The Report Committee for Melissa Anne Mascovich
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report

Poverty, Porn, and the Picture: Exploring representation of exploitative
photography through the case of Oxfam

APPROVED BY

SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor: _____

Karin Wilkins

_____

Joe Straubhaar

Poverty, Porn, and the Picture: Exploring representation of exploitative media through the case of Oxfam

by

Melissa Anne Mascovich, B.A.

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2017

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents; for supporting me throughout my time during my master's program, for providing invaluable advice, and for listening to my long rants about research.

Thank you to my amazing cohort who became not only colleagues to me, but friends. I will always value your thoughts, perspectives, and long talks during our Hole in the Wall happy hours. Especially thank you to Ryan Wong, who helped me analyze and understand my collected data.

To my advisor, Karin Wilkins, thank you for your support and guidance throughout this process. Karin's ability to guide while allowing me freedom to explore my research helped shape my work as well as my passion for development communication. Your ability to connect media research to large-scale impact has been an inspiration.

Finally, thank you for my second advisor, Joe Straubhaar. Even before I began the thesis process, he was a sounding board for my work, my career aspirations, and my life path. Thank you again for letting me show up to your office unannounced and talk about nothing and everything at once.

Abstract

Poverty, Porn, and the Picture: Exploring representation of exploitative media through the case of Oxfam

Melissa Anne Mascovich, MA

The University of Texas at Austin, May 2017

Supervisor: Karin Wilkins

Cumulating in the watershed moment of *Live Aid*, the phenomenon of "poverty porn" has continued to define exploitative media used in humanitarian work in an effort to gain sympathy or support. Although the nature of "poverty porn" has changed, understand the semantic limitations as well as the visual repercussions helps structure how exploitative media looks within a visual frame. Within international development, ethical guidelines concerning exploitative media exist, but too frequently they only concern context and consent, ignoring the important aspect of visual representation. Using the organization *Oxfam* as a site of study, press releases were examined for visual markers of exploitation. Creating parameters of exploitation including isolation, passivity, vulnerability, food insecurity, and poverty, the images were coded to find visual trends of exploitation in *Oxfam's* press releases. The study resulted in a significant correlation between subjects being in isolation and signs of poverty as well as children being present in the frame and actions being performed. The results expand the understanding of how poverty is represented and visualized in humanitarian media. With

the parameters explored, it furthers the discussion of how we frame media in development and how we move away from visualizing "poverty porn," toward representing empowerment.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

In 2013, *Save The Children* released a Christmas advert across the United Kingdom encouraging viewers to help end childhood hunger by donating toward *Save The Children*'s mission. The video stressed that without the help of donations from viewers, the children would die. Across the screen the advert flashed images of emaciated children, babies with bloated bellies, and a call to action for viewers. The advert drew criticism for its portrayal of vulnerable groups such as poor communities and children. *Save The Children* was brought to court under charges of showing emaciated children[1]. Beyond the legal ramifications of the advert, critics started accusing the organization's video of being "poverty porn." Critics justified the label, citing the exploitative nature of the video and its use of stereotypical pictures of poverty without depicting the context of the subjects.[2] While criticism grew, the advert simultaneously became the

Figure 1: Screenshot of *Save The Children* television advertisement

---

[1] "At What Point Does A Fundraising Ad Go Too Far?" *NPR*. NPR, n.d. Web. 01 Dec. 2016.

[2] Kurzyp, Rachel. "5 Reasons Why Save The Children Australia's New Ad Is Bad Development | WhyDev Blog." *WhyDev Blog*. N.p., Apr. 2014. Web. 29 Nov. 2016.

highest grossing donation drive in *Save The Children's* history.[3] *Save The Children's* advert provides an example of the complicated and nuanced nature of exploitative media in funding campaigns for nonprofit organizations.

The term "poverty porn" is generally defined as media that exploit or fetishize poverty in order to garner sympathy or support for a cause.[4] The phrase is mainly used as an inflammatory statement against an organization's use of media, but lacks a concrete definition. As a result, the term is used in reaction to exploitative or manipulative media,[5] typically in funding videos and photography for aid organizations. Without a widely established term, does the phrase "poverty porn" have practical implications when examining aid related media? Or is it a bombastic phrase used to incite emotion and attention with little weight behind it? Beyond defining the term, exploring the parameters highlights larger trends of exploitative visual representation in charity and humanitarian aid media. Mapping the historical legacy of the term reveals a gap in current literature and development media in not only defining "poverty porn," but also a gap in understanding how exploitative media are visually represented. Understanding how visual images denote exploitation in development media helps us understand the origins of the terms and the visual indicators that accompany them. Following an examination of the aid organization *Oxfam's* press releases, this paper will provide data analysis of the

---

[3] "At What Point Does A Fundraising Ad Go Too Far?" *NPR*. NPR, n.d. Web. 01 Dec. 2016.

[4] Dortonne, Nathalie. "Poverty Porn Is Dangerous." *CNN*. Cable News Network, n.d. Web. 01 Dec. 2016.

[5] Roenigk, Emily. "5 Reasons Poverty Porn Empowers the Wrong Person." *ONE*. N.p., 09 Apr. 2014. Web. 01 Dec. 2016.

visual images as well as recommendations to aid organizations on best practices of visual

representation.

"Poverty Porn" and Exploitative Media

While the term "poverty porn" has been in use for decades, it gained popularity in the 1980's, culminating with the *Live Aid* benefit concert. *Live Aid* was the 1985 aid concert to raise funds for the ongoing Ethiopian famine. Rock stars performed in front of crowds, promoting images of starving children. While *Live Aid* was the watershed moment for exploitative imaging being used for fundraising on a grand scale, the phenomenon persists in across development media.[6] The concert was a precursor to understanding how "aid agencies thought about images of disaster."[7] The images were taken from primarily foreign journalists, used for a non-Ethiopian audience, promoted by wealthy rock stars, to benefit whom? *Live Aid* would argue the victims of the famine benefited from the event, but the legacy of *Live Aid* remains: a concert that reduced a country, a culture, and a crisis into a stereotypical image of African suffering. Just as *Save The Children*'s campaign of starving, helpless children with bloated bellies may be the archetype of "poverty porn," times of crisis bring out new framing of the poor, famished, and vulnerable.[8] In the 1980's the exploitation took on a certain style and then term "poverty porn" began to encapsulate a specific, stylistic trend[9] in development. The archetype for this type of media campaign would be a poor, African child, skinny or starving, with a bloated belly and flies on their face. This type of depiction in development media is problematic because it "finds the most extreme situations and

---

[6] Campbell, David, D. J. Clark, and Kate Manzo. "Imaging famine." (2005): 388.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Recuber, Timothy. "Disaster Porn!." *Contexts* 12.2 (2013): 28-33.

