

**VOLUNTEER TOURIST'S MOTIVATION AND
SATISFACTION IN MALAYSIA: THE ROLES OF
PERCEIVED BENEFITS AND TOURIST-HOST
INTERACTION**

DINI FARAHYAH BINTI NORDIN

UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

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by

DINI FARAHYAH BINTI NORDIN

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SET	Social Exchange Theory
UNWTO	United Nation World Tourism Organisation
MCO	Movement Control Order
CMCO	Conditional Movement Control Order
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UNSDGs	United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
NBOS	National Blue Ocean Strategy
1MG1MC	1Malaysia Green 1Malaysia Clean
MOTAC	Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture
VMK	Visit My Kampung
SEM	Structural Equation Modelling
BSBCC	Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre
NEP	National Ecotourism Plan
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
ECT	Expectation-Confirmation Theory
PLS-SEM	Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling
FPC	Finite Population Correction
EFA	Exploratory Factor Analysis
AVE	Average Variance Extracted
VIF	Variance Inflation Factor
CR	Composite Reliability
VAF	Variance Accounted For

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MOTIVASI DAN KEPUASAN PELANCONG SUKARELAWAN DI MALAYSIA: PERANAN PERSEPSI FAEDAH DAN INTERAKSI PELANCONG-HOS

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneliti kepuasan pelancong sukarelawan di Malaysia dengan menggunakan Teori Pertukaran Sosial (SET) sebagai kerangka konseptual. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk: (1) mengenal pasti faktor motivasi pelancong sukarelawan; (2) mengkaji hubungan antara motivasi dan persepsi faedah; (3) menilai tahap kepuasan keseluruhan pelancong sukarelawan; (4) menyiasat kesan pemoderasi interaksi pelancong-hos terhadap hubungan antara persepsi faedah dan kepuasan; dan (5) mencadangkan model integratif pelancongan sukarelawan. Pengumpulan data yang pada asalnya dirancang secara fizikal telah disesuaikan kepada tinjauan dalam talian susulan pandemik COVID-19, menghasilkan sebanyak 424 respons lengkap. Analisis data dilaksanakan menggunakan SPSS dan Model Persamaan Berstruktur Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM) melalui SmartPLS 4.0.0. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa faktor motivasi seperti altruisme, pembangunan peribadi, cabaran dan pengembaraan, penghayatan budaya, hubungan sosial, peluang kerjaya, pencarian rekreasi dan keunikan mempunyai pengaruh positif terhadap kepuasan pelancong sukarelawan. Secara khusus, penghayatan budaya, hubungan sosial, peluang kerjaya, pencarian rekreasi dan keunikan menunjukkan kesan positif yang signifikan terhadap manfaat yang dirasakan. Namun begitu, altruisme, pembangunan peribadi serta cabaran dan pengembaraan tidak menunjukkan kesan yang signifikan. Kajian ini turut mengesahkan kesan pemoderasi interaksi pelancong-hos terhadap hubungan antara manfaat yang dirasakan dan kepuasan pelancong. Implikasi praktikal dan teoritikal turut dibincangkan, serta cadangan untuk kajian lanjutan dalam konteks pelancongan sukarelawan di Malaysia yang kian berkembang turut dikemukakan.

VOLUNTEER TOURIST'S MOTIVATION AND SATISFACTION IN MALAYSIA: THE ROLES OF PERCEIVED BENEFITS AND TOURIST-HOST INTERACTION

ABSTRACT

This study examines volunteer tourists' satisfaction in Malaysia by employing Social Exchange Theory (SET) as the conceptual foundation. Addressing the limited understanding of what drives and sustains satisfaction among volunteer tourists, the research aims to: (1) identify motivation factors; (2) examine the relationship between motivation and perceived benefits; (3) assess overall satisfaction; (4) investigate the moderating effect of tourist-host interactions; and (5) propose an integrated model of volunteer tourism. Initially intended for field distribution, the data collection adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic through an online survey, yielding 424 valid responses. The study applied SPSS and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS 4.0.0. Findings reveal that motivation factors – altruism, personal development, adventure and challenges, cultural immersion, social relationships, career opportunities, leisure-seeking, and novelty – positively influence volunteer tourists' satisfaction. Specifically, cultural immersion, social relationships, career opportunities, leisure-seeking, and novelty significantly contribute to perceived benefits, while altruism, personal development, and adventure do not. The study also confirms the moderating role of tourist-host interactions in the relationship between perceived benefits and overall satisfaction. The research offers practical insights for programme developers, and contributes to theoretical advancement by linking volunteer motivation, perceived value, and interaction within the broader scope of sustainable tourism. Limitations and directions for future research in Malaysia's dynamic volunteer tourism sector are also discussed.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Tourism plays a vital role in driving economic growth, fostering cultural exchange, and contributing to community development. Among its niche segments, volunteer tourism – commonly referred to as voluntourism – has gained increasing prominence for combining travel with altruistic activities. It enables tourists to engage in community service, environmental conservation, and cultural immersion, fostering reciprocal benefits for both volunteers and host communities (Wearing, 2001). Despite Malaysia's rich cultural heritage and environmental assets, the development of volunteer tourism remains relatively underexplored in comparison to neighbouring countries. Existing research in the Malaysian context is limited, particularly in examining the motivations that drive volunteer tourists, the perceived benefits they gain, their overall satisfaction, and the moderating role of tourist-host interactions. Addressing these gaps is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of volunteer tourism programmes and understanding the mechanisms that contribute to a fulfilling volunteer tourism experience. This study aims to investigate these interrelated factors by developing an integrated model of volunteer tourism. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET), the research explores how motivation influences perceived benefits and satisfaction, and how tourist-host interaction moderates these relationships. The findings are intended to contribute theoretically to tourism and communication studies, while offering practical guidance to policymakers, programme developers, and host communities seeking to improve volunteer tourism experiences in Malaysia. Additionally, by incorporating relevant perspectives from mass communication – particularly how narratives, media framing, and public discourse shape voluntourism

