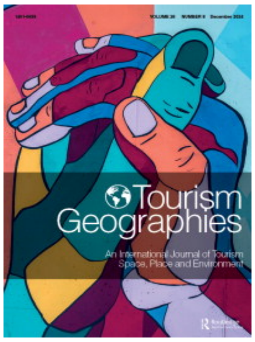

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Digital voluntourism and sense of place: volunteers' responsibility towards an 'imaginary locality'

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ABSTRACT

Digital volunteer tourism (DVT) has emerged as a viable alternative to positively impact destinations when travel is impossible during times of crisis. This leaves volunteers, the 'agents' in volunteer projects and development work, who might often identify with a destination or specific cause, without a tangible link to the locality. Raising the important question of what role being physically connected to the locality plays in voluntourism; this study focuses on volunteers' perception of their own impact in an out-of-reach destination. Through online fieldwork during an eight-week internship with a volunteer organisation in Fiji, this paper offers first insights into the phenomenon of digital voluntourism by discussing the role that a link to the destination and a sense of place play in still feeling to be making a difference. Furthermore, this debate reveals whether and how DVT intends to stimulate a sense of belonging of those volunteers to foster their sense of responsibility, while juxtaposing these digital programmes to in-situ voluntourism. This paper, therefore, constitutes one of the first contributions conceptualising the geography of digital voluntourism, arguing that while DVT has its merits in contributing to the sustainable development agenda, the physical distance and isolation from the place where this impact should be felt compromise their feelings of achievement and understanding of the locality even more than in usual voluntourism projects.

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Introduction

Volunteer tourism (VT) has rapidly increased in popularity in the past years (Bandyopadhyay, 2019; Dolezal & Miezelyte, 2020; Scheinert et al., 2019), with experts estimating that the volunteer tourism industry has, before the 2020 pandemic, been a '$3 billion a year industry' (Gharib, 2021, n.p.). A significant body of research exists on this ever-growing industry, with travellers' motivations to engage in volunteering while travelling abroad as one of the most researched areas (Proyrungroj, 2021; Raymond & Hall, 2008; Wearing, 2001), in addition to an increasing body of literature that concerns destination impacts (Hernandez- Maskivker et al., 2018) and residents'

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viewpoints (Dillette et al., 2017). VT has particularly been heavily criticised for decades, with volunteers trying to 'do good' in exotic holiday destinations while often perpetuating a 'white saviour complex' (Bandyopadhyay, 2019; Vrasti, 2013) and living an experience that has become essentially commodified (Wearing et al., 2018). Nonetheless, more attention is paid to VT's potential (Lee & Zhang, 2020), for example, volunteering has been defined as an important tool for the advocacy of Agenda 2030 (Dolezal & Miezelyte, 2020; Haddock & Devereux, 2016). To this aim, volunteers are seen as 'agents' in volunteer projects, often aiming to positively impact the destination and contribute to sustainable development.

However, in times of crisis, for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, VT's potential contribution to sustainable development is suddenly jeopardised (Dolezal & Miezelyte, 2020). While many businesses stopped operating in this time, some decided to innovate and re-established their programmes in the digital environment. One such organisation is 'Destination Fiji' [1] (DF), a UK social enterprise that promotes responsible, sustainable, and ethical volunteering expeditions to rural areas of Fiji for university students, graduates, or gap year travellers. Fiji is among the most popular destinations in the South Pacific, with tourism contributing 45% to the Fijian GDP (Chambers, 2019). In addition, it supports the local economy through direct and indirect employment and foreign exchange earnings, with visitor arrivals of 894,389 and tourism receipts of more than $898 million in 2019 (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Despite having seen little to no COVID-19 cases in Fiji by April 2021, the island's tourism industry was heavily impacted by the crisis, with 95% of flights operated by Fiji Airways grounded, almost 300 hotels and resorts closed, and over 25,000 people unemployed in the first year of the pandemic (Chanel, 2020). Through digital volunteering programs, DF attempted to contribute to the sustainable development of those highly tourism-dependent communities in Fiji. By digitally connecting volunteers with projects requested by the Fijian Government and local NGOs supporting local communities, DF allows students to engage in experiential learning whilst 'making a difference' (Anonymised website).

This paper investigates these digital volunteer programmes by Destination Fiji, seeking to understand the *perceived* impact of volunteers and the role that a sense of place and place attachment play for volunteers to feel they are making an impact—and, consequently, take an increased responsibility towards sustainable development. Through remote digital fieldwork and online interviews collected during a digital internship programme during lockdown, this research seeks to understand the link between volunteers' perceived impact and their sense of place and belonging to the destination and cause.

That digital technologies have blurred the boundaries between being 'here' (physically) and 'there' (digitally) has already been established. This often results in voluntourists that are increasingly torn between their life at home and away, many of whom are doing it all 'for the gram' (Woods & Shee, 2021a). Responsibility is therefore no longer a' place-based' matter as once argued by Sin (2014) but can span cross-border and concern various matters at the same time (Woods & Shee, 2021a). This research takes this critical stance as a starting point and raises the overall question of whether digital volunteering could positively contribute to destinations, even without taking place in the locality. While the ‘virtual’ and ‘digital’ are terms that are used interchangeably at times, this paper adopts the term ‘digital volunteer tourism’. This is mainly because this type of tourism takes place in a broader environment created by digital technology, while the virtual is normally referred to as a realm of potentiality, as something that does not yet exist and as a continuation of reality—in the more Deleuzian sense. It can also refer to a more specific digital environment, in which things are made to appear to exist, e.g. with the help of avatars, which does not apply to the present study context.

