Voluntouring on Facebook and Instagram: Photography and social media in constructing the ‘Third World’ experience

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Abstract
This article studies photographic practices in ‘voluntourism’ alongside the rise of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. The advent and widespread use of social media platforms today complicates the ethics of photographic practices, as the ease of sharing photographs accentuates and stirs up the unequal relations between the photographer and the photographed. From a conceptual standpoint, the moral and altruistic underpinnings of volunteer work supposedly differentiate voluntourists from their counterparts in mainstream tourism, who are often assumed to be engaged in commoditized and leisure-based activities. However, existing research suggests that voluntourists do participate in conventionally touristic practices, as the pervasiveness of photography illustrates. Using interviews with 16 voluntourists, this article examines the negotiations behind photo-taking and photo-posting in voluntourism. We also consider the case of Barbie Savior, a satirical Instagram account featuring ‘the doll that saved Africa’. The emergence of such online media articles that critique and make fun of voluntourists’ depiction of their Third World experience therefore becomes a self-governing mechanism for how one should behave in encountering the Third World, even as voluntourism itself continues to be seen as a viable way of caring for the Third World.

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6-day visit to rural African village completely changes woman’s Facebook profile picture

Calling the experience ‘completely transformative,’ local 22-year-old Angela Fisher told reporters Tuesday that her six-day visit to the rural Malawian village of Neno has completely changed her profile picture on Facebook. ‘As soon as I walked into that dusty, remote town and the smiling children started coming up to me, I just knew my Facebook profile photo would change forever’, said Fisher … ‘I don’t think my profile photo will ever be the same, not after the experience of taking such incredible pictures with my arms around those small African children’s shoulders …’ Since returning, Fisher said she has been encouraging every one of her friends to visit Africa, promising that it would change their Facebook profile photos as well. (The Onion, 2014)

Photography is widely assumed to be one of the most common attributes of tourist behaviour and a ‘modern twin’ of tourism (Larsen, 2006). Since the development of cheap Kodak cameras, it has become possible for tourists to produce photographs of their travels, and the consumption of visual imagery is often deemed to be central in shaping contemporary touristic practices and experiences (Adler, 1989; Urry, 1990). Yet, photo-taking and photo-sharing are never innocent: photo-taking during travels and the subsequent sharing of these photos on social media platforms such as Facebook reveal a power-laden contact zone for photographer–photographed interaction (Cohen et al., 1992). Indeed, Sontag (1977) suggested that ‘to photograph people is to violate them … seeing them as they never see themselves’ (p. 14).

This article therefore studies photographic practices in voluntourism alongside the rise of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. The advent and widespread use of social media platforms today complicates the ethics of photographic practices, as the ease of sharing photographs accentuates and stirs up the unequal relations between the photographer and the photographed. In The Onion article (above), smiling children in dusty, remote towns in Africa become captured (whether willingly or not) and used to represent First World identities and Third World1 experiences on social media, increasingly as a result of tourists’ participation in what is commonly named as volunteer tourism or voluntourism. Using interviews with 16 voluntourists, this article examines the negotiations behind photo-taking and photo-posting in voluntourism. It also considers the case of Barbie Savior, a satirical Instagram account featuring ‘the doll that saved Africa’. The emergence of such online media articles that critique and make fun of voluntourists’ depiction of their Third World experience directs a ‘reverse gaze’ upon voluntourists. The fictitious Barbie Savior and real voluntourists’ postings on social media are therefore seen as mutually constituted. Barbie Savior is inspired by voluntourists’ postings on social media, while voluntourists are often highly cognizant of how their postings can be seen to be ‘just like Barbie Savior’. Putting the two together in one paper therefore allows us to ask how the Third World experience in voluntourism is constructed.
through photography posted on social media. What sorts of negotiations encompass the self-governing mechanisms of voluntouristic behaviour online?

**Voluntourism in the Third World**

Voluntourism is often seen as a subset of responsible and sustainable tourism (Wearing, 2001). Emphasis in voluntourism lies on reciprocal benefits, elevating local socio-economical conditions, and encouraging tourist mindsets and behaviours that are sensitive to local communities, almost inevitably in the Third World. Similar to gap years, voluntourism is often associated with its capacity to ‘broaden the mind’ (Snee, 2013). The act of travel is assumed to open up opportunities to engage and learn about different cultural contexts, and volunteering is seen to be an activity that facilitates a better understanding of both privilege and difficulties faced by other communities around the world (Raymond and Hall, 2008). Research has thus focused largely on the experience of the voluntourist (Sin, 2009; Stoddart and Rogerson, 2004; Wearing, 2001; Zahra and McIntosh, 2007). Most of these describe the observed or perceived positive outcomes of voluntourism, such as voluntourists’ supposed broadened horizons and increased self-confidence.

It is also widely accepted that voluntourism should aim towards sustainability and bring about positive impacts for locals in a host destination (Ooi and Laing, 2010; Wearing and McGehee, 2013), such as poverty alleviation or local capacity building. Academic work has, however, increasingly questioned the claims of positive impacts of voluntourism (Guttentag, 2009; Raymond and Hall, 2008; Simpson, 2004). Works have problematized how the notion of ‘caring at a distance’, emblematic of voluntourism, is carried across macro-scales to perpetuate notions of the privileged developed and needy less developed worlds (Sin, 2010) and critiqued voluntourism models through post-colonial or neo-liberal discourses (Conran, 2011; Lyons et al., 2012). Indeed, Snee has suggested that ‘the idea that volunteering in any context is automatically a “good thing” is a normative assumption’ (Snee, 2013: 144).