perceptions – this study reinforces its interdisciplinary relevance, bridging tourism studies with its foundational academic discipline.

1.2 Background of study

Tourism has long been recognised not only as a source of leisure and cultural enrichment but also as a significant driver of economic, social, and infrastructural development. Particularly in developing countries, tourism contributes substantially to employment, international trade, and community growth (Manzoor et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2020). In 2019, international tourist arrivals reached 1.465 billion, generating USD 1.7 trillion in revenue globally (UNWTO, 5 June 2020).

However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 triggered an unprecedented decline in global tourism. International arrivals fell by 72%, the steepest drop in modern history. Despite these setbacks, the industry showed remarkable resilience, with a gradual recovery noted by 2023 when arrivals reached approximately 1.3 billion once more (UNWTO, 2021; 2023). Figure 1.1 illustrates the fluctuations in global tourism over this period.

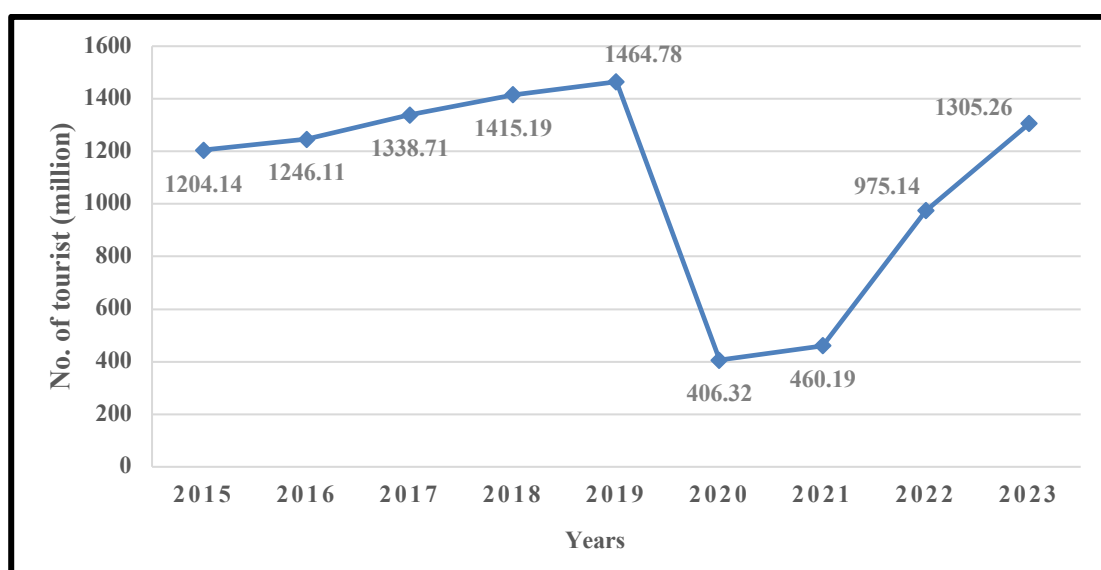
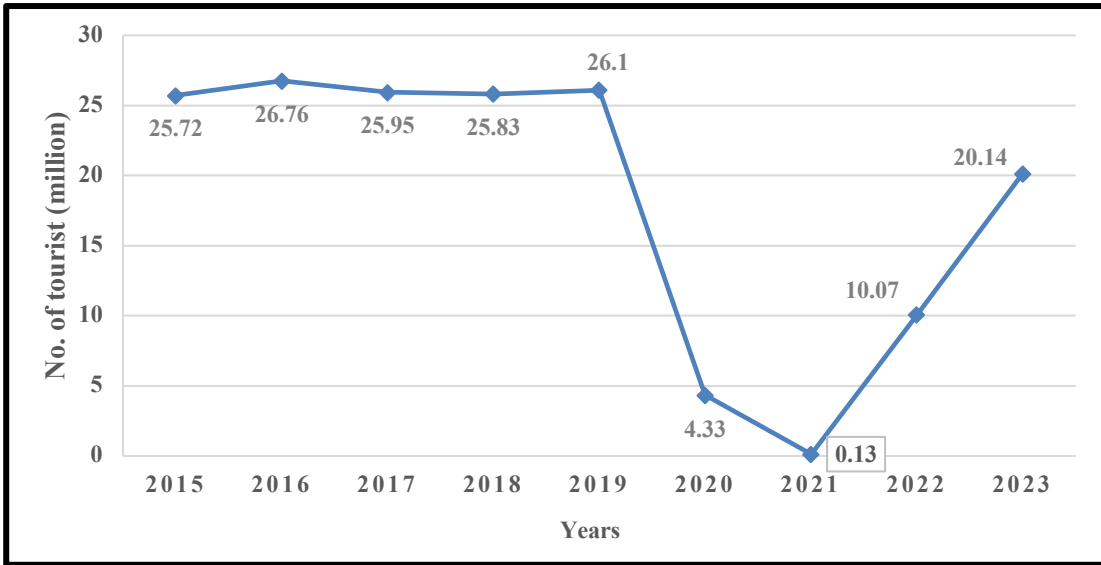


