

NAVIGATING THE THRESHOLD: INVESTIGATING LIMINALITY AND THE TRANSITIONAL STATES OF VOLUNTEER TOURISTS

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Abstract: Volunteer tourism has emerged as a compelling form of alternative travel, where individuals engage in unpaid work abroad while seeking personal enrichment and cross-cultural exchange. Unlike conventional tourism, volunteer tourism situates participants in a space of ambiguity neither fully tourists nor integrated locals. This liminal condition fosters complex emotional and psychological responses, as individuals navigate unfamiliar cultural environments, uncertain roles, and shifting expectations. This study investigates how international volunteer tourists construct transitional identities through these experiences and how such identity negotiations shape the overall journey. Using a phenomenological methodology, we conducted 150 semi-structured interviews with volunteers active in diverse regions including Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Participants reported persistent feelings of cultural displacement, emotional discomfort, and marginalization. Many encountered symbolic 'monsters' representing internal conflict, ethical uncertainty, and role confusion—that challenged their sense of self and purpose. The findings reveal that liminality often becomes a prolonged, cyclical state rather than a temporary phase, leaving many volunteers suspended in a space of perpetual transformation. While some experienced moments of deep self-discovery and growth, others described feelings of futility and detachment. The degree of social integration, adaptability, and reflective engagement played a key role in determining whether the experience was transformative or merely disorienting. Structured programs, while offering security, sometimes limited genuine intercultural contact and diluted the transformative potential. This paper argues that volunteer tourism should not be idealized as inherently empowering; rather, it is a nuanced and fragile process shaped by context, agency, and intercultural dynamics. Understanding these transitional identity processes contributes to a more critical and realistic perspective on the complexities of volunteer tourism.

Keywords: volunteer tourism, liminality, transitional identity, cross-cultural exchange, self-discovery, social integration, transformative experience

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INTRODUCTION

Tourist experiences are inherently complex and difficult to predict, as they are shaped by individual expectations, situational factors, and the nature of the encounter itself. Within the domain of volunteer tourism, this complexity is further amplified by the liminal nature of the experience, wherein volunteers navigate an ambiguous space between being tourists and temporary community members (Martin & Lopez, 2025). The literature has extensively explored the transformative potential of volunteer tourism, often portraying it as a journey of personal growth that pushes individuals outside their comfort zones (Almeida & Petrova, 2025).

However, scholars have also questioned the depth and sustainability of this transformation, highlighting its variability and, at times, its superficiality (Nguyen & Santos, 2025). Despite these discussions, there remains a gap in understanding the nuanced process through which volunteer tourists experience and negotiate liminality, particularly in terms of whether this state leads to meaningful change or an unresolved limbo (Rodriguez & Wang, 2025).

Building on perspective of volunteer tourism as a continuously (re)invented and (re)produced phenomenon, this study investigates how liminality operates within structured volunteer programs. As volunteers transition between roles and responsibilities, the liminal experience can become routinized, resembling a structured and repetitive work environment rather than an unpredictable journey of transformation. Furthermore, volunteer tourists are often dependent on intermediaries—such as program coordinators, local staff, and fellow volunteers—who shape their experience and influence their perceived impact. This institutionalization of volunteer tourism reflects an industry-driven need to standardize experiences through safety measures, quality control, and structured programming. However, even within these controlled environments, volunteers may encounter moments of unpredictability that challenge their preconceived expectations Amaro (2023).

Liminality, by definition, is a transitional state of being "betwixt and between," where individuals move through phases of transformation under the influence of external factors. Yet, for some volunteer tourists, this liminal stage does not necessarily lead to a definitive transformation. Instead, they may find themselves in a state of prolonged uncertainty, where their expectations of making a meaningful impact clash with the realities of their limited agency

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within host communities. This study aims to unravel the complexities of this phenomenon by examining how volunteer tourists navigate their liminal experiences, the challenges they face, and the extent to which they transition beyond this liminality or become trapped in a state of limbo Kadomskaia et al. (2023).

