

# Why do people opt for voluntourism in Bangladesh? An exploratory study

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## Abstract

This qualitative study aims to disclose the motivations of volunteer tourists and their perceived benefit of the activity, using push/pull theory. Thematic analysis of data from interviews (face-to-face and telephone) and focus group discussion ascertained core meanings. Findings reveal (1) push factors include the desire to give something back to society and the desire for self-exploration, (2) pull factors include learning about other social classes and the enticement of a challenge. The perceived benefits were greater self-confidence and enhanced communication, networking, and presentation skills. It is concluded that voluntourism in Bangladesh has a bright future.

**Key Words:** Voluntourism, travel motivation, push/pull theory, perceived benefit, voluntourists.

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## 1. Introduction

The nature of international tourism has been changing since the mid-1960s. As well as travelling for leisure, people are becoming interested in gaining meaningful experiences from touring, and aiming to satisfy specific desires (Germann Molz, 2015; Robinson & Novelli, 2005). One increasingly popular way that travelers can gain meaningful experience and simultaneously help the welfare of a community is through volunteer tourism ('voluntourism'). Voluntourism is evolving quickly, ensuring around \$2 billion contribution to the travel industry (Hernandez-Maskivker, Lapointe & Aquino, 2018; McGhee & Andereck, 2008). It has captured international attention. Many tour operators act as facilitators (Rogers, 2007), collaborating with charities and businesses (often to diversify funds or appear ethical, according to Callanan & Thomas, 2005), to help to raise funds for volunteer programs.

Volunteer tourists (voluntourists) participate in building schools, homes, and orphanages in developing countries (Ambassadors for Children, 2008; Lo & Lee, 2011), and care for lions in South Africa (Rogers, 2007), elephants in Thailand (Carter, 2005), and sea turtles in Costa Rica (Campbell & Smith, 2006). They can conduct research on environmental or societal issues

(Wearing, 2001), conserve the natural environment (American Hiking Society, 2008), teach English to children (Ambassadors for Children, 2008).

In Bangladesh, voluntourism is in its infancy, with an acute need to grow because numerous social problems including unemployment, illiteracy, and child labour need to be significantly minimized. Voluntourism could make an abiding impact on the disadvantaged areas, leading to sustainability. Yet although studies on the topic have been conducted for western countries, little has been conducted in the SE Asia region. This study aims to initiate research to reduce the gap.

## **2. Objectives**

The study aims to examine the following objectives:

1. To explore motivations for voluntourism in Bangladesh.
2. To identify perceived benefits gained by voluntourists.

## **3. Literature review**

### **3.1 Voluntourism**

Voluntourism can be defined as travel that includes activities for the welfare of a specific community. Its modern form emerged in 1990 (VolunTourism.org Travel and Volunteer Opportunities, 2018), emphasising sustainability and responsibility (Wearing, 2001; Brown, 2005). It soon came to the attention of researchers and marketers. Its core motive is altruism, powerfully developing personal growth and enhancing self-awareness while engaging in a meaningful experience (Lo & Lee, 2011; Wearing, 2001; Wearing & Neil, 2000). Voluntourists distribute necessities and resources, save the environment, or help protect endangered species (Lo & Lee, 2011; Broad, 2003; Wearing, 2001).

### **3.2 Theories underlying tourism and voluntourism**

Voluntourism is a subset of traditional mass tourism, so motivation theories of traditional tourism can be used to find out the motivations of tourists toward voluntourism. Several theories are discussed in this section to provide a background to this study.

Popular motivation theories that have been adopted by tourism researchers include Plog's (1974) theory of types, Maslow's (1954, 1970) hierarchy of needs, approach/avoidance theory, and push/pull theory. In Plog's (1974) theory, tourists are grouped into two psychographic types, allocentric and psychocentric: allocentric tourists look for adventure and choose remote, unfamiliar destinations, and psychocentric tourists are conservative, and prefer familiarity and safety. Hudson (1999), Mill and Morrison (2002), and Pearce (1982) follow Maslow (said by Hudson to be popular because it is simple and easy to use). Hudson states that the basic physiological and safety needs are highly correlated with travel motivation—if the destination cannot meet these needs, individuals will not be motivated to visit. Mill and Morrison (2002), on the other hand, claim that the higher need for self-actualization is the ultimate goal of travelling. Dann (1977) and Crompton (1979) added the push/pull theory to the hierarchy of needs theory. Push factors are mostly socio-psychological in nature, and direct the internal craving for travel (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977; Snepenger et al., 2006). Of particular interest is Dann's (1977) push factor 'anomie', which is the feeling of loss of purpose. Pull factors are the characteristics of a place that pull tourists to travel towards it, in order to fulfil their needs. For reasons that will become apparent in the next section, this study adopted the push/pull theory of motivation.

