

Article

The Importance of International Volunteering for the Tourist Destination Image: Case Study in Barcelos (Portugal)

Ricardo Pacheco Coutinho ^{1,*} , Bruno Barbosa Sousa ^{1,2,3,*}  and Vasco Ribeiro Santos ^{2,4,5} 

¹ School of Hospitality and Tourism (ESHT), IPCA-Polytechnic University of Cávado and Ave, 4750-810 Barcelos, Portugal

² CiTUR—Centre for Tourism Research, Development and Innovation, Polytechnic of Leiria, 2411-901 Leiria, Portugal; vasco.ribeiro@islasantarem.pt

³ UNIAG—Applied Management Research Unit, 5300 Bragança, Portugal

⁴ Instituto Superior de Gestão e Administração—ISLA Santarém, 2000-241 Santarém, Portugal

⁵ Research Unit on Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policies (GOVCOPP), Universidade de Aveiro, 3810-193 Aveiro, Portugal

* Correspondence: rcoutinho@ipca.pt (R.P.C.); bsousa@ipca.pt (B.B.S.)

Abstract: This research investigates the significant role of international volunteering, particularly through the European Solidarity Corps (ESC), in shaping the image of Barcelos as a tourist destination. The study specifically examines various volunteer programs in Barcelos, such as construction projects, teaching, and agricultural assistance. It focuses on the volunteers' perceptions and motivations and on the impact of their experiences on the city's touristic recognition. Using a mixed-methods approach, this research analyzes responses from electronic surveys with 92 former ESC volunteers and interviews with four local organizations that host these participants. The findings reveal that international volunteering through specific programs enhances Barcelos' image as a welcoming, culturally rich, and civically engaged tourist destination. This research highlights the importance of integrating such initiatives into the city's tourism management strategy, suggesting that such efforts can significantly enrich the tourist experience and the overall image of the destination. Furthermore, the study identifies areas for future research, including the need for a more in-depth analysis of the long-term impact of these volunteering activities on the local economy and cultural sustainability. The limitations of the study, such as the use of a convenience sample and the reliance on self-reported data, which may influence the results and their generalizability, are also discussed. In conclusion, this work provides valuable insights for tourism managers and policymakers, demonstrating how international volunteering can be a strategic component in enhancing the image of tourist destinations. Through careful and strategic management, Barcelos can continue to develop and promote its identity as a destination for solidarity tourism and cultural vibrancy.

Keywords: international volunteering; European Solidarity Corps (ESC); tourist destination image Barcelos; solidarity tourism



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1. Introduction

This research explores the impact of the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) on the tourist image of Barcelos, giving particular emphasis to the role of solidarity tourism and international volunteering. This introduction establishes the context and relevance of the study, highlighting a gap in the academic literature on the specific impact of ESC on tourist destinations.

Solidarity tourism and international volunteering are catalysts for community development, cultural promotion, and positive destination imaging (Raymond and Hall 2008). These activities are particularly significant as they offer substantial contributions to the local economy, enrich cultural exchange, and reinforce positive perceptions of destinations.

Examples such as the US Peace Corps (Hall 2007) and Kibbutz volunteering in Israel (Avrahami and Dar 1993) illustrate the significant role of international volunteering in fostering community development and cultural exchange. In Nepal, extensive volunteer programs played a crucial role in the recovery efforts following the 2015 earthquake, significantly aiding in rebuilding infrastructure and supporting local communities (United Nations Volunteers 2017).

Recognizing the potential of such initiatives, the European Commission created the European Solidarity Corps (ESC), an initiative that fosters active citizenship and solidarity among young Europeans. This research focuses on the ESC's impact on Barcelos, a city that has actively participated in hosting ESC volunteers in various programs such as construction projects, teaching, and agricultural assistance.

Although several articles in the existing academic literature recognize the growing importance of international volunteering (Valente 2020; Wearing 2001; Wearing and Grabowski 2011), there is a notable lack of studies focused on the specific impact of ESC on the construction of the image of tourist destinations. This research aims to fill this research gap and focus its object of study on the specific case of Barcelos, a city that has received many ESC volunteers and stands out as a living laboratory for the interactions between tourism, volunteering, and the community.

The choice of Barcelos for the case study is justified not only by the significant interaction between tourism, volunteering, and the community, but also by the logistical convenience in data collection. Similarly to the impacts seen in other regions such as the community development fostered by the US Peace Corps, the agricultural advancements through Kibbutz volunteering in Israel, and the post-disaster recovery in Nepal, Barcelos has experienced substantial benefits from its volunteer programs. ESC volunteers in Barcelos have contributed to various projects, including construction, education, and agriculture, which have not only supported local development but also enriched the volunteers' experiences. This work intends to deepen and explore the study of the impact of voluntary activities on the image of Barcelos by expanding the academic understanding of solidarity tourism while providing us with important data for interested local parties. By examining these impacts in Barcelos, we aim to highlight how specific volunteer tourism programs can significantly enhance the image and development of a destination.

This study's central objective is to analyze how the presence of ESC volunteers and their activities influence the image of Barcelos as a tourist destination. It will be performed through a mixed-methods approach that aims to explore volunteers' perceptions, experiences and motivations. The questionnaire will be sent to (former) ESC volunteers who are or were working in Barcelos, and the data collected will be analyzed to answer the research questions. Participant selection will be carried out using a convenience sampling approach.

This work is organized into five chapters. The first chapter presents an in-depth review of the literature and is structured to facilitate a holistic understanding of the phenomenon studied, allowing a robust theoretical overview of international volunteering and solidarity tourism to be obtained, with special emphasis on the influence of these activities on the image of tourist destinations. The second chapter details the research methodology, followed in the third chapter by an analysis of the data collected. In the fourth chapter, we present the discussion and implementations, and then to finish, the fifth and final chapter presents the conclusions, practical recommendations, and suggestions for future studies.

We hope that the results of this research will contribute to a better understanding of the role of ESC in shaping the image of Barcelos, in addition to providing valuable contributions to the effective management of local tourism, promoting more supportive and sustainable practices.

2. Destination Image and Strategic Management

The image of a tourist destination is a dynamic and multifaceted process, the evolution of which can be influenced by a variety of internal and external factors (Bassols-Gardella and Coromina 2022; Chu et al. 2022). Historically, the perception of a destination has been

shaped by both authentic experiences and mediated representations, with strategic image management playing a critical role in sustaining tourism competitiveness (Bassols-Gardella and Coromina 2022; Gartner 1994).

In the context of tourism marketing, redefining a destination's image can be driven by innovative campaigns or as a response to external crises (Bassols-Gardella and Coromina 2022; Chu et al. 2022). An illustrative example is the city of New Orleans, which after the frightening devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, implemented a series of marketing strategies to transform its image from a disastrous and catastrophic city to a symbol of resilience and cultural renewal (Kates et al. 2006). This approach has not only revitalized local tourism, but also helped the city reshape its identity (Kates et al. 2006; Ritchie 2009).

Likewise, the image of destinations like Rwanda has also been significantly transformed (Folarin 2023). After the 1994 genocide, Rwanda undertook a remarkable journey of recovery, promoting itself as an adventure and conservation tourism destination, centered on experiences such as mountain gorilla trekking (Folarin 2023). Through concerted efforts involving global marketing campaigns and sustainable development partnerships, Rwanda has emerged as a success story in post-crisis reinvention (Folarin 2023; Stone 2012).

