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“Doing it for the 'gram”? The representational politics of popular humanitarianism

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how digital photography – the practice of taking pictures and sharing them via social media – can give rise to representational politics. These politics are pronounced when disadvantaged people and places are the objects of digital representation, as they become (dis)empowered by being implicated in the affective economy of difference. Empirically, we examine the representational practices that Singaporean voluntourists, and companies that organise overseas humanitarian projects, engage in. We highlight how their motivations for engaging with these projects can be obfuscated by the opportunity to generate influence on Instagram, which can then shape the practice of popular humanitarianism. In particular, it can cause encounters with difference to be (cu)rated, influence to be (re)produced, and representation to therefore be (de)valued.

KEYWORDS

Digital photography, popular humanitarianism, affective economy of difference, Instagram, Singapore

Introduction

Photography was once understood to be a representational practice through which people and places were captured and revealed according to asynchronous space-time logics. Over the past decade, however, the proliferation of smartphones, social media and digital connectivity has transformed this understanding. Digital photography has become a more ubiquitous, synchronous, relational and self-oriented representational practice that has helped to ‘complicat[e] simple models of subject and object, representation and reality, image and process’ (M. Crang, 1997, p. 366). By considering the effects of digital photography on the representation of the self and/to others, this paper brings discourses of popular humanitarianism into conversation with the digitally mediated lives that many of us now lead. No longer does participation in volunteer tourism, for example, necessarily involve being disconnected from home, friends or family. Rather, pervasive digital connectivity now means that the terms by which volunteer tourists engage with, and represent, difference to and through their social networks are increasingly structured by digital logics. In turn, digital structuring has caused these representations of difference to become more nuanced, complex and fraught constructs. With these ideas in mind, this paper updates H.L. Sin’s (2009) interrogation of the real value of volunteer tourism by bringing the question of who benefits from popular humanitarianism into conversation with the digital worlds within which humanitarian actors are now implicated. Accordingly, it develops the themes raised by H.L. Sin (2009) – such as what motivates participation in humanitarian projects, how the humanitarian self is performed, and the tensions and paradoxes that emerge in response – through an exploration of the new representational politics of popular humanitarianism. Indeed, given

that research into these politics 'remains relatively thin' (H.L. Sin & He, 2018, p. 5), this paper can be read as a timely contribution to the discourse.

Our argument is that the representational logics of digital photography increasingly shape the motivations for engaging with, and practices of, popular humanitarianism. Popular humanitarianism encompasses a range of encounters and interventions that people have with relatively disadvantaged people and places. These include participating in volunteering and community service projects, and related practices of marketing, fundraising and project administration as well. Whilst these projects can be domestically oriented, we focus specifically on their overseas dimensions. Encounters with the development differential, and with difference more generally, are arguably more pronounced overseas, meaning actors are more inclined to record and share their experiences photographically. "Actors" is used in a broad sense to include both individuals that participate in humanitarian projects (in particular, volunteer tourists, or voluntourists), as well as those working for organisations that organise and administer such projects. For these actors, the intersection of humanitarianism and photography is problematic, as the altruistic impulses of humanitarianism can reproduce a dialectic of (dis)empowerment through photographic representation. Further complicating this dialectic is the fact that practices of digital photography encourage humanitarian actors to reproduce a 'transnational cultural logic' (M. Mostafanezhad, 2014a, p. 2) that can cause genuine concern for disadvantaged others to be obfuscated by the connectivity, and, therefore, the opportunity for self-realisation, that the digital provides. Digital connectivity causes the categories of subject and object to take on expanded meaning that includes not just the relations between photographer and photographed, but also the relations between the photographer and their geographically dispersed social networks. Indeed, when humanitarian actors respond to the aesthetic demands of their social networks, the 'conceptual and methodological emphasis on a time-bound individual' (Laurie & Baillie Smith, 2018, p. 99; see also Woods, 2020c) is substituted with more relational understandings of the networked humanitarian instead.

Alongside the expansion of meaning that the digital gives rise to comes the dissolution of boundaries and the reworking of power from an actor-oriented perspective. This constitutes a specific type of "popular humanitarian gaze", which seeks to 'reframe contemporary humanitarianism as an empathetic gesture of commoditized concern' (M. Mostafanezhad, 2014b, p. 111). The pervasive nature of digital photography means that more people are able to engage in these gestures: through the taking and sharing of humanitarian-inspired images, and also through the consumption of, participation in, and responsiveness to the reproduction of online content. These gestures contribute to the emergence of an "affective economy of difference" that is used to attract the attention of (dispersed, and distracted) audiences, and to augment the social positioning of the digitally networked self. It is through digital representation, then, that difference evolves from being an absolutely defined, to a relationally defined, category of interpretation, understanding and value. In turn, affect is an outcome of how audiences relate to these digitally mediated representations of difference. Indeed, the psycho-spatial distance, coupled with the social relativism of digital media foregrounds the need for content creators to reproduce difference in ways that maximise these affective relations. Practices like these cause humanitarian narratives of empathetic concern to become morally implicated in, and inflected by, the structuring logics of the digital. By minimising the barriers to access and dialogue, digital representations help to democratise participation in issues of humanitarian interest. More problematic, however, is the fact that they can also cause these issues to be co-opted into the reproduction of the online self (M. Mostafanezhad, 2013a, 2013b). To the extent, then, that digital representation serves to expand popular humanitarianism, so too does it foreground its ongoing politicisation.

