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### **GIVING BACK, MOVING FORWARD: PERSONAL AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH VOLUNTEER TOURISM**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Volunteer tourism has emerged as a dynamic form of travel that offers youths opportunities for personal development and social impact. However, the developmental and transformational needs of youth involved in volunteer tourism remain underexplored, especially in rapidly developing urban contexts like Ho Chi Minh City. This study aims to investigate the personal development and transformation needs of young individuals in Ho Chi Minh City, with a particular focus on factors such as gender, occupation, and income. The research used a quantitative approach, surveying 522 youths and analyzing their motivations, developmental needs, and the influence of demographic factors on those demands. The findings reveal that young participants are strongly driven by a desire for personal growth, particularly in soft skill enhancement, self-awareness, and meaningful engagement with local communities. Importantly, the study uncovers significant variations in development needs across demographic lines, emphasizing the necessity for inclusive, tailored program designs. Beyond skill acquisition, the data suggest that volunteer tourism plays a critical role in fostering reflective global citizenship and pro-social behavior. By situating personal transformation at the heart of volunteer tourism, this research contributes to both theory and practice, offering new insights into how service-oriented travel can shape empowered, socially conscious youth in rapidly urbanizing contexts.

**Keywords:** Volunteer tourism, personal development, transformation, transformative learning, urban youth.

## INTRODUCTION

Driven by a change in the tourism needs of modern tourists, volunteer tourism has attracted major interest recently (Avolio et al., 2024). Tourism was historically mostly about enjoyment and relaxation; tourists sought passive experiences. Currently, there is a growing demand for more meaningful tourism experiences that not only support the personal development of tourists but also enhance the well-being of the places they visit (Eck et al., 2024). This change in the character of tourism reflects more general social developments than only trends. Tourists are realizing their ability to help communities as societies confront growing issues needing community support. Volunteer tourism has become rather popular in response to the increasing demand for contribution and personal involvement, allowing tourists to participate in meaningful service activities while visiting new locations (Eck et al., 2024; Sthapit et al., 2024).

Volunteer tourism presents a special chance for tourists to undergo personal growth and transformation as well as for sites to gain from the efforts of tourists (Gilfillan, 2015). While the current tourism literature has examined the advantages of volunteer tourism for nearby communities and sites, it has hardly addressed in-depth how such encounters might inspire personal development and transformation for the volunteers themselves (Han, Lee, et al., 2020; Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011). This discrepancy in the literature is important since personal development and transformation reflect a higher degree of tourism motivation, one that fits deeper, more intense wants for positive change. The growing interest in volunteer tourism and the wish to investigate its possibilities for personal growth and transformation inspire this work (Alexander & Bakir, 2013; Han, Lee, et al., 2020). Although the literature on volunteer tourism has mostly concentrated on the advantages to the destination communities, it is important to better know how volunteer tourism experiences affect the volunteers themselves, especially in terms of self-development and transformation.

This gap is particularly evident in the context of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, one of the region's most dynamic urban centers, where young people navigate complex intersections of modernization, global influence, and traditional values. Despite the city's growing involvement in volunteer tourism initiatives, limited empirical research has examined how urban youth experience and benefit from such programs, especially in terms of personal transformation and identity development. Addressing this gap is essential for designing inclusive and contextually relevant volunteer tourism models that align with the needs and aspirations of youth in urban Southeast Asia. To respond to this need, the present study sets out to investigate the personal development and transformational outcomes of volunteer tourism among young individuals in Ho Chi Minh City. Specifically, it pursues the following research objectives:

1. To identify the key personal development needs of urban youth participating in volunteer tourism, including areas such as soft skills, self-awareness, and social connectedness;
2. To examine the influence of demographic factors, namely gender, occupation, and income, on these developmental needs and motivations;
3. To evaluate the extent to which volunteer tourism experiences contribute to transformative outcomes such as reflective global citizenship and pro-social behavior.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Volunteer Tourism Concept**

Within the larger tourism business, volunteer tourism, also known as voluntourism, has become a sizable niche. The term describes tourism experiences whereby one explores new locations while helping out in community-based projects. Volunteer tourism covers a broad spectrum of events, including environmental preservation, community development, medical aid, instruction, and disaster relief efforts (Avolio et al., 2024; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Often with an eye toward supporting humanitarian projects or conserving natural resources, these projects center on assisting underprivileged areas. Wearing (2001) defines volunteer tourism as a type of tourism whereby people participate in voluntary activities for a minimum period of time while interacting with nearby local communities in the tourism destinations (S. Wearing, 2001). But this involvement ought to go beyond simple charity work to include real cross-cultural communication and mutual learning.