[9] Gharib, Malaka. "At What Point Does A Fundraising Ad Go Too Far?" *NPR*. NPR, 30 Sept. 2015. Web. 23 Nov. 2016.

makes it look like the most common situation on the continent."[10] By narrowing the focus

to a stereotype, the projected image becomes accepted as the objective truth and depiction

of poverty. One person's story becomes the stereotype for many.[11]

The phenomenon of "poverty porn" is thus not really a phenomenon at all, but in

reality, a continued trend of exploitative disconnect between camera and subject. The

relationship between camera, subject, and suffering has been in balance "for more than a

century, [where] photographers have been hovering about the oppressed, in attendance at

scenes of violence—with a spectacularly good conscience. Social misery has inspired the

comfortably-off with the urge to take pictures, the gentlest of predations, in order to

document a hidden reality that is, a reality hidden from them."[12] The camera enhances the

distance in power and reality between photographer and subject. Susan Sontag wrote of

the relationship between the camera and subject as photography being an act of

violation.[13] By the camera's nature, an individual becomes an object, literally objectified

through the lens. When the subjects of photography then are marginalized and vulnerable

communities - frequently photographed by outsiders – their violation occurs on multiple

levels. They are photographed and objectified in a Sontagian sense, but also used as a

subject to elicit an emotional response from funders, outsiders, and policy makers.

Funding for humanitarian aid work in part depends on viewers recognizing suffering and

---

10 Ibid.

11 McGarvey, Julie. "The Truth About Poverty Porn." *How One Story Became The Only Story*.
N.p., 08 July 2016. Web. 24 Nov. 2016.

12 Clark, David J. "The production of a contemporary famine image: The image economy,
indigenous photographers and the case of Mekanic Philipos." *Journal of International
Development* 16.5 (2004): 696.

13 Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. Macmillan, 1977.

wanting to act on this concern. From the photographers point of view, the more suffering they capture, the more funds and action they may elicit. War photographers and aid journalists have grappled with this tension for years: portraying the true horror of events to elicit a response to action from viewers, while maintaining the dignity of subjects. The Somali Civil War, the refugee crisis in South Sudan, the Ethiopian famine: each crisis named conjure specific archetypal imagery of starving children with bloated bellies, desolate landscape, and dusty barren crop fields. These images become iconic because they become the representation of complicated and nuanced crises. While the images act as an unsparing representation of crises they also ignore the social and economic conditions in which they are rooted. [14] They simplify the problem, therefore simplifying the guilt and responsibility for the situation as well. Rather than viewing the images in context, and understanding how we are complicit in the events, the archetypes create generalized narrative, separate from our own, but still consumed by us as distanced viewers. Subjects are then put into a compromising position then, where their poverty becomes a commodity.

Although poverty porn has a general definition, there is little discussion of the extent of the term. Within the phrase itself, the semantic use of the word "porn" elicits a certain reaction and a moral judgment. This is where the term becomes problematic because there is disconnect between sexual fetishization of classic pornography, and the pornification of the consumption of development images for financial gain. Pornography

---

[14] "Breaking the poverty porn habit." *Emergent Economics*. N.p., 03 Apr. 2014. Web. 10 Jan. 2017.

is the depiction of erotic behavior intended to cause sexual excitement.[15] Traditionally, fetishization has a sexual connotation, but when applied to development photography, the fetishization perpetuates a consumerist obsession of the same stereotypical aid images. Although not sexual, the fetishization is rooted in the same act of fixating on the most drastic images. Same too with pornification, where activities and images do not reference the sexualization, but rather the explicit nature of images. Recently, the use of the shortened form "porn" has now been attached to nonsexual activities such as "food porn" or "travel porn." In each circumstance, the act of attaching the word "porn" to a descriptor acts as a denotation that the media in question are exaggerated, wanton, or desirable.[16] The resulting "pornification"[17] in these non-sexualized sphere attaches pornographic styles, gestures, and aesthetics to the media. Even though there is no sexuality attached to media when they are pictures of someone's decadent lunch labeled "food porn," there is an implicit euphoric desire in the way its presentation.[18] In this manner, the consumption helps define "porn" as much as the actual term does.[19] Part of the mystique of food porn or travel porn is that it offers a voyeuristic quality – it is the act of the outside looking in – people can eat, see, and go where others are with the comfort of being distanced by a screen.

---

[15] *Merriam-Webster*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 29 Nov. 2016.

[16] Attwood, Feona. "The paradigm shift: Pornography research, sexualization and extreme images." *Sociology Compass* 5.1 (2011): 13-22.

[17] Ibid.

[18] McBride, Anne E. "Food porn." *Gastronomica: the journal of food and culture* 10.1 (2010): 38-46.

[19] Attwood, Feona. "The paradigm shift: Pornography research, sexualization and extreme images." *Sociology Compass* 5.1 (2011): 16.

In the same manner that porn distances consumer from the actual action of sex, appropriated porn labels distance consumers from food, locations, etc. Part of the problem is also the desire and consumption that is attached to these images. Consumption is a key element to poverty porn and exploitative media because people consume these narratives and then give donations. There is then monetary value placed on the suffering of others. People and communities become commodities for someone else's consumption (even if the consumption is in the form of donation). Some argue this desire for the images are tied to colonial rule,[20] while others[21] that photography itself has always been a companion of death and suffering.[22] Whether a legacy of colonial rule, or the function of the technology, the harm lies in vulnerable balance in representing the poor. When the balance tips in favor of consuming more of these images, even to gain funds, sympathy, or action, the attention is on the image itself, and not the people within the frame.

