Motivations of volunteering at business events: An auto-ethnography perspective

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Introduction

Even though event volunteering has attracted increasing academic attention in recent years (Smith, Lockstone-Binney, Holmes, & Baum, 2014), this work has been dominated by a focus on sports events. Other event types including business events have been largely ignored, leaving a curial knowledge gap.

This current study aims to explore the motivations of volunteering at business events. Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative method. Specifically, the study draws adopts auto-ethnography approach. Auto-ethnography (or, according to Holbrook, 2005, a subjective personal introspection) was chosen due to the exploratory nature of this study, the unique ‘insider’ insight it could yield (Houge, Mackenzie, & Kerr, 2013) and its advantage of affording “researchers the opportunity to explore the nuances of social phenomena from a suitably engaged position” (Mkono, Ruhanen, & Markwell, 2015, p. 168). Auto-=ethnography has been successfully employed in tourism and event fields (e.g., Kodama et al.’s (2013). Data were drawn through the autobiographical narrative, as well as participant observations and field accounts including free-flowing conversations. Qingdao 25th International Fabric and Accessories Procurement Fair (TexQingdao) is a good example of the increasing number of exhibitions. TexQingdao is one of the biggest exhibitions in the field in China. It is held every year in Qingdao, Shandong, with over 600 exhibitors.

Literature Review

A variety of research on event volunteering from around the globe has emerged that predominantly focuses on volunteer motivation at events and, to a lesser extent, focuses on a variety of issues related to volunteering at sports events (Smith et al., 2014). Volunteer motivation has been one of the most popular research topics. Studies have identified different motives for volunteers involved at events. Helping the events, love of the events, gain personal development, extrinsic rewards, career orientation, and social motives are all the identified reasons for individuals volunteering at events (e.g., Bang & Ross, 2009; Qi, Smith, & Yeoman, 2018; Twynam, Farrell, & Johnston, 2002). Besides the topic of event volunteering motivation, volunteers’ experience, commitment, cross-cultural volunteering, satisfaction, and volunteering legacy have drawn scholars’ attention (e.g., Girginov & Nedvetskaya, 2017; Lee, Reisinger, Kim, & Yoon, 2014; Qi, Smith, & Yeoman, 2018). However, these papers, which predominantly focused on sports events and other events such as the growing business events sector, have not drawn enough scholarly attention.

A quantitative analysis combining with motivation scales is the most common method among the existing studies while there is a lack of research by qualitative methods. The sports events are not-for-profit, while some business events are for-profit and commercially run, so it is worth investigating the issue of volunteer motivation in the context of business events.

Methodology
Smith and Holmes (2012) proposed that the current studies of event volunteering have overwhelmingly used quantitative methods, which “often fail to capture the specific motivations” for individuals choosing to volunteer (p. 563). This current study aims to gain a general understanding of what motivates individuals to volunteer at business events. Due to the explorative nature, a qualitative approach is deemed to be an appropriate way to conduct this research.

Auto-ethnography was adopted due to its advantage of gaining the ‘insider’ perspective (Houge et al., 2013). It enables the researchers to include their personal insights, thoughts, and observations into the phenomenon under investigation (Ateljevic et al., 2007). This qualitative method has been successfully employed in the tourism and event field (e.g., Kodama et al., 2013; Kristiansen et al., 2014).

Specifically, this research collected the raw data in the form of reflective daily journals during the first author’s volunteering at the TexQingdao. The research journals not only recorded what happened but also ‘engage its audience with work to such an extent they feel the author’s or subject’s emotional response to given situations’ (Rinehart, 2005, p. 503). Field notes and observations were also used as data. To gain a systematic and comprehensive understanding of the volunteer motivations, a reflective analytic process was conducted after finishing the volunteer activity at the TexQingdao.

The first author is an international Ph.D. researcher in NZ with much volunteering experience including volunteering at many business events, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, and non-profit fields in China. She is proficient in Mandarin and English and has a background in event management and volunteering research.

**Results and discussions**

The exhibition of TexQingdao lasted for three days and the first author volunteered for five days including two days for helping prepare and venue set up. She recorded her volunteer experiences with the focus of the question of ‘motivation’. Due to the word limit, the following section showed some parts of the research daily journal.

12 April 2016

*Today I noticed the information of the 2016 Qingdao 25th International Fabric and Accessories Procurement Fair (TexQingdao) online, so I called the organizer and told them my interest in being a volunteer at this exhibition… For me, it is really attractive to be part of the exhibition through volunteering, otherwise, I cannot attend the event as it is not open to the public… I did not realize that this exhibition is organized by CCPIT Qingdao. Happy to know that as the platform of the organizer could bring additional value to me. I was happy after confirming with them despite a little bit hasty. However, I have been in Qingdao over seven years and very familiar with this city, so it would not be a problem. In the evening, I booked the hotel. The next day (13th) I headed to Qingdao early in the morning.*

13 April 2016

*After arrived at the registration center, I found that they have begun their work and many exhibitors were registering there. After a while, another staff Miss Yan introduced me to other staff and other volunteers, and she explained the main work to me: distribute exhibitor cards.*
became one member of the organizer to provide service to the exhibitors. Based on the previous volunteer experience, I have been very familiar with the process of exhibitor registration, so I can learn how to begin the work quickly... From the work, I have learned many new things that cannot be learned from the book. Moreover, I had the opportunities to meet the exhibitors, which is believed to be valuable networking opportunities and probably they could help for my future employment.

Field note: Having met so many volunteers during the exhibition, I noticed that most of them are university students from the casual conversations. Most of them are studying event and tourism. They indicated that volunteering at TexQingdao is a good opportunity to practice what they learn from book and learn something new from practice.

