



Constraints of international volunteering: A study of volunteer tourists to Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The volunteer tourism market consists of individuals with different and specific needs. An often overlooked area in many volunteer tourism studies however remains the constraints of these travel patrons. Though studies have addressed the importance of motivations and experiences, the challenges faced by volunteers provide valuable input to understanding the volunteer holiday market and its potential for repeat visit. This paper adopts the leisure constraint theory in exploring the constraints of volunteer tourists to Ghana. A random sample of 336 volunteer tourists revealed that organizational, structural, interpersonal, and work related constraints are the main areas of constraints to volunteering. These constraints were related to education, schooling status, past volunteer experience, and travel party size.

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1. Introduction

With its growth and associated benefits, the development of volunteer tourism in any economy is welcoming. There are currently a plethora of NGOs, charity bodies, and tour operators offering volunteer placements (Otoo, 2013; Otoo & Amuquandoh, 2014a; Tomazos & Butler, 2010). At the same time, recent studies caution the development of this tourism sub-sector. Wearing (2001) warns of the danger of growing number of profit oriented organizations offering volunteer packages, arguing that volunteerism is entering a phase of commercialization. The consequences of such development are reflected in misfit of jobs and skills, inability of projects to meet community needs, inflow of inexperienced and unqualified labor, and discontinued projects.

Clary, Snyder, and Stukas (1996) highlight the difficulty in volunteering as people have to overcome a number of constraints to become volunteers. Even at destinations, volunteers encounter series of constraints in adapting to newer environments and cultures. Such constraints include time and space constraints (Keith & Schafer, 2002; Sévigny, Dumont, Cohen, & Frappier, 2010), structural constraints (Gage & Thapa, 2012), budgetary constraints (Andreoni, 1990; Segal & Weisbrod, 2002), and organizational constraints (Handy, 2005).

Though earlier studies have focused on volunteers' motivations (Chen & Chen, 2011; Otoo & Amuquandoh, 2014b), researchers have begun to recognize that a wider consideration of constraints may lead to a better understanding of motivations, decision-making, destination

image, and destination choice (Gage & Thapa, 2012; Witt & Wright, 1992). There is the need to shift focus from the reasons people volunteer to understanding their actual needs within the host communities as these have effects on repeat visit and destination loyalty (Kottler, 1997; Wearing, 2001). Gage and Thapa (2012) concur that though studies exist on constraints in general, there has been paucity of research with respect to constraints in volunteer tourism. This study therefore examines the constraints associated with volunteering in Ghana. The study further explores the influence of socio-demographic and travel variables on these constraints.

As an emerging market segment in the tourism sector, it is important to identify and explore the constraints of international volunteer tourists. As put by Kotler and Andreasen (2000), recruiting volunteers requires getting to know the needs of the target audiences. Such knowledge is relevant for developing marketing strategies and packages for volunteers. Jackson and Burton (1999) mention that understanding constraints contributes to understanding of leisure behavior in general.

2. Literature review

While literature is replete with benefits of volunteer tourism, contemporary studies are extending well beyond these benefits. Zahra and McIntosh (2007) observe that volunteer tourism literature remains somewhat silent on the negative aspects of volunteer tourists' experiences.

Goldratt and Cox (1992) define constraint as any element or factor that limits a system from doing more of what it was designed to accomplish. Jackson (1988) also defines constraints to leisure participation as

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anything that inhibits people's ability to participate in leisure activities or desired level of satisfaction. For the purpose of this study, volunteerism constraints are those factors, either perceived or real, that potentially limit the effectiveness of volunteering before or during volunteer placements. As argued by [Henderson \(1997\)](#), constraints are not just a matter of participation or non-participation but whether people participate enough.

While people encounter constraints to initiating or continuing participation, this does not necessarily result in non-participation or ceased participation. [Kay and Jackson \(1991\)](#) iterate that people often participate in holiday activities despite constraints. Contemporary researches suggest that in many instances, constraints are more likely to result in modified participation than non-participation. This has been a major weakness for researchers who defined constraints as the absence of participation and thus, neglect the constraints of participants ([Gage & Thapa, 2012](#)). This common weakness of past findings has compelled more generic categories based on constraints facing participants rather than non-participants ([Williams & Fidgeon, 2000](#)). Constraints hindering participation are not investigated in this study as all respondents were essentially participants of a volunteer placement. Thus, non-volunteers are those who could not overcome or negotiate their preliminary constraints.

[Caldwell and Baldwin \(2005\)](#) suggest that there are varied constraints influencing leisure interest development, choice of leisure pursuits, participation in leisure, and the leisure experience. A review of separate studies suggest that constraints vary by population groups as evidenced by research on women ([Henderson & Allen, 1991](#); [Whyte & Shaw, 1994](#)), age ([Gilhooly, 1999](#); [Hall, McKeown, & Roberts, 2001](#)), individuals with disabilities ([Dattilo, 1994](#)), older adults ([McPherson, 1994](#); [Scott & Jackson, 1996](#)), ethnic backgrounds ([Stodolska & Yi-Kook, 2005](#)), and gender roles ([Holland & Andre, 1994](#)).

Again, constraints also vary across dimensions of leisure. Notable illustrations include safety concerns ([Culp, 1998](#)), lack of skills and lack of time ([Jackson & Rucks, 1993](#)), peers influence, and the lack of financially and geographically accessible opportunities ([McMeeking & Purkayastha, 1995](#)).

