

A true alternative?: A discourse analysis of the Alternative Spring Break's online marketing material

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Abstract

Volunteer tourism, otherwise known as voluntourism, is generally defined as a way in which young, unskilled, individuals from the Global North can spend 1 to 4 weeks abroad, contributing to community development or environmental sustainability. Voluntourism is a growing phenomenon and many universities are responding to student demands, while also capitalizing on the key demographic to whom voluntourism is marketed (young students). The Alternative Spring Break (ASB) is one such program that provides students an opportunity to volunteer abroad or in Canada for 1 to 4 weeks. This paper examines the ASB websites of Carleton University, Ryerson University and the University of Western Ontario and uncovers, through a discourse analysis, several challenges with the language of an “alternative experience.” This paper suggests that ASB markets their programs in such a way that students believe they will make a difference abroad, while simultaneously experiencing something alternative to everyday life. Although marketed as such, ASB in fact perpetuates two often cited thematic frames found within the voluntourism literature: neocolonialism and neoliberalism. Through this analysis, this study suggests that the way in which ASB trips are marketed does not fully inform students of the effects of their choice to travel abroad, and thus students perpetuate the idea that they are superior and have come to “help” the “Other.”

Key Word: Alternative Spring Break, Voluntourism, Alternative, Neocolonialism, Neoliberalism

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1.0 Introduction

“The anticipated hard work became a vacation, hardships became playtime” (Vodopivec and Jaffe, 2011, p. 120).

In 2012 almost 1.6 million volunteer tourists traveled from the Global North to “developing countries” in the Global South, contributing upwards of \$2.6 billion to the neoliberal economic system (Coghlan, 2012). These volunteers had different motivations; however, the end result of their travels often benefitted the volunteer more than the individuals that the volunteers intended to help. Or, as the quote provided at the start of this MRP notes, voluntourism may be imagined as a way in which individuals can make helpful contributions abroad; however, their supposed volunteer trip often plays out as a form of vacation.

In voluntourism programs, the needs and desires of the voluntourist are often put above the volunteer-receiving community’s needs. As one volunteer from Thailand noted: “I was a bit disappointed because I didn’t get any cuddles today. Usually I get some cuddles [with the Thai children]” (Conran, 2011, p. 1461). In this situation the volunteer notes that they did not receive their expected cuddles from the children they played with daily, something that had become an important part of their volunteer trip. In another example, a voluntourist discusses their contribution in Peru as a medical volunteer and notes that they did not think that they “really made any difference at all” (Godfrey, Wearing and Schulenkorf, 2015, p. 116). Volunteer tourism testimony raises important questions about the educational and community development contributions of these programs. The idea of an alternative form of tourism is often highlighted in the promotional material for these programs. In this MRP, I examine what the language of “alternative” means in these contexts and the implications of using this word in promoting voluntourism programs.

Volunteer tourism – or voluntourism – is the act of going abroad for a short period of time (normally no longer than four weeks) to volunteer (often) in an “underdeveloped” country. Volunteer tourists spend their leisure time participating in tourist activities.¹ Over the course of the 21st century, international volunteering has become increasingly popular amongst individuals from the Global North aged 18-30, and specifically voluntourism has become the fastest growing niche tourism market worldwide (Raymond & Hall, 2008; Baptista, 2011; Conran, 2011; Coghlan & Noakes, 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2014; Butcher & Smith, 2015; Kontogeorgopolous, 2017; Molz, 2017). Yet, despite this growth in popularity, scholars are increasingly concerned with the impact of short-term international volunteering. For example, positive impacts on host-communities that are spoken of in voluntourism are rarely measured and important questions have been raised about the tangible changes that are noted as result of the volunteer work (see: Conran, 2011; Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011; Hawkes, 2014; Lupoli and Morse, 2014; Butcher & Smith, 2015; Polus and Bidder, 2015).

Volunteer tourism is often associated with mainstream and mass tourism. These critiques point to privilege and inequality in the world arising from colonial practices and inequitable power relations between the volunteers and people in host communities. Further, neoliberal norms, and the consumption of an “experience” at the expense of some for the pleasure of others, is critiqued in both tourism and voluntourism literatures (Hall & Tucker, 2004; Simons, 2004; Mostafanezhad, 2014; Butcher & Smith, 2015). While some important similarities between mainstream/mass tourism and volunteer tourism are examined in the literature, some scholars argue that volunteer tourism offers an alternative form of global interaction and travel (see: Wearing, 2001; Butcher & Smith, 2010; Sin, 2010; Butcher & Smith, 2015). For example, Wearing (2001) notes that tourist organizations commodify “destination cultures so as to serve

¹ See section 2.1 for further definitional aspects of “voluntourism.”

their profit purposes better, often with limited regard for the local community” (p. 40). Whereas alternative forms of tourism, such as voluntourism, “are fundamentally aligned to sustainability in attempting to ensure that the resource and destination impacts are minimized” (p. 7).

Furthermore, there is a popularized discourse of an ‘alternative’ experience emerging from the marketing materials of voluntourism organizations (Simpson, 2004). Here too, the language of an alternative form of travel is presented as a better and improved approach to travelling abroad.