The broader field of international volunteering is itself also increasingly seen through the lenses of neoliberalization (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011; Griffiths, 2015), professionalization (Baillie Smith and Jenkins, 2011), NGOization (Jenkins, 2009) and Westernization (Simpson, 2004, 2005). Similar to observations in gap year tourism made by Lyons et al. (2012), a ‘neoliberal ethos’ focusing on skills development, self-advancement and a broader ‘quest for career and personal development’ (Devereux, 2008: 358; Diprose, 2012) has pervaded the rise of voluntourism. In the same vein, empirical research centring on the voluntourist has collectively implied that motivations of voluntourists do not fully align with the idealism behind voluntourism (Simpson, 2004). While voluntourists are acutely aware of and do not shy away from expressing their good intentions to help the poor (Stoddart and Rogerson, 2004), other reasons focusing on the self are central, such as self-development and opening up opportunities for travel to less-accessible destinations (Sin, 2009) or interacting with peoples from other cultures. Existing research suggests a need to reflect critically on the inequalities that result in uneven patterns of development and highlights that in its failure to
consider these, voluntourism can become highly paternalistic (Perold et al., 2013) and neo-colonial in practice (Palacios, 2010; Raymond and Hall, 2008).

Central in these critiques is that voluntourism can be understood alongside the emergence of an identifiable popular humanitarian gaze (Mostafanezhad, 2014) – development celebrities, together with development professionals and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), collectively produce multiple narratives that construct the ‘tourist imaginary’ (Salazar, 2012; Urry and Larsen, 2011). In mimicking key humanitarian or development celebrities like Madonna or Angelina Jolie, voluntourists see their own placements as opportunities to generate understanding of global issues and inequalities (Jones, 2008). This also provides them with the chance to reproduce visions of compassion and empathy for the so-called Third World that they understand from media representations. A CNN report succinctly captured these sentiments:

the industry is growing because more and more people are seeking meaningful fulfillment and a sense of purpose in life. If this is not met in their careers and daily lives, volunteering whilst traveling is a powerful way to meet this desire. (Clothier, 2010)

Thus, as Vrasti (2012) notes,

instead of the rational, calculating and cold-blooded American Psycho, the good neoliberal subject of the twenty-first century is the rather schizophrenic figure of the compassionate entrepreneur, the happy workaholic, the charitable CEO, the creative worker, the frugal consumer and, last but not least, the volunteer tourist. (p. 21)

In fulfilling such needs and desires of the voluntourist, the ‘Third World’ becomes constructed in a particular manner, as both needy yet receptive of aid provided by voluntourists, and also suitably differentiated as the ‘Other’ (Sin, 2010). Snee critically questioned the placid acceptance of how less developed countries are often framed as needy within voluntourism opportunities catering to gap year tourists. ‘Colonial discourses of disorder and unreliability in opposition to models of modern Western rationality’ (Snee, 2013: 155) are often reproduced despite claims made in voluntourism precisely to right the wrongs of colonial exploitation or capitalist marginalization. Such simplistic boundaries between developed and less developed countries therefore perpetuate an ideal of development that legitimizes young unskilled international labour as a development ‘solution’. Simpson (2004) further elaborates that the

very legitimacy of such programmes is rooted in a concept of a ‘third world’, where there is ‘need’, and where European young people have the ability, and right, to meet this need … Homogenous descriptions of groups of people and cultures are relied on to produce evocative and recognizable imagery. (p. 682)

Here, development realities, such as disease, poor sanitation, a lack of access to potable water and issues in public education systems, become painted as challenges for voluntourists to overcome or rectify (Griffiths, 2015). Together with an application of the ‘lotto logic’ to global inequalities (Quinby, 2002) where the poor are characterized as less fortunate, and ‘living conditions and life are products of a randomized process of luck’
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(Simpson, 2005: 689), voluntourism itself becomes apoliticized (Mostafanezhad, 2013). As Griffiths (2015) highlighted, ‘at its worst, the role of ‘difference maker’ – especially when taken on by formally untrained volunteers – ‘can be seen to represent the neo-colonial construction of the westerner as racially and culturally superior’ (Raymond and Hall, 2008: 531)’ (p. 208).

Photography and voluntourism

Approaching photographs as material artefacts that share intimate connections with everyday social worlds (Pink, 2001), this article therefore opens up dialogues that consider the role of photography and photographs in shaping voluntourist performativities. Travel photography is seen as more than just an extended mode of gazing; it is a series of practices that inevitably involves visual and representational engagement, but is also deeply embodied through other sensual and less-represented modalities (Urry and Larsen, 2011). By emphasizing the ‘intersection of gazes’ (Crang, 1997: 361) within the voluntouristic encounter, photography-as-practice occurs between variously positioned agents, allowing for discussions of power and agency overlooked previously (Scarles, 2012). Photography continues to be partly performed – prone to perpetuating the ‘hermeneutic cycle’ – yet, it is also understood as an improvisational practice through which ethics might be ‘creatively constituted’ (Rose, 2002: 395).