The term becomes complicated though when associated with "development porn," "famine porn," or "poverty porn," because it creates an inherent contradiction in the name. While the term "porn" may be voyeuristic and fetishized, poverty is sympathetic and guilt inducing.[23] It becomes a complicated mix of distanced viewing with a call to action. It demands action from a passive audience. And yet, it works. The funds from *Live Aid*, *UNICEF*, and *Save The Children* campaigns are a testament to the effectiveness

---

[20] Clark, David J. "The production of a contemporary famine image: The image economy, indigenous photographers and the case of Mekanic Philipos." *Journal of International Development* 16.5 (2004): 696.

[21] Sontag, Susan. *On photography*. Macmillan, 1977.

[22] Metz, Christian. "Photography and fetish." *October* 34 (1985): 81-90

[23] Paglamidis, Konstantinos. "Semiotics of Humanitarian Photography." (2013).

of exploitative media in times of disaster, poverty, and famine. For all "its flaws, [it] is a vital political terrain in which publics are at least implicitly asked to struggle with the social significance of the suffering of others. It connects public issues like war, famine, earthquakes, and terrorist attacks to the private lives of those they affect, and shows us how disruptions of social structure become disruptions in individual biographies."[24] The resulting effectiveness of poverty porn and other exploitative imagery creates a mixed reaction because the poverty part of the term is meant to garner sympathy and an emotional response built on compassion, while the porn part demands the opposite. Just as people scroll through social media feeds viewing "food porn," millions attended *Live Aid* watching "poverty porn" under the guise of a different name.

At the center of the problem of poverty porn though, is the problem of exploitation. Porn by its very nature exploits actors as well as consumers. Too frequently, poverty related media do the same.[25] While the phrase is gaining momentum in development related discussions, the debate over exploitation in media of vulnerable groups such as the poor was present long before now. Beside the problem of making vulnerable communities more vulnerable, privileging one narrative over another takes away any agency the vulnerable communities have in their depiction. Exploitation already causes an impact on perceptions and by association, policy, but it also creates a power imbalance between the poor communities being exploited, and the audiences watching the media. It creates the perception that "people in developing countries are not

---

24 Recuber, Timothy. "Disaster Porn!." *Contexts* 12.2 (2013): 33.

25 Roenigk, Emily. "5 Reasons Poverty Porn Empowers the Wrong Person." *ONE*. N.p., 09 Apr. 2014. Web. 01 Dec. 2016.

incapable or passively awaiting rescue."[26] Just as the *Save The Children* campaign put the onus on viewers to save the lives of those in need, exploiting the poor through exaggerated giving campaigns and emotional appeals maintains a culture where poor communities *need* the help of wealthier people distanced from the poverty in question. The myths "poverty porn" create "provide convenient storytelling templates for the media, but they also inspire complacency on the part of citizens and policymakers."[27] Because the story of one becomes the policy justification for many, "poverty porn" poses real threats to development policies and fundraising campaigns.

---

[26] Gharib, Malaka. "At What Point Does A Fundraising Ad Go Too Far?" *NPR*. NPR, 30 Sept. 2015. Web. 23 Nov. 2016.
[27] Ibid.

Gap of Guidelines in Humanitarian Visuals

While the harm of exploitation is clear, the nature of it is not. Beyond the semantics of the phrase, "poverty porn" has practical implications in the development and aid sphere. Because there is no universal accepted definition, the label becomes an insult rather than a defining attribute to media. It exists in a culture where the term is used without knowledge of the implications it holds. The most commonly used definition of poverty porn comes from research conducted by World Relief as "the practice of depicting the 'graphic qualities of a [vulnerable human being…for the sole purpose of eliciting an emotional experience and ultimately, money,"[28] but the details of the definitions are left to interpretation. Additionally, labeling certain media "poverty porn" causes backlash against the media, because "once you call something pornographic, you bring down moral opprobrium on it. You poison the topic and stop the discussion from going further."[29] Understanding how development media exploits the poor and citing specifics examples of where it becomes voyeuristic, harmful, or stereotypical then allows the conservation on best practices for development media to move forward.

The lack of universal guidelines in international development communication is acknowledged throughout the literature.[30] While large international aid relief organizations take a systematic view of policies surrounding photographing and videoing

---

[28] Roenigk, Emily. "5 Reasons Poverty Porn Empowers the Wrong Person." *ONE*. N.p., 09 Apr. 2014. Web. 01 Dec. 2016.

[29] McBride, Anne E. "Food porn." *Gastronomica: the journal of food and culture* 10.1 (2010): 40.

[30] Lentfer, Jennifer. *The Development Element: Guidelines for the future for communicating about the end of global poverty*. Rep. N.p.: 2014. Print. Spring.

the poor, others provide guidelines for journalists and development aid workers to keep in mind when messaging sensitive issues like poverty and disaster. For example, the U.N. has an entire office devoted to ethical conduct, but the guidelines they provide address the logistics of using the images, not the representation of them. Smaller scale guidelines address the gap in tangible action-oriented communication strategies. Researchers at Georgetown provide a ten-step approach ranging from the way development workers speak about poverty to showing a sense of agency through media.[31] In their guidelines, they acknowledge the research came to fruition after not finding consistent parameters in development literature. Regardless of approach, guidelines across industry and thought leaders lack attention to the visual facet of humanitarian aid photography. While they offer guidelines in the form policies and practices, too often, they do not include a discussion of the picture itself. By not addressing the visual representation of poverty within photos, current guidelines miss a crucial factor in how aid agencies and organizations portray crises.

Further complicating the lack of universal guidelines is the fact that established guidelines differ based on context. While guidelines exist overall, there are differences in standard according to organization type, country, and organization focus.[32] Common themes throughout do exist, however, including: avoiding images that discriminate,

---

[31] Ibid.

