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"Poverty Porn": The Narratives of INGO Media Campaigns

Monique Costner and Tanu Kohli



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Monique Costner and Dr. Tanu Kohli

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Abstract

International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have different strategies of raising awareness and funds for their causes. Sometimes however, these strategies can rely on the use of stereotypical or dehumanizing depictions of people from the developing world. We have all seen the images of hungry children with bloated stomachs, presumably from some African or Asian country. To what extent do these narratives present a grossly simplified version of the struggles people in poverty face? The term “poverty porn” has been coined to describe these kinds of shock-based images which reduce people to their vulnerability and helplessness. Narratives within INGO media campaigns can either contribute to, or combat stereotypical images of developing regions. The first section of this research will discuss representations of people from developing regions. Second, the research will examine strategies employed in several digital-based INGO media campaigns through their use of visual and verbal tools. Third, the research will analyze the ethical nature of media campaigns which contribute to or combat stereotypes. It is important for international non-governmental organizations and those within the field of international development to consider how communication strategies impact the understanding we have of developing regions. This research aims to look critically at INGO communications and provide best practices for organizations constructing their own media campaigns.

Introduction

When you think of the Global South, what narrative comes to mind? Perhaps it is of a reliance on the Global North for relief efforts, trade and economics, and political organization. Perhaps the immediate association is of disease, disaster, and war. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) that focus on development in the Global South face ethical challenges in their efforts to relay communications about the people they work with. Simplistic messages that rely on single-story narratives are easy to follow, but are an overused strategy for INGO communications. Poverty porn is a term increasingly used to describe shocking imagery from exploitative aid campaigns. These messages have real implications for how people from the Global North conceptualize and understand people from the Global South. Many from both the Global North and Global South have increasingly critiqued INGO campaigns' usage of old stereotypes which do not promote the dignity or agency of subjects. The RADI-AID parodies of INGO campaigns and subsequent awards to organizations which either promote or challenge stereotypes through their media campaigns have brought a comical perspective to this problematic issue.

Global North-based INGO aid campaigns use media to reinforce and challenge stereotypes about people in poverty from the Global South. This research will provide a case study analysis of both visual and verbal elements of three video aid campaigns from three Global North-based INGOs which focus on alleviating poverty: Oxfam, World Vision, and Save the Children. This analysis will look at the depictions of poverty in the Global South to understand how their aid campaigns can reinforce and challenge stereotypes.

Literature Review

Media Effects Theories

Early media effects theories from the 1920s suggested a direct and linear progression of ideas from the media to the receiver, such as the hypodermic needle theory (University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2016). Media scholars today know that media effects are much more complicated than this simplistic model might have one believe. Another theory which emerged is the agenda-setting theory, claiming that the media may not necessarily determine how the public views certain issues, but it has a role in determining which issues are on the public's mind (University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2010). Media effects theories have shifted to give more agency to the viewer in interpreting messaging and either rejecting, adopting, or changing a message (University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2016). Symbolic interactionism emphasizes how media plays a role in creating shared symbols; these symbols are important in the development of self as well as our interactions with others (University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2010). A more recent development, cultivation theory, explains how media "shapes our social realities" (University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2016) and distorts our views of the world. Violence is increasingly shown on television in particular, and is often in a racialized context, and this makes viewers perceive the world to be more dangerous than it actually is (University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2016).

Representations of the Global South in Media

Within the general media there are consistently problematic representations and portrayals of the Global South. The content in question presents certain ideas about poverty, and other

intersecting topics such as war and conflict, women, racial and ethnic groups, refugees, immigrants, and migrants, and disease.

The idea of “otherizing” is common in media representations, and as Hall (1997) would argue, has a legacy dated back to European colonial perspectives about the world. In “The Spectacle of the Other”, Hall demonstrates how imagery and messages about racial and ethnic differences in today’s media landscape have retained many of the same underlying notions of colonial times (Hall, 1997). Understanding European imperialism, especially with regards to the African continent, is essential to understand themes in media portrayals of African nations today. Journalists often resort to cliché or even inaccurate stories from Africa, and in deciding what is newsworthy, sometimes completely disregarding events altogether (Franks, 2010). Audiences are overwhelmed with stories about bad events occurring in Africa, but rarely does the public see stories about normal, everyday life as one might see about European countries, for example (Franks, 2010).

Film also falls for the use of certain tropes about racial, ethnic, or religious groups, especially with regards to the Global South. In one example, the documentary *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Jhally, 2006), shows how Arabs have been portrayed as barbaric, exotic, and evil at different points in film history. Arab women are often fetishized and not given a sense of agency in popular media (Jhally, 2006); this speaks to the fact that media representation of minority groups is often associated with other identity intersections such as gender.