Within studies on humanitarian aid, photography and the resultant iconography of childhood as associated with universal rights reflect a long lineage of colonial ideology – where images of children reflect key tropes of innocence, dependence and protection (Manzo, 2008). Such representations often feature a ‘discursive relationship between an individual-developed subject and a non-developed object implicitly contains a parent-child metaphor’ (Manzo, 1991: 14). Photographs taken by humanitarian workers have been criticized as demeaning, where powerful institutions like UNICEF and World Bank and various NGOs are said to work in an assemblage that strategically turn suffering into ‘a commodity to be worked on and recast’ (Cohen, 2001: 169). Here, the very act of using photographs of children in development-oriented NGOs to bring attention to human suffering and possibly work towards alleviating poverty and suffering is in itself paradoxical as it instead reinforces a paternal logic of a superior global North as compared to an inferior global South. Indeed, Manzo (2008) highlighted that ‘images of children in fundraising appeals, in particular, have been condemned for provoking “sympathy for passive suffering rather than support for active (including armed) struggle”’ (Burman, 1994: 241; see also Moeller, 1999)’ (p. 635).

Research that explores the overlaps between voluntourism and photography however remains relatively thin. Crossley (2012), for example, has considered the ethical reflexivities of taking photographs within host communities, while Clost (2011) has seen photographs as visual artefacts that perpetuate rather than narrow cultural gaps between voluntourists and host community members. Grimm and Needham (2012) identified organization websites as key sites that use photographs as promotional visual material, in turn sustaining the inherently visual economy of voluntourism. Sink’s (2011) research turned to online spaces where, once again, the debate identifies photographs as perpetuating narratives of visual representation. Accordingly, photographic practices have been
explicated as ‘othering’ host community members (Said, 1978): the premise of voluntourism relies on the creation of ‘a simple “geography”, one that offers prescribed cultural experiences, and indicators of their successful consumption’ and hence like Orientalism uses visual images and constructions to invent ‘a space populated by the existence of consumable experiences of “the other”’ (Simpson, 2004: 683). This is said to appropriate cultural differences as commodity (Clost, 2011) and perpetuate poverty/voluntourism porn (VolunTourism, n.d.) through the voluntourist gaze (Sink, 2011).

Indeed, the roles of the camera and photographic practices seem ever present in voluntourism even if they may not form central foci of research. Mostafanezhad (2014), for example, raises many illuminating examples of photography in practice in voluntourism:

A 22-year-old German girl motions to her friend, ‘Take my photo!’ as she picks up one of the young girls off the swing. The other women are also taking pictures of the children on the makeshift jungle gym next to the gate … Undoubtedly, these images will become Facebook profile pictures. (p. 111)

Here, Mostafanezhad argues that images produced by such photographic practices become key signifiers in the development industry, where voluntourism proffers an immersive experience into particular parts of the world that is painted as pathetic or helpless. At the same time, through actively photographing the Third World in particular ways, voluntourists perpetuate such images of helplessness. These reinforce the aesthetics of poverty and justify voluntourists’ participation and involvement in development projects in the Third World. Mostafanezhad (2014) further argues that this example reflects the development of the popular humanitarian gaze that co-produces and extends geopolitical discourses of North–South relations through an assemblage of institutions, cultural practices and key actors (see also Guiney and Mostafanezhad, 2015). Van de Ven (2011), for example, noted that her search for photographs in Calcutta forced her to confront how the realities of her experience escaped stereotypical depictions of a chaotic, overpopulated city. In addition, she argued that the sheer complexity of urban life simply could not be reflected in a photograph. This echoed Garlick’s (2002) argument that the tourist must confront the ‘unphotographable’, or the ‘feeling that no matter how you try … somehow you cannot “capture” the experience that you wish to record’ (pp. 299–300). There is the sense that photographs just ‘do not cut it’ – rather, you ‘simply have to be there’ (Scarles, 2009). Accordingly, the photographer must contend with a disjuncture between stereotypical place representations and the heterogeneous realities of place that underlie Massey’s (2004, 2005) call for responsibility.

Drawing on fieldwork in Ladakh, Gillespie (2006) introduces the ‘reverse gaze’ to argue that locals can speak back. The reverse gaze refers to a momentary reversal of photographer–photographed power relations, through a prolonged stare or a questioning look that shames and triggers a ‘moment of repositioning’ in which tourists turn their gaze on themselves to reveal a gap between their idealized self-position and their actual (irresponsible) behaviour as ‘just another tourist’ (Gillespie, 2006: 361). By prompting the tourist to question photography itself, the reverse gaze ‘mediate[s] the emerging tourist self’ (Gillespie, 2006: 347), heightening tourists’ awareness of the claims that locals
might make of them. Similarly, Maoz (2007) argues that the power of the photographer is never complete: rather, the gaze is ‘mutual’ since locals may blatantly refuse to be photographed or insist on payment. Therefore, photography ceases to be uniformly exploitative but can even generate pride for local cultures (Cole, 2007) or livelihood for locals through which a mutually beneficial photographer–photographed relationship premised on fleeting ‘trust, respect and togetherness’ might emerge (Scarles, 2012: 943). In taking the reverse gaze further, this article argues that the unacknowledged surveillance of social media platforms and the increasingly critical stance popular media takes on voluntourism also act as a form of the reverse gaze upon voluntourists. Voluntourists are typically conscious of how their posts on social media are seen by others, whether these are friends and family from home, or locals they have befriended and added as contacts on their social media profiles.

