteer tourists and their schooling status ($p = 0.009$), length of stay ($p = 0.008$) and past volunteer travel exposure ($p = 0.011$) (see Table 3).

A significant association was established between experiences and schooling status of volunteers ($p = 0.009$). Student volunteers seemed to have more work (23%), travel (24%) and negative (13%) experiences than non-students (15%, 20% and 9% respectively). Their non-student counterparts, on the other hand, cited social (30%) and cultural experiences (25.5%).

There was no significant association between volunteers' experiences and past travel experience ($p = 0.920$). Repeat visitors reported having social (27%) and travel and recreational experiences (24%). Even though nearly the same proportion of both first-time and repeat visitors had social experiences, negative experiences were more prominent among first-time visitors (12%) than repeat visitors (7%). The association between the experiences of volunteers and duration of stay was statistically significant ($p = 0.008$). For volunteers who spent less than one month in the country, social (25%) and work experiences (24%) were most memorable to them. Similarly, those who spent between 1 and 3 months

Table 3. Experiences of volunteers by travel characteristics.

Background characteristics	Experiences					χ^2 statistic (<i>p</i> -value)
	Work (%)	Social (%)	Cultural (%)	Travel and recreational (%)	Negative (%)	
Schooling status						
Student volunteer	22.7	25.0	14.9	24.2	13.2	0.009*
Non-student volunteer	15.2	30.3	25.5	20.0	9.0	
Travel experience						
First-time visitor	20.1	26.7	18.2	22.7	12.3	0.920
Repeat visitor	22.0	26.8	19.5	24.4	7.3	
Duration of stay						
Less than 1 month	24.2	24.6	17.6	21.1	12.5	0.008*
1–3 months	16.7	28.5	19.4	27.4	8.1	
4 months plus	7.9	34.2	18.4	13.2	26.3	
Past volunteer trips						
None	24.5	27.5	16.6	18.5	12.8	0.011*
One time	14.9	26.1	18.5	29.7	10.8	
Two plus	23.1	23.1	34.6	7.7	11.5	

Note: Significant at $p \leq 0.05$

noted travel and recreational experiences (27.4%) as well as social experiences (29%) to be very important to them. Social (34%) and negative experiences (26%) were however most noted among volunteers who spent 4 months and above in the country.

Statistically significant association was also established between respondents' experiences and past volunteer travel ($p = 0.011$). Volunteers who had no prior exposure to volunteerism indicated that social (28%), work (25%) and travel and recreational experiences (19%) were their most memorable experiences. For those who had a single previous exposure, travel and recreation (30%) as well as social experiences (26%) were common among them. Culture (35%) and work-related experiences (23%) were a common denominator among participants who had two or more previous exposures.

Discussion

An individual's previous exposure in travel is an important asset in subsequent travel arrangements. Experienced travellers, for example, spend less time seeking travel information and making accommodation arrangement. On the whole, slightly more than half of the volunteer tourists who took part in the study had no prior exposure to any international volunteer-related activity.

For many of the volunteer tourists who visit Ghana, the outcome of their experiences could be described as positively memorable. The experiences expressed by volunteer tourists in Ghana centralised on the positive outcome of their visits. Though there were pockets of negative experiences reported by the respondents, there is an overall indication that their volunteering encounter in the country was indeed memorable.

The five categories of experiences identified with international volunteer tourists to Ghana are consistent with studies that suggest that experiences of volunteer tourists are varied (Archer & Wearing, 2003; Higham & Carr, 2003). Three of the four constructs (involvement, hedonism and socio-cultural interaction) in the MTE conceptualization were related to those identified in the findings of this paper. The constructs unique to the Ghanaian context included social, cultural (socio-cultural interaction), travel and recreational (hedonic) and work (involvement). Though knowledge as a construct in the MTE was not explicit in the findings of this paper, it was manifested in cultural attributes such as learning new languages, music and dance and food. Kim (2013) notes that local culture and norms are memorable for volunteers. The findings of Barbieri, Santos, and Katsube (2012) equally indicate that cultural experiences were memorable among volunteer tourists in Rwanda.

