

**Non-Profit or For-Profit Volunteer Tourism Organizations  
Contributing to the Cause of Increasing Global Health Inequities? A  
Review of Online Marketing Tools**

by

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B.Sc., University of Waterloo, 2014

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Public Health

in the  
Public Health / SFU / Global Health  
Faculty of Health Science

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**SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY**

**Summer 2016**

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Organizations Contributing to the Cause of Increasing  
Global Health Inequities? A Review of Online Marketing  
Tools*

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## Abstract

Voluntourism is defined in this paper as organized short-term volunteer work completed in the Global South by a tourist from the Global North whose goal is to provide relief from or alleviate poverty in a society. Recently, this practice has been publicly critiqued for exacerbating global inequities, namely power and health. The marketing of voluntourism programs plays a significant role on the impacts of voluntourism (i.e., either reinforcing or stopping these critiques). Therefore, this paper seeks to examine volunteer tourism websites to better understand how medical voluntourism is marketed. It further seeks to compare for-profit and non-profit volunteer tourism organizations' marketing practices. A qualitative analysis of online mission statements and related text of 21 volunteer tourism websites, offering a medical project, was completed. It was found that for-profit volunteer tourism organizations promoted responsible volunteer travel and sustainability more often than non-profit organizations. However, non-profit organizations were more empowering than for-profit organizations when describing host communities. Lastly, organizations often demonstrated a discrepancy between their mission statement and website text constituting their underlying values.

**Keywords:** medical volunteer tourism; marketing; responsible volunteering; global inequity

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## **Background**

Voluntourism, used interchangeably with volunteer tourism throughout this paper, is a new and growing form of alternative tourism with approximately 3.5 million voluntourists having travelled abroad in 2015 (Mostafanezhad, 2014; Lee & Woosnam, 2010; Jakubiak, 2012; McCall & Iltis, 2014). Volunteer tourism has been defined many different ways, but for the purpose of this paper it is defined as organized short-term volunteer work completed in the Global South by a tourist from the Global North whose goal is to provide relief from or alleviate poverty in a society (Jakubiak, 2012; McCall & Iltis, 2014). One distinction that is made explicit in the literature, and critical to understand, is between traditional voluntourism and development volunteerism: traditional voluntourism (henceforth, simply ‘voluntourism’) is of shorter duration, involves less sustainable projects, requires fewer skills and is less culturally appropriate (McGloin & Georgeou, 2015). It is imperative to note here that *voluntourism is of shorter duration*. Although no consensus has been reached on what duration constitutes voluntourism, this paper will refer to volunteer tourism as volunteer experiences lasting between one week and three months.

### ***Purpose and Objectives***

The purpose of this paper is to examine volunteer tourism websites to better understand how medical voluntourism is marketed. This paper will attempt to assess if the underlying values of the for-profit and non-profit organizations differ.

### *Voluntourism as an Industry*

Emerging in the 1990s with its roots in the Peace Corps, voluntourism shares its ideology with cross-cultural solutions, which is “to provide volunteers and service in local communities rather than financial or material contribution” (Mostafanezhad, 2014, p. 29). Since the 1990s, voluntourism has grown considerably and has come to be viewed as a ‘rite of passage’ by some students (Calkin, 2014). Wilkinson, McCool & Bois (2014) further elaborate on this point by explaining that students now feel pressure to conform and participate in voluntourism in order to gain skills and experience required by schools and employers (Simpson, 2005). To explain further, global work experience is now a requirement for the acceptance of a student into many university programs and is an asset for an individual seeking employment, as volunteer tourism provides individuals with “cultural capital”, an asset that shows an individual has experience and education with different cultures (Simpson, 2005).

Voluntourists are often females travelling from high-income countries to low-income countries (McCall & Iltis, 2014; McGloin & Georgeou, 2015; Mostafanezhad, 2014; Molz, 2015). The most prevalent group of voluntourists is middle-class students and gappers (individuals who take a year off after high school or an undergraduate study) (Mostafanezhad, 2014; Molz, 2015). It has been stated that this young audience raises a cause for concern, particularly for medical voluntourism, as younger students have less medical, cultural and problem-solving experience and skills than qualified professionals (McCall & Iltis, 2014). Moreover, undergraduate students are less likely to be culturally aware than doctors and medical students because they have yet to receive “an introduction to cultural competence education” (McCall & Iltis, 2014, p. 288).

These volunteer tourism trips can be organized through for-profit or non-profit organizations or academic institutions. The scope of this paper will solely be focusing on for-profit and non-profit organizations that offer medical trips on a rolling basis throughout the year to multiple destinations in the Global South. For the purpose of this paper, ‘for-profit’ organizations will be used interchangeably with ‘commercialized’ organizations. The primary goal of a commercialized volunteer tourism organization is to generate profit. On the other hand, the ‘mission’ or goal of a non-profit organization is not primarily profit, as these organizations do not have owners or shareholders. This means that surplus revenue that is generated by a non-profit does not go to an owner or a shareholder through dividends, but instead is redistributed back into the organization to help achieve its mission (About Money, 2015).

There is currently no national or transnational regulation anywhere in the world specifically for private volunteer tourism organizations (McGloin & Georgeou, 2015; The Guardian, 2014; Breman, 2015). There are general national advertising guidelines in some countries (e.g., Canada) that outline principles for ethical marketing, however, these guidelines are not specific to voluntourism organizations and they are not mandatory (Advertising Standards Canada, 2016). In addition, organizations that are registered charities must adhere to specific obligations outlined by their federal governing body (e.g., Canada Revenue Agency) (CRA, 2015). However, these obligations are not specific to the marketing practices of charities.

Fortunately, there is one non-profit organization that offers optional guidelines to international volunteer organizations regarding ethical practice: The International Ecotourism Society (TIES). TIES provides commercialized volunteer tourism organizations with international voluntourism guidelines that help these organizations to “plan and manage their programs in a responsible and sustainable manner” (TIES, 2014, pg. 3). These guidelines

promote responsible volunteer travel, which refers to sustainability, setting the local communities' needs as the first priority, “[conveying] the goals of voluntourism programs, why they are important and how they make a difference” (p. 8), “[avoiding] all forms of poverty marketing”, which refers to marketing services by degrading others and using others' poverty as a selling feature (p. 8), “appropriately [matching volunteers'] interests, skills budgets and availability” with projects (p. 9), promoting cross-cultural understanding, and “clearly [communicating] about the possibility that volunteering is not the right option for some travellers due to a variety of reasons” (p. 11) (TIES, 2014). It is important to note that the TIES guidelines are targeted solely at commercial organizations, as it is these organizations that have received criticism regarding their mismanagement and negative impacts (TIES, 2014).

A second non-profit organization that promotes ethical voluntourism is the International Volunteer Programs Association (IVPA). The IVPA promotes responsible and ethical standards for volunteer tourism organizations, however, these guidelines are targeted at interested volunteers. This association currently has eight member organizations that adhere to these ethical standards. Interested volunteers can use this ‘stamp of approval’ to differentiate quality volunteer abroad programs from other available programs (IVPA, 2016).

### **Critiques of Volunteer Tourism**

#### ***Public Health Significance***

As an emerging practice, volunteer tourism has received much public attention and criticism (The Washington Post, 2016; Quartz Africa, 2016; New York Times, 2014; ABC News, 2016). Ultimately, medical volunteer tourism is criticized for exacerbating global inequity, that is, the unfair and unjust distribution of health and power that exists between

countries. As such, medical volunteer tourism is a global health issue through various mechanisms including its roots in neo-colonialism, lack of sustainable projects, and promotion of neoliberalism ideals.

