

# Designing a Model of Commercial Voluntourism Services

Minna Tunkkari-Eskelinen and Rositsa Röntynen

Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences, Finland

[minna.tunkkari-eskelinen@jamk.fi](mailto:minna.tunkkari-eskelinen@jamk.fi)

[rositsa.rontynen@jamk.fi](mailto:rositsa.rontynen@jamk.fi)

**Abstract:** Travelers nowadays increasingly seek destinations and activities through which they can immerse themselves in the local culture as a contrary to mass tourism and inauthentic tourist attractions. This has led to the reconsideration of tourism types and other activity involving travelling, such as voluntourism or volunteering away from home, which has earlier been predominantly seen as volunteering rather than tourism. Digitalization has brought opportunities for new actors to provide such services. Apart from the non-commercial activity, volunteering travellers are often willing to pay to enter the authentic scene and act together with and in benefit of the locals. Previous research has already established that Finland has the potential to provide a variety of experiences desired by voluntourists, and spontaneously emerging, uncoordinated voluntourism activity exists in the country. This activity, however, differs from voluntourism in other parts of the world and attracts different tourists. To be able to systematically design voluntourism activity as commercial tourism products, the influence of multiple factors defining visitor's choice needs to be taken into consideration and understood. This paper aims at identifying the major factors and producing a model of conceptualizing commercial voluntourism services. The paper uses qualitative research data which consists of 70 global actors' websites in total. Content analysis and quantifying is used. The most typical elements of commercial concepts are identified, and the model for designing a concept is created. The found elements are as follows: destination, significance and amount of voluntary work, traveller's motives, duration of trip, need of qualification. The model shows that these elements work as dichotomy indicators. The element could be considered as "either – or" type of choice, but some activity could also be situated in between the extremes. For example, the duration of a trip can vary from one day to one year, but some trips' duration can be less than the maximum and more than the minimum. The model promotes further voluntourism development in the Nordic countries such as Finland but could potentially be used even more broadly. The results reveal the importance of understanding the customer insight, and further steps should include testing of products designed according to the suggested model and studying customer reviews from destinations in the Nordic countries.

**Keywords:** Voluntourism, Conceptual model, Finland, Live like a local

---

## 1. Introduction

As a beginning of this paper, we introduce the urge for authenticity, transformation, and regeneration in tourism, as well as how voluntourism could be a tool for accomplishing them. We briefly present what we know about voluntourism and its commercial side, and why better planning is needed for successful commercial voluntourism activity. Digitalization's role in voluntourism product supply is also discussed.

### 1.1 The new Needs of Contemporary Tourists

Mass tourism and overexploitation of destinations have turned tourism from serendipity to zemblanity phenomenon (Ajoon & Rao 2020). Conventional tourism is perceived as "good for the economy" but "very harmful" for natural and cultural environments, as well as for the local community, habits, and traditions. Destinations try to regain balance through restricting the number of tourists or encouraging tourism activity in less popular areas. (Glazyrina 2018)

Tourists taking interest and concern with the impact of their travelling on sustainability are referred to by Visit Finland, the state-owned tourism promotion organization of Finland, as modern humanists, and more recently as authentic lifestyle seekers (Glazyrina 2018). Rather than following a trodden tourism path, travellers wish to experience quotidian life close to locals, something truly authentic. This is often referred to as the aim to "live like a local" while travelling, immersing oneself in the local culture and potentially experiencing something unique and unforgettable (Live Like a Local Abroad 2019). There are more benefits to being close and in interaction with the local community when travelling. A survey conducted in 2022 discovered that when having a local guide U.S. tourists recognize the value of visiting places they wouldn't otherwise find, avoiding dangerous areas, and decreasing the risk of overpaying (Turner 2022).

Travellers are demanding authenticity not only for the adventure and assurance it offers, but also to experience fulfilment and learn new (Das 2018). While personal enlightenment and inner discovery have a history of association with travelling, recently transformational travel has been enlisted as one of the most significant trends of future travel (Melo, Richards & Smith 2021). The substantial paradigm shift is, however, the introduction of regenerative tourism as a further step of sustainability. The idea of regenerative travel is to

contribute to positive impact and improvement of tourism practices, but not by transforming the traveller but rather the destination, to see the world not as a machine being operated from outside but rather as a living organism which is capable of self-generating (Pollock 2019).