The results of this study reveal that the opportunity to have social interactions with members of the local community was paramount in their memorable tourism experiences. Indeed, Singh (2004) and Stoddart and Rogerson (2004) have concluded that volunteer tourists are different from other tourists as they pursue a close person-to-person interaction with the host community. Such close contact with local communities provide an understanding of the social nature of people and how sociality affects volunteer tourists before, during and after their volunteer experience (DeSocio, 2005). The literature confirms that some intrinsic benefits volunteer tourists experience stem from their close interaction with local people (Barbieri et al. 2012; Raymond & Hall, 2008; Singh, 2004; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004; Wearing, 2001; Zahra & McIntosh, 2007). While younger volunteer tourists were more interested in work related experiences, their older counterparts (30 years plus) who were more likely to be in the working class regarded their experiences to be socially tailored. Soderman and Snead (2008) found that among other

reasons, career development and skill learning are common among young volunteers. Volunteer tourism for many young people is an avenue for gaining working experience and developing their skills in a chosen career. For student volunteers, they are graded as part of their academic assessment (Holmes & Smith, 2009). For older volunteers, building a career resume may not be a key interest.

Finally, rather unique to this study is that participants reported having negative encounters during their trip. Various forms of harassment including begging, theft, threats, sexual harassment and being called names were but few of the negative responses. In Ghana, one of the principal ways locals distinguish foreigners is by their skin colour. It is therefore not uncommon for a fair-coloured person walking along the street to be called “obroni” (white) regardless of nationality. This may be extended to local salesmen discriminating in giving “obroni” prices to foreigners. The study also seems to reinforce the view that females are usually the targets of such harassments (Brown, 1999). As one of the respondents put it:

Travelling around the country [Ghana], the people are sociable; [but] being a white girl, it is not easy around Ghanaian men, being hassled constantly to buy things.

Volunteer tourists are noted to spend longer duration at their destination (TRAM, 2008). This study suggests that the longer stay in the country by volunteers translates into negative experiences thus confirming the view by Boakye (2010) that longer duration spent by volunteers makes them more predisposed to becoming the target of victimization.

Conclusion and implications

This study set out to investigate the experiences of volunteer tourists to Ghana. The study has offered a different perspective of volunteer tourists’ experiences by conceptualizing five domains of experience, notably social, cultural, travel and recreational, work and negative. The study re-enforced the view that experiences of volunteer tourists are mixed, varied and subject to multiple interpretations. While most volunteer tourism experiences are positively memorable, an exceptional finding of this study is that negative encounters are predominant among first-time visitors, long-stay volunteers as well as novices.

The research supports the growing body of literature which concludes that socio-demographic characteristics including gender, marital status, age, educational attainment and origin are important factors influencing experiences of volunteer tourists. In terms of socio-demographics, it is more probable for a female volunteer tourist in Ghana to encounter negative experiences. The study also argues that certain variables, including schooling status, travel duration and number of previous travels are common denominators influencing the experience of volunteers.

Understanding volunteers’ experiences along the five dimensions explored will enable marketers and planners to better design marketing and promotional strategies. In the face of increasing competition, destination marketers are under greater pressure to understand the experiences of travel patrons. Ghana’s destination marketers in their promotional bid should emphasise the social, tourism, work and cultural values of volunteerism. Overall, social experience was found to be the most important construct in understanding volunteers’ experiences in Ghana. It is imperative for marketers to focus on creating social legitimacy among volunteers and locals.

While the findings of this research further expand the understanding of volunteer tourists’ experiences, it is novel that experiences are mixed, expressed positively and negatively. The authors find that memorable experiences are not always pleasurable

experiences. This opposes the conclusion by Kim et al. (2012) that experiences are positively memorable. The managerial implication of this result is that volunteer organizations and destination marketers ought to consider the importance of evaluating volunteers' experience during their stay in the country. The misgivings expressed about the organisation of volunteer placements have implications for regulatory and control agencies in Ghana. For example, the Department of Social Welfare and the Tourism Ministry need to be strengthened if Ghana is to remain competitive and attractive as a key volunteer destination. Similarly, harassment of volunteer tourists is a critical issue which requires the attention of volunteer facilitators and the security services at attractions and communities. Heuman (2005) proposes increasing the role of local community members in providing security to ensure the safety of volunteers.

The study was limited by the absence of non-institutional volunteer tourists. Volunteers involved in the study were identified through volunteer based organisations and this implies that results reflected only institutional volunteers. There are still grey areas with the exploration of experience within the volunteer tourism sub-sector. Future research on volunteer experiences should therefore involve a dichotomy of institutional and non-institutional volunteers. While the implications of this paper may be most useful for volunteer tourism organisations and marketers, there is still the need for subsequent investigations into the roles such experiences have on other important variables such as satisfaction and destination loyalty.

Note

1. Email: amuquandoh@yahoo.co.uk

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