Numerous studies have investigated the traits and reasons behind volunteer tourism. Usually driven by a mix of altruistic goals and personal development aspirations, the main distinction between volunteer tourism and conventional tourism is the active participation the visitor takes in the social, economic, or environmental issues of a destination; tourists in this sense are not merely consumers (Doctori et al., 2023; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Younger tourists, including students and recent graduates who fit the demographic profile of volunteer tourists, sometimes reflect on their experiences (Amin et al., 2023). Generally speaking, these people are motivated by a sense of responsibility, a wish to change things, and an interest in learning about many cultures (Coghlan, 2015).

Although volunteer tourism is increasingly popular, the existing literature lacks detailed information on how these experiences contribute to tourists' personal development and transformative journeys. While most research has concentrated on the social and environmental effects of these activities on the host communities, less has been paid to how volunteer tourism shapes tourists' perspectives of themselves and their surroundings (Callanan & Thomas, 2004). This discrepancy indicates a significant need for future studies.

### **Personal Growth in Volunteer Tourism**

The idea of personal development through volunteer tourism is entwined with the more general theory of self-actualization, which holds that people search for events that help them to develop emotionally, cognitively, and socially (Witt & Wright, 1992). Volunteer tourism gives tourists the chance to improve self-awareness, pick up fresh abilities, and deepen their knowledge of world problems. Recent research indicates that volunteer tourism lets people examine their values, question their perspectives, and grow closer to the local communities they help (Alexander & Bakir, 2013; Wearing & Neil, 2000). Learning new skills is among the most obvious advantages of volunteer tourism. These could comprise emotional skills like empathy, emotional intelligence, and resilience, as well as pragmatic skills including language ability, cross-cultural communication, problem-solving, and project management (Sin, 2009). Moreover, studies by McGehee and Santos (2005) show that volunteering helps people develop self-efficacy, in which case tourists start to feel empowered by their capacity to significantly support a cause (McGehee & Santos, 2005). This sense of success and encouraging comments from society can greatly raise one's confidence and self-esteem.

The chance for experiential learning is another essential component of personal growth through volunteer tourism (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011). Volunteering in local communities abroad exposes volunteers to diverse

cultures, lifestyles, and viewpoints, thereby enhancing their cultural intelligence and social sensitivity. Volunteer tourism provides a special kind of “transformative learning,” according to Lyons and Wearing (2008), whereby tourists develop not only cognitive knowledge but also emotional and experiential awareness of the social reality of the host communities (Lyons & Wearing, 2008).

### **Volunteer tourism and transformation of attitudes and behaviors**

Apart from personal growth, volunteer tourism is considered a tool for promoting personal transformation more and more. Mezirow (2000) defines transformative learning as the process by which new events cause people to change their viewpoints, behaviors, and values. One way such change might take place is via volunteer tourism (Cavender et al., 2020; Coghlan & Gooch, 2011). Volunteers sometimes undergo significant changes in their attitudes, values, and perspectives when they are exposed to many social and cultural settings (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; Müller et al., 2020). These developments might include growing awareness of social concerns, including poverty, environmental damage, and human rights, which in turn inspire tourists to participate in more conscientious and sustainable daily activities (McGehee & Andereck, 2009).

Many studies highlight the positive, transforming results of volunteer tourism, according to a critical review of pertinent literature. Pearce (2008), for example, contends that volunteer tourism experiences help people to become global citizens, that is, more sensitive to problems outside their hometown and more linked to the planet (Pearce & Coghlan, 2008). Studies by Dolezal et al. (2020) similarly show that post-trip reflections frequently highlight the significant influence these events have on the volunteers’ values and behaviors, including choosing more sustainable lifestyles and following careers in social entrepreneurship or international development (Dolezal & Miezelyte, 2020). Though most people agree that volunteer tourism has tremendous transforming power, some academics warn that not all volunteer tourism experiences inevitably result in favorable change. The type of volunteer project, degree of cultural immersion, and degree of self-reflection urged during the trip will all affect how effective the change is. McGehee (2012) also issues a warning about the “voluntourism paradox,” in which volunteers might develop personally and find gratification but without real knowledge of the complexity of the problems they are tackling. Therefore, careful design of volunteer tourism projects is essential to maximize their possibilities for promoting significant transformation.

Examining the body of current research reveals several important trends in connection to volunteer tourism and personal growth. First of all, there is great agreement that volunteer tourism has great possibilities for promoting self-awareness, skill development, and personal progress. Those who engage in volunteer tourism sometimes express a stronger sense of purpose and a better awareness of their part in a worldwide scene. Although many studies acknowledge these advantages, there is a significant lack of empirical research specifically examining the transformative effects of volunteer tourism on the volunteers themselves, particularly concerning long-term behavioral changes. Furthermore, although the literature is full of debates on the advantages of volunteer tourism for nearby towns, less focus is paid to the ways in which the experience changes volunteers personally. As Callanan and Thomas (2005) emphasize, there is still much to learn about how these events cause favorable changes in attitudes, values, and behavior (Callanan & Thomas, 2004).