### *Neo-colonialism*

Colonialism is a “practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one [country] to another” (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2012). Rooted in colonialism, neo-colonialism – namely, the persistent economic and power imbalances between former colonies and colonizing nations – is still observed today (Simpson, 2005). Neo-colonialism, within the context of volunteer tourism, refers to “foreign owned companies [i.e., volunteer tourism organizations] taking control and power over the local and regional levels” (Breman, 2015, p. 5). Simpson (2005) explains neo-colonialism in medical voluntourism as a construction by volunteer tourism organizations of a dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Simply put, this perpetuating dichotomy of ‘us’ and ‘them’ – a process sometimes referred to as ‘othering’ – in medical volunteer tourism stems from colonial world views that position ‘the other’ as inferior to ‘us’ because they are ‘poor’. This dichotomy normalizes poverty (Mostafanezhad, 2014, p. 145; Jakubiak, 2012; McCall & Iltis, 2014) and further leads to the concept that “something is better than doing nothing” (McCall & Iltis, 2014, p. 290). This idea, that ‘something is better than doing nothing’ has been criticized because it implies that host communities are ignorant and incapable of doing for themselves (McGloin & Georgeou, 2015; Calkin, 2014). This further excuses sending unqualified students from the Global North to the Global South to perform medical procedures that are outside their skill level, directly impacting the quality of health service and health status of host communities. Furthermore, this idea of ‘something is better than

nothing' provides opportunity for voluntourists to justify participating in such activities (McCall & Iltis, 2014). This rationalization of poverty and rendering the host community as incapable externalizes development and cultivates a dependency on aid (Simpson, 2004; McLennan, 2014). This dependency implies power relations, with the host countries holding less power (McLennan, 2014).

The dichotomy between 'us and them' also affects how voluntourists view and treat the local residents. Woosnam & Lee (2011) found that "many voluntourists consider local recipients as 'inferior' or 'less-able'" (p. 309). Even more worrisome is that often "voluntourists are ignorant of [these] underlying power and privilege issues inherent in voluntourism", which stems from their ignorance about the history of colonialism (McLennan, 2014, p. 163). McCall & Iltis (2014) further explain that if volunteers think they are 'better' than the host community and local health care professionals, the volunteers may disrespect local health personnel. Volunteer tourism organizations play a big role in either reinforcing this dichotomy or breaking the cycle by teaching voluntourists about the history of colonialism and the persistent power and privilege issues, as well as cultural competence.

Cultural competence is "a set of congruent behaviours [and] attitudes... among professionals and enable... those professions to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (Cross et al., 1989, p. iv). Research shows that decreased cultural competence increases cross-cultural misunderstandings between the voluntourist and the host community, which can reinforce negative cultural stereotypes and ultimately strengthen dichotomies of 'us and them' (Coren & Gray, 2012; McLennan, 2014; Woosnam & Lee, 2011; Breman, 2015). Furthermore, decreased cultural competence can lead to decreased cultural safety, where local residents do not feel comfortable accessing the medical services provided by voluntourists.

Further perpetuating the cycle of neo-colonialism, voluntourism has been cited as often neglecting locals' opinions or culture (McCall & Iltis, 2014; Guttentag, 2009; Breman, 2015). Medical volunteers bring their Western culture to the host communities in two ways, causing cultural changes among locals (Guttentag, 2009; McCall & Iltis, 2014; McLennan, 2014). First, medical voluntourists believe the biomedical model - their way of doing things – is the 'right' health model (McLennan 2014), thus, ignoring the locals' beliefs surrounding traditional medicine. This paternalistic view is problematic because Westerners do not always know what is best for the host country populations or communities. For example, the West has come to rely heavily on medical technology to promote health. However, this technology is expensive and not feasible in many host countries where electricity is scarce and/or not reliable. Further, host countries may not accept the medical strategies employed by voluntourism for cultural reasons. Second, the behaviours that the volunteers exhibit are later replicated by locals (Guttentag, 2009; McCall & Iltis, 2014; McLennan, 2014). McLennan (2014: p. 165) describes this process as a “form of imperialism, as their activities boost Western government and neo-liberal interests rather than tackling the root causes of poverty and injustice”. Furthermore, the persistent, disempowering engagement with countries that have previously been colonized does not address the desire and need of these countries for self-determination. Volunteer organizations, in most instances, do not recognize self-determination as a struggle against neo-colonialism and the injustices of colonialism. This neglect for the local culture and opinion means Westerners think their way of 'doing' and 'creating knowledge' is the best way. Inherent in this line of thinking are power imbalances and the belief that the West is superior. Volunteer tourism organizations and subsequently volunteers who accept these power relations do not challenge nor question how they came to be.

Since culture is predicated on historical and political contexts, volunteer tourism consequently ignores these contexts of host communities (Simpson, 2004; Calkin, 2014). By ignoring them, voluntourists cannot understand the cause of the observed inequities (Simpson, 2004). Instead, they frequently attribute their privilege to 'luck' or 'fate' (Simpson, 2004). Calkin (2014) refers to this ignorance as the 'innocent gaze', where volunteers are absent from reflecting on their "own positionality or socio-political effects on the destination" (p. 39). This innocent gaze justifies global inequality as something that cannot be changed (as it is seen to be dependent upon luck) as opposed to questioning the power relations or inherent structures that allow these power relations to persist and can be changed (Calkin, 2014; Simpson, 2004).

Medical volunteers travelling to host countries take away local employment opportunities, which contributes to the persistent power imbalances, and hence, neo-colonialism. This is achieved in one of two ways. First, volunteers provide the service for free or at lower cost than local providers, potentially putting local providers out of business (McCall & Iltis, 2014; Guttentag, 2009). Second, voluntourism often involves performing unskilled tasks that local residents could have completed (Guttentag, 2009). This loss of employment opportunity can result in a dependency on aid because locals are no longer being trained in the fields that are populated by international volunteers or because locals are losing business to the international aid workers. In a broader sense, Guttentag (2009) further explains that the presence of volunteers may also cause financial dependence for those employed in other sectors because they rely on volunteers to buy their products and services. This dependency on financial aid and voluntourism implies unequal power relations with the volunteers (and sending countries) holding all the power. Unfortunately, these power relations are not questioned nor challenged but instead reinforced because it is justified that volunteers (more generally, the Global North) are providing

aid to the receiving country and therefore ‘helping’ them. Furthermore, the aid that is provided to receiving communities also rationalizes existing global inequities because it is justified that those from the Global North are ‘doing their best’ to help those less fortunate. It does not question the underlying causes of inequities, nor does this ‘aid’ mitigate these underlying causes of inequity, creating and maintaining a dependence.

### ***Sustainable Change***

A main concern in the literature critiquing voluntourism is described well by Coren and Gray who assert that medical volunteer tourism “romanticizes poverty – failing to see the structural factors of inequality, which are responsible for that poverty” (Coren & Gray, 2012, p. 223; Mostafanezhad, 2014; McLennan, 2014; Jakubiak, 2012). Put another way, the medical volunteer tourism practice lacks a population health approach, which draws on health promotion strategies and acknowledges individual and collective agency within targeted communities (PHAC, 2013). It is imperative that solutions that wish to achieve sustainable change target the structural causes of inequality and acknowledge the agency of local communities, as it is these changes that will empower host communities to believe and do for themselves. Medical voluntourism is primarily focused on offering medical *aid* (lasting anywhere from a week to a few months) to the Global South. At best, this aid improves the acute health status of a few individuals in the host country (McCall & Iltis, 2014). Once this aid is finished and is no longer available to the host country, many of these individuals are likely to quickly return to their previous level of health. It is important to understand that this medical aid helps a few individuals here and there, but does not address health at a community (e.g., prevention through social determinants of health) or structural (e.g., capacity building) level. At its worst, medical

voluntourism has negatively affected the health of some individuals in host communities because these individuals become dependent on the free medical treatment from volunteers and wait for the next volunteer medical visit (McLennan, 2014). Additionally, these initiatives of volunteer organizations are not well integrated into the national, regional, and local poverty reduction programs as well as more local, community-based and led efforts. This does not allow for capacity development or skill transfer nor self-determination. Overall, medical voluntourism results in a dependency because voluntourism organizations do not create sustainable change. This dependency implies power imbalances, with the receiving community holding very little power.

