Selfies or self-development? *Humanitarians of Tinder (HoT)* and online shaming as a moral community

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**Abstract**

*Humanitarians of Tinder (HoT)* is a meme account found on Tumblr and Facebook that aggregates screen captures of Tinder profiles wherein users have posted photos of themselves participating in volunteer tourism activities throughout the Global South. For example, many users’ photos depict themselves embracing racialized children in their arms or participating in rituals or traditional ceremonies in cultures to which they do not belong. In this article, I argue that *HoT* establishes a moral community by shaming these individuals for presumably relying on these images to attract dates, while not recognizing their own complicity in colonial structures such as the volunteer tourism industry. Using strategies of humour to mock or deride these Tinder users for their actions as well as their appearances, *HoT* and its commentors engage in practices of digital vigilantism that seek to punish individuals for their behaviour, rather than the organizations and industries that structure these experiences. With this in mind, I demonstrate how Tinder users’ photos replicate images in recruitment media that are designed to advertise volunteer tourism expeditions. I further question how online shaming acts as a political action motivated by solidarity that comes to replace other actions, like volunteering.

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**Introduction**

Hannah, a 27-year-old white woman, poses for a photograph, holding a small Black child in her arms. She turns to face the child who she presses to her body, while holding him upright with her right arm. Her face, although partially turned from the camera, expresses what could be thoughtful solemnity, or concern for the child. The child, wearing a blue and red, “USA” t-shirt is staring into the distance, not meeting her gaze. His expression is equally as mercurial, although he looks considerably less peaceful than Hannah, who holds him. The child is nameless. There is no context surrounding who he is, or what his emotional state is.
This image is a screen capture, taken from Hannah’s Tinder profile. The only curatorial note of the image is the partially visible text written by Hannah herself; a brief description that reads in staccato punctuation:

Sunshine + being outside = happiness

Ultimately, the child’s perspective is not the focus of the image. The narrative belongs to Hannah, one of approximately 50–57 million global users of the dating app, Tinder (Iqbal, 2020). The enormously profitable app, which was founded in 2012 by University of Southern California classmates, Sean Rad and Justin Mateen, “generated an estimated $US433 million in spending across Apple’s iOS Store and Google Play Store” in the first six months of 2020 (Whitlock, 2020). Tinder allows users to build their own dating profiles, including photos or other images, and 500 characters of text to form a simple description. The app then uses geo-location algorithms to match users. If a desirable partner or prospective date shows up on one’s screen, you can swipe the image to the right to indicate your interest. If the prospective date does the same, you ‘match’; at this point, users may begin chatting. This “double opt-in” strategy (Iqbal, 2020) enables users to minimize embarrassment or awkwardness of rejection, while also filtering out other users with whom they don’t wish to engage.

Tinder’s effects on dating/hookup culture, gender relations or the gamification of romance and sexuality have been widely commented on by scholars, cultural critics and stand-up comedians. This article is less concerned with the app itself than the source of Hannah’s particular image, Humanitarians of Tinder (HoT). HoT is a meme account found on Tumblr and Facebook that aggregates screen captures of Tinder profiles, like Hannah’s, in order to turn their personal experiences of travel on volunteer abroad missions into sources of humour. By recontextualizing these images from the Tinder platform, and aggregating them on the Tumblr/Facebook page, HoT reveals a common trope, and pattern of behaviours. App users featured on HoT have each posted a photo of themselves in various settings throughout the Global South where they appear to be engaging in some sort of international humanitarian activity. Often, like Hannah, they pose with young African children inside a classroom. Others engage in other activities alongside locals. They practice traditional dances, prepare traditional foods, or stand in front of idyllic and picturesque backgrounds in their destination country. Frequently, they smile joyfully at the camera while surrounded by racialized community members.

It is perhaps obvious, but nevertheless important to note that the label of “humanitarian” in HoT brims with sarcasm that is designed to shame and blame Tinder users for their perceived behaviours while volunteering. The content of the account was generated by Tinder users who located these images, screen grabbed them and sent them to the account manager until late 2017, when the site stopped posting new images. The aggregation and labelling of these “humanitarian” images is a form of “networked laughter” (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015); wherein “connective action and ad hoc community building based on individuals’ self-expression, sharing, and the interaction and dialogue that transpired through commenting, mock reviewing” [1] are directed towards, in this case, a class of young, white, globally mobile single folk. We might cynically consider that this trend is motivated by superficial or self-motivated interests to perform humanitarian labour, rather than what is commonly thought of as the altruistic motivations of “helping others who are less fortunate, and in need.” It becomes satisfying and cathartic to laugh at these misguided young people for their perceived lack of self-awareness and entitlement. Various online and print media outlets have joined in on the fun, which HoT is happy to note. The site’s homepage description lists a number of international news sources and blogs that have covered or commented on its work, such as, “The Guardian, Washington Post, Huffington Post, HuffPost Live, Business Insider, The Atlantic, Fast Company, NY Mag, The Daily Dot, Policy Mic, Nerve, and more (HoT).”