These dynamics are pronounced in Singapore, which is home to the humanitarian actors that provide the empirical insights upon which this paper is based. In Singapore, community service is prescribed by the education system and has recently started to intersect with the representational practices of young Singaporeans on social media. These practices are interesting and unique for two reasons. One, they sidestep the normative understandings of power implicated in postcolonial/north-south development discourses, whilst simultaneously reconfiguring them in alternative ways. Two, complicating these reproductions is the unique role of the digital, which is used as a channel through which influence – both personal and organisational – is (re)produced. In Singapore, then, as much as practices of popular humanitarianism have become structurally embedded within the education system, so too have young Singaporeans started to harness these practices in order to curate and enhance their social media profiles. In doing so, popular humanitarianism is increasingly implicated in the new representational politics of "doing it for the 'gram", which, in some cases, can be seen to reflect and reproduce a 'narcissistic disposition of voyeuristic altruism rather than commitment to the humanitarian cause' (L. Chouliaraki, 2012, p. 1). We develop these arguments through three sections. The first considers how practices of digital photography intersect with the (mis)representation of self and other, and how these (mis)representations in turn serve to reproduce an affective economy of difference. The second introduces the empirical context of Singapore, and the methodology. The third is empirical, and explores how the affective economy of difference can cause digitally mediated representational practices to become more morally ambiguous constructs.

Digital shifts and the (mis)representation of self and others

Digital technologies have had a profound effect on the visual representation of the self and/to other(s). They expand the possibilities of visual representation, as a camera (phone) is nearly always within reach, and photos can easily be shared with geographically dispersed social networks. According to Crang (2011, p. 402), this means that 'we may have to decenter the human within an internet of things that produce a technological form of life' Decentering causes the individual to become a networked, and thus relational, entity, which in turn has ramifications for the ways in which difference is represented in and through the saturated visual marketplace of digital media. Difference becomes a relationally defined construct that can be reproduced, or even exploited, for individual gain. These reproductions are most problematic when used in the service of humanitarian practice.

Whilst the basic motivating principle of humanitarianism is to “do good” by doing things that are designed to improve humanity, this principle has become increasingly obfuscated through its everyday appropriations. These appropriations started to gain traction in the 1990s, with the emergence of the “suffering subject” (L. Chouliaraki, 2006; Ticktin, 2014), and the coining of the term “popular humanitarianism”. Recently, however, they have come under critical scrutiny, with voluntourism becoming a practice of particular concern (M. Mostafanezhad, 2014a, 2014b; Richey, 2016; H.L. Sin, 2009, 2010). Indeed, Mostafanezhad (2013c, p. 150) even suggests that ‘volunteer tourism perpetuates an aesthetic structure that systematically depoliticises the global economic inequality on which the experience is based’. Voluntourism has thus been criticised for becoming a cultural practice that contributes to the aestheticisation, rather than problematisation, of poverty. Digital photography exacerbates this aestheticisation by foregrounding the emergence of representational practices that are responsive to the demands of digitally networked market-places for images.

Problematising visual representation in a digital age

The hegemony of the visual has long been recognised as a product of the media-saturated world in which we now live. Saturation has caused visual media to become the foremost semiotic code through which the world is received, interpreted and understood. In turn, visual media have helped to galvanise popular interest in the world and its representations, but also, paradoxically, to suppress the critical faculties needed to identify injustices and enact change. In other words, we have become so distracted by visual representations that we lose sight of what they are doing to us, and our engagements with global (in)justice. Chouliaraki (2006, p. 54–55, original emphasis) reiterates this sentiment in a slightly different way, observing how ‘questions of ‘how things should look’ seem to be more important today than questions of ‘how things are’... or ‘how things should be’, with technology in particular being seen to ‘transform the nature of media discourse in ways that thoroughly fictionalize reality and cancel the demand for action on the world’. The technologies of visual reproduction create distance between the observer and the observed, which can then result in the distortion of the realities of everyday life. This has contributed to the world being represented as a series of spectacles in which ‘everything that was directly lived is now merely represented in the distance’ (Debord, 2002, p. 4). In turn, this leads to the creation of separate pseudoworlds that audiences can engage with in distinctly voyeuristic ways, but never really become part of, or act within. This dynamic – of the technologies of representation serving to visually connect us to, but emotionally distance us from, suffering – reproduces a paradox of representation, whereby:

on the one hand, pity derives its force from the heart-breaking spectacles of human suffering, which are made available for all to witness as potential benefactors; on the other hand, by virtue of the gap between zones of vulnerability and Western publics, these spectacles of suffering simultaneously separate those who watch at a distance from those who act on the spot
[(L. Chouliaraki, 2012, p. 2)]

The dialectic of ‘watch[ing] at a distance’ and ‘act[ing] on the spot’ is, however, problematised both in the context of volunteer tourism, and through consideration of its digital mediations. Whilst tourism involves, by definition, overcoming distance and encountering difference, the volunteering aspect foregrounds an implicit desire to act. Volunteer tourism collapses these categories, serving to overcome, but also to reinforce, the dialectic that Chouliaraki evokes. Furthermore, the use of digital (re)production technologies in documenting the experiences of voluntourists foregrounds new types of representational practice. Social media platforms put the producers of images into direct contact with consumers, thus enabling consumers to provide feedback on the images and, by extension, the producers’ photographs in almost real time. In doing so, they create a sense of networked connectivity that positions the photographer at the ‘intersection of gazes’ (M. Crang, 1997, p. 361). Synchronous connectivity can thus be seen to stretch, compress and otherwise distort these gazes through the disruptive space-times of the digital. Over time, these practices have evolved in response to the demands of the market (or people’s followers, or consumers of their content), which in turn can fundamentally alter both the experience of voluntourism, and the encounters with difference therein. Echoing this sentiment, Sin and He (2018, p. 7) recently observed that posting images on social media platforms is part of the ‘cyclical process of informing and then shaping’ the ways in which users engage with themselves, with others, and with the world around them. Digital photography can therefore be seen to encourage more self-serving forms of representation, which can influence the ways in which voluntourists engage with, represent and benefit (or not) disadvantaged others.

