
Marketing of Tourist Destinations through International Volunteering: Strategies for Differentiation and Growth

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Abstract

International volunteering has emerged as a differentiating factor in the promotion and positioning of tourist destinations. This study aims to analyse how volunteering can be incorporated into destination marketing strategies, exploring its impact on the perception of the destination's image and its attractiveness to different traveller segments. The objective of this research is to understand how volunteering experiences can be utilised to reinforce the identity and authenticity of a destination, leveraging values such as sustainability, social responsibility, and community engagement. Additionally, the study examines the role of social media and influencers in disseminating positive narratives about volunteer tourism, influencing the travel decisions of potential volunteers and tourists. The methodology will include a systematic literature review and case studies of destinations that use volunteering as a marketing strategy. Furthermore, the perceptions of volunteers and destination managers will be explored through qualitative analysis. The expected results aim to demonstrate the relevance of international volunteering in differentiating tourist destinations, as well as provide recommendations for its integration into tourism marketing campaigns. This research will contribute to the understanding of the intersections between tourism, marketing, and social impact, promoting innovative approaches to the growth and development of sustainable tourist destinations.

Keywords: International Volunteering, Destination Marketing, Sustainable Tourism, Social Media, Digital Influencers.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the tourism sector has undergone significant transformations, driven not only by technological innovation and globalisation but also by changing consumer values and behaviours. Travellers increasingly seek experiences that go beyond traditional sightseeing, aiming for meaningful engagement with local communities and a sense of personal fulfilment. Against this backdrop, international volunteering has emerged as a distinctive form of travel, offering participants the opportunity to contribute to social or environmental causes while experiencing a destination in a profoundly immersive way.

This evolution in tourist motivations has prompted destination marketing organisations (DMOs) to explore new strategies for differentiation and branding. International volunteering presents an innovative avenue for positioning destinations as authentic, responsible, and community oriented. By integrating volunteering into tourism marketing campaigns, destinations may not only attract more socially conscious travellers but also enhance their image in terms of sustainability and ethical values.

Despite its growing relevance, the intersection between international volunteering and destination marketing remains underexplored in academic literature. Most studies tend to focus either on the socio-cultural impacts of volunteer tourism or on branding strategies in isolation, overlooking the potential synergies between them. This paper addresses this gap by examining how international volunteering can be leveraged as a marketing strategy to differentiate tourist destinations and promote sustainable growth.

The aim of this research is twofold: first, to understand how volunteering experiences contribute to shaping the perceived image and identity of destinations; and second, to analyse the role of digital communication tools, particularly social media and influencers, in disseminating narratives that reinforce the attractiveness of volunteer-based tourism. By adopting a qualitative and case-based approach, this study seeks to generate practical insights and recommendations for tourism stakeholders, while contributing to a broader understanding of tourism marketing in the context of social impact and sustainability.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. DESTINATION IMAGE

The concept of destination image is pivotal in understanding how individuals perceive, evaluate, and choose tourism locations. As highlighted in the literature, destination image encompasses both cognitive and affective evaluations, which influence tourists' behavioural intentions, such as their willingness to visit or recommend a destination (Luong, 2023). This dual nature—where beliefs about tangible attributes (cognitive) and emotional impressions (affective) interact—forms a holistic perception that shapes the desirability and competitiveness of destinations.

Recent studies emphasise that the image of a destination is not static but rather evolves in response to sociocultural, political, and digital influences. For instance, in cross-border or peripheral regions, the construction of destination image often involves additional layers of complexity due to differing governance structures, shared cultural identities, and geographic marginality (Maldonado-López et al., 2024). These areas frequently face challenges in visibility and accessibility, which makes strategic image building essential for fostering sustainable tourism development.

In the context of social media and user-generated content (UGC), destination image formation has become increasingly decentralised. Tourists no longer rely solely on official marketing campaigns but actively engage in shaping perceptions through platforms such as Instagram, which acts as a space for co-creation and image negotiation (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020). The interplay between projected image (by tourism organisations) and perceived image (by visitors) becomes particularly salient when mediated through digital environments. As such, visual storytelling and personal narratives can either reinforce or contradict official branding efforts, impacting trust and perceived authenticity.

Moreover, destination image plays a critical role in determining visitor satisfaction and loyalty. According to (Wang et al., 2024), satisfaction acts as a mediating factor between perceived image and behavioural intention.