Although most comedians would agree that explaining the punchline of a joke tends to ruin its impact, this article will ignore this convention in hopes to deconstruct the source of this humour in HoT’s practice of shaming Tinder users who participate in volunteer tourism in the Global South. Wearing (2001) describes volunteer tourists as “those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the
restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment” [2]. In many ways, a
damning critique of the entire, multi-billion-dollar industry of volunteer tourism [3] is warranted. In this
article, I understand participation within the volunteer tourism industry as a form of what Heron (2007)
describes as a “colonial continuity,” wherein both an “entitlement and obligation [exist] to intervene within
the Global South for the ‘betterment’ of the Other wherever he or she resides” [4]. These interventions
serve not only to reinforce colonial power relations, positioning those who reside in the Global South as
inherently vulnerable, desperate and in need of help, but also serves to construct the bourgeois subjectivity
of the volunteer. Volunteer experiences are framed from the outset in ambiguous ways by the organizations
that coordinate them, as the values of global citizenship are themselves interpreted and contested by
different stakeholders. Critical scholars have noted that volunteer tourism projects have little to no effect on
positive outcomes for host communities and may even impede progress by disrupting the local economy,
undermining local traditions and overburdening host organizations (Guttentag, 2009; McGehee, 2012;
McGehee and Andereck, 2008; Lyons and Wearing, 2008). Educators have also questioned the presumed
benefits for volunteers who participate in these expeditions; suggesting that any kind of transformative
consciousness-raising or intercultural experience within the field usually fails to create long term changes
among participants (Crossley, 2012; Simpson, 2004; Cameron, 2014; Sin, 2009; Epprecht, 2004), even
though the discourse of global citizenship education is commonly invoked by universities and post-
secondary administrations as a recruitment tool to attract prospective students who are eager for
international experience (Lewin, 2009; Jorgenson and Shultz, 2012).

Without offering a justification for volunteer tourism activity, this work aims to critically question the
tendency to shame those who are susceptible to misleading advertising media that strategically aligns
notions of personal emotional fulfillment with gestures of solidarity in transnational social movements. I
suggest that volunteers assume that images of their time in the field depict them as admirable activists, as
the photos that they publish tend to mirror tropes in images that are used by digital marketing strategies that
seek to recruit volunteers to participate in these experiences, including depictions of volunteers with
racialized children, posing next to wildlife, or in other photographic contexts that seek to represent the
Global South. These images connote opportunities for fun, friendship and the pleasures of international
travel, while simultaneously suggesting that these experiences may be understood by participants as activist
initiatives that engage in demonstrations of solidarity, grassroots organizing and community-oriented
development.

The redeployment of this same genre of images (as shown through selfies and vacation photographs taken
by volunteers) reveals the ultimately neoliberal focus on private philanthropy or donorship; in other words,
the prioritization of one’s own self-development and personal pursuit of pleasure takes priority over the
supposed goals of working towards community or international development objectives. As such,
representations of international volunteers are different points of a volunteer’s pre- and post-departure
experiences and emotional journey. Recruitment strategies promise personal empowerment and positive
experiences of fun and pleasure through solidarity work, while the recontextualization of volunteers’
personal images of their own experiences, as published on Tinder, and later redeployed on Humanitarians
of Tinder, are used as tools to shame volunteers for misidentifying their own interventions as activism,
when HoT users have framed them as neo-colonizers.