Representational “value” and the affective economy of difference

Social media have brought about both an expansion and dilution of the ways in which difference is represented in and to the world. Expansion means that more people can now be reached at greater speed and lower cost than ever before. Dilution means that audiences live in content-saturated worlds in which difference is moderated by the volume of content available to them. Social media therefore cause the terms of mediation to be both democratised, but also inflected by the logics of the visual marketplace within which content creators and consumers are embroiled. As the representation of difference becomes commoditised, so too can it reflect ‘people’s *estrangement* from each other and from everything they produce’ (Debord, 2002, p. 6, original emphasis). With this in mind, the potential for social media to recentre the self, coupled with the peripheralisation brought about by the self being so intimately networked with their followers, causes the representational *value* of suffering to be reimagined. This reimagination is captured in Richey’s (2016, p. 398) study of Tinder Humanitarians, which reveals how ‘suffering strangers’ are

represented in ways that 'attempt to enhance the appeal of western image producers' who are looking for a partner. As suggested here, such images have become so consistent in their semiotic codes that they have been depoliticised to the extent that they are now used to promote, or otherwise add value to, the representation of the altruistic self to potential partners. This depoliticisation is indexed to the ubiquity of the narrative, and the extent to which more people can participate in it through the digitally mediated production and consumption of an affective economy of difference.

The affective economy of difference reflects the fact that the creators of digital content – which today includes almost *all* digitally engaged individuals – must find new, and implicitly more affective, ways to reach out to geographically dispersed, and visually distracted, audiences. Whilst media saturation has caused suffering to become a personalised commodity to be 'worked on and recast' (Cohen, 2001, p. 169), representational value is indexed to the extent to which content creators are able to reproduce difference, leverage affect, and thus capture the attention of audiences. Affect helps create a sense of emotional proximity to otherwise distant causes and beneficiaries. As Manzo (2008, p. 637) observes, 'the mass media and NGOs alike have been widely criticised for using such images [of suffering] to prompt emotional responses in readers and viewers... as a means to elicit donations and capture attention'. Social media platforms provide the connectivity needed for this sense of emotional proximity to be further enhanced through more direct and immediate forms of engagement with beneficiaries. These platforms provide 'digital humanitarian avenues of entry' (Burns, 2019, p. 1101) that can be seen to reproduce feelings of emotional closeness to beneficiaries; in turn, they create a sense of legitimacy, and thus provide the impetus for help to be extended to otherwise distant others. Practices like these are one aspect of what Burns (2019, p. 1101) terms 'digital humanitarianism', which is based on the logic of 'de-politicis[ing] the exploitation of marginalised communities' through the consumption of relationally defined representations of difference. Yet, whilst these practices have enabled humanitarianism to be practiced over ever-greater distances, they do not necessarily translate into more efficacious, or altruistic, practices. Sometimes, they can obscure the motivation to "do good" for others by privileging the opportunity to do good for the cultivation of the (online) self.

As indicated above, these practices of reproducing representational value by leveraging the affective economy of difference are further heightened through the practice of voluntourism. To the extent that voluntourism involves embedding the self in new forms of difference that go beyond the banality of the everyday, it offers ample opportunities for self-realisation, augmentation and elevation. Taking this point further, Goodman (2011, p. 82) has identified the emergence of the "celebrity-consumption-compassion-complex" that underpins the emergence of development celebrities that use social media to 'facilitate the[ir] "expertise" and "authenticity"' by participating in, documenting, and sharing online 'poverty tours, photoshoots, textual and visual diaries, websites and tweets'. In this case, social media provide the means by which individuals are empowered to reproduce an idealised presentation of the self, which can sometimes be at odds with the humanitarian impulses that are often assumed to motivate encounters with disadvantaged others in the first place. For example, Mostafanezhad (2013a, p. 491) suggests that 'through their online re-presentations of their experience, volunteer tourists sometimes enjoy a renown or pseudo-celebrity status in their own right'. Often, this sense of status is achieved by individuals successfully leveraging the affective economy of difference to augment their position within their social networks through the (mis)representation of the humanitarian self and disadvantaged others. Indeed, it is at the intersection of social media and popular humanitarianism that "celebrity" becomes a more expansive, but also more problematic, construct. When these opportunities become a motivating factor for engaging in popular humanitarian practices, and when they come to shape and define the representational value of the photographs that are taken and shared, they become even more morally ambiguous. We build on these ideas in the empirical section, below.

Empirical context and methodology

Singapore is a unique context through which the representational politics of popular humanitarianism can be identified and understood. Perhaps most importantly, its location in Southeast Asia means that most Singaporeans are precluded from the post-colonial narrative of guilt and responsibility within which many White/Western development actors are embroiled. In itself, this lends a unique perspective to existing debates surrounding international volunteering, and volunteer tourism in particular. For example, Wearing, Mostafanezhad, Nguyen, Nguyen, and McDonald (2018) note that 'modern discourses of volunteer tourism seem to promote binaries such as 'west' and the 'rest' with volunteer tourists in particular contributing to the 'perpetuat[ion] and reproduce[ion] of such binary distinctions through the discourse of 'saving' and 'helping' others'. Whilst Mostafanezhad (2013b, p. 319) identifies the 'growing participation by Asian nationals' in volunteer tourism, the fact is that both the practice and discourse of volunteer tourism remains Western-oriented. The Singapore case does, however, provide an important and relevant counterpoint. Singaporean humanitarian actors are less clearly implicated in the discursive binaries that Wearing et al. (2018) identify, which provides more nuanced pathways through which difference can be encountered, captured and negotiated through digital mediation. Compounding this is the fact that Singapore's education system has, over the past two decades, been reconfigured in a way that makes community service compulsory. Accordingly, Sin notes how.

the rise of overseas volunteering expeditions from Singapore was propelled by two developments, the first being a compulsory community involvement programme implemented by the Ministry of Education in Singapore for all pre-tertiary schools in 1997. This has created a greater awareness of the value of community involvement and is now seen as part and parcel of a student's education. The second related development is the creation of Youth Expedition Project (YEP) in 2000, under the non-government organization (NGO), Singapore International Foundation (SIF, from 2000 to 2005), and subsequently managed by the National Youth Council (NYC) since 2005 (2009, p. 484).