The research carried out for this MRP explores whether volunteer tourism offers a true kind of ‘alternative’ to mainstream/mass tourism. To do so, I examine the language used to advertise volunteer tourism programs and consider this language in the context of the scholarly debates. The volunteer tourism company that was chosen for this research is the Alternative Spring Break (ASB). ASB is a student-run program that is present in numerous universities across Canada. This study looks specifically to the ASB programs run out of Carleton University (Carleton), the University of Western Ontario (Western) and Ryerson University (Ryerson).

The core questions guiding this research are: 1) How is the language of ‘alternative’ used in the promotional material of volunteer tourism programs; and 2) How is this discourse strategic?

1.1 Overview of the Study

In this study, I analyze the discourse² used in online promotional materials from the Alternative Spring Break program, to understand *how* the language of ‘alternative’ is used in its marketing material. The analysis will be undertaken through a discourse analysis³ looking to the language used by the ASB websites of Carleton University, Ryerson University and the

² Discourse can be best described as written or spoken language and communication.

³ A discourse analysis is the study of the language used to discuss a certain topic (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). See Methodology for a thorough definition.

University of Western Ontario. A sociological and social psychological discourse analysis was chosen for this study due to its use in the Social Sciences, and its ability to see beyond the basic syntax and grammar of a word or phrase (Taylor, 2013). This type of discourse analysis looks beyond the word or phrase to uncover the implied meaning of the word, and looks to the purposeful nature of word choice by individuals.

The analysis of the online material of ASB creates an opportunity to analyze the language in the context of the scholarship on voluntourism and international volunteering to understand *why* this language is employed. In turn, I will be able to better understand the rationale and the implications of the discourse of ‘alternative.’

The study follows two key thematic frames that are commonly found in the academic literature regarding volunteer tourism, these two thematic frames are neocolonialism and neoliberalism. Through these two thematic frames, an analysis of the language of key webpages was undertaken to understand the marketing strategy of the ASB programs at Carleton, Ryerson and Western. It was found that although the three programs do not advertise themselves as an alternative to tourism, they do advertise themselves as an alternative to everyday life and notably as an alternative to a college or university Reading Week.⁴⁵ They do this by marketing the unique nature of their trips to students, and by strategically choosing testimonials that highlight the “once-in-a-lifetime” features of the trips. Upon further analysis, both these findings were found to correlate with the thematic frames discovered in the voluntourism literature. Through essentializing local people and places into something exciting to be experienced, ASB retains

⁴ Reading Week is typically one week per semester that students have off to study. Professors often say that this week is for completing assigned readings, preparing for upcoming exams and assignments, and catching up on sleep.

⁵ Of note, Ryerson University no longer sends students abroad over Reading Week, but rather for the month of May. However, Ryerson still emphasizes the alternative nature of their trips and promotes the “once-in-a-lifetime-ness” of the trip to students.

many colonial vestiges of the past. Furthermore, through partnering with for-profit NGOs, and selling their trips as a product where students can purchase an experience based on their personal needs and desires, ASB has seamlessly entered the neoliberal marketplace.

This study is interested in how the language of the ‘alternative’ is employed in the marketing materials of volunteer sending organizations’ (specifically on their websites) to promote a particular kind of experience – “an alternative experience” – for volunteer tourists. Scholars have highlighted other things in regards to volunteer tourism, such as “making a difference” or a desire to “give back” (see: Butcher & Smith, 2010; Conran, 2011; Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011; Wearing & Grabowski, 2011; Butcher & Smith, 2015; Godfrey, Wearing & Schulenkorf, 2015). Other scholars have argued that the marketing strategies of voluntourist companies perpetuate racism through the overemphasis on white female volunteers (Clost, 2013; Mostafanezhad, 2013a). Building on these critical analyses of international volunteering, this project focuses on the use of the word alternative, as well as the language of the alternative in related concepts such as: other, substitute, alternate, different, unconventional. Further, it looks to themes of the alternative such as “life-changing” and “once-in-a lifetime” found in the marketing discourse.

This analysis uncovers that voluntourism is marketed as something through which young people can “do something different” in order to “make a difference;” however, voluntourism remains very similar to conventional tourism. Thus, as this Major Research Paper (MRP) will argue, voluntourism frequently perpetuates neocolonialism and neoliberalism, while simultaneously reinforcing essentialist qualities onto the local populations of voluntourist travel destinations.

This research is timely due to the remarkable growth of international volunteering. All three ASB programs studied follow this trend and have grown exponentially in the last 10 years. This research is important for two core reasons. First, the analysis of the promotional material of voluntourism organizations can inform one of the trends in current volunteer abroad marketing strategies, and relate these findings to the expectations of participants in these programs through their online testimonies. Secondly, it contributes to critical scholarship and research within the broader body of literature on international volunteering by explaining the powerful impact of language.

This MRP is organized into 6 sections, each of which touches on key aspects of the research. Chapter 2 begins with a literature review that introduces readers to voluntourism and the trends associated with the growth of the industry. An explanation of the linkages between tourism and voluntourism follows. The remainder of the literature review discusses neocolonialism and neoliberalism as they relate to voluntourism through essentialism, dependency, power, voyeurism, commodification of cultures and peoples, and self-enhancement.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology that I employed during my research. This chapter discusses the merits and shortcomings of the case study method and discourse analysis, and it outlines the steps I took to ensure thorough and sound research methods. It also discusses the limitations I faced with my original proposed research concept, and outlines the steps I took to broaden my discourse analysis in order to better situate my findings in the academic literature.