The abrupt change in meaning creates a discursive whiplash for volunteers; what was once meant to
demonstrate a photographic subject’s admirable qualities (such as their commitment to social justice, their
good hearts, worldliness or adventurous spirits) becomes a shameful display of white saviourdom and a
presumed lack of self-awareness around privilege and entitlement. This mode of shaming is unique as it is a
form of digital activism in itself, calling out activists for not engaging in a morally correct form of activism;
admonishing those with supposedly “good intentions” for not demonstrating these intentions in the right
way. What was once a source of pride and a category for positive online self-presentation becomes recast as
a point of embarrassment and ridicule.
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Outline

I begin by locating HoT as a mode of digital vigilantism that relies on certain non-violent doxing practices that seek to deanonymize and delegitimize the identities and experiences of international volunteers. I argue that HoT makes use of two shaming strategies; the first uses insults and name-calling against particular volunteers to mock and insult them, while the second critically analyses the images and texts included in the photos that they share on Tinder, in order to reveal specific colonial narratives and structures that these volunteers replicate. These strategies create a moral community, informed by shaming as a political act, that works to establish norms and a code of conduct for how not to behave when traveling abroad. I then argue that the photos posted to Tinder commonly replicate images that are found throughout marketing and recruitment strategies, designed to entice prospective volunteers to travel abroad. I locate these recruitment strategies within a post-humanitarian media environment and demonstrate how these same styles of images rely on positive associations of individual empowerment and personal pleasure. When volunteers stage these same experiences on their travels and later publish these photos, they are shamed for their gullibility and lack of self-awareness for recognizing complicity in neocolonial practices. I conclude by discussing the tendency to seek punishment for those who seek to participate in this kind of volunteer activity, further asking what does it mean to cancel the emotional lives of young people who seek to learn about their own roles and responsibilities of citizens, yet who unwittingly perpetuate colonial tropes rooted in global power regimes?

Methodology

This article explores the Humanitarians of Tinder (HoT) accounts on Facebook and Tumblr as digital sites that utilize online shaming strategies in order to establish a moral community of practice that develops norms and standards of conduct within international volunteerism and travel abroad experiences. By engaging in an interpretive content analysis of the images that are posted and the comments that characterize them, I demonstrate that ways in which audiences simultaneously engage in justice-seeking and entertainment-seeking behaviour (Trottier, et al., 2020); a phenomenon that I situate within a post-humanitarian mode of communication that prioritizes individual emotions (usually, of pleasure). This work engages in a form of virtual ethnography, where I analyze common forms of user engagement (i.e., uploading photos, commenting on photos, the types of conversations and subjects that are discussed in comments) and theorize how these engagements influence the community that is established. Specific photos and comments were selected from approximately 948 submissions as indexes of commonly posted genres of commenting and posting practices that occur on these platforms. They are not intended to represent the entirety of the HoT archive, but rather to highlight themes and trends that exist within the dynamic and evolving community. This work also puts recent scholarship on digital vigilantism and online shaming practices in conversation with work in the field of post-humanitarian communication studies in order to expand discursive categories of how “solidarity” and “transnational allyship” are practiced within a digital, neoliberal context.

Digital vigilantism

We can understand sites such as HoT as examples digital vigilantism, which Trottier (2017) describes as “a process where citizens are collectively offended by other citizen activity, and respond through coordinated retaliation on digital media, including mobile devices and social media platforms. The offending acts range from mild breaches of social protocol (bad parking; not removing dog faeces) to terrorist acts and
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As a form of online interpersonal surveillance that occurs between individuals, rather than the state or institutions (Trottier, 2013), digital vigilantism often relies on extra-judicial practices like “naming and shaming” [6], effectively “weaponising visibility” [7] by informing a digital audience of a citizen’s perceived misdeeds. The impact “comes from both the audience witnessing it, and the identified individual’s knowledge that there is such an audience, who may themselves participate in further shaming them” (Douglas, 2020). These “vigilant audiences” (Trottier, et al., 2020) hold complex and multiple motivations for shaming practices, although they often conflate “justice-seeking and entertainment-seeking” (Trottier, et al., 2020), aiming to satisfy urges for the consumptive pleasures of a media spectacle with the satisfaction of calling out injustice or immorality.