Methodology

This article therefore examines the ways photographic practices are employed in the context of voluntourism, where visual practices are part of embodied dimensions of the self (Crang, 2003; Jokinen and Veijola, 2003). It does so in a multi-methods approach and uses (1) in-depth interviews with 16 voluntourists and (2) an analysis of a satirical Instagram account of a fictitious character, Barbie Savior. It should be noted that while there is indeed great value in studying the interactions and agencies of voluntourists and their hosts while photographs are being taken and produced, the focus of this article looks towards the construction of the Third World experience. As such, it focuses on how photographs are used to represent and relay voluntourists’ experiences, rather than unpick the actual encounter of taking photographs. It is precisely because of such a focus that we used a methodology encompassing interviews with real voluntourists with an analysis of Barbie Savior, a fictitious voluntourist existing online on Instagram and a satirical website. Both real and fictitious characters and representations on social media feature strongly in the creation of imaginative spaces of those considering a voluntouring stint overseas and of existing or past-voluntourists making sense of their encounters and experiences in the Third World. We see representations on social media (both other voluntourists’ and Barbie Savior’s) as part of a cyclical process of informing and then shaping our respondents’ practices and choices on their own social media accounts (see Sin, 2015, for a methodological consideration of including social media in fieldwork). Indeed, framing our methodologies in such an unconventional manner is our way of responding to various calls within the social sciences that have since highlighted that technologically mediated communication (including what individuals view on social media) forms critical elements of our daily life (Hjorth and Kim, 2005) – ‘we need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces, that they happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they cannot escape into a self-enclosed cyberian apartness’ (Miller and Slater, 2000: 5). Individual voluntourists’ decisions on what to post or not, and how to construct and represent their Third World experience, are therefore outcomes of constant negotiation with others’ representations on social media, rather than a linear process of before, during and after their voluntourism experience. As such, Barbie Savior’s account, while fictitious, is viewed as
not entirely separate from other voluntourists’ representations. Instead, it parodies and exaggerates precisely how some voluntourist behave online on social media and serves as a warning to existing voluntourists – on how not to be like Barbie Savior.

For the in-depth interviews, we considered photographs belonging to respondents that were produced prior to their awareness of this research and its agendas, so as to capture knowledge production through photographs in ways that were as non-intrusive as possible. Interviews were conducted from May to September 2013 with 16 undergraduate students located in Singapore who had participated in at least one overseas volunteering project during their enrolment in university. Participants were recruited through snowballing – the second author (S.H.) was part of a larger team of students from the National University of Singapore on a volunteer trip to Cambodia in 2012. From this team of 25 students, she recruited seven initial participants to join this research. To ensure that experiences discussed are not limited to the specific situations of one particular group of students, we then extended the recruitment to include the S.H.’s peers also in university at the time of the research and asked whether they or their friends were interested and able to participate in this research. To maintain some consistency in the contexts of their volunteering, all participants were then enrolled in university in Singapore and involved in team-based volunteering (ranging from 20 to 30 students in a team) in Southeast Asia (13 volunteered in Cambodia, 2 in Vietnam and 1 in the Philippines). The volunteering done was mostly construction or building refurbishment projects, although elements of teaching English and organizing children’s games and activities were also common in each volunteers’ experience. Respondents were aged between 21 and 25 years and include seven males and nine females.

Participants were asked to share photographs that they took during their overseas volunteering trip. All research participants then directed the researcher to the photographs that were accessible via their personal Facebook accounts (photographs either uploaded by themselves or linked to the participants by other Facebook users). At least six participants offered their Instagram accounts as the second-most-used social media platform for the uploading of their volunteering photographs. By browsing and talking about respondents’ photographs, it was highlighted to us that photographs can elicit emotional and corporeal experiences that were vital in how respondents constructed their Third World experiences. Respondents were given pseudonyms, fully informed of the purposes of the study prior to granting access to their photos and briefed about how photographic images will be used in this research project. Permission was also sought and obtained from owners of all photographic images presented within this article.

Original, higher-resolution photographs, where available, were sought from respondents with their permission to be included in this article. A number of respondents, however, told us that they did not retain soft copies of their photographs, and whatever was posted on their Facebook accounts and shared with us at the point of the interview were the only copies they had of their photographs. Thus, some of the photographs in this article are slightly pixelated as they are screen-captured from Facebook pages. This in itself reflects the critical role of social media platforms like Facebook in representing and retaining experiences in travel and voluntourism.

Anecdotes derived from interviews were then compared against an analysis of the Instagram account, Barbie Savior. Barbie Savior is a fictitious character created to
parody and question critically what voluntourists and mission workers do in the Third World. It is important to include Barbie Savior in our analysis, not simply because of the viral status of this character (Barbie Savior had 122,000 followers in June 2017 at the time of analysis. Most Instagram posts receive an excess of 3000 likes and 100 comments), but also because it clearly shows the role of humour and satire in pitching ethical considerations in voluntourism. This is especially relevant to the discussion in the final section on voluntourists who deliberately avoid posting photos of their voluntourist experiences on social media platforms. The actual analysis of Barbie Savior is framed around a semantic scrutiny of the political rhetoric (Lees, 2004) presented on the Instagram account. Barbie Savior’s posts are evaluated to highlight the issues typically represented, and their contents are compared with how such posts are framed in other stereotypical accounts of tourism in Africa, development work and mission work. Barbie Savior had a total of 107 pictures posted in June 2017 at the time of analysis, and those represented in this article are selected because they are directly relevant to constructions of Barbie Savior’s encounters especially with the ‘Third World Child’ and are also among posts that were ‘liked’ the most times on Instagram.