## **1.2 Characteristics of Voluntourism and its Commercial Deposit**

In our previous research we have discovered that voluntourism has a stained reputation globally due to the overexploitation of Westerners' willingness to help, whether it is motivated by altruism or white saviourism, and of the vulnerable position of different society groups in developing countries, being them children, women, farmers, or others, leading to the heavy and malicious commoditization of voluntary work (Röntynen 2022). On the other hand, in countries like Finland, far away from such problematics, we found voluntourism to be almost completely unknown as a term, although volunteer activity involving travellers is taking place continually. The term "voluntourism" is often replaced due to the lack of knowledge, the constraining requirements of funding acquisition, as a means of differentiation from the competition, or just to fit an organisation's main activity, which makes it extremely difficult to concentrate the development effort for this type of tourism. Often the international volunteering intermediary organizations ignore as a whole that the volunteer exchange conducted by them involves tourism aspects. (Röntynen & Tunkkari-Eskelinen 2022.)

Voluntourism could be redefined to serve the contemporary needs of travellers and destinations. This type of tourism could be a reckoned tool of accomplishing the goals both of transformational and regenerative travel because it allows the interaction of the traveller with local community, the cultural exchange, the learning of new skills, but also the contribution to the sustainability and evolvement of the destination, the minimization of traveller's footprint and the creation of positive handprint – all this enabled by the co-creation between travellers and locals (Röntynen & Tunkkari-Eskelinen 2022). In order to build sustainable voluntourism without the problems of the past, it should be examined in a more versatile way, and, most importantly, the phenomenon of its commercialization should be studied unbiasedly to enable planned and systematic activity.

Commercialization is often seen in tourism literature as the opposite of authenticity, however, instead of destroying the meaning of a culture-related tourism product sometimes it changes or enriches its meaning (Cohen 1988). In voluntourism, commercialization is undeniable and unavoidable. It is rooted in the fact that tourism is an economic phenomenon. Unlike in other types of tourism, in voluntourism there is a clash of values and a deep polarization between the commercial nature of tourism and the unselfish standpoint of volunteering. The mechanism of them both working together is not black and white. (Röntynen 2022.)

Generally, there are three types of voluntourism according to the level of commercialization: non-commercial, split, and commercial. However, even in its non-commercial extreme voluntourism involves some monetary transactions: the costs of volunteers travelling and staying at a destination are covered by participation fees (of volunteers, hosts, or both) or external funding. Also, even if the trip is mediated by a volunteer association or a digital platform and not a travel agent, the volunteers' experience is defined by touristic features such as getting acquainted to the local places and culture, visiting sights and events, having touristic costs for food, equipment rental, and transportation because of being in an environment away from home. (Röntynen 2022.)

In this paper we focus on the commercial form of voluntourism where the trip including volunteering activities is being presented and sold as a trip package. Volunteering and voluntourism have been researched mainly focusing on volunteer's motivation (see e.g., Lopes, Gorete & Poças 2022; Yeung 2004). Understanding one's motivation for volunteering, however, is not enough to successfully plan volunteering activities, let alone tourism services. To gain a deeper understanding, our research aims at identifying other factors - elements of the service – which affect customer's decision for undertaking a particular volunteering trip.

## **1.3 Digitalization and Global Supply as an Opportunity for New Destinations**

Historically voluntourism has focused on western volunteers visiting developing countries in Asia and Africa (Röntynen 2022). More recently, other countries like Australia and Iceland have joined the bucketlist of voluntourists – not for developmental reasons but to experience cultural exchange or diminish the cost of travelling to remote destinations (see e.g., Gorga 2021; Care Iceland NGO n.d.). Digitalization has introduced platform economy in the context of globalization (Enachi & Enachi 2020) and matchmaking platforms have broadened the horizons of voluntourism even more, to global dimensions. Some of the most popular voluntourism platforms are Workaway, Wwoof, HelpX (Pitkänen 2020), which by now serve mainly non-profit voluntourism. This kind of platforms allow more unconventional volunteering destinations, such as Finland and other Nordic countries, to enter the global supply.

## 2. Research Methods

The qualitative research data consists of 70 global actors' websites in total. The websites were chosen based on search words 'volunteering tourism', 'voluntourism', 'volunteering + tourism' in google commercial context (not Google scholar).

The data is read through several times following the criteria of content analysis. The factors (later they are called dimensions in voluntourism content matter) were identified as categories with the help of quantifying analysis method. Categories were found in data driven process without any theoretical frame in use. It could be said demonstrating the grounded theory approach in analysing the data (Strauss & Corbin 1990). The content of the categories was counted and validated in this matter. The categories reflect the factors or dimensions in the final model of this research.