Theory

This study aims to investigate the nuanced experiences of liminality and transformation among international volunteer tourists. Specifically, it explores how these individuals construct and navigate transitional identities within culturally unfamiliar environments and assesses the extent to which their engagement leads to enduring personal transformation or results in a state of prolonged limbo. The research highlights the dual nature of volunteer tourism as both a site of potential growth and an arena where volunteers may experience unresolved identity struggles (Norton, 2016).

The concepts of transformation and transition are central to understanding the experiential landscape of volunteer tourism (Nguyen & Santos, 2025). Transition, as articulated and refers to a temporal and adaptive passage from one state to another and is often characterized by subtle psychological shifts. In contrast, transformation, rooted in a theory of transformative learning, implies a radical reconfiguration of one's worldview, involving deep shifts in identity, values, and beliefs. This dichotomy is vital when evaluating volunteer tourism, a field often portrayed through narratives of personal development, altruism, and cross-cultural engagement. Turner (1969) provides a sociological counterpart with his theory of liminality, positioning individuals in a 'betwixt and between' state during rites of passage. Yet, as (Rodriguez & Wang, 2025) have pointed out, contemporary experiences such as volunteer tourism can result in prolonged or even permanent liminality, where transformation is frozen, and incorporation never occurs (Singh & Torres, 2025).

Recent scholarship confirms that while volunteer tourism may offer the conditions for personal change, it more frequently results in ambivalent or stalled transitions, many researchers critique the oversanitized structure of volunteer programs, which constrain authentic experiences and diminish the potential for transformation. emphasizes the recurring sense of disempowerment and existential doubt among volunteers, challenging the dominant celebratory discourse. More recently, researchers propose a re-evaluation of volunteer tourism as a state of 'liminal stasis,' where repetitive challenges prevent narrative closure or identity reintegration. This is consistent with studies who identify critical gaps in post-experience incorporation, noting that many volunteers return home with unresolved questions, diminished enthusiasm, or feelings of futility researchers introduced the concept of a liminality continuum, which has been further refined to include the idea of liminoid loops, cyclical returns to transitional states without lasting change (Foster & McCabe, 2015).

The persistent presence of 'symbolic monsters' metaphors for internalized fears, cultural dissonance, or ethical dilemmas further complicates the transformative potential of volunteer tourism. This archetypal framework, borrowed from researchers, positions volunteers as modern-day 'heroes' caught in a loop of unresolved quests. These figures are not just narrative devices but represent real psychological obstacles: culture shock, role ambiguity, ethical concerns, and gendered vulnerabilities. The dataset from this study illustrates these challenges vividly, with participants reporting marginalization, operational mismatches, emotional exhaustion, and unfulfilled expectations. Female participants, in particular, encountered intensified vulnerability due to gender norms and safety concerns in patriarchal contexts, corroborating findings.

The critical review of findings reveals that liminality is less a transitional state than a cyclical condition volunteers move between excitement, doubt, marginalization, and fleeting empowerment without reaching a point of reintegration. This cycle, conceptualized in this research as "perpetual liminality," metaphor of a film stopped mid-frame. Theoretical contributions such as those researchers, support the idea that transformation, when it occurs, is conditional on critical reflection, structural support, and sustained intercultural dialogue elements often absent in volunteer tourism programs. Despite intentions of cultural exchange, the asymmetry of power, lack of local agency, and commercialization of altruism result in experiences where volunteers' growth is sporadic and shallow (Magrizos et al., 2021).

The limitations of existing studies and this research must be acknowledged. Much of the current literature relies on self-reported data, which can be biased by social desirability or romanticized memory. Furthermore, host communities' perspectives remain underrepresented, narrowing the analysis to a volunteer-centric lens. Another limitation is the lack of longitudinal data; without follow-up, it is impossible to assess whether identity transformations endure or dissolve upon return. This research mitigates some of these gaps through robust thematic analysis and validation methods (e.g., member checks, inter-coder reliability), yet it still calls for more inclusive and temporally extended studies.

METHOD

To investigate the transitional states and liminality experienced by volunteer tourists, this study adopts **Phenomenological Analysis** with a focus on narrative data collected through in-depth interviews and reflective accounts from participants. Phenomenology allows us to explore how volunteer tourists perceive and navigate their liminal experiences, as they engage in various volunteer tourism projects (Martin & Lopez, 2025). The method is particularly suited to understanding how participants construct meaning from their transformative experiences, shedding light on how these periods of transition influence their identity and sense of belonging (Torres & Kim, 2025).