While volunteers’ actual impacts on the locality and residents lie beyond this study’s scope, it takes volunteers’ subjective perception of their contribution as a starting point to create a first link between digital voluntourism and sustainable development. In addition, this paper raises a terminological debate regarding digital volunteer *tourism* and makes a contribution to the geography of voluntourism by establishing a first link between the notions of digital volunteering/voluntourism, volunteers’ perceived impact and sense of place.

Volunteers’ perceived impact and the role of sense of place in digital volunteer tourism

Volunteer tourists’ perceived impacts and responsibility towards the locality

Volunteer tourism provides university students and graduates, gap year travellers or other tourists—usually from more economically developed countries—the opportunity to ‘do good’ through their time and money, often in developing countries (Simpson, 2005). Despite these positive intentions, a vast amount of literature has criticised volunteer tourism, particularly the short project duration (Sin, 2009), the lack of understanding of local circumstances (Godfrey et al., 2020), limited interactions with locals (Lee & Zhang, 2020), commercial interests of volunteering organisations (Mowforth & Munt, 2009) and its elitist nature (Bandyopadhyay, 2019). Some even argue that VT represents a form of post-colonialism, driven by ‘Othering’ and the exoticisation of cultural differences (Laurie & Smith, 2018) in destinations with ‘poor but happy’ residents in need of help (Crossley, 2012). These points of criticism often compromise sustainable development or local development solutions (Raymond & Hall, 2008).

An increasing interest, if not pressure, has emerged to understand how VT can positively contribute to destinations and residents, notably sustainable development and the SDGs (Devereux et al., 2017; Scheinert et al., 2019). For example, Dolezal and Miezelyte (2020, p. 52) argue that the ‘universality of the SDGs can make an essential start in terms of challenging power imbalances and the idea of the ‘South’ as in need of outside help delivered by the volunteer as a perceived agent of change—a discourse that has nurtured volunteer tourism for a long time’. Despite the still questionable contribution and the fact that volunteers often feel unable to make a positive change at home (Mostafanezhad, 2013a), they still feel encouraged by an ambitious desire to do good whilst travelling (Georgeou & Haas, 2019) and take on responsibility towards not only a destination but also a cause (Keese, 2011). According to Sin (2010), this cause comes in the shape of delivering aid and development services to those in need, with responsibility usually ascribed to those in more privileged positions.

Voluntourism has thereby contributed to the popularisation and commodification of humanitarianism (Mostafanezhad, 2014), meaning that responsibility and care have become a matter of concern for a wide variety of actors on a global scale, who feel greater agency to act on topics of importance (Woods & Shee, 2021b). While this may be perceived as a positive development, Woods & Shee (2021b) also emphasise the dilution of responsibility and care, which, in the increasingly digitally connected world we live in, are often used as new currencies to leverage for one's own profile and online status, by portraying 'the caring self'.

In addition to a lack of understanding of what this digital shift means for the representation of difference that is acted out in volunteer projects (Woods & Shee, 2021a), a significant gap often exists between what volunteers *feel* they can do and whether they could be regarded as 'agents of change' (Dolezal & Miezelyte, 2020). Understanding the *perceived* impact from their perspective is a crucial first step to understanding to what extent volunteers *feel* like they are making an impact and take on responsibility towards the cause they signed up for. In a study on volunteers' perception, Dolezal and Miezelyte (2020), for example, argue that common problems that hinder volunteer tourism from contributing more effectively to the SDGs include, 'a lack of skills and feelings of uselessness on volunteers' part, expectations that are set too high through marketing, as well as a lack of coordination and the fact that projects do not focus on the marginalised' (p. 51).

Digital volunteer tourism

To a certain degree, digital volunteering has existed as an alternative to traditional in-person volunteering experiences for many years (Conroy & Williams, 2014). However, with limited opportunities to engage face-to-face during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, volunteering organisations have been offering increasingly more digital work opportunities recently (Irandoost et al., 2022). In his 2017 publication, Schott already proposed digital field trips as 'a meaningful tool for experiential learning' (2017, p. 13) and a 'carbon-sensitive alternative'. Additionally, because of the increasing interest in online education, experiential learning in the form of digital internships started to surface (Marr, 2019), despite the criticism that these internships place marginalised students at a disadvantage due to the technology needed (Franks & Oliver, 2012). Nevertheless, based on volunteers' prosocial motivation, online volunteering increasingly became a tool for connectivity (Silva et al., 2018). An important question here is to what extent volunteer tourism can still be referred to as volunteer *tourism* without taking place in a destination, as once argued by Wearing (2001, p.1). In this definition, the purpose of a holiday in a particular locality is an essential factor differentiating volunteer tourism from other volunteering work.