## 3. Findings

In the operating models of voluntourism, certain elements are emphasized, within which there is measurable variation from side to side according to customer choices. These elements are examined in Figure 1, which emerged as a summary of the analyses carried out. The elements identified to determine the operating model are presented as measurement units of a dichotomous scale. A dichotomous scale means that the element has extremes that determine the choices, and between them there are different selectable variations of the options. In this way, individual action patterns in different voluntourism activities are formed as a spider web pattern (Figures 2 and 3).

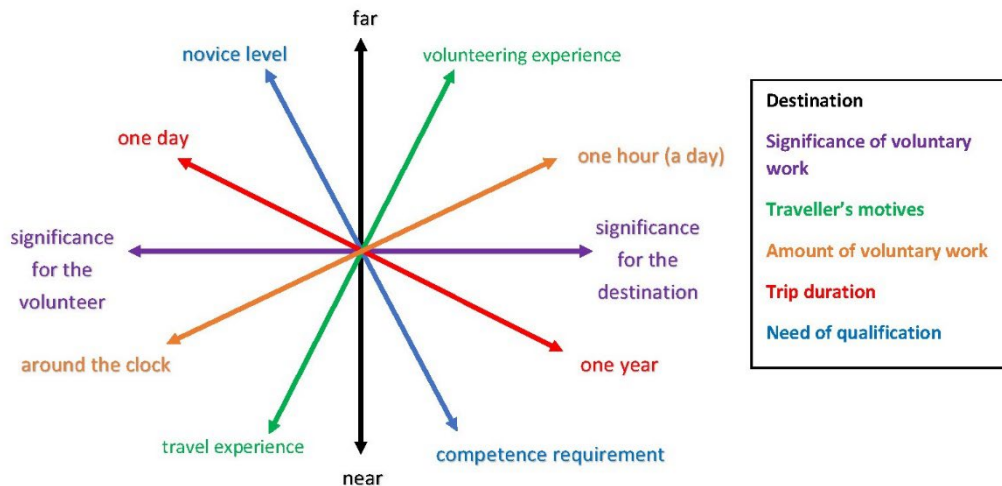


Figure 1: A Model of Elements Influencing Traveller's Choice of Voluntourism Destination and Activity

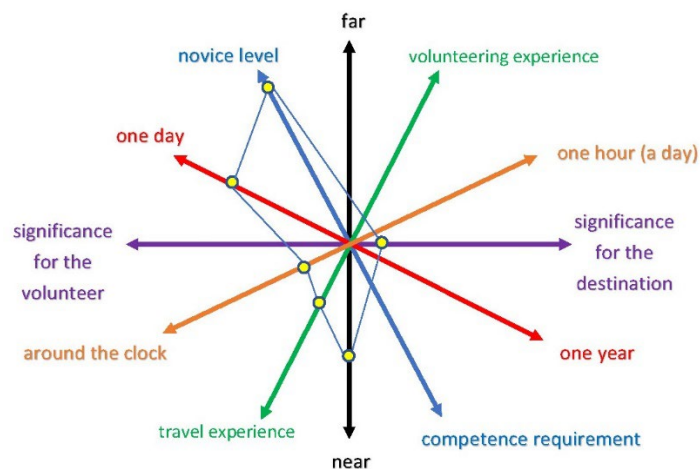
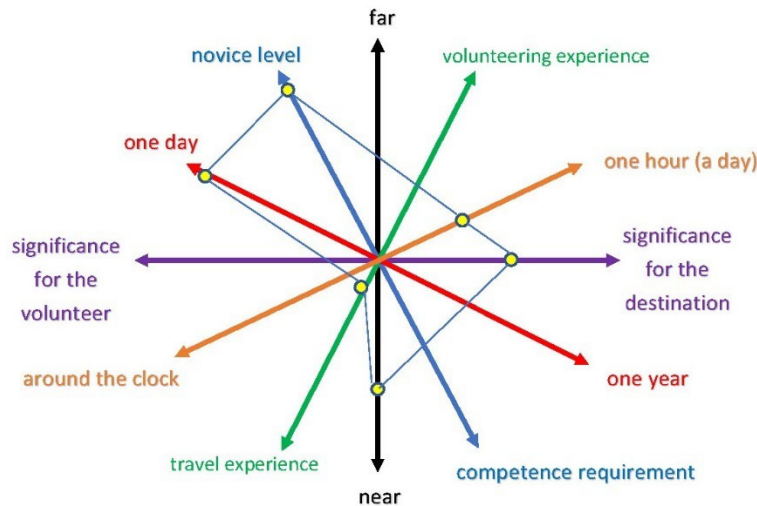