Figure 1.1 International Tourist Arrivals Worldwide (2015 – 2023)

Malaysia, as a key tourism destination in Southeast Asia, experienced a similar pattern. In 2019, the country welcomed 26.1 million international tourists and generated RM86.1 billion in receipts (Tourism Malaysia, 2020). The pandemic led to a dramatic drop in tourist arrivals – just 0.24 million in 2021. Nevertheless, a strong recovery followed, with arrivals reaching 20.14 million in 2023 (Tourism Malaysia, 2023). The cancellation of major campaigns, such as the “Visit Truly Asia Malaysia 2020” initiative, and the imposition of the Movement Control Orders (MCO) and Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) disrupted operations and affected thousands of small tourism-dependent businesses (Abhari, Jalali, Jaafar, & Tajaddini, 2021). These trends are captured in Figure 1.2.



*Source: Tourism Malaysia with the cooperation of the Immigration Department

Figure 1.2 Tourist Arrivals in Malaysia (2015 – 2023)

Beyond its economic impact, the pandemic also accelerated a shift in global tourism values towards sustainability and resilience. Consumers increasingly prefer socially and environmentally responsible travel, while governments and industry stakeholders are prioritising low-carbon development, eco-tourism, and digital transformation (OECD, 2020; Gossling, Scott, & Hall, 2021). Malaysia has responded

by aligning national tourism strategies with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), promoting heritage conservation, eco-tourism, and rural community development (Amir, Abd Ghapar, A. Jamal, & Ahmah, 2015; Fong & Lo, 2015).

Mass communication has played a crucial role in supporting this transformation. Through social media, digital marketing, and interactive content such as virtual tours and sustainability storytelling, communication strategies have influenced tourist behaviour and maintained destination interest during travel restrictions (Morrison, 2024). These approaches have helped reinforce Malaysia's image as a destination committed to responsible and sustainable tourism, attracting travellers with shared values.

Within this evolving landscape, volunteer tourism – or voluntourism – has emerged as a meaningful alternative to conventional tourism. Voluntourism blends leisure travel with service-oriented activities such as environmental conservation, education, and cultural preservation. Unlike traditional tourism models that often focus on consumer satisfaction, volunteer tourism emphasises reciprocal value, sustainability, and personal development (Wearing S. , 2001; Bailey & Russell, 2012).

In Malaysia, volunteer tourism is gaining traction as part of broader efforts to promote sustainable travel experiences. To fully harness its potential, it is necessary to understand the factors that shape the experience of volunteer tourists – particularly their motivations, perceived benefits, satisfaction, and the quality of their interactions with host communities. The following section explores how volunteer tourism operates in Malaysia and sets the foundation for the research conducted in this study.

1.2.1 Volunteer tourism in Malaysia

Volunteer tourism is an emerging form of alternative tourism that integrates service-based activities with travel experiences, enabling participants to contribute meaningfully to host communities while gaining cultural and educational enrichment (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Globally, voluntourism has expanded across various regions, including developing nations in Asia, where initiatives range from environmental conservation and education to healthcare and cultural preservation (Lo & Lee, 2011; Alexander, 2012a, 2012b).

According to Thompson (2022), volunteer tourism represents a hybrid form of travel where individuals engage in short-term projects aimed at benefiting the host community, often with a focus on social causes like poverty alleviation and environmental preservation. It emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between volunteer tourists and the community, aiming to create sustainable impacts on both sides. Furthermore, Parkes (2018) asserts that volunteer tourism has emerged as a global phenomenon, where travellers are motivated by the desire to contribute to community development, often blending leisure and altruism through immersive experiences that foster cross-cultural understanding.