### *Neoliberalism*

An underlying argument against voluntourism is that it is growing to be a very commercialized industry, with private organizations becoming vaster and having a wider scope (Mostafanezhad, 2014; Hartman, Paris, & Blache-Cohen, 2014; Coghlan & Noakes, 2012). This commercialization is rooted in neoliberalism, which is defined as transferring “control of economic factors to the private sector from the public sector”, including factors such as market economics, cutting social expenditures, privatization, deregulation, and promoting individual responsibility rather than community (Investopedia, 2016). As previously mentioned, the major goal of commercialized volunteer tourism organizations is to generate profit for the owners and/or shareholders and, within the voluntourism context, does so at the expense of exploiting those less fortunate (i.e., host communities) (Mostafanezhad, 2014; McGloin & Georgeou, 2015; Coren & Gray, 2012). Volunteer tourism organizations exploit the host communities by using pictures of locals in which they look ‘poor’ or by disempowering the local communities through

text that describes them as ‘in need’. Organizations use this to attract more customers because it is this exploitation that pulls at the heart strings and caters to the motivations of volunteers to help those less fortunate. These ideals align with neoliberalist ideals, which promote the role of the private sector and the commodification of services (The Guardian, 2016). Further, there is no regulation for private volunteer tourism organizations (McGloin & Georgeou, 2015; The Guardian, 2014), which is concerning as it furthers the opportunity for unethical practices within these organizations (McGloin & Georgeou, 2015). For example, although some organizations state that volunteers must show medical qualifications prior to completing a placement, this is not always the case in practice (Bremner, 2015). The profit that an organization can make off of a volunteer sometimes overrides the ethical decisions made by for-profit volunteer organizations. This contributes to global health inequity because untrained, unqualified volunteers are being sent to the Global South and provide medical care to local residents.

### **Marketing in Volunteer Tourism**

#### ***How Marketing Relates to the Critiques***

The marketing of volunteer tourism programs – through the use of language and images – plays a significant role on the impacts of volunteer tourism (i.e., either reinforcing or challenging the critiques stated above) (Smith & Font, 2014). This is demonstrated through the theory of destination, which states that “individuals can have an image of a destination even if they have never visited it” (Coghlan, 2007, p. 268). It is for this reason that Smith & Font (2014) state that volunteer tourism organizations have a social duty “in influencing, leading and managing consumer desires and expectations” (p. 943). Specifically, the *online* materials play a crucial role in attracting volunteers in their decision-making process, as it has been stated that all volunteers

use the Internet at least once in their decision-making process (Grimm & Needham, 2012). To attract volunteers, volunteer tourism organizations market country- and project-specific cultural motives and novelty (Grimm & Needham, 2012; Keese, 2011; Breman, 2015). These pull factors are external factors that attract volunteers to a specific destination or project and cater to volunteers' push factors, which are intrinsic to an individual (Grimm & Needham, 2012; Keese, 2011; Breman, 2015). Volunteers' push factors include motivations for participating in volunteer work and are expanded on in a later section of this paper: 'Volunteer Motivations'.

### **Neo-colonialism**

A common marketing technique that has been found across volunteer tourism organizations is portraying the host community as the 'other' (Nyahunzvi, 2013; Simpson, 2004). Simpson (2004) analysed marketing materials from commercial organizations in order to "explore the ways development and the 'third world' are presented and 'sold' to gap year participants" (p. 682). Simpson's findings show that marketing of host communities use homogeneous descriptions and "summarize entire nations of people into simple pairs of descriptors, clearly intended to be recognizable to a western imagination" (p. 683). This use of stereotypical language reinforces the neo-colonial narrative by grouping host communities as the 'other' (Breman, 2015). Moreover, marketing materials from volunteer tourism organizations validate the neglect of locals' opinions and culture by "portraying a simplistic version, largely devoid of history [and] people" (Coren & Gray, 2012, p. 232).

Using Pratt's framework of imperial encounters, Calkin (2014) examined the discourse of volunteer tourism organizations' promotional materials in light of the neo-colonial critique. In this study, she did not differentiate between commercial and development organizations. Calkin

found that volunteer tourism discourse tries to differentiate volunteer tourism from mass tourism and does so by portraying a “perception of remoteness” and romanticizing poverty (p. 33, 34). Language used to romanticize poverty include statements such as ‘poor-but-happy’ (Simpson, 2004, p. 688). This language perpetuates the narrative of neo-colonialism by allowing volunteers to rationalize, instead of challenge, global inequities and by framing the host community as ‘poor’. Not only do organizations frame the host community as ‘poor’, they go even further by using marketing videos to promote the volunteer as a ‘hero’ who helps a country that would otherwise not survive (Breman, 2015). This marketing further contributes to the thinking that volunteers (or the Global North) are powerful, while host communities are powerless. It has also been noted that volunteer tourism organizations’ promotional materials are devoid of political and historical content that explain the colonial past and the economic arrangements between countries, which help to explain why these host communities are experiencing such deprivation and poverty (Calkin, 2015; Simpson, 2004). Due to the ‘need’ and deprivation existing in these host communities, it has been found that volunteer tourism organizations promote personal characteristics as sufficient for completing a medical volunteer tourism placement and professional qualifications as unnecessary or simply missing from the dialogue altogether (Calkin, 2014; Wilkinson et al., 2014).

### **Sustainability**

Simpson (2004) notes that ‘development’ is never directly referenced, but only alluded to, in volunteer tourism marketing materials. She explains that the reasoning for this indirect language may be to allow organizations to protect themselves from being held accountable from such an agenda (Simpson, 2004). Furthermore, these marketing materials “offer a view that

encourages a perception of development as a simple matter” (Simpson, 2004, p. 685). Missing is the discussion around “long-term strategy... and impact of volunteers” (Simpson, 2004, p. 685), meaning volunteer tourism organizations are focusing their efforts on short term projects.

Organizations often exaggerate information on their websites, or make unrealistic promises, “as it is inconceivable that in just two weeks and regardless of the nature of the voluntary duty undertaken, a voluntourist would have made a ‘real’ difference” (Nyahunzvi, 2013). This use of hyperbole in marketing materials reinforces the sustainability critique because it leads volunteers to believe that they will ‘make a difference’ and therefore will only want to work on activities that show immediate change and show the volunteer that they have ‘fixed’ something (McCall & Iltis, 2014, p. 289).

### **Volunteer Motivations**

Devoid of history and politics, volunteer tourism websites promote voluntourism as an experience to be “consumed” by the volunteer (Calkin, 2014, p. 34). To promote this consumption, organizations appeal to the volunteer motivations by using language that implies an ‘exotic’ experience as well as photos of local residents to characterize a ‘real’ experience (Calkin, 2014; Wilkinson et al., 2014). The problem with using this type of promotion is that it exploits the host community, rendering them powerless. Marketing materials that promote the notion of personal gain (e.g., gaining new skills or boosting a CV) and “deeper” motivations (e.g., “altruism”, “purpose” and “helping”) are also found across volunteer tourism websites (Wilkinson et al., 2014, p. 13). Oftentimes, however, claims appealing to the ‘deeper’ motivations promote unrealistic promises as a marketing strategy to appeal to more volunteers (Calkin, 2014, p. 40). Again, this may result in volunteers who want to work on activities that

show immediate change and show that they have ‘fixed’ something, as opposed to working on activities that will help a country break out of poverty and a dependency on aid. Individuals with good intentions are also exploited by these organizations by not grounding these intentions within context and educating these volunteers on history and the persisting power imbalances. These volunteers return home with “little insight into the causes of poverty and what can be done to alleviate them” (Van Engan, 2001, p. 2). With little insight, no efforts will be made to change these causes and instead continue to provide aid, resulting in a dependency implying power imbalances. Furthermore, by marketing to the personal gain motives, it may attract volunteers with the wrong intentions. If they have the wrong intentions, they are more interested in the superficial aspects and less likely to question or challenge the poverty observed on their experience.