These examples highlight the importance of adopting adaptive strategies in destination image management, which not only respond to circumstances, but also actively redefine the destination narrative to attract tourists and sustainable investments (R.-Y. Huang et al. 2021; Wang et al. 2023; Zupancic 2023). When studying the evolution of destination images, it becomes clear that flexibility and innovation are essential to maintain and rejuvenate the tourist image in the face of emerging challenges and opportunities (De la Gala-Velásquez et al. 2023; Huang et al. 2021; Wang et al. 2023; Zupancic 2023).

Effective destination image management is crucial, as it influences visitor choices, behavior, and post-visit perceptions, and is vital for maintaining competitiveness in the global tourism market (Fyall and Garrod (2020).

The image of a tourist destination is also complex and multifaceted, reflecting the perception of potential visitors about a specific place. This aspect plays a crucial role in travel decisions and directly influences the choice of destination, tourist satisfaction and the probability of returning (White 2004; Zuo et al. 2023).

To effectively manage this image, those responsible for managing the tourist destination must understand the current image of the destination. It is essential to have detailed knowledge of the current image of the destination. Andrades-Caldito et al. (2013) and Morgan and Pritchard (1998) highlight the importance of using varied methods such as surveys, focus groups, and data analysis to obtain this understanding and knowledge. Identify and meet the expectations of the target audience: As mentioned by Gursoy and Rutherford (2004) and Kotler and Armstrong (2019), knowing the expectations of the different target audience segments is essential, because it allows the development of more effective marketing strategies and promotional messages. Develop promotional messages aligned with defined objectives: As discussed by Kanwel et al. (2019), promotional messages must be in sync with the desired image of the destination. Utilizing a variety of channels, including digital advertising and social media, is essential to effectively reach your audience (Morgan and Pritchard 1998). It is also important to highlight the need for continuous monitoring and adjustment. The image of a destination is dynamic and must be continually monitored and adjusted (White 2004). This ensures that the destination image remains relevant and attractive.

Another factor that must be taken into consideration is the impact of new technologies on destination image management. The Web 2.0 era has transformed the way destination images are constructed, with a major influence from online content created by tourists, who now play a crucial role in shaping the perceptions of future visitors (Zhu et al. 2022). The integration of digital technologies in tourism management facilitates a co-creation of the tourist experience, where visitors and local residents collaborate, through the use of digital platforms to improve the cultural and economic sustainability of tourist activities (Marques

and Borba 2017). Therefore, the use of technology in international volunteering can be an effective strategy to increase cultural interaction and strengthen the image of the tourist destination as innovative and socially responsible. The evolution of digital technologies has profoundly reshaped the image management of tourist destinations. In particular, virtual reality (VR) and social networks have emerged as powerful tools to influence tourists' perception and behavior (D. Guttentag 2010; Xiang and Gretzel 2010). Virtual reality has been used to create immersive experiences that allow potential visitors to explore destinations virtually before deciding to visit them physically (D. Guttentag 2010; Morales et al. 2022). For example, destinations like Australia have used VR to showcase their natural landscapes and iconic landmarks, providing a sensory showcase that can increase the desire to experience the destination in person. In addition, Guttentag (2010) discussed how virtual reality can effectively influence visit intention by providing experiences that are perceived as unique and memorable.

Social media has revolutionized the way tourists interact with destinations (Munar and Jacobsen 2014; Xiang and Gretzel 2010). Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok allow you to create and share compelling visual content that can go viral, reaching global audiences quickly and effectively. For example, the #ShareYourJordan campaign, promoted by Jordan, used photos and videos of real tourists to highlight the country's beauty and hospitality, which helped to improve the destination's image and attract more visitors (Munar and Jacobsen 2014).

The integration of digital technologies into marketing campaigns allows destinations to create a richer and more engaging narrative (Harizi and Trebicka 2023; Hays et al. 2013; Yuan et al. 2022). For example, the use of hashtags has proven to be an effective strategy for expanding the reach of campaigns and engaging potential tourists in conversations about the destination (La Rocca and Boccia Artieri 2022; Paiano et al. 2017). Destinations like Iceland have used the hashtag #InspiredByIceland to encourage the sharing of personal experiences that together form a vibrant and compelling image of the destination.

Despite the many and varied advantages, the use of new technologies in destination image management also presents challenges (Gretzel et al. 2006, 2015). The reliance on images and videos can, in some cases, create unrealistic expectations among tourists or emphasize only positive aspects, ignoring more complex issues such as sustainability and the impact of tourism on local communities (Gretzel et al. 2015). New technologies, when used strategically, offer a significant opportunity for destination managers to improve the image and attraction of their locations (D. Guttentag 2010). Virtual reality and social media, in particular, have the power to transform public perception and influence travel decisions, allowing tourist destinations greater interaction and engagement with a global audience.

In addition to these factors to take into consideration, collaboration between various stakeholders—including local governments, private companies, tourism organizations and the local community—is vital for efficient management of the destination's image (Morgan and Pritchard 1998). This synergistic collaboration ensures a more holistic and integrated approach.

Managing the image of a tourist destination is, therefore, a strategic and collaborative process that requires continuous involvement and commitment from all stakeholders. By optimizing this management, responsible organizations not only strengthen the competitive position of the destination, but also enhance its tourist attractiveness.

Among the most influential models in tourism literature are those by Echtner and Ritchie (1993) and Baloglu and McCleary (1999). These models not only explain destination image formation, but also offer *insights* into how these theories are applied in practice.

An article by Lopes (2011) expands this understanding by discussing the origin, development, and implications of destination image. Lopes (2011) highlights that destination image management is not just about understanding how destinations are seen, but also about actively managing that image to attract and satisfy tourists. The author argues that a well-managed destination image can help overcome economic crises and increase the

sustainability of tourism, reinforcing the importance of strategic and informed management (Lopes 2011).

The model by Echtner and Ritchie (1993) gives us one of the most comprehensive approaches to understanding the target image. This model suggests that a destination's image comprises holistic attributes and characteristics. Attributes are specific components of the destination, such as beaches, architecture, cuisine, while holistic characteristics refer to the overall atmosphere or aura of the destination. Echtner and Ritchie (1993) also differentiate between the functional and psychological dimensions of the image, where the first concerns tangible aspects of the destination, and the second, intangible elements that provoke sensations and emotions. In practice, this model is used to develop marketing campaigns that highlight both the specific attributes and the holistic experience of a destination. For example, Portugal's marketing campaign, "Can't Skip Portugal", combines visual images of natural landscapes and vibrant cities with narratives that evoke a sense of adventure and discovery (Parreira 2018). The model by Baloglu and McCleary (1999) focuses on the influence of personal and stimulating factors on the perception of the destination image. It is used to segment markets based on tourists' personal preferences and past experiences, using digital influencers and targeted marketing campaigns to promote specific destinations.