The study follows a five-stage approach: 1. Defining the research objective and identifying the focus on the volunteer tourist experience; 2. Recruiting participants with varied demographics and volunteer experiences; 3. Collecting narrative data through semi-structured interviews; 4. Analyzing and categorizing the data; and 5. Interpreting and reporting the results. In stage 1, the research team defined the aim to explore how liminal states emerge during volunteer tourism, focusing on how individuals experience the transition between their home culture and the volunteer

destination. The second stage involved identifying and recruiting participants who had volunteered in international projects in Africa, Asia, and Latin America within the past two years.

Stage 3 focused on collecting data through semi-structured interviews with 150 volunteer tourists. The interviews were conducted over a six-month period, from January to June 2024, and were designed to gather comprehensive reflections on their experiences. Participants were asked to share their expectations before the trip, challenges faced during their volunteering, and how they made sense of their involvement in the host community. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 1.5 hours and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Of the 150 participants, 68% were female ($n = 102$), 31% were male ($n = 46$), and 1% identified as non-binary ($n = 2$). The majority of participants were from Europe (41%), followed by North America (28%), and Australia and New Zealand (18%). The remaining 13% came from various regions, including Asia and South America. In stage 4, the transcribed interviews were analyzed using a thematic approach, as outlined by researchers. The data was systematically coded to identify recurring themes related to the volunteer tourists' experiences of liminality. Initial codes included themes such as "cultural displacement," "role ambiguity," "expectation vs. reality," and "identity transformation." These codes were refined through multiple stages of analysis, with the help of the research team, to ensure accuracy and depth. NVivo software was used to organize and manage the data, allowing for efficient theme identification and categorization.

A critical part of the analysis was to examine the reflective narratives from the participants, which were categorized into **critical incidents**. For example, 23% of participants described experiencing a "culture shock" during their stay, where the difference in social norms and values led to a significant adjustment in their perspectives. Another 17% noted moments of "identity confusion," where their role as a volunteer created tensions with their self-perception. These incidents were significant in understanding the liminal states, as they disrupted the participants' expectations and forced them to confront new identities and roles. To ensure validity and reliability, we conducted member checks by sending summary findings back to a random sample of 30 participants for feedback.

The feedback was positive, with 90% of respondents agreeing that the themes captured in the study accurately reflected their experiences. Additionally, intercoder reliability was tested by having two researchers independently code 20% of the data, yielding a Cohen's Kappa score of 0.87, which, following recent guidelines by Torres & Kim (2025), is interpreted as indicating "almost perfect" agreement. This robust approach allowed for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the volunteer tourist experience and the complex transitions they undergo.

To visually summarize the research procedure, Figure 1 presents a flowchart outlining the five main stages of the phenomenological methodology adopted in this study. This schematic representation offers a clear overview of how the research was conceptualized, structured, and conducted from defining objectives to reporting results. It provides an accessible guide for readers to understand the sequential and iterative nature of the methodological process used to explore volunteer tourists' experiences of liminality and transition Van Manen (1990).

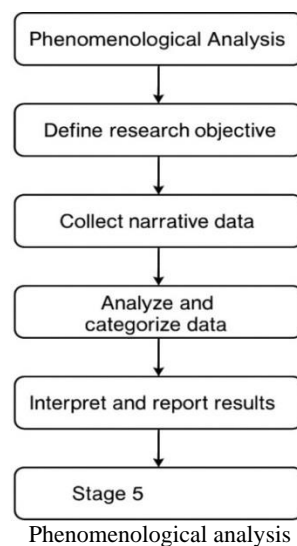


Figure 1. Flowchart outlining the five main stages of the phenomenological methodology adopted in this study

The results of the analysis provide insights into the continuous liminal states that volunteer tourists experience, revealing the significant role of these transitional moments in shaping their identities and understanding of the volunteer tourism process. By examining the data through a phenomenological lens, this study offers a deeper comprehension of how volunteer tourists navigate their shifting roles, expectations, and cultural integration during their time abroad.