In Malaysia, volunteer tourism plays an increasingly important role in the sustainable tourism sector. It allows travellers to engage in community-based projects that promote environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and rural development (Anuar, Yatin, & Azemi, 2022; Samuri, Yusof, Mahmood, & Rahman, 2024). Unlike conventional tourism, which often emphasises leisure and consumer satisfaction, voluntourism blends altruism with community engagement, generating mutual benefits for both tourists and local populations. Malaysia's rich biodiversity, cultural

heritage, and community-oriented values position it as a compelling voluntourism destination (Alias, Mariapan, Aziz, & Samdin, 2023).

The country offers a variety of volunteer tourism programmes tailored to environmental, educational, and cultural interests. For example, marine conservation projects in Tioman Island focus on coral reef restoration and turtle conservation, involving volunteers in efforts to protect marine ecosystems (Anuar et al., 2022). Similarly, eco-volunteering in Bukit Belungkor, Johor, emphasises forest and wildlife preservation, while promoting sustainable tourism practices (Samuri et al., 2024). Other initiatives involve rural education and community development, offering volunteers opportunities to deliver training and assist under-resourced areas (Ngah, et al., 2021). Cultural immersion projects such as those at Min House Camp enable participants to engage in traditional crafts, farming, and heritage preservation, fostering deeper intercultural understanding (Yusoff, et al., 2024).

Recognising the potential of volunteer tourism, the Malaysian government has taken steps to institutionalise its practice. The 1Malaysia Voluntourism Programme, launched in 2012 under the National Blue Ocean Strategy (NBOS), aimed to deliver low-cost, high-impact volunteer activities. Its themes included environmental clean-ups (1Malaysia Green 1Malaysia Clean – 1MG1MC), tutoring (1Malaysia Voluntutoring), and cultural promotion (1Malaysia Cultural and Heritage) (Peng & Wagiman, 2015). From 2012 to 2015, the programme conducted 272 activities involving over 87,000 volunteers, with youth making up 53% of participants. The initiative continued in later years, including 76 activities in 2019 with more than 5,500 participants (Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC), 2020).

Additional government-supported initiatives include Visit My Kampung (VMK) and the Malaysia Homestay Programme, which offer rural cultural immersion and eco-tourism experiences. These initiatives support economic diversification and cultural exchange, providing local communities with alternative income sources while strengthening Malaysia's responsible tourism brand (Alias et al., 2023).

Despite these positive developments, several challenges remain. Volunteers may hold unrealistic expectations or fail to grasp the complexities of local contexts, leading to mismatched goals and limited impact (Wearing, 2001). Cultural differences and communication barriers can also hinder meaningful interactions (Nghah, et al., 2021). Moreover, short-term voluntourism projects risk becoming unsustainable if not grounded in long-term development strategies, potentially fostering dependence rather than empowerment (Yusoff et al., 2024). Addressing these issues requires ethical guidelines, transparent communication, and strong stakeholder partnerships.

As Malaysia's tourism sector recovers post-pandemic, voluntourism offers a unique avenue for sustainable and ethical travel. Emphasising social impact, environmental stewardship, and meaningful engagement, Malaysia has the potential to emerge as a leading voluntourism destination. Future development should focus on enhancing digital outreach, building public-private collaborations, and aligning voluntourism initiatives with national tourism goals (Samuri et al., 2024). By leveraging its natural and cultural assets, Malaysia can continue to deliver transformative experiences that benefit both tourists and host communities.

1.2.2 Study overview

Building on the understanding of volunteer tourism in Malaysia, this study explores the key factors shaping the experiences and outcomes of volunteer tourism programmes. As a unique form of sustainable travel, volunteer tourism emphasises reciprocity between tourists and host communities through activities that support environmental conservation, cultural heritage, and community development. However, the effectiveness of such programmes hinges on a comprehensive understanding of the interrelationships between tourist motivation, perceived benefits, overall satisfaction, and tourist-host interaction.

Motivation is a fundamental element influencing tourists' decisions to participate in volunteer tourism. These motivations may include altruism, personal development, cultural immersion, career aspirations, or the acquisition of new skills. They not only inform the choice to engage in voluntourism but also influence the perceived value of the experience. Perceived benefits, both tangible (e.g., skill development, career prospects) and intangible (e.g., personal fulfilment, cross-cultural appreciation), are critical in shaping how tourists evaluate their participation. Satisfaction emerges as a central outcome, dependent on the extent to which initial expectations align with the realities of the experience.

This study further examines the moderating role of tourist-host interaction in the relationship between perceived benefits and satisfaction. Meaningful and respectful engagement between tourists and local communities can significantly enhance the overall experience. Such interactions foster mutual understanding, cultural exchange, and a deeper emotional connection to the destination – particularly salient

in a multicultural context like Malaysia, where sensitivity to local customs and traditions is essential.