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design and Data Collection

This study uses quantitative research to address the personal development and transformation needs of youths engaged in volunteer tourism in Ho Chi Minh City. We chose the youths for the case study group due to their strong interest and availability in participating in such events. The target group consists especially of people between the ages of 18 and 30, since this group is most involved in volunteer tourism activities and shows a strong need for personal development and transforming tourism experiences. The study is carried out among youths either living, learning, or working in Ho Chi Minh City. These individuals are perfect candidates since they reflect the growing demand for meaningful tourism experiences and probably have access to volunteer tourism options.

### Materials and Procedures

Understanding the several points of view on volunteer tourism helped guide the design of the survey instrument by means of an initial review of the literature. We created a comprehensive scale based on the review results and insights from previous related studies (Table 1). To ensure the scale is appropriate in the context of Vietnam, ten professionals in the domains of tourism, sociology, and volunteer work examined and validated this scale to ensure its validity and applicability. This process took place from August to December 2024.

**Table 1**

*Measurement scale*

No.	Construct	Indicator	Source
1	Personal development needs through volunteer tourism	I want to develop my soft skills.	Han, Ariza-Montes, et al., 2020
2		I want to expand my knowledge about the community around me.	Junek & Chang, 2022
3		I want to better understand myself through interactions with the community.	Coghlan & Weiler, 2018
4		I want more opportunities to develop my career.	Clary et al., 1996; Clary & Snyder, 1999
5		I want to improve my self-assessment abilities regarding the issues around me.	Coghlan & Weiler, 2018
6		I want to love others around me more.	Clary et al., 1996; Clary & Snyder, 1999
7		I want to develop as a global citizen.	Han, Ariza-Montes, et al., 2020
1	Transformative impact of volunteer tourism	Volunteer tourism makes me have a more positive awareness of myself.	Clary et al., 1996; Clary & Snyder, 1999
2		Volunteer tourism makes me have a more positive awareness of the world around me.	Coghlan & Weiler, 2018
3		Volunteer tourism helps me develop more good life skills.	Han, Ariza-Montes, et al., 2020

4	on participants' attitudes and behaviors	Volunteer tourism helps me have a better understanding of intercultural interactions.	Han, Ariza-Montes, et al., 2020
5		Volunteer tourism helps me develop a mindset of connecting with others around me.	Clary et al., 1996; Clary & Snyder, 1999
6		Volunteer tourism makes me change my behavior in a positive direction after returning.	Coghlan & Weiler, 2018

To ensure the validity of the data collected, participants were screened based on their prior knowledge and experience with volunteering activities that included tourism components or specific forms of volunteer tourism organized by recognized institutions. Individuals without such experience were excluded from the survey. The quantitative phase of data collection was conducted between June and December 2024. A total of 550 survey forms were distributed, and 522 valid responses were received and processed for analysis. The sample was selected using a convenience sampling method. Two formats of the survey, digital (via email) and paper-based, were used to reach students at universities across Ho Chi Minh City and other young people living or working in the city. This mixed distribution approach enhanced the effectiveness and breadth of data collection, allowing access to a diverse cross-section of the youth population.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics, which offer a summary of the demographic traits of the sample as well as the response distribution across important variables, were used to examine the quantitative data gathered through the polls. Statistical tests, including the independent t-test (for variations depending on gender) and one-way ANOVA (for comparisons depending on occupation and monthly income), were used for the study of relationships between several variables. These statistical methods enable a better understanding of how several elements affect the personal development and transformation requirements of young volunteers who travel. Using Excel and SPSS 24.0 tools, the data analysis guarantees accurate and exact results.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study follows rigorous ethical guidelines to safeguard participant welfare and rights. Before participating, people were told about the study's aims and scope, as well as their right to privacy. The final data set would not include any personally identifiable information, so the researchers assured all survey participants that their answers would remain anonymous. Moreover, the survey tool was carefully crafted to exclude any questions concerning sensitive personal information, so maintaining participant privacy and confidence all through the research.

With participants freely consenting to participate in the research after knowing the goal and extent of the study, the study also followed ethical norms regarding informed permission. The study guaranteed openness and respect for participants' autonomy, by means of which one could stop at any moment without facing repercussions. All ethical issues were thus carefully addressed to preserve participant interests and ensure the integrity of the research.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Characteristics of the Sample

Based on the complete dataset from the survey of 522 young individuals (Table 2), several prominent demographic characteristics can be observed. The majority of participants are female, with 404 individuals (77.4%), while males make up 118 individuals (22.6%). This gender disparity indicates that the sample is predominantly composed of females. Regarding monthly income, 118 individuals (22.6%) reported earning less than 5 million VND, while 62 individuals (11.9%) had an income ranging from 5 million to just under 10 million VND. Those earning between 10 million and under 15 million VND represent 24.5% of the sample, while 18.0% earn between 15 million and under 20 million VND. Notably, 14 individuals (2.7%) reported a monthly income above 20 million VND, and 106 individuals (20.3%) indicated that they had no income, a common trait among students or individuals financially dependent on their families.