[32] Examples include: AusAid, Oxfam, Unicef, The U.N., Docha, New Zealand Medical Assistance Team (NZMAT), WHO, Photographers Without Borders, Center For Media Literacy (CML), and the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA).

promote stereotypes, and privilege the voice of an outsider.[33] They focus on preventing harm to photographed communities as well as avoiding a "white savior narrative." The white savior narrative is a term used to describe when the fates of exotified dark people in the "developing" world are saved through the actions of a white outsider.[34] Further grouping the themes into overall trends, most guidelines focus on issued of consent, context, and representation.

Consent is important to an ethical approach to aid media and avoiding exploitation because it provides agency to photographed communities. Consent allows people to have a say in their own narrative. Establishing consent involves receiving permission to photograph groups or use images of people who are in the frame. Organizations such as the U.N., *Oxfam*, and WHO all have policies and strategies for obtaining consent. Without consent, subjects can be harmed through a betrayal of trust, disturbing their lifestyle, or decreasing their agency.[35]

Context is also important because it provides a broader perspective to images and the stories they tell. Through contextual images, photographers can avoid privileging their voice as an outsider, creating a stereotypical narrative, and narrowing the scope of complex issues aid images. Context is harder to track and measure because it is not as tangible as consent. Frequently however, context is established by providing multiple narratives and perspectives in an aid related story, providing written description of

---

[33] "NPPA Code of Ethics." *NPPA Code of Ethics | NPPA*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Mar. 2017.

[34] Shome, Raka. "Race and popular cinema: The rhetorical strategies of whiteness in City of Joy." *Communication Quarterly* 44.4 (1996): 502-518.

[35] Felcher, Peter L., and Edward L. Rubin. "Privacy, Publicity, and the Portrayal of Real People by the Media." *The Yale Law Journal* 88.8 (1979): 1577.

images, or providing a larger scope of contextual information. Barthes suggests even the act of reading, understanding, and creating meaning from photography "depends on a series of processes related to the historical and social context.[36] To understand the true nature of a photograph then, with the agency of subjects and the social influences involved, context matters. In humanitarian and development photography, however, audiences have no experiences or frames of reference for the images they are seeing.[37] Without knowing and internalizing the historical and social context, they cannot contextualize the images or the urgency of suffering.

Representation is the final aspect of ethical photography guidelines that speaks to the visual depiction of people, places, and events. While consent, context, and representation are all important, aid photography and film are visual media. Therefore, the consent and the context of the picture are unknown outside of the visual frame of the image. Representation then becomes a vital factor to explore because it is the metric which exploitation is frequently measured against. When viewing an image on its own, there is no way to know if consent was given or the nature of the context in which the picture was taken. However, viewing the image does visually show the representation of the subjects involved. Representation then, needs definite parameters and guidelines because it is the metric for value judgment of an image. Unfortunately, across the

---

[36] Paglamidis, Konstantinos. "Semiotics of Humanitarian Photography." (2013): 7.

[37] Clark, David J. "The production of a contemporary famine image: The image economy, indigenous photographers and the case of Mekanic Philipos." *Journal of International Development* 16.5 (2004): 695.

industry, there is a lack of guidelines for how to visually represent poverty. The guidelines range from vague "do not misrepresent" to nonexistent.[38]

To help frame the discussion of visual representation of poverty in development media, the focus was only on physical photographs to determine representation, not intention, motives, or issues that created the photograph. Viewing aid related photographs as singular artifacts for study allows attention to focus on the representation of the image without being influenced by the known (or unknown) consent and context. Through inductively viewing and coding photos, parameters of exploitation will be established. Using press releases from the aid organization *Oxfam*, the photographs used for one of the largest aid agencies in the world were used to evaluate for trends of exploitation. Following a discussion of methodology, recommendations are provided for other development agencies and organizations tackling the eradication of poverty on how to avoid poverty porn tendencies.

The specific themes the images are coded for are different forms of vulnerability that can lead to exploitation, and possibly, poverty porn. In aid media, the vulnerable groups of the poor and disaster stricken are usually the subjects that are most often exploited.[39] Vulnerability is the unequal exposure of risks. Vulnerability within aid media is intersectional – combining a literal exposure of the camera and a social exposure to unequal socioeconomics. Vulnerability is important to consider because "examining

---

38 "Code of Ethics." *Photographers Without Borders*®. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Mar. 2017.

39 Fehrenbach, Heide, and Davide Rodogno. ""A horrific photo of a drowned Syrian child": Humanitarian photography and NGO media strategies in historical perspective." *International Review of the Red Cross* (2015): 1-35.

disasters through the lens of vulnerability confers real insights at a time when both the frequency and magnitude of such events is escalating."[40] Vulnerability operates parallel to poverty because the social risks of being in vulnerable economic, social, or political positions are also the key indicators of being poor. When someone is experiencing food insecurity, or food vulnerability, they are also experiencing a form of poverty. By understanding vulnerability, poverty is better understood as well. Poverty is a symptom of systemic processes of vulnerability. Like the terms "exploitation" and "empowerment," the term vulnerability is so broad, it "only serves as a rhetorical indicator to highlight areas of greatest concern."[41] Continuing the exploration of vague terms, without metrics or definitional parameters, coding key factors of vulnerability helps us understand exploitative media as a whole. The specific vulnerabilities explored in the *Oxfam* coding are food insecurity, children, isolation, passivity, and indicators of poverty such as type of clothing, dwelling, or visible access to resources.

Children are a vulnerable group not only because they lack agency, but also because there is a historical legacy of photographing children in times of disaster and famine. Some consider children to be the most vulnerable group in society because they cannot support themselves fully without the help of others.[42] For the majority of humanitarian media history, the "photographic depiction and publication of dead, dying

---

[40] Bankoff, Greg, Georg Frerks, and Dorothea Hilhorst. *Mapping vulnerability: disasters, development, and people*. Routledge, 2004: 4.

[41] Ibid.: 8.