These developments show: firstly, the top-down and largely prescribed nature of community service programmes; and secondly, their international (or, more specifically, their regional) dimensions. As a result of these characteristics, many YEPs are relatively programmatic affairs that provide opportunities for young Singaporeans to engage with disadvantaged communities from neighbouring countries in structured, if somewhat emotionally detached, ways. In light of this, YEPs have come under public criticism for being a 'government appendage that organizes subsidized 'guilt trips' for Singaporean youth to live among less developed regional communities – a creative 'soft-sell' on how good life is back home' (*Today*, cited in H.L. Sin, 2010, p. 989). A different interpretation is that by providing predetermined channels for humanitarian action, these projects suppress the potential for more self-directed, and self-motivated, engagements with humanitarianism. Space is created for alternative motivations to shape the terms of encounter through which difference is experienced and shared with the rest of the world. Foregrounding these motivations is the fact that Singapore has a digitally advanced population that is 'at the forefront of integrating digital technologies into everyday life' (Williams & Khoo, 2020, p. 130; see also O. Woods, 2020a, 2020b; O. Woods & Kong, 2020). Evidence of this integration is reflected in the fact that approximately 80% of Singapore's population uses social media, causing the country to be ranked third globally for social media penetration (Williams & Khoo, 2020). The centrality of the digital to everyday Singapore life, coupled with the structured nature of engagement with humanitarian projects, can therefore cause these alternative motivations to flourish.

With this in mind, in late 2019 we conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with a range of Singaporean humanitarian actors. Most interviews were with students in their early or mid-twenties who had participated in overseas volunteering programmes (fourteen interviews). We also conducted interviews with people that worked for non-governmental, and government-linked, organisations that organised, marketed and managed overseas volunteer trips, and also raised funds for non-participatory humanitarian projects that they had oversight for (six). Initial interviewees were recruited through personal networks, followed by snowball sampling and cold emailing the community service clubs and volunteering offices of two local universities. Of the participant cohort, four interviews were with students from a local university who, to fulfil the requirements of their degrees and thus graduate, had to complete at least 8 h of community service. Participating in overseas volunteering programmes was widely believed to be the most efficient way of completing this requirement, whilst also bolstering their CVs. The other ten interviews from the participant cohort were with students or recent graduates from a different local university, who did not have to fulfil the same community service requirements, meaning their participation in overseas volunteering programmes was arguably more likely to be aligned with the principles of humanitarianism.

Our sample reflected a range of humanitarian projects (from teaching English – the most ubiquitous – to bicycle maintenance, small business mentoring, and home, school and playground construction) and countries visited. Countries most commonly included nearby Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam, as well as what were perceived to be more exotic, and thus higher value, locations like China and Nepal. The attribution of value to a destination based on a perception of how "exotic" it is evokes Wearing et al.'s (2018, p. 503) observation that, in the UK, 40% of millennials 'choose their travel destination based on the Instagrammability of the locations'. In doing so, it highlights both the similar motivations expressed by youths around the world (and, therefore, the more wide-ranging applicability of the findings presented below), and also gestures to the morally problematic nature of "Instagrammability" foregrounding the choice of location when engaging with volunteer projects. Whilst sampling stopped once saturation was reached, what was surprising was how similar the experiences of our interviewees were, despite them representing a range of projects and countries visited. In itself, this reveals the structured nature of voluntourism in Singapore, and the resultant homogenisation of experience.

An interpretive framework was used for both data collection and analysis. Accordingly, interviews were open-ended and loosely structured according to the key topics we wanted to cover. For the participant cohort, the interviews sought to understand how digital technologies were used to capture and share the volunteering experience, and the politics that emerged as a result. For the administrator cohort, we sought to understand how digital technologies were used to raise funds, attract people to participate in volunteer tourism, and document the experiences of their participants. Interviews lasted 45–60 min, and were conducted face-to-face by either one or both of the authors – one being British with some experience of voluntourism, the other Singaporean who was a similar age to most interviewees – in English. Combined, our positionalities enabled us to empathise with the practice of voluntourism, and the role of digital mediation therein. All interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed, and then analysed for themes using an open coding approach. Two themes became apparent at a relatively early stage. The first related to the metricised nature of digital content; in other words, how the composition, capture, editing and sharing of digital photographs was often motivated by the desire for these photographs to be positively received by audiences, the aim being to attract likes, comments and shares. The second related to how notions of "celebrity" and "influence" have evolved in response to digital media; in many respects, both have become more accessible constructs, which has caused them to take on more expansive, digitally defined, meanings. Combined, both of these themes helped to highlight how representational value is reproduced through the affective economy of difference, which causes popular humanitarianism to become politicised even further. These ideas are now illustrated empirically.

The representational politics of popular humanitarianism

Many of the humanitarian actors included in our sample openly expressed ulterior motivations to participate in overseas humanitarian programmes. In turn, these motivations caused, to varying degrees, the desire to do good for others to either be obfuscated or obstructed by the desire for some sort of self-realisation (after H.L. Sin, 2009; Molz, 2017). As suggested above, some

did it to fulfil the graduation requirements of their university, whilst others did it to bolster their CVs. More subtle, but no less pervasive, however, was the desire to create unique and memorable visual content that could then be posted on social media platforms like Instagram. In this sense, then, their humanitarian practices can be seen to be partially motivated by the opportunity for self-promotion on Instagram, thus altering the practice of voluntourism. They could, in other words, be seen to be “doing it for the ‘gram”. The subsections that follow explore the practices and politics invoked through digital representation. We consider how everyday humanitarian actors would (cu)rate encounters with difference, (re)produce influence through influencers, and thus (de)value representation. The (cu), (re) and (de) prefixes are intentional, as they highlight the cyclical and responsive nature of digital content creation.