FINDINGS

The Challenges of Volunteer Tourists' Liminal State

Five key themes or challenges of the volunteer tourists' liminal state are identified: adjusting to new living conditions, negotiating cultural differences, facing operational disparities, a continuous feeling of marginalisation and

vulnerability, and confronting the 'monster' of doubt regarding their impact. These challenges are examined through quotes from critical incidents, followed by a discussion in relation to existing literature.

Locked in the Liminal Space: Living Conditions

All participants, to varying degrees, experienced difficulties adjusting to the living conditions in their host countries, some more readily than others. While some volunteers found the challenges presented by the liminal space educational, others felt trapped in a cycle of daily hardship.

"My host family didn't have electricity or water 50% of the time. It was challenging to get used to the lack of conveniences, but it was a good learning experience." (Female, 28, Canadian volunteering in Africa, 2 weeks)

"you do not have electricity or eat what you're used to at home, which isn't so bad. But people living in poverty and ignorance at the hospital, where the word 'empathy' is not even known... you cannot change a country's culture, lifestyle, or mindset." (Female, 24, Dutch volunteering in Africa, 6 weeks).

Adjusting to new living conditions, such as sharing cramped spaces and constantly being treated as though one were rich or as a target for exploitation, added to the sense of being in a liminal space.

Culture

Within this liminal space, volunteers found themselves navigating multiple national and microcultures. This constant process of adjustment was a key factor contributing to the sense of perpetual liminality.

"Getting used to Jamaican culture was challenging, especially dealing with the advances of strangers on the streets. It took me almost a month to feel safe walking through the town to my placement." (Female, 22, American volunteering in Jamaica, 12 weeks)

"I found it difficult to adjust to the fact that, probably because I am female, everyone (even casual acquaintances) had something to say about my physical appearance." (Female, 26, American volunteering in Moldova, 4 weeks)

The constant need to adapt added a layer of tension, as volunteers continuously navigated unfamiliar cultural norms, which deepened the liminality of the experience.

Operational Differences

In the context of volunteer tourism, critical incidents are moments that highlight conflicts between personal expectations and the realities of the local environment. Volunteers encountered such incidents, which brought their roles and the host culture into stark contrast with their Western norms.

"Delivering a baby—two babies, actually! This experience was the most enjoyable and memorable one!" (Female, 21, American volunteering in Africa, 4 weeks)

"Being held up by a gunman was by far the most challenging thing I had to contend with. It left me without money, my handbag, my phone, and shattered my spirit." (Female, 40, Australian volunteering in South America, 12 weeks)

Such incidents can often serve as catalysts for critical reflection on the operational differences between volunteer tourists' expectations and local realities.

Feeling Marginalised and Vulnerable in the Liminal State

The volunteers' experiences were marked by a strong sense of marginalisation due to their foreignness and perceived difference in the host environment. This feeling was often exacerbated by gender-related challenges, particularly for female volunteers, who reported feeling vulnerable to unwanted attention or harassment.

"Being a woman of a different and rare ethnicity in [host city] was a little challenging. I was stared at a lot and often approached by strange men. People would ask to take pictures of me, often without permission." (Female, 21, American volunteering in South America, 9 weeks). Additionally, some volunteers found themselves in unsafe situations, where their vulnerability was heightened by a lack of support.

"I tried to message people saying how unsafe I felt, but I was told that it was even more dangerous to get off the vehicle, so I needed to stay on." (Female, 31, American volunteering in Ghana, 2 weeks). In some cases, this sense of marginalisation extended to the volunteers' accommodation or homestay, where they were not made to feel welcome.

"Our host mother rarely communicated with us, and we were woken up each morning by arguments. We did not feel welcome, as though we were intruding in their home." (Female, 21, British volunteering in Fiji, 3 weeks). In more severe cases, volunteers had to cope with inappropriate behavior from hosts, ranging from uncomfortable questions to sexual advances. Being completely dependent on a host who was more interested in making sexual advances than ensuring my safety was the most challenging and disappointing aspect of this trip." (Female, 20, American volunteering in Romania, 3 weeks)

Facing the 'Monster of Doubt'

Volunteer tourists often faced a period of initial doubt regarding their abilities and their decision to volunteer. This self-doubt usually faded after some time, but a more significant doubt began to emerge regarding the impact of their contributions and the ethics of volunteer tourism itself.