### **Neoliberalism**

Volunteer tourism organizations interested in profit over ethical practice use the marketing techniques previously discussed to commodify volunteer tourism (i.e., turn volunteer tourism into a service that can be bought and sold). When commodification of volunteer tourism occurs, volunteers become the customer and volunteer tourism organizations try to please volunteers rather than host communities (Breman, 2015). This would mean volunteer tourism organizations market aspects such as flexibility, security, and low prices as a strategy to attract potential voluntourists (Wilkinson et al., 2014). This shift in focus to volunteers from the host community further perpetuates the existing power imbalances by giving the power to the volunteers’ wants as opposed to the host communities’ needs. It has been observed that it is these superficial factors (e.g., flexibility, security, and affordability) that potential volunteers are

comparing between organizations when choosing an organization and project, meanwhile are unmindful of the underlying values of an organization (Coghlan, 2006).

### ***Why Compare Non-Profit and For-Profit***

It is clear from the above discussion that volunteer tourism organizations market projects and destinations using commercialized strategies that focus on the volunteer as opposed to the host community. This is not a surprise for for-profit organizations, as their goal is profit, which is dependent on the number of voluntourists they can attract (Wilkinson et al., 2014). Less clear, however, is how non-profit volunteer tourism organizations compare to for-profit organizations in ethical marketing. It is known that non-profit organizations have been forced to use commercial strategies due to the proliferation of volunteer tourism organizations (Coghlan & Noakes, 2012), but it has also been stated, “the status of the organization is no guarantee of responsible practice” (Smith & Font, 2014, p. 942). Calkin (2014) made reference to this need to distinguish between for-profit and non-profit organizations. However, there still remains no research with a central focus on comparing the online marketing of for-profit and non-profit voluntourism organizations. Understanding how the status of an organization affects ethical marketing practices will help to better target recommendations and to hold specific organizations accountable. Considering the primary goals of for-profit and non-profit organizations, one would anticipate for-profit organizations to have less ethical marketing practices (as their primary goal is profit) than non-profit organizations, whose primary goal is humanitarian and whose focus and attention is to the host community.

### ***Personal Bias***

First, it is important to highlight my potential bias in discussing voluntourism, as I have worked as a voluntourist on multiple occasions. My first experience abroad was working in a hospital in Tanzania, Africa. This experience was organized through a commercial volunteer tourism organization, whose head office is located in the Global North. My second work experience abroad was conducting a needs assessment in a small community in the Tecpan area of Guatemala. This experience was organized directly through a small, non-profit organization and communication was done through the founders who lived on-site. I had very different expectations for each of these trips because they were marketed very differently. For example, I was expected to learn Spanish before starting my placement in Guatemala. However, my medical placement in Tanzania was marketed as a more fun, exotic experience where I was going to be living in a volunteer house with other volunteers who also did not speak the local language. Having these experiences have provided me with knowledge surrounding the voluntourism process and how this process is carried out in practice. However, these previous experiences may also bias my results as Coghlan (2006) explains, “individuals who have more experience travelling are more critical of organizations” (p. 236).

### **Methods**

#### ***Organization Selection***

An online search using the search engine *Google* and the terms “medical volunteer abroad” was performed on May 8, 2016 and generated 449,000 results. Google was used as it has been stated that this search engine is “the most common method for searching and finding information” for voluntourists (Grimm & Needham, 2012, p. 21). Each individual link was

visited chronologically until organizations started to repeat and links became irrelevant (the first 170 links were visited until this point was reached). From these links, 66 organizations were found. The websites of each organization on this initial list were reviewed using the inclusion criteria outlined in Appendix 1. A total of 21 organizations met the inclusion criteria, which were subsequently sorted into for-profit and non-profit organizations. Non-profit organizations were identified if they explicitly stated they were a charity or a non-profit on their website or if they were listed on Guidestar (a website that provides financial and overview information on all non-profit organizations in the United States). The remaining organizations were labelled for-profit, as there was no clear indication that they were non-profit.

### *Analysis*

Website text that constituted the values and purpose of the organizations and is a communication by the organizations about their values (e.g., ‘about us’ page, ‘history’ page) was imported into a data analysis software called NVIVO. Each organization was created as a *case* and labelled as ‘for profit’ or ‘non-profit’ as an attribute. This categorization of organization using an attribute allowed a query to be made later, which compared the organizations based on this attribute. A qualitative summative content analysis – “[involving] counting and comparisons, usually of keywords or content, followed by the interpretation of the underlying context” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277) – was conducted using the website text. First, the mission statements – chosen because they are a “formal summary of the aims and values of an organization” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016) – of each of the 21 websites were coded line-by-line. Additional text along with the mission statements was then coded line-by-line in order to identify the underlying and intrinsic values embedded in these statements. Codes were continuously grouped together

based on similarities until themes emerged inductively from the analysis. The dominance of a theme was predicated on the frequency each theme was referenced in the coded text. These frequencies were also used to compare marketing practices of for-profit and non-profit organizations. Memos were also written during and after reviewing the material for each website and are used in addition to the coded text. These memos include additional notes surrounding the meaning of the words and messages used as well as discrepancies between an organization's mission statement and their underlying values.

## **Results**

In total, 21 organizations met the inclusion criteria and are included in this study. A list of these included organizations and their associated characteristics can be found in Appendix 2. Sixteen of the 21 websites had a mission statement clearly stated on their website. For the remaining five organizations, the mission statement was summarized from the additional text examined as a mission statement is a “formal summary of the aims and values of an organization” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). Four themes emerged from the analysis in addition to two observations.

### ***Theme 1: Volunteer Tourism is a Business (with the Volunteer as the Customer)***

The second most referenced theme that emerged from the mission statements – and was mentioned in the additional text of every included organization – was an organization selling themselves to potential customers. ‘Selling themselves’ was defined as a set of techniques – listed later in this paragraph – used to promote what the organization has to offer voluntourists. Some common techniques the organizations used to sell themselves in their mission statements

include affordability, promising a quality experience, and ensuring safety to the volunteers. Safety was explicitly stated in two mission statements, while affordability and quality were each explicitly stated in three mission statements. Additional marketing techniques used to promote the organization itself – but to a lesser extent – include customization, professionalism, flexibility, accessibility, experience and knowledgeable staff, trust, and variety. Moreover, examining the additional text from all websites, it was found that for-profit organizations sell themselves – using the keywords previously mentioned – roughly three times more than non-profit organizations (after accounting for the number of each type of organization in this study). One organization’s mission statement had limited purpose outside of boosting the organization itself and using positive adjectives to try and promote ‘excellence’ and ‘great’ or ‘the best’ programs. When examining additional text for another organization, it was found that they were honest about volunteering abroad and not only try to sell their product:

“Volunteering is exhilarating, life changing and rewarding but if you are not ready and haven’t thought it through it can be difficult, not just for you. It will also affect other volunteers, project participants who have been waiting for your help, and people at home who will worry about you. Sometimes it is just that you are not ready to volunteer, not that you shouldn’t volunteer. By deferring for a year or volunteering in your local community you may be ready to become an international volunteer in the future.”

As a business, some organizations viewed the volunteer as their customer, and therefore made the volunteer their priority. This was made explicit on some websites where the “prime responsibility is to the volunteer”. Less explicit, another organization discusses the benefits of volunteering in their FAQ section, and frames their response entirely around the volunteer

including the personal and professional benefits they will gain. In addition to promoting their own organization and emphasizing the volunteer as their customer, it was found that these websites also appeal to volunteers' motivations in order to attract potential 'customers'.