Development Communications and Ethics

In 2007, Dóchas, the Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations and CONCORD, The European NGO Confederation for Relief and Development, adopted a code of conduct for use by development NGOs and all those reporting about development (Dóchas, n.d.). This code includes guiding principles centered around the respect for human dignity and showing the complexity of development work (CONCORD, 2012). The document provides commitments for signatories of the code, including the promotion of “fairness, solidarity, and justice” (CONCORD, 2012), avoidance of stereotypical imagery and messaging, full consent of subjects being portrayed, and consideration of subjects’ voices, rights, and wishes (CONCORD, 2012). The document makes special notice of protecting children in all communications. Dóchas created an illustrative guide to explain the code using examples of what principles mean in practice for both images and messages (Dóchas, n.d.). While some INGOs have adopted these codes, it is not uncommon for organizations to have their own set of ethical codes for media messages.

Aid Campaign Approaches

Aid campaigns usually resort to one of three different approaches to draw in audiences: shock effect, deliberate positivism, and post-humanitarian communication. All three approaches have a tendency to overly-simplify the situations people in poverty face, the causes of poverty, and the work INGOs do to alleviate poverty. This could be a product of the need for communication practitioners to present easy to understand message for their viewing publics (Scott, 2014). However, many INGOs may believe it is not to their benefit to reveal development in all of its complexities, as this could impact donations (Scott, 2014). In *Media and Development*, Scott (2014) argues no form of humanitarian communication is perfect. The development field itself has

inherent tensions; these are a product of the nature of INGO and charity work as well as outside influencing factors (Scott, 2014).

The shock effect approach is characterized by negative appeals “aimed to induce emotions of pity and guilt on the part of potential donors through images and descriptions of material poverty and images of helpless ‘others’ in the global South” (Cameron & Haanstra, 2008, p. 1476). Campaigns using these appeals tend to focus on human suffering, especially in close-up shots of the human body, almost in an objectifying manner (Scott, 2014). There is an overuse of children in shock-based advertisements, which fits well with the narrative of helplessness and innocence promoted in such campaigns, with little context explaining why the suffering is occurring in the first place (Scott, 2014). Such imagery is often considered to be exploitative and un-dignified. The classic case of this approach was the Live Aid and Live Aid/8 Campaigns under the UK-based Band Aid charity which began in the 1980s in the wake of the famine in Ethiopia which were dehumanizing and othering (Grant, 2015).

In response to the criticisms of the negative appeals of shock effect, deliberate positivism became more popular in aid campaigns, with its use of positive image appeals. It presents to audiences the positive effects donations can have for people in need and commonly employs imagery of smiling children (Scott, 2014). In contrast to the shock effect approach, deliberate positivism uses individual and personal stories to humanize subjects of aid campaigns, bringing a greater degree of agency and voice to those in the Global South (Scott, 2014). However, just as with shock effect, deliberate positivism provides an overly simplistic understanding of life in the Global South, which is not fair to claim as only happy and joyful, or miserable and difficult. Scott (2014) explains how these positive appeals also serve to reinforce an interpretation of Global North

– Global South relations which places those of the Global South as reliant on the generosity of the Global North for livelihood and happiness.

Post-humanitarian communication, coined by Chouliaraki (2010) focuses on low intensity emotions, individual judgement, and self-reflection. This approach is particularly “vulnerable to critiques of commodification” (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 17) since it does not involve emotional appeals or commitment. This lends itself to low-intensity and low-risk involvement, aided by the rise of internet technologies and branding, and can draw comparisons to the rise of slacktivism (Chouliaraki, 2010). Furthermore, post-humanitarian communication removes the “other” altogether, not allowing the audience to see or understand those in need.

Perceptions of Poverty in the Global South

Perceptions of poverty as a whole are generally negative and based off of misinformation, however, when related poverty to the Global South, these perceptions can be conflated. A report by Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) titled “The Live-Aid Legacy: The developing world through British eyes – A research report” demonstrated how pervasively certain stereotypes are associated with the developing world and the extent to which British participants understood development to be a non-mutual giving of help (VSO, 2002). Participants expressed misinformation and outdated information about developing countries, and when faced with the facts, many respondents felt upset that they felt conned by the media for its inaccurate portrayals (VSO, 2002).

Methodology

The research will examine video advertisements from three different INGO campaigns: Every Last Child, Save the Children; Child Health Now, World Vision; and Even it Up!, Oxfam. Each of these INGOs are based in the Global North, either in the U.S. or in the U.K., and focus primarily on alleviating poverty in the Global South. The campaigns were chosen based off three factors: the amount of exposure received, the funds raised, and celebrity endorsements. The specific videos from each campaign are: Every Last Child | Save The Children Advert (SaveTheChildren, 2016); What YouTube missed (WVIAdvocacy, 2014); and It's Time to Even It Up | Oxfam GB (Oxfam GB, 2017). These videos were chosen to represent their respective campaigns because they are the most recent general campaign advertisements with depictions of the Global South.