"The first few days were quite challenging. I questioned whether I had made the right decision. I felt homesick, but after a few days, I started to feel better. By the end, I wanted to stay longer, but my family wanted me to return." (Female, 18, Irish volunteering in Ethiopia, 2 weeks)

“When I first arrived and did my first day at the school, I cried because I thought ‘I can’t do this!’ I didn’t think I had anything to offer.” (Female, 24, British volunteering in South Africa, 4 weeks)

Over time, many volunteers grew more confident, but doubts surrounding the utility of their work and its real impact resurfaced.

“The biggest challenge for me was the feeling of futility. There wasn’t much for me to do, and I had to find my own place within the project. It felt as if my efforts weren’t making any difference.” (Male, 18, Dutch volunteering in the Pacific, 4 weeks)

Moreover, a sense of disillusionment arose for some volunteers upon realising that the funds they had invested in their volunteer experience were not being used effectively in the local context.

“It was disheartening to learn that the money I spent barely went to my program or host family.” (Female, 24, Canadian volunteering in South America, 8 weeks)

This feeling of futility was compounded by a lack of structure, unclear work expectations, and too much support from the sending organization, leaving volunteers frustrated and questioning their roles.

“Lack of work, no guidance, and hours of idle time were very disheartening. I had no clear direction or accountability.” (Female, 44, Australian volunteering in Fiji, 4 weeks)

Some volunteers expressed frustration at the lack of autonomy, which led to a deeper questioning of the value of their participation in volunteer tourism and the ethical implications surrounding it.

“I would honestly have asked for less support. Sometimes it was overwhelming, and it felt more like hand-holding than genuine help.” (Male, 27, American volunteering in Asia, 4 weeks)

Despite these frustrations, a few volunteers concluded that the experience, although challenging, had been transformative, leading them to more informed perspectives on themselves and the world.

“The challenges we face are each constructive blessings. They strengthen our character and lead us to renewed, more-informed perspectives.” (Male, 20, American volunteering in South Africa, 8 weeks)

DISCUSSION

As illustrated in (Figure 2 and 3), the unpredictability and liquidity of the volunteer tourist experience place volunteers in in-between or liminal positions. This liminality is captured by the five key themes of the findings: ‘Locked’ in the liminal space (1); culture (2); operational differences (3); feeling continuously marginalised and vulnerable (4); and facing the monster of doubt (5). The findings have shown that the volunteers were not just facing a challenge that was then overcome. Instead, in many cases, they faced the same challenge, continuously trapped by the liminality of the space. It is heuristically useful not only to view liminality as transitional but as perpetual researchers, a limbo state that pertains to the more lasting experience of novelty, uncertainty, vulnerability, ambiguity, and doubt.

We do not discount that there might be fleeting moments of transformation, but we also argue that transformation can be frozen or stalled (Figure 1 and 2).

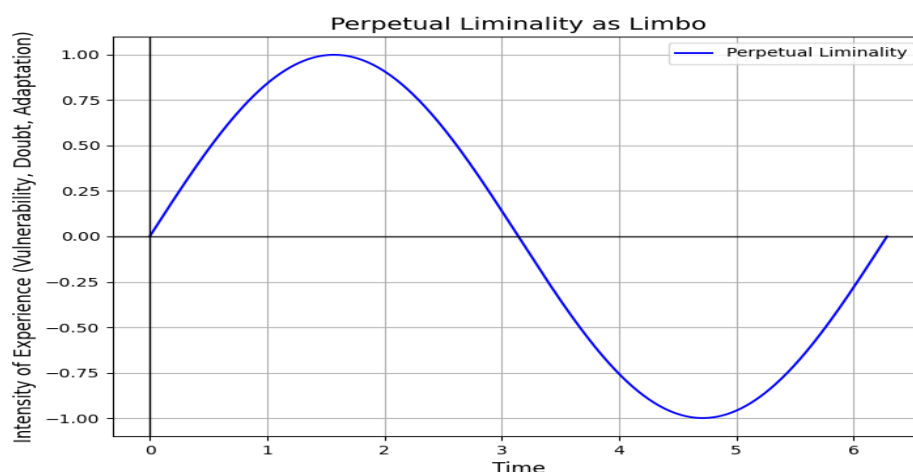


Figure 2. Perpetual liminality as limbo (Source: Authors’ fieldwork analysis, 2024) (Note: The horizontal axis represents the progression of time throughout the volunteer experience, while the vertical axis reflects the intensity of perceived liminality)