A positive image can lead to stronger emotional connections, thereby increasing the likelihood of repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. This relationship is particularly relevant in sustainable and volunteer tourism, where image is often linked to values such as community engagement, environmental responsibility, and authenticity.

Authenticity itself is a central element in image perception, especially within platforms like Airbnb, where tourists seek experiences that align with their self-identity and ethical expectations (Sakr et al., 2024). In such contexts, the perceived authenticity of local interactions and accommodations can significantly enhance the destination's symbolic capital, further differentiating it in a competitive global market.

In summary, destination image is a dynamic, multifaceted construct shaped by cognitive and affective dimensions, socio-digital interactions, and the authenticity of local experiences. Its strategic management is crucial not only for attracting visitors but also for sustaining tourism development, especially in peripheral and cross-border areas that rely on differentiation and value-based branding.

2.2. VOLUNTEER TOURISM

Volunteer tourism—commonly referred to as voluntourism—has emerged as a hybrid form of travel that blends leisure with altruistic engagement in social or environmental projects. Originally framed as an alternative to mass tourism, it offers participants the opportunity to contribute to host communities while gaining immersive, often transformative, experiences (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). This duality between personal fulfilment and community benefit underpins much of the academic interest surrounding this phenomenon.

In its early conceptualisation, volunteer tourism was celebrated for promoting intercultural understanding, fostering solidarity, and stimulating local development in under-resourced areas (Wearing, 2001). However, more recent critiques have questioned the ethical and developmental implications of short-term volunteer engagements. Concerns include the reinforcement of neocolonial dynamics, dependency on external aid, and potential displacement of local workers (Guttentag, 2009; Palacios, 2010). Scholars such as Butcher and Smith (2015) argue that without critical reflection, volunteer tourism risks becoming a commodified experience that prioritises the emotional gratification of volunteers over sustainable community impact.

Despite these criticisms, volunteer tourism has continued to evolve, particularly in alignment with the principles of regenerative tourism. Rather than focusing solely on reducing harm, regenerative models aim to actively restore ecological systems, empower local actors, and enhance community resilience (Coutinho et al., 2024). This shift is evident in case studies such as community-led agroecological projects or post-disaster reconstruction initiatives, where volunteers contribute to long-term regeneration strategies (Röntynen & Tunkkari-Eskelinen, 2024; Wearing et al., 2017).

Volunteer motivation remains a central theme in the literature. While early models dichotomised motivations into altruistic versus egoistic categories (Callanan & Thomas, 2007), contemporary approaches adopt a more nuanced view, recognising a spectrum of interconnected drivers including skill development, cultural exchange, environmental concern, and social recognition (Han et al., 2019). A study by (Prayag et al., 2022) found that younger generations, particularly Gen Z, increasingly align their volunteering choices with climate action and personal values related to sustainability.

In the digital age, communication and image-building in volunteer tourism have also gained prominence. Influencers and social media play a decisive role in shaping the public perception of volunteer projects, often amplifying their emotional and symbolic appeal (Kılıç et al., 2024). However, this visibility can also lead to performative altruism or “voluntourism for likes”, raising questions about authenticity and ethics (Röntynen & Tunkkari-Eskelinen, 2025). Research has shown that when managed responsibly, influencer narratives can help disseminate regenerative practices and promote inclusive, respectful engagement with host communities (Coutinho & Sousa, 2025).

In summary, volunteer tourism is a dynamic field offering opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and sustainability, but it demands critical ethical reflection. A regenerative approach emphasises reciprocity, inclusivity, and restoration.

2.3. SUSTAINABLE MARKETING

In response to escalating ecological concerns and shifting consumer expectations, sustainable marketing has emerged as a critical strategic domain for both academics and practitioners. Defined as the application of marketing principles to promote products, services, and behaviours that are ecologically, and socially responsible, sustainable marketing transcends traditional notions of 'green' or 'eco-friendly' branding by addressing the full spectrum of the marketing mix—product, price, place, and promotion (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019; Yadav et al., 2024).

The increasing societal awareness of sustainability has prompted organisations to reconfigure their marketing strategies in alignment with global environmental and social imperatives. This strategic recalibration has been particularly pronounced since 2016, which marks a significant growth phase in sustainability-related publications and corporate adoption (Yadav et al., 2024). The shift from conventional product-centric approaches towards a broader marketing mix reflects a maturing discourse that encompasses ethical branding, value-driven consumption, and stakeholder engagement across the supply chain (Batat, 2024).