[42] Blockland, Sara. *Photographic production as colonizing practice: the construction of the 'non-Western subject in crisis' analyzed through the film Episode III: Enjoy Poverty by Renzo Martens*. Thesis. Leiden University, 2011: 71

or suffering children was not taboo."[43] Awareness of exploitation and ethical standards of photography grew and the depiction of children became a sensitive area. Now, the depiction and discussion of how to photograph children regarding consent and practices can be found in many photography guidelines across the humanitarian and aid sphere.[44] Children remain popular as subjects however because they act as an innocent symbol of suffering that garners sympathy. Their innocence also reinforces an apolitical stance for the images.[45] Because there are culturally held notions of childhood innocence, they exist outside the context of photos. This can aid in reducing famine, disaster, and poverty photos because it displays the child as an individual victim of suffering rather than victims of political, economic, and social influences that cause the suffering.

Passivity and isolation of subjects also act as factors of vulnerability because they reinforce the stereotypical notion of the poor being helpless actors in their struggle of poverty. They perpetuate the stereotype of poverty being a result of tragedy; a tragedy that people cannot escape, where the poor exist in "the land of motionless substance and of the blinding and tragic disorder of creation."[46] For isolation, the vulnerability lies in the number of people present. Studies have shown that people identify sympathy and

---

[43] Fehrenbach, Heide, and Davide Rodogno. ""A horrific photo of a drowned Syrian child": Humanitarian photography and NGO media strategies in historical perspective." *International Review of the Red Cross* (2015): 4.

[44] Examples include: Unicef, WHO, and Photographers Without Borders.

[45] Fehrenbach, Heide, and Davide Rodogno. ""A horrific photo of a drowned Syrian child": Humanitarian photography and NGO media strategies in historical perspective." *International Review of the Red Cross* (2015): 23.

[46] Haney, Erin, and Erika Nimis. "Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography." *African Arts* 40.1 (2007): 92-94., Moufakkir, Omar, and Yvette Reisinger, eds. *The Host Gaze in Global Tourism*. CABI, 2013: 15.

compassion more in situations when understanding the plight of an individual versus the plight of a mass number of people.[47] People do not act upon the sufferings of the many because they cannot identify a mass amount to individual suffering. Even in instances of genocide, where atrocities abound against individuals, inaction follows in part because the scale of suffering is too large. To help audiences connect to the realities of certain situations then, war journalists, aid organizations, and humanitarian media use an individual body to represent the suffering of others. Unfortunately, isolating an individual away from the context and community of their reality can create false perceptions. Examining how both passivity and isolation are represented in images helps us to understand the effect they may create on audience perception.

The final vulnerability examined in the analysis of *Oxfam*'s press release images is food insecurity. Food insecurity is the state of being without reliable access to affordable and nutritious food. Examining food insecurity is important because it intersects with other vulnerabilities such as isolation and poverty. Eva Von Oelreich, the head of disaster preparedness at the International Federation of Red Cross notes, "that agencies often used images that were degrading or portrayed people as helpless victims, and the worst examples were usually related to drought."[48] Since drought breed food insecurity, the most degrading images during disasters contain food insecurity related

---

[47] Slovic, Paul. "If I look at the mass I will never act: Psychic numbing psychic numbing and genocide." *Emotions and risky technologies*. Springer Netherlands, 2010. 37-59.

[48] Gidley, Ruth. "NGOs still fail standards on appeal images." *Reuters Foundation, AlertNet* 14 (2004).

imaging. Understanding how food insecurity then looks visually within a frame will help provide another layer of understanding exploitation.

Methodology

Providing a case study analysis of an NGO's media is an appropriate way to guide the discussion on the definition of poverty porn and exploitative aid media because it frames the definition in a visible and empirical way. *Oxfam* was chosen as the site for study because *Oxfam* is one of the largest aid organizations and has been criticized in the past for poverty porn tendencies in their media. Also, *Oxfam* was chosen to study because it works on a global scale to eradicate poverty. *Oxfam* is a confederation of organizations founded in 1995. Originally named Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, today *Oxfam* operates with the purpose to "help create lasting solutions to the injustice of poverty…by empowering people to create a future that is secure, just, and free from poverty."[49] The organization achieves its mission through finding development solutions for long-term poverty change, assisting with immediate support in areas of conflict and natural disasters, and advocating for policy change to legislation that affects the poor. While *Oxfam* operates globally as a seventeen-member organization, this study specifically focuses on *Oxfam* International's media.[50] The analysis of pictures is not meant as a critique on *Oxfam*'s structure or policies, but rather act to illustrate trends in selected aid related media.

The data sample used is *Oxfam*'s press releases range from 2011-2016. The press releases were chosen because *Oxfam* virtually archives all of its press releases along with pictures associated with them. Having access to multiple year archives is important when

---

[49] "Our Purpose and Beliefs." *Our Purpose and Beliefs | Oxfam International*. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Dec. 2016.
[50] Ibid.

looking for trends, because image style are dynamic in nature. By sampling across multiple years, a more longitudinal look of how aid agencies construct famine can be found. Along with the virtual archives, *Oxfam*'s press releases are categorized through a series of tags that describe the main themes and key information of the press releases. These metadata tags delineate each press release from each other. Metadata tags of poverty, aid, hunger, food insecurity, drought, and extreme inequality grouped the press releases chosen. The total number of photos containing the tags was 52. The tags poverty and aid were chosen for analysis because they encapsulate the main themes of examining exploitation of poverty through aid media. Hunger, food insecurity, drought, and extreme income inequality were also chosen because they address the common underlying systemic issues that contribute to poverty. Along with addressing systemic issues, the additional tags also describe situations that create vulnerability. As discussed earlier, when groups are vulnerable in terms on resources, power, or access, then they are primed for exploitation.

Each photo associated with a press release ranging from 2001 - 2016 and appropriate tag was then coded to pull out themes of exploitation. Since no framework or guidelines exist to apply to the images, instead, the images were inductively examined to create appropriate framework. The exploratory issues the coding focused on were isolation, passivity and vulnerability. The questions addressing vulnerability specifically focused on vulnerability through food insecurity and through images of children. To find trends of isolation, each photo was examined to see if people were present in the photograph compared to being in a group of people as well as whether they were the

main subjects of the photograph. To find trends of passivity, each photo was examined to see if the main subject of the photo was performing an action. To find trends of vulnerability, each photo was examined to see if there were children present (alone or in a group), and if there were explicit signs of food insecurity. The indicators of food insecurity include: explicit starvation in the form of bloated bellies and visible ribcages, lack of crops, and any aid dispensers or aid related food items. Each photo was also coded for obvious signs of poverty to find any correlation between isolation, passivity, and vulnerability to poverty. The indicators of obvious poverty include lack of resources, lack of infrastructure, and dirty/torn clothing. For a complete look at the coding used, please refer to the Appendix.