14 April 2016

For the morning section, I was arranged to the registration center and my role was to issue badges and paper bags to the exhibitors. The main roles of other volunteers were to lead the exhibitors to their booths. Some exhibitors enter the hall from the unloading area near the back door, and they are not familiar with the exhibition center, so some volunteers need to lead them. Although a little bit tired, we were still passionate and energetic.

I was so excited about the opening ceremony in the morning. So many people attended including some government officers and key people in the industry. There were some speeches and activities... This was the most exciting part of the volunteering and I was happy to be part of the event. It is an unforgettable experience... Interestingly, I pretty enjoy the on-site atmosphere of being professional and commercial, which was different from that on campus.

15 April 2016

Today, except for me and Miss Gao, all the other volunteer were arranged to serve at the arresting area (to provide tea, coffee, and desert to exhibitors and visitors). I still work at the entrance registration area and my task is to make sure the professional visitors (or potential buyers) could fill in the form and distribute the electronic exhibition journal to them. Gao is responsible for fulfilling the visitor registration form...I realized that many of the theories learned in the classroom could help in practice. But without such opportunities, I even did not know how to apply the knowledge. So volunteering at the event is really a good practice opportunity to practise. I told myself to volunteer more in the future.

Field notes: The volunteers I met were very enthusiastic and they were very happy to chat with exhibitors, organizers, and visitors. From their conversation, I realized that they could not only use the related terminologies but also had a very good willing to learn attitude. They were keen to gain information from others.

16 April 2016

It is the last day of the exhibition. Many of the exhibitors have left, so there were not that many people in the exhibition center... For myself, I was not that excited as the first few days... In the afternoon, I came to help clean the hall...

It has been a long day and I was very tired. After we finished all the work, all the organizes and the volunteers sat together in the meeting room. The manager thanks for all the volunteers’ great work and contribution... I was very happy to receive the recognition from the organizers.
Moreover, they said they would deliver the volunteer certificates to us in the near future. To be honest, this certificate means a lot to me. I can put it on my CV, which is good for scholarship application...

A diverse range of motivations for volunteering at TexQingdao was identified, such as “to practice the theoretical knowledge”, “to learn something new”, “to get the volunteer certificate”, and “to be part of the event”. To gain a systematic and comprehensive understanding of the volunteer motivations, a reflective analytic process was conducted after finishing the volunteer activity at the TexQingdao. The findings revealed the following motivations:

**To be part of the exhibition.** To get involved in the exhibition has been one of the key reasons for me. Due to the fact that many exhibitions are not open to the public, attending the exhibitions became a big attraction. As demonstrated in the journal, “for me, it is really attractive to be part of the exhibition through volunteering, otherwise I cannot attend the event as it is not open to the public”. So volunteering became a way to involve such exhibitions. Also, the on-site atmosphere brought me different feelings (e.g., professional and commercial). All these different aspects constitute the motivation to be part of the exhibition.

**To learn.** During the volunteering, I realized that the many volunteers’ involvement was motivated by the learning opportunities, which was reflected in the fields notes: “a good opportunity to practice what they learn from the book and learn something new from practice”. Personally, the volunteer opportunity at TexQingdao was a valuable learning chance and I can not only gain information on the new trends in the exhibition field, but also get familiar with the event organizing process. This study supported the previous findings that to learn is one common motive for volunteers (e.g., Bussell & Forbes, 2002; Hibbert, Piacentini, & Dajani, 2003).

**To practice.** TexQingdao has a strong “pull” for me, as it enabled me to practice, to apply knowledge into practice, and to learn from practice. This became a reason for me to be a volunteer at the event. I valued the experience itself of being a part of the events, such as the opening ceremony, strong business atmosphere, and large crowd flow. One possible explanation for this could be the classroom focused learning way of education in China, and students do not have many practice opportunities, so for me, these kinds of integration into the industry are attractive.

**Utilitarian.** From the reflective analysis process, it also found that utilitarian was an important reason that pushes me to volunteer at the exhibition. In my daily journal, I mentioned “learning” “networking”, “CV”, and “scholarship application”. Actually, I was making the most of the “springboard effect” of the volunteer activities at TexQingdao. Instead of purely helping or contributing, the volunteer behaviour also brought me some benefit. Data reinforced findings that there are relationships between volunteering, self-benefiting such as developing CV and preparing for the future career, and utilitarian (e.g., Clary et al., 1998; Handy et al., 2010).

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study is to provide an “insider” interpretation of the volunteer motivation at business events, taking TexQingdao as an example. The qualitative method of auto-ethnography was used to include my (the researchers’) personal insights, stories, and observations. This study identified four motivation concepts: to be part of the exhibition, to learn, to practice, and utilitarian. There are both similarities and differences compared with the motivations of
volunteering at sports events and other fields (e.g., Bang & Ross, 2009; Clary et al., 1998; Lee et al., 2014). Notably, the exhibition itself has been one of the attractions for volunteers, which can be explained by the features of exhibitions or business events. Moreover, the emergent of the utilitarian motives provides a direction for future research to further explore volunteer motivations.

The main limitation is associated with the representative of TexQingdao. This current study has a range of practical and theoretical implications. The findings provide volunteers and business event organizers with insights into the volunteering experiences at business events. It is important for the organizers to recognise the reasons why individuals volunteer and adopt the related strategies to meet their needs, which are useful to recruit volunteers. Theoretically, this research demonstrated an explorative investigation for the volunteer behaviour in the field of business events, which is complementary to the literature on sports event volunteering.

References