Nevertheless, the practice of sustainable marketing remains fraught with challenges. One of the most critical is the prevalence of greenwashing—where companies falsely convey environmental responsibility through misleading or unsubstantiated claims. This not only erodes consumer trust but also undermines legitimate efforts towards sustainability (Balbal & Soumia, 2024; Rastogi et al., 2024; Yadav et al., 2024). In this context, transparency, accountability, and third-party certifications are essential to enhancing the credibility of sustainability claims and bridging the so-called “green attitude-behaviour gap” (ElHaffar et al., 2020; Yadav et al., 2024).

Addressing this gap—defined as the inconsistency between consumers’ pro-environmental attitudes and their actual purchasing behaviour—has become a focal point in contemporary research (Joshi & Rahman, 2015; White et al., 2019). The gap is influenced by a myriad of psychological, contextual, and structural factors, including price sensitivity, perceived product efficacy, social norms, and the accessibility of sustainable alternatives (Park & Lin, 2020; Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018). Strategies for overcoming these barriers include behavioural nudging, social identity framing, and the use of digital tools to personalise and contextualise sustainability messaging (Piligrimiene et al., 2020; Torma et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the integration of emerging technologies and data analytics into sustainable marketing offers new avenues for influencing consumer behaviour. Platforms powered by artificial intelligence can help tailor green marketing campaigns, monitor real-time consumer responses, and detect shifts in values or preferences. In doing so, they contribute to the operationalisation of sustainability across diverse cultural and economic contexts (Yadav et al., 2024).

Overall, sustainable marketing is not merely a tactical approach but a transformative paradigm that necessitates a rethinking of value creation, communication, and stakeholder engagement. Future research should continue to explore how digitalisation, psychological framing, and policy alignment can reinforce sustainable consumption patterns and fortify the authenticity of marketing efforts.

2.4. DIGITAL INFLUENCE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The proliferation of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped the ways in which tourist destinations are promoted and perceived, especially in the context of international volunteering. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok serve as powerful vehicles for storytelling, enabling volunteer tourists and host organisations to co-create and disseminate narratives that influence destination image and tourist behaviour (Hays et al., 2013; Idbenssi et al., 2023; Schwarz & Richey, 2019). These platforms allow real-time interactions, visual documentation, and widespread dissemination of personal experiences, which collectively contribute to a multidimensional, often emotionally resonant, image of a destination (Coutinho et al., 2024).

One of the most significant developments in recent years is the emergence of social media influencers (SMIs) as intermediaries in shaping perceptions of volunteer tourism. According to (Kılıç et al., 2024), travel influencers can inspire responsible consumption and raise awareness about social and environmental issues

by portraying ethical volunteer experiences. Their curated content, often framed through emotional appeal and aspirational narratives, not only increases visibility of volunteer projects but also triggers cognitive responses that shape followers' attitudes and behavioural intentions towards such destinations (Kılıç et al., 2024)

However, the use of digital media in this context is not without critical tensions. While it provides opportunities for inclusive narratives and wider engagement, it also risks encouraging performative altruism—what some scholars term “voluntourism for likes.” As noted in the literature, this phenomenon reflects a superficial engagement with the host community, driven more by self-promotion than genuine contribution, raising ethical concerns about the authenticity and sustainability of the volunteer experience (Coutinho et al., 2024).

Moreover, the collaboration between NGOs and social media strategies has proven instrumental in promoting sustainable tourism initiatives. Zada et al. (2025) highlights how digital influence, when aligned with community-driven goals and NGO frameworks, can enhance ecotourism visibility and foster a deeper commitment to sustainability objectives. Strategic use of hashtags, interactive campaigns, and influencer endorsements are tools that, when ethically managed, can reinforce a destination's image as socially and environmentally responsible (La Rocca & Artieri, 2022; Paiano et al., 2017).

The impact of digital storytelling in this context is not only promotional but also transformative (Zhang & Ramayah, 2024). Volunteers often share their experiences post-project via blogs, vlogs, and social media posts, effectively acting as informal ambassadors of the destination. These grassroots narratives, particularly when embedded in visual content, shape perceptions of authenticity, trust, and cultural (Coutinho et al., 2024). This is especially relevant in cross-border or peripheral regions, where visibility is limited, and differentiation strategies are essential.