### ***Theme 2: Volunteer Motivations***

The most common theme that emerged across the organizations' mission statements was marketing that appealed to volunteers' motivations to help sell their product. This section is different from selling oneself (as in the preceding section) because the preceding section focused on what the organization itself has to offer the voluntourist, whereas this section focuses on what the experience and practice of voluntourism as a whole has to offer a voluntourist. These motivations were divided into two broad categories: personal interest and selfless motives. Examining the additional text from the websites, the first category – the personal interest motivation – included notions such as 'travel', 'fun', 'unique' or 'exotic' experience, 'CV builder', 'experience of a lifetime', and meeting other volunteers. These notions were referenced almost twice as much as the selfless motives across for-profit and non-profit organizations. Some organizations even made these personal interests the primary focus of their marketing. For example, one organization, whose mission statement focused on volunteer gain, elsewhere on their website was found stating, "not only will you receive beneficial experience to help with your university applications and interviews but you will also learn more about your future profession". This same organization goes even further to emphasize the volunteers' 'personal gain': "it no longer matters what they do, it matters why they do it. Making bigger memories, filing journals with photos and inspiring and shareable content. Sharing all that with the world". Although this organization tried to frame 'memories' in a positive light, it is clear from their

underlying values that they are solely rationalizing volunteers travelling abroad to volunteer for superficial motives and to ‘improve their social media’ with photos. Referenced far fewer times in both the mission statements and the additional text, selfless motives included notions such as wanting to ‘make a difference’, ‘change lives’, ‘help others’ or ‘make a contribution’. Overall, for-profit and non-profit organizations have comparable ratios of appealing to volunteers’ personal interests and selfless interests.

### ***Theme 3: Responsible Volunteer Travel***

Specifically mentioned in three mission statements (addressed twice within one mission statement) and alluded to in 9 mission statements, responsible volunteer travel emerged as a common theme. When examining additional text, it was found that although explicitly referenced numerous times by seven of the organizations (five for-profit and two non-profit organizations), only two organizations (both for-profit) provided a clear (incomplete) definition of responsible volunteer travel and three organizations (all for-profit) provided a responsible volunteering policy. Though incomplete, one organization explained responsible travel as “travellers making informed and responsible choices, and planning trips which have a positive impact on the country they're visiting, and its wildlife, environment and people. This usually means getting closer to local cultures, learning about the people and the history of places, and embracing diversity”. The remaining two organizations used the term ‘responsible travel’ or ‘responsible volunteering’ on their websites without specifically explaining what they meant by it, how they achieve it, or why it is important.

An important concept of responsible volunteer travel is promoting “cross-cultural understanding and cultural sensitivity” (TIES, 2012). This concept was portrayed in the mission

statements and additional text explicitly or implied using descriptions such as “a greater awareness of other cultures leads to peace and understanding”, “creating a global community”, “nurture a culture of mutual respect and understanding”, or “to promote multiunderstanding among volunteers all over the world”, among others. It is important to note that only one organization explained the link between cross-cultural understanding and successful volunteer placements: “we have found that when international volunteers feel safe and knowledgeable about their new environment [e.g., the political and historical context], they are far better prepared to focus their energies on their work”. Going into more depth, one organization explained the link between inequity and cross-cultural understanding:

“More than ever, people around the world want change. Change in the inequities that polarize. Change in the corrupt systems that prevent self-determination. Change in the unjust repression of entire populations. But the change we all wish to see won't be realized through big, sweeping acts—not by governments, or armies, or the UN. Instead, lasting change will be achieved through small, personal acts of kindness and selflessness, and through the spreading of tolerance and understanding between people and cultures. Only as people become more willing to change themselves—the way they think, the way they act—will real change become possible. It is exactly these types of changes that [our organization] makes possible. The passion that you bring to your volunteer abroad experience will start a ripple effect, bringing change to people and the communities in which they live. Meanwhile, you'll find wisdom and beauty in a way of life different from

your own. You'll discover the critical role that every individual plays in achieving lasting change.”

#### ***Theme 4: Sustainability***

Overall, sustainability was promoted a lot more than aid in both the mission statements and the additional text, with all but four of the organizations specifically using the term ‘sustainability’ in the additional text. However, far fewer organizations were found that mentioned concrete solutions of how they hope to achieve this ‘sustainability’. Some examples that were provided in the additional text included understanding the political, historical, and economic contexts, tackling the root causes, local empowerment, local employment, culturally specific interventions, and capacity building. Among these sustainable solutions, local engagement and empowerment were the most prominent with notions such as “the locals are the experts”, “tailoring our programs to the needs expressed by the families and local leaders”, and “local organizations or communities to identify and engage in solving their problems”. One organization goes even further to explain why local engagement is important:

“the staff in these organizations are locals, they have been raised in the area and know it inside and out. They can speak the local language, they know the local people and are in the best position to provide guidance, advice, supervision and support... an important aspect of effective volunteer abroad programs is community involvement, and for that reason, it is imperative to have local stakeholders”.

This importance of local engagement was nicely summed up by one organization as “local problems demand local solutions”.

Demonstrating sustainability, one organization discusses how their additional outreach programs (e.g., a global health conference and research fellowship program) will complement their healthcare delivery. They go further to explain how this comprehensive approach will allow education, knowledge sharing, and capacity building, which all promote sustainability. Overall, the ratio of promoting sustainability over aid was greater for for-profit organizations than non-profit organizations in the additional text.

In addition to the themes that emerged from the coding, I reflected on my memos and made the following observations.

***Observation 1: Use of Language and Messages***

Involving the local community in the voluntourism process shows respect and appreciation for that community. However, while analyzing the mission statements, it was apparent that some organizations were less respectful in how they referred to the host communities. This was examined in more detail in the additional text, which led to two broad concepts being found that did not show the same level of respect: the use of language used to describe the host communities and messages used. It was found that organizations most often describe host communities as ‘those most in need’ or where volunteer services are ‘desperately needed’. Other, less frequently used terms used to describe host communities were ‘poor’, ‘underserved’, ‘underprivileged’, ‘developing’, ‘disadvantaged’, and ‘foreign’. Negative descriptors (‘poor’ and ‘in need’) were noted as being more disempowering of host communities, while appropriate descriptors (those listed as being used less frequently) were more empowering. The ratio of negative descriptors to appropriate descriptors was more than two times as high for for-profit organizations compared to non-profit organizations in the additional text. This means

that for-profit organizations use the negative descriptors more often than the appropriate descriptors when compared to non-profit organizations.

Some embedded messages that do not show respect for the local residents include the following: one organization stated that “because [they] work in only these three countries, [they] know them... as well as most locals”. Further, another organization stated that “it no longer matters what [the volunteers] do, it matters why they do it. Making bigger memories, filling journals with photos and inspiring and shareable content. Sharing all that with the world”. Another organization states “we don’t risk your health or safety by placing you with a host family. Instead, you’ll stay in our Home-Base, where there’s 24-hour security, safe and delicious local food, local transport in [company] vehicles, and other volunteers who are sure to become your lifelong friends”.

### ***Observation 2: Discrepancies and Ambiguities***

Overall, the themes and their relative frequency that emerged from the mission statements alone were the same as the themes that emerged from the mission statements and additional text combined. Unfortunately, it was noticed that the mission statements of some organizations did not always match the underlying values embedded in the additional text. For example, one organization’s mission statement focuses on “improving the lives of destitute children and communities that are far less fortunate”. However, their underlying values are concerned with the safety of the volunteer and selling themselves as an organization. On the other hand, there are some organizations whose underlying values are well intentioned and interested in the global good, but whose mission statement does not do a good job portraying this. For example, one organization’s mission statement is very diffused, mentioning their

interest in “making a long term, positive change”, “improving their own business”, and “being appealing for travellers”. Reading further, this organization values responsible travel and sustainable projects. Another example is the mission statement of one organization, which is very general promoting “access to medical care”, but whose underlying values promote sustainability and local engagement.

