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Discourses of Volunteer Farm Tourism in Nepal: A Methodological Approach to World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms

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Abstract

In this research note, I propose an appropriate methodology to study discourses around the volunteer farm exchange programme World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) in Nepal. WWOOF is an international movement that connects organic farmers and international travellers who wish to exchange their labour for food and accommodation. Previously WWOOF was described as volunteer tourism, alternative tourism or as an alternative to tourism. As a non-profit exchange programme WWOOF abodes the commercialisation of tourism and attracts long-term international travellers who do not describe themselves as tourists and see WWOOF as a way to explore the destinations off the beaten track. As such, WWOOF members share different philosophy or discourse of travel from commercial farm tourism. Thus, it is essential to understand what drives farm hosts and volunteers to participate in this unique exchange programme in Nepal.

Introduction

Sustainability principles and green ideals entered people's daily lives about three decades ago and leisure and holidays were influenced by those trends too (Cohen, 2002; Joshi & Dhyani, 2009; Mowforth & Munt, 2015). In this way, programmes like World Wide Opportunities on

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Organic Farms (WWOOF) have become increasingly popular among travellers (Maycock, 2008). WWOOF is an international movement that links international travellers interested in volunteering on the organic farmer that promotes non-commercial cultural and educational exchanges aiming to contribute to building a sustainable global community (Federation of WWOOF Organisations, 2018). The daily arrangements within WWOOF programme consider volunteers are contributing with labour on the farm up to six hours a day in exchange for food, lodging, social interactions and sharing knowledge about organic farming (McIntosh, 2009).

Some researchers position WWOOF programme as a form of alternative tourism (McIntosh & Bonnemann, 2006; Mosedale, 2009), others associate it with volunteer tourism (Deville, Wearing, & McDonald, 2016). The majority of WWOOF volunteers are international travellers travelling long term on a limited budget; they differentiate themselves from commercial tourists and see WWOOF programme as a possibility to travel off the beaten track (Nimmo, 2001). Dana (2012) and (Ord, 2010) conclude that the that the national coordinators of WWOOF branches choose to distance the programme from tourism altogether. Thus, as an international movement WWOOF contributes to non-commercial volunteers exchange that avoids the commercialisation of tourism. As such, this exchange practice is underpinned by distinct philosophy or discourse of travel differentiating the programme from commercial farm tourism or traditional volunteer exchange programmes (Phillip, Hunter, & Blackstock, 2010).

The WWOOF movement gained increasing attention from academics about two decades ago. McIntosh and Campbell (2001) pioneered research on WWOOF and focused on hots' attitudes and motivation in the New Zealand context. However, previous studies do not go deep enough to uncover the deeper understanding of social dimensions of host-guest experiences in WWOOFing (Cronauer, 2012; Deville, 2011). In their recent study, Wengel, McIntosh, and Cockburn-Wootten (2018) challenge the idealistic picture of WWOOF movement and report finding that highlight tensions of economic and ethical accountability within WWOOFing.

In this research note, I suggest an appropriate theoretical framework and methodological approach to investigate and critically examine the discourses of host-guest interactions in non-profit volunteer exchange programme in Nepal on the example of WWOOF programme; the empirical findings of this research will be reported elsewhere. The research outlined in this research note is part of an international multisite study of host-guest interactions in WWOOF programme. The project focused on the communication aspects and understanding of the philosophy that underpins this non-profit host-guest exchange.

Literature review

The World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms originated from the United Kingdom in the 1970s. Firsts WWOOFers aimed to support the organic movement and the farmers while escaping the urban environment in a meaningful way (Pier, 2011). Over the last four decades the movement spread among the organic farmers and volunteers worldwide and as of 2010 there are nearly 12000 hosts and about 80000 volunteers in about 50 countries (International WWOOF Association, 2013). In the Nepal context, WWOOF started in 2003. In recent years WWOOFing gained increasing popularity among travellers coming to Nepal; 115 farmers are listed on the website along with 2500 volunteers joined the programme so far (WWOOF Nepal, 2018). In 2017 200 volunteers mainly interested in cultural exchange came to work on WWOOF farms in Nepal (WWOOF Nepal, 2018).