### **3.3 Motivations of volunteer tourists**

Brown and Morrison (2003) group tourists into two categories, vacation-minded and volunteer-minded. Vacation-minded tourists give only a small portion of their time to volunteering, while volunteer-minded tourists spend a great deal of their time in volunteer activities. Callanan and Thomas (2005) make a further classification: volunteer tourists are “shallow”, “intermediate”, or “deep”. Shallow voluntourists give more weight to the leisure or amusement aspect of voluntourism, the intermediate give them equal weight, and the deep give more weight to the volunteering. Chen and Chen (2011) and Lo and Lee (2011) go even further, classifying eleven volunteer motives into three groups: personal, interpersonal and “others”. The personal factors include experience, travel, interest, and challenges. The interpersonal factors include collaborating with multiple cultures, willingness to help others, and broadening relationships. “Others” include financial motives and organizational goals. In general, the majority of motives uncovered by researchers (including Broad, 2003; Broad & Jenkins, 2009; Brown & Lehto, 2005; Bruyere & Rappe, 2007; Bussell & Forbes, 2002; Campbell & Smith, 2006; Clary, Snyder & Stukas, 1996; Riecken, Babakus & Yavas, 1994) match the social and psychological needs of volunteer tourists. They are, in effect, Dann’s (1977) push factors.

### **3.4 Identifying volunteer tourists for the present study**

Volunteer tourists in Bangladesh are involved in many projects, working with various NGOs that aim to provide education to street children, reduce poverty, save the environment from pollution, empower women, distribute clothes among disaster victims, and so on. To identify a potential voluntourism market, generations of demographic cohorts were examined. Three important cohorts for marketers are Baby Boomers (boomers), Generation X (Gen X), and Generation Y (millennials). Boomers are mostly retired, and although they are active in contributing their expertise and giving back to society by volunteering, they mostly travel for leisure (Miske, 2016). Gen Xs, paying off mortgages and raising families, are also keen to volunteer, but mostly for fund-raising and activities related to their workplace or children; in other respects, this generation is generally time poor. Millennials comprise high school leavers, university students, young graduates, and young workers. They are frequent travelers (Pearce & Coghlan, 2009), do voluntary tasks during holidays (Brown & Lehto, 2005; Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Rogers, 2007), and are relatively better educated and more highly techno-savvy than the other two cohorts (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Importantly, these descriptions are generalisations, and some voluntourists of all ages are more tourism-minded than volunteer-minded (Brown & Morrison, 2003; Callanan & Thomas, 2005). Overall, however, the millennium generation appeared to have greater potential than the other cohorts as participants in this study.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Research context**

This study was conducted in Bangladesh. The *Survey on Volunteerism in Bangladesh* (2010) found that 88.8% of volunteers were engaged in informal (unpaid) volunteering, and the rest were involved in formal (paid) volunteering. This study recruited postgraduates (most had finished their tertiary education) engaged in both formal and informal volunteering.

### **4.2 Research Design**

The main aim of the study was to identify and explore the motivations of a sample of volunteer tourists. Details of an individual's motivations can be disclosed by rigorous qualitative research, and although data analysed from observable behaviour provides more interesting insights and understanding about motives than from spoken or written words alone (Brown, 2005; Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2016), this method was unavailable to the current authors. Accordingly, the research was conducted using two other qualitative methods: in-depth interviews (telephone and face-to-face) and focus group discussion.

#### **4.3 Sample and Procedure**

Once ethics approval had been granted, thirty Bangladeshi Gen Y (aged 20-35) volunteer students were recruited for the study. Ten were females from the BRAC Microfinance program (BMFP), an important NGO in Bangladesh that provides credit to extremely poor women to minimize their poverty and to empower them. Twenty were male and female teachers at Charulata Biddiyapith School (CBP), established in 2012 to educate deprived children living in the slums.

To identify the major motivations and the perceived benefits from the work, two data-collection methods were used: in-depth interviews (face-to-face and telephone) and focus group. The volunteers were asked open-ended questions based on the factors of push/pull theory. BRAC participants were interviewed by phone, and CBPs were interviewed face-to-face or by phone. With the acquiescence of the participants, each interview was recorded. Both methods were employed in order to ensure cross validation of the themes identified in the findings. Highest security was ensured, especially in the focus group where all the participants were friends and could express their feelings without fear and hesitation. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the means to encourage open conversation by which deep insights could be exposed. The average length of the telephone interviews was 45 minutes and face-to face interviews 55 minutes, while the focus group discussion lasted for 90 minutes.