It was also common across these organizations to use buzzwords to promote goals in both the mission statements and additional text without explaining how or why they will achieve these goals. To exemplify, one organization’s mission statement promotes “understanding in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and international settings”. However, reading further, the organization does not explain what this goal means, show how it will be achieved nor why this goal is important. This same organization uses the words “rewarding experience” multiple times. However, the meaning of the word “rewarding” is unclear as to whether it means ‘rewarding’ in terms of helping others (a selfless motive) or ‘rewarding’ because one is able to add it to a CV (a selfish motive). In similar fashion, one organization uses the term “worthwhile” when describing their volunteer projects. Again, the meaning of ‘worthwhile’ is ambiguous as to whether it is referring to ‘making a difference’ and ‘helping change lives’ or adding to a CV. Another organization uses the term “responsible travelling” and “cross-cultural understanding” throughout their website. However, nowhere on their website do they describe to the volunteers what these terms mean. Again, another organization mentioned ‘fair and sustainable partnerships’ with the host community but do not explain how they will achieve this. Finally, one mission statement used the buzzword ‘ethical organization’. However, after reading additional text from their website, there is no mention of how they promote ‘ethical’ practice.

## Discussion

### *Volunteer Tourism is a Business*

Due to the proliferation of volunteer tourism organizations, these organizations have been forced to rely on commercialized strategies (e.g., marketing) to attract potential volunteers (Coghlan & Noakes, 2012). This was reinforced in this study, as self-promotion by organizations was observed on all the websites. This is of concern as it is argued, “commercial strategies and activities can pull a non-profit organization away from its original mission” (Coghlan & Noakes, 2012, p. 123, 124).

Similar to previous research, this study found that organizations used customization, flexibility, affordability, and safety as a strategy to attract potential customers (Wilkinson et al., 2014). However, the idea of security can further reinforce the idea of ‘us and them’. To exemplify, many organizations made reference to a volunteer house with 24/7 security and protection around the house (i.e., a fence). This separates the volunteers from the rest of the community, reinforcing the ‘us and them’ mentality. This separation also reinforces the idea that volunteers need to be protected from the local residents, inherently indicating the power imbalance that the volunteers are superior to the host community.

Supporting previous literature (Breman, 2015), it was also found that the included organizations viewed the volunteer as the customer. For example, one website was cited stating “prime responsibility is to the volunteer”, while another organization discusses the benefits of volunteering in their FAQ section, and frames their response entirely around the volunteer including the personal and professional benefits they will gain. This is problematic because it shifts the focus from the host community and the long-term impact of bringing about global change to tailoring products to please volunteers.

### *Volunteer Motivations*

In viewing the volunteer as the customer, organizations were found to try to appeal to volunteers' motivations, be it selfless or selfish motives. This is confirmed by Grimm & Needham (2012) who state that organizations will often promise volunteers that they will "make an enormous impact on poverty and the environment" (p. 25). This is worrisome for multiple reasons. First, it is problematic to volunteers who have good intentions because organizations try to market to these intentions, increasing the likelihood of an organization making unrealistic or false promises. This unrealistic marketing creates expectations for volunteers that end up being different from reality causing "decreased satisfaction levels and lowered volunteer motivation and commitment. This in turn will decrease the effectiveness of the volunteer tourism organization which is trying to achieve its conservation or humanitarian goals" (Coren & Gray, 2012, p. 232). Another problem with appealing to the selfless motives of volunteers with good intentions is explained by Bremen (2015) as "the tour operators really persuade the volunteer tourist to the belief that they conduct a meaningful act when volunteering. Therefore, it can be said that the tour operators are the ones that most likely mislead the expectation of volunteer tourists and part of the aim of volunteer tourism projects. It is deceitful to only judge the volunteer tourists on their acts while volunteering, when the [volunteer tourism organization] makes the volunteer tourists feel like they are doing something beneficial" (p. 26).

Second, by appealing to the selfish or personal gain motives, organizations will attract volunteers with self-gratifying intentions. This means these volunteers will be volunteering for superficial reasons and therefore may not be as engaged in or reflexive of the experience. When individuals are not engaged or reflexive, there will be no questioning of the observed global

inequity or its causes. Furthermore, by appealing to volunteers' motivations, organizations are not teaching them what is appropriate in the host community. McCall & Iltis (2014) explain this as "students should be responsible enough to be aware of and respect their limits, but they must be taught to do so. Eager students who see only poverty and need may not restrain themselves without being taught to do so" (p. 294). One selfish motive that was capitalized on by multiple organizations was making friendships with other volunteers. Although this may not be the primary goal of volunteer tourism, Coren & Gray (2012) explain how these international friendships, nonetheless, can still promote cultural acceptance.

Finally, host communities are at a disadvantage when organizations cater to volunteers' motives because the focus and attention of the organization shifts to the volunteer from what is really important: humanitarian goals. This shift occurs because volunteers and host communities often have competing interests, with volunteers wanting to experience new activities and see their impact (e.g., perform clinical duties) and host communities requiring assistance with more upstream causes (e.g., capacity building). Furthermore, this shift to pleasing customers does so at the expense of exploiting those less fortunate (Mostafanezhad, 2014; McGloin & Georgeou, 2015; Coren & Gray, 2012).

### ***Responsible Volunteer Travel***

Responsible volunteer travel is an umbrella term that includes many concepts. However, in this context, responsible volunteer travel refers specifically to the use of the term 'responsible' or promoting cross-cultural understanding on the websites. Interestingly, it was found that for-profit organizations were more likely than non-profit organizations to provide a responsible volunteer travel policy. A possible explanation for this finding is that since there has been much public

criticism around voluntourism and the goal of for-profit organizations is to attract as many customers as possible, for-profit organizations want a tangible document to provide to potential customers to assure them that their organization does not foster those criticisms. This policy may be used more as a technique to attract potential customers instead of as a product of pure intentions.

Only one organization attempted to explain the relationship between inequity and cross-cultural understanding. It was explained that smaller, individual acts (as opposed to big, sweeping acts) will allow for change to occur by learning and accepting other cultures. However, this explanation does not make it clear how understanding and accepting another culture will promote equity. The explanation also mentions the desire for “change in the inequities that polarize. Change in the corrupt systems that prevent self-determination. Change in unjust repression of entire populations”. However, the explanation undermines the importance of ‘big, sweeping acts’ in achieving global equity. This equity can only be achieved once the inherent political structures are broken. This organization was correct in stating that cross-cultural understanding will aid in tearing down these structures and creating systemic change as these smaller, individual acts will create attention that will put global inequity on the political agenda. Furthermore, this explanation provided by the organization does not address the importance cross-cultural understanding in questioning existing power imbalances.

Nyahunzvi (2013) states that “voluntourists have also been criticized for their superficial understanding of the causes of the poverty encountered in voluntoured environments” (p. 84). However, this is not entirely the individual’s fault as it was found that the marketing from most of the organizations were devoid of the political and historical contexts. If organizations wish to promote cross-cultural understanding, “their volunteers need to be trained [in] the local culture”

(Coren & Gray, 2012, p. 232). Explained in another way, “social distance toward residents decreases as individuals become more familiar with a nation and its culture through visual information” (Woosnam & Lee, 2011, p. 310). These researchers also state that “organizations should utilize educational media to lessen the distance” (Woosnam & Lee, 2011, p. 311). Without this education on responsible volunteer travel and cross-cultural understanding, volunteers rationalize the observed poverty and inequality as a result of fate or ‘luck’ as opposed to viewing the inequality as a structural or systemic problem – one of which something can be done to change it (Simpson, 2004). Using these justifications means social justice will never take place because in order to achieve social justice, volunteers must first recognize the existence of inequality and take action to change it.