Schwarz and Richey (2019) have identified HoT as a form of what Jane (2017a, 2017b) has described as “digilantism,” overlapping with Trottier’s definition as a “putatively politically motivated extrajudicial practices in online domains that are intended to punish or bring others to account in response to a perceived or actual lack of institutional remedies” [8] to include “any combination of trickery, persuasion, reputation assaults, surveillance, public shaming, and calls to action” [9]. Digilantism results in a moral public that aims to counter-discipline (Hess and Flores, 2018) by raising awareness and educating users about intolerable or unacceptable social practices that exist on and off-line. A case like HoT rests on notions of moral accountability, rather than any particular legal offense, but nevertheless uses public shame as a mode of denunciation and discipline by creating potential search engine infamy and unexpected or unwanted visibility in the public eye (Trottier, 2018). In any case of digital vigilantism/digilantism, the practice of shaming “operates in excess of the individual (or any other social actor who initiates a campaign” (Trottier, 2018). The public nature of shaming means that it may take a life of its own; other online users can comment on the image, share and repost it in other contexts. It can gain increased attention from other media sources, such as those that published news stories about HoT. It can even be scrutinized and evaluated in an article for First Monday. This endows the impact of the shaming with potentially enduring effects for its users. HoT offers no linkage to institutional practices of humanitarianism, foreign aid provision or of macro-economic theories of global dependency between the Global North and South. Consequently, “shame is a deeply internalised sentiment yet externally imposed through an assemblage of actors” [10] which in the case of HoT include social media platforms like Tinder and Tumblr, their vigilant users who aggregate and submit these images through screen image-capturing technology on their handheld devices or Web browsers.

Schwarz (2018) notes that the volunteer’s gaze is in fact a crucial aspect of the experience of international volunteer work, which we can connect to the practice of taking and viewing photographs. Drawing on Urry’s seminal work on “the tourist gaze” (Urry and Larsen, 2011) she notes that travelers have always been hyperconscious of the implications of their travel. The act of looking constructs a tourist’s sense of self in relation to her surroundings, while on holiday. This is often expressed through moralization of other tourists’ actions on their trips, and their motivations for traveling abroad in the first place — or the “intragroup gaze”, which as Holloway, et al. (2011) note, acts “to differentiate the moral self from the other less virtuous tourist” [11]. The 27 U.K.-based participants in Schwarz’s case study, which unfolded longitudinally over the pre-departure, expedition and return of this volunteer group, documented a series of narrative statements of self and group understanding that clearly moralized the behavior of some volunteer activity over others. She established that those with shorter term placements, those who provided unskilled or unspecialized labour, and those whose trips allocated the majority of time to holidays (as opposed to volunteer labour) were viewed negatively as “voluntourists” as opposed to more legitimate volunteers [12]. Participants tended to identify others with these criteria, as opposed to their own group. These “appeared to be influenced by their word-of-mouth interactions with the sending organisation as well as electronic word-of-mouth spread virally via social media (including blog posts, opinion pieces and YouTube videos)” [13]. Here, “participants tended to view the ‘volunteer’ label with admiration, interpreted to be a selfless individual who undertook arduous project work and offered a substantial level of commitment to the host community” [14]. Schwarz’s participants identify their own understanding of volunteering through mediated sources. The fact that there is an awareness and anticipation of negative moral judgement associated with the activity, indicates that mediatisation has, to some extent, impacted volunteer behaviour, reflecting what Schwarz (2018) frames as “anticipated digilantism” [15].
Public shaming on *HoT* may be contextualized within call-out culture, “the tendency among progressives, radicals, activists, and community organizers to publicly name instances or patterns of oppressive behaviour and language use by others ... Because call-outs tend to be public, they can enable a particularly armchair and academic brand of activism: one in which the act of calling out is seen as an end in itself” (Ahmed, 2015). The call is at once directed at the behaviour of the individual in the *HoT* image itself, as well as at a broader body politic of political subjects. Casting *HoT*’s subjects in unexpectedly visible roles plays with, but perhaps does not fully commit to doxing practices, which Douglas (2020) describes as “the public release of personally identifiable information, as both a means of harassment and intimidation, and a tool for activism.” Vigilantes using doxing as a tool often seek to identify personal information including home addresses, places of work or other private information in order to incite violence, or a credible fear of violence, against the doxing victim/perceived perpetrator of legal, social, moral transgression. *HoT* stops far short of this goal by engaging in scrutiny with no ambition of violence against anyone. Nevertheless, the account relies on deanonymization and deligitimisation, two strategies that Douglas (2016) identifies are used by doxing to identify and remove the credibility of the doxed [16]. As Tinder users own the rights to their own photos and images, screen capturing and reposting these images technically may be considered a breach of privacy, even if there is no further likelihood of determining identifying information. (Tinder’s geolocation service identifies the relative location of users in miles or kilometers on screen, if users consent to this. But since it is unclear where the user who captures the image is located, this information is rendered inaccessible.) The remaining chance of identifying the specific Tinder user remains possible although presumes some personal knowledge of him, her or them, in order to recognize them based on their posts. In many cases, screen captured images include blurred names and faces, when requested. As the site’s moderator indicates in one comment to an image from 2014, “These photos are all publicly posted, so they never really have a ‘case’ against us posting them, but when requested, I blur em as a sort of olive branch. Most are really nice about it when asking, some even see the humor and/or necessity of the site. A few have been mean and threatening.” The comment reveals that at least occasionally, *HoT* “outs” those who are posted to the extent that they are notified or made aware that their image has been shared. The willingness to offer the olive branch of facial and textual blurring suggests that the purpose is not to seek revenge through exposing these individuals, but to use the images in service of a broader critique of international volunteering as a practice.