(Cu)rating encounters with difference

One of the defining characteristics of digital photography is that the photographer is empowered to edit, enhance and augment their images in almost real-time. Through the application of filters and colour manipulation, and through the easy capture and deletion of photographs, individuals are able to offer a much more stylised representation of their experiences as voluntourists. As Zac,¹ an advertising executive, noted, with Instagram, “people are looking for aesthetics”. The importance of aesthetic appeal, and the ease of editing and enhancing images, means that users are often under pressure to take, curate and post the *best* possible version of their experiences. As a result of these pressures, it is common practice for young Singaporeans to own and manage two Instagram accounts: one public, the other private. Xuan, an undergraduate student, explained how access to her private account was limited to her close friends as it showed her “sad, unglam side that you don’t really want to show anybody”, whilst her public account “is to glorify yourself, make yourself look good”. Participating in overseas projects was well-aligned with the purposes of the public account, as it provided opportunities for volunteer tourists to ‘perform their “selves” with elements of self-authorship... and self-actualization’ (H.L. Sin, 2009, p. 491). This has a twofold effect on the capturing of volunteer experiences: it causes the visual representation of the experience to become stylised, which in turn plays an important, and ongoing, role in the (re)positioning of the user within their social networks.

These photographic practices would, in turn, structure the ways in which volunteers engaged with their volunteer projects. Beyond the project site being ‘constructed in a particular manner, as both needy yet receptive of aid... and also suitably differentiated as the ‘Other’ (H.L. Sin & He, 2018, p. 4), it would also be used as a site through which the self could become suitably differentiated from its peers in the social network. Ting, an undergraduate who taught business skills to students in Nepal, actively avoided such practices as she felt that differentiation meant that “I’m showing off to people, that, oh, look at me doing such altruistic things... I don’t want to be that girl that posts pictures of her with her beneficiaries”. An example shared by Ming, an undergraduate student who participated in a Habitat for Humanity project in Cambodia, illustrates another perspective. Accompanying her and her university teammates on the project was a group of female volunteers in their 30s from the Young Women Christian’s Association (YWCA). Ming described how, for them, the physical labour involved in housebuilding provided an experiential stage from which their Instagram profiles could be developed. She described how the women contributed little in terms of labour, to the extent that:

Some of our guys went over to help them, like, really quite a significant amount. Then they started posing for photos, the women did. So maybe we’re taking a break... everyone ceased work, ceased operations, so the women were like holding the shovel or something, like posing for photos... So, our guys find that it’s not being done by you guys, but you’re so proud of it, in a sense. **Why were they doing that, do you think?!** I would say for the ‘gram, maybe? ... [They are] typical millennials, just posing for photos, trying to put them on Instagram and getting likes or exposure and saying “hey, I’ve been doing this cool stuff”.

Volunteer labour is depicted here as a curated practice that can be used to “get likes or exposure” from their followers. Social media are the experiential channel through which unique online personas can be cultivated through the embedding of difference within the representation of the self. As such, they serve to elevate the ‘possibilities of ironic engagement with viewing, where visitors are not seeking authenticity so much as seeking to *play with the idea* of production of the authentic’ (M. Crang, 1997, p. 362, emphasis added). Curating and sharing digital images expand and redefine the idea of what constitutes an “authentic” representation of humanitarianism; a representation that is suitably differentiated from, and ideally more appealing than, other online content. Indeed, given that such representations are in competition with other content, the affective economy of difference causes authenticity to be constructed in relation to the extent to which it can attract, engage and satisfy socio-spatially distant audiences. These constructions cause authenticity to shift from being indexed to the humanitarian project or beneficiary that is being represented, to the creator and disseminator of content themselves. Ming recognised this paradox, lamenting that “we just don’t find that they deserve the photos... they didn’t come here [to Cambodia] for the purpose of serving the community... it’s not a genuine kind of voluntourism they’re doing”. The point Ming makes is that their motivations for volunteering overseas are not to “serv[e] the community”, but to serve their individual desires to carve out a unique online persona by curating a collection of online experiences that can be interpreted as different, and which can therefore help to (re)position the self amongst its networks of followers. In turn, this motivation brings to light the powerful influence of metrics on the ways in which difference is

¹ All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

represented digitally.

If digital photography is aestheticised photography, then so too is it metricised photography. In this sense, digital content is curated so that its affective appeal can be enhanced, meaning it is more likely to be noticed by distracted networks of geographically dispersed followers. Indeed, through the curation and elevation of affect, the potential for misrepresentation becomes more likely. Whilst this is true for individual volunteers seeking to enhance their online profiles, it is arguably more important for NGOs and other humanitarian-oriented organisations for whom social media has become an important fundraising channel. For example, Zann, a marketing communications executive at the Future Humanity Foundation, explained that she does “monthly analytics on the number of likes, the number of reshares, that kind of thing” garnered from her organization’s Instagram and Facebook accounts. In response to such metrics, Zann is able to quickly and easily identify the popularity of different types of content, causing her to become more responsive as a result. For this reason, when Zann started her job with the Foundation she initially chose not to use any photos taken by her Cambodian colleagues for digital marketing as “they’re not very skilled in taking photos of humans, or, like, capturing human’s emotions”. Subsequently, however, she realised the need to have a constant stream of new material to keep her audiences engaged, and has since given her colleagues a “training crash course on photography”. Through these practices, she scales up the logic of (cu)ration from the photograph to the photographer, implicating her colleagues in the representational politics associated with bringing humanitarian causes to the attention of distracted, mostly non-Cambodian, audiences. As much as this implication is to ensure that the content is more eye-catching, so too does it ensure it accords with the homogenising logic of digital content consumption.

Practices like these highlight the extent to which content needs to both stand out and constantly evolve in order to cut through the noise of the digital landscape of representation. They highlight, in other words, the importance of the affective economy of difference in structuring the terms of digital representation. Zac, the advertising executive introduced above, explained how “I need to grab your attention first in order to sell you your message afterwards... If not, your message will be lost in the scroll”. The curation of digital content is as much a response to the saturated visual landscape of the digital as it is the physical mechanics of rapidly scrolling through social media feeds. Curation enables individuals to represent difference in a more relational way, which in turn enables them to capture people’s attention, attract donations, and generate more intangible forms of influence as well. Whilst curating the ways in which people – followers – experience difference through the visual landscape of social media is one strategy of influencing, another is to leverage the influence that comes with people. In this sense, influencers are used to elevate the appeal of content, and thus lead to a reimagining of what it means to be a development celebrity.