### ***Sustainability***

Similar to responsible volunteer travel, it was found that the ratio of promoting sustainability over aid was larger for for-profit organizations when compared to non-profit organizations. Furthermore, it was found that the term ‘sustainability’ was used far more often than actual sustainable solutions were promoted. This is troubling because it is possible that organizations are unclear on how to achieve sustainability or that they are uninterested in actually achieving it and instead, are using it more as a keyword to attract potential customers. This explanation was reinforced by Breman (2015) who stated “since hardly any of the studied tour operators make use or see the importance of guidelines, it might be possible that the tour operators do not take a proactive attitude towards the success of volunteer tourism in the long term and, thus, very likely put the focus on the wrong elements of providing aid” (p. 35). Regardless of the reasoning behind not promoting sustainable solutions, many of the current

volunteer tourism organizations will not achieve sustainability until their projects consider the political, economic, and historical contexts, address these root causes of poverty, and use systems thinking when providing solutions. That is, upstream, systematic changes are necessary to help a country out of poverty. Interestingly, it has been stated that for-profit organizations might be at an advantage when it comes to tackling the upstream causes since they have “access to a sustainable, regular source of revenue [that] will greatly assist volunteer tourism organizations [to] work with [the larger] problems” (Coghlan & Noakes, 2012, p. 125)

### *Use of Language*

It was found that the ratio of using disempowering descriptors over appropriate descriptors was higher for for-profit organizations when compared to non-profit organizations. This is to say that for-profit organizations used language that perpetuates inequities when describing host communities more often than non-profit organizations. This supports the responsible volunteer travel explanation from earlier: for-profit organizations do not truly understand what it means to promote responsible volunteer. Instead, for-profit organizations have a ‘checklist’ they use (e.g., responsible volunteer travel policy) to appear to potential customers that they are responsible, when in practice, they do not truly understand the underlying values of responsible volunteer tourism.

Disrespectful messages were also found on a few of the organizations’ websites. The first message was that an organization claimed to know the countries that they work in ‘as well as most locals’. This is hugely disrespectful to the locals who know a lot more about their culture, having lived there their entire lives. This public display of disrespect for the locals show volunteers that it is accepted and permitted to disrespect the locals. The second message was that

taking pictures of the local culture and sharing these photos is important. Although trying to promote cross-cultural understanding, this message teaches volunteers that it is permitted to exploit the host communities for their own personal interest (i.e., taking photos for the sole purpose of uploading them to Facebook). Lastly, another message that was presented was that host families and the local community are dangerous. This is disrespectful to these families and residents, and it reinforces negative stereotypes as well as the notion of ‘us and them’. Each of these examples show disrespect to the local community. If an individual is able to disrespect a community, it means they see the community as ‘inferior’ and ultimately as less powerful.

### *Discrepancies and Ambiguities*

A common theme that emerged from this analysis was that there was a discrepancy between organizations’ mission statements and their underlying values. This can mean that volunteers will pick organizations whose mission statements align with their own intentions, but whose underlying values do not (as the mission statements are meant to be a formal summary of the organization’s aims and values and are more explicit than the underlying values and therefore easier to recognize for many volunteers). This mismatch and false hope will result in dissatisfaction for the volunteer and decreased motivation and commitment with the host community (Coren & Gray, 2012).

Furthermore, it was found that organizations will use keywords but not explain what they mean. This is probably used as a selling technique since volunteer tourism organizations have been found to use buzzwords that they know will attract and persuade potential volunteers (Grimm & Needham, 2012). However, this is troubling because it is unclear whether organizations fully understand what the term means, how to achieve that term, and why that term

is important to volunteer tourism. Secondly, it is troubling that terms are not well-defined because it means that volunteers who have good intentions, but may not fully understand how these terms are achieved, will trust the organizations. It has been found that volunteers are especially motivated by buzzwords (Grimm & Needham, 2012) and it is the superficial factors that potential volunteers compare between organizations when choosing an organization (Coghlan, 2006). This means volunteers may choose the organizations that use these terms even if they do not deliver on them because the volunteers trust the organization to be the 'expert'. Overall, if organizations do not understand the term or how to achieve it, host communities will not benefit.

### ***For-Profit vs Non-Profit***

Bremen (2015) states that "it is unclear why volunteer tourists choose a commercialized company rather than a non-profit organization" (p. 44). From this study, it was clear that for-profit organizations promoted themselves much more than non-profit organizations, marketing features such as affordability, flexibility, quality, variety, and trust. Furthermore, for-profit organizations promoted sustainability and responsible volunteer travel more than non-profit organizations (regardless of the intentions of the for-profit organizations for doing so). Although non-profit organizations fared much better for the language used to describe host communities, one possible explanation for volunteers choosing commercialized companies could be that volunteers look for the 'checkmark' items that promote responsible and sustainable voluntourism that for-profit organizations provide.

## Conclusions

Volunteer tourism is growing in popularity and as a result, so too are criticisms surrounding the practice. When voluntourism criticisms are mentioned in the public media or by the general at large, they often put the blame in terms of the individuals. However, it is clear from this study that organizations also need to be held accountable for reinforcing these criticisms because they are providing false or incomplete marketing to volunteers, while at the same time are trusted by the volunteers to be the ‘expert’. Grimm & Needham (2012) support this argument as their study found that even though “volunteers recognized that photographs or information could be deceiving, they still admitted to trusting and being influenced by seemingly professional websites” (p. 25). Online marketing, one commercialized strategy used by volunteer tourism organizations, differs between non-profit and for-profit organizations. First, for-profit volunteer tourism organizations try to sell themselves more often than non-profit organizations (even though non-profit organizations still do promote themselves). Second, both for-profit and non-profit appeal to volunteers’ motivations, targeting the personal gain motives more often than the selfless motives. Third, for-profit organizations address responsible volunteer travel and sustainability more often than non-profit organizations, including a responsible volunteer travel policy. Fourth, non-profit organizations are more appropriate than for-profit organizations when describing host communities. Lastly, for-profit organizations are more likely to mislead the audience as demonstrated through a discrepancy between their mission statement and underlying values. These marketing techniques are used to attract potential volunteers, however, they do so at the expense of contributing to the persisting global inequity, namely power and health.

## **Recommendations**

Overall, there is a need for volunteer tourism and when practiced responsibly, benefits will be seen (Mostafanezhad, 2014; McLennan, 2014; Jakubiak, 2012). However, it is also evident that neither the for-profit nor non-profit organizations included in this study currently promote responsible volunteer travel. Therefore, this paper has one recommendation: to establish a global accrediting body for for-profit and non-profit organizations together.

It is imperative that this accrediting body is provided for both for-profit and non-profit organizations together because it is evident from the findings of this study that non-profit organizations are also not providing responsible volunteering and there are currently no guidelines available to them. This accrediting agency can exist as an arm under an existing international organization, the United Nations. This accrediting body should include guidelines outlining specific standards organizations must adhere to before they can promote themselves as ‘responsible’ or ‘sustainable’. Additionally, this accreditation process should include a required education component for the organizations, as Simpson (2004) highlights that current medical voluntourism is lacking a ‘pedagogy of social justice’ (p. 690). It should also include standardized pre-departure curricula for volunteers so that volunteers will be well equipped and knowledgeable regardless of the organization they volunteer with. Education is important because it is the key step in allowing social justice, meaning “recognizing the existence of inequality, and then seeking social change” (Simpson, 2004, p. 690).

It is important to note that operationalizing this recommendation will be difficult. However, provided here are two concrete ways to work towards this recommendation. First, this accrediting body will require awareness among potential voluntourists. Therefore, it may be beneficial to have previous voluntourists advocate for responsible volunteer travel to help raise

awareness among potential voluntourists. This can be done in way of an annual conference or putting up posters at high schools and post-secondary academic institutions (targeting the most common voluntourist group). This will raise awareness of both responsible volunteer travel and the accrediting body that certifies organizations that promote responsible practices.

Second, this accrediting body will require buy-in from volunteer tourism organizations. To achieve this buy-in, a type of 'peer pressure' needs to happen where volunteer tourism organizations want to be an accredited member. This can be accomplished by creating a partnership between the accrediting body and academic institutions. Academic institutions are a large cause of the dramatic increase in the number of voluntourists in recent years, as many programs and schools seek prospective students that have a global experience. However, it is difficult for these academic institutions to distinguish a 'fun' volunteer tourism experience from an 'educational' voluntourism experience based on what is written in a student's letter of intention. Therefore, one way to gain recognition and acceptance of this accrediting body among volunteers and subsequently organizations, as well as to help academic institutions rule out 'fun' global volunteer experiences, is to partner with academic institutions that seek students with previous global experience. This partnership between the accrediting body and academic institutions means academic institutions would seek students who have an experience from volunteer tourism organizations that are a member of the accrediting body. Using this technique, volunteers will become more aware of this accrediting body and more likely to participate in a volunteer experience with one of its membering organizations. Subsequently, organizations will want to buy in to this accrediting body in order to attract more potential volunteers.