Nevertheless, the critiques can be scathing and quite mean-spirited when focused on particular volunteers’ credibility. The delegitimisation strategy is much more apparent in the post and comments on the particular image and its contents. The *HoT* archive itself is a framing tool that is used to implicitly and sarcastically undermine the credibility of the Tinder users/volunteers whose images its users aggregate. Building on Richey’s (2016) earlier description of the “morality of shaming as a political act” [17], *HoT* relies on the construction of a sense of moral panic around the behaviours of individuals, achieved through the circulation of their images [18] in order to delegitimise them. In a critique of Barbie Savior, a similar Instagram meme generating account that creates pastiche tableaux featuring Barbie dolls and other toys in the place of actual volunteers, Wearing, *et al.* (2018) note that Barbie suggests the performance of “altruistic individualism” [19] among volunteers within a “white savior complex” [20] who unconsciously replicate the effects and affects of “sentimental colonialism” [21]; a form of care provision that detractors argue include a flip side of domination and implicit violence.

Comments about these tropes serve to build a moral community of scrutiny around the practices of international volunteerism, and at times, offers a meta-analysis of image sharing as well. Comments that characterize these photos exist on a spectrum of ruthlessness, including dismissive derision, speculative judgements of the volunteer’s intentions, and total denigration of their character. Dismissiveness is clear from various insults characterizing volunteers commonly as “douche”, “wanker” or similarly objectionable synonyms, as well as unspecific but clearly unimpressed sentiments such as “gross”, “ugh” or “vom!”.

Comments also include blanket statements about the practice of volunteering that reference some element of selfishness of egoism, as well as the white saviour/white messiah complex.

Other comments choose to mock or criticize specific aspects of the profile’s image or accompanying text.
Commenters took special umbrage with the usage of children’s bodies in these images. In one image, Andrew, who is a 27-year-old white man holding a small child in his arms, is met with disdain from commenters like Nick, who writes, “The child looks so uncomfortable ... He’s a stranger, stop!” or Anton who writes, “Her reaction pretty much says ‘TF [the fuck] are you doing? ... put me down you plum’,” among others. A commonly repeated scene in photos — wherein a volunteer would hold a child in their arms, and placing their thumb and forefinger around either side of the child’s mouth to stretch the child's face into a grimace resembling an apparent smile — especially annoyed commenters. In another image, Steven who is 34 poses while seated, facing the camera and smiling. He is flanked on either side by members of an Indigenous tribe, of varying ages and adorned in grass skirts and headdresses, who also smile. Commenters chose to address Steven in two distinctive modes that characterize responses to these images. Some, like Lance, lob insults at Steven, such as “This just screams ‘I’m a missionary in both career and sexual preference.’” Fraser also adopts this approach, noting the stains on Steven’s pants by writing, “He could of [sic] worn clean jeans.” Austin comments with a different critique focusing on the legacies of enduring colonial relationships that exist in Steven’s image. He posts an image and description of the 1904 World Fair and a description of “human zoos” that closely mirrors the staging in Steven’s photo, wherein a white man (presumably a “zookeeper” from a turn of the twentieth century human zoo) stands in the centre of the frame, and is surrounded by a group of Indigenous people.

The two tactics of mocking the volunteer for their inferred various personal characteristics and calling out the cultural and political realities of international volunteerism, work in tandem towards shaming the individual volunteer in the image. They attempt to establish a normative code of conduct for prospective world travellers about how not to behave while working or volunteering abroad. However, they also reflect the second ambition of vigilant publics, which is to seek entertainment and pleasure, as well as some sort of regulatory justice. The following section examines the role that pleasure plays in mediated volunteer recruitment.