3. Transformational Tourism and Experiences

Transformational tourism, as defined by Nandasena et al. (2022), is a tourist experience that not only leads to a significant change in an individual's perspective, self-awareness, and behavior, but also engages travelers in deep processes of learning and personal connection. This type of tourism is often motivated by the desire for deep, meaningful experiences that challenge pre-existing worldviews and promote a broader understanding of different cultures and environments. Ramos et al. (2021) and Sampaio et al. (2021) also highlight that transformational tourism can include activities that range from spiritual retreats to international volunteering, to adventure trips that challenge the traveler's physical and mental limits.

Röntynen and Tunkkari-Eskelinen (2024) argue that, in addition to personal changes, transformational tourism also seeks to positively impact local communities, fostering cultural exchanges that benefit both visitors and hosts. Travelers are encouraged to participate ethically and responsibly, contributing to the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of destinations. Thus, transformational tourism stands out for being a doubly enriching journey, which transforms the individual and supports the communities that welcome them, promoting a legacy of mutual respect and intercultural understanding. Wahba et al. (2024) add that green transformational leadership can play a moderating role in promoting green dynamic capabilities and green creativity in the hospitality and tourism industry, which may be relevant in the context of transformational tourism.

However, transformational tourism research, presented by Nandasena et al. (2022), stands at the forefront of contemporary academic thought, outlining the pressing need to expand and deepen experiential analysis methods in this domain. The authors carried out a systematic review of the literature, highlighting the evident gap in the calibration and holistic measurement of transformational experiences in tourism.

This study, by critically examining current publications, reveals that despite academics' growing interest in transformational tourism, there is a substantial lack of in-depth understanding of the processes underlying these experiences. The authors argue that a more detailed understanding is imperative, especially when considering the diversity of transformational experiences that range from religious pilgrimages and backpacking to the diverse aspects of ecotourism.

The importance of this analysis takes on an additional dimension in the context of the post-COVID-19 pandemic. Nandasena et al. (2022) point to this relevance of investigating how the pandemic, together with the incorporation of new smart technologies, has reshaped not only travelers' expectations and perceptions, but also the very essence of

transformational travel. It is emphasized that transformational experiences in tourism will need to be understood and evaluated not only through robust qualitative and quantitative metrics, but also through the changes induced by COVID-19 in the dynamics of tourism and travel.

4. Sustainability and Environmental Impact on Tourism

Sustainability and social responsibility have emerged as crucial foundations in the management of tourist destinations, reflecting a growing global awareness of the environmental, economic, and social consequences of tourism (Buckley 2020; Dredge 2022). Adopting an integrated and responsible approach not only ensures the protection of natural and cultural resources, but also promotes the well-being of local communities and visitors (Higgins-Desbiolles 2021).

Sustainability has thus become one of the guiding principles for the development of the tourism sector, prevailing not only as a competitive differentiator, but also as an ethical and preservation imperative (Frantzeskaki et al. 2021). In this context, the environmental image of a tourist destination emerges as a crucial factor in promoting pro-environmental behaviors among visitors and in building sustainable strategies for tourism development (Cerveny 2022).

Developing effective environmental management is therefore vital for sustainable tourism. Tourist destinations face the challenge of preserving their natural beauty and ecosystems while welcoming a large number of visitors. Sustainable practices, such as resource consumption reduction, waste management, and biodiversity conservation, are essential to minimize negative impacts (Hall 2019). The use of renewable energy in tourism infrastructure and the promotion of low-impact tourism activities can be significantly beneficial. The implementation of environmental certifications and adherence to international sustainability standards are also proactive measures to strengthen environmental management (Weaver 2001).

Recent studies, such as Bilynets and Knezevic Cvelbar (2022), point out that the perception of a destination as ecologically conscious can encourage sustainable practices on the part of tourists. This behavior is amplified by the environmental awareness that is carried over from everyday life to travel practices, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between the destination's environmental reputation and the behavior of visitors.

In a complementary way, the analysis of Burbano et al. (2022), a study on the Galápagos Islands, and other studies of great interest in this research, such as Cerveny (2022), Diéguez-Castrillón et al. (2022), Frantzeskaki et al. (2021), and Lockstone-Binney and Ong (2022), highlight the need to reconfigure tourism from a sustainability perspective. The investigations by these authors indicate the need for a joint and participatory approach, and that this is fundamental to balance the dimensions of development and preservation, especially in places of great ecological sensitivity.

The researchers Rajaonson and Tanguay (2022) report that, after research into Canadian destinations during the pandemic, the relevance of the environmental impact of tourism was reinforced. The sudden shift to domestic tourism has highlighted the consequences of increased pressure on non-urban ecosystems, underlining the urgent need to create sustainable tourism management strategies.

Sustainability in tourism, especially in the context of solidarity tourism, is a vital topic for ethical and beneficial development for both tourists and local communities (McIntosh and Zahra 2007). Sustainable tourism involves minimizing environmental impact, respecting local culture and promoting the economic development of host communities. According to researchers such as Ramos et al. (2021), sustainable tourism is not only an ethical approach, but also a practical strategy for preserving resources for future generations.

Sustainability in tourism is therefore a multifaceted topic that requires a comprehensive critical analysis (Diéguez-Castrillón et al. 2022). When approaching sustainability practices in tourism, it is essential to recognize the complexity of the strategies adopted and know their environmental implications (Baloch et al. 2023). Sustainability initiatives

can easily be only superficially implemented, leading us to the phenomenon known as “*greenwashing*”, where actions are more focused on promoting an ecological image than on the real environmental impact (Honey 2013). Therefore, the effectiveness of sustainable tourism policies must be questioned. Often, these policies can be limited by focusing on short-term gains and neglecting long-term consequences for the environment (Baloch et al. 2023; Simo-Kengne 2022). It is important to assess whether tourism management practices are genuinely aligned with sustainability principles and whether they are robust enough to face growing environmental challenges (García et al. 2024).

It is also important to emphasize that the discussion must cover the inherent responsibilities of the various stakeholders in the tourism sector, including governments, tourism companies, and tourists (Burbano et al. 2022). Consideration should be given to how collective actions can promote real and lasting change, which benefits both the environment and local communities (Lockstone-Binney and Ong 2022). A critical analysis should also consider the balance between tourism development and environmental preservation, exploring how strategies can be improved to ensure a more sustainable future for tourism (Jovanović et al. 2024).

Social responsibility in tourism involves a commitment to the social and economic development of local communities. This is achieved by providing employment, improving infrastructure, and ensuring that a significant portion of tourism income is reinvested locally (Reindrawati 2023). Initiatives such as community tourism and support for local small-scale businesses strengthen the local economy and increase residents’ quality of life (Ritchie and Crouch 2003). The active participation of local communities in the design and implementation of tourism projects is crucial to ensure that their voices and concerns are heard and considered.

Additionally, solidarity tourism, which encompasses volunteering and respectful interaction with local communities, offers a way for tourists to make a meaningful contribution to the places they visit. As highlighted in previous studies (Jiang et al. 2022; Seo et al. 2021), solidarity tourism can strengthen local economies, support cultural and environmental preservation, and promote intercultural understanding. Local attachment emerges as a significant mediating factor between tourist destination image and intention to revisit, suggesting that a stronger emotional bond may increase the likelihood that visitors will return (Wei et al. 2024).