Chapter 4 discusses the findings of my research, and is broken into two main parts: Key Words and Text Analysis. Only four out of the sixteen key words were found in the original analysis, thus a text analysis was used to compliment the key word analysis. The text analysis uncovered two key themes: ASB trips as “out-of-the ordinary” and ASB trips as life changing.

Chapter 5 analyzes the findings by situating them in the academic literature. Both thematic frames outlined in the literature review were reflected in the analysis, notably the voyeuristic tendencies of volunteers and ASB trips as a package to purchase.

Chapter 6 concludes the MRP by outlining recommendations for future research, and offering concluding remarks on the research project.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Voluntourism

A general definition of international volunteering is: a volunteer who engages and contributes to communities across international borders, for little or no monetary compensation, through a public or private organization (Sherraden, 2001). There are different forms of international volunteering abroad, which include: long-term skilled and semi-skilled volunteers who volunteer for one or more years; skilled and semi-skilled medium term volunteers who volunteer between three and eleven months; skilled, semiskilled and unskilled short-term volunteers who volunteer for less than three months; and finally volunteer tourists (voluntourists) who use their leisure time (generally no longer than one month) to volunteer and travel in communities abroad.

The specific type of international voluntary service examined in this study is voluntourism – a form of short-term international volunteering. For the purpose of this study, voluntourists are defined as individuals who “volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment” (Wearing, 2001, p. 1). This definition has been chosen due to its common use in the scholarly work on voluntourism (see: Sin, 2010; Tomaszos & Butler, 2010; Benson, 2011; Conran, 2011; Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011; Easton & Wise, 2015; Zavitz & Butz, 2015; Polus & Bidder, 2015). In order to effectively undertake this analysis, this paper will look to the broader landscape of international volunteering to inform this study. Voluntourism will be examined as a subset of unskilled short-term international volunteering and scholarly articles from both areas of study will be utilized. Distinctions between the two forms of international volunteering will be noted when necessary.

Voluntourism falls under the subset of short-term international volunteering for a variety of reasons. First, it is the simplest way to avoid confusion within the academic literature that does not adhere to a specific definition regarding the length of time of international voluntary service (see the following articles for differences in timelines and titles of volunteers: Palmer, 2002; Simpson, 2004; Raymond & Hall, 2008; Conran, 2011; Lupoli & Morse, 2014; Butcher & Smith, 2015; Polus & Bidder, 2015). Secondly, voluntourism holds some similarities to short-term international volunteering. For example, short-term international volunteering consists primarily of individuals from the Global North⁶ who spend no more than three months volunteering in a developing country. These individuals can be skilled or unskilled depending on the sending organization's criteria (Lough *et al.*, 2011; Perold *et al.*, 2012; Godfrey, Wearing & Schulenkorf, 2015). Like short-term international volunteers, voluntourists are predominantly from the Global North and are overwhelmingly white (Conran, 2011; Mostafenezhad, 2013a; Molz, 2017); however, the skill levels of the voluntourists differ from their short-term counterparts. Whereas short-term international volunteers can be unskilled *or* skilled, volunteer tourists are *almost exclusively* unskilled individuals and receive little to no training (Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011; Butcher & Smith, 2015). Further, the time spent abroad can differ – generally voluntourists will spend no longer than 1 month abroad (Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011; Polus & Bidder, 2015). However, voluntourism also encompasses “gap year” students who spend *no less than* three months abroad, thus the timeline is not always a defining factor between short-term volunteers and voluntourists (Butcher & Smith, 2010; Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011; Molz, 2017). The similarities the two hold allow voluntourism to be considered a subset of short-term international volunteering. Other important characteristics of voluntourism that set it apart from

⁶ Although there are South-South volunteers (Devereux, 2008; Tiessen & Heron, 2012), these are not the focus of this study.

other forms of international volunteering is the tendency for volunteers to be very young (18-30) (Lough *et al.*, 2011; Godfrey, Wearing & Schulenkorf, 2015; Polus & Bidder, 2015).⁷ Further, the marketing involved in voluntourism is often very one-sided as it focuses on the adventure and altruism of the experience, while generally neglecting to inform potential volunteers of the negative aspects of voluntourism (Simpson, 2004; Butcher & Smith, 2010; Easton & Wise, 2015).

2.2 Tourism and Voluntourism

Mass tourism is the largest global industry and employs one in every twelve people worldwide (Mostafanezhad, 2014); yet, despite its popularity, the tourism industry has been critiqued by many as an extension of colonialism where tourists are inherently superior to the “inferior local inhabitants” (Simons, 2004, p. 45) of the countries they visit by virtue of their privilege to explore different countries other than their own (Hall & Tucker, 2004; Butcher & Smith, 2015). Furthermore, in tourism, there are only superficial social exchanges – the cultures of local people become commodified as something exotic for tourists to experience (Wearing, 2001; Caton & Santos, 2009; Mostafanezhad, 2014). In response to this, some scholars have noted that voluntourism can be an ethical alternative to mass tourism (Wearing, 2001; Butcher & Smith, 2010; Butcher & Smith, 2015); however, voluntourism and the broader scope of unskilled international volunteering, have readily been critiqued through similar thematic frames as tourism, thus dispelling the idea that voluntourism is the alternative to tourism.