Whilst an extensive body of research discusses the concept of online volunteering (Ellis & Cravens, 2000; Silva et al., 2018) or the link between volunteering *in situ* while remaining connected online to a variety of digital communities (Woods & Shee, 2021a, 2021b), limited debate to date questions DVT's impact on the ground or volunteers' perspective on their *perceived* impact, particularly in projects that take place entire online, without a place-based aspect. Cravens (2006), for example, demonstrates that fundamental problems compromising the impact of online UNV programmes are volunteers not acquainting themselves with local circumstances. Digital volunteering could easily compensate for some of the negative impacts of conventional volunteering, including the ambiguous relationship with children, local dependency or reduced local employment opportunities, however, to date there is a clear lack of understanding of this form of voluntourism that takes place entirely online.

Digital volunteer tourists' sense of place and belonging

Digital spaces can provide genuine learning experiences by constructing 'a sense of being physically present in a non-physical setting' (Berti, 2021, p. 61). However, to date, it is unclear whether volunteers require a physical connection to the locality where they hope to make an impact or at least a 'sense of place' to feel the drive to contribute. Woods & Shee (2021a) even go as far as arguing that the increasingly connected digital self has brought about more distance and narcissism due to distraction and the various social media communities one has to serve and please, thereby leading to an aestheticization rather than problematisation of poverty.

Researched across many disciplines, the notion of 'place' is particularly contested. In addition to being seen as a physical location, it is often understood as a space that gains in meaning (Cresswell, 2008), mainly through social acts, relationships (Nova, 2005), and feelings (Arora & Khazanchi, 2010). Furthermore, Cresswell (2008) argues that any physical place also involves a 'sense of place' by the people inhabiting it. Creating an 'authentic' sense of place remains 'an emergent property of the interaction between an individual and the environment, (…) (and) fundamentally unique to each of us' (Turner & Turner, 2006, p. 207). In the present context, the question emerges as to whether a sense of place can also occur without an embodied experience in a place or destination. Particularly since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital has become quite a 'real' extension of social life, and technology can realistically recreate places (Khobra & Gaur, 2020). In their research on digital tours of Egyptian heritage sites during COVID-19, El-Said and Aziz (2022) argue that while digital touring cannot replace the actual experience of being in the location, it can provide a valuable tool to sustain visitors' interest—something that has also been shown in a study by Dolezal et al. (2022) researching digital pub quizzes organised by homeless tour guides in London. Digital tours further encourage underprivileged people or visitors with mobility issues to experience places (El-Said & Aziz, 2022). In the context of voluntourism, Woods & Shee (2021b) even argue that 'the real world is needed to provide stimulus and material for the "mediated representations" of the digital' (p. 49). However, what this means in a volunteering context that takes place entirely online is unclear to date.

In volunteer tourism, like in tourism more broadly, place and the individual experience of it play a crucial role. It distinguishes destinations (i.e. 'places promoted' and 'sold' to the tourist) from each other based on their unique characteristics and tourists' perceived image (Keese, 2011). On the one hand, voluntourists prefer destinations where they can 'help', i.e. the volunteering destination is nearly as important as the activity itself (Proyrungroj, 2021). On the other hand, volunteers favour exotic destinations to escape and have fun, thus looking for 'in-between spaces that are both different and familiar' (Keese, 2011, p. 262). To date, what is known is that place matters for VT and attracts volunteers. In fact, Inversini et al. (2020) argue that VT online representations are still predominantly about the destination and touristic experience rather than volunteering activities performed, or the contribution to sustainable development. As argued in a recent study by Proyrungroj (2021),

> volunteer tourists tend to choose a destination where there is a problem that matches their concerns and that should be a place where they believe that their endeavour can make a difference. This emphasizes the fact that for these tourists, their contribution has to be place-specific (p. 12).

Place and a sense of belonging thus play a key role in delivering an impact for wider sustainable development (Dallimore et al., 2018), however, in how far one can really speak of a tangible impact might be questionable. For example, Woods and Shee (2021a) argue that volunteers are often 'physically proximate to, but emotionally and representationally distanced from, their beneficiaries' (p. 10), even if they find themselves physically present in the locality.

However, what research has indeed found is that a deeper appreciation of the locality can also lead to a greater drive to support local businesses (Milne et al., 2018). Place plays a role, therefore, as a key motivator and in 'structuring volunteering practices' (Dallimore et al., 2018, p. 3). Keese (2011) goes so far as to argue that 'if properly structured, learning about the destination country can help the volunteer to understand the root causes of poverty, (…) and to have a long-term impact' (p. 275). Similarly, Gooch (2003) reinforces that a 'sense of place can be cultivated to foster active volunteer groups' (p. 1). Through a profound connection and spending time in the locality, Gooch's (2003) research suggests that volunteers established trust and mutuality with the communities and fulfilled tasks more successfully. Some even argue that the embodied experience in place is required to make volunteers think more critically about their actions and formulate a more hopeful VT agenda (Driessen, 2022; Everingham, 2016). Indeed, volunteer tourism has the potential to stimulate ethics of care for residents and 'the more volunteers care with the host community, the greater the impact they can make' (Lee & Zhang, 2020, p. 1829).