Image sharing and volunteer recruitment

The use of shame as a mode of denunciation and public disciplining is notable in light of the largely positive feelings that are purposefully cultivated within what Chouliaraki (2013) defines as late modern humanitarianism, or post-humanitarianism. She notes the defining characteristic of post-humanitarian practice as the blurred boundary between commodity exchange and “sentimental obligation towards vulnerable others ... In doing so, it manages both to turn the ever-expanding realm of economic exchange into a realm of private emotion and self-expression and, in a dialectical move to simultaneously commodify private emotion and philanthropic obligation” [22]. In this view, solidarity is no longer based on grand narratives of common humanity or a cosmopolitan sense of justice. It is primarily imagined in individualist terms, where the “emergence of a self-oriented morality, where doing good to others is about ‘how I feel’ and must, therefore be rewarded by minor gratifications to the self” [23]. Advertising appeals for donations circulate throughout the Internet, where celebrities like Angelina Jolie or Madonna act as ambassadors for important social causes while Bono headlines charitable concerts like Live Aid. All of these messages “may deprive us not only of the voice of vulnerable others but also of moral discourse that would link vulnerability to justice” [24]. It is the emotionality of Western donors, “rather than the vulnerability of the distant other” that serves “as a key motivation for solidarity” [25]. Humanitarianism is motivated by positive emotional experiences rather than notions of duty or obligation.

Volunteer-sending organizations recruiters use an array of imagery in their marketing materials that circulate throughout online job posts on volunteer-specific search engines like Om Prakash, EcoTeer and Idealist host this content in order to match prospective volunteers with potential organizations and communities, offering thousands of different volunteer experiences for which volunteers might apply or register. These rely on two premises: the first is the Global South is a vulnerable, deprived and abject territory, and the second is that volunteers are capable of not only ameliorating these conditions on their
holidays, but they will *enjoy* the process; learning, growing and ultimately empowering themselves through their labour.

One of the most prominent, reoccurring tropes within the genre of volunteer recruitment oriented photography, is the depiction of (typically white) volunteers embracing children. The imagery is so commonplace that a Google image search of “volunteering in Peru” that I conducted during my doctoral research reveals nothing but this genre (Figure 1). Often, the image is set in a classroom, with volunteers crouched beside the young children’s desks, demonstrating how to solve a homework problem, or assisting them with some other craft or project. In others, they play together in a park, or in a natural environment, foregrounded in front of a lush jungle or mountainous backdrop. In other images, the volunteers administer tender responsibility over the children by helping them brush their teeth or conducting a medical inspection of some kind, while wearing white plastic gloves. In many of these images, the volunteers stand or crouch while surrounded by young, smiling children; all laughing, hugging and beaming towards a camera.

![Google Images search for “volunteering in Peru”](image.png)

**Figure 1:** Screen capture of first results page in Google Images search for “volunteering in Peru,” accessed 13 May 2017.

Each of the tableaux in these images could be published by any Tinder Humanitarian. They are largely identical in form and content, in denotative and connotative meaning. As with Hannah’s image when embracing a child, and demonstrating her care and sensitivity to prospective dates, these marketing materials showcase the supposedly wonderful opportunities that come from international volunteering. In each case a relationship between volunteer and child is used to reveal presumed benefits of the relationship, while positioning the volunteer as subject and focal point of the image. While they demonstrate to prospective volunteers as a sense of joy, and in dating app profiles like Tinder a virtuous aura around the volunteer, it is when they are recontextualized on HoT that they are reclassified as sources of shame; for excessive privilege, for showing off, and for ultimately “not getting it” in terms of self-awareness.

However, the use of children’s bodies to communicate specific messages concerning humanitarian intervention is not unique to volunteer recruitment imagery. While the relationship between childhood and national development remains under-theorized (Millei and Imre, 2016; Stephens, 1995), Cheney (2007) argues that within the Global South, “childhood is constructed in everyday discourses as a primary space in which prosperity will either be made or broken” [26]. The lives of children come to bear meaning for
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citizens, institutions and social movements that extend far beyond the awareness of any individual child. Vestergaard (2013) notes that these images appeal to a Western sense of moral duty; inciting donations to fundraising campaigns by reducing children to symbols of victimization, devoid of agency, history or individual personalities. Such images rely on a “Western preoccupation with the spectre of the missing, lost or abused child” [27] that renders these images of suffering children as traumatic — not just for the represented child, but vicariously, for the viewers who encounter these images. The preoccupation with images of children provokes a sentimental response that often “neutralizes the political response that the amelioration of chronic poverty and structural violence against the poor necessitates” [28]. In their study of postcards depicting scenes of childhood poverty that are sold in and around Cusco and the Sacred Valley, Sinervo and Hill (2011) note that within these postcards “poverty is often indexed through markers such as ragged clothing and dirty faces. Children are usually photographed in the countryside, intensifying the hinging of rural poverty to Peruvian underdevelopment” [29]. There are various typologies of these images of poverty, depicting children as abandoned, orphaned and suffering or in contrast, as idealized, aestheticized or beautiful, however all “reflect, reify, and reinforce (neo)colonial and imperial ideologies, practices and agendas” [30].