Voluntourism has been discussed as having many neocolonial tendencies, and a subset of the academic criticism regarding international volunteering speaks directly of short-term

⁷ To note: there is an emerging trend of families with young children participating in volunteer activities in countries in the Global South, either as a unique trip, or as part of worldschooling. Worldschooled children are teaching children through travel and encountering different cultures (Molz, 2017).

international volunteering as a mechanism through which the colonial history of the volunteer-receiving countries is perpetuated (see: Palmer, 2002; Simpson, 2004; Sherraden *et al.* 2008; Conran, 2011; Zavitz & Butz, 2011; Tiessen 2012; Perold *et al.* 2013; Hawkes 2014; Butcher & Smith, 2015; Howard & Burns 2015). The concern here is whether the language of ‘alternative’ employed by voluntourist organizations is consistent with the reality of the voluntourist experience. Furthermore, voluntourism has been criticized for perpetuating the ideals of neoliberalism due to the commodification of development, altruism, and cultures (Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011; Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2012; Lyons *et al.*, 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2014; McGloin, 2016). These frames of analysis will guide this literature review.

2.3 Neocolonialism

To fully understand the linkages between colonialism and voluntourism one must look to the history of international travel. The history of unskilled international volunteers can be traced back to the colonial Christian missionaries of the 19th and 20th century (Mostafanezhad, 2013b). These missionaries travelled to colonized countries that they viewed as places of adventure and intrigue to convert the local peoples of that country to their belief system (Said, 1978; Ogden, 2008; Varsti, 2013; Mostafanezhad, 2014). Although not all present day volunteer tourism programs hold the religious aspect of missionaries (though some still do), voluntourism does continue to enable the spread of different values to people living in countries in the Global South, most of which are former colonies.⁸ Due to the marketability of voluntourism, the

⁸ It is important to note that not all countries that voluntourists visit were once colonized; however European and Western norms have often had a strong influence on the growth of volunteer-receiving countries. For example, although Thailand was never officially colonized, the current unequal distribution of wealth and power in Thailand has been attributed to the imposition of Euro-American and Japanese economic reforms and power structures. Thus, many of the same struggles associated with colonialism are present within Thailand, and power relations between volunteers and individuals in the volunteer-receiving communities can still be discussed within the neocolonial framework (Conran, 2011).

business has grown rapidly since the mid-1990s; yet, voluntourism continues to be criticized due to its linkages to colonialism. Furthermore, volunteer tourism continues to perpetuate the “romanticization of peoples and places” (Mostafanezhad, 2014, p. 40) in host countries that were once colonized (Said, 1978; Ogden, 2008).

Voluntourism extends the legacy of colonialism, and this thematic frame is found in a large amount of academic literature regarding voluntourism (see: Palmer, 2002; Simpson, 2004; Sherraden *et al.* 2008; Conran, 2011; Zavitz & Butz, 2011; Tiessen 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2013b; Perold *et al.* 2013; Hawkes 2014; Butcher & Smith, 2015; Howard & Burns 2015). This legacy creates a power imbalance between the volunteers and the individuals living in volunteer-receiving communities, which in turns negates much of the positive work that voluntourism purports to do in countries in the Global South.

2.3.1 Power Imbalance

Through the historical processes that have led to the unjust and destructive power relations in voluntourism, host community members are often essentialized into one homogenous group of people. To essentialize a group of people is to attribute specific and unchanging characteristics to the entire group. In voluntourism, people living in the voluntourist-receiving communities are frequently essentialized as being poor and incapable of helping themselves, which in turn creates a hierarchy where people from the volunteer-receiving countries are seen as inferior to the volunteers and as incapable of helping themselves (see: Simpson, 2004; McKinnon, 2006; Sharps & Briggs, 2006; Butcher & Smith, 2015).

In his influential work on postcolonialism, Said (1978) notes that Western identity is seen as superior, which fuels the cultural domination of the Western world. This idea has continued to permeate the postcolonial writings of the 21st century (see: McKinnon, 2006; Sharps & Briggs, 2006; Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2010), and plays a large role in voluntourism. In the global hierarchy, volunteer-receiving countries often have less relative power than volunteer-sending countries. This inherent superiority is perpetuated in voluntourism, where a perceived superiority of the individual volunteer develops over the individuals in the volunteer-receiving countries, thus enforcing the global power relations of the two given countries (Simpson, 2004; McKinnon, 2006; Sharps & Briggs, 2006; Raymond & Hall, 2008; Mostafanezhad, 2013b; Butcher & Smith, 2015). At its core, voluntourism must construct the individuals living in the volunteer-receiving countries as an unchanging group of people who are in need of assistance. Without this premise there would be no need for the voluntourist. It is because of this supposed “need” in the Global South that voluntourists “construct their own identities as helpers” (Vodopivec, 2011, p. 123). In doing so, they give themselves power over the people they are ‘helping’. This power relation contributes to the seemingly inescapable power imbalance between the Global North and the Global South (McKinnon, 2006; Sharps & Briggs, 2006).

In essence, advertisements for voluntourism programs sell travellers the idea of the Global South as a place to better oneself by helping a homogenous group of individuals who are incapable of helping themselves (Palmer, 2002; Godfrey, Wearing & Schulenkorf, 2015; Polus & Bidder, 2015). By extension, voluntourism can foster a sense of privilege amongst volunteers that allows them to feel as if they have the right to “to interfere in the political and socio-economic agenda of the communities in the Global South” (Gius, 2015, p. 2), and that this intervention is both positive and in-line with the host community’s needs. Consequently, the

people of volunteer-receiving communities become dehumanized, their “agency and autonomy” destroyed (Johnson, 2015), and they become tools of enhancement for the Western volunteers.