#### **4.4 Data Analysis**

The recordings were transcribed verbatim and transcripts were emailed to the participants to check for accuracy—a crucial step, as qualitative research is always questionable as to its validity, generalizability and reliability (Pan, 2012).

Thematic analysis was conducted as this is a rigorous, reliable and independent approach to analyze data and to discover themes (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is also useful because it helps to find affinities and antipathies in participants' statements, and to discover unexpected insights. Five steps were followed. First, the recorded interviews were listened to several times, and the transcripts read carefully. Second, relevant themes were inferred from the responses of the participants, and interesting and meaningful codes (factors) were listed under each theme. For example, under the theme "need to be a better person" was placed self-motivation, instigation from friends and family, and so on. Repeated data were discarded. Third, comparable codes were merged. Fourth, a copy of the themes and codes was emailed to each participant, so they could provide an opinion at a follow-up interview and to ensure the greatest reliability, authenticity and transparency of the research. Fifth, each

coded factor was freely discussed, providing detailed narratives about voluntourism for potential volunteer tourists and voluntourism organizing companies.

#### **4.5 Triangulation**

Data triangulation and environmental triangulation were used to enhance validity. For data triangulation, (i) the participants had been selected from two different fields, the BMFP and the CBP, and (ii) different data-collection methods had been used. The information acquired from the participants was very similar from each group and method.

### **5. Findings**

#### **5.1 Motivations for voluntourism**

To reveal the motivations, volunteers were asked several questions from two perspectives – what pushed them to participate in volunteer activities, and what pulled them. The responses revealed the major themes:

1. Push factors: (a) the desire to give back, (b) the need to be a better person, and (c) the urge for self-exploration.
2. Pull factors (a) to find out about different social classes of people, (b) to make friends with a common interest, and (c) the lure of a challenge.

##### **1(a) The desire to give back**

Feelings of responsibility, duty, and service were basic factors driving the participants to develop their careers in the development sector.

“In my childhood, I read many books and learned we should stretch out our hands to needful people. I felt from my heart that I was lucky to enjoy my rights, and now it’s my duty to help the disadvantaged (Jotey, CBP teacher, aged 22).”

“At first I saw some of my friends were contributing. This motivated me. Now I want to come here every day for these children...I grew up enjoying all the benefits and opportunities, so I want to give something back .... (Nowshin, CBP teacher, aged 24).”

“I’ve always thought that a significant portion of my society doesn’t get the amenities that I enjoy. I care about this. So I work with CBP and want to continue for ever (Raihan, CBP teacher, aged 23).”

##### **1(b) The need to be a better person**

Thirteen participants thought about this factor before joining. Believing themselves to be too self-centred, they hoped that voluntary involvement might make them less self-indulgent:

“I always wanted to add something to my life that would satisfy me...now I feel it from my heart when I go CBP and bring a smile to the faces of those needy children (Puspo, CBP teacher, aged 25).”

“I used to think only about myself—poor unfortunate me, leading such a deficient life. But since coming here...I realise now how fortunate I am (Mahtab, CBP teacher, aged 24).”

**1(c) The urge for self-exploration**

This motivation had an influence on all participants, although most realised its strength after joining as they discovered hidden talents and grew in confidence:

“At first I was shy, but now they live in my heart (Noor-E-Jannat, CBP teacher, aged 24)”

“I’ve found in myself a new way of gathering practical knowledge about the people here. This is self-enriching in a way no words can describe (Rizvy, CBP teacher, aged 24).”

“I just feel I have everything when I meet those needy but extremely happy people, see those bright smiling faces (Mahnoor, BMFP MT, aged 25).”

“I’ve done some self-exploring—discarded the negativity and lifted the positivity to provide a beacon for the children (Tutul, CBT teacher, aged 27)”

“Before working here, I followed the ideology of my family and friends, but after coming here I found my own ideology. This place is really helping me to explore my thinking (Adeeba, BMFP MT, aged 26).”

“I’ve become co-operative and patient (Dip, CBP teacher, aged 27).”

“I have expanded my knowledge and the power of problem solving. I’ve even won a competition with an idea I got from this tour (Rizvy, CBP teacher, aged 24)”

“Now I think, ‘I can do anything’, and this is my biggest discovery (Nowshin, CBP teacher, aged 24).