At the same time, one of the issues with how place is framed and understood in the volunteer tourism context is that it is often bounded around notions of aid, poverty, and development (Crossley, 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2014; Sin, 2010). Place is seen as the site of poverty and underdevelopment, with volunteers arriving to 'save' the locals, a romanticised idea of VT (Crossley, 2012). VT promises the tourist to go beyond the usual tourist experience, 'from consuming a place to helping to construct it, and from purchasing staged tourist displays to witnessing the 'reality' of a place' (Crossley, 2012, p. 245). However, this commodification of poverty is problematic for two reasons: First of all, in the context of VT, poverty is often directly associated with the touristic aspect of the experience (tours, dance classes etc.) and the authentic aspects of local life, 'making it difficult for volunteer tourists to balance their responsibilities as volunteers and their leisure time as tourists' (Burrai et al., 2017, p. 374). Secondly, the commodified landscape of poverty perpetuates similar power inequalities as can be seen more broadly in tourism in developing countries and a discourse of 'us' versus 'them', which is often seen in the landscape of aid (Mostafanezhad, 2014; Sin, 2010). This focus on place as experienced by the individual neglects the systemic issues that create poverty in the first place, meaning that many volunteer projects aim to target the symptoms of poverty that are bound in place through individual actions by the tourist, however not its root causes—thus contributing to the 'depolitici(sation of) international development agendas by replacing the political with the personal' (Mostafanezhad, 2013b, p. 496).

The debate surrounding place and the depoliticised nature of aid expressed through the commodified and romanticised VT product raises important questions in the digital realm. Does the humanitarian gaze (Mostafanezhad, 2014) and the 'them' versus 'us' division (Godfrey et al., 2020) that VT often propounds still hold true in a digital context that is somewhat, at least physically, disconnected from place? The role a sense of place, rather than physical and embodied experience, plays in potentially reproducing this humanitarian gaze is paramount to discussing the geography of DVT.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach based on an interpretivist research paradigm to research Destination Fiji's digital internship programmes. It explores the perceptions of research participants as constructed through their digital internship experience, acknowledging each intern's unique and personal experience of reality. The aim, therefore, is not to understand or even measure actual impacts, but to grasp volunteers' individual, subjective perception and experience.

The COVID-19 health crisis forced researchers to shift their focus towards innovative forms of fieldwork (Howlett, 2022). Given that the locality of the internship was out of reach, this study uses online fieldwork. It therefore contributes to the recent debate on the need to re-imagine, re-evaluate, and adjust ethnographically orientated research to respond to crises, accessing individuals and places that otherwise cannot be reached (Podjed & Muršič, 2021). Even though conducted from the comfort of one's home, digital fieldwork, of course, requires time and technological resources (Firomumwe, 2022). It also comes with certain limitations and challenges, particularly relating to the inability to establish the same level of trust as through embodied interactions. Nevertheless, overt participant observations by one of the researchers who participated in the digital internship for eight weeks between June and August 2020 supplemented the online interviews to fully comprehend the contexts and meanings attached to the programme (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2012). Notes were taken during meetings with fellow volunteers, internship coordinators and weekly group discussions. These notes focused on the relationships developed but also the thoughts and emotions on the digital nature of the programme felt by volunteers during the internship whenever they were expressed.

The empirical data also includes 16 online interviews with digital volunteers (20–60 min each), conducted in English *via* Zoom. All semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide, which was driven by the research questions and literature review, focusing on volunteers' opinions about the programme and their impacts, motivations to volunteer, perceived contributions to sustainable development, experiences of the cultural immersion, the digital nature of the programme, and the contrast between traditional and digital volunteering. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed. Informed consent was gained orally from all research participants, including the volunteering organisation. Research participants were

Table 1. Interview participants.

Gender	Age	Nationality	Internship field	Internship length	Pseudonym
Female	20	English/ Polish	NGO & Charity Management	4 weeks	Amelia
Female	21	English	Global Education	4 weeks	Jade
Female	20	English	International Development	4 weeks	Bella
Female	19	Welsh	Business and Enterprise	4 weeks	Ruby
Female	19	English	International Development	4 weeks	Lily
Female	20	Scottish	International Development	8 weeks	Hazel
Female	20	Canadian	Environment	8 weeks	Charlotte
Female	19	Canadian	International Development	8 weeks	Ava
Female	22	Welsh	Global Health	8 weeks	Victoria
Female	21	English	NGO & Charity Management	8 weeks	Jens
Female	24	English	NGO & Charity Management	8 weeks	Lucy
Female	20	Nigerian/ Welsh	International Development	8 weeks	Ivy
Male	19	English	Global Health	4 weeks	Leo
Male	23	Scottish	Environment	8 weeks	Oliver
Male	21	English	Environment	8 weeks	Edward
Male	21	English	International Development	8 weeks	Max

Source: authors' compilation.

allowed to withdraw at any time, and the data collected was treated confidentially, with pseudonyms used (see Table 1).

The visual and audio recordings of online interviews provided rich data on the non-verbal communication of research participants. A convenience sample was chosen amongst the interns volunteering at the time, ensuring that different types of projects were chosen, as illustrated in Table 1. Thus, a purposive sampling strategy was implemented to select individuals who could provide crucial information about the digital internship. While gender and age were further important aspects in the sampling, the cohort of digital volunteers included a majority of female participants in their early 20ies, which is also represented in the demographics of the sample. In addition to volunteers, an online interview with one of the organisation's representatives was conducted to understand the company's viewpoint.