The power relation between volunteers and host communities that is created by essentializing local people is further exacerbated by the visual representation of differentness perpetuated by the racialized relationships inherent in voluntourism. The overwhelming whiteness in voluntourism creates an instantaneous image of differentness, where volunteers are perceived as different, which is associated with the voluntourist’s privilege, power, and wealth. By extension, volunteer-receiving communities are relegated to a homogenous group who are juxtaposed against the voluntourists in similar ways and are presented as having less value than the volunteers (see: Devereux, 2008; Sherraden *et al.*, 2008; Enders & Gould, 2009; Conran, 2011; Zavitz & Butz, 2011; Tiessen, 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2013a; Mostafanezhad, 2014).

In a study conducted on the reactions of host communities in Tanzania and Mozambique to international voluntary service in 2013, it was found that many individuals in the host communities believed that “the white international volunteers viewed them [individuals living in the host-communities] as poor and in need of assistance” because of their skin colour (Perold *et al.*, 2013, p.187). Thus, the members of the host communities were essentialized in a way that closely mimics the power relations between colonizing countries and colonized countries from decades ago. Duffield (2007) explains that in development work, developing countries are often categorized as not being “self-reliant enough” (p. 219) to care for their own affairs. Through essentialism, volunteer tourism can perpetuate the idea of the white, powerful, Western Saviour rescuing those in developing countries who cannot help themselves.

2.3.2 *Dependency*

When countries were under colonial rule there was a formal dependency imposed on countries whereby the colonized country had to rely on the colonizer to, essentially, exist (Perold *et al.*, 2013). Through international voluntary service, host communities can develop political and financial dependency where they rely on the continuous presence of international volunteer organizations (Sherraden *et al.*, 2008; Butcher & Smith, 2015). This dependency can be considered a form of exploitation over the communities that are recipients of voluntourism ‘aid’ (Guttentag, 2011). The vulnerability that is created through dependency is such that the members of host communities may begin to assign a higher worth and status to the volunteers than they assign to themselves; dependency creates an image where (white) Westerners have special skills and are the “superior race” (Perold *et al.*, 2013, p. 186). The constant presence of international volunteers in certain communities perpetuates Western control over countries in the Global South, and allows the legacy of colonialism to influence the voluntourist experience.

2.3.3 *Voyeurism*

Volunteer tourism has also been critiqued due to the voyeuristic tendencies that volunteers develop because of the “us” vs “them” mentality that is grounded in the power dynamics inherent in voluntourism (Mostafanezhad, 2013a). In the past, colonized countries were “a place of romance, [with] exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, and remarkable memories” (Said, 1978, p. 1). They were places where colonizers sought adventure (Ogden, 2008). In volunteer tourism, volunteers live in a fantasy world where “local inhabitants are compliant and submissive [in order] to sustain [the] myths and fantasies” of the picturesque Global South (Simons, 2004, p. 46). Volunteers become the voyeurs who witness the lives of people for a short period of time, while failing to engage with the individuals living in the volunteer-receiving communities on a personal level (Palmer, 2002; Godfrey, Wearing &

Schulenkorf, 2015; Polus & Bidder, 2015). Voluntourism fails to properly immerse volunteers in the local community, and thus they become witnesses to strangers' lives, unable to understand the true lived realities of the individuals in the volunteer-receiving communities.

2.3.4 Positive Outcomes? – Mutually-Beneficial Relationships

As has been discussed above, colonialism holds many ties to voluntourism, and a large number of scholars discuss the shortcomings of voluntourism as it relates to colonialism. However, there are scholars who write about voluntourism in a different vein than what has been outlined above. For those who promote voluntourism, such as Wearing (2001), the cultural domination of the Western world can be mitigated and “the power balance between tourist and hosts can be destabilized” (p. 172) through voluntourism. The balance of power allegedly allows voluntourists and host community members to form real relationships of equals that are able to combat the colonial legacy of the ‘superior’ individual helping the ‘inferior’ (see: Raymond & Hall, 2008; Sin, 2010; Alexander & Baker, 2011; Wearing & Grabowski, 2011; Zahra, 2011; Lupoli & Morse 2014). This argument is also held by many voluntourists. For example, in a study conducted of volunteer tourists in Thailand, volunteers were commonly found to say that the main difference between volunteer tourism and mass tourism is the “‘real’ interactions with local people” (Mostafanezhad, 2014, p.41). However, true interactions based on equality and respect are rarely present in voluntourism. Firstly, a setting where a highly privileged group is giving of their time to provide assistance to a seemingly underprivileged community is not a scenario that can produce real interactions, and thus allow for the building of a relationship of equals (Guttentag, 2011). Furthermore, speaking directly to the short-term nature of voluntourism, voluntourism does not allow volunteers and community members to spend enough

authentic time together to form mutually-beneficial bonds (see: Devereux 2008; Lough *et al.*, 2011; Tiessen & Heron, 2012; Howard & Burns 2015).