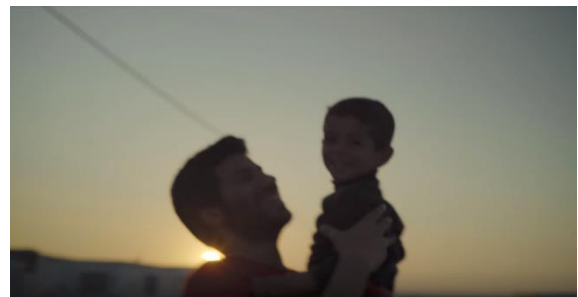
Data

Every Last Child | Save The Children Advert

The Every Last Child video (SaveTheChildren, 2016) show quick clips of scenes, presumably from around the world, of newborns, children and young adults interacting with Save the Children workers. The beginning moments show Save the Children workers transporting to various distant locations by plane, car, motorbike, and boat. Images of destruction, such as a collapsed highway, and lightning, are intermixed with scenes of workers traveling. The Save the Children workers appear to come across children in refugee camps, child laborers, homeless or street children, and children in other vulnerable circumstances.



There are shots of babies crying and Save the Children workers approaching the children to pick them up or offer a hand. There are clips of a girl learning with a teacher and children receiving food, water, and a prosthetic leg. Doctors are seen assisting with the birth of a child and providing medical care.



The final moments are of happy scenes, children playing sports with a Save the Children worker and cheering, and a Save the Children worker picking up a boy while both are smiling. The ad ends with the text “Help us save every last child” and a call to donate.

The video includes quick audio clips, with the theme of the video feeling chaotic as it jumps between scene to scene. There is some speech used but always in another language and generally hard to hear. There are sounds of children crying and cheering at different points. In the beginning portion of the video, transportation-related sounds can be heard along with other chaos-related sounds and imagery, such as lighting, dogs barking, and ambulances.

What YouTube missed

What YouTube missed (WVIAdvocacy, 2014) starts by showing videos of children which would be shared online, happy and playing, learning, dancing, celebrating birthdays, swimming, playing instruments and playing sports.



Fast-paced, uplifting music plays in the background. There is no narration, but on-screen text reads, “We live in an age where stories can be shared like never before. Every child has a story behind them. And a dream for their life ahead of them. There are some that we see. And others we don’t.”



At this moment in the video, the music slows down and decreases in volume. Several clips of children, either staring into the camera or off to the side are shown. There is also a clip of a young child in a woman’s arms, with the woman drying off the child’s tears. The text continues, “Hundreds of millions of children live their life unseen and uncounted. They are invisible to the health services that could save their lives. Their stories are left untold. Voices unheard. Together

we can change this.” The music changes once more to become gradually uplifting, as an image of a child eating from their hand is shown. There are other scenes of school children in groups, holding hands, singing, and dancing. The text reads, “This May stand with communities around the world,” as groups of adults and children raise their hands. The next screen reads “Share their voices. Help them be seen.”



Images of children smiling play as the music crescendos. The call to action is displayed, encouraging viewers to learn more about the Global Week of Action, part of World Vision’s Child Health Now campaign.

This campaign video does not rely heavily on verabals, however music plays an important part. There is some audio played during the scenes at the start of the video featuring children from Youtube videos, however only one clip of the children portrayed as being in need of help uses audio. The music for this video suggests to the viewer how to feel about what is being shown. At times the music is light and joyful, other times it slows down and has a sadder tone to it.

It's Time to Even It Up | Oxfam GB

Oxfam’s Even it Up campaign video (Oxfam GB, 2017) focuses on showing inequality between the rich and poor. It shows contrasting images of rich areas and people and poor areas and people. The video has statements about wealth and displays of wealth with images of wealth

and then images of poverty immediately following as a way to portray the hypocrisy of the statements. The statements seem to be narrated by reporters or other people in the news, suggesting they have been part of previous coverage. Similar music plays in the background throughout the video.



The images of poverty include a man digging in a trashcan, houses, refugees on boats, a child eating food among rubble, children collecting water from a stream, child laborers, a beggar outside of a Louis Vuitton store, and a man collecting disposed bottles.



In contrast, the images of wealth include big cities, yachts, expensive food, fancy events, and gold. The video ends with the text, “Just 8 billionaires own as much as the poorest half of the planet. It’s time to even it up” followed by a call to action, asking viewers to share the video.