All data collected was analysed using thematic analysis. Common themes and sub-themes were identified and coded and then put into categories, which emerged from the data and research questions. Several rounds of data analysis were undertaken, letting the data 'speak' first, followed by a round of analysis guided by the research questions. In this process, recurring patterns were highlighted using colours, and tables were used to organise the codes and the findings.

Findings

Questioning the long-lasting *impact in digital spaces*

Particularly at the beginning of the internships, volunteers' feelings towards their work were very positive. A feeling of excitement to still make a difference emerged as one of the recurring themes. Volunteers, including Victoria, Max, and Charlotte, shared a feeling of support for Fiji; even though travel restrictions did not allow volunteers to visit, the digital internship provided an opportunity to assist in times of crisis and a hope for long-lasting impact. In addition to the altruistic and hopeful behaviour towards the cause, volunteers' self-development and career advancement were equally important. Bella, Ava, Jens, Leo, and Max emphasised a feeling of relief about the digital alternative to cancelled expeditions or on-site internships. Taking away the mobility privilege that Di Matteo (2023) talks about, digital volunteering still provides volunteers with 'access to social recognition and status, to affective experience, and to knowledge and intellectual enrichment, as well as to positive outcomes for one's career' (p. 12) reinforcing the narrative of privilege that dominates traditional volunteering.

Volunteers' financial contributions also emerged as a symbol of their impact. According to DF, over 50% of the digital internship fee contributes to a foundation and partner programs, making volunteers feel like their internship fees were a significant contributor to their impact—which, in most traditional forms of voluntourism, is not the case (Tomazos & Cooper, 2012). Consequently, the most evident long-lasting impact that volunteers identified in the early stages of the internship was their financial contribution towards the charity, with the volunteering industry once again 'turning heavily towards the international traveller as agent of (at least economical, if not sometimes humanitarian) change' (Trupp & Dolezal, 2020, p. 10), thereby further perpetuating popular humanitarianism (Woods & Shee, 2021a).

A further contribution that volunteers *perceived* was the reduced environmental impact of digital volunteering: *'really the biggest carbon offsetting or carbon reduction projects that we can do, is going entirely digital (…) we no longer have to fly people over to Fiji'* (Destination Fiji). Jade, one of the volunteers, mentioned this as a crucial advantage: *'also for the environment, I think people are just staying in their home and then helping them [Fijians] rather than getting on a plane'.* Along with the reduced environmental impact, volunteers perceived the volunteering experience as more democratic and accessible to all layers of society, opening up opportunities for those less privileged to travel (Victoria). While a traditional volunteering experience is hugely beneficial at a personal level (Destination Fiji), digital internships thus can transmit values of global citizenship on a broader scale, taking action to fight environmental and societal problems.

Of course, while a traditional volunteering experience can be *'incredibly humbling and […] what that can do for your understanding or your appreciation for different things is massive'* (Destination Fiji), DVT seems to have a certain value for volunteers, particularly to become global citizens. Destination Fiji believes that one does not necessarily need a physical link to a place to develop these traits:

> I think that people feeling like the world is smaller making connection with different cultures digitally, they're more likely to become that global citizen that has that responsibility for… well for the world. […] I think there is a space there, and it just encourages that collective responsibility […], and it's a better distribution of knowledge and understanding and skills realising that we can now do all digitally or a lot of it digitally.

The digital could indeed enable a strong sense of community fostering global citizenship and 'contributing towards a wider-reaching socially shared responsibility' (Dolezal et al., 2022, p. 416). It is through stimulating 'the collective ability of more affluent participants to use their power and privileges' (Dolezal et al., 2022, p. 417) that a contribution to social change could be made—also without the embodied experience of being in a place. At the same time, one needs to keep in mind the negative consequences of this commodification of humanitarianism, which might also mean that 'whilst these practices have enabled humanitarianism to be practiced over ever-greater distances, they do not necessarily translate into more efficacious, or altruistic, practices' (Woods & Shee, 2021, p. 4).

In fact, despite the overall positive feelings of volunteers in this research about still making a difference, doubts emerged after some time, particularly related to volunteers' digital projects and the dynamics between actors (e.g. Fijian Ministries, NGOs, and grassroots businesses). Once volunteers decided on a digital project, DF mediated the communication. However, after a few weeks, volunteers began questioning their knowledge and the long-lasting, sustainable contribution they could have in Fiji through their digital projects: *'Initially not a lot of impact, I would say, particularly a four-week internship. I mean, really, what international difference can you make in such a small amount of time?' (Amelia)*. Jens, who worked on a digital project in the form of a database of journal articles, also shared a feeling of confusion regarding his impact on the ground by arguing that *'it's hard to do that [have an impact] through a screen with like a 12-h time difference, especially with stuff that is so theoretical.'*

According to DF, '*the direct impact is how their proposal might be received, […] they [partner organisations] might take an idea, or they might take the whole thing, whichever matches up best with their aims and initiatives.*' Volunteers must trust the long-term effects of their work, depending very much on the choice of partner organisations. Research has shown that these doubts about the long-lasting impact are not new but were also identified in traditional volunteering (Milne et al., 2018; Schroeder et al., 2009). However, in the digital context, doubts are linked mainly to a lack of control or witnessing at least some sort of positive change. In a digital volunteering programme, volunteers depend on partner organisations' decisions, whom one cannot physically meet. Accordingly, it can be argued that this short-term digital volunteering experience does not manage to integrate the volunteers into the local communities (Franco & Shahrokh, 2015). Instead, it transfers know-how from 'educated' individuals in the Global North to *'under-staffed, under-funded and under-resourced'* partner organisations in the Global South (Destination Fiji), accompanied by a lack of embodied encounters between tourists and residents.