Figure 2 illustrates the evolving intensity of perceived liminality experienced by volunteer tourists throughout their journey. The horizontal axis represents the chronological phases of the volunteer experience (Arrival, Cultural Immersion, Crisis, Reflection, Re-entry), while the vertical axis shows the intensity of psychological and emotional liminality. The curve suggests that liminality is not a linear or temporary phenomenon but occurs in repeated waves, influenced by cultural shock, role ambiguity, ethical doubt, and emotional adaptation. Each phase brings new challenges (symbolic “monsters”), requiring the volunteer to renegotiate their identity. This cyclical pattern supports the concept of *perpetual liminality* rather than a single transformative event.

This figure can represent the cyclical nature of liminality, where volunteers experience repeated phases of vulnerability, doubt, and adaptation. According to the literature on liminality, the liminal space presents individuals with

challenging encounters, with ‘symbolic monsters’ that must be tamed, mastered, and overcome as part of crossing a threshold. The volunteers in this study found themselves in numerous situations that may represent the archetypal monsters presiding over the passages of volunteer tourists. However, in the mythology of the heroic journey, the hero does not fight the same ‘monster’ every day. The constant negotiating and renegotiating of the same problems and challenges make each volunteer tourist day almost *Groundhog Day*.

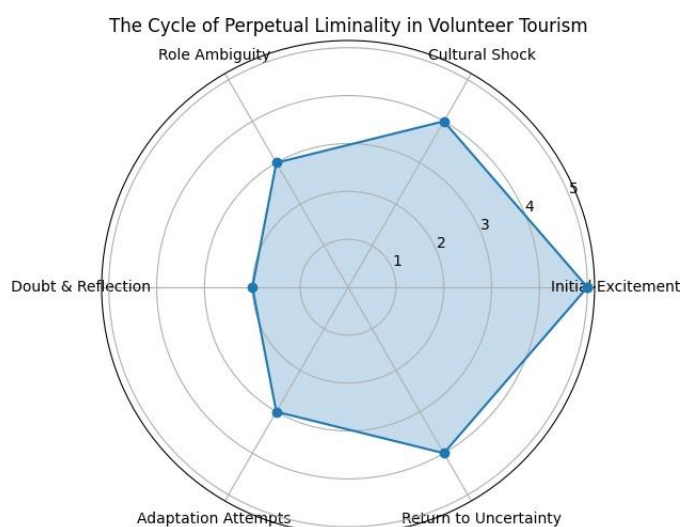


Figure 3. The Symbolic 'Monsters' in Volunteer Tourism (Source: Authors' fieldwork analysis, 2024)

Figure 3 visualizes the symbolic challenges (or "monsters") encountered by volunteer tourists throughout different phases of their journey. These metaphorical monsters—such as cultural shock, role ambiguity, ethical dilemmas, and personal doubt—represent the emotional and psychological barriers that hinder transformation and reinforce the feeling of being trapped in a liminal state. The horizontal axis maps key phases of the volunteer experience (e.g., Arrival, Immersion, Disillusionment, Reflection), while the vertical axis indicates the **intensity** of each challenge. The size and recurrence of each "monster" symbolize how these emotional obstacles vary by individual, situation, and context.