One important observation is that while Barbie Savior adopts the positionality of a young, White female voluntouring in Africa, respondents in our interviews are instead Singaporean, mostly ethnically Chinese, reflecting on their experiences of voluntourism within the Southeast-Asian context. The physical and cultural distance between our interview respondents as voluntourists and the indigenous people they have met is perhaps closer than that represented in Barbie Savior. Indeed, the optics of photos taken and posted by our respondents are perhaps less jarring – at times, it can be difficult to identify immediately who were the volunteers and who were the locals since both parties have similar skin tones and hair colour. While our interviews missed out on an important opportunity to systematically ask all respondents about whether they thought this made a difference in their voluntourist experience and photo-taking/posting endeavours, students in classes taught by the first author (H.L.S.; outside of this research) have often responded to the Barbie Savior representation by denying that their own practices in volunteering overseas are associated with being the ‘White Savior’. A common response is that unlike Barbie Savior, they certainly cannot be guilty of being the ‘White Savior’ because they are not ‘White’. Inherent in such responses are the assumed cultural sensitivities of being ‘Asian like their hosts’. This is indeed an intriguing stand to have, and while we do not have space within this article to fully explore this, how such a starting point for volunteer or voluntourist affects what happens on the ground is an important consideration perhaps worthy of a separate research project and paper altogether (see also Baillie Smith et al., 2018; Sin, 2010).

**Posting, looking, remembering**

During the interviews, the simple question ‘what did you do to your photographs upon returning home?’ elicited a wealth of responses that highlighted what respondents ‘do’ to photographs, among which online sharing on Facebook surfaced as the most common. For the respondents, Facebook is a convenient site due to its function that allows uploading large numbers of photographs and options to sort photographs into different albums.
Other functions such as the tagging, captioning and placing of comments or descriptions onto photos augment the dynamism of Facebook as a photo-sharing social media platform. Elsewhere, a study on Travelpod.com proposed blogs as alternative research platforms where travel photographs are shared with online users with similar travel interests (Vrana and Zafiropoulo, 2010). However, as Sink (2011) suggests (and with which we agree), voluntourists are primarily motivated to upload photographs for the purposes of sharing with teammates and updating friends and family members, rather than to inform other volunteer tourists or public online users of their own experiences. The constructions of their (Third World) experiences in voluntourism are thus framed by such intents and are hence rarely a comprehensive review of what they saw or felt. Some photos were uploaded with long reflective captions, while yet others were posted with no comments. Respondents were often keenly aware of the audience of their posts, and many said that they were more willing to share personal details or thoughts on Facebook without thinking too much about how it would be seen since viewers were likely to be friends and family.

As we browsed through Facebook photographs with respondents, various key trends regarding their photographic preferences emerged. Respondents were motivated to capture ‘differences in how things are run’ (Veron, interview, 2013) or ‘natural things that you won’t get to see in Singapore’ (Betricia, interview, 2013), echoing common attributes of tourists collecting places (Timothy, 1998) or sights of differences (Desforges, 1998). Perhaps, what stood out the most were the appearances of children from host communities in a significant number of photographs. Other photographs captured candid moments (Betricia, interview, 2013) or monumental accomplishments of volunteer work (Nathan, interview, 2013). By considering how and why photographs were uploaded on to Facebook, we were able to glimpse how volunteer tourists use photographs as visual objects to curate particular negotiations and authorships of their selves.

A focus on pictorial-editing of Facebook photos highlights particularly how some respondents do this to curate and re-experience their memories of voluntourism. Lily, for example, pointed us towards how her captions and pictorial-editing was an effort to ‘try to put a meaning’ into an edited image (Figures 1 and 2) that she uploaded first on Instagram and then reposted onto Facebook:

I used Instagram to make the photo very retro-looking. It was [at the right moment] that I caught that angle … very cute. Three happy kids with a simple bike, and grass fields, and the sky is blue … Specific photos like this one – it’s being taken out of context. You have to put in the meaning yourself … your caption explains the meaning you want to put into the photo.

Lily’s edited and captioned photo illuminates on her conscious attempt to re-construct the image through inter-textual means by engaging with her imaginations of village childhood experiences. By using what she called a ‘retro filter’, Lily highlighted how the photo at once represented the carefree innocence of the children captured and a nostalgia towards her own childhood, even though she reminded us that she never grew up in similar settings. Along the same vein, Wendy guided us to Figure 3 and highlighted her encounters with the ‘nature’ that she recognizes cannot be located back home, ‘I like these kind of rare interactions that you know you don’t usually get in Singapore … I like the tree photos. Because, you know, you can’t climb trees in Singapore’.
Lily and Wendy’s accounts echo previous works on the photographic gaze as being guided by internalized dominant narratives associated with particular tourist places or experiences, in turn completing the hermeneutic cycle of visual travel consumption (Edensor, 1998; Urry, 1990). The images that they captured held up and expressed their expectations of rural village life, nature and the associated freedoms from stressful demands of urban living.

Figure 1. Lily’s untitled photograph (2012). Reproduced with the permission of the photographer.