In sum, digital influence and social media are central to volunteer tourism, amplifying ethical travel narratives and shaping destination image. When supported by transparent communication and community engagement, these tools can transform branding and volunteer impact.

3. METHODOLOGY

This exploratory mixed-methods study examines how international volunteering shapes destination image and supports its differentiation through sustainable marketing. Due to limited research linking volunteering to destination branding, a sequential explanatory design was used, combining quantitative data collection with interpretative analysis.

While the insights are valuable, certain limitations apply. The small, non-probabilistic sample ($n = 35$) from Barcelos, Portugal, constrains generalisability. Self-reported data may also reflect social desirability bias. Nevertheless, this pilot study served as a pre-test for a broader phase within a doctoral project. The instrument showed strong internal consistency and yielded clear responses, supporting its reliability and future academic use.

3.1 CONTEXT AND SAMPLE

The research was conducted in Barcelos, Portugal, a municipality that has hosted numerous international volunteers through mobility programmes between 2024 and early 2025. A structured questionnaire was administered to a convenience sample of 35 international volunteers from countries including Turkey, Spain, France, Ukraine, and Morocco. The sample consisted predominantly of young adults ($n=27$ aged 20–29) and was balanced in terms of gender (22 female, 13 male). Most participants held tertiary-level qualifications, and the majority were first-time volunteers.

3.2 INSTRUMENT DESIGN

The questionnaire was designed to measure four dimensions: (1) volunteer motivations; (2) perceived personal impact; (3) change in destination image; and (4) behavioural intentions. Items were adapted from validated instruments in tourism and volunteering literature (e.g., Kirillova et al. 2017; Styliadis, 2018;

Wearing, 2001), and each construct was measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

Volunteer motivations included both altruistic (e.g., "I wanted to help others") and self-developmental items (e.g., "I aimed to develop useful skills"). Impact was assessed through indicators such as personal growth, empathy, and reflection on personal values. Perceived changes in destination image were evaluated by comparing pre- and post-experience perceptions of hospitality, cultural richness, and safety. Additionally, intentions to revisit or recommend the destination were recorded.

3.3 DATA RELIABILITY AND ANALYSIS

Internal consistency of the instrument was verified using Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha = 0.83$), confirming the reliability of the scale. Descriptive statistics were used to profile the sample and summarise the responses. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each item, and differences between pre- and post-experience evaluations were analysed using paired sample comparisons. The data were then interpreted in conjunction with insights drawn from a qualitative synthesis of open-ended responses and previous focus group feedback.

This mixed approach allows for a deeper understanding of how individual volunteer experiences contribute to broader narratives of sustainable tourism, while offering practical insights for destination marketing organisations and NGOs engaged in hosting international volunteers.

4. RESULTS

The quantitative findings provide robust empirical support for the theoretical propositions developed in the literature review. Results are presented according to the four dimensions analysed: volunteer motivations, perceived personal impact, destination image transformation, and behavioural intentions.

4.1 VOLUNTEER MOTIVATIONS

Respondents reported strong altruistic and developmental motivations for engaging in international volunteering. The most highly rated drivers were "experiencing new cultures" ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 0.68$) and "helping others" ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.71$), followed by the desire "to do something meaningful" ($M = 4.11$). Although career-oriented motivations such as enhancing the CV ($M = 3.94$) or developing professional skills ($M = 3.83$) were also recognised, they ranked slightly lower, indicating a predominantly value-based engagement.

4.2 PERCEIVED PERSONAL IMPACT

Participants reported meaningful transformations at the personal level. Notably, 85% agreed or strongly agreed that the experience led them to reflect on their personal values ($M = 4.37$), and 80% perceived an increase in their sense of empathy and social responsibility ($M = 4.23$). A majority also reported enhanced intercultural awareness and personal growth, reinforcing the transformative potential of volunteer tourism.

4.3 DESTINATION IMAGE TRANSFORMATION

A comparative analysis of perceptions before and after the volunteering experience revealed significant improvements in the perceived image of the destination. Hospitality of locals improved from a mean of 3.58 to 4.09, while perceptions of cultural richness increased from 3.49 to 4.06. Perceived safety also rose, from 3.37 to 4.00. Additionally, 74% of respondents recognised visible efforts toward environmental sustainability and community well-being, and 71% felt their own contributions supported sustainable tourism.