Theoretically, the research aims to fill gaps in existing literature by proposing an integrated model that elucidates the connections among motivation, perceived benefits, satisfaction, and tourist-host interaction. Practically, it offers insights for policymakers, programme designers, and community stakeholders in developing effective and sustainable volunteer tourism programmes. These contributions support Malaysia's broader vision for responsible tourism aligned with the UNSDGs.

The findings from this study are expected to enhance both theoretical knowledge and practical application in the field of volunteer tourism. They will serve as a foundation for identifying strategies to maximise the positive impact of voluntourism on volunteer tourists' experiences, particularly in terms of motivation, satisfaction, and meaningful engagement. While the research centres on volunteer tourists, the insights gained may also support the design of programmes that promote constructive and culturally respectful interactions with host communities. The subsequent sections will present the study's problem statement, research objectives, and key questions, laying the groundwork for this investigation into Malaysia's volunteer tourism landscape.

1.3 Problem statement of the study

Malaysia is widely recognised as a leading tourism destination, offering diverse cultural experiences, natural attractions, and renowned hospitality (Mosbah & Saleh, 2014). Despite this, volunteer tourism remains a relatively underdeveloped segment within the country's tourism industry, particularly when compared to

neighbouring Southeast Asian nations such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. These countries have successfully positioned themselves as volunteer tourism hubs, attracting international participants to engage in activities related to community development, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation. In contrast, Malaysia has yet to develop a comprehensive voluntourism framework or receive significant academic attention regarding its potential in this niche sector.

While volunteer tourism aligns with Malaysia's sustainable tourism goals, there is limited empirical research exploring the key factors that influence volunteer tourists' participation, experiences, and satisfaction. Specifically, there is a lack of structured investigation into the motivations that drive volunteer tourists, the benefits they perceive, and how these factors influence overall satisfaction. Furthermore, although interactions between tourists and host communities are often considered essential to successful volunteer tourism, their moderating effect on tourist satisfaction in the Malaysian context remains underexplored.

This study applies SET as a theoretical foundation to examine the relationships among motivation, perceived benefits, satisfaction, and tourist-host interactions. Understanding these interconnections is essential for advancing the volunteer tourism sector in Malaysia and informing the development of more effective, impactful, and sustainable programmes.

To provide a robust basis for this investigation, the subsequent subsections will review existing literature on volunteer tourism in Malaysia, identify research gaps, and demonstrate how this study contributes to the academic discourse.

1.3.1 Previous research of volunteer tourism in Malaysia

The exploration of previous research provides essential context for understanding the dynamics of volunteer tourism and its implications in Malaysia. At the global level, volunteer tourism has been extensively studied, particularly in relation to tourist motivations, host-community engagement, and sustainability outcomes (Wearing, 2001; Brown & Lehto, 2005; Lyons & Wearing, 2008). These foundational studies identify key motivations, such as altruism, cultural exchange, personal development, and skill acquisition. Subsequent research by McIntosh and Zahra (2007) and Raymond and Hall (2008) has further highlighted the potential of volunteer tourism to foster cross-cultural understanding and emotional fulfilment.

More recent studies indicate a shift from purely altruistic motives to those involving personal and professional development (Everingham, 2015; Almela & Calvet, 2021). In parallel, scholars have examined the effects of volunteer tourism on host communities, identifying both benefits and ethical concerns – including dependency, empowerment, and community representation (Banki & Schonell, 2018; Hertwig & Lusby, 2021). These insights underscore the complexity of the volunteer tourism experience and the importance of structured evaluation.

In Southeast Asia, countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam have emerged as leading destinations for voluntourism. Numerous studies have documented their success in engaging international volunteers through wildlife conservation, community outreach, and education programmes (Avolio, Prados-Pena, & Pardo, 2024). Thailand, in particular, has positioned itself as a regional leader, with a well-developed infrastructure for sustainable volunteer tourism.

In contrast, Malaysia's position within this niche remains under-researched. While Malaysia offers the necessary infrastructure and cultural appeal, the country has not received comparable academic attention. Much of the existing literature focuses on broader tourism themes, such as eco-tourism and competitiveness (Mosbah & Saleh, 2014), with limited studies explicitly exploring volunteer tourism. For example, Peng and Wagiman (2015) discussed the 1Malaysia Voluntourism Programme's alignment with sustainable tourism, though they noted issues such as low international participation and programme sustainability.

More recent contributions have begun to address these gaps. Sa'dom et al. (2024) identified personal development, altruism, and cultural immersion as the primary motivators for volunteer tourists in Malaysia. Similarly, Sadom and Yusoff (2024) found that meaningful host interactions significantly influence repeat participation. Anuar et al. (2022) examined marine conservation-based voluntourism on Tioman Island, while Yusoff et al. (2024) evaluated the contribution of volunteer tourism to community-based ecotourism in Kelantan. These studies reflect a growing interest in understanding the diverse expressions of voluntourism across different contexts in Malaysia.