The research questions asked during the coding were:

- *If a person/group is the main subject of the photo, is there a significant relationship to displaying indicators of food insecurity and or/poverty?*

- *If a person is single or in a group in the photo, is there a significant relationship to them being in a group and performing an action?*

- *If a person is single or in a group in the photo, is there a significant relationship to them being in a group and displaying indicators of food insecurity/poverty?*

- *If a child is present in the photo, is there a significant relationship between then being present and indicators of food insecurity and/or poverty?*

- *If a child is present in the photo, is there a significant relationship between them being present in the photo performing an action?*

Analysis

Coding *Oxfam*'s press release photos is not only an effort in finding trends in exploitation, but also in establishing the relationship between the different factors of vulnerability and poverty. The majority of the photos features people as the main subject. Delineating further, there was no significant difference between photos with a main subject being a single person photographed in comparison to having a group as the main subject. Other overall findings indicate 78.85% of photos included obvious indicators of poverty. The main poverty indicators were lack of infrastructure, obvious lack of resources visible, and dirty/torn clothing. Knowing that people are the focus for the majority of the photos is relevant because it implies there is a connection between depicting poverty, and depicting humans. Rather than have pictures of housing, transportation, or technology, the main focus of the photos was on the human condition. This becomes especially important when then analyzing further for relationships between the indicators and potential exploitation of the subjects. If exploitation implies harm, and harm is a known potential consequence of aid photography, then having people as the main subject implies the harm happens on a human level. Although a seemingly obvious conclusion, the data support not only the overall trend of focusing on human suffering, but also acts as a reminder that the data are connected to individuals with lived human experiences.

According to the data, there is no strong relationship between groups, food insecurity, and being the main subject. The examination of *Oxfam*'s press releases does provide significant data however, by implying if a person is visualized as a single individual, then

there is a higher possibility of indicators of poverty and if an action is being performed, then there is a significant association that children are present.

Regarding the initial research questions, the first question: *If a person/group is the main subject of the photo, is there a significant relationship to displaying indicators of food insecurity and or/poverty?* The data indicate there is no significant relationship between a person being a main subject of a photo and displaying indicators of poverty or food insecurity. For the second research question: *If a person is single or in a group in the photo, is there a significant relationship to them being in a group and performing an action?* The data indicate there is no significant relationship between the size of group and performing an action in the photo.

For the third research question: *If a person is single or in a group in the photo, is there a significant relationship to them being in a group and displaying indicators of food insecurity/poverty?* The data suggest there is a correlation between a person being single in a photograph and displaying indicators of poverty. For the correlation between a person being single and displaying indicators of poverty, Pearson's chi-square test was performed on the data set. The test indicates the asymptotic significance between the variables of singleness and poverty was pc .05. This implies isolation is a significant vulnerability factor when considering how humanitarian media displays poverty. Although the data do not indicate any levels of exploitation, understanding the visual indicator of singleness is connected to poverty, helps raise awareness of the humanitarian media framing.

Figure 2: Oxfam Press Release, *"Building a More Resilient Nepal"*

In Figure 2, we can see the connection between singleness and poverty. This picture is taken from the *Oxfam* press release from 2015 titled, "Building a More Resilient Nepal." Key codes from this image include a single inactive person displaying sings of poverty. The obvious signs of poverty coded to this picture include, lack of resources, lack of infrastructure, and rubble housing. Beyond the visual codes, there is a lack of movement and interaction of subject with her surroundings. While the title suggests an action is occurring in the form of rebuilding, there is no action, no movement, and little context to the subject. The subject stands alone in rubble. Based on the visual alone, we do not know her role in building a more resilient Nepal, but this pictures leaves the viewer with a perception that Nepal is in ruins and there is little being done to rebuild it.

Whether this perception is true is inconsequential. The image displays the subject individually and with explicit signs of poverty. The resulting connotations and narratives and then tied to her poverty, not her agency.

The fourth research question states: *If a child is present in the photo, is there a significant relationship between then being present and indicators of food insecurity and/or poverty?* There is no significant relationship between a child presence in a photo and indicators of food security or poverty.

The fifth research question is: *If a child is present in the photo, is there a significant relationship between them being present in the photo performing an action?* The data indicate that there is a strong correlation between a child's presence in the photo and action being performed in the photo. For the correlation between an action being performed and children being present, Pearson's chi-square test was performed on the data set. The test indicates the asymptotic significance between the variables of children present and action person was $p<.05$. There appears to be a strong correlation between the presence of children and the projected vulnerability factor of passivity. The finding is interesting because rather than supporting the historical legacy from the 20th century of inactive helpless children, this suggests pictures containing children are dynamic and not as likely to show vulnerability.

Take for example, the image from the press release, "*Oxfam*'s Strategic Plan, 2013-2019: The Power of People Against Poverty." Figure 3 depicts a young girl writing numbers on a chalkboard. This image contained the key codes of a single child

performing an action. In the image, we can see that the child is actively engaging. Having her writing letters also implies she in learning and obtaining an education. Even without context of geography, politics, or economics, we can infer that this girl has opportunity in

Figure 3: Oxfam Press Release, *"Oxfam's Strategic Plan, 2013-2019: The Power of People Against Poverty"*

the form of education. Visually framing opportunity instead of passivity (Figure 2) creates a positive, although incomplete narrative. Based on the title of the press release, we can assume the subject is part of a poor community, but based on the visual alone, her state of poverty is not the focus. Instead, her learning is.