Specific to volunteerism, such constraints as time ([Hall et al., 2001](#)), lack of awareness of opportunities ([Gaskin, 1998](#)), and transportation in rural communities ([Locke & Rowe, 2006](#)) have been discussed. For example [Barbara, Kirton, Birakurataki, and Merriman \(2011\)](#) emphasized that in social trends of volunteering; mobility constraints are becoming more common among volunteers. Similarly, a study by [Paull \(2009\)](#) in wheat-belt towns in Western Australia revealed such mobility constraints as petrol cost, distance between towns, and limited information. [Barbara et al. \(2011\)](#) and [Willems et al. \(2012\)](#) equally identified issues of limited infrastructure and resource constraints. Another issue is the inadequacy of volunteers. Many volunteer societies have articulated concerns about the lack of volunteers ([Bringle & Hatcher, 1996](#); [Burns et al., 2005](#); [Gage & Thapa, 2012](#)).

Some studies also identify constraints pertaining to the organization of volunteer placements. In a study conducted by [Warburton, Paynter, and Petriwskyj \(2007\)](#), participants identified that volunteer organizations do not use volunteers' skill or experience effectively. In the same study, it emerged that little effort was made to socialize participants and that time-wise, volunteering was too inflexible.

Conceptually, [McKercher, Packer, Yau, and Lam \(2003\)](#) considered three areas of constraints notably factual and perceived, intrinsic and extrinsic, and internal and exogenous. Examples of perceived intrinsic constraints include 'people may perceive that volunteering is useless or is only for active persons' ([Thoits & Hewitt, 2001](#)). Examples of factual intrinsic constraints include age discrimination, fear of isolation associated with unfamiliar surroundings, social anxiety, personality ([Ferrier, Roos, & Long, 2004](#); [Paull, 2009](#); [Warburton et al., 2007](#)), and disabilities. Examples of perceived extrinsic constraints include pressure from peers who may see volunteering as 'not cool', lack of family support and encouragement, restrictions imposed by organizations, lack of information

on how they could assist, and lack of recognition/reward for their efforts ([Ferrier et al., 2004](#); [Paull, 2009](#)).

[Taillon \(2007\)](#) also looked at reasons why volunteer tourists do not reengage in volunteerism, concluding that constraints are detrimental. According to this researcher, constraints can be grouped as external or internal. For the internal constraints, participants were not sure that they could help community effectively through volunteerism. Also, [Taillon](#) stated that finance and time constraints were barriers to becoming re-involved in volunteerism. For the external constraints, [Taillon \(2007\)](#) mentioned that there were cultural barriers faced by participants in the destinations they served. In addition, problems with safety and security at the destination visited and the lack of professionalism of the organizations influenced their decision to repeat volunteerism.

3. Conceptual framework

A number of researchers (e.g. [Coghlan, 2007](#); [Green & Chalip, 1998](#)) have noted that volunteering can be considered as serious leisure; that is, an amalgamation of work and leisure. [Gage and Thapa \(2012\)](#) posit that since volunteerism is undertaken during leisure, leisure models provide reasonable framework for examining volunteer constraints. Consequently, literature on leisure constraints was used for the conceptual foundation of this study. The theory of constraints coined by [Goldratt \(1990\)](#) is one that has gained use in the tourism literature in explaining the barriers to participation (e.g. [Jun, Kyle, & O'Leary, 2008](#); [Khan, 2011](#); [Samdahl & Jekubovich, 1997](#)). The leisure constraint framework was given strong consideration over others as it considers both participation and non-participation. [Gage and Thapa \(2012\)](#) have highlighted the importance of leisure constraints to volunteer tourism.

[Crawford and Godbey \(1987\)](#) proposed three classifications of constraints: structural, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. Interpersonal constraints denote anything that limits interaction with other individuals. Intrapersonal constraints refer to psychological constraints such as willingness, motivation, personal finance, or attitude caused within the individual. Structural refers to the physical environment or something of a physical nature such as time, money, transportation, or facilities. People deal with constraints through negotiations. [Jackson, Crawford, and Godbey \(1993\)](#) suggested that eventual leisure behavior is dependent on the successful negotiation of constraints.

Emerging studies on specific forms of tourism are extending beyond the three traditional constraints. An important constraint which is worth examining to that effect is work constraint. Volunteering implies undertaking work during leisure or holiday ([Wearing, 2001](#)). [Otoo and Amuquandoh \(2014a\)](#) for example observed that work experiences were among the three most memorable to volunteer tourists. The presence of work constraints among volunteer tourists have been investigated with notable views like the work may have been boring or participants may have experienced physical or psychological harm ([Bruce, 2006](#); [Cleave & Doherty, 2005](#); [Warburton et al., 2007](#)). Additionally, organizational constraints ([Handy, 2005](#)) were also factored in the study.

Despite its usage, [Samdahl and Jekubovich \(1997\)](#) critique the leisure constraints theory on the basis of effectiveness of constraints as a framework for understanding the factors that shape people's everyday leisure choices. These researchers further suggest that grounded analysis should be considered to examine emergent themes from people's experiences rather than defined by the researcher.

4. Methodology

Ghana has since the 1980s adopted tourism as an engine of growth with the vision of making the country the tourist hub of West Africa. Ghana has long history of contacts with Europe and the Africa-American community through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade ([Akyeampong, 2007](#)). [Tomazos and Butler \(2009\)](#) and [Novelli \(2005\)](#) record that the country generates high inflow of volunteers. In spite

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