Rather than facing new challenges at each stage, volunteers often confront the **same symbolic threats repeatedly**, reflecting the cyclical and unresolved nature of their liminal experience. Not all the 'monsters' are the same, but the size of the 'monster' can be relative to the unique individual characteristics of the volunteers and each situation, as reflected by critical incidents. The incidents shared by volunteers demonstrate how the reality on the ground was challenging and relentless, affecting their experience, constantly pushing the participants into a limbo state where seemingly nothing ever changes. Upon arrival, volunteers must acclimatize and adjust to their accommodation and living conditions, including a lack of electricity, Wi-Fi, different hygiene practices, or even the rules and dictates of the host family, including curfews, shower times, and instances where the volunteers felt like hostages. To some, these monsters will be large, intimidating, and impede their journey, while to others, they will be perceived as more trivial. Differences in priorities and perspectives related to culture also influenced the size of the 'monster,' as volunteers continuously had to attempt to fit into the locals' day-to-day activities (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018). This continuous sense of feeling out of place, conspicuous, and threatened was highlighted by the participants. Volunteers had to get used to the noise, crowds, and unwanted attention from locals, including street hawkers and the advances of local men. Some volunteers dismissed this as mere cultural curiosity, while others felt threatened by a larger 'monster.' What made this more intense was the realisation that they would probably have to face the same situation the following day Khan & Pereira (2025).

Volunteers also have to acclimatise to deal with the realities of their daily work life. There is no severity meter to predict this accurately; however, we can say with relative certainty that the size of the 'monster' differs for each individual. From working in a hospital without equipment to being held up at gunpoint while at work, it is hard to move past this and consider it part of the course. Marginalisation and feelings of vulnerability were also prominent in the findings. Female volunteers, in particular, felt harassed, exposed, touched, and intimidated at worst.

The above is not new, as the tourism literature has dealt with female solo travellers' issues and the male gaze. In this context, the feeling of vulnerability is exacerbated, especially for females travelling to traditionally patriarchal societies, as volunteers find themselves trapped and have to face this harassment each day.

Some volunteers were expected to be needed more, while others were overwhelmed by the support received. Too much support can detract from the overall experience and mitigate the challenges the volunteers face, aligning with some views that volunteer tourist experiences are over-sanitised and standardised (Sheldon, 2020; Soulard et al., 2019). Necessary safety measures, the sanitisation of experiences, home comforts, and hedonistic pursuits pull the individual back to their old self, researchers and stall incorporation. Oversanitisation of projects and too much handholding can lead to a variety of outcomes related to perpetual liminality many researchers, including but not limited to a thirst for more, a continued search for reflection, a feeling of powerlessness, a continuous struggle with doubt, or just going with the flow and doing what others do. It can be considered that the setrapped individuals may appear confused and

contradictory while the ‘monster of doubt’ is gnawing at them. Individuals in this state tend to cast and recast themselves instantly for different audiences at different times. When volunteer tourists talk to family and friends or post on social media, their experience is always transformational and worth the time, expense, and effort. When adding a section on their volunteering work to their CV, volunteering has honed their adaptability and leadership skills.

However, there are times when confronted by the ‘monster of doubt,’ they find themselves asking questions that the journey, or no journey, could ever answer, so more doubt creeps in.

When considering their impact, volunteers were found either trying to dismiss the ‘monster of doubt’ in different ways or were tortured by the futility of their efforts and their powerlessness to inflict meaningful change. This difference in approach affects the experience’s liminality as different volunteers will process and reflect on this differently. Some may romanticise their choices and contributions, while others may try and affect meaningful change, armed with their new awareness, leading to a new journey. While neglected in tourism studies, the concept of limbo allows us to extend the volunteer tourist as ‘hero’ motif to discuss feelings of vulnerability, confinement, neglect, and doubt, akin to those souls that inhabit limbo in the Christian tradition.

Figure 4 illustrates the varying intensity of challenges faced by volunteer tourists, such as cultural shock, role ambiguity, doubt, marginalization, and adaptation. Each volunteer encounters these ‘monsters’ differently, influenced by personal resilience, cultural background, and situational factors. The fluctuations in intensity demonstrate how the experience can feel like a recurring battle, reinforcing the feeling of being trapped in a liminal state.