**Table 2**

*Demographic data (N=260)*

<b>Demographic Characteristic</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	118	22.6
Female	404	77.4
<b>Average Monthly Income</b>		
Below 5 million VND	118	22.6
From 5 to below 10 million VND	62	11.9
From 10 to below 15 million VND	128	24.5
From 15 to below 20 million VND	94	18.0
Above 20 million VND	14	2.7
No income	106	20.3
<b>Occupation</b>		
Student	259	49.6
Office worker	107	20.5
Civil servant	42	8.0
Professional occupation	25	4.8
Business, trade	24	4.6
Freelancer	65	12.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>522</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### Personal Development Needs Through Volunteer Tourism

The assessment of personal development needs through volunteer tourism reveals that participants are highly motivated by opportunities for growth on both personal and social levels. The results presented in Table 3 indicate a strong interest in acquiring knowledge, enhancing skills, and cultivating deeper connections with

both the community and oneself. These needs reflect the intrinsic motivations that often encourage individuals to participate in volunteer tourism experiences.

**Table 3**

*Results of assessment of personal development needs through volunteer tourism*

No.	Indicators	Mean	STD	Reference
1	I want to develop my soft skills.	4.21	0.892	Strongly Agree
2	I want to expand my knowledge about the community around me.	4.26	0.864	Strongly Agree
3	I want to better understand myself through interactions with the community.	4.18	0.921	Agree
4	I want more opportunities to develop my career.	4.05	0.934	Agree
5	I want to improve my self-assessment abilities regarding the issues around me.	4.17	0.892	Agree
6	I want to love others around me more.	4.19	0.911	Agree
7	I want to develop as a global citizen.	4.13	0.921	Agree

The highest mean scores were associated with the desire to expand knowledge about the surrounding community (M = 4.26) and to develop soft skills (M = 4.21). These findings reflect a strong motivation among participants to grow in areas that support personal, interpersonal, and professional effectiveness.

Respondents also reported a desire to better understand themselves through interaction with the community (M = 4.18), as well as to enhance their ability to assess social issues (M = 4.17). These are deeply introspective goals, indicating that participants view volunteer tourism not only as a way to help others but also as a mirror to explore their own values, capacities, and emotional responses. Interestingly, while the item “I want more opportunities to develop my career” (M = 4.05) still received agreement, it ranked lower than more socially and emotionally focused motivations. This may suggest that, for many participants, the professional benefits of volunteering are a secondary outcome rather than a primary driver.

Meanwhile, responses such as “I want to love others around me more” (M = 4.19) and “I want to develop as a global citizen” (M = 4.13) illustrate a moral and relational dimension to these motivations. Participants appear to view volunteer tourism as a path to cultivate empathy, solidarity, and a broader sense of human responsibility.

These findings suggest that volunteer tourism is not only seen as a way to give back but also as a meaningful avenue for self-improvement, emotional growth, and broader social understanding. Programs that support these development goals through immersive, reflective, and skill-building activities are likely to meet the expectations and needs of participants more effectively. The findings of this study offer an important new perspective on youths’ reasons for engaging in volunteer tourism in Ho Chi Minh City. In all spheres, soft skills development, community involvement, self-awareness, career development, empathy, and global citizenship, the participants clearly expressed a great desire to use volunteer tourism as a means of personal growth and transformation.

For several reasons, these results are noteworthy. First, the findings reveal that youths today are seeking chances to interact with local communities, support social causes, and acquire fundamental life skills in addition to leisure or relaxation; they are looking for tourism experiences that offer more. This change in perspective is in line with world patterns whereby youths find inspiration in meaningful experiences and tourism motivated by goals. Studies have shown that volunteer tourism provides a forum for developing

personally and learning soft skills (Gilfillan, 2015; Simpson, 2004). But this study offers fresh understanding of the particular requirements of young tourists in an urban setting, such as Ho Chi Minh City.

One of the most important results is the substantial demand for learning about the community and knowing oneself by means of social interactions (Aquino & Andereck, 2022). These findings underline the need for cultural immersion and introspection in volunteer tourism, which has been demonstrated to produce transformative learning (Clarke & Norman, 2021). Through interaction with various communities, one's desire to better understand their part in society corresponds with the more general objectives of volunteer tourism, promoting cross-cultural understanding and a feeling of global citizenship. The participants' overwhelming enthusiasm for career development through volunteer tourism also reflects a growing trend among youths who give practical skills and real-world experiences top priority. As Sin (2010) emphasizes, volunteer tourism gives youths a chance to develop professionally and help worthwhile projects (Sin, 2010). Ho Chi Minh City is especially seeing this trend since youths are looking for chances to stand out in a crowded employment market.