Many of the women found the confidence to work without a man's help, and to face new challenges:

“At first I felt that I wouldn’t be able to go anywhere without a male, but now I fully confident (Shawona, BMFP MT, aged 26)”

**2(a) To find out about different social classes of people**

Willingness to learn from different cultures was a factor. Some were reluctant at first, as it is commonly believed that slum people are offensive and village people are unintelligent but their views underwent a revolutionary change:

“I was concerned that I only mixed with the people of my class, so I found work in CBP where I could meet outcast children. I felt that gathering knowledge from them about their lifestyle would help me a lot (Dip, CBP teacher, aged 24).”

“Ever since my childhood I’ve heard that slum children are hostile ...After teaching them about right and wrong I’ve found them very gentle and respectful (Khatun, CBP teacher, aged 24).”

“This work is teaching me to respect the village people and I'm gradually learning to understand them (Sanjida, BMFP MT, aged 26).”

“Only when you meet a community can you feel how hard they struggle! We who belong to an elite class can help them. Just a little hope is needed (Mahtab, CBP teacher, aged 24).”

## **2(b) To make friends with a common interest**

This motivation was low to start with (although they were all sociable), but they soon experienced the strong pull of the friendly environment. Some said that their workplace was almost like family. Almost all mentioned they felt lucky:

“In CBP there are many teachers from many universities and medical colleges. Without coming here I wouldn't have met them. Now I get help from them, I can share my thoughts with them, I get support when things go wrong for me (Mahtab, CBP teacher, aged 24).”

“I've always been motivated to meet new people, but sometimes, after meeting them I feel something bad may happen and I try to avoid them. But in CBP I have seen the dedication among the teachers, their positivity and honesty. Truly, I have a second family in this city (Puspo, CBP teacher, aged 25).”

## **2(c) The lure of a challenge**

Twenty-eight of the thirty had spent their lives protected by friends and family. To step away from safety and be challenged by village or slum life motivated them to volunteer:

“A year ago I was tied to my family and friends, but now I meet people from a different level of life. It was a challenge, but it was a really great feeling when I found that they feel comfortable about sharing all their problems with me (Sanjida, BMFP MT, aged 26).”

“Before school [2–5 pm], children perform laborious activities...At school I saw scratches and wounds on their hands and feet-it was criminal! Getting their parents to put a stop to it was a huge challenge (Emdad, CBP teacher, aged 24)”

“At CBP, we have to face local political leaders. Managing them strategically is incredibly challenging. (Rizvy, CBP teacher, aged 24).

“We are provided with stress management training here. It has taught us to manage stress in a constructive way as it is a part of our life (Tisha, BMFP MT, aged 27)”

## **5.2 Perceived Benefits of the Experience**

The participants were positive about all aspects of their experience, and all have observed intrinsic and extrinsic beneficial changes in themselves. Respondents are now socially well recongnized and become praised for their altruistic activities. Five key intrinsic perceived benefits were identified in this study.

### **5.2.1 Enhancement of sense-of-self**

The close observation of the afflictions of poverty opened their minds and a brought sense of sharing. Many participants said that they felt blessed. Through their experiences, they discovered new strengths: of adaptability, tolerance, patience, understanding, and ability to analyse problems and handle critical situations. This finding supports Germann Molz's (2015) and Lo and Lee's (2011) conclusions: that privileged voluntourists gain compassion and the feeling that they are living a blessed life.

### **5.2.2 Ability to build relationships**

Around 70 percent of the participants stated that they had succeeded in building relationships with the villagers and children. The others said that building and enhancing relationships was a continuing process. Most expressed the joy of feeling welcome in their communities; it seems that when the disadvantaged know that they can rely on the volunteers and accept them, a successful alliance has been formed.

### **5.2.3 Stress management**

Twenty-eight participants perceived this benefit to themselves. Stress management programs encourage the volunteers to accept more challenges. As well as practising the techniques learnt from the programs, just seeing a smiling face erases stress and provides the energy to carry on.

### **5.2.4 Improved learning and teaching methods**

All had been taught traditionally: by drills, memorising, and repetition. Now they understood the importance of practical knowledge, interactive teaching, and two-way learning as ways of helping others understand and want to learn. This finding is consistent with Kitney, Stanway & Ryan (2016) who explained how shared experience enhanced and encouraged learning.

### **5.2.5 Development of personal growth**

All the participants have fostered their new skills of communication, presentation, management, decision-making, and leadership. They can adapt to and cope with any problem without hesitation. Their horizon of knowledge is expanding daily.