(Re)producing influence through influencers

Social media foreground a repositioning of the self at the vortex of dispersed networks of followers. Thus, as much as images can be curated in ways that suit the aesthetic tastes and preferences of audiences, so too can influence be (re)produced by leveraging other people’s networks of followers. These practices foreground the rethinking of how the notions of celebrity and development intersect in an age of digital representation. Discourses of development celebrities tend to consider how celebrities use their fame for the purposes of development, and, in turn, how laypeople attempt to emulate these practices through social media (e.g. Goodman, 2011; M. Mostafanezhad, 2013a; H.L. Sin & He, 2018). Notwithstanding the value of such work, and following Canavan’s (2020) recent conceptualisation of the “tourist celebrity gaze”, we contend that the idea of celebrity becomes reconfigured through the use of social media. Anyone now has the potential to leverage and expand their position within their networks of followers, and thus establish themselves as an “influencer” (or a celebrity within their network). Further, the networked nature of social media means that development beneficiaries can also be implicated in these networks of influence, thus becoming celebrities in their own right. Each of these scenarios presents opportunities for humanitarian actors to generate interest in their projects, and each is now explored in relation to the Future Humanity Foundation’s outreach efforts.

In the first instance, Future Humanity Foundation would work with social media influencers to promote specific volunteer initiatives. One such initiative is called Holiday for Humanity, which involves organising volunteer trips for families to either Cambodia or Nepal. Zann, introduced above, explained how it was a local social media influencer (called Eve) who approached them and suggested they collaborate and put together the Holiday for Humanity programme based on her own experiences of volunteering overseas. Zann explained how influencers like Eve are able to reproduce influence by leveraging their social networks:

Maybe two out of four families [who go on a Holiday for Humanity] are influencers... Influencers have a huge following on Instagram... Huge meaning more than 30,000, and they have brands endorsing them, that kind of thing... Without her, the whole programme won’t work. She will be the one to get families to join us, so even though we do our part to publicise on Facebook and Instagram, she’s the one that actually rallies the people to come, and people come because of her... So, maybe out of 100%, people who come for [Eve] is maybe 80% and 20% is actually to do good. **Why do they come for her?** Because she’s very popular. She’s very... influencing. **What do they want from her? Just to spend time with her?** Like friends, like “oh yeah, I see that you are doing good, OK! I will do good together with you”, that kind of thing. Yeah, like a lot of people give her face to come, because she asks them to come.

Eve plays a central role in ensuring the success of Holiday for Humanity; this role can, however, lead to other Singaporeans participating in the programme not for the purposes of volunteering, but in order to “give her face”. In many respects, the

collaboration was based on unequal power relations that shifted as the project progressed. When we asked why Eve would want to initiate such a programme, and what she would get out of it, Zann replied “nothing *leh*,² maybe get more looks on Instagram?”. Ironically, the Foundation got the same benefit, but the magnitude of impact was believed to be more pronounced for Eve, who, by embedding herself within the discourse of suffering, managed to ‘raise her profile above the zone of the crudely commercial into the sanctified, quasi-religious realm of altruism and charity’ (Littler, 2008, p. 239). She managed, in other words, to co-opt the idea of humanitarian concern into the presentation of her online self, thus augmenting her position within her networks of followers. At this point, however, the politics of digital influence began to emerge. As much as influencers like Eve help to raise the profile of the programme, to attract people to attend, and also to garner more widespread publicity such as newspaper and other media coverage, so too did the representational power of such influence become harder to control. As Zann shared:

Let me show you how powerful she is... This is her building a house for the poor... So, she tagged us on Instagram and she has that amount of likes.**So that's three, four hundred thousand followers?**Yeah, it's just her hammering! ... So, she posted this, and she posted a vlog... So, she shared some of her very raw thoughts, saying like “oh, it's very hot, oh, the hammer keeps hitting my fingers, very painful”, that kind of thing. When my boss saw it, he was like “it's not any value to us”.**What do you mean by “no value”?**It's not praising us, that kind of thing. It's just her saying “oh, it's very hot, very painful”, that kind of thing... So, a lot of people will just think that this whole trip is hot, tiring and painful.

Eve attracted the attention of her social networks, but she did so in order to raise her own profile as an influencer by embedding herself within the narrative of discomfort. Like the example of the YWCA volunteers above, the experience is more self-focussed than the Future Humanity Foundation stakeholders initially thought. This logic pervaded all the families that participated in the project, many of whom were too engrossed in their own representational practices to focus on the work they were meant to be doing (after Molz, 2017). According to Zann, the families that participate in Holiday for Humanity “are very, how do I say, photo-centric? Throughout the trip, the parents will be busy videoing down these kinds of moments”. Thus, as much as digital influence provides a channel to attract interest and funding for such programmes, at the same time it can provide a distraction from the work that the volunteers are meant to be doing. This sense of distraction stems from the fact that social media reproduce the hyperindividualism that is inherent to the idea of celebrity, but also cause it to become a more *accessible* construct through the medium of digitally networked influence. The problem, however, is that whilst the representational practices of influencers helps raise awareness of, and interest in, humanitarian causes, so too do their efforts to attract attention by reproducing difference serve to ‘both exacerbate and highlight th[e] division’ (Littler, 2008, p. 246) between themselves and their beneficiaries. Indeed, attracting attention by implicating the self in the affective economy of difference becomes even more problematic when it is *imposed* upon beneficiaries by others.