Moreover, the outstanding will to grow compassion and enhance self-assessment skills suggests the growing focus among youths on emotional intelligence and introspection. Personal growth and professional success now depend much on emotional intelligence, and volunteer tourism presents a special chance for youths to acquire these vital abilities (Lyons & Wearing, 2008). At last, the wish to be a global citizen and help to solve world problems like poverty, social inequality, and climate change reflects the rising awareness among youths of global issues, including these ones. This global perspective fits the ideals of volunteer tourism, which motivates participants to participate in environmentally friendly events and so change the planet (Lin et al., 2023). Unlike earlier studies, the findings of this one provide insightful, fresh ideas. Although most of the current research on volunteer tourism has concentrated on its advantages for the host communities and the acquired skills, this study highlights the personal development that might happen for the volunteers themselves. The subjects of this study are looking for active involvement that results in personal development, self-awareness, and a feeling of purpose, not only for passive experiences.

### **Transformative Impact of Volunteer Tourism on Participants' Attitudes and Behaviors**

The survey results reveal a remarkable desire for transformation among youths in Ho Chi Minh City through volunteer tourism, as most participants say they experienced positive changes in their self-awareness, global awareness, life skills, and behavior after participating in volunteer activities (Table 4). The generally excellent mean scores for all the transformation-related questions show that most of the participants grasp the possibility of volunteer tourism to help personal development and constructive change.

**Table 4**

*Results of the transformative impact of volunteer tourism on participants' attitudes and behaviors*

No.	Indicators	Mean	STD	Reference
1	Volunteer tourism makes me have a more positive awareness of myself.	3.84	0.800	Agree
2	Volunteer tourism makes me have a more positive awareness of the world around me.	3.66	0.929	Agree
3	Volunteer tourism helps me develop more good life skills.	3.73	0.849	Agree
4	Volunteer tourism helps me have a better understanding of intercultural interactions.	3.17	1.086	Neutral

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5	Volunteer tourism helps me develop a mindset of connecting with others around me.	3.70	0.928	Agree
6	Volunteer tourism makes me change my behavior in a positive direction after returning.	3.59	0.950	Agree

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Participants reported moderate positive outcomes, especially in terms of self-awareness ( $M = 3.84$ ) and awareness of the world around them ( $M = 3.66$ ). These changes speak to the reflective and often humbling experience of engaging with communities in different social, economic, or cultural contexts. Respondents also acknowledged the development of life skills ( $M = 3.73$ ) and a mindset geared toward human connection ( $M = 3.70$ ). These results align well with the motivations expressed in Table 2, suggesting a coherence between what participants sought and what they gained. However, not all responses pointed to strong transformative effects. The statement “Volunteer tourism helps me better understand intercultural interactions” received a lower mean score ( $M = 3.17$ ), falling into the “neutral” category. These findings may indicate that while participants are emotionally moved and grow personally, deeper cultural understanding might require longer engagement or more intentional intercultural training. The item “Volunteer tourism makes me change my behavior in a positive direction after returning” received moderate agreement ( $M = 3.59$ ), implying that while internal shifts do occur, sustained behavioral change might depend on follow-up actions, support systems, or reflection after the program ends.

These results offer information about the expected changes that volunteer tourism enables youths in Ho Chi Minh City to go through. The high mean scores indicate participants’ general agreement that volunteer tourism brings positive changes in their social and personal viewpoints. The results of this study reveal several significant changes that youths in Ho Chi Minh City seek through volunteer tourism; self-awareness and global understanding stand out as the most important areas of change. Participants expressed a great increase in self-awareness; volunteer tourism helps them to evaluate their values and strengths. This finding is particularly important since it suggests that volunteer tourism is not only a way to help nearby societies but also a tool for reflection and personal development. The high score for “positive awareness of oneself” corresponds with present research on transformative learning, in which tourism experiences, especially those involving active participation with local communities, help people develop a clearer sense of their own identity and abilities. Especially regarding self-awareness, these findings add to the growing corpus of studies linking volunteer tourism to personal transformation.

Similarly, the results of positive awareness of the surroundings reveal a stronger desire among youths to engage with world events and develop more social consciousness. Having a rather high mean score of 3.66 for “positive awareness of the world,” volunteer tourism seems to foster a closer knowledge of society issues, including poverty, inequality, and environmental damage. This finding is in line with earlier studies showing how volunteer tourism advances more global consciousness (Ong et al., 2018; Ouma & Dimaras, 2013). Although the concept that volunteer tourism increases awareness of social issues clearly enjoys support, the extent to which it inspires long-term behavioral changes is still a challenging and complex issue. The strong agreement with the statement “volunteer tourism helps me develop more good life skills” highlights the role of volunteer tourism in helping participants acquire practical skills. Not only are these skills valuable in volunteer work, but they also have long-lasting benefits for personal and professional development, problem-solving, adaptability, and communication. This result is consistent with present studies that highlight the contribution of volunteer tourism in developing soft skills, qualities much sought after in the modern employment market (McGehee & Santos, 2005). These life skills could be considered essential tools for success in both the personal and professional spheres for youths in Ho Chi Minh City who are often negotiating career and educational changes.