Figure 2. Lily’s edited photograph, captioned as ‘童年’ (Childhood years in Chinese) (2012). Reproduced with the permission of the photographer.
As the interview process sheds light on the mundane, commonsensical and fundamentally corporeal practices revealed in these online photographs, it also confirms most accounts of photo-based research that images sharpen memory. Mickey, for example, had used the following photograph (Figure 4) as her Facebook cover image because it was one of the more ‘memorable moments’ of her experience while voluntouring. After a paper-folding activity, the children were gathered outside with their paper airplanes, and a voluntourist counted down ‘3, 2, 1’ in Khmer for the children to release their airplanes at the same time. There were at least three volunteer tourists other than Mickey holding their cameras or smartphones waiting to capture this particular moment. Mickey noted that she was not the only person who had uploaded a photograph of this activity onto her Facebook, and that she had been tagged in several other versions. She elaborates,

Figure 3. Wendy’s photograph (2012).
Reproduced with the permission of the photographer.

Figure 4. Mickey’s photograph (2012).
Reproduced with the permission of the photographer.
Oh my god! The release aeroplanes part. You know? Everybody folded an airplane and they just release and it’s like ‘whoooooooo’. Paper airplanes! And they were so happy! Oh my god. Seriously touching. Paper airplanes. It’s not even an awesome plane. Just a folded [one].

As in Snee’s account of gap year tourists, Mickey’s choice of highlighting this photo and her narrative of this activity highlighted how local interaction is generally viewed to be ‘a positive experience: a privileged insight into a different place’ (Snee, 2013: 154). Such posts relate not only the voluntourists’ cognizance of the differences between their own privilege and the children’s joy and simplistic satisfaction of playing with paper airplanes. They also underscore a positioning of voluntourists entering the ‘real life’ of local people and in doing so allowing them to move beyond touristic relationships.

Mickey was not alone in verbally expressing awe and inspiration from her interactions with the children in voluntourism. Responses such as ‘they look so happy’ (Betricia, interview, 2013) or ‘they are just very innocent’ (Wendy, interview, 2013) often surface when respondents recalled their encounters with children in voluntourism. These responses are strikingly similar to the ‘poor but happy’ tales reflected by some Western youth volunteer tourists in empirical research (Crossley, 2012; Simpson, 2004) and are indeed the subject of scrutiny and satire in Barbie Savior that we will look into in the next section. Elsewhere, the portrayal of Third World children has come under scrutiny and criticism, where images of suffering to prompt emotional responses and action such as donations (Campbell, 2004; Voluntary Service Overseas, 2002), have been condemned. Save the Children’s guidelines (1991, emphasis in original), for example, compel photographers thus: ‘Do not show children as helpless victims – e.g. closely cropped pictures of children with sad eyes looking up to the camera. We should be truthful not sentimental’. The portrayal of ‘poor but happy’ children on respondents’ Facebook posts could be reflective of an aversion towards painting children in host communities as powerless and passive.

Respondents sometimes expressed feelings of being inept in describing their own emotions as they pinpointed particular photos. Gregory recounted his favourite encounter (also with children), describing the children who kept posing for the camera as ‘very friendly, so simple minded’. However, when it came to questions like ‘How do you feel about this photo?’, Gregory’s response ‘Uhh … Happy? I don’t know …’ suggested that emotional effects of photographs are often difficult to (re)present in words (Rose, 2016). Griffiths’ (2015) work on affect in voluntourists’ experiences is particularly useful to consider here:

Anna and Ben evoke connections with other people in a similar way where understandings emerge through a passing of laughter between bodies and Alison’s ‘acceptance’ is something she comes to feel via the communicative capacities of the face. The cumulative account is one of sensorial experience, implying that an important part of volunteering and global citizenship plays out on a corporeal level. (p. 214)

Central to our work is an acknowledgement that while photographs remain important as visual representations of voluntourists’ experiences, in reality, they are much more than that. Photographs elicit memories of emotional responses that are often difficult to
express in words. Posting these photographs on social media represents both an attempt to capture and re-present such corporeal and sensorial experiences in the Third World and photographs’ innate limitations and inability of doing precisely so.

Satire and the Internet – Barbie Savior

The capturing and posting of photos on social media by voluntourists is not something that has gone unnoticed by a wider public. In recent years, numerous critiques have surfaced online, and a search on the term ‘voluntourism’ on Google in June 2017 yielded six critical posts among the first page of 10 sites. Most of these articles highlighted the power disparities between voluntourists and voluntoured locals and posed pertinent questions of whether voluntourism does in fact bring about any benefits for communities hosting and receiving voluntourists. Alongside the emergence of academic articles critically evaluating voluntourism/volunteer tourism, articles, opinion editorials and blogs online have also suggested that voluntourism in fact replicates colonial relationships and benefits voluntourists far more than the voluntoured. While this most directly addresses issues encountered in voluntourism, articles on The Onion website, like the one cited at the start of this article, and the ‘Barbie Savior’ Instagram account, effectively uses humour and satire to make fun of common behaviours of voluntourists. ‘Barbie Savior’ captures this succinctly (Figure 5) — ‘liked’ by 4785 other Instagram users in June 2017 at the time of research, since it was posted on June 2016, this post features a picture of Barbie Savior approaching a young, Black child, with a backdrop of a half-constructed building. Accompanying the post is a seemingly emotional text recounting ‘the experience’, a parody of what is often represented by voluntourists and humanitarian celebrities in their encounters with children in the Third World (Mostafanezhad, 2013). And
perhaps more enlightening about the strange, complex and contradictory positions many have with voluntourism is the series of hashtags that follow. Some of the hashtags give clear instructions revealing Barbie Savior’s real stand against voluntourism and orphanage tourism. Others, however, continue to suggest in an almost post-tourist (Fiefer, 1986) manner, the subjective acceptance and blasé celebration of encounters of poverty and the Third World through voluntourism – where children with real names and identities become subsumed within the landscape of the voluntourist projecting his or her care and generosity.