2.4 Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is the privileged position of ‘the market’ in driving economic, political and social policies – a neoliberal world is thus a world where survival is dependent on one’s competitive ability to make a profit at all costs (Lyons *et al.*, 2012). Further, neoliberalism holds that in order to maximize social good, one must maximize the reach and prevalence of human transactions. By expanding the reach of human transactions, human interactions are brought into the global marketplace, contributing to the expansion of human movement on a global scale (Mostafanezhad, 2013b). Proponents of voluntourism assert that voluntourism is able to combat the exploitation and commodification of tourism through a relationship of equals between host community and voluntourist (Guttentag, 2011). However, as described in the previous section, volunteer tourism does not allow space for a meeting of equals, and thus one must look to voluntourism as a subset of tourism and discuss the economic associations that are often ascribed to voluntourism.

2.4.1 Commodification of volunteering

Mostafanezhad (2013b) notes that voluntourism has become so entrenched in the global marketplace that it contributes to the expansion of neoliberalism. In doing so, voluntourism has commodified development, altruism, and cultures by taking advantage of an individual’s desire to help (Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011). In a study conducted in 2008 it was noted that as the number of interested voluntourists grew, so too did the prevalence of for-profit voluntourist companies (Coghlan & Noakes, 2012). This trend is especially worrisome due to the quick pace at which the

voluntourist marketplace is growing (Molz, 2017). With more for-profit companies, the more likely it is that the altruistic desires of volunteers will be exploited to make a profit.

Volunteer tourists must purchase expensive travel packages from voluntourist companies in order to travel abroad (Howard & Burns, 2015).⁹ Through this transaction, they conduct business in the neoliberal business space and contribute to the competitive advantage of voluntourist companies (Coghlan & Noakes, 2012; Lyons *et al.*, 2012; McGloin, 2016). The trip packages are designed with the voluntourist in mind – the voluntourist is the purchaser of a product, and therefore the trips are designed based primarily on their preferences (Guttentag, 2011; Lough *et al.*, 2011). The marketability of a trip is directly correlated to such things as: the location of the trip; the type of work being done by the volunteers, for instance interactions with local children is often in high demand in the voluntourism industry; how much of a “difference” a volunteer can make; and, the type of mini-trips that volunteers will be offered during their free time (Mostafanezhad, 2014; Molz, 2017). Volunteers become the consumers of a moral marketplace where volunteers consume the culture that the host communities produce. In essence, voluntourism is a “commodified experience that situates participants and their social justice aspirations in the realm of the marketplace rather than in the civic sphere of political activism” (Molz, 2017, p. 339). The underlying association with the marketplace severely impedes the volunteer’s ability to have a positive impact. Thus, a trip is created that is remarkably similar to packaged holidays common in mass tourism (Tomazos & Butler, 2010). The volunteer’s experience abroad becomes one of consumption as opposed to altruism.

⁹ For example, ASB Ryerson charges students \$4,000 for one month, Carleton’s programs to developing countries are \$2,285 for one week, and Western charges students between \$2,400 and \$3,000 for one week.

2.4.2 Personal Skills Building

As volunteer tourism has become widespread, so too has the notion of voluntourism as an avenue to enhance one's professional skills for the Western marketplace. Neoliberal economic trends such as entrepreneurialism, self-development and social development have become prioritized in voluntourism (Mostafanezhad, 2014; Kontogeorgopolous, 2017). One of the most cited reasons given by volunteers for wanting to participate in a voluntourist trip is "skill acquisition and career development" (Vrasti, 2013, p. 9). Personal development has become so prevalent in voluntourism that the needs of those in the host communities are "superseded by the growing emphasis on the needs of the individual volunteer and their own personal professional development" (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011, p. 550). The time the voluntourist spends in a developing country enhances that individual's human capital, as they use this experience to add a line to their resumé, to enhance their reputation, and to gain competitive advantage in the job market (Tomazos & Butler, 2010; Butcher, 2012; Lyons *et al.*, 2012; Vrasti, 2013; Griffiths *et al.*, 2015; McGloin, 2016). Meanwhile, the communities where volunteers developed these skills remain remarkably the same as when the volunteer first arrived and have not gained much from this experience (Raymond, 2012; Griffiths, *et al.*, 2015).

2.5 Summary

The characteristics that define voluntourism are best exemplified through the two thematic frames outlined above. The power relations inherent in voluntourism are directly linked to the legacy of colonialism that is inherent in voluntourism, where an "us" vs "them" mentality is accompanied by the voyeuristic tendencies of the volunteers. The neocolonial tendencies of voluntourism allows for the essentialization of local peoples into one homogenous group of individuals, where volunteers are seemingly more powerful and capable than the people in host

communities. Essentialism and neocolonialism distance the volunteer from the community, and in doing so allow the commodification of development, altruism and cultures. Local communities become places of allure and adventure to be bought, and travel becomes a way for young people from the Global North to better themselves in order to become more competitive in the job market, while simultaneously having an adventure and a cross-cultural experience. Through these thematic frames, it is evident that volunteer tourism cannot be considered an ethical alternative to tourism. Rather, it perpetuates many of the same damaging characteristics as conventional tourism.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Case Study

For the purpose of this research, I have chosen to use a case study to better understand one particular component of voluntourism: the language and implications of the word “alternative” as it relates to voluntourism’s promotional materials. The case study method is most often employed by disciplines in the Social Sciences, which is in-line with other aspects of my research, notably the discourse analysis that is outlined in the section below (Gerring, 2007). Put simply, a case study research project will “examine many features of a few cases” (Neuman, 2014, p 42) in order to focus in on smaller details that can later be extrapolated to larger-scale structures and processes. Time is also a key factor in the case study research method – in most case study research designs time is a fixed entity, thus the passage of time cannot interfere with the research that is conducted (Neuman, 2014).