Previously researchers provided a general overview of the concept of WWOOFing (Maycock, 2008), looked at WWOOF as part of rural and farm tourism and deemed WWOOFers as alternative tourists interested in sustainable tourism practices (Deville, 2011; McIntosh & Campbell, 2001; McIntosh & Bonnemann, 2006). Stehlik (2002) focused on cultural exchange aspects and informal adult learning in WWOOF. Deville (2011) suggested that WWOOF represents a 'new model of travel' allowing long-term budget travellers the opportunity to extend the period of travel and to interact with locals in non-commercial setting. Other studies focused on host-guest interactions in the WWOOF movement (Cronauer, 2012; Deville, 2011; Wengel et al., 2018). In their latest study, Wengel et al. (2018) focus on in-depth host-guests relationships and challenge the positively framed aims of this type of volunteer tourism exchange programme that is usually reported in tourism literature. In particular, their findings highlight the tensions of economic and ethical accountability within the WWOOF programme.

In this multi-sited international research project, I endeavoured to understand the narratives of hosts and guests and examine how these shape and sustain the philosophies around host-guest exchange in WWOOF. Arguably, WWOOF is a distinct form of tourism, WWOOF movement embraces strong underlying values and philosophies, based on ideals around sustainability, organic farming and non-commercial tourism exchange practices (Cronauer, 2012). Previous research has neglected the role of communication and philosophy underpinning this form of non-commercial exchange. However, these aspects are vital to ensure the match of expectations, values and cultural perceptions of farmers and volunteers.

Within this research on WWOOF movement, language and text are integral parts playing a crucial role in information exchange, as WWOOF volunteers gain and share their experiences via the internet platforms like Facebook, TripAdvisor, blogs

as well as using word of mouth and friends' personal experiences. Consequently, online communication about WWOOF Nepal and representation of WWOOF Nepal homepage and Facebook page are important components of this research.

Proposing an appropriate theoretical framework

Despite the historical dominance of positivist frameworks in social sciences research the qualitative research has gained momentum over the past two decades (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015). As such, tourism scholars turned their attention to constructionist paradigm to examine social interactions in tourism setting (Dunn, 2005; Hunter, 2016; Li, 2010; Pritchard & Morgan, 2005, 2006; Tribe, 2008). Social constructionists consider subjective meanings of multiple realities constructed by individuals and based on their philosophy, worldviews and experiences (Young & Collin, 2004). The communicational aspect of host-guest interactions and understanding the philosophies around WWOOF fits into the constructivist paradigm as these are the part of the socially constructed realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, I propose constructionist framework as the most appropriate methodological approach to investigate critical discourses around WWOOF in order to make sense of the participants' experiences in Nepal. Subsequently, I discuss appropriate methods for data collection and analysis in the following section.

To gain the deeper understandings on subjective realities constructionist researcher apply various methods which may substantially vary from each other. As such, ethnographic methods rooted in anthropological research are widely applied in geography and tourism studies (Botterill & Platenkamp, 2012). Ethnographic studies are time-consuming as they allow the researcher to 'live' the research and be one of the participants while conducting observation and participating in daily activities (Bryman, 2016). Tourism ethnographies used to explore the aspects of dark tourism (Buda, 2015), community development (Azcárate, 2006; Cole, 2008), understand tourists' experiences (Frazer & Waitt, 2016; Westerhausen, 2002), host-guests' relations (Wei, Qian, & Sun, 2018) and impact of tourism on water resources (Cole, 2017).