Transmission of a 'sense of place' in the digital volunteering world

Despite a strong physical separation between tourists and receiving communities, discussions with volunteers showed that they did acknowledge cultural differences and the need for cultural understanding. In the eyes of DF, volunteers need to understand Fiji to really make a change. Therefore, the internship involved an introductory phase, where volunteers gained knowledge about Fijian culture and local challenges with the help of mentoring sessions, weekly briefings, cultural workshops, and presentations. For example, cultural sessions focused on history and colonisation, music and dance, cooking, *kava* drinking (Fijian ceremonial drink), traditional handicrafts, or the Fijian language. Volunteers observed the traditional practice demonstrated by a Fijian representative of DF in each of these cultural sessions. In addition, they were invited to remotely join and attempt their own *meke* (Fijian dance), mat weaving or drinking whilst having discussions on the specific customs in the form of a *talanoa*—a culturally appropriate form of dialogue and storytelling in which participants sit on the floor with their legs crossed. In this way, volunteers could 'immerse' into the Fijian culture by digitally learning about customs and traditions.

Attending these online cultural sessions gave participants a feeling of comfort but also identification with the destination. Some participants identified so strongly with what they were doing and the knowledge they gained that they even wanted to educate others about Fijian culture, which means that '*being taught about these things [culture of Fiji] […] is going to have a really big impact' (Lily).* Even though volunteers were joining the sessions remotely—for example, drinking a beverage of choice instead of the traditional Fijian *kava* or using paper for mat weaving instead of traditional Pandanus leaves—observations showed that these practices led to at least some level of understanding of cultural differences. The program used mundane objects that volunteers would find at home, decoupling and unrooting traditional cultural practices from their original place and, in a sense, linking them to the familiar, the trivial, for the volunteer. Participating in these sessions thus provided an opportunity to remotely connect with a location out of reach, developing not only volunteers' knowledge about Fiji but also their curiosity, as both DF and volunteers noted. In doing so, DF argued that it even contributes to decolonisation by teaching volunteers about history and sending them away with a drive to '*preserve culture and celebrate culture'.*

Many volunteers found these sessions useful in better embedding their projects in the local context. They began to develop a sense of attachment to a destination by taking responsibility towards the locality. For instance, Max argues:

> The introductory phase is meant for us to basically gain cultural intelligence, so it's to understand the Fijian culture […]I think one of the goals is to learn about the colonial history, and […] cultural appropriation and […] racism. […] A lot of people would be ignorant to those things if they didn't do the Discovery Phase […] I suppose it's a good way to kind of understand what is a sensible and appropriate way for us to contribute would be.

Ruby even argued that she was able to implement the cultural knowledge gained in her digital project:

> I don't think I have ever learned that much about a topic. I think without that *[the cultural intelligence module]*, I would have had no clue about what to do […]. If you think about empowering women […] you have to deal with some resistance… I had to go back through the history, which was all in the Discovery portal, showing them that this was a part of your culture once that you can adopt it again.

While this cultural knowledge is seen as useful, the argument above also reveals a certain kind of 'white saviour' attitude, with volunteers teaching residents how to understand their culture. This critique of voluntourism is not new but usually relates to voluntourists—often identified as ‘experts’—travelling to the Global South to perform tasks regardless of their expertise (Raymond & Hall, 2008; Sin, 2009).

While the digital environment here demonstrates that responsibility is clearly no longer place-bound as once argued by Sin (2014), what is different about the digital context is that it remains entirely one-sided, focused mainly on helping ‘them’ rather than learning ‘from them’:

> As a negative, if you compare it with actually being out in a country and working directly with the people, I mean you try to help them, but they are also teaching you… and at the moment, it seems to be very one-sided. Unless you are aware that you are not any better than who you are trying to help or contribute to, then there’s going to be a bit of an issue with ethics, I think. (Amelia)

Avoiding falling into the ‘white saviour complex’ trap when volunteering online therefore depends on individual awareness. Nevertheless, this research again shows signs of ‘othering’, in a digital environment that is not place-bound. Here, the division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Godfrey et al., 2020) remains, even though the ‘Other’s’ home does not serve as a pleasure periphery for voluntourists (Bandyopadhyay, 2019). What might be missing here is, as Everingham et al. (2022) note, a ‘collaborative consumption (that) shifts the relationships of power between tourists and hosts by enabling both to interact and learn from each other, allowing for a (re)conceptualisation of self/other understandings’ (p. 633).