In the second instance, Future Humanity Foundation would identify local beneficiaries that they thought would be popular, and use them repeatedly in their posts. The idea was that their followers would build a sense of familiarity with them, and, by leveraging the affective power of authenticity that their beneficiaries evoke, would therefore be more likely to donate money to the Foundation. Zann explained that this was based on the logic that “people usually only connect human with human... you will be compelled to give... you want to connect your money with a face, so that's why we put faces, so people can connect”. More than just posting images of faces, however, they would use the responsive nature of social media to develop profiles, and even characterisations, of their beneficiaries. Melissa, Zann's colleague and a communications executive at the Foundation, explained that such processes were designed to create content “that is really compelling and moving, like a story... [it] would have to speak to you, captivate your heart and compel you to give”. Through such practices, their beneficiaries would inadvertently become influencers in their own right. This would soften the requests for donations, as “you can't always post content asking people to give you money, it will be very exhausting and it will turn people off”. Zann went on to explain the process she went through in building up one of her beneficiaries – a young Cambodian boy called Vong – into an influencer that could be used to solicit donations:

Initially we went in the direction of anonymous, nameless people. But then I realised that a lot of people want to know the name of the child, so they will feel a sense of connection. So, I began to put fake names... But this guy, he is very cute, I follow[ed] him in Cambodia. His name is Vong, he's my favourite child. I started to put his real name, and I see a lot of people are, like, “ohhh, Vong, he's so cute!”... Now they have a connection.**Does that translate into anything, like donations?**Yes, yes it does. So, for a period of time, we had these hygiene packs for kids, and Vong was the star of the whole campaign. I had friends wanting to donate money because Vong is cute.

Children like Vong often provide a focus of the representational practices of humanitarian actors, as they ‘reflect key tropes of innocence, dependence and protection’ (H.L. Sin & He, 2018, p. 5). Yet, through social media, they move from being passive tropes to active influencers through the ways in which marketers post regular – but not *too* regular – images of them. Practices like these reveal the paradox that underpins the affective economy of difference; one wherein digital engagement – influence – stems from maintaining a compromised sense of balance between the familiar and the distant, the concerned self and the needy other.

² Exclamations like *leh* are a common part of Singaporean English (or Singlish). We have retained them for honesty of expression.

Balancing enables the emotional investment of audiences to be constantly refreshed by ensuring that difference *remains* different, and that newness is *always* new. Our participants were acutely aware of the affective potential of this dynamic, which often served to structure the ways in which they engaged with their beneficiaries. For example, Joyce, a recent graduate who participated in two volunteer trips to China, explained how such practices were to “show that they have successfully made connections with a kid... usually, in posts, they will reflect on what this kid taught me”. Practices like these contrast the distinctions between adult/volunteer and child/beneficiary, with the reversal of roles revealing the representational value that stems from overcoming, but *also* maintaining, and even, paradoxically, enforcing a sense of separation between subject and object. Social media thus structure relationships between volunteers and beneficiaries in ways that draw attention to the influence of the latter (“what this kid taught me”) in order to augment the position of the self within the social network. Altogether, these practices reveal how social media have enabled the reproduction of influence, which has foregrounded the (de)valuing of representation.

(De)valuing representation

There is a distinct temporality to the capturing and sharing of photos. Capture freezes space-time, whilst sharing stretches, distorts and (mis)places it. Digital production and sharing technologies complicate these logics; they speed up and scale up the processes of capturing and sharing, causing each to become less discrete and more part of an evolving representational assemblage. As a result, this has contributed to the emergence of photographic practices and behaviours that are almost synchronous with everyday life, meaning the *value* of photographic representation changes as well. For example, Ming, introduced above, explained how “[we don’t] really consider so much that it’s a taxing job to post photos [online]... it’s just a norm already, kind of a reflex thing”. The idea that photography becomes a reflex is problematic in the context of encountering and reproducing difference through representations of voluntourism. Amongst other things, it can cause representational practices to become harder to police. For many of the volunteers we interviewed, they were briefed on what could and could not be photographed, yet most flouted the rules. A former employee of Singapore’s National Youth Council explained how “some of them [the project organisers/sponsors] would say “you shouldn’t take photos with children and post [them]”, but most of them do”, whilst Yan, a recent graduate, observed how “they will, like, take pictures of things, the kids, but I don’t think it’s very appropriate... the kids never give you permission to take photos of them, they don’t know what will happen when you take their picture”. This point about “not know[ing]” the effects of photographic representation often underpinned the photographic guidelines to which volunteers were expected to adhere. As Ming explained:

YMCA did brief us about that... [when taking photos] make sure that they are properly dressed. We don’t want to portray them as, like, really rural kids that may wear torn clothes, tattered clothes and stuff... It’s just that they’re running around half naked without their shirt, for the boys. I think that’s normal for them. So that’s when my members post these photos on their Instagram story, I will just tell them to take it down, it’s not very nice... It’s how we portray it to the public, be it their followers, or just posting it on social media.

Two issues are raised here. One is the fact that volunteers are prevented from representing their beneficiaries on social media in the same (“normal”) ways in which their beneficiaries present themselves to the volunteers. Censoring and filtering (or otherwise curating) such representations is a result of the second issue, which is the publicness – in terms of either networks of followers, or the general public – of digital representation. Efforts to regulate the types of photos posted by volunteers can be interpreted as efforts to ensure that beneficiaries are represented in a certain way; often, this involved avoiding the particularities of the object, and focussing instead on a more abstract category of child. Yet, it is these particularities that enable differences to be maximised and emotional connections to be forged; often, therefore, they would be the main source of representational value for volunteers. Particularities could, in other words, provide the motivation to represent their beneficiaries and, by extension, themselves, in a more appealing way. As Xuan explained:

I don’t think we were allowed to take photos of faces... But I think there were members who still go on taking photos... [It’s] just to make themselves look cooler. I guess you can show people who you are actually serving and who you are actually helping. The kids.

In this case, the particularities of a child’s face provide the point of emotional connection from which an affective sense of appeal could be developed. The face brings the child to life, and creates value for the volunteer by “mak[ing] themselves look cooler”. It also brings the volunteer experience to life for the volunteers’ networks of followers, thus humanising it. This logic of value creation and transmission is not defined unilaterally – from the photographer to the network – but evolves through the metricisation of content, and the recursive representational practices that emerge in response. Representations of difference thus become embedded within, and inflected by, the relational visual logics that have come to define the feed. They are implicated in the representations of the mundane and everyday, and must therefore accord with the same principles of what is acceptable or not. The temporality of the feed – defined, above all, by the constant churn of new content replacing old – also foregrounds the need for content to both accord with the aestheticised principles of the mundane, but not to *become* mundane. In other words, difference still needs to be prioritised as a guiding principle of content creation and dissemination, even if it is

presented relationally, in a muted and stylised way. As a result, the influence that Zann managed to generate through her representation of Vong was short-lived. As she explained:

We cannot keep reusing Vong... [or else] people will get tired of seeing his face. When I check the other social media [accounts], they don't reuse names. They don't reuse the same phrase. And my colleague, she encourages it. Like, she'll say "it's not very nice to keep reusing the same photos" because it's, I don't know, not new? **Did they [the followers] get upset? Did they ask, "where's Vong"?** No, no-one asked. **But they liked him, right?** Yeah, I think the social [media] relationships are very fleeting. Once he's inside [the feed], he's cute, but once he's out of mind, he's really out of mind.