### ***Future Study***

This paper started to uncover the underlying values of volunteer tourism organizations through a content analysis. However, it would be beneficial to interview the organizations to gain a better understanding of their underlying values and their understanding of responsible volunteer travel. It is also recommended to interview the organizations and the academic institutions in order to determine what standards should be included to meet in order to be a member of the accrediting body. It is recommended that further studies also expand the scope of this research to examine the marketing of organizations that promote volunteer abroad experiences, but do not organize the entire process (e.g., academic institutions). Future studies should also examine how the marketing on these organizations' social media websites (e.g., Facebook) compare to the marketing on the organizations' official websites.

### **Limitations**

It is important to note the limitations to this study. First, five of the organizations included in the study did not have an explicit mission statement. Instead, a mission statement was inferred based on the additional text examined. Second, only website content was examined in the analysis, which does not include social media, interviews, or downloadable documents or brochures. Third, specific web pages (e.g., 'about us' page) for each organization were not consistent across all websites. Therefore, the additional text used in this study may vary from organization to organization.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix 1 – Inclusion Criteria for Organizations*

1. Head office is located in North America
2. Offers medical placements (either in a clinic or hospital) in multiple countries in the Global South
3. Duration of medical placements range from one week to three months
4. Host an official website with text that constitutes the values and purpose of the organization
5. Is not an intermediary organization (offers projects directly; does not redirect to other organizations (i.e., is not an online database))
6. Organizes the entire volunteer experience including food and accommodations (not just an organization that accepts volunteers)
7. Targets those who do not require a medical license (audience is premedical or other students, not qualified professionals)
8. Sends volunteers on an on-going basis throughout the year (not just once or twice a year on a medical mission or medical brigade)

*Appendix 2 – List of Organizations and Associated Characteristics* (in order they appeared on Google)

Organization	For Profit/Non-Profit	Head Office Location	Medical Trips Send to	Type of Trip	Duration of Medical Trips	# of Medical Trips Offered on a Rolling Basis
1. Projects Abroad – Volunteer as an Intern Abroad in Medicine	For Profit	Canada	Argentina, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Cambodia, China, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Mexico, Mongolia, Morocco, Nepal, Peru, Philippines, Romania, Samoa, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Togo, Vietnam	Medical	From 1 week	22
2. International Volunteer Headquarters (IVHQ)	For Profit	US/UK/Canada/Australia	Argentina, Bali, Costa Rica, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Nepal, Peru, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Uganda, Vietnam, Zambia	Medical or Public Health	From 1 week	17
3. Uvolunteer	For Profit	US	Ghana	Medical	From 3 weeks	1
4. United Planet	Non Profit	US	Chile, Ecuador, Ghana, Peru, Romania, Nepal, Tanzania, Costa Rica	Medical and public health	From 1 - 12 weeks	21
5. Kaya Responsible Travel	For Profit	US/UK	Belize, Philippines, Ecuador, Nepal, Ghana, Chiang Mai, Zambia, India, Antelope Park	Medical and public health	From 2 weeks	11 (hospital)+

6. Gap Medics	For Profit	US	Tanzania, Dominican Republic, Thailand, Croatia, Poland, Mafia Island	Medical	From 1 week	6
7. Work the World	For Profit	US/AUS /NL/EN	Tanzania, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Ghana, Peru	Medical	From 2 weeks	11
8. Unite for Sight	Non-Profit	US	Ghana, Honduras, India	Medical	From 1 week	5
9. A Broader View Volunteers	Non-Profit	US/UK/AU	Tanzania, Peru, Zambia, Nepal, Ecuador, India, Columbia, Ghana, Honduras, Guatemala, Uganda, Philippines	Medical	From 2 weeks	26 (includes dental)
10. Volunteer BaseCamp – Medical Internship	For profit	Canada	Tanzania, Nepal, Ghana, Ecuador	Medical	From 1 week	11
11. Maximo Nivel	For profit	US, Peru, Costa Rica, Guatemala	Guatemala, Costa Rica, Peru	Medical in specialized living facilities (still administer medications)	From 1 week	3
12. Volunteering Solutions	For Profit	US, UK, US	Kenya, Tanzania, Peru, South Africa, Delhi, Guatemala, Ghana, Costa Rica, Vietnam, Thailand,	Medical	From 1 week	15

			Uganda, Cambodia, Philippines,			
13. Cross Cultural Solutions	Non-Profit	US	Guatemala, India, Peru, Ghana, Tanzania	Medical	4 - 12 weeks	5
14. IFRE Volunteers - volunteer	Non-Profit	US	Cambodia, India, Thailand, Kenya, Argentina, Costa Rica, Peru	Medical	From 1 week	8
15. GeoVisions	Non-Profit	US	Costa Rica, Peru	Medical	2 weeks – 3 months	2
16. Foundation for International Medical Relief of Children (FIMRC)	Non-Profit	US	Costa Rica, India, Peru, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Uganda, El Salvador, Philippines	Medical & public health	From 1 week	9
17. UBELONG	For profit	US	Cambodia, Ecuador, Ghana, Mexico, Peru,	Medical and public health	From 3 weeks	5
18. Cross Continental	For Profit	Canada	Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana, China, Nepal, Ecuador, Bolivia, Mexico	Medical	From 1 week	10
19. Rustic Volunteers	Non-Profit	US	India, Thailand, Ghana, Argentina, Guatemala, Peru	Medical	From 1 week	6
20. African Impact	For Profit	US/UK	Zambia, South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Malawi,	Medical & Public Health	From 2 weeks	10

21. Canadian Alliance for Development Initiatives and Projects (CADIP)	Non-Profit	Canada	Vietnam, Kenya, Costa Rica, Indonesia, Uganda, India, Togo, Morocco, Belgium	Medical & Public Health	From 1 month (offer shorter ones, but those have specified time periods)	14
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**Appendix 3 – Results**

**Themes Found in Mission Statements Alone**

Theme		Non-Profit Reference Count	For-Profit Reference Count	Total Reference Count
Organizations Selling Themselves	Accessible	0	1	1
	Business Oriented	0	1	1
	Customized	0	1	1
	Flexible	0	1	1
	Professional	0	1	1
	Safety	0	2	2
	Affordable	2	1	3
	Quality	2	1	3
	Total	4	9	13
Volunteer Motivations	Selfish	1	8	9
	Selfless	3	3	6
	Total	4	11	15
Responsible Volunteer Travel	Cross-Cultural Understanding	5	4	9
	Responsible Volunteering	1	3	4
	Total	6	7	13
Sustainability	Sustainability	7	6	13
	Aid	1	0	1
	Total	8	6	14

**Themes Found in Mission Statements and Additional Text Combined**

Theme		Non-Profit Reference Count	For-Profit Reference Count	Total Reference Count
Organizations Selling Themselves	Accessible	0	1	1
	Affordable	10	40	50
	Customized	9	25	34
	Enthusiastic and Experienced Staff	7	16	23
	Flexibility	3	15	18
	Quality	2	27	29
	Safety	9	38	47
	Trust	1	8	9
	Variety	4	13	17
	Total	45	183	228

Volunteer Motivations	Selfish	57	66	123
	Selfless	36	39	75
	Total	93	105	198
Responsible Volunteer Travel	Cross-Cultural Understanding	9	8	17
	Responsible Volunteering / Travelling	5	30	35
	Total	14	38	52
Sustainability	Sustainability	27	48	75
	Aid	4	2	6
	Total	31	50	81