Analysis

Passive Versus Active

These campaign advertisements show the use of both passive and active portrayals of people from the Global South. In the clips utilized by the advertisement What YouTube missed that portray children from what the viewer would assume to be the Global North, the children are active, playing and engaging in activities. The clips of children from what the viewer would assume is the Global South show children staring, but generally not engaging in any action. The children representing the Global South are primarily passive, either looking solemnly at the camera before the call for a viewer's help or smiling at the camera afterwards. This choice of content contrasting the two groups of children allows the message of needing the viewer's help to come through easily.

Save the Children's Every Last Child video includes several clips of children in active roles, attending school, playing sports, receiving packages, and working. By showing aid workers speaking various languages and of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, the video implies that the workers featured are local to the areas they work in. This would suggest to the viewer that those of the Global South actively play a role in assisting their communities. Although Save the Children is a Global North-based INGO, by making a conscious choice in the people featured in this video, the advertisement provides a degree of agency back to those who work in the Global South.

It's Time to Even It Up from Oxfam depicts both adults and children in active roles. The video shows clips of people working, searching for food, gathering water, and seeking refuge via a boat. The Global North is primarily represented through objects in this advertisement: houses, yachts,

gold, and champagne. Although voiceover and text mentions billionaires, there is only one clip of people from the Global North. The advertisement, which focuses on inequality, compares material objects of wealth with active and working people of the Global South.

Saviorism

The Every Last Child video explicitly demonstrates elements of saviorism. The focus of the advertisement is in its depiction of Save the Children aid workers intervening to help children in need. The heroic characterization of aid workers is underscored throughout the advertisement, as the viewer is shown numerous clips of children being picked up, offered a hand, and given food or water. In other shots, aid workers are shown giving medical care, teaching, and approaching children who are working or living on the street.

Although the other two advertisements do not show saviorism so explicitly in the content chosen, this theme can be found in each video's call to action. The Every Last Child video instructs viewers to "help us reach every last child". World Vision's What YouTube missed tells viewers "together we can change" the situation children in the Global South face and asks viewers to "stand with communities around the world" and "share their stories." The call to action from It's Time to Even It Up directs viewers to share the video and "demand an economy that works for everyone." The underlying message in these calls to action is that the power to change the situation of the people featured in the video is in the hands of viewers, either by donating or sharing on social media.

Vulnerability

The emphasis on emotional appeals in the advertisements is noteworthy. In each case, there is at least one shot, if not several, where the children or adults featured make direct eye contact with the camera. This strategy is often accompanied by a close-up shot of the subjects' face. Viewers feel a personal connection to the subject portrayed in this type of shot. There is a level of intimacy, as though the subject is looking at the viewer. In World Vision's What YouTube missed video, the clips of children used in this manner also rely heavily on facial expressions and emotions, either a solemn expression or a joyful expression. One clip from this advertisement features a woman, presumably a mother, wiping the tears off their young child's face. This shot is close enough where viewers can only see the child, not the mother. The vulnerability of some clips representing the Global South does not compare to those which portray the Global North. There is a certain level of intrusiveness permissible in these shots. Another potent example is the inclusion of a childbirth in the Every Last Child video. One might question whether these shots portray people of the Global South with the dignity afforded to people of the Global North.

Lack of Context

In all video advertisements, there is a lack of context with the visuals provided. There is no indication of specific locations or time periods. Viewers make assumptions about where the clips are taken from and this can lead to stereotypes. Additionally, the selected advertisements do not present any background explaining how or why those shown are in poverty or require assistance. Instead, viewers determine this based off pre-held assumptions. Oxfam's *It's Time to Even It Up* advertisement addresses the problem of inequality but does not provide insight for casual audience as to how this has occurred.

Lack of Voice

The selected advertisements do not rely as heavily on voice in the literal sense. However, those from the Global South are not given an opportunity to speak for themselves in all three cases. The audio from Oxfam's *It's Time to Even It Up* video is crucial to the central message, but it is solely representative of the Global North. There are different voices speaking about wealth in the news, seemingly from Global North-based media. Noticeably absent are the voices of those shown in poverty from the Global South.

Conclusion

Although INGO media campaigns may have come a long way from the extreme shock-based approaches of the Live Aid era, problematic elements persist. This research showed how three recent campaign videos have components which challenge stereotypes about the Global South but also contain reoccurring themes which undermine the work to destigmatize people in poverty. INGOs looking to be part of the changing narratives of the Global South in media should incorporate depictions of active roles, collaboration, dignity, context, and voice in their campaigns.

Communications practitioners are tasked with conveying a message which will be easily received and inspire action. A video, although easier to share a complex story than a single image, can still oversimplify and de-contextualize poverty in the Global South. The challenge will be to not take the easy route of one-sided portrayals and instead find creative ways to explain the complexities of development work and poverty. As demonstrated in this research, INGOs have more work ahead of them to challenge stereotypes of poverty in the Global South.

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