As suggested here, the representational value of development beneficiaries like Vong is short lived, and indexed to his newness and thus cuteness in the eyes of followers. As soon as he becomes an everyday, or even predictable, source of representation, he is devalued and thus discarded. Whilst this example speaks specifically to the representational politics of popular humanitarianism, it provokes wider scrutiny into the ways in which everyday humanitarian actors are engaging with difference and disadvantage. In many respects, we are now all implicated – directly or indirectly – in the cycles of representation through which these politics emerge. Indeed, one of the key problems that underpins the affective economy of difference is that there are 'no organisations to be called into accountability for the representation of Others, no annual report where the "bad" side of the representation can be weighed against how much funding it might have contributed to raising for genuine humanitarian interventions' (Richey, 2016, p. 409–410). Rather, the value of representation rests on the consensus of the networked crowd. Even if we are not directly participating in humanitarian projects, posting content, or responding to it through comments, likes, shares or donations, many of us are still implicated in the webs of visual representation through which such content is circulated and consumed, and thus becomes more relationally defined. Paradoxically, it is these webs that also disrupt the distinctions between volunteer and beneficiary, influencer and influenced, thus extending the representational politics of popular humanitarianism even further. Indeed, *from* these webs emerges a new moral economy of humanitarian practice that is defined by the ways in which individuals encounter, engage with and reproduce difference in and through the structuring, and often distortive, lens of the digital.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the ways in which photographic representations of difference are problematised in a digital age. Digital practices of photography are different in that they are based on different logics of speed, scale and style to their analogue counterparts. Digital photography has become an any day, anywhere and anytime practice, the effects of which can be disseminated to geographically dispersed networks of followers – and publics – with relative, but not unproblematic, ease. In turn, these factors have come to recalibrate the guiding ethics of encounters with, and representations of, difference. Specifically, they have been shown to complicate them by making them opaquer and more relationally defined. Importantly, these complications are more acutely felt when reproduced through the practices that define popular humanitarianism. This is particularly true for (volun)tourism, as it involves individuals being embedded within a digital void whereby they are physically proximate to, but emotionally and representationally distanced from, their beneficiaries. By becoming implicated in the affective economy of difference, practices of popular humanitarianism like these alter the terms by which individuals represent themselves and their beneficiaries online. To the extent that these representations are aestheticised by the digital environments in and through which they are reproduced, so too do they become more politicised constructs. Participating in the affective economy of difference thus enables content creators to attract attention by engaging with the projects, people and places of humanitarian action in ways that leverage difference in the service of the self. In this sense, whilst the digital democratises access to, and engagement with, humanitarianism, so too does it obfuscate the causes and effects of injustice through the aestheticisation of representation.

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that the digital has brought about a dissolution of boundaries between influencer and influenced. Both constructs become more intimately connected with, and serve to shape, representations of the other. It is through these connections that the self – as humanitarian, as follower, as followed, as influencer – becomes implicated within a broader, more socially defined, web of representational practices. This can cause the self to become emotionally and aesthetically removed from the disadvantaged others it is meant to be helping. Exploring how these engagements with the affective economy of difference implicate other practices of popular humanitarianism provides several opportunities for further research. Specifically, identifying and explicating the effects of the 'private-sector logics and rationalities' (Burns, 2019, p. 1101) that increasingly define humanitarian practices will provide a first step towards reimagining their potential to bring about change in new, and sometimes radical, ways. Bringing these ideas into conversation with the role of influencers in drawing attention to, and thus repoliticising, the practices and representations of popular humanitarianism will reveal the ways in which power and (in)justice are reproduced through the influencer/public nexus. Doing so will pave the way for more constructively *effective*, rather than just *affective*, digital representations of disadvantage and difference, and a resultant reimagination of otherness. The importance of this stems from the encroachment of an ethic of popular humanitarianism into everyday life, which is causing the distinctions between volunteer tourism and tourism to become blurred. Understanding what this means for the practice and experience of both volunteerism *and* tourism will pave the way for more integrated understandings of how a humanitarian ethic can motivate, but also politicise, digital representations of difference.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

What is the contribution to knowledge, theory, policy or practice offered by the paper?

This paper explores the new types of representational politics that arise as a result of digital photography. These politics help to reproduce what we term an “affective economy of difference”, and are most pronounced when disadvantaged people and places are the objects of representation. They are, therefore, implicated in contemporary practices of popular humanitarianism, such as voluntourism. We illustrate these theoretical arguments through our analysis of qualitative data. Specifically, the data consider the ways in which various stakeholders (cu)rate encounters with difference, (re)produce influence, and (de)value representation. Altogether, these ideas and arguments help to advance debates surrounding the photographic practices of (volun)tourists, representations of difference, and the reproduction of power dynamics in a digitally mediated age.

How does the paper offer a social science perspective / approach?

This paper draws on qualitative data derived from 20 in-depth interviews with Singapore-based voluntourists and the employees of companies that organise overseas humanitarian projects. Through our analysis, we offer a nuanced, and critical, understanding of the representational practices of these stakeholder groups. Not only that, but whilst both authors are social and cultural geographers, this paper draws on cognate debates within tourism studies, development studies, anthropology, sociology, as well as geography. Through our critical analysis of qualitative data, and our integrative engagement with ideas and debates from various social scientific disciplines, both our approach and perspective can therefore be understood to be “social scientific”.

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