## **6. Discussions**

In this paper motivations for Bangladeshi students toward volunteer tourism and their perceived value from the trip have been identified. Thirty participants (millennials) have participated in this study and data has been collected by conducting in-depth face to face interview, telephone interview and focus group discussion. Finding reveals respondents participated in this study are highly volunteer-minded which explains they are willing enough to provide their full time in doing voluntary activities. The voluntourists respondents of this study have an experience to work in the remote corner of Bangladesh. Motivations of these Bangladeshi volunteer tourists have been identified based on the push and pull theory. Three push factors have been identified as suppressing the themes. (a) the desire to give back, (b) the need to be a better person, and (c) the urge for self-exploration. Additionally, three pull factors have also been identified such as 2. Pull factors (a) to find out about different social classes of people, (b) to make friends with a common interest, and (c) the lure of a challenge. This study shows "Self-motivation" is the core inspiration to join volunteer trips. It comes from the thirst of acquiring self-esteem and self-actualization. Voluntourism also flourishes the personal strength of the volunteers. Friends and family group play a pivotal role to drive the respondents toward voluntary program. Significant number of students are also involving in voluntourism in order to gather knowledge about the



lifestyle of the needy people. It is also the goal of the volunteer tourism which had been identified by Brown & Lehto (2005), Bruyere & Rappe (2007), Riecken, Babakus & Yavas (1994) also tried to explain the same. The findings showed that hundred percent of the respondents want to give back to society. They want a positive as well as a meaningful change as they have some responsibilities toward society. According to World Bank (2018) in Bangladesh, still 8.5 percent people of the total population can not fulfil their basic needs (food, cloth, accommodation, medical service and education). Therefore, as concerned citizen, it is their duty to do something meaningful for them. Lo and Lee (2011) also argued and supported this factor as a major motivation behind voluntourism. Self-centric life is monotonous and few want to embrace it. A good news is that participants desire to get a life which is full of responsibilities because it is the best way to acquire mental satisfaction. Cited in Pan (2012), Manners and Durkin (2000) claimed that embracing an exigent life flourishes people's thought process and provides individuals an opportunity to enhance self-learning.

Without challenge acceptance mentality none can survive in experiencing voluntourism. This niche tourism field is full of new and unavoidable challenges. Respondents of this study are facing mainly political challenges, individual challenges and social challenges every now and then. Adapting ability to the absolutely different culture, building rapport with the people who belong to a low-class, making those people to think like the regular people are the individual challenge they face. Respondents from CBP mentioned political challenges arise when they want to arrange any social programs from the school (e.g. Eid dress distribution, new year celebration). Local political leaders make some trouble to arrange those programs smoothly. As all the respondents belong to 22 to 35 age group, moving anywhere anytime for visiting is bit challenging (as far as safety and security is concern) for them. People in the rural areas with whom respondents have to work do not take it easily. This challenge is mostly faced by the female tourists. It has been identified that many positive changes have been taken place among the tourists because of the volunteer trips. Their personal development is upgrading as they have learnt from the trip how to communicate efficiently, how to present a thing in an understandable way. In short, their skills and abilities are flourishing. Harlow and Pomfret (2007), Lo and Lee (2011) and Pan (2012) showed their support regarding this. Through volunteer trip tourists are opening new windows to their career. They can now pass their daily life in a productive way. Volunteer trips have learnt them to set a priority of their activities and perform those in a planned way. In academic life, they also make the efficient use of their experience gained from the trip.

## **7. Conclusion**

The article explored and identified the motivations that impelled Bangladeshi students to volunteer their help and to continue offering their help. It also identified many advantages to the students in addition to the disadvantaged communities that need that help. The push/pull theory worked well in explaining and understanding not only the motivations of the voluntourists (the sociopsychological drives of the push factors and the attractions of the pull factors) but also their motives to continue to work in their communities.

This study had its limitations. First, the participants were from two specific voluntary programs, and may not be generalisable. However, the study's findings support many of the findings and conclusions of the literature, which suggests some generalisability. Future research could explore other volunteering aspects in Bangladesh. Second, it concentrated only on the positive aspects: lack of time prevented a more comprehensive exploration. Third, voluntourism is an interactive form of tourism which requires the participation of tour operators: this was not addressed.

Overall, this study can be considered a first step towards a thorough understanding of voluntourism as an emerging sector in Bangladesh. The general positivity of the participants in this study points to a bright future.

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