By investing in education and raising awareness among both tourists and residents about the importance of sustainability, it is possible to foster a culture of responsible tourism (Chen et al. 2022). Environmental education programs and awareness campaigns can help shape behaviors and encourage more sustainable practices (Font and McCabe 2018). *Workshops* on local biodiversity and the importance of specific ecosystems can raise awareness about conservation efforts (Cheung and Jim 2019).

The role of public policies is also crucial in promoting sustainability in tourism (Madanaguli et al. 2022). Effective tourism governance involves establishing clear and coherent regulations that encourage sustainable and responsible practices. Bramwell and Lane (2013) emphasize that sustainable tourism requires an evolving global approach, which integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Furthermore, Bramwell (2011) discusses the political economy of sustainable tourism, highlighting the importance of governance in ensuring collaborative participation and accountability. Dangi and Petrick (2021) provide a case study demonstrating how enhanced governance can improve collaborative participation, responsiveness, representation, and inclusion in community-based tourism. Therefore, local and national governments must play an active role in facilitating these processes to achieve sustainable tourism development.

Management in tourism must be transparent and inclusive, allowing for effective collaboration between the government, the private sector, NGOs, and local communities (Organização para a Cooperação e Desenvolvimento Económico (OCDE) 2017). The integration of sustainability and social responsibility in the management of tourist destinations is a practical and ethical strategy to ensure the long-term viability of tourism (Saarinen

2021). By adopting sustainable and socially responsible practices, tourist destinations can protect their resources, improve the local quality of life, and enrich the visitor experience (Miller et al. 2023).

5. The Role of International Volunteering and Solidarity Tourism in the Image of the Tourist Destination

Volunteers are a critical component to any workforce. Each volunteer brings a different level of skill and value, but it is their tenacity and commitment that demands clear recognition from the event organizers and holistic workforce (Milner and McCullough 2024). As explored previously, Barcelos stands out as a tourist destination, enriched by a significant cultural and historical heritage. This enrichment is reinforced by international recognition and the appreciation of local traditions, elements that Bilynets and Knezevic Cvelbar (2022) identify as crucial in the formation of the environmental image of a destination. The influence of tourism on the city's economy and culture is notable, resulting in job creation and stimulation of the local economy, in addition to contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage—an impact also observed in Elsayeh (2020) and in other contexts.

In this scenario, international volunteering and solidarity tourism emerge as transforming forces in the image of Barcelos as a tourist destination. These practices are not limited to visits to historical or cultural sites; they promote a deep immersion in the community, generating meaningful interactions and tangible contributions to the social and environmental development of the region, a concept Howard et al. (2022) emphasize in their analysis of international volunteering.

These activities not only reinforce the city's image as a culturally rich and socially responsible tourist destination, but are also crucial in building a broader and positive narrative about the destination, as suggested by Zuo et al. (2023). The experiences of volunteers and supportive tourists enrich and diversify the image of Barcelos, reflecting a city committed to preserving its legacy and promoting values such as sustainability, active citizenship and social involvement, a perspective also addressed by Chen (2021). The image of a tourist destination is a complex and dynamic interactive system, which involves the combination of tourists' beliefs, thoughts, feelings, expectations, and impressions (Wei et al. 2024).

However, volunteer tourism, which is often promoted as a contribution to development, can actually shape and mediate public perceptions of development, influencing how people choose to 'make a difference' in development contexts (Butcher 2024).

Therefore, it is essential to explore in depth the impact of international volunteering and solidarity tourism on the perception of Barcelos as a tourist destination. Nostalgic emotions have a positive impact on local connection, which in turn positively influences the intention to revisit the tourist destination (Wei et al. 2024). A comprehensive analysis, as suggested by Tyler et al. (2018), will allow us to better understand how these practices influence the external perception of the city and how they can be used strategically to strengthen its position on the global tourism scene. This detailed study is vital to understand the value of these influences and their significance for the management of tourist destinations, as pointed out by Polus et al. (2023).

5.1. The Rise of International Volunteering and Solidarity Tourism

Personal development emerges as a primary motivator for young people who participate in cross-border volunteer tourism programs (Han et al. 2020). This search for personal growth and new experiences can be channeled to the benefit of local communities if volunteer programs are well structured to promote meaningful and sustainable cultural interactions (Han et al. 2020). By understanding and integrating volunteers' motivations into tourism management efforts, destinations can improve their global image and sustain long-term economic and cultural benefits. Volunteering can be extremely beneficial for both the individual and the host countries (Persaud and Chisholm 2020) and in the current tourism landscape, there is a notable increase in the practices of international volunteering

and solidarity tourism (Caldas et al. 2020; McGehee 2002; Wearing 2001; Wearing and McGehee 2013). These modalities, which are interconnected in the growing trend in social and environmental awareness, offer a new dimension to the interaction between tourists and destinations (Caldas et al. 2020). International volunteering refers to participation in voluntary activities by individuals in countries other than their country of residence, with the aim of contributing to social, environmental, or development causes (Lima et al. 2017). In turn, solidarity tourism is characterized by the search for tourist experiences that support the sustainability and well-being of local communities, promoting the direct involvement of visitors in the social realities of destinations (Caldas et al. 2020; Dolnicar and McCabe 2022).

Both practices emerge as relevant dynamics in the context of tourist destination management, given their potential to shape the image of these places in the eyes of the world (Lima et al. 2017). The image of a tourist destination is a complex construction, influenced by several factors, including the experiences and perceptions of visitors, which are largely determined by the cultural, social, and emotional interactions they establish with local communities (Jiang et al. 2022; Lima et al. 2017).

The relevance of this topic lies in the ability of international volunteering and solidarity tourism to establish a positive narrative for destinations, emphasizing cultural exchange and positive social impact (Bentall 2022; Elsayeh 2020). These activities play a crucial role in enriching travelers' experiences, as well as contributing to sustainable development and the projection of an authentic and responsible image of destinations (Jiang et al. 2022; Seo et al. 2021). Bentall (2022) highlights how international volunteering fosters meaningful interactions that enhance cultural understanding and social cohesion. Similarly, Elsayeh (2020) illustrates the significant positive impact of solidarity tourism on local communities and their economies. Jiang et al. (2022) and Seo et al. (2021) further emphasize that such initiatives not only support sustainable tourism but also help in building a destination's reputation as socially responsible and culturally vibrant. Therefore, international volunteering and solidarity tourism are pivotal in promoting sustainable practices and reinforcing the cultural and social value of tourist destinations.

5.2. Impact and Management of International Volunteering and Solidarity Tourism

According to Coghlan and Fennell (2009), the motivations and benefits of volunteer tourists are complex and multifaceted. Although volunteer tourists may initially be motivated by a desire to help others (altruism), the personal benefits derived from the experience often dominate the experience. This can include personal development, intercultural learning, building skills, and the satisfaction of contributing to a cause (Coghlan and Fennell 2009). However, the authors argue that volunteer tourism represents a form of social selfishness, where personal benefits are often prioritized. However, depending on the management of volunteer tourists and the objectives and implementation of projects, volunteer tourism can still benefit local environments and communities (Coghlan and Fennell 2009).