Among other trends Barbie Savior identifies (e.g. on conservation works with wildlife or the representation of Africa in (volun)tourism), the theme of representing children is repeated yet again in another post (Figure 6). Here, the post plays on the tension between how voluntourism is at once criticized for reducing orphan children to nothing but numbers while claiming to respect their individual identities and life stories. Hashtags such as #theyaremorethannumbers are juxtaposed with #buttheyaremostlynumbers. This highlights a fundamental disconnect between what voluntourism was intended to achieve and what it is now criticized to be. As early scholars argued, voluntourism was envisioned as a type of tourism that was sensitive and ethical and a shift away from the ills of mass tourism (McGehee and Santos, 2005; Wearing, 2001). Critiques in media like Barbie Savior suggest a range between a nagging suspicion to an outright critique that despite its noble claims, the orphans or other locals voluntourism supposedly celebrates and respects are instead just mostly numbers. In a series of strongly worded tweets, J.K. Rowling (2016), author of the Harry Potter books, commented,

The #voluntourism charity tells volunteers that they will be able to ‘play and interact’ with children ‘in desperate need of affection.’
#Voluntourism is one of drivers of family break up in very poor countries. It incentivises ‘orphanages’ that are run as businesses.

The charity I have just been asked to support offers (doubtless well-intentioned) Westerners ‘volunteer experiences’ in child institutions.

Seen against the previous section on voluntourists’ photographic practices on social media then, Barbie Savior, and other voices like J.K. Rowling, profoundly question not only whether voluntourism is a viable space to right the wrongs of the world at large but also whether representations of the Third World by voluntourists are at all responsible. Assumptions and representations of the ‘poor but happy children’ or the ability of voluntourists in ‘bringing happiness to the Third World’ as seen in Mickey and Wendy’s accounts are questioned. Stories like the one Mickey shared about children’s joy in flying paper airplanes become objects of suspicion. This is not to say that Mickey’s experience was not real or valid. Yet, when voluntourists make such representations of the Third World on their social media platforms, we have to ask difficult questions on whether this is self-celebratory voluntourism or a voluntourism that favours aesthetics, rather than a voluntourism that sees children for what they really are.

‘I am just not a photo type person’

Putting Barbie Savior side by side with real voluntourists’ practices in their photo-taking and photo-posting therefore highlights the emergence of a reverse gaze on voluntourists, reflecting the increased awareness and surveillance on online social media platforms. This is particularly evident in types of behaviour previously taken for granted as benign when voluntourism was accepted and celebrated as a positive phenomenon. A direct response to the critique represented by Barbie Savior is a point of differentiation made among some respondents in this research – not all respondents relate to their memories or experiences of photographs taken and posted online with intensity or enthusiasm. In the light of the increasing criticism towards particular practices of voluntourists, some respondents showed heightened sensibilities over photographic practices. Rachel, for instance, often paused in silence because she simply could not ‘connect’ with the photos that she had taken, some of which she had posted online. She had no favourite photo that captured any memorable moment and did not pick any to talk about unless questions were asked. Rachel then spoke up:

> What do you want me to say? [laughter] I don’t know why I took these photos … and to me, it’s just … like that. A few months after [my trip] I looked through my photos. But now, not really’.  
> (Interview, 2013)

Rachel’s disposition was echoed by Edward, who said that ‘photographs are not essential for me, but it’d be nice to have a few’ (interview, 2013). Winnie recalled the frustration she felt with her teammates who ‘took so many photos of the same things … all at the same time, that they weren’t living the moment’ (interview, 2013). Lydia and Wendy both point out the impracticalities of taking photographs during some activities such as construction
building and other chores. These accounts seem to contradict the conventional narrative of photography being a common attribute of voluntouristic behaviour. Indeed, photographs taken by voluntourists have the potential to raise questions about the notions of power and visual discourse that often revolve around photographic practices. To Scarles (2009), the act of photography as a performance itself is open to negotiation by the self, thus ‘where some experience extreme discomfort and unease, others experience comfort in practice’ (p. 476). In the same vein, conversations with some respondents suggested that voluntourists exude reflexivities or concerns with the ethics of photography to varying degrees. Heightened sensibilities or reflexivities may develop more for voluntourists who have been informed about or exposed to the moral debates revolving travel photography (and online posting). For example, Betricia and Nathan reflected that they only became more conscious of their behaviour when taking photographs after personnel from affiliated NGOs ‘told [us] to ask the kids for permission before taking photographs, which made [us] think of [the issue]’ (Betricia, interview, 2013).

Referring to a group photo with children holding framed polaroid photographs in their hands (Figure 7), Madalene explained her concerns and demonstrated her inability to resolve her dilemma:

We wanted to do some crafts … and we invested in some polaroids because I think it’s something lasting for them. So we did this photo frame thing … Years down the road when they see these photos, what will they think? I’m not sure, up till now. I don’t have an answer. I don’t know if it is good, or whether it’s worse off.