The insertion of the chipper, helpful volunteers into images of Andean childhood poverty create an altogether different representational regime but still functions through the construction of a racial logic that depicts white bodies as saviors and Indigenous bodies as helpless, infantile and dependent in order to sell a specific product or experience. The images create a narrative that justifies volunteers’ interventions by suggesting that these children would not receive care or attention otherwise.

Within recruitment imagery, representations of Andean poverty are interrupted here by the presence of (mostly white) tourist volunteers, who have presumably arrived not just to help resolve domestic social issues like poverty, but to spread joy and happiness while doing so. Like Red Cross ads or the postcards of children, these depictions of volunteerism rely on the evocative imagery of childhood poverty to compel action on the part of the viewers. The insertion of the smiling volunteer provides an example of a specific and personal way that the viewer might “help.” The joy shared between each represented figure, volunteer and child, promises that the volunteer’s contribution is worthwhile and beneficial. The children are cared for and volunteers are content as well, through both the satisfaction of their efforts and the fun of spending time with loving, playful kids.

These images relay optimistic, highly palatable narratives of the good work undertaken by international volunteers. By relying on depictions of happy childhood to stand in as the indicators of Peru’s success as a nation, these advertisements frame volunteerism as a successful (and personally satisfying) strategy for individuals to address international development obstacles. Such representations avoid the much less satisfying complexity of the reality of issues facing Peru. Focusing on children provokes a reaction from viewers, inciting them, perhaps, to volunteer. The simplistic narrative within these images suggests that volunteers provide childcare because Peruvian adults are absent, unwilling or unequipped to do so, presumably because the nation is unable to support its underclass. Volunteers can and do occupy these positions of care and authority — as teachers, medical workers or surrogate parents — and what’s more, they take visible pleasure in filling these roles. Just look at those hugs and smiles!

Smiles, and the promise of happiness, play an essential role in the marketing of these experiences. It is known, however abstractly, prior to the volunteer’s departure that they will visit a site where people, and especially children, require assistance to make their lives more bearable. Although volunteers anticipate encountering poverty, deprivation and overall suffering, recruitment images depicting these journeys still promise to rouse positive feelings, such as the intimate bond between a volunteer and child and the satisfaction of making a positive difference in the lives of others. In spite of, or perhaps even because of, the suffering of these vulnerable others, volunteers come to know that they will personally benefit from their time spent in these communities.
Concluding discussion: Shame and solidarity

If, as Richey (2016) states, “the circulation of the images of the Humanitarians of Tinder between the semi-private platform of the dating app and the public platform with commenting of Facebook requires a consideration of the morality of public shaming as a political act” [31], it merits serious consideration as to what this political act aspires to accomplish. The volunteer faces criticism for not fully understanding colonial power relations that have existed since the fifteenth century. Volunteers are interpellated by the promise that through programmatic participation and good intentions, they can achieve a sense of self-worth and help others. HoT responds by shaming their lack of recognition for their privilege to participate in the first place. HoT produces ambivalence about transnational, intercultural activism by highlighting the risks of reproducing colonial relationships within the Global South, or else personally experiencing the consequences of being called out. Solidarity is a difficult prospect under such circumstances. Individual behaviour is scrutinized by a moral public that strongly characterizes what not to do. What remains undeveloped is how to establish supposedly virtuous or appropriate allied relationships. These may or may not be characterized by qualities including altruism, reciprocity, communalism or capacity-building. Does calling out anticipate a response, a behavioural or social change, or is the act of vocalizing one’s moral castigation in itself the end goal? It is difficult to imagine a dialogic process of consciousness-raising, in the Freirian sense, when shouted back and forth across an expansive (digital) gulf. In short, is this kind of “awareness-raising” as a form of public pedagogy really changing anyone’s minds? Or is it simply resulting in self-surveillance of one’s behaviour, as Schwarz and Richey suggest; that is, an “anticipated digilantism” [32].