Participants also suggested that developing a viewpoint on how to relate with others could lead to very high ratings. This finding suggests that volunteer tourism is rather important for the development of empathy, teamwork, and social responsibility. The findings validate earlier studies demonstrating that volunteer tourism fosters not only global citizenship but also close personal relationships with people from many backgrounds (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Common traits of volunteer tourists who then shape their daily interactions with others are stronger social responsibility and a broader perspective of the world.

Regarding behavioral modification, modest agreement is shown by the mean score of 3.59 for “volunteer tourism makes me change my behavior in a positive direction after returning.” The results indicate that participants’ degree of these changes may vary even if they imply that volunteer tourism can inspire good behavior. While some would find it simpler to use the knowledge gained during volunteer tourism in practical activities after their trip, others could find trouble doing so. This conclusion is consistent with earlier studies on the “voluntourism paradox,” in which participants grow personally but might not always be able to include these changes in their daily life.

Although participants understand the need for intercultural exposure, the lower mean score for “understanding intercultural interactions” shows that this is not as highly stressed in their volunteer tourism experiences. This outcome could reflect the nature of the specific volunteer initiatives where people involved themselves. If the projects lacked obvious interaction with other cultures or communities, the lesser impact on intercultural understanding could be justified. Still, intercultural learning is a vital part of volunteer tourism since earlier studies have indicated that such interactions might foster more cultural sensitivity and understanding (Lyons & Wearing, 2008). This result may imply that more opportunities for direct intercultural interaction should be part of future volunteer tourism projects to improve the experiences of participants even more.

The findings of this study highlight how volunteer tourism might motivate notable changes in the lives of youths living in Ho Chi Minh City. Participants claimed that their self-awareness, view of world issues, life skills, and social contacts had developed. Although behavioral modification is possible, the degree of this change could depend on the personal situation and the type of volunteer experience. The study also stresses the need for volunteer tourism projects to underline intercultural learning, thereby raising participants’ global awareness and knowledge of many civilizations.

These results support the ongoing discussion on the transforming possibilities of volunteer tourism by offering new angles on how such encounters foster personal and social growth. They also have significant consequences for developing volunteer tourism projects that can maximize both community impact and personal transformation. This helps youths develop into more self-aware, environmentally conscious, and globally concerned citizens.

## **Impact of demographics**

### **Gender**

The analysis of gender differences using independent sample t-tests reveals significant differences between male and female participants regarding their developmental needs in volunteer tourism (Table 5).

**Table 5**

*The influence of gender on the need for development and transformation through volunteer tourism*

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</b>	<b>t-test for Equality of Means</b>
I want to develop my soft skills	Male	118	4.02	0.028	0.023
	Female	404	4.27		
I want to expand my understanding of the community around me	Male	118	4.05	0.454	0.003
	Female	404	4.32		
I want to better understand myself when interacting with the community	Male	118	3.97	0.341	0.003
	Female	404	4.25		
I want to improve my self-assessment skills on surrounding issues	Male	118	3.92	0.060	0.003
	Female	404	4.25		
I want to be able to love those around me more	Male	118	4.03	0.374	0.033
	Female	404	4.24		
Volunteer tourism helps me gain more life skills	Male	118	3.86	0.011	0.035
	Female	404	3.69		
Volunteer tourism makes me more aware of intercultural interactions	Male	118	2.97	0.130	0.019
	Female	404	3.23		

Females consistently showed higher mean scores for various indicators related to personal development, such as “I want to develop my soft skills” (mean for females: 4.27, males: 4.02), “I want to expand my understanding of the community” (mean for females: 4.32, males: 4.05), and self-assessment, community interaction, and empathy (all with p-values less than 0.05). These findings suggest that females tend to prioritize personal development areas like soft skills, community understanding, and self-reflection more than males, possibly due to societal expectations that encourage women to cultivate these qualities (Das & Roy, 2024). This knowledge could inform the design of gender-sensitive volunteer tourism programs that tailor activities to meet the distinct needs of both genders, promoting a more inclusive approach to personal growth.