The shift from focusing on learning instead poverty highlights a core issue in humanitarian aid media. What the camera focuses on not only creates a visual focus, but a narrative focus as well. Focusing on a poor single woman in rubble is not necessarily harmful or exploitative. It may be the reality for that woman. When the trend because photographs focusing on poor single women though, then the focus is on their state of passive helpless, and not the rebuilding of hope or the eradication of poverty.

Limitations and Further Points of Study

The largest limitation of this study is the sample size and selection. Being a sample of 52 images from one organization, the conclusions made only imply potential trends of poverty, but do not do more. On a broader level, the act of coding photos for visual representation creates a limitation because the visual significance of photos is iconic in nature.[51] Although a photo exists as an artifact of its own, its meaning is a result of subjective, cultural, and historical context. I have performed the coding for this research, so expanding the data set size as well as the coders would provide more reliable and accurate data. By extension, the conclusion made then about the data would provide a more comprehensive assessment.

Examining poverty porn unearths more nuanced discussions of vulnerabilities and exploitative tendencies in humanitarian media. Investigating the term begins to expose additional questions such as organizational structure and its impact on media content, audience reception of "poverty porn," and success of the media despite its exploitative nature. Although this research cannot answer the full scope of questions, by offering a definition of poverty porn and then teasing out how the exploitative nature transfers to the visual frame of *Oxfam*'s media creates a framework to expand and explore further. The companion data expose larger questions of the intersection between media narratives, public perceptions, and organizational structures of aid organizations.

---

[51] Paglamidis, Konstantinos. "Semiotics of Humanitarian Photography." (2013): 8.

Future areas of study based on this research include exploring consent and context, expanding the scope of the research, and creating different indicators of vulnerability and exploitation to study. As discussed earlier, both consent and context are imperative for ethical photography. Further questions of consent and context should be addressed in the future, but the nature of both cannot be determined through the established coded methodology for this research. Another possible area of exploration on this topic is expanding the scope of the study. The data were confined to a specific medium (press releases) from a specific organization (*Oxfam*). While *Oxfam* provides a snapshot how development aid organizations organize and frame poverty in their media, expanding the scope to other institutions would be beneficial. By expanding to other organizations, additional and important questions are raised such as the relationship between organization structure and levels of exploitation in media or prevalence of exploitation across humanitarian aid organizations. Also, focusing on different media besides press releases would provide a different perspective on the framing of poverty. Finally, the indicators of isolation, passivity, and vulnerability were tested against the data, but finding other indicators would be useful to filling the gap in literature on the visual representation of poverty in development media. Other focuses could include different parameters of vulnerability or looking at the relationship between photographer and subject.[52] Regardless of what areas of future studies this research inspires, all feed into the ultimate question of how exploitative media operate within the aid sector and to

---

[52] Barberini, Marta. "The Impact of Humanitarian Photography on the Generation of Sympathy and on Donation Behavior." (2010).

what extent do exploitative media limit or enhance the effectiveness of fundraising campaigns.

Recommendations and Conclusion

This research contributes to our understanding of humanitarian media. Even before the development of the term "poverty porn," aid organizations have grappled with the ethical boundaries of photography poverty. Today's images are a far cry from the images of the Chechnya War or the Spanish Civil War where suffering of the human body was an object of fascination without a call to action.[53] Even though organizations still lack proper guidelines and codes of conduct addressing the visual representation of subjects, the awareness of potential harm is now more in conversation than ever before. *Oxfam*'s press releases give a glimpse to a much different framing and focus than the photos during poverty porn's pinnacle in the 1980s. There seems to be a larger trend emerging in the humanitarian aid media sphere where the focus is on action or empowering the subjects within the frame. Much different than the framing and focus from *Live Aid* and the *Save The Children* adverts, where the onus for solutions is on the viewer, many organizations are recognizing change can begin within the frame. Instead, many of the photographs focused on empowerment. When focusing on empowerment, the subjects were frequently in action. Perhaps the cries of poverty porn and the lessons learned from the past thirty years since the heydays of poverty porn have helped shift the conservations aid organizations are having, as well as shift the perceptions of what poverty looks like.

---

[53] Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the pain of others*. New York: Picador, 2004. Print.

With a lack in universal guidelines on the visual representation of poverty, I offer practical suggestions for humanitarian and development aid organizations when framing poverty.

- Displaying people in isolation reinforces potential harmful perspectives.

- Portraying children in dynamic action weakens the status quo of photographing passivity

- Focusing on people as the main subjects of photos helps maintain a human connection to the photograph.

- Photographing action, empowerment, or agency of subjects helps if subjects are isolated as individuals in the frame.

- Photograph people in relationship to others when the themes of the subject are food insecurity or poverty.

Even though recent analysis of aid photography shows a shift in thinking, the problem still persists in the language and practices within development communication. This research provides not only awareness of where the gap in literature exists, but also recommendations for nonprofits fill the gaps within their work. In the case of *Oxfam*, the media was not overtly exploitative, but still highlighted potential harmful issues of isolation and the vulnerability of children within photographs. *Oxfam*'s vision is rooted in providing charity in crucial times of need. Portraying people at their most vulnerable with dignity in representation helps empower affected communities as well as highlight new alternatives to addressing poverty. Too often, the pictures used in aid organizations exist in a vacuum where the problem is distanced from the viewer or the

action needed arrives too late. David Campbell, a former press secretary and freelance photojournalist working across the globe, recognizes of the problem saying:

> A story becomes possible when there is visual evidence of disaster, but in the case of famine that evidence cannot be easily visualized (at least in terms familiar to the media) until people start showing an embodied trace of the food crisis (with distended stomachs and prominent ribs) or start dying. By that time, however … the possibility for preventive action has long passed, and the only course of action is humanitarian and remedial. We have then a systematic problem … The urgent task – in advance of the next humanitarian crisis – is to find a way to tell the story of the many and varied reasons that produce food insecurity without waiting for the visual traces that signify it's too late.[54]

The images used in the aid organizations address a sliver of the overall problem. Campbell's discussion of taking a systematic view of photography also translates to taking a systematic view of poverty. The two are interconnected. A main problem in humanitarian media representation is the lack of visual guidelines, but the heart of the problem is the absence of alternative narratives. Only showing the stereotype, the generalized, the passive observer, the helpless child, reinforces a false narrative and perception of how poverty operates. The problem exists as much "with the *absence* of alternative as if does with the presence of *stereotypes*."[55]

How does the absence in visual images connect with the larger absence in poverty? Viewing a photo through a single frame without knowledge of consent, context, or representation offers only a snapshot of suffering with reinforced stereotypes. Viewing

---

[54] Campbell, David. "Imagine famine project." *Regarding Humanity*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Feb. 2017.