Jayden also recounted how he had not been well-attuned to the various debates about photography and volunteer tourism. However, after an opportunity to work within the Singaporean organization, Children-At-Risk Empowerment Association, Jayden expressed his dissatisfaction as he browsed through with us some photographs to which he had been ‘tagged’ (interview, 2013). Narratives from Madalene and Jayden suggest that photographs’ visual qualities serve as ethical prompts which in turn ‘demand an emotional and committed sense of other to ensure responsiveness to the complexity of
human plurality’ (Scarles, 2009: 475). Therefore, although the narratives of ‘poor but happy’ encounters may imply that voluntourists tend to harness their emotions to trivialize and romanticize impoverishment upon their return back home, Jayden and Madalene’s narratives give a fresh perspective to the dynamism of emotions. This in turn opens up subjective negotiations of the self in reflections on personal sensibilities regarding travel photography and photographs. To assume that voluntourists are naively unaware of the contradictions and critiques of their representations of the Third World is perhaps to miss the point entirely. The desire to engage with the Third World, or to know the Third World, remains a strong rhetoric in numerous areas – youth development, cosmopolitanism, education and so on. And there is indeed value in encouraging privileged people to consider the lives and well-being of those beyond their immediate circles (Massey, 2005). The question that remains therefore is how one can do so while opening up conversations on the problematic portrayals of the Third World. And how we can acknowledge the complex negotiations and emotions voluntourists may encounter – in their fears of being just like Barbie Savior and their attempts to be nothing like Barbie Savior.

Conclusion

Photographs are not a means to an end, nor are they mere ‘containers within which the world proceeds’ (Thrift, 2003: 96). By approaching photography as a series of practices that extends and continues into the everyday, this article has sought to show that touristic practices linger and affect the returning voluntourist beyond the hermeneutic cycle of travel, where by extension, photography becomes an encompassing series of corporeal performances. On one hand, the detailing of various ‘doings’ with online photographs, such as the sharing of photographs on Facebook, enables voluntourists to develop authorships of the self and their experiences in the Third World through trivial tasks such as uploading, ‘tagging’, editing and captioning of photos. On the other hand, this research highlights respondents’ tendencies to point out photographs that include the children in their host communities, adding worded responses that showcase their adoration or awe for these ‘simple’ and ‘happy’ children. However, affectual studies on volunteer tourism by Conran (2011) and Crossley (2012) have thus far used intimacy and emotions, respectively, to bemoan that affect has been appropriated as a ‘force’ to trivialize poverty. This article therefore juxtaposed real voluntourists’ postings and reflections with the parodied representations of Barbie Savior. Using satire, Barbie Savior seeks to lampoon some forms of volunteerism which, through the exercise of care and emotion, risk the trivialization of poverty. The emergence of online media material critiquing and making fun of voluntourists’ behaviour in the Third World then creates a separate sphere in which such behaviour becomes governed and sanctioned, so that voluntourists perhaps become more cautious of appearing to be ‘like Barbie Savior’. This is reflected in how some respondents engaged with their photographs with more enthusiasm than others, while others proclaim that they are in fact ‘just not a photo type person’. The critical stance taken towards voluntouristic behaviour therefore becomes a self-governing mechanism against how one should behave in encountering the Third World, even as voluntourism itself continues to be seen as a viable way of caring for the Third World. What then becomes of voluntourism in a time when online critiques from Barbie Savior and J.K. Rowling have become the norm? Is
voluntourism eventually just a fad that is now over its prime? Or would the form of ‘touring the world and doing good’ prevail in a manner that is now more sensitive to the dignities of the the locals they encounter? Indeed, further research is needed to examine how online critiques influence practices on the ground – and also to consider, what are the spin-offs of voluntourism that we need to also look at even though they may no longer or was never named as voluntourism precisely because of such critiques. How does the rich body of research literature on voluntourism that has emerged over the past two decades relate to numerous fields of tourism and international volunteering?

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Notes

1. The term the ‘Third World’ and the binaries set up between the First World and Third World are acknowledged to controversial as these reflect geopolitical situations that have since evolved and is perhaps no longer relevant since the time such terms first emerged as framed along the Cold War. This article, however, continues to use this term precisely because while the term the ‘Third World’ is a dated one, it is still used loosely among voluntourists interviewed. It also relates this article to the critiques of problematic accounts of the ‘Third World Child’ in popular humanitarian aid (Campbell, 2004; Mostafanezhad, 2014). We use the ‘Third World’ beyond its Cold War context – where it is popularly misregarded as ‘meaning the countries in the “Third World” were in third place’ (Willis, 2011: 16) often in the economic sense or in terms of material well-being. Framing the paper using this is therefore a deliberate act to immediately highlight the power play inherent in voluntourism (Sin, 2010; Snee, 2013).

2. It is important to acknowledge that there is a gap between the time in which respondents were interviewed in this research (2013) and when Barbie Savior became popular online and was then included for analysis (2017). However, we are of the opinion that if we were to repeat the interviews with another set of voluntourists today, after Barbie Savior has seen immense following online, our arguments about satirical spaces and online critiques acting as a form of governance towards real voluntourist will be even more relevant. It is unfortunate that we are unable to do so given limitations in time and resources and would encourage other researchers to take out further research that critically evaluates such trends.

3. The terminology of tagging refers to a function provided by Facebook which allows users to create web links that notify tagged Facebook users about particular photographs.

5. Orphanage tourism itself has come under scrutiny in recent years. Tourism Concern mounted a campaign in 2013 to question the abuses vulnerable children have had to live with in orphanage tourism that was then gaining popularity. The Australian government has also openly addressed their role in perpetuating the problematic orphanage tourism, recognizing that ‘Australians are among the top donors for such orphanages, driving up a demand for these institutions’ (Guilbert, 2018; see also Guiney, 2018, for a comprehensive study of orphanage tourism in Cambodia).

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