Despite these advancements, several research gaps persist. Few studies have explored how motivation, perceived benefits, satisfaction, and tourist-host interactions interrelate in a Malaysian setting. Additionally, most existing studies rely on qualitative approaches, with limited quantitative research applying models such as structural equation modelling (SEM) or regression analysis to assess these variables (Avolio et al., 2024). These gaps highlight the need for empirical investigations using robust analytical frameworks.

This study addresses these gaps by offering an integrated, quantitative analysis of the key factors influencing volunteer tourism in Malaysia. The next section will further elaborate on the specific research gap that this study seeks to address.

1.3.2 Research gap of volunteer tourism in Malaysia

Despite increasing academic attention to volunteer tourism, significant gaps remain in the literature concerning its development, implementation, and impact within the Malaysian context. While existing research in Malaysia has explored broader themes such as sustainable tourism and eco-tourism, dedicated studies focusing on volunteer tourism remain limited. The sector's underrepresentation on global voluntourism platforms – especially compared to regional leaders such as Thailand and Cambodia – further underscores the need for targeted research to understand and strengthen Malaysia's position in this niche (Volunteering Solutions, 2019).

One prominent gap concerns the motivations of volunteer tourists. While global literature has long established motivations such as altruism, cultural engagement, and personal development (Wearing, 2001; Brown & Lehto, 2005), few studies have contextualised these drivers within Malaysian voluntourism programmes. Although Sa'dom et al. (2024) identified personal growth and cultural immersion as key motivators, most studies in Malaysia focus on general travel behaviours rather than the specific psychological or social incentives linked to voluntourism. More research is needed to explore differences between local and international volunteers and how these motivations influence satisfaction and engagement.

A second gap lies in the understanding of perceived benefits. While some studies suggest volunteers gain skills, personal fulfilment, and cross-cultural understanding (Ngah et al., 2021; Sodom & Yusoff, 2024), few examine how these benefits mediate the link between motivation and satisfaction. Studies like Anuar et al. (2022) focus on environmental outcomes but overlook the emotional or social dimensions of volunteer experiences. Further empirical work is needed to explore how perceived benefits influence long-term volunteer commitment and programme effectiveness.

The third gap involves volunteer satisfaction and tourist-host interaction. Although satisfaction is central to the volunteer tourism experience, its determinants remain underexplored in Malaysia. Some research has acknowledged that local engagement enhances volunteer satisfaction (Yusoff, et al., 2024), but little empirical data exists on how the quality of interactions with host communities' influences outcomes. Given findings by Sodom and Yusoff (2024) that strong tourist-host relationships predict re-participation, further investigation into this moderating role is warranted.

A fourth major gap is methodological. Malaysian studies predominantly rely on qualitative methods, such as interviews and case studies, which offer rich narratives but lack generalisability. Few have used quantitative tools such as surveys and statistical analyses, to test relationships among motivation, perceived benefits, satisfaction, and interaction (Ngah et al., 2021; Avolio et al., 2024). As a result, the development of generalisable models and predictive frameworks for voluntourism is limited. A stronger quantitative approach is necessary to provide statistically valid insights that can inform programme development.

Finally, there is a theoretical gap in the application of structured conceptual models within Malaysian volunteer tourism research. International scholars have successfully used SET to study tourism interactions (McGehee & Andereck, 2008), yet its use in Malaysian voluntourism research is scarce. SET offers a valuable lens through which to examine the reciprocal nature of volunteer-host relationships and how these exchanges affect satisfaction. Incorporating such theories will enhance both the academic and practical value of future research.

Addressing these research gaps is essential for developing effective, sustainable volunteer tourism initiatives in Malaysia. This study contributes to the literature by investigating the interrelationships between motivation, perceived benefits, satisfaction, and tourist-host interactions using a structured, theory-driven and quantitative approach. The following section outlines the research objectives and questions that guide this investigation.

1.4 Purpose of study

This section outlines the primary research objectives and questions, providing a structured foundation for investigating volunteer tourism in Malaysia. The study aims to analyse the complex dynamics that define voluntourism experiences by exploring the motivations of volunteer tourists, their perceived benefits, and the factors influencing overall satisfaction.

Furthermore, the research examines the moderating role of tourist-host interactions in shaping the relationship between perceived benefits and satisfaction. Through this investigation, the study aims to develop a conceptual model of volunteer

tourism, contributing to academic literature while offering actionable insights for tourism practitioners and policymakers in Malaysia.

1.4.1 Research objectives

The study is guided by the following research objectives:

- RO1:** To analyse the motivations that drive individuals to participate in volunteer tourism in Malaysia.
- RO2:** To assess the relationship between voluntourists' motivations and their perceived benefits (rewards and costs) from participation.
- RO3:** To measure the overall satisfaction levels of volunteer tourists in Malaysia.
- RO4:** To analyse the role of tourist-host interactions in shaping the relationship between perceived benefits and satisfaction.
- RO5:** To develop an integrated model that explains the interconnections among motivations, perceived benefits, satisfaction, and tourist-host interactions.

Collectively, these objectives support a comprehensive and empirically grounded understanding of volunteer tourism in Malaysia, relevant to both academic and practical audiences.

1.4.2 Research questions of the study

The following research questions guide this study's empirical inquiry:

- RQ1:** What are the key motivations that drive tourists to engage in volunteer tourism in Malaysia?
- RQ2:** How do voluntourists' motivations relate to their perceived benefits, including both rewards and costs?
- RQ3:** What are the key determinants of overall satisfaction among volunteer tourists in Malaysia?
- RQ4:** How does tourist-host interaction influence the relationship between perceived benefits and overall satisfaction?
- RQ5:** How can an integrated model be developed to explain the interrelationships among motivations, perceived benefits, satisfaction, and tourist-host interactions in Malaysia's volunteer tourism sector?

These research questions provide a coherent framework for exploring volunteer tourism in Malaysian and serve as the foundation for developing an integrated model to enhance both theoretical understanding and programme development.

1.5 Significance of the study

This study holds significant theoretical, methodological, and practical implications in the field of volunteer tourism, particularly within the Malaysian context. By examining the interrelationships between motivation, perceived benefits,

satisfaction, and tourist-host interactions, the research contributes to advancing knowledge while offering actionable insights for tourism policymakers, volunteer tourism programme developers, host communities, and tourism operators. The significance of this study is structured into four key dimensions:

1.5.1 Contextual significance

Malaysia, while recognised as a prominent tourism destination, remains underrepresented in volunteer tourism research and practice compared to regional neighbours such as Thailand and Cambodia. Existing studies in Malaysia tend to focus on broader sustainable tourism themes, with little emphasis on the unique dynamics of voluntourism. This study addresses this gap by offering a focused examination of volunteer tourism in the Malaysian context.

Additionally, in light of Malaysia's efforts toward post-pandemic tourism recovery, volunteer tourism presents an opportunity for sustainable, community-based tourism development. By analysing the motivations and satisfaction of volunteer tourists, this research supports positioning voluntourism as a strategic niche within Malaysia's broader tourism strategy.

1.5.2 Conceptual / theoretical significance

Conceptually, the study contributes to the development of an integrated model of volunteer tourism by linking motivation, perceived benefits, satisfaction, and tourist-host interactions. Previous research has often studied these elements independently. This study offers a holistic approach that deepens understanding of how these components interact within the voluntourism experience.

The study also extends the application of SET in the context of volunteer tourism. Although SET is widely used in tourism studies, its application in explaining the role of volunteer-host interactions and their influence on satisfaction in the Malaysian context is limited. This research addresses that gap, offering a novel contribution to theory in volunteer tourism.

1.5.3 Methodological significance

Methodologically, this study responds to the predominance of qualitative research in volunteer tourism literature by adopting a quantitative research design. Most prior studies offer descriptive or interpretive findings but lack empirical validation of theoretical models. By employing SEM, the study introduces analytical rigour to the field and provides robust statistical insights into the interrelationships among the key variables.

The methodology adopted here enhances replicability and serves as a reference for future researchers, particularly in similar cultural and tourism settings where volunteer tourism is emerging.

1.5.4 Practical / empirical significance

Beyond academia, this research offers practical value for multiple stakeholders. For policymakers, the findings provide evidence-based insights that can support the integration of voluntourism into Malaysia's national tourism strategy. This aligns with current global interest in responsible and ethical travel experiences.

For programme developers and tourism operators, the study highlights how to design initiatives that align with volunteer motivations, ensure perceived benefits and

foster satisfaction. Strategies may include cultural immersion, skill-based activities, and host community engagement to enrich the volunteer experience.

For host communities, the study underscores the value of positive tourist-host interactions in generating mutual benefits. Local engagement not only enhances visitor satisfaction but also contributes to economic, social, and cultural development.

Finally, for volunteer tourists, the study helps clarify expectations and identifies conditions that enhance personal fulfilment, cross-cultural learning, and sustained participation.

In summary, this study contributed to academic literature, methodological advancements, and practical applications in volunteer tourism. By developing an integrated model focused on motivation, perceived benefits, satisfaction, and tourist-host interactions, the research offers a comprehensive understanding of volunteer tourism in Malaysia. As the country continues its post-pandemic tourism revitalisation efforts, the study provides timely insights to support sustainable and impactful programme development. With these contributions outlined, the next section will define the boundaries of the research, including its temporal, geographical, and conceptual scope.

1.6 Scope of the study

This study investigates the key factors influencing volunteer tourist satisfaction in Malaysia, focusing on the relationships between motivation, perceived benefits, satisfaction, and tourist-host interactions. To ensure clarity and a targeted research design, the scope of the study is defined across three dimensions: conceptual, geographical, and temporal.