Both acts, volunteering and of shaming on HoT, are designed with potentially liberatory ambitions to foster social change through consciousness-raising and awareness-building. Although volunteer recruitment media and HoT adopt different understandings of the relationality between a privileged, typically white, Northern Subject and the racialized, (neo)colonial beneficiary of volunteer labour, as Other, they are both ultimately concerned with an ethics of the Subject’s conduct and duty of care towards the Others who “benefit” from it. Both recruitment media and HoT are broadly concerned with promises of delivering transnational justice in spite of their disagreements about how it looks and the means to achieve it. In each case the end goal of producing more equitable and just global relationships is located within the role of the individual volunteer. Either the volunteer travels abroad in efforts to improve the lives of those living within the Global South, or they do not do this in order to disrupt relations of colonial dependence. Neither imperative invites reflection on the political, economic and social structures that perpetuate relations of colonial dependence in the first place.

The transformations that volunteers are meant to undergo are typically framed through recruitment media, and understood by volunteers themselves, as opportunities to work on or develop their character, to mature or to grow professionally. This self-development stands apart from the context of broader, collective struggles and it does not rely upon a politics of solidarity or working as an ally. Volunteers hope to achieve positive feelings of accomplishment about their intervention through the establishment of positive, personal affects associated with individual accomplishment, empowerment, pride and gratification, rather than promoting social change in an ongoing and committed way. These feelings sit outside the practice of collective struggle and instead are prioritized alongside a neoliberal status quo that emphasizes individuality and personal success. Yet, as hooks (1989) notes, the experience of political awakening can often feel “difficult, frightening, and very demanding,” as “to change consciousness, cannot necessarily be experienced immediately as fun or positive or safe” [33]. Learning about oppression is often a painful process, and rarely does one’s first recognition of injustice illicit feelings of pleasure.

It strikes me that vigilant audiences also seek pleasure through exposing and shaming Tinder users. While this practice seeks to establish a broader, moral public, more research is needed to determine how substantive this form of shaming may be as a corrective form of pedagogy. To what extent does this type of calling-out inform, educate, and provoke processes of consciousness-raising and heightened self-reflexivity among those who view these jokes? And to what extent does it provoke self-regulation through anticipated
shame, such as changing the ways in which one posts or shares photos while on holiday or on a volunteer expedition?

Finally, I would like to conclude by asking how might we seek to understand specific impacts of shaming on the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of institutions rather than individuals? Can, or should, shaming be mobilized to address structural constraints that result in global poverty or underdevelopment from private sector corporations (i.e., extraction, tourism and financial industries) or public sector operations (i.e., governmental departments/ministries of international development, trade and international cooperation)? It seems like a useful exercise might be to imagine shaming these institutions, rather than the individuals who participate within and in spite of them.

About the author

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Acknowledgements

The author was supported throughout the data collection phase of this research by generous fellowships from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and Media@McGill.

The author has no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

Notes


3. The Tourism Research and Marketing (TRAM, 2008) suggests that 1.6 million tourists participate in volunteer programs a year and that the “total expenditure generated by volunteerism is likely to be between £832 million ($1.66 billion [USD]) and £1.3 billion ($2.6 billion [USD])” (2008, p. 42). No comparable study has been conducted since 2008, but these figures were projected to grow annually. Findings from the United Nation’s World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and World Youth Student and Educational (WYSE) Travel Confederation’s joint study (2016) show the increasing frequency of youth travel, estimating that in 2014, the total value of the international youth travel market (identified as travelers between ages of 15–29) was $US286 billion. By the year 2020, they estimate “almost 370 million youth travelers will account for a total spend of over USD 400 billion” (p. 10). While not all of these youth will necessarily travel as volunteers, the study observes an increasing trend of what they call “purposeful travel,” distinguished from leisure travel as work or study abroad trips, volunteer tourism or language learning-related travel (p. 12).
4. Heron, 2007, p. 7.
7. Ibid.
11. Holloway, et al., 2011, p. 244.
14. Ibid.
23. Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 3.
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**Editorial history**

Received 25 February 2021; accepted 3 March 2021.

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Selfies or self-development? *Humanitarians of Tinder (HoT)* and online shaming as a moral community by Nathaniel Laywine.


doi: [http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i4.11673](http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i4.11673)