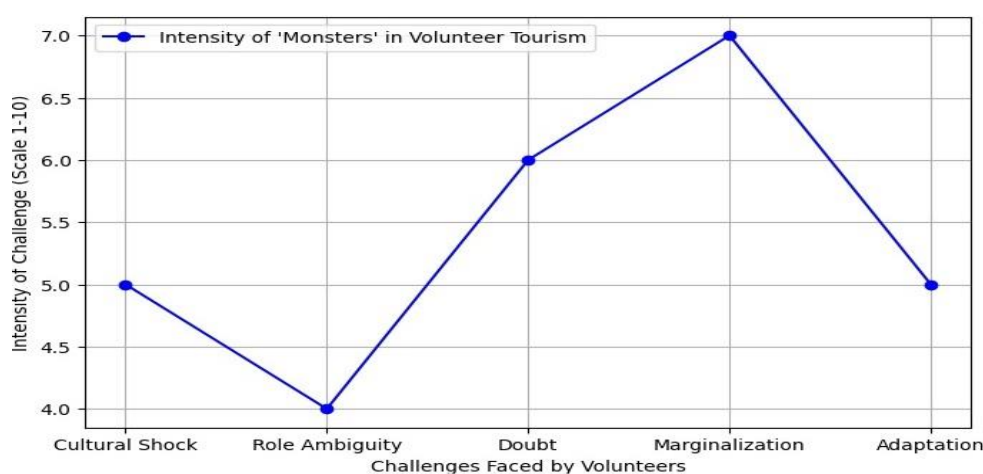


Figure 4. The Symbolic 'Monsters' in Volunteer Tourism (Source: Authors' fieldwork analysis, 2024)

Note: The horizontal axis represents recurring phases of the volunteer journey (e.g., Arrival, Immersion, Disillusionment, Reflection), while the vertical axis indicates the intensity of emotional and psychological challenges (ranging from low to extreme)

CONCLUSION

The experience of volunteer tourists, as discussed in this work, highlights the complexity and permanence of the liminality they experience in various cultural and operational contexts. Through the five key themes identified – being ‘locked’ in the liminal space, cultural differences, operational discrepancies, a sense of marginalization and vulnerability, and the confrontation with perpetual doubt – it has become clear that volunteers are not merely facing temporary challenges but are trapped in a form of perpetual limbo where these challenges repeat and intensify over time. This liminality, while it can occasionally foster moments of transformation, tends to freeze certain volunteers in a state of uncertainty and constant questioning, where the answers to the profound questions they ask seem never fully satisfying Tomazos & Murdy (2023).

Furthermore, the concept of liminality has been expanded through the lived experiences of volunteers, who constantly navigate between different worlds, confronted by symbolic ‘monsters’ that are never completely overcome. This dynamic can lead to a reinforcement of their inner doubt, vulnerability, and a continuous reflection on the true impact of their presence and actions. However, how each volunteer manages this liminality varies, with some attempting to transform their experience into something more meaningful, while others are caught in an endless cycle of doubt and questioning.

This work highlights the paradoxical nature of volunteer tourism, where the hope for transformation and contribution often collides with the reality of a complex experience marked by uncertainty and the confrontation with different cultures, structures, and expectations. Through this analysis, we suggest rethinking the role of the volunteer tourist as an actor in a liminal space, where challenges and obstacles become central elements of their journey, profoundly influencing their personal development and understanding of the world (Vassiliadis et al., 2020)

While this study has provided valuable insights into the liminal experiences of volunteer tourists, it is important to acknowledge several limitations. First, the study’s sample size and geographic scope were limited, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Volunteer tourists’ experiences can vary significantly depending on the region, the type of work they are involved in, and the cultural context they encounter. Therefore, the conclusions drawn here may not fully represent the diversity of experiences across different volunteer tourism settings.

Additionally, the phenomenological approach used in this study, while offering a deep understanding of individual experiences, does not capture the broader quantitative aspects of volunteer tourism. Future research could build on these

findings by incorporating mixed methods, combining qualitative insights with statistical analysis to provide a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon. Another limitation lies in the potential researcher bias in interpreting the subjective experiences of participants. Although great care was taken to maintain objectivity, the very nature of studying liminality involves personal interpretation, which may influence the findings. In future studies, involving multiple researchers could enhance the reliability and validity of the interpretations.

Lastly, the dynamic and evolving nature of volunteer tourism presents a challenge in fully capturing the experiences of volunteers over time. As the field continues to grow and change, it is crucial to consider how these shifts may impact the liminal experiences discussed in this study.

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