According to Dong and Li (2023), the use of comparative feedback can be a powerful tool to motivate volunteers in the context of volunteer tourism. Comparative feedback can trigger self-conscious emotions, which can, in turn, enhance volunteers' efforts by increasing their awareness of their performance relative to others. This suggests that beyond the initial motivations of altruism and the personal benefits volunteers gain, additional strategies such as comparative feedback can be employed to sustain and enhance volunteer motivation over time. Such strategies can improve the overall effectiveness and outcomes of volunteer programs, benefiting both the individual volunteers and the local communities they serve (Dong and Li 2023).

At the intersection between the tourist experience and social responsibility, this segment of tourism has been gaining expression as a vector of transformation and innovation in the sector, placing tourist destinations on the path to a differentiated offer aligned with the values of the current era (Caldana et al. 2012). This research aims to explore in depth

the impact of these practices on strengthening the image of tourist destinations, as well as identifying the best strategies for destination managers to maximize their benefits.

To complement the discussion, [Kabil et al. \(2023\)](#) propose a new conceptual framework to improve volunteering, exploring the so-called “*underdog effect*”. The “*underdog effect*” is a psychological phenomenon where people tend to support or identify with individuals or groups who are perceived as being at a disadvantage or facing significant challenges. This effect is frequently observed in various areas, including sport, politics, and business. In the context of volunteering, the “*underdog effect*” can be used to motivate volunteers, especially in challenging situations ([BSL 2023](#); [OPUS 2023](#)). The ‘underdog effect’, as described by [Kabil et al. \(2023\)](#), can be an effective tool for motivating volunteers, especially in challenging contexts where they might feel disadvantaged or underestimated. This psychological phenomenon, where people tend to support or identify with those perceived as facing significant challenges, can be leveraged by destination managers. By harnessing the ‘underdog effect’, managers can develop strategies to maximize the benefits of volunteering, enhancing the motivation and commitment of volunteers. This approach not only benefits individual volunteers by providing them with a sense of purpose and recognition but also supports local environments and communities by ensuring sustained and enthusiastic volunteer participation.

We started with the concept of “*Transformative Cycle*” in the context of volunteer tourism. This cycle describes how volunteering can result in a learning and growth experience for both volunteers and host communities ([Almeida 2022](#); [Magrizos et al. 2021](#); [Maher et al. 2024](#)). The “*Transformative Cycle*” in Barcelos manifests itself as a continuous process where international volunteer activities generate mutual benefits for both volunteers and the local community. This transformation can contribute to improving the image of the destination, as volunteers can return home as ambassadors of the destination, sharing their positive experiences and contributing to the formation of a positive image ([Huang et al. 2024](#); [Magrizos et al. 2021](#)). This cycle begins when volunteers bring new perspectives and energies to local projects, contributing significantly to the cultural and social development of the city ([Almeida 2022](#)).

The “*Transformative Cycle*” has not only allowed the development of skills in volunteers, such as project management and leadership, but has also strengthened local capacity to organize and implement sustainable community initiatives ([Maher et al. 2024](#)), an aspect that [Almeida \(2022\)](#) identifies as being one of the key benefits of international volunteering for host destinations. The impact of this cycle is a testament to the power of international volunteering not just as a helping tool, but as an enabler for community development and personal growth.

In addition to the practical dimension of the “*Transformative Cycle*”, it is essential to recognize that this process is not linear, but rather a continuous cycle of learning and transformation ([Magrizos et al. 2021](#)). By becoming deeply involved in the culture and challenges of the host community, volunteers gain greater understanding and empathy, as discussed by [Almeida \(2022\)](#) and [Magrizos et al. \(2021\)](#). This enriched understanding transforms visitors’ vision of the world and their perception of Barcelos, enhancing the creation of a positive image of the destination. More than that, when they return home, the volunteers share their transformative experiences, functioning as ambassadors of the destination and positively influencing others’ perception of the destination ([Huang et al. 2024](#)), in this case, Barcelos.

However, the image of the destination is not just created by the volunteers themselves. [An et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Jiang et al. \(2022\)](#) explore how volunteer tourists’ intentions to revisit the tourist destination are influenced by emotional solidarity and the experience gained there. This study emphasizes the importance of creating meaningful experiences and fostering an emotional connection between volunteers and the host community. This emotional connection can encourage volunteers to return, improving the destination’s image and stimulating the development of sustainable tourism.

When analyzing the works of [An et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Jiang et al. \(2022\)](#), we can understand that emotional solidarity and memorable experiences are key factors for loyalty to the destination. Emotional solidarity refers to the emotional connection volunteers develop with the host community, which can lead to a sense of belonging and a desire to support the community in the future. Memorable experiences, on the other hand, refer to the unique and unforgettable experiences that volunteers have during their stay, which can lead to a desire to revisit the destination.

The perception of destination [Burrai et al. \(2015\)](#) is that stakeholders also have a significant impact on the destination's image. Their study suggests that an equitable approach to volunteer tourism, where benefits are mutually shared between volunteers and host communities, can improve destination image and tourist satisfaction ([Burrai et al. 2015](#)).

The experiences of everyone involved in international volunteering are multifaceted and deeply enriching ([Chen 2021](#)). Stakeholders involved in international development volunteering (IDV) are often pragmatic and adaptable, eager to engage with foreign knowledge and negotiate cultural differences. These experiences allow them to develop a cosmopolitan perspective while remaining deeply rooted in and committed to local communities. Furthermore, they are able to leverage transnational knowledge networks for personal and professional benefit. This results in a type of local cosmopolitanism that is both grounded and strategic, highlighting the importance and value of experiences gained through international volunteering ([Chen 2021](#)).

The image of the destination is also influenced by the way volunteering activities are managed and organized. [Coghlan \(Coghlan 2007, 2008\)](#) highlights the importance of the expedition team in shaping the volunteer tourist experience, which, in turn, can impact the image of the destination. Furthermore, a study ([Coghlan and Gooch 2011](#)) applied a transformative learning framework to volunteer tourism, suggesting that the volunteering experience can be a powerful tool for personal and social change, which can result in a more positive image of the destination.

There are studies that illustrate the positive impact of international volunteering and solidarity tourism on the image of tourist destinations. For example, a study ([Jiang et al. 2022](#)) examined the effect of emotional solidarity on memorable tourism experiences and destination loyalty in volunteer tourism. The results showed that volunteer tourists who feel welcomed by residents, who feel emotionally close to them, and who understand them well are more likely to become loyal to the destination. This is because these positive experiences lead volunteer tourists to feel more connected to the destination and their community. These case studies demonstrate the potential of international volunteering and solidarity tourism to have a positive impact on the image of tourist destinations, fostering emotional connections between volunteers and local communities, creating memorable experiences, and promoting sustainable tourism practices.

In short, the literature suggests that international volunteering and solidarity tourism have great potential to significantly change the image of a tourist destination. However, to maximize this impact, it is essential that effective management practices are adopted that foster emotional solidarity, meaningful on-site experiences, and equity between volunteers and host communities.