Figure 2: Example of Evaluation of Customer's Choices by the Spider Web Model. Product: Finnish Shepherd's Weeks



**Figure 3: Example of Evaluation of Customer's Choices by the Spider Web Model. Product: Domestic Animal Protection Volunteering Trip in Finland**

In voluntourism, the *trip destination* can correspond to the attraction factors of the destination identified by tourism, or it can represent a place that is considered completely unknown. Examples of travel destinations identified in voluntourism are development cooperation destinations on the African continent, such as Ethiopia, destinations located in maritime areas known for nature conservation, such as Indonesia, and destinations related to animal husbandry in Asia, such as Thailand. (Volunteer Abroad Made Easy n.d.) The destination of the trip is closely linked to the traveller's motive for choosing the form of volunteering travel.

The voluntary work itself, its content and nature are a significant part of the interest in voluntourism and the lifeblood of its manifestation. Voluntary work can be classified using larger titles or themes, but it is so-called qualitative information. The *significance of voluntary work*, on the one hand, for the traveller, and on the other hand, for the object of its production, decisively helps to describe the offer of versatile voluntary work as one element of the model. For example, the work tasks in the animal operating environments can be an activity that creates a great transformative experience for one traveller, while for others the work task could be similar to their quotidian life, thus bringing more regenerative benefits for the destination.

Voluntourism is often recognized by the *traveller's motive*. The motive is best understood when using the positioning of doing voluntary work as primary or secondary activity of one's trip. A voluntourist either chooses a travel destination according to what kind of voluntary work is available there, or looks for a voluntary work opportunity in the destination of choice. The studies talk about an altruistic form of voluntourism, where the travellers want to offer their contribution for the benefit of others and only secondarily to pursue the benefit of their own travelling. The other extreme of voluntourism is the traveller's motive, where one aims at the intended travel destination and looks at the possibility of compensating travel-related expenses, such as accommodation or meals, or the footprint of one's travel by doing a small-scale activity at the destination in return.

The *amount of volunteer work* during the trip is often up to the traveller himself, especially when the trip is planned as part of the primary motive for tourism. The amount of work done can be measured in terms of hours per day, even if it is spread over several days with different daily durations. The daily schedule of the voluntary work with the orphaned animals shows that there is a programmed day, including daily availability for work even around the clock (Figure 4). At the end of the work effort, the voluntourist gets to meet peers and participates, for example, in some evening program in accordance with the local culture. In the presented program, there is less time for that than for volunteering.

06AM Wake Up & Make Bottles for baby baboons  
07AM Breakfast  
08AM Enclosure Cleaning  
10AM Bottle/food preparation  
11AM Nursery supervision of youngest orphans  
12PM Lunch  
01PM Enrichment  
02PM Nursery supervision of youngest orphans  
03PM Bottle/food preparation  
04PM Cleaning of Milk Kitchen & Caring for Chickens  
05PM Playtime with the youngest orphans along the banks of the Olifants River  
5/6PM Your day is done! Time to shower and hang out with other volunteers at the River  
06PM Dinner! A great time to catch up with everyone and then get ready to start another day!

**Figure 4: An Example of a Daily Program at Sites Working With Orphaned Animals (Volunteer Abroad Made Easy n.d.)**

The *duration of the trip* is typically from a single day to even a whole year. Months long voluntourism trip is typical for the traveller's contemplation stage of life offering time for reflection. According to Holmes and Smith (2009), during a two-week trip, a few days are used for voluntary work. The entire time at the destination or most of it is used for voluntary tasks. Some of the sites require the volunteer to commit to a sufficiently long period of voluntary work because of the preliminary stage of orientation. For example, a farm in Wellsville requires a stay of at least four weeks, unless the applicant has special construction or engineering skills (Host 7424 n.d.).

The *need for competence* of the volunteering activity can be evaluated to measure the competence, knowledge or skill and experience required by the tasks. Some voluntary work in the destination may be intended for a limited target group. An example of this is a person doing teaching or nursing work in their home country, who can go to a destination where exactly these skills are needed to perform the voluntary work. In some sites, the volunteer is required to have experience or training suitable for the task, but those who want to volunteer can also find sites and tasks online, in which it is enough to get acquainted to the tasks onsite. Volunteering could also be something that does not require special skills or specific conditions to perform it. For example, cleaning or forest thinning work can suit everyone, as long as basic rules are established as a start.

#### **4. Discussion and Recommendations**

This paper searched for commercializing solution in voluntourism. The model resulted from the website analysis is suitable not only for stakeholders' service design activities but also explaining the type of tourism in which the customer is actively fulfilling the content of his/her trip. It is somewhat rare to choose a tourism destination based on how one could contribute with the professional competence. Voluntourist requires this type of planning, and it is why the model differs from other listings for the commercial purposes.