This research aimed to understand in-depth host-guests' relations between Nepali farmers and international volunteers shaped by 'organic nature' of farming and interest in local socio-cultural practices (Maycock, 2008). Hence, the primary data for this study come from the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2014 and 2017 throughout four months. Following methods for data collection were used: individual in-depth interviews with tourists, farmers and tourism stakeholders, participant observation, reflexive diary and netnographic accounts of WWOOF Nepal. The unstructured qualitative interviews with farmers and volunteers were based on a set of themes. As a WWOOF volunteer myself I observed participants on the farms and captured

daily events in a reflexive journal. These data complemented qualitative interviewing and allowed to bear out my assumptions and hence provided deeper meanings of the encounters made by research participants (Bryman, 2012; King & Horrocks, 2010). Furthermore, the reflexive journal helped with interpretation of findings (Watt, 2007) and increased my understanding of participants interactions, philosophies and realities (Gilgun, 2008; Ortlipp, 2008).

The third method of data collection represents aligned with the ethnographic nature of this study is focused on netnographic accounts of WWOOF Nepal. As such, I examined the internet platforms including Facebook, TripAdvisor and blogs mentioning accounts of WWOOFing in Nepal. I also focused on the WWOOF Nepal website as it serves as a mediator for participants and contains significant relevant information. Although netnography was coined to understand consumer experiences (Kozinets, 2012; Rageh, Melewar, & Woodside, 2013; Snehota, Mandelli, & La Rocca, 2014) it has gained momentum and become increasingly popular method in tourism studies (Hsu, Dehuang, & Woodside, 2009; Mkono & Markwell, 2014; O'Connor, 2010; Tavakoli & Mura, 2018). The netnographic component of this research allowed a deeper insight into the philosophy of WWOOFing, helped to explore personal meanings, attitudes and experiences of the participants as well as to gain insights in experiences of hard to reach research participants (Mkono, 2012; Wu & Pearce, 2014).

Considering the focus of this paper on the discourse around WWOOF Nepal I chose to turn my attention to discourse analysis as an appropriate method of data analysis. Discourse analysis is a widespread qualitative research tool associated with constructionist epistemology (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1999; White, 2004). Discourse analysis presents a reflexive, interpretive method interested in language as a mean of social construction (Burman & Parker, 1993). Researchers claim that social reality is a product of discourses, and discourse analysis aids the understanding of how the reality is constructed, sustained and experienced by research participants (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Hence, as an analysis method, I propose Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is used to investigate language, discourse and communication and it considers 'language as a social practice' (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258). It thus focuses on language, power, history, ideology and connections among them. In tourism studies Caruana and Crane (2011) used CDA to investigate how freedom is constructed in tourism magazines' texts. Feighery (2006) analysed the information brochures to understand representation of tourism organisations in England and Small and Harris (2012) investigate the airline experiences of obese and non-obese passengers by using CDA.

Conclusion

In this research note, I suggest a possible appropriate methodology to study discourses around the WWOOF phenomenon. WWOOF is a phenomenon which requires diversified methods and methodologies in order to discover understand complex host- guests interactions and philosophies underpinning this non-profit tourism exchange programme. Thus, social constructionism was deemed as the most appropriate theoretical framework which served as an epistemological foundation around discourses of WWOOFing. I further propose a multi-method approach to data collection including ethnographic participant observations, in-depth interviews, reflexive diary and netnographic accounts of WWOOF Nepal. Discourse analysis, strongly associated with constructivist epistemology (White, 2004), was deemed as an appropriate tool of data analysis for this study as discourses around WWOOF represent "socially constructed knowledge of reality…[T]hey have been developed in specific social contexts, and in ways which are appropriate to the interest of social actors in these contexts" (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996, p. 4).

This research note contributes to the academic literature on qualitative methodologies, multi-method approach to data collection, the phenomenon of WWOOF, as well as the literature on hosts-guests' relationships in non-commercial volunteer tourism. The findings of this research contribute not only to academic literature in tourism and communication but also could benefit WWOOF movement, farmers and volunteers by enhancing the mutual understanding of core values and philosophies of the unique experience within this international exchange programme.

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