The case study method is a useful research method for my research for a variety of reasons. First, the websites that were examined in this research were printed on a specific day and time, thus allowing my research to satisfy one of the main criteria of the case study method. Secondly, case studies are able “to link abstract ideas in specific ways with the concrete specifics of cases” (Neuman, 2014, p 42). Therefore, a case study will benefit my research by linking some of the wider thematic frames found in the volunteer tourism literature, such as neoliberalism and neocolonialism, to the concrete example of a voluntourist organization, the Alternative Spring Break.

3.1.1 *Alternative Spring Break*¹⁰

For this research project one organization was chosen, The Alternative Spring Break (ASB), and from that organization three specific cases were used. The programs run through Carleton University (Carleton), in Ottawa, Ontario, Ryerson University (Ryerson) in Toronto, Ontario and the University of Western Ontario (Western) in London, Ontario. These specific universities were chosen as they are all in Ontario, and their ASB programs were found to be extremely similar.

The Alternative Spring Break is a program run through Canadian universities that allows students and faculty members to volunteer in Canada or abroad for 1 week to a month. For the purpose of this research, only trips to developing countries were used in the analysis. Each university's ASB program runs slightly differently, however their main goal is to provide a service to communities in need. Each program that was analyzed partnered with established NGOs, community organizations, or international organizations in the destination country. The type of work done by students does not differ considerably between the three ASB programs chosen for this analysis, with most trips focusing on education, construction, or environmental sustainability. Western also offers trips that focus on health care.^{11 12}

¹⁰ All information was taken from each program's individual websites.

¹¹ Although the inclusion of medical volunteering is a rather striking difference between Western's ASB program and Ryerson and Carleton, there does not seem to be any different criteria to be a part of these volunteer trips. Thus, what may have been deemed a contribution to a community (a nursing student administering vaccinations to children), holds many, if not more, of the shortcomings associated with unskilled short-term international volunteering.

¹² Although the three universities chosen in this study are public universities, and are not seemingly motivated by profit (and thus would seem to stray too far from neoliberalism to justify using them as part of the case study), the ties that Canadian universities have to the neoliberal marketplace are strong. Canadian universities have become part of a consumer-driven model of education – students bring capital to the university by providing the university with tuition fees and academic prestige, and universities produce young adults who are groomed to fit within the neoliberal marketplace (Fullick, 2013). Further, universities have begun to market themselves as places through which individuals will be prepared to enter the job market; universities are ranked in a system that has created a reality where universities are products to be evaluated and compared, and students purchase their education based on which university will most help them successfully enter into white-collar careers (Bolan and Robinson, 2013).

Break down of ASB trips by University

Carleton University

Trip Location (1 week)	Partnering Organization	Possible trip themes
Mondana, Ecuador	Me to We	Access to education, clean water, sanitation, biodiversity
Aldea de los Angeles, Guatemala	Students Offering Support	Education
Nicaragua	Me to We	Access to education, clean water, sanitation

Ryerson University

Trip Location (4 weeks)	Partnering Organization	Possible Trip theme
Nepal	Volunteer Initiative Nepal	Education, rebuilding
India	Yeaoutindia (YOI)	Small scale building, renovation, solar energy

University of Western Ontario

Trip Location (1 week)	Partnering Organization	Trip theme
Monte Cristi, Dominican Republic	Outreach360	Quality Education, Gender Equality, youth development
Nicaragua (Scholars' Elective)	Companeros	Coffee farming, clean water and sanitation, economic growth
Jinotega, Nicaragua	Outreach360	Quality Education, Gender Equality, youth development
Costa Rica	International Service Learning	Medical volunteering, community health
Jamaica	International Service Learning	Medical volunteering, community health
Panama	International Service Learning	Medical volunteering, community health
Urubamba, Peru	Nexos Comunitarios	Community development, education, gender equality, youth development
Matelot, Trinidad and Tobago	Amizade	Community development, Gender Equality

The history of each ASB program differs depending on the university. Western's program started in the 2002/2003 academic year with five students travelling to Pittsburg,

Pennsylvania “to serve and learn.” Since then the program has grown exponentially, and in 2017 Western sent 180 students to 9 different countries and partnered with 9 different organizations. Ryerson University has much the same history. In 2006 five students partnered together to travel to Guatemala to work with Habitat for Humanity. Since then, the program has grown beyond reading week, and every year the Ryerson ASB program sends students on a month long trip in May to a country in the Global South. Carleton’s ASB program began in 2006 with one trip to British Columbia where they partnered with the University of British Columbia on a community project. Since then, they have continued to grow, moving to projects in developing countries in Central America and South America. They now hold six trips a year, three in developing countries and three in Canada or the United States (Sabourin, 2017).

Some of the key similarities each program holds are as follows: each program has grown exponentially since its conception; there has been a growing emphasis on sending students to countries in the Global South; none of the program participants can use their trips as credits towards their degrees; all the programs are open to students from any faculty; each program is open only to undergraduate students (faculty members and graduate students can be team leaders); and, each program is run through an Ontario university. However, despite these similarities, there are still important differences one must note. As mentioned, Western does provide students with an opportunity to participate in medical volunteering. As well, Ryerson has implemented one month volunteering projects due to feedback from past participants who noted that the one week program was too short for them to “get the full experience” (About, Ryerson).¹³ The final difference between the three programs is the emphasis Western and

¹³ This study included only desk-based research and was thus unable to uncover information that was not publicly accessible online. That being said, based off this research, it seems that the trip length grew because of student demand alone, and not based off research conducted by the organizers on the harms associated with extremely short-term international volunteering.