5.3. The Impact of International Volunteering and Solidarity Tourism in Specific Destinations: The Case of Barcelos

The analysis of the role of international volunteering and solidarity tourism in the image of the tourist destination proved to be very enlightening due to the multiple dimensions that these phenomena take on in the global tourist context ([McGehee 2002](#); [Wearing 2001](#)). We understand how volunteering and solidarity tourism shape visitors' perceptions and experiences, significantly influencing the image of a destination, through [McGehee \(2002\)](#) and [Wearing \(2001\)](#). This understanding, though comprehensive, paves the way for a more focused and detailed look. In this sense, it is pertinent to narrow the focus

of the analysis to understand the specific impact of these practices in local contexts and, to this end, we narrow down our investigation, focusing attention on the particular case of Barcelos. This city, rich in culture and tradition, serves as an illustrative example to explore how international volunteering and solidarity tourism are reflected in its identity and reputation as a tourist destination. The transition to a more detailed and localized analysis will allow a deeper understanding of the concrete impacts and specific dynamics that volunteering and solidarity tourism can generate in destinations like Barcelos, in line with what was discussed by [McGehee \(2002\)](#) and [Wearing \(2001\)](#).

This section provides a broader review of the literature on the impact of international volunteering and solidarity tourism on specific destinations, before focusing on the specific case of Barcelos. Although there are no specific previous studies on international volunteering in Barcelos, this section can discuss the importance of volunteering and solidarity tourism for Barcelos and how this case study can contribute to the existing literature.

International volunteering and solidarity tourism have stood out as powerful forces of transformation for specific destinations around the world ([Grotz 2023](#); [Milner and McCullough 2024](#); [Tomazos and Butler 2012](#)). The impact of these activities goes beyond local socioeconomic development and encompasses education and cultural enrichment, increasing global awareness and promoting a positive image of the destination ([Hermann and Klerk 2024](#); [Wearing and Grabowski 2011](#)). The content generated by tourists has a significant influence on the perceptions of other potential visitors, and modifies the image of the destination in a cumulative and dynamic way ([Zhu et al. 2022](#)).

In a recent study, [Braun \(2023\)](#) offers a unique insight into volunteering on the Camino de Santiago, specifically the role of hospitalers, it reveals that volunteer work serves as a kind of “substitute drug” to satisfy the longing and dependence on the Camino. With the increase in interactions, the relevance of interpersonal motives appears to shift from pilgrims to neighbors near the hostel ([Braun 2023](#)).

Despite the lack of specific studies on international volunteering and solidarity tourism in Barcelos, the importance of these elements for the city is undeniable. Barcelos, known for its rich cultural tradition and the notorious Barcelos Fair, is an emerging tourist destination that could benefit greatly from these practices.

International volunteers can bring a variety of skills and knowledge that can contribute to the preservation and promotion of Barcelos’ cultural heritage. Through voluntary work, educational and cultural activities can be developed that expand knowledge about local culture and encourage the participation of residents ([Mustonen 2007](#)).

Likewise, solidarity tourism can have a significant impact on Barcelos. In addition to providing an additional revenue stream for the local economy, solidarity tourists are often willing to interact in deeper and more respectful ways with local culture and people, contributing to the creation of more sustainable and responsible tourism ([Sanchez-Cañizares and Castillo-Canalejo 2015](#)). Through this interactive process, both destination management organizations and tourists actively participate in the ongoing construction and reconstruction of the destination image ([Zhu et al. 2022](#)).

The case of Barcelos can be a valuable complement to the existing literature, as it can provide a new perspective on how international volunteering and solidarity tourism can contribute to the appreciation and promotion of a destination with a strong cultural identity.

Although the lack of specific studies limits a more detailed analysis, it is important to highlight the need for future research in this area. Studying the impact of international volunteering and solidarity tourism in Barcelos could provide valuable contributions not only for the city, but also for other similar destinations.

5.4. Comparative Examples of Volunteer Tourism Impacts

The positive impacts of volunteer tourism are well-documented in various regions around the world. For instance, the US Peace Corps has been crucial in fostering sustainable community development and cultural exchange across numerous countries. Volunteers

engage in education, health, and agriculture, directly contributing to local development and creating long-lasting positive perceptions of the host countries (Hall (2007)).

In Israel, the Kibbutz volunteer programs have been successful in promoting agricultural development and communal living. Volunteers from around the world participate in these programs, gaining unique cultural insights and contributing to the agricultural productivity and social fabric of the Kibbutzim (Avrahami and Dar 1993).

Following the devastating earthquake in Nepal in 2015, extensive volunteer programs were implemented to aid in recovery efforts. These programs were instrumental in rebuilding infrastructure, providing medical aid, and supporting the local economy. Volunteers played a key role in revitalizing tourism by promoting Nepal as a resilient and welcoming destination (United Nations Volunteers 2017).

Similarly, in Barcelos, ESC volunteers have made significant contributions to various local projects. Volunteers have been involved in constructing community infrastructure, teaching in local schools, and assisting in agricultural activities. These efforts have not only supported local development but also promoted Barcelos as a hospitable and culturally rich destination. The presence of volunteers has enhanced cultural exchange and community cohesion, reflecting the positive impacts seen in other successful volunteer tourism programs around the world.

By comparing these examples, it becomes clear that well-managed volunteer tourism programs can substantially benefit both the volunteers and the host communities. Barcelos serves as a prime example of how international volunteering can be leveraged to improve the image and development of a tourist destination.

5.5. Research Hypotheses and Main Research Questions

In order to thoroughly investigate the impacts of volunteer tourism, it is crucial to establish clear research hypotheses and questions guiding the study. This section introduces the main hypotheses and research questions that have informed the methodology and analysis presented in this article.

5.5.1. Research Hypotheses

The research hypotheses for this study were formulated based on a comprehensive review of the existing literature on volunteer tourism and its impacts on local communities and the overall destination image. The hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): *Volunteer tourism significantly enhances the cultural understanding and social cohesion between volunteers and local communities (McIntosh and Zahra 2007; Wearing 2001).*

Hypothesis 2 (H2): *The presence of international volunteers positively influences the perception of the destination's image among other potential visitors (Raymond and Hall 2008; Sin 2009) (Raymond and Hall 2008).*

Hypothesis 3 (H3): *Volunteer tourism contributes to the sustainable economic development of the host community by providing additional sources of revenue and fostering responsible tourism practices (Benson and Seibert 2009; D. A. Guttentag 2009).*

Hypothesis 4 (H4): *Volunteers' experiences and interactions within the host community lead to higher levels of destination loyalty and revisitation intentions (Alexander 2012; Broad and Jenkins 2008).*

5.5.2. Main Research Questions

In alignment with the above hypotheses, this study aims to address the following primary research questions:

- (1) What are the specific cultural and social impacts of volunteer tourism on local communities? (Lyons and Wearing 2012; Wearing and McGehee 2013).
- (2) How does volunteer tourism affect the overall image of the destination from the perspective of international visitors? (Coghlan and Gooch 2011; Ooi and Laing 2010).
- (3) In what ways does volunteer tourism contribute to the economic sustainability of the host community? (Callanan and Thomas 2007; McGehee and Andereck 2009).
- (4) What factors influence the loyalty and revisitation intentions of volunteer tourists towards the destination? (Wearing 2004).

5.5.3. Survey Questionnaire and Interview Guide

To address these research questions, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative semi-structured interviews. The survey questionnaire included items designed to measure the following key variables:

- Demographic information (age, gender, nationality, education level).
- Motivations for participating in volunteer tourism (Broad 2003).
- Perceptions of cultural exchange and social cohesion (Lepp 2008).
- Views on the destination's image before and after the volunteering experience (McGehee and Santos 2005).
- Economic impacts observed or perceived during the stay (Wearing 2001).
- Intentions to revisit the destination.