**Occupation**

**Table 6**

*The influence of occupation on the need for development and transformation through volunteer tourism*

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</b>	<b>t-test for Equality of Means</b>
I want to develop my soft skills	Student	259	4.26	0.054	0.004
	Office Worker	107	4.29		
	Civil Servant/Employee	42	4.19		
	Professional Occupation	25	4.48		
	Business/Trade	24	3.67		
	Freelancer	65	3.98		
	Total	522	4.21		
I want to expand my understanding of the community around me	Student	259	4.31	0.483	0.017
	Office Worker	107	4.31		
	Civil Servant/Employee	42	4.33		
	Professional Occupation	25	4.44		
	Business/Trade	24	3.83		
	Freelancer	65	4.02		
	Total	522	4.26		
I want to better understand myself when interacting with the community	Student	259	4.24	0.115	0.015
	Office Worker	107	4.21		
	Civil Servant/Employee	42	4.36		
	Professional Occupation	25	4.32		
	Business/Trade	24	3.71		
	Freelancer	65	3.94		
	Total	522	4.18		

Job types significantly affect how individuals perceive their developmental needs in volunteer tourism. Highly specialized professionals had the highest mean scores for soft skills development (mean: 4.48), followed by office workers (4.29) and students (4.26). Businesspeople, on the other hand, scored the lowest (3.67), suggesting that professionals in highly specialized fields, who rely on strong interpersonal and communication skills, value soft skills development more. Similarly, students tend to focus on personal growth during their academic years, while businesspeople may prioritize technical expertise or entrepreneurial skills over soft skills. For community understanding, highly specialized professionals again ranked the highest (4.44), while businesspeople (3.83) and freelancers (4.02) showed a lower inclination toward community engagement. This could reflect businesspeople's focus on their immediate work environment and freelancers' often independent working style. Civil servants, who are more directly engaged in community work, scored the highest for understanding themselves through community interactions (4.36), with freelancers scoring the lowest (3.94). These findings highlight how job roles shape personal and professional growth priorities, suggesting that volunteer tourism programs should be tailored to the needs of specific job categories, such as teamwork-focused programs for professionals or entrepreneurial-focused initiatives for businesspeople.

**Monthly income**

**Table 7**

*The influence of monthly income on the need for development and transformation through volunteer tourism*

Indicator	Monthly Income	N	Mean	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means
I want to develop my self-assessment ability regarding issues around me	Below 5 million VND	118	4.23	0.003	0.019
	5 million to under 10 million VND	62	4.15		
	10 million to under 15 million VND	128	4.27		
	15 million to under 20 million VND	94	4.30		
	Above 20 million VND	14	4.00		
	No income	106	3.92		
	Total	522	4.17		

Income level analysis in Table 7 showed that those with lower incomes, that is, those below five million VND, had a somewhat higher mean score (4.23) for the indicator “I want to develop my self-assessment ability” than those with greater incomes. Fascinatingly, those whose incomes exceeded 20 million VND reported the lowest mean score (4.00), implying that higher-income people could feel more confident and less in need of doing self-assessment exercises. On the other hand, people without income had the lowest score (3.92), which could be explained by their emphasis on immediate financial problems instead of personal growth. With lower-income people perhaps giving personal development top priority because of a lack of other resources, the general trend suggests that financial stability may play a role in one’s capacity for self-reflection and personal development. This result implies that different developmental priorities should be taken into account in volunteer tourism projects aimed at different income levels, particularly with relation to self-assessment and personal development.

Gender, occupation, and income levels significantly influence the developmental needs of people engaged in volunteer tourism. Especially in areas like soft skills and empathy, women often give personal development top priority over men. Different job types define developmental priorities; highly specialized professionals concentrate more on soft skills and community involvement. Income levels also affect the inclination for self-assessment; lower-income people show more inclination for personal reflection. These results emphasize the requirement to create volunteer tourism initiatives that satisfy the various developmental needs of different demographic groups, thus guaranteeing inclusiveness and more impact in promoting personal development among many populations. Particularly with regard to soft skills, self-assessment, and community understanding, the three elements, gender, occupation, and income, show clearly how much individuals’ development needs in volunteer tourism are influenced.

Overall, with women generally showing a greater need for personal development in areas like soft skills, community involvement, and self-awareness, the results imply that gender shapes developmental priorities in a rather significant manner. More than men, women seem to value interpersonal skills, empathy, and introspection. Women are often socialized to be more sympathetic, socially conscious, and focused on

emotional intelligence, which helps to explain these traits in light of societal expectations and gender roles. Men, on the other hand, may concentrate more on technical or independent skills depending on different social conditioning. Therefore, gender-related variations could affect the emphasis of development projects; programs for women could stress communication, empathy, and self-awareness, while programs for men might concentrate more on leadership or technical competency.

With people in highly specialized professions (e.g., technical fields) and public service roles (e.g., civil servants) generally showing a higher emphasis on developing soft skills and community involvement, occupation also greatly influences development needs. These groups could view their roles as demanding substantial degrees of social responsibility, self-examination, and interpersonal communication as well as reflection. Conversely, businesspeople and freelancers, whose work is often more autonomous or profit-driven, scored lower on the need for development in these sectors, maybe because of their emphasis on skills connected to entrepreneurship or autonomy. Therefore, occupation affects the priorities of people regarding development since it determines the kinds of skills and competencies most applicable to their employment surroundings.