At the same time, some volunteers showed more self-awareness and greater reflection on issues to do with power inequalities, with the introductory module leading them to question their role ‘*so you don’t impose your own views on them*’. (Ivy). Therefore, if organised well, digital volunteering could foster greater reflection on the volunteers’ part than traditional VT, with Ava, for example, having reflected on whether people in Fiji would really want to follow the practises she uses at her farm at home. Particularly in traditional VT, the assumption might dominate that volunteers will automatically gain cultural knowledge and learn how to behave adequately by being in the location. As suggested by Kipp et al. (2020),

> awareness of gendered and racialized spaces and subjectivities may open moments of possibility for volunteers to reflect on, and critically engage with, the privilege and power they embody as visitors from the Global North. (p. 62)

One might argue that the cultural programme as part of the digital internship is essential in generating a greater sense of place and empathy towards residents and a greater hope to achieve a meaningful impact. However, as previous research has shown, care in the context of VT is often characterised by unequal power relations (Sin, 2010) and, through the increasing immersion in the digital world by volunteers, even used as a new ‘currency’ to promote the online self (Woods & Shee, 2021b).

The prevailing value of being in the locality

Despite a certain transmission of a sense of place during the digital internships, for some volunteers, the digital nature of the internship led to difficulties in fully understanding local circumstances and their impact: *‘It’s hard to see it […] see the project as a person, like with people behind it, rather than just a project I work on in my spare* *time from my home in London'* (Jens). Thus, the physical distance and isolation from the place of impact, in a way, compromised the sense of understanding and achievement of volunteers—despite the cultural knowledge gained.

For Oliver, the digital is a decent alternative for the immersion a traditional volunteering project offers; however, it is not a replacement. *'For sure there's nothing like going to the country and learning from the people yourself, especially with the locals'.* Interactions with residents do seem entirely out of reach during a digital programme, given the missing link to the place, something Amelia also picked up on:

> with this whole digital internship experience, you are pretty detached from the real cause that you are working with. I mean, we all are working for Fiji, but we're not in Fiji, we are not interacting with Fijians, and that seems to be this big gap between us, DF and then the people we try to work with. Does that impact how beneficial our experience is? Maybe.

Again, the interaction with the residents is missing for volunteers, with their volunteering experience being much more detached from the cause they have signed up for. DF is indeed cognisant of the physical isolation of the digital internship and the limitations that come with digital volunteering:

> when you go out to Fiji, it's total cultural immersion, you are living in a Fijian village, you are sleeping in a Fijian home, you've got your Fijian Mom, your Fijian Dad, your siblings that come with that, […], and you are eating Fijian food, you are preparing Fijian food, you might be washing in the river.

Therefore, DF knew that *'the cultural immersion is so different'* regarding the limited interactions with locals but believed that *'you can still have the same gratification and feeling of having given something back'.* For example, based on stories from volunteers, DF strongly trusted that this way of volunteering does have huge potential for cultural immersion and reflection on the volunteers' part—keeping in mind that this is only achieved by working on your laptop and reading about Fiji. Maybe, as Max argued, this is the 'new' way of contributing as a volunteer, where one does not contribute physically but rather helps *'with these small businesses with their research and the revenue streams, […] I guess it will be more data focused volunteering, if that makes sense.'*

For some, DVT is even seen as a preparation to travel to the location and volunteer *in situ* after: '*I feel better prepared to go out next year having done this programme.'* (Hazel). This notion of the digital programme preparing and equipping volunteers also came out clearly in what Charlotte shared when she reflected on the difference between volunteering in-situ and online. Being *in situ*, of course, comes with the adaptation to locals' daily life, giving '*you a better understanding of the culture there, because you are involved in it'.* However, being distanced from it, *'gives you time to think more about it and process it.'*

Discussion

This research has problematised the geography of DVT by creating a first link between a sense of place, perceived impact and digital voluntourism that takes place entirely in a digitalised world. The existing literature demonstrates that a greater attachment to the destination might also lead to a greater drive to make a difference (Dallimore et al., 2018; Milne et al., 2018), meaning that VT as we know it can stimulate a certain sense of care and responsibility (Lee & Zhang, 2020), even in a romanticised context where young volunteers intend to take over humanitarian tasks, thus contributing to the depoliticization of development agendas (Mostafanezhad, 2013b). As once argued by Sin (2010),

> as an end-consumer, tourists actually do personally see and engage the "other" that he or she had committed responsibility to when he or she opted to take tours or holidays that are supposedly socially responsible. The nature of the tourism industry is thus a rather unique one, and posits challenges to the traditional view of geographies of responsibility or care at a distance. (p. 984)

This close interaction with the 'Other', which the very nature of the tourism industry is characterised by, thus creates specific challenges when talking about responsibility and impact, including volunteers finding themselves in a constant limbo between their responsibilities to make an impact and the leisurely aspect of their VT experience (Burrai et al., 2017). More critical stances argue that this limbo is even more pronounced in the digital age we live in, whereby the digital void leads to even less connection with but greater commodification of difference that we experience in the locality, and even more narcissistic motivations in voluntourism than we have previously known (Woods & Shee, 2021a) At the same time, it has been shown that personal and embodied experiences and interactions make volunteers more critical of their own actions (Driessen, 2022; Everingham, 2016). The entirely digital environment in which the present research has taken place adds a new dimension to this debate, raising the question of whether it could create a new space that shifts the humanitarian gaze away from a voyeuristic 'them' versus 'us' understanding.