The semi-structured interviews aimed to gather in-depth insights into the volunteers' experiences and the nuances of their interactions with local communities. Key themes explored in the interviews included the following:

- Personal growth and development through volunteering (Bailey and Russell 2012).
- Specific cultural exchanges and learning experiences (Raymond and Hall 2008).
- Observations on the local community's response to volunteer tourism (Guttentag 2009).
- Challenges faced during the volunteer experience (Sin 2009).
- Recommendations for improving volunteer tourism programs (Wearing and McGehee 2013).

5.5.4. Demographic Details

The study involved 92 volunteers from diverse geographical regions, including Europe and partner countries in the ESC Program. The sample consisted of 54% males and 46% females, with ages ranging from 18 to 30 years. Education levels varied; the majority had recently finished their degree or were in the final stages of their studies and took advantage of school holidays to have a volunteer experience. This diverse demographic profile provided a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of volunteer tourism across different cultural contexts (McGehee and Andereck 2009).

5.5.5. Preliminary Insights and Statistical Analysis

To support the preliminary insights presented earlier in the manuscript, several statistical analyses and qualitative excerpts from the interviews are provided. For instance, the relationship between volunteer tourism and cultural understanding was analyzed using correlation and regression techniques, while thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes in the qualitative data (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

In conclusion, establishing these hypotheses and research questions has provided a structured framework for analyzing the multifaceted impacts of volunteer tourism. This approach not only enhances the academic rigor of the study but also ensures that the findings are robust and actionable for stakeholders in the tourism sector.

6. Methodology

In this chapter, we present a detailed analysis of the data collected through electronic questionnaires sent to 92 European Solidarity Corps (ESC) participants who volunteered

internationally in Barcelos, as well as to the main host organizations in the municipality. Interviews were conducted with four key host organizations in Barcelos, providing insights into their experiences working with and hosting ESC volunteers, and the perceived impact on the community. Representatives from all four organizations participated in these interviews.

Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study integrated quantitative data from electronic surveys and qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews (Bryman 2016; Creswell and Creswell 2018).

6.1. Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

The quantitative data from the surveys were analyzed using statistical methods to identify common trends and patterns among the volunteers' responses. Descriptive statistics provided an overview of the demographic profile and motivations of the participants. Specifically, the demographic details of the 92 volunteers included:

- Countries or Regions of Origin: The volunteers originated from diverse geographical regions, including Europeans (55%) and partner countries eligible to carry out the ESC program (45%).
- Gender: The sample comprised 54% males and 46% females.
- Age Groups: Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 30 years, with the majority (48%) being between 20 and 22 years old, and the second largest (28%) group being those between 22 and 25 years old.
- Education Level: The majority are in the final stages of their studies and take advantage of school holidays to have a volunteer experience (48%) or have recently finished their degree (26%). All participants have completed secondary education.

These demographic details provided a comprehensive understanding of the backgrounds of the volunteers and facilitated an analysis of how these characteristics influenced their experiences and perceptions.

6.2. Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006), allowing for the identification of key themes related to the impact of volunteering on the community and the volunteers themselves. The interviews with representatives from the host organizations provided in-depth insights into the following areas:

- Personal growth and development through volunteering;
- Specific cultural exchanges and learning experiences;
- Observations on the local community's response to volunteer tourism;
- Challenges faced during the volunteer experience;
- Recommendations for improving volunteer tourism programs.

Preliminary insights from the data indicate that ESC volunteers significantly contribute to the cultural and social development of Barcelos. These insights, grounded in both survey responses and interview data, highlight the dual benefits of volunteering for personal growth and community enrichment (Wearing and McGehee 2013). The data indicated a varied range of motivations for involvement in international volunteering, with an emphasis on the search for adventure, personal development, and altruism (Callanan and Thomas 2007). This diversity of motivations underscores the multifaceted role of volunteering, not only as an opportunity for social contribution but also as a means for personal growth and cultural exploration.

The 92 participants completed the entire survey, providing a robust data set for analysis. The data show that the volunteering experience in Barcelos under the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) provides young people with a unique opportunity for contribution and personal growth, while simultaneously affecting their previous perception of the country, the city, and the local community.

This section explores in detail the volunteers' experiences and how these shaped their image of Barcelos, reflecting on the intersection between volunteering and tourism, and the role of this experience in promoting a positive vision of the destination.

7. Preliminary Insights

Analysis of the data collected, and the trends observed in the survey of former European Solidarity Corps (ESC) volunteers in Barcelos reveals significant implications for international volunteering and tourism. This subchapter seeks to explore these implications, focusing on how the international volunteering experience in Barcelos can serve as a model for other regions and how it can positively influence tourism, reinforcing the importance of sustainable and responsible practices. Through this analysis, we seek to provide an in-depth insight into how international volunteering and solidarity tourism can coexist in a beneficial way, contributing to local development and building a positive image of the destination.

1. **Enriching the Tourist Experience through International Volunteering:** The integration of international volunteering into the fabric of tourism in Barcelos highlights the capacity of these experiences to enrich the experience of tourists. Not only do volunteers gain a deep understanding of the local culture and community, they also actively contribute to its well-being. This approach creates a more authentic and meaningful tourist experience, moving away from mass tourism and towards a more conscious and responsible tourism model.
2. **Promotion of Sustainability and Social Responsibility:** International volunteering programs in Barcelos serve as tangible examples of how tourism can be aligned with principles of sustainability and social responsibility. By promoting practices that respect the local environment and contribute to community development, Barcelos not only improves its tourist offer, but also positions itself as a leader in sustainable tourism. This stance has the potential to attract tourists who value experiences that offer positive contributions to the place visited.
3. **Strengthening Community Cohesion:** The participation of international volunteers in local projects promotes interaction between visitors and residents, reinforcing community cohesion. This cultural exchange enriches both parties and creates a sense of belonging and pride in the community. By involving local residents in volunteer programs, the creation of a support network for volunteers is enhanced, while local knowledge and traditions are valued.
4. **Development of Transversal Skills:** The international volunteering experience in Barcelos contributes to the development of transversal skills in both the volunteers and the local agents involved. Skills such as intercultural communication, leadership, teamwork and adaptability are reinforced, benefiting not only the individual, but also the organizations and communities involved. These skills are essential in today's globalized world and can open up new professional and personal opportunities for participants.
5. **Management Models and Strategic Partnerships:** To maximize the benefits of international volunteering and solidarity tourism, it is crucial to adopt effective management models and establish strategic partnerships. This includes collaboration between local, national, and international organizations, the public and private sector, and educational institutions. These partnerships can facilitate the sharing of resources, knowledge, and best practices, contributing to the sustainability and success of volunteering and tourism programs.

In conclusion, the Barcelos experience illustrates the potential of international volunteering and solidarity tourism to contribute significantly to sustainable local development and the construction of a positive tourist image. Similarly to the US Peace Corps, Kibbutz volunteering in Israel, and the post-earthquake recovery efforts in Nepal, the volunteer programs in Barcelos have demonstrated substantial benefits for both volunteers and the local community. These examples highlight the need for innovative and responsible ap-

proaches in the tourism sector, which value the active participation of visitors in the life of local communities. Thus, Barcelos not only enriches the experience of its visitors but also promotes the development of more conscious and sustainable tourism. By learning from these successful models, Barcelos can continue to enhance its identity as a destination for solidarity tourism and cultural engagement.

Enriching Experiences: ESC volunteers in Barcelos reported a variety of enriching experiences that transcend conventional volunteer work, by participating in cultural, social and environmental activities. These experiences not only contribute to the personal development of volunteers, but also foster a deep appreciation for local culture and traditions. Immersion in projects with a direct impact on the community allows volunteers an intimate understanding of local challenges and opportunities, strengthening the feeling of solidarity and belonging to a common cause.

Impact on the Perception of Barcelos: Volunteers' perception of Barcelos is profoundly influenced by their experiences during the volunteering period. The city is often described as welcoming and rich in cultural heritage, where the values of community and solidarity are experienced in practice. This positive image of Barcelos is amplified by the testimony of volunteers, who share their stories and experiences through different platforms, contributing to the construction of an attractive and authentic image of the destination.

Contribution to Community and Local Development: Volunteer involvement in projects with community benefits highlights the vital role of international volunteering in local development. Volunteers' efforts in areas such as education, sustainability, and social support not only meet the immediate needs of the community, but also promote a long-term vision for sustainable development. This synergistic interaction between volunteers and the local community reinforces the image of Barcelos as a destination that values and invests in collective well-being and the preservation of its cultural and natural heritage.

Reflection on the Volunteering Experience: Reflecting on the volunteering experience reveals a deep sense of gratitude and personal fulfillment among participants. The opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others while exploring a new culture is often cited as one of the most rewarding aspects of volunteering. This mutual appreciation between volunteers and the Barcelos community is fundamental for the sustainability of the volunteer program and for the continuous reinforcement of the city's positive image.

Challenges and Recommendations: Despite positive experiences, volunteers also face challenges, such as language barriers and the need for greater cultural integration. To overcome these challenges, it is recommended to strengthen orientation programs and promote cultural exchange activities that facilitate communication and mutual understanding. Such initiatives can further enrich the volunteering experience and ensure an even more positive perception of Barcelos as a welcoming and inclusive destination.

We can therefore conclude that the volunteering experience in Barcelos, through ESC, offers young people a unique springboard for civic engagement and cultural exploration, significantly impacting their perception of the destination. The experiences shared by volunteers reflect the richness and diversity of the local community, promoting Barcelos as a volunteering destination of choice in the European context. As the program continues to evolve, the inclusion of more voices and experiences will further enrich the social fabric of Barcelos and strengthen its image as a place of meeting, learning, and solidarity.

The integration of international volunteers in Barcelos, within the scope of the European Solidarity Corps (ESC), proved to be a significant added value for the local community. This segment explores the tangible and intangible contributions of these volunteers, evaluating the impact of their actions on the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of Barcelos.

Social and Cultural Impact: ESC volunteers in Barcelos dedicated themselves to a wide range of projects with profound social and cultural impacts. From participating in educational programs aimed at including at-risk youth to engaging in cultural heritage conservation initiatives, volunteers have demonstrated a unique ability to adapt their skills and enthusiasm to the specific needs of the community. This interaction dynamic not

only benefits local projects, but also promotes an enriching cultural exchange, allowing volunteers and community members to share knowledge, traditions, and perspectives.

Sustainable Economic Development: In addition to the social and cultural impact, the presence of international volunteers in Barcelos contributes to the sustainable economic development of the region. Through their participation in sustainable tourism and rural development projects, volunteers help promote Barcelos as an ethical and responsible tourist destination. This approach to tourism not only attracts visitors interested in authentic and sustainable experiences, but also supports the local economy, encouraging the consumption of regional products and supporting small businesses.

Strengthening Community Cohesion: The interaction of volunteers with the local community also has a significant effect on strengthening community cohesion. By working side by side on common projects, volunteers and residents develop a sense of solidarity and shared purpose. This collaborative engagement not only addresses local challenges more effectively, but also builds bridges between cultures, promoting tolerance, mutual understanding, and respect for diversity.

Training and Long-Term Legacy: A crucial aspect of volunteers' contributions to the local community is the training and long-term legacy they leave in Barcelos. Through the transfer of knowledge and the implementation of sustainable practices, projects led or supported by volunteers have the potential to continue to benefit the community well beyond the duration of their volunteering. This lasting impact is a testament to the effectiveness of international volunteering in promoting community development and empowering local residents to face future challenges independently.

To conclude, the contributions of ESC volunteers to the local community of Barcelos are vast and varied, covering social, cultural, and economic aspects. These volunteering experiences not only enrich the lives of participants and community members, but they also leave a positive legacy that transcends the volunteers' length of stay. Volunteers' commitment to local projects, combined with their desire for cultural immersion, demonstrates the potential of international volunteering to transform both host communities and volunteers themselves, promoting a more connected, supportive, and understanding world. An analysis of these contributions reveals the importance of continuing to support and expand volunteering initiatives like ESC, maximizing their beneficial impact in Barcelos and beyond.

8. Final Considerations and Conclusions

The comprehensive analysis of data collected from surveys distributed to European Solidarity Corps (ESC) participants who engaged in international volunteering in Barcelos allows us to draw several significant conclusions about the nature and impact of this experience. This chapter summarizes the main research findings, emphasizing the value of international volunteering for the volunteers, the local community, and the ESC program. It also highlights the challenges faced and offers recommendations for future initiatives.

Value of International Volunteering: International volunteering in Barcelos enriches volunteers through personal growth, intercultural skill development, and meaningful community contributions. The diversity of motivations that drive individuals to embark on this journey—ranging from the search for adventure and personal development to altruism and the desire to contribute to a greater cause—reflects the broad spectrum of benefits that international volunteering can offer.

Impact on the Local Community: Volunteers' contributions to social, cultural, and environmental projects in Barcelos foster mutual cultural appreciation and strengthen international solidarity.

Challenges Faced: Despite the many positive aspects, challenges related to cultural integration, project sustainability, and expectation management have been identified as areas requiring attention and improvement. If not addressed, these challenges could compromise the effectiveness of international volunteering and its ability to achieve the proposed objectives.

Recommendations for Future Initiatives: Future international volunteering initiatives should include comprehensive mentoring programs, project sustainability strategies, clear and realistic communication of expectations, and enhanced support and monitoring for volunteers. These measures are fundamental to maximizing the benefits of international volunteering for all parties involved and ensuring that the experience remains enriching and sustainable in the long term.

In conclusion, international volunteering in Barcelos through the ESC represents a powerful tool for personal development, cultural exchange, and social contribution. The analysis of the collected data reveals a multifaceted experience with significant impacts for both volunteers and the local community. By addressing the identified challenges and implementing the proposed recommendations, the value of these experiences can be further enhanced, ensuring that international volunteering continues to be transformative for individuals and communities. Consequently, the ESC program in Barcelos can serve as a model for other international volunteering initiatives, promoting a culture of solidarity, mutual learning, and sustainable development.

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