The study centres on four primary constructs. Motivation refers to the internal drivers prompting individuals to engage in volunteer tourism, including altruism, personal development, cultural immersion, and skill acquisition. Perceived benefits encompass the positive and negative outcomes volunteers associate with their experience, including rewards (e.g., learning, fulfilment) and costs (e.g., time, effort, financial expenses). Satisfaction is defined as the degree to which volunteer tourists' expectations align with their actual experiences. Tourist-host interactions explore the quality and frequency of exchanges between tourists and local communities, which may influence satisfaction levels. The study applies SET to guide analysis and employs a quantitative methodology using SEM to test interrelationships among these variables.

The research is confined to Malaysia, with a particular focus on volunteer tourism within the context of environmental conservation. Malaysia is home to a range of voluntourism initiatives related to ecological preservation, including coral reef rehabilitation in Sabah, reforestation in Sarawak, and wildlife protection in national parks. Rather than focusing on a single project or organisation, the study captures general trends and experiences across multiple environmental voluntourism sites in Malaysia. This provides a broader understanding of volunteer tourism at a national scale.

Data were collected between December 2020 and April 2021 through an online survey. However, all respondents participated in volunteer tourism activities prior to 2020, ensuring their experiences were not influenced by COVID-19-related travel restrictions or altered programme formats. While the study does not explore the

pandemic's direct impact on voluntourism, it offers a pre-pandemic baseline against which future developments may be assessed.

By establishing clear parameters, this study maintains a focused and consistent research framework that supports the investigation of volunteer tourism in Malaysia. The next section provides conceptual definitions of the key terms used throughout the study to ensure clarity and alignment with the research objectives.

1.7 Conceptual definitions of key terms

To ensure clarity and consistency throughout this study, key concepts related to volunteer tourism, motivation, perceived benefits, satisfaction, and tourist-host interactions are conceptually defined below, drawing on established literature. These definitions provide the conceptual foundation for the research framework and empirical analysis.

Volunteer tourism

Volunteer tourism, or voluntourism, refers to a form of tourism in which individuals travel to a destination to engage in voluntary service activities that support local communities, cultural heritage, or environmental initiatives (Wearing, 2001). Unlike leisure-based tourism, volunteer tourism combines altruistic intentions with travel, offering opportunities for personal development and meaningful cross-cultural engagement (McGehee & Andereck, 2008).

Motivation factors of volunteer tourism

Motivation in this study refers to the psychological and personal drivers that influence individuals' decisions to engage in volunteer tourism. These motivations are categorised into the following key factors:

Altruism: A selfless intention to assist others or support causes without expecting material gain (Callanan & Thomas, 2005). Many volunteer tourists engage in programmes to assist disadvantaged communities, support environmental conservation, or contribute to social development efforts purely for the benefit of others.

Personal development: The desire to grow intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually through new experiences, skill acquisition, and self-discovery (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011). Volunteers often perceive their participation as an opportunity to learn new skills, gain valuable life experiences, and foster personal transformation.

Adventure and challenges: The pursuit of novel and demanding experiences that push personal boundaries, often through physically or mentally challenging volunteer roles (Chen & Chen, 2011). Some volunteer programmes, such as rainforest conservation or disaster relief efforts, require endurance and resilience, attracting those who seek excitement and personal tests of strength.

Cultural immersion: The motivation to engage deeply with the host culture by participating in local customs, traditions, and lifestyles (Lo & Lee, 2011). Through voluntourism, participants can interact with local traditions, customs, and lifestyles, fostering deeper cross-cultural appreciation.

Social relationships: The opportunity to form meaningful bonds with fellow volunteers and local communities, fostering a sense of global citizenship (Alexander, 2012a). Engaging in group-based volunteer activities enhances social bonding and the development of new friendships, strengthening the sense of community.

Career opportunities: Engagement in voluntourism to enhance employability, gain relevant experience, or expand professional networks (Gray & Campbell, 2007). Some programmes offer certifications, leadership training, or professional development opportunities, making voluntourism an attractive option for career-oriented individuals.

Seeking leisure: The combination of recreational travel and volunteer work to achieve enjoyment and fulfilment (Ong et al., 2014). Some voluntourists prefer programmes that offer a balance between community service and leisure activities, such as wildlife conservation projects that allow for eco-tourism experiences.

Novelty: The desire for new and unconventional travel experiences, which offer escape from routine and exposure to different environments (Wearing, 2001). Many volunteers seek new and transformative experiences that allow them to explore less commercialized and more authentic destinations.

Perceived benefits

Perceived benefits refer to the outcomes, both positive and negative, that volunteer tourists associate with their participation in volunteer programmes (Brown & Lehto, 2005). These benefits influence volunteer satisfaction and long-term engagement influence volunteer satisfaction and long-term engagement with voluntourism activities.