As Enachi & Enachi (2020) mentioned, platform economy is appeared in voluntourism in the context of globalization and matchmaking. The model as an outcome of this research is also fruitful in this matter. The customer can choose service options that have been created based on the model dimensions. The search could be easier when using the dimensions as criteria, and therefore it is suggested applying in matchmaking platform context.

#### **References**

- Ajoon, E., & Rao, Y. (2020) "A study on consciousness of young travelers towards regenerative tourism: with reference to Puducherry", *Journal of Tourism Economics and Applied Research*, 4(1). [online] <http://jitear.uoctourism.com/publication/2020volume1/regenerativetourism.pdf>.  
Care Iceland NGO (n.d.) *Worldpackers*, [online], <https://www.worldpackers.com/locations/care-iceland-ngo>.

- Cohen, E. (1988) "Authenticity and commoditization in tourism", *Annals of Tourism Research*, 15(3), pp. 371-386, ISSN 0160-7383.
- Das, S. (2018) "Destination future: Trends and predictions for travel & hospitality", [online], <http://www.forbesindia.com/blog/alibaba/destination-future-trends-and-predictions-for-travel-hospitality/>.
- Enachi, C. M. & Enachi, M. E. (2020) "The Rise of Platform Economy in the Context of Globalization. Challenges and Opportunities", *Economic Insights – Trends and Challenges*, 9 (3), pp. 39-46.
- Glazyrina, M. (2018) "Visit Finland Segmentation Study 2017 – From Modern Humanists to Authentic Lifestyle Seekers", Kajaani University of Applied Sciences, [online], <https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:amk-2018082414642>.
- Gorga, E. (2021) "Why Volunteer in Australia?", *Goa Abroad*, [online], <https://www.goabroad.com/articles/volunteer-abroad/why-volunteer-australia>.
- Holmes, K. & Smith, K. (2009) "Managing volunteers in tourism", *Attractions, destinations and events*, Elsevier, Oxford.
- Host 7424 (n.d.) Wwoof USA, [online], <https://wwoofusa.org/user/7424>.
- Live Like a Local Abroad (2019) *What It Means to Live Like a Local*, [online] <https://www.livelikealocalabroad.com/what-live-like-local-abroad/>.
- Lopes, M., Gorete, D. & Poças, S. (2022) "Can Volunteer Tourism be a sub-segment of Wellness Tourism?", *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Tourism Research, 2022*, pp. 208-215.
- Melo, C., Richards, G. & Smith, M.K. (2021) "Transformational Tourism Experiences: The Communication of Service Providers", *Impact of New Media in Tourism*, Hershey, PA: IGI Global, pp. 210-233.
- Pitkänen, A. (2020) "Vapaaehtoismatkailusta elinvoimaa Keski-Suomeen? Hankesuunnitteluprosessi", *Jyväskylän University of Applied Sciences*, Jyväskylä, Finland, [online], <https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:amk-2020102021453>.
- Pollock, A. (2019) "Flourishing beyond sustainability", *ETC Workshop in Krakow*, pp. 1-10, [online], [https://etc-corporate.org/uploads/06022019\\_Anna\\_Pollock\\_ETCKrakow\\_Keynote.pdf](https://etc-corporate.org/uploads/06022019_Anna_Pollock_ETCKrakow_Keynote.pdf).
- Röntynen R. (2022) "Voluntourism in Finland: between profitability and public benefit", *Special issues in responsible tourism*, Vol. 2, pp. 56-81. Jyväskylän ammattikorkeakoulu.
- Röntynen, R. & Tunkkari-Eskelinen, M. (2022) "The Potential of Voluntourism in Central Finland", *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Tourism Research, 2022*, pp. 361-369.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. 1991. *Basics of Qualitative Research; Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (3rd edition). London: Sage Publications.
- Turner, M. (2022) "Survey: Travelers Want to Experience Destinations as Locals, Crave More Authenticity", *Travel Agent Central*, [online], <https://www.travelagentcentral.com/your-business/survey-travelers-want-experience-destinations-locals-crave-more-authenticity>.
- Volunteering Abroad Made Easy (n.d.) *Volunteer World*, [online], <https://www.volunteerworld.com/en>.
- Yeung, A. B. (2004) "The Octagon Model of Volunteer Motivation: Results of a Phenomenological Analysis." *Voluntas. International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, Vol 15, pp. 21–47.