Findings show that strong feelings of hope and relief on volunteers' side to still make a difference characterised the first weeks of the internship—along with the privilege of gaining useful work experience and a sense of shared responsibility. Concurrently, though, volunteers rarely *perceived* to be making an actual impact *on the ground*. For some, the physical isolation from the destination made their work both abstract and intangible, in addition to the uncertainty about how digital projects would have been implemented. The personal link to the locality was missing for many, compromising their sense of purpose. While the organisation was eager to transmit a sense of place through creative ways to bring Fijian customs closer, it was impossible to recreate the same volunteering experience that one could have in-situ—of course, without trying to argue that the latter would be more impactful or beneficial for residents.

Simultaneously, while creating a similar volunteering experience as the physical one is challenging, a sense of place and care can indeed emerge online. Most volunteers agreed on the usefulness of the cultural education they received, incorporating this into their projects and, at times, even questioning their assumptions. Nonetheless, this does not mean digital voluntourism is safe from becoming a victim of a white saviour attitude. Similar dynamics of Othering can also be observed in the digital world; nevertheless, in the case discussed here, the digital offered more space for education about local culture and history than is probably often the case in traditional forms of volunteer tourism. On the other hand, however, it also offers less opportunity to learn from residents, thus maintaining the humanitarian gaze and 'self' versus 'Other' division to a certain degree. Therefore, Everingham et al. (2022) 'collaborative consumption', which can potentially shift power relationships through mutual learning, could not be observed. The shared responsibility that somewhat emerges online, however, has the potential to stimulate social change also in a digital environment (Dolezal et al., 2022).

After all, being physically separated from the destination and hence completely missing out on the 'leisurely' and 'tourism' part of their volunteering experience, as propounded in VT's original conceptualisation (Wearing, 2001), signifies that volunteers might be more focused on their actual work and contribution. While acknowledging the distractive nature of the highly connected digital world and the multiple responsibilities it brings with it (Woods & Shee, 2021b), this paper argues that when the destination suddenly is less (or no) reason to choose a project, meaningful tasks might gain priority, and more attention is paid to the work one actually has to engage in.

The physical separation from the destination has also raised a terminological debate about whether digital volunteer tourism can be considered as such. We argue that the attachment to the destination and a certain sense of place are key factors that characterise digital travel and, hence, digital voluntourism. If volunteers work on online projects with a strong link to a place, leisurely programme or 'cultural intelligence module' linked to the destination, one can indeed talk of digital volunteer tourism. In the very case at hand, we witnessed a certain sense of place being created online—even though this may be challenging and very different from the 'real' destination experience.

Conclusions

The vast criticism of volunteer tourism is by far not new, and so is the global pressure to view this form of tourism with much more scrutiny, particularly linked to its impact on the ground. Shifting it entirely to the digital might thus be a cheap duplicate or a mere necessity to support tourism-dependent communities in times of crisis. At the same time, though, it might be just the solution everyone was waiting for to halt the flocking of white gap-year students to developing countries to 'do good'. This paper has aimed to unravel this recent phenomenon by taking volunteers as 'executors' of development work as a starting point. Usually, *being* in the destination plays a key role in volunteering and choosing a certain project and developing a sense of responsibility and place attachment, despite a certain distraction from the cause through the online presence that voluntourists usually have to curate at the same time.

This research has shown that while volunteers do feel like they are making an impact, the physical distance and isolation from the place where this impact should be felt compromises their feelings of achievement. The cultural knowledge transmitted serves as an attractive 'add-on' to the experience that can also lead to a stronger community spirit; however, with little to no interaction with actual Fijians, it leaves volunteers detached from the place they are trying to contribute to. At the same time, this could be seen as a more 'careful' way of preparing volunteers for their projects by equipping them with the necessary knowledge to challenge stereotypes and a Western perspective before even starting the project or travelling to the destination. Volunteering companies should, therefore, consider digital programmes to educate volunteers before their projects in-situ, keeping in mind that for many, the digital will not be able to replace an experience in the destination.

This research has thus also revealed the potential this form of tourism holds for sustainable development in terms of constituting a more carbon-friendly or inclusive form of voluntourism, as well as fostering a sense of global citizenship. Through the physical distance created, the social bonding to work towards a common goal and 'do good' has grown stronger and bears much-underused potential.

Given the focus of this research, which was solely placed on volunteers' perspective (particularly of a certain age range), future research must address the link between a sense of place and the tangible impact in the destination as perceived by other volunteer tourism stakeholders, above all residents. It is also important to better understand volunteering businesses' viewpoint on these digital alternatives, thus creating insights from within the industry to maximise the benefits of volunteer tourism in the future.

This paper makes a first step in demonstrating the importance of volunteers' emotional attachment to the destination—something that stands at the core of the geography of traditional and digital volunteer tourism alike. It, therefore, argues that sustainable development through voluntourism depends to a large degree on a sense of purpose and place attachment to feel a desire to make an impact and take responsibility, something that becomes even more challenging in a purely digital context. Unravelling the geography of digital volunteer tourism means taking embodied and affective encounters in the destination out of the equation entirely and replacing our analyses with those of care and responsibility towards 'imagined' rather than experienced localities. Whether and to what extent gap year students and other travellers will be attracted by the digital alternative remains yet to be seen. At the same time, its potential regarding accessibility, education or simply preparation for an in-situ programme should not be overlooked.

Note

1. For matters of protection of the organisation, the name is kept confidential here and replaced with the pseudonym 'Destination Fiji' (DF). This also applies to company webpages.

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

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