[55] Campbell, David. "Famine photographs and the need for careful critique." *David Campbell Photography*. N.p., 12 Dec. 2011. Web. 24 Nov. 2016.

poverty through these frames, without teasing out the complex relationships between culture, power, and infrastructure, addresses a fraction of the larger problem, without offering solutions. Viewing the images and poverty on a systemic level, however, begins to illustrate the relationships between poverty, representation, and the picture and contributes to our knowledge to resolve these global injustices.

Works Cited

Attwood, Feona. "The paradigm shift: Pornography research, sexualization and extreme images." *Sociology Compass* 5.1 (2011): 13-22.

Bankoff, Greg, Georg Frerks, and Dorothea Hilhorst. *Mapping vulnerability: disasters, development, and people*. Routledge, 2004: 4. 8.

Barberini, Marta. "The Impact of Humanitarian Photography on the Generation of Sympathy and on Donation Behavior." (2010).

Blockland, Sara. *Photographic production as colonizing practice: the construction of the 'non-Western subject in crisis' analyzed through the film Episode III: Enjoy Poverty by Renzo Martens*. Thesis. Leiden University, 2011: 71

"Breaking the poverty porn habit." *Emergent Economics*. N.p., 03 Apr. 2014. Web. 10 Jan. 2017.

Campbell, David. "Famine photographs and the need for careful critique." *David Campbell Photography*. N.p., 12 Dec. 2011. Web. 24 Nov. 2016.

Campbell, David, D. J. Clark, and Kate Manzo. "Imaging famine." (2005): 388.

Campbell, David. "Imagine famine project." *Regarding Humanity*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Feb. 2017.

Clark, David J. "The production of a contemporary famine image: The image economy, indigenous photographers and the case of Mekanic Philipos." *Journal of International Development* 16.5 (2004): 695, 696.

"Code of Ethics." *Photographers Without Borders®*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Mar. 2017.

Dortonne, Nathalie. "Poverty Porn Is Dangerous." *CNN*. Cable News Network, n.d. Web.

01 Dec. 2016.

Fehrenbach, Heide, and Davide Rodogno. ""A horrific photo of a drowned Syrian child":

Humanitarian photography and NGO media strategies in historical

perspective." *International Review of the Red Cross* (2015): 1-35.

Felcher, Peter L., and Edward L. Rubin. "Privacy, Publicity, and the Portrayal of Real

People by the Media." *The Yale Law Journal* 88.8 (1979): 1577.

Gharib, Malaka. "At What Point Does A Fundraising Ad Go Too Far?" *NPR*. NPR, 30

Sept. 2015. Web. 23 Nov. 2016.

Gidley, Ruth. "NGOs still fail standards on appeal images." *Reuters Foundation,*

AlertNet 14 (2004).

Haney, Erin, and Erika Nimis. "Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary

African Photography." *African Arts* 40.1 (2007): 92-94., Moufakkir, Omar, and

Yvette Reisinger, eds. *The Host Gaze in Global Tourism*. CABI, 2013: 15.

Kurzyp, Rachel. "5 Reasons Why Save The Children Australia's New Ad Is Bad

Development | WhyDev Blog." *WhyDev Blog*. N.p., Apr. 2014. Web. 29 Nov.

2016.

Lentfer, Jennifer. *The Development Element: Guidelines for the future for communicating*

about the end of global poverty. Rep. N.p.: 2014. Print. Spring.

McBride, Anne E. "Food porn." *Gastronomica: the journal of food and culture*10.1

(2010): 38-46.

McGarvey, Julie. "The Truth About Poverty Porn." *How One Story Became The Only*

    Story. N.p., 08 July 2016. Web. 24 Nov. 2016.

Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 29 Nov. 2016.

"NPPA Code of Ethics." *NPPA Code of Ethics | NPPA*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Mar. 2017.

"Our Purpose and Beliefs." *Our Purpose and Beliefs | Oxfam International*. N.p., n.d.

    Web. 01 Dec. 2016.

Paglamidis, Konstantinos. "Semiotics of Humanitarian Photography." (2013): 7,8.

Recuber, Timothy. "Disaster Porn!." *Contexts* 12.2 (2013): 28-33.

Roenigk, Emily. "5 Reasons Poverty Porn Empowers the Wrong Person." *ONE*. N.p., 09

    Apr. 2014. Web. 01 Dec. 2016.

Shome, Raka. "Race and popular cinema: The rhetorical strategies of whiteness in City of

    Joy." *Communication Quarterly* 44.4 (1996): 502-518.

Slovic, Paul. "If I look at the mass I will never act: Psychic numbing psychic numbing

    and genocide." *Emotions and risky technologies*. Springer Netherlands, 2010. 37

    59.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. Macmillan, 1977.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the pain of others*. New York: Picador, 2004. Print.

Appendix

Appendix A: Oxfam Press Release Coding Sheet

Oxfam Press Release Coding		ID#	
Date:	Tag:		Url:
Title: Mali:			
What is the physical setting for this photo (country, rural, city, inside, outdoors)?			
Is any person present? YES NO Are they single or in a group? SINGLE GROUP Are they the main subject of the photo? YES NO			
If a person/people are present, are they performing an action? YES NO			
Are children present? YES NO Alone or with someone? ALONE NOT ALONE NA			
Are there obvious indicators of food insecurity? YES NO What are the indicators?			
Are there obvious signs of poverty? YES NO What are the indicators?			
Would you describe this image as exploitative? YES NO			
Additional Notes?			

Appendix A (Cont.): Oxfam Press Release Coding Sheet

Picture: