

The limits of transformation: exploring liminality and the volunteer tourists' limbo

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ABSTRACT

Using data collected from 9,508 volunteer tourists, we employ Critical Incident Technique to identify and explore the volunteers' experience and how this affects the liminality of their journeys. What becomes apparent is that the liminality of the experience can have uncertain outcomes as volunteer tourists have to navigate living conditions, culture, operational differences, and feelings of marginalisation and vulnerability, all while feeling powerless to make meaningful change. As such, volunteer-sending organisations should be mindful of the use of transformation within the marketing of their programmes, given the highly individualised experiences of volunteers. The use of transformation should be fine-tuned to the individual, their expectations, and the contribution they wish to make.

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Introduction

Tribe (2006) postulates that it is virtually impossible to depict or predict tourist experiences precisely. There will always be ambiguity between what emerges from a tourism encounter contingent on the experience itself, the individual, and their expectations. However, the relevant literature either focuses on transformation learning through liminality and a narrative of facing challenges and being pushed outside one's comfort zone (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; Knollenberg et al., 2014; Mulder et al., 2015; Tomazos & Butler, 2010) or highlights the superficiality and subsequent variability of this transformation (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018). The existing body of research does not cover all aspects of this alleged transformation, and most crucially, it is challenging to assess the actual process that facilitates meaningful change empirically (see Magrizos et al., 2020). We trace liminality within the context of organised volunteer tourism, borrowing from Salazar's work (2012, p. 866), viewing the volunteer tourist experience as endlessly (re)invented, (re)produced, (re)captured, and (re)created. Additionally, we question whether volunteer tourists can be trapped in limbo. As volunteers take on new tasks or shift between roles, the liminal aspect becomes almost routinised and demystified, job-like and repetitive (Ybema et al., 2011).

Liminality is defined as being betwixt and between, and there will be deviations when someone moves

from one stage to another, primarily when influenced by others. Many volunteer tourists rely on the help and continuous support of brokers, project directors, staff, and other volunteers. This is symptomatic of the sector's institutionalisation, driven by the need to offer sanitised volunteer tourism experiences underlined by safety, quality assurance, and value for money. However, this sanitisation is not foolproof, and incidents can occur beyond the perceived scope of the 'standard experience' a volunteer tourist has come to expect. Tracing volunteers' journeys through their thoughts on their experience, we start to unravel how the experience has affected them. What becomes apparent is that the liminality of the experience can have uncertain outcomes. It can lead to transitional liminality, but it can also be perpetual, leading to a limbo of doubt as they become aware of the futility of their efforts (Gius, 2017).

Theory

Transformation and liminality

Personal transformation has been deconstructed as a 'dynamic, uniquely individualised process of expanding [one's] consciousness' (Wade, 2002, p. 713). It is an ongoing process and not an end state. It could repeatedly occur in a person's life, often envisaged as a journey beyond the known into the unknown. It

confronts individuals with disorienting dilemmas and challenges, leading to self-examination, acquiring new skills and a fresh perspective (Buechner et al., 2020; Mezirow, 2003). At least, in theory, stimulation past one's comfort zone hastens a perspective transformation and acts as a trigger event (Lee, 1997; Taylor, 1989). In this process, integrating surroundings provide milieus for these events and licenses individuals to discover meaning through their experience.

The term 'liminality' recognises that rituals follow a three-stage separation, transition, and incorporation (Van Gennep, 1960). Separation (pre-liminal) is where people are distanced from their natural settings, and incorporation is where one returns to the structure of everyday life (Nash & Smith, 1991). Liminality marks the middle point of a rite of passage, a transitional period of change (Van Gennep, 1960). The intermediate stage, transition (liminal), denotes an actual passing through the threshold that marks the periphery between two phases. The word 'liminality' characterises this passage, which is facilitated by the temporary ritual removal of all limits. In the third stage, incorporation (post-liminal), one has progressed from the transitional phase and has potentially returned to society transformed. Within the confines of the ritual, the very structure of society is temporarily suspended. This passing suspension of pre-existing order offers an excellent vehicle for understanding experiences and time and space to question and reflect. In effect, liminality is both liberating and full of promise because, for a time-bound period, the rules do not apply (Turner, 1969). While transformation is generally perceived as positive (Robledo & Batle, 2017; Sheldon, 2020), previous studies have highlighted how this process could hide danger (Douglas, 1966), fear and hostility (Tumbat & Belk, 2011), extreme pain (Scott et al., 2017), and addiction (Celsi et al., 1993). However, there is an argument that liminality could be perpetual, a transitional situation that persists (Szakolczai, 2009, p. 212).

While in some contexts, transformation can be symbolically or physically encapsulated, for example, through the presence of mud on a participant in a tough mudder race (Scott et al., 2017), the same cannot be said for all experiences. Thomassen (2009) placed liminalities on a continuum from short-term (episodic) to persistent (permanent). This spectrum is pertinent to this paper as volunteer tourism experiences, at least on the surface, would be anticipated to fall within the bracket of short-term or episodic liminality. However, even episodic liminality becomes persistent or permanent when incorporation stalls. Szakolczai (2009, p. 213) argues that this stalling takes place and incorporation freezes before it is completed, 'as a film stopped at a particular frame'.

However, Szakolczai's conceptualisation does not explain the causes of the freezing, nor does it conceptualise permanent liminality as a repetitive cycle of transition, where persisting, extended liminality can become permanent (Appau et al., 2020).

Transformation, liminality, and tourism

Traditionally applied in anthropology, liminality views the tourist experiences as time and space (Turner, 1974), where the restraints of daily life are temporarily lifted, and one can act more freely and express their true self (Wang, 1999). Liminality portends a tourist immersing themselves in a state of being, both physically and psychologically different from their ordinary self but not yet fully transformed into a new state of being (Belhassen et al., 2008; Brown, 2013; Wang, 1999). Liminality can also be protracted to encompass any condition outwith or on the peripheries of ordinary life or experiences at the threshold (Thomassen, 2009; Turner, 1974). Thus, tourism provides a restricted period for an authentic self to emerge from which the tourist is supposedly plummeted back into an inauthentic life (Brown, 2013).

Liminality has been applied widely in tourism, for example, in yacht tourism (Lett, 1993), airports (Huang et al., 2018), beaches (Andriotis, 2010), festivals (Wu et al., 2020), backpacking (Bui et al., 2014; Cohen, 2003), volunteer tourism (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017; Robledo & Batle, 2017; Tomazos & Butler, 2010), dark tourism (Pastor & Kent, 2020), and sex tourism (Ryan & Martin, 2001; Selännemi, 2003; Weichselbaumer, 2012). Furthermore, liminality has also been used to discuss other forms of specific tourism pursuits, including river rafting (Arnould & Price, 1993), sky diving (Celsi et al., 1993), mountain climbing (Tumbat & Belk, 2011), and BDSM activities (Tomazos et al., 2017). All studies deconstruct liminality using a similar motif of escape from routine social structures to experience something extraordinary.

In general, our understanding of the transformative boon of travel is somewhat limited (Kirillova et al., 2017), but it is now understood that it marks a shift towards global citizenship and gaining a new outlook. It is rather challenging to examine this change empirically, but several studies have explored different forms of tourist experiences and settings for evidence of transformative learning (Kirillova et al., 2017; Magrizos et al., 2020; Pung et al., 2020; Soulard et al., 2019; Soulard et al., 2020; Zhang & Xu, 2019). The liminality and the challenges awaiting beyond the threshold are perceived as personal growth and self-actualisation opportunities. First, they enhance one's cultural horizons and

cosmopolitan outlook (Curtin & Brown, 2019; Grabowski et al., 2017). Second, they foster value change and a reflexive outlook (Noy, 2004; O'Reilly, 2006). Third, in practical terms, experiences beyond the threshold offer the opportunity to develop new or upgrade existing skills (Crossley, 2012). Finally, the challenge of being pushed outside one's comfort zone presents individuals with the test of adjusting to new environments (McGladery & Lubbe, 2017). The successful immersion fosters change in attitudes towards the destination hosts (Nyau-pane et al., 2008) and a newfound sense of confidence and perspective (Crossley, 2012).

Separation, transformation, incorporation or permanent liminality?

Booker (2004) argues that human behaviour can be traced in stories underlined by seven archetypes; overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, voyage and return, comedy, tragedy and rebirth. All these archetypes can feature in the liminal space, especially the monster that needs to be overcome. Freud argued that monsters are embodiments of one's fears and anxieties generated by the unconscious mind to reflect the worries the individual fails to acknowledge consciously (Fuss, 2018). Turner (1987) points out that individuals in liminal spaces may encounter symbolic 'monsters'. Facing, taming, mastering, or overcoming the 'monster' indicates that the threshold has been crossed, and the transition from one state to another is nearing an end. The anthropological literature also reveals several archetypal figures which may be present in the liminal space. They are the hero, the mentor, the ally, the herald, the trickster, the shapeshifter, the guardian and the shadow (Campbell, 2008). These figures help to understand the role of those presiding over the passages of volunteer tourists (Tomazos & Butler, 2010). Some of these archetypal figures appear as 'monsters', which tend to manifest at times of uncertainty when venturing into the unknown. These figures are linked to being between and betwixt in a liminal state (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003).

In effect, the liminal 'monsters' experienced by volunteer tourists take the form of the doubt and uncertainty they share about many aspects of their journey (Magrinos et al., 2020). This includes their perceptions of volunteer tourism, the recipients of their effort, their role, and their ability to view the world in terms of right, wrong, good, and bad.

Diverse, co-produced and shared experiences can lead to transformative insight that challenges existing beliefs and biases (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Mulder et al., 2015). The main caveat is reflection and

re-examination with a sense of perspective (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018). This existentialist argument offers excellent potential to understand the volunteer tourist experience (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017) and the many choices, events, and interactions that comprise the experience. By making choices and prioritising, they become authors of their experience. Volunteers taking on their role is only a first step in a transition that can have undetermined potential outcomes. Their individual histories and the narrative permeate their tourist imaginaries and the lens they attach to their experience. These imaginaries may be romanticised representations of volunteer tourism, as informed by commercials, websites, social media, and other tourist narratives (Gius, 2017; Mostafanezhad, 2013), highlighting the tension between reality and expectation (Tegelberg, 2013). We take forward that liminality has the potential to provide ground for understanding the very intricate dimensions of transformation in transient and unsettled organisational settings (See Sturdy et al., 2006), where liminality can also become elongated and stalled.

The literature shows there are no guarantees of transformation. Even at the very basic three-stage level of separation, transition, and incorporation (Van Gennep, 1960), incorporation is not always complete. There is potential for persistent, permanent liminality that traps individuals in a continuous transformation cycle (Szokolczai, 2009), impeded by the monster of doubt or just the individual choosing to take an easy way out, which also brings the process to a halt. In any liminal situation, human reaction is usually a combination of will and emotion and explicit rationality that could lead to imitation. To put it simply, in a situation that generates anxiety and uncertainty, individuals tend to opt to follow what others do (Szokolczai, 2017, p. 234).

By slightly stretching the conceptual barriers of the original anthropological tradition, we can use the same motif to understand the lived realities of volunteer tourists who are trapped in between, potentially unable to complete the transformation process.

Transformation or volunteer tourist's limbo?

Despite the above theoretical constraints to transformation, some industry players are moving away from over-sanitising experiences and are using the transformational narrative to create market differentiation. In many cases, believing in transformation would generate a sense of achievement and purpose for participants via a placebo effect (Benedetti et al., 2005) reinforced by the experience's heroic narrative. We must not underestimate the power and lure of the heroic narrative. One of the most dominant themes in volunteer tourism is the

charity and mission element (Brown & Morrison, 2003; Wearing, 2001), differentiating volunteer tourism in participants' minds as an expression of political consumerism (Holzer, 2006; Shah et al., 2007) which does not separate their roles as citizens and consumers. In this context, tourism consumption is supercharged with political and ethical meanings (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018; Jacobsen & Dulsrud, 2007; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). The young people partaking in such experiences and buying into this narrative find a conduit to exercise selfhood and find meaning and satisfaction in an ailing society where '... narcissism appears to embody – in the guise of personal growth and awareness- the highest attainment of spiritual enlightenment' (Lasch, 2018, p. 234). This quest for meaning and the symbolic power of expressing oneself through consumption signals to producers and businesses that there is potential in the trading of such powerful products, and in the process, these experiences become surrealist goods, a fetishist form of commodified altruism (Godfrey, 2018; Kainthola et al., 2021) ingrained in capitalist structures facilitated by specialist tour operators. Such operators are identified in the literature as transformative tourism operators (Lean, 2015), espousing taking concrete actions to encourage travellers down the transformation path. In a volunteer tourism context, they use activities that push volunteers out of their comfort zone and foster self-reflection (Sheldon, 2020; Souldard et al., 2019). It remains to be seen how effective such initiatives and experiences are or whether this is another attempt to segment the volunteer tourism market further. It would be overambitious to assume that transformative tourism organisations can induce transformation through experience design. However, this is welcome evidence that there is a shift, or at least some viable market space, away from the status quo of sanitised experiences.

To deal with these inherent theoretical and practical constraints, this paper proposes a different outcome of transformational journeys: perpetual liminality, in which a volunteer can be trapped in limbo. This blending of liminality and limbo is prominent in the work of Turner, who argued that rites of margin or limen are performed in a limbo space allowing time and space for those who, while transitioning from one state to the other, have lost their previous status but have not fully passed through to their new state (see Turner, 1985, p. 209). This concept has been examined within work settings by Johnsen and Sørensen (2015, p. 326), who found that 'permanent liminality is a situation in which liminal licence is extended – possibly indefinitely – in a social limbo'. Limbo has been explored in the organisational literature (see Browning & McNamee, 2012; Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015; Shortt, 2015), and it has many

applications, from leadership to the spatial aspects of work. For this paper, we employ limbo as a frozen, trapped state (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019) that can only be changed via profound intervention (Capps & Carlin, 2010), and those who inhabit it are stalled, hoping that either their time will come or that someone will intervene.

To capture limbo, this paper uses Critical Incident Theory to identify the key aspects of the liminal zone or limbo. Critical incidents can be positive or negative, and as discussed later, they are subject to conscious reflection (Richards & Farrell, 2005) on the volunteer's understanding of their experiences. By vividly recalling and describing such critical incidents, volunteers can explore all kinds of assumptions and emerging doubts about their experience.

Method

Employing Critical Incident Technique (CIT), we consider post-trip narratives of volunteer tourists to explore perpetual liminality in volunteer tourism. CIT is a content analysis method that uses self-reported narratives to categorise occurrences, phenomena, and specific events (Holloway & Beatty, 2008). Narratives offer an extra dimension to the study allowing time and space for the participant to configure and reconfigure their thoughts and evaluate different stimuli, which may or may not have disrupted their value system. A critical incident is defined as an experience that 'contributes to or detracts from the general aim of the activity in a significant way' (Bitner et al., 1990, p. 73). Therefore, the self-reflective narrative facilitated by the study offers a vivid examination of how the reality on the ground can conflict with expectations.

Borrowing from the social constructivism paradigm (Creswell, 2014), this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the volunteer tourist experience and the potential for perpetual liminality. CIT involves five stages: 1. Ascertain the general aims of volunteer tourism participation; 2. Making plans and setting specifications; 3. Collecting the data by obtaining self-reported narratives from volunteers; 4. Analyse the data; and 5. Interpret and report the data. In stage 1, the research team set the volunteer tourism objective as what each volunteer expected to accomplish (Ebema, 2015). The second stage defined the types of situations reflected upon. As the paper explores liminality, critical incidents were defined as memorable moments during participation and affected the volunteers' performance. Stage 3 involved 11,916 critical incidents from 9,508 volunteers who provided self-reported narratives of their experience. Flanagan (1954) suggests

that the number of participants does not determine the sample size but the number of incidents when using CIT.

Data was collected between 2015 and 2019 with the help of a major volunteer-sending organisation responsible for facilitating volunteer tourist experiences globally. The organisation was carefully selected based on its scope, geographical reach and resources. Of the 9,508 volunteers who provided critical incidents, the majority identified as female ($n = 7,537$; 79.3%), with fewer participants identifying as males ($n = 1,832$; 19.3%). The remaining volunteers either provided gender-neutral or no title ($n = 139$; 1.5%). Most volunteers were from mainland Europe ($n = 3,683$; 38.7%), followed by North America (2,319; 24.4%), the UK and Ireland ($n = 2,078$; 21.9%), Australia and New Zealand ($n = 1,062$; 11.2%), and Asia ($n = 288$; 3%), with remaining regions each representing less than one per cent of the sample (Middle East, $n = 44$; Latin America, $n = 30$; Africa, $n = 4$). Volunteers participated in projects around the world, with most undertaking their experience in Asia ($n = 3,431$; 36.1%), followed by Africa ($n = 2,765$; 29.1%), South America ($n = 1,797$; 18.9%), the Pacific ($n = 893$; 9.4%), Latin America ($n = 463$; 4.9%), and Europe ($n = 159$; 1.7%).

We acknowledge that the organisation is for-profit; however, its resources enabled the detailed and systematic data collection used in this analysis. Volunteers reflected in line with Gibb's (1988) reflective cycle, considering key moments of their experience, what sense they could make of the situation, and what else could be done. Reflecting on these incidents allowed the volunteers to gain greater awareness of themselves as a volunteer, their role, and their impact.

Critical incidents were explored in line with the frame of reference (Stage 5) before the incidents were formulated into categories based on the level of specificity and generality. Guidance was taken from Braun and Clarke (2006), and we familiarised ourselves with the data before considering additional themes and subsequently allocating quotes. The researchers reviewed themes individually before coming together to ensure triangulation (Rhoden & Kaaristo, 2020). The first author explored all reviews, and 3,000 reviews (15.8%) were assessed for intercoder reliability with the second author. A Cohen's Kappa of 0.86 was identified, and based on guidelines from Landis and Koch (1977), this was considered almost perfect agreement and deemed appropriate for continued interpretation. Thematic analysis facilitated an in-depth review and interpretation of the data, enhancing the understanding of this social phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The use of narratives assisted in creating new knowledge by exploring a range of individual reflections. It allowed for the

identification of common implicit and explicit elements of the experiences tied to the notion of perpetual liminality in volunteer tourism.

Findings

The challenges of volunteer tourists' limbo

Five themes, or challenges, of the volunteer tourists' limbo, are identified: living conditions, culture, operational differences, a continuous feeling of marginalisation and vulnerability, and facing the 'monster' of doubt in relation to their impact. These are presented here with quotes from the critical incidents presented before discussing them in relation to the literature.

Locked in the liminal space: living conditions

To some extent, all participants appreciated the challenges presented by the new setting, but some more readily adjusted to conditions on the ground. Some volunteers were able to incorporate learning opportunities arising from the liminal space. However, others felt locked in the liminal space where they had to overcome the same challenges day in day out.

My host family did not 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 eating what you know at home that is not so bad. But people living in the dirt on each other, that the word 'empathy' is not known at the hospital ... You cannot change the culture/ lifestyle/ mindset of a country (Female, 24, Dutch volunteering in Africa, 6 weeks).

Getting used to the amenities available, adjusting to living with 6–10 people (not much privacy), people treating you differently (thinking you were rich) and constantly trying to rip you off and get money from you (Female, 18, Australian volunteering in Africa, 2 weeks).

Culture

Within the liminal space, volunteers found themselves standing between and negotiating different national cultures and microcultures. This continuous negotiation extended to every aspect of the experience, from simple tasks to simple conversations. As such, this constant need to adjust and re-adjust added to the perpetual liminality of the experience.

Getting used to the Jamaican culture was challenging, especially dealing with the advances of people on the streets. It took me almost one month to feel safe walking through the town to my placement and to not be bothered by the random strangers that came to

walk beside me. While it was just a product of culture shock, gaining confidence in doing things independently in Jamaica was the most challenging thing for me (Female, 22, American volunteering in Jamaica, 12 weeks)

I found it difficult to adjust to the fact that, probably because I am female, pretty much everyone (even casual acquaintances) had something to say about my physical appearance. Whether their comments were positive or negative, it was an awkward thing to experience if one comes from a culture where looks are not really discussed except among close friends, and it did not really become any easier throughout my weeks in Moldova (American, 26, American volunteering in Moldova, 4 weeks)

Operational differences

In the literature, critical incidents are described as moments or events that create a conflict between one's self-view and their immediate surroundings. Given the hybrid nature of the volunteer tourist context, critical incidents manifested in three different ways: 1) critical conditions and activities directly linked to the volunteer tourist role, 2) extraordinary situations that function as catalysts for critical reflection, and 3) moments or events that underline the shocking reality of the life of others:

Delivering a baby, two babies actually! This experience was most enjoyable and will be a 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. Not only did it leave me without money, my sentimental handbag and purse, my phone which was also my travel camera, but broke my spirit (Female, 40, Australian volunteering in South America, 12 weeks).

As a human rights-lover it was really hard for me to witness child labour, child trafficking and the mistreatment of disabled and mentally ill individuals (Female, 22, British volunteering in Africa, 7 weeks).

Exploring these three types allows insight into the possible impact of different critical incidents related to operational differences, where volunteers feel at odds with practices that are different from Western standards.

Feeling continuously marginalised and vulnerable in the liminal state

The findings show that the volunteers felt marginalised by their conspicuous appearance within the setting and powerless in a way they were not used to back home. The discomfort of being overtly different from most of the population manifested differently. Some volunteers were followed around and photographed by strangers, and this was emphasised primarily by female

volunteers who found themselves subject to the male gaze and acts of sexual aggression.

Being a woman of a different and rare ethnicity in [host city] was a little challenging for me to adapt to. I was stared at a lot of times, approached by strange men and few women, and people either asked or took a picture of me (a majority of the time without my permission) (Female, 21, American volunteering in South America, 9 weeks).

All of the placements for volunteers there were at least an hour away on two or more modes of transportation. For example, I was put on a trotro around 5pm one day and by the time I returned and had to get off and cross the street for a taxi it was very late in the evening. I tried to message people saying how unsafe I felt and that there were two men in the vehicle being very touchy and aggressive towards me, grabbing my leg and hair. The response I got was that it was even more dangerous to get off the trotro so I needed to stay on (Female, 31, American volunteering in Ghana, 2 weeks).

The same marginalisation was also felt within the confines of the volunteers' accommodation or home-stay, where in theory, volunteers should have always felt comfortable and safe. Some volunteers expressed discomfort and felt unwanted and a burden.

Our host mother rarely communicated with us for the duration of our stay. We were woken each morning to the sound of family arguments and shouting which did not put us at ease. We did not feel welcome or wanted by our host family and felt we were intruding in their home. They did not seem to want to engage in conversation with us and therefore we did not get to know them (Female, 21, British volunteering in Fiji, 3 weeks).

By far the most challenging thing for me was my original host family experience. She was not mentally or physically well and put me and my roommate in many uncomfortable situations for 6 weeks until the day she found out we were changing houses. That night she kept us hostage and only let us out when the police were called, and without our things. In the end we got our things back but with bleach and garbage poured on them (Female, 22, American volunteering in Argentina, 13 weeks).

It is important to note that female volunteers raised concerns about some hosts' inappropriate conduct. In the less severe cases, hosts were rude and nosy, and in the most severe cases, the hosts often made inappropriate remarks and made sexual advances towards them. The quotes below underline the difficult situation some volunteers found themselves in, exacerbated by their dependence on these individuals.

Being completely dependent on a person who is also more interested in making sexual advances than your

own personal comfort or safety was easily the most challenging, disappointing, and frustrat[ing] aspects of this trip (Female, 20, American volunteering in Romania, 3 weeks).

She was very nosy, past the point of just the normal Bolivian cultural tendency to want to know things about you. She often asked questions that I found somewhat inappropriate (like about my relationships, sexuality, etc.), and she also made fun of my appearance in a way that made me feel like I was back in high school again having to deal with obnoxious and immature 'mean-girl' types (Female, 24, American volunteering in Bolivia, 3 weeks).

The above quotes again underline this feeling of being trapped within the liminal space. Not all volunteers can change their circumstances immediately. It might take time, and there is no certainty that it will be better when it does.

Facing the 'Monster of doubt'

The volunteers' experience started with facing the 'monster of doubt' and ended with more doubt. Initially, when volunteers arrive in the setting and take on their roles, they doubt themselves and their abilities. As illustrated below, this feeling of doubt in oneself evaporates over time.

The first few days for me were quite challenging. I questioned and doubted my decision a lot. I was uncertain whether I had made the right decision or if I was cut out for this by myself. I knew I had the support of my host mam, the other volunteers and (the organisation) but I couldn't shake the feeling of homesickness. This feeling left sooner than I expected once work began. If I could've worked 7 days a week I would've! By the end of my trip, I wanted to stay longer and the only reason I didn't was because of my family (Female, 18, Irish volunteering in Ethiopia, 2 weeks).

When I first arrived and did my first day at the school, I got home and cried because I thought 'I can't do this!' I felt I had nothing to offer and was frightened that I wouldn't have the courage to teach bigger classes. After that first day, I gave myself a pep talk and then thankfully things got easier. It's a challenge coming to the placement for the first time and wanting to be able to give and contribute and doubting that you can. (Female, 24, British volunteering in South Africa, 4 weeks).

While the initial feeling of doubt eased off after a few days for many volunteers, the same feeling returned with a vengeance as the days passed, and they started questioning their work and impact. No longer insecure and doubtful of their abilities, some volunteers wondered about their participation and the realities other people face. In contrast, others were dismissive of any doubt. In many cases, doubt was dealt with in a very

decisive manner, summarised as 'I am just a volunteer, how can I make a difference?' and 'I wish I could do more, but I do not make the rules'. In other cases, the volunteers appeared to struggle with the blurring of distinctions concerning their understanding of their role, others, and volunteer tourism in general. This particular feeling of powerlessness to affect meaningful change pushed volunteers to re-evaluate their choices and expectations regarding the role of sending organisations and other stakeholders. Some volunteers offered romanticised sentiments of learning and growing, which can be summarised in the following quote below:

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

Other participants started to question volunteer tourism in general, sometimes resorting to over-simplifications driven by what they perceived as the futility of their efforts.

The biggest challenge for me was the feeling of futility in my project. There was not much to do for me, and I had to find my own place within the project. I worked at a special education school, so this has probably contributed to the additional difficulty. In addition, it was difficult to put through your own way and look at life in a different culture (Male, 18, Dutch volunteering in the Pacific, 4 weeks).

Knowing the money you paid for this trip, mainly went to costs not related to where you were. It is very disheartening to learn and see that the money I spent barely went to my program or my host family (Female, 24, Canadian volunteering in South America, 8 weeks).

The apparent disillusion was amplified by comments on how some volunteers felt surplus to requirement or did not make the impact they expected as they had too much idle time.

Lack of work. No guidance on work expectations. Hanging around for hours and hours doing nothing was very disheartening and unmotivating. The work I did was piecemeal, there was no plan, didn't know who I reported to (Female, 44, Australian volunteering in Fiji, 4 weeks).

Another source of frustration was the organisation's overwhelming support to the volunteers, which they found unconstructive and patronising. Several volunteers felt not challenged enough due to too much 'hand holding' by the sending organisation and their representatives.

I would honestly have asked for less support from [Organisation]. Sometimes it was overwhelming, and

I was offered more help and assistance than I felt I needed but this may simply be due to the fact that I travel often to a variety of countries. I can certainly see this support being helpful for some less-experienced travelers (Male, 27, American volunteering in Asia, 4 weeks)

Finally, in several instances, volunteers were left to re-examine their worldviews, but the most common sentiment expressed was anger and resentment towards the apparent inequality they experienced, along with a deep feeling of respect and empathy towards the locals.

It was also challenging to witness the kind of inequality in [host country]. When we built a school garden in a very poor community that lacked basic resources (e.g. garbage collection, proper housing, electricity and water supplies), it was most frustrating to see that five minutes away, a fancy community with a golf course was being built. (Female, 42, American volunteering in Asia, 3 weeks).

The hospital was most challenging for me in the sense that there was such a lack of resources and sometimes nothing could be done to help people in need. It was definitely an adjustment to watch emergency patients come in and have to lay there in agony (sometimes dying) until someone paid for the care and materials they needed to receive (Female, 22, American volunteering in Tanzania, 10 weeks).

Discussion

As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), 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 (Szokolczai, 2009), a limbo state which 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 (Appau et al., 2020), but we also argue that transformation can be frozen or stalled (Szokolczai, 2009).

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

(Tomazos & Butler, 2010). 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.

Of course, 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 and affected their experience, constantly pushing the participants into a limbo state where seemingly nothing ever changes. Upon arrival, volunteers have to acclimatise and get used to their accommodation and living conditions, including lack of electricity, wifi, 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 by 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.

Volunteers also have to acclimatise to deal with the realities of their daily work life. There is no severity metre 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 (see Proyrungroj, 2017; Thomas & Mura, 2019; Wilson & Little, 2008). 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.

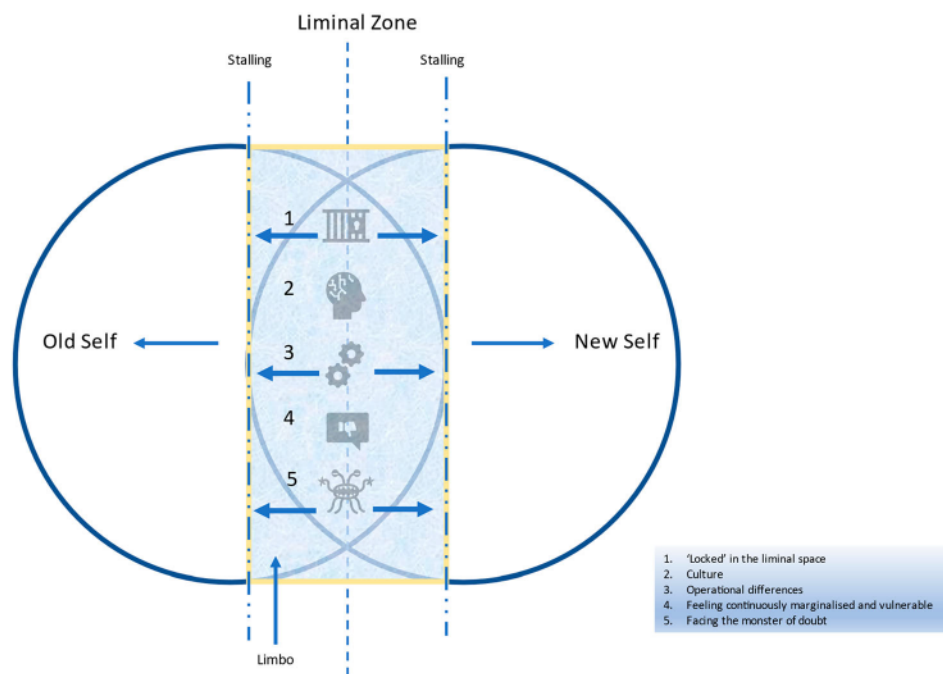


Figure 1. Perpetual Liminality as Limbo.

Some volunteers 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 (Szokolczi, 2009) and stall incorporation. Oversanitisation of projects and too much handholding can lead to a variety of outcomes related to perpetual liminality (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019; Szokolczi, 2009), including but not limited to a thirst for more, a continued search for reflection, a feeling of powerlessness (Gius, 2017) a continuous struggle with doubt or just going with the flow and doing what others do (Szokolczi, 2017).

It can be considered that these trapped individuals may appear confused and contradicting while the 'monster of doubt' is there 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 (Soulard et al., 2019) 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 (Tomazos & Butler, 2010). However, there are times that when confronted by the 'monster of doubt', they find themselves asking

questions that the journey, or no journey, could ever answer (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017; Magrizos et al., 2020), 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 (Mostafanezhad, 2013). 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 contribution (Gius, 2017), while others may try and affect meaningful change, armed with their new awareness leading to a new journey (Tomazos & Butler, 2010) and further liminality (Mälkki, 2010). While neglected in tourism studies, the concept of limbo allows us to extend the volunteer tourist as 'hero' motif (Tomazos & Butler, 2010) to discuss feelings of vulnerability, confinement, neglect and doubt, akin to those souls that inhabit limbo in the Christian tradition (see Capps & Carlin, 2010).

Conclusion

The volunteer tourist journey has the potential to provide a transformational experience for volunteers. Previous studies have explored volunteer tourist transformation (see Pung et al., 2020) and have considered the construct at an empirical level (see Magrizos et al., 2020; Soulard et al., 2020). However, the inclusion of

such messaging through the promotion of transformation within the volunteer experience (see Sheldon, 2020; Soulard et al., 2019; Soulard et al., 2020) is a difficult sell when the nature of transformation is relatively individualised and, as discussed in this study, can lead to perpetual liminality. One could argue that any effort to include, predict, or preclude transformation is a positive step toward encouraging a volunteer's realistic outlook and reflection on their contribution. However, we must be vigilant that transformation does not become a convenient addition or marketing differentiation tool and is integrated meaningfully into the experience.

This paper contributes new theoretical perspectives and empirical findings to conceptualising liminality in volunteer tourism. Here, we posit 'volunteers' limbo' as a state distinct from both transitional and permanent liminality. This is a critical analytic distinction in better understanding volunteer tourists' experiences. While it is challenging to measure transformation, we can almost say with certainty that the transition has begun at the crossing of the threshold. The value of this approach is that it lifts the pressure off individuals recognising the potentiality that not all journeys have the desirable ending, but it is about the journey itself.

This article contributes a fresh perspective to the literature on the lived experience of volunteer tourists. Most saliently, to theoretical and conceptual debates around liminality, as applied to volunteer tourism, our study has explored critical incidents provided by volunteers across various projects and represents a valuable extension to previous work. We seek to encourage further exploration and potential measurement of tourist transformation, especially when there is a trend to include this within future marketing of the industry (see Sheldon, 2020; Soulard et al., 2019; Soulard et al., 2020). However, we also advise caution as this measurement may continue to prove problematic.

Given that our data was collected pre-COVID19, we acknowledge that there will likely be a change in the industry as we come out of the pandemic. However, our findings highlight the potential difficulties of delivering on advertised 'transformational experiences' and offer a useful template for the industry as volunteer projects restart post-COVID19. In light of perpetual liminality (Szokolczai, 2009), our industry recommendation acknowledges that transformation may not occur for all individuals. While we acknowledge the importance of understanding the positive outcomes of volunteer tourist transformation when an organisation seeks to apply for certificates, awards, and grants (see Soulard

et al., 2020), the industry must be mindful that transformation, as an add-on to existing marketing, does not become a victim of blueprinting, standardisation and 'green-washing'. Given the highly individualised experiences and learning, transformation should be fine-tuned to the individual, their expectations, and the contribution they wish to make.

As discussed in this paper, the experience of liminality is not the same for all volunteers. Perpetual liminal volunteer tourists see themselves trapped in limbo where being in between is not part of the journey, but is the journey. They confront 'monsters', sparking more doubt and more ambiguity. Unless someone intervenes or something radically changes, the 'monsters' appear and reappear throughout the journey. As the experience unfolds, they are not the same wide-eyed volunteer but transitioning, whether incorporation takes place or not. Therefore, volunteers may find themselves permanently or persistently locked in transitional processes, never reaching the final new state or their desired identity. The ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras used to say that 'man is the measure of all things', highlighting that meaning and truth can be found in each person's life history and experiences (Kattsoff, 1953). As such, limbo and doubt are part of the human experience. Volunteer tourism experiences are not abstract or transcended outside the psychology of the tourist; they are part of a growing web of interconnected journeys where politics and meaning are replaced by the emotional wing of the experience economy and reinforced by a heroic narrative.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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