Particularly with relation to self-assessment, income level also became clearly important in determining development needs. Higher-income people often reported a somewhat lower need for self-assessment, maybe because they already feel confident in their abilities or have more access to tools allowing them to concentrate on other kinds of professional development. Those in lower-income groups, on the other hand, expressed more need for self-assessment, which would reflect their continuous battle for personal development and financial stability. This scenario implies that stability and financial resources could affect a person's capacity for personal growth; lower-income people might use self-assessment as a tool for negotiating both personal and occupational obstacles.

### **Theoretical Implications**

First, especially with regard to youths, this study helps theoretically clarify the idea of personal development and transformation in volunteer tourism. It emphasizes that volunteer tourism is a means for people to search for significant events that support personal development, self-awareness, and community involvement rather than only a leisure or relaxation activity. Through stressing its transforming power, this study increases the body of knowledge already in use on volunteer tourism by looking at the developmental needs of young participants. According to the study, youths are drawn to tourism experiences that transcend passive consumption and instead concentrate on active participation, self-reflection, and supporting social concerns more and more. This theoretical lens views tourism as a means of personal and social transformation rather than just a leisure activity, subverting the conventional wisdom.

Second, the study helps to clarify how, in the framework of volunteer tourism, various demographic elements, such as gender, occupation, and income, form the development and transformation needs of youths. Through investigating the variations in developmental priorities depending on these elements, the study offers a complex theoretical framework to help explain the reasons behind volunteer tourism. Future studies should pay great attention to how particular groups, such as students, professionals, and people from various income levels, approach personal development through volunteer tourism.

## **Practical Implications**

Based on the results of this study, the following suggestions are meant to direct the creation of more powerful, inclusive, and transformative volunteer tourism projects for young people in metropolitan settings. Firstly, integrate personal development as a core program objective.

Initiatives involving volunteer tourism should deliberately include personal development objectives and go beyond only emphasizing community service. Structured activities aimed at improving soft skills, including communication, leadership, teamwork, and self-reflection, should be part of programs. Including reflective journals, mentoring meetings, or peer feedback loops, experiential learning models help to enhance the developmental effect on participants even more.

Next is designing for inclusivity across demographic lines. Volunteer tourism programs have to be more sensitive to the several realities of youth, given the significant variations in developmental needs depending on gender, occupation, and income. This includes providing several tracks of participation that fit varying availability, obligations, and budgets. Sliding-scale fees, gender-sensitive programming, and alternative scheduling ideas, such as weekend or short-term models, help to guarantee more general access and participation. Third is to strengthen intercultural competency components. Although many young people claimed improved attitudes, there was a clear discrepancy in intercultural knowledge. Organizations should thus apply deliberate intercultural learning models to solve this. Pre-departure seminars on cultural sensitivity, in-field cross-cultural dialogue sessions, and post-trip thought emphasizing global citizenship and diversity awareness could all fit here. Working with academic institutions or intercultural trainers will help to enhance these elements even more.

Fourth is to provide post-program support to sustain change. When participants keep interacting with program values long after the trip ends, sustained behavioral change is more likely. Consequently, companies should set up organized follow-up systems, including online communities or alumni networks, follow-up volunteering opportunities in local settings, reflection retreats or digital storytelling projects. These initiatives help reinforce learning outcomes and strengthen participants' long-term civic engagement. Last but not least is to expand outreach to underrepresented youth. Mostly from metropolitan university environments, this study involved young people with past voluntary experience. Future programming should specifically target young people underrepresented or lacking access to such experiences, especially those in rural areas, lower-income communities, or non-academic settings. Outreach collaborations with community centers, vocational institutions, and youth organizations can diversify volunteer tourism and enlarge its social impact.

## CONCLUSION

This study sought to investigate, via volunteer tourism, the personal development and transformation needs of youths living in Ho Chi Minh City. Surveying 522 youths, the study examined their developmental needs and motivations with an eye toward gender, occupation, and income.

The key findings suggest that youths prioritize personal growth, with a strong desire to enhance soft skills, engage with local communities, and develop self-awareness. The study also found significant differences in developmental needs based on gender, occupation, and income, highlighting the importance of designing inclusive and tailored volunteer tourism programs. The results contribute to both theoretical and practical knowledge, offering new insights into the role of volunteer tourism in fostering personal and social transformation among young tourists. This study's novelty lies in its exploration of the developmental and transformational aspects of volunteer tourism, emphasizing its role in shaping global citizens who actively contribute to community well-being. Still, the study has some limitations. The sample size might not fairly reflect the varied young population of Ho Chi Minh City, and the emphasis on self-reported data might bring prejudices. Future studies ought to increase the sample size and look at long-term behavioral changes following volunteer tourism programs. Practically speaking, the study offers suggestions for creating volunteer tourism initiatives that particularly meet the developmental needs of different demographic groups. By customizing initiatives to emphasize community involvement, skill development, and self-reflection, youths will be enabled to have more impactful and inclusive experiences, thereby fostering both social and personal change.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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