4.4 BEHAVIOURAL INTENTIONS

Behavioural outcomes were positive and consistent with image transformation. A majority expressed strong intentions to return to the region as tourists ($M = 4.20$) and to recommend it to others ($M = 4.26$). Similarly, 66% stated they would participate in another volunteering project in the same destination, and 71% indicated they would encourage others to do the same. These findings suggest that positive experiences in volunteer tourism foster not only emotional attachment but also destination loyalty and advocacy.

Together, the results illustrate the capacity of international volunteering to shape destination perceptions, stimulate transformative learning, and cultivate long-term connections between volunteers and host communities.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer compelling evidence that international volunteering can be a powerful tool in shaping the image of tourist destinations, while also contributing to transformative experiences for volunteers. These results substantiate and extend the conceptual linkages proposed in the literature review, particularly regarding the intersections of volunteer tourism, destination branding, sustainable marketing, and digital influence.

Firstly, the high levels of altruistic and cultural motivations reported by respondents align with prior research suggesting that volunteer tourists are primarily driven by intrinsic values and the pursuit of meaningful engagement (Han et al., 2019; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). The strong emphasis on “experiencing new cultures” and “helping others” supports the view that international volunteers are not passive consumers but rather active co-creators of social value, resonating with the broader shift towards value-based travel (Bellato et al., 2023).

The perceived personal impact, particularly in terms of empathy, self-awareness, and cultural openness, corroborates theories of transformative and experiential tourism (Kirillova et al., 2017). Volunteers reported positive shifts in their personal values, indicating that such experiences not only benefit host communities but also act as formative processes of identity construction and global citizenship. This is particularly relevant when considering tourism’s potential contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those related to education, inclusivity, and sustainability.

From a marketing perspective, the improvement in perceived destination image after the volunteering experience reinforces the argument that emotional engagement and lived experience can effectively enhance brand equity. Increased appreciation for cultural richness and hospitality, as well as the recognition of sustainable practices, highlight the potential of volunteer tourism as a marketing strategy rooted in authenticity and social value (Stylidis, 2018; Yadav et al., 2024).

Importantly, the strong behavioural intentions reported, such as willingness to return, recommend the destination, and advocate for further volunteering, demonstrate how international volunteers can evolve into informal brand ambassadors. This dynamic reflects the growing role of User-Generated Content (UGC) and digital storytelling in destination image formation, especially among younger travellers attuned to social media platforms (Kılıç et al., 2024; Zada et al., 2025).

While the findings are promising, they must be interpreted with caution. Positive volunteer perceptions may reflect a honeymoon effect or social desirability bias. The sample’s geographic limitation (Barcelos) restricts generalisability. Future research should compare multiple regions and apply longitudinal designs to assess the persistence of image and behavioural changes.

Overall, the study enhances understanding of international volunteering as a tool for sustainable destination marketing, offering practical and theoretical insights for DMOs, NGOs, and policymakers in cross-cultural and peripheral contexts.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined the potential of international volunteering as a strategic driver for enhancing the image of tourist destinations, particularly within the framework of sustainable and regenerative tourism. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, the research has demonstrated that volunteer tourism fosters both personal transformation and positive destination perceptions, while simultaneously supporting sustainable development narratives.

The findings reveal that international volunteers are primarily motivated by altruistic and cultural factors, and that their experiences lead to increased empathy, intercultural awareness, and shifts in personal values.

These personal outcomes are closely linked to changes in the perceived image of the host destination, particularly in terms of hospitality, cultural richness, and social responsibility. Furthermore, the strong behavioural intentions expressed by volunteers, such as returning, recommending, or engaging in further volunteer experiences, highlight the enduring influence of such programmes on destination loyalty.

From a strategic perspective, this study reinforces the view that international volunteering can serve as an effective component of sustainable marketing for tourism destinations. By leveraging the emotional depth and authenticity of volunteer experiences, destination marketing organisations (DMOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can co-create value-based narratives that distinguish their territories in an increasingly competitive global tourism market.

Nonetheless, the study acknowledges its limitations, including the context-specific nature of the data and the relatively small sample size. Future research should expand to comparative case studies and explore the long-term effects of volunteer tourism on both host communities and the volunteers themselves.

In conclusion, international volunteering offers not only a pathway for fostering global citizenship and social inclusion but also an innovative tool for sustainable destination branding. As tourism continues to evolve in response to ethical, environmental, and technological imperatives, volunteer-based initiatives represent a promising avenue for aligning tourism marketing with broader societal goals.

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