Carleton place on personal enhancement through their one week program, whereas Ryerson puts more emphasis on the ‘experience’ of doing international volunteering.

3.2 Discourse Analysis

A discourse analysis was chosen to undertake this study. A discourse analysis is the study of the language used in certain contexts. Words have a fundamental definition, however the meaning of words, and the language in which they are used, can change given the context in which they are used (Taylor, 2013). By conducting a discourse analysis of the language of the ‘alternative’ on each website, one can better understand if ‘the alternative’ is in name only, or if the trips truly do move beyond conventional tourism. The way one understands and internalizes language, and the way human beings understand the discourses around them, depends greatly on from whom one receives the information. It is more likely that one will internalize the language of an expert as opposed to the language of a peer due to the power relations involved in the relationships (Georgakopoulou and Goutsos, 2004). As Easton and Wise (2016) note, “websites [are the] primary sources of volunteer [tourist] information...” (p. 142), thus a careful reading of the website materials allows one to analyze the language of the voluntourist expert (the volunteer sending organization).

Discourse analyses vary considerably due to the interdisciplinary nature of the research methodology; however, one can categorize a discourse analysis into one of two overarching types. The first type of discourse analysis is one that incorporates linguistics tools to analyze language, using grammar and syntax to uncover meaning. The second form of discourse analysis uses social psychology and sociology to understand how language is a social tool; words carry meaning because of their social significance, and the way in which they are used can demonstrate power relations in society and between individuals (Taylor, 2013). This study will

use the latter form of analysis to uncover if, and how, the language used by ASB is, or is not, used a social tool to form a ‘relationship’ of trust between the company and the potential consumers (students) that encourages students to believe that ASB trips are an alternative experience.

The discourse analysis I employed during my research employed two stages. First, I undertook a key word analysis of the ASB websites, and second I did a generalized discourse analysis where I identified phrases and short sentences that used language that implied the alternative.

3.2.1. Key Word Analysis

I identified words on each ASB website that promoted the idea of “an alternative experience” using synonyms of the word “alternative” that were generated by Google and Microsoft Word prior to the analyses. The synonyms that were found using both these electronic platforms were copied into a word document on May 1, 2017 in order to ensure continuity throughout the duration of my research.

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Alternative | 9. Uncommon |
| 2. Unconventional | 10. Radical |
| 3. Substitute | 11. Replacement |
| 4. Alternate | 12. Choice |
| 5. Different | 13. Option |
| 6. Unusual | 14. Unique |
| 7. Other | |
| 8. Unorthodox | |

The final words that were chosen were:

3.2.2 Language Analysis

A language analysis requires one to look at phrases and short sentences to uncover meaning. This was not part of my original research design; however, due to the lack of data that

was extrapolated from the key word analysis, I employed a generalized language analysis to broaden my research scope. This analysis allowed me to move beyond specific words to understand the general language of the website, and the context in which the language was used. This research method is in line with social psychological and sociological discourse analyses as it looks beyond a word and searches for the meaning behind the language.

3.3 Data Collection

For this study I adopted a key word discourse analysis, and a general language analysis, using key pages on the websites of each ASB program (See figure 1.0 for details). Where pages were not identical in name, similar pages were chosen. For example, Ryerson University did not have a frequently asked questions section, thus “Breakdown” was chosen as a replacement. Website pages were printed on May 8, 2017 and all the analysis was undertaken using the printed pages to ensure continuity throughout the course of my research.

	Introduction to ASB	Information about ASB	ASB Trips to the Global South	Student Testimonials
Ryerson University	Home Page & About	Breakdown	Current Projects	Testimonials, 2015
Carleton University	Home Page (detailed overview of program)	FAQs	ASB Trips (looking specifically to trips outside of Canada and the USA)	Testimonials (looking only at testimonials from students who travelled outside of Canada)
University of Western Ontario	Home Page & Program Overview	FAQ	Locations (looking specifically to trips outside of Canada and the USA)	Testimonials

Figure 1.0. This outlines the specific pages that were used from each ASB program’s website. For a hyperlink link to each specific page, please see the reference list.

On each website I counted the number of times a key word was used, and considered them in the context of their implied meaning to understand if they were being used to imply an alternative experience. I then coded the material using a simple Excel spreadsheet. Following this analysis, I did a careful re-reading of each page to determine if there were other instances where the general language used by each program implied the idea of an alternative experience. I highlighted all the text that alluded to the idea of an alternative experience, and recorded them in a Word document for further analysis.

3.4 Limitations

A discourse analysis is not an exhaustive research method, and it is limiting in that it is not able to tell us the intentions behind the language, nor if the language translates into practice. For example, it is possible that students might have informal discussions about the negative impacts of their ‘alternative’ vacation, and these discussions are not part of the formal ASB websites. Furthermore, by using a case study it is difficult to extrapolate these conclusions to other voluntourist organizations. Future research can be expanded to analyze different voluntourist organizations, and can be expanded still to incorporate facets of the scholarship on voluntourism that highlight the positive attributes of the language of ‘alternative.’

3.4.1 Positionality

It is important to look to personal bias when discussing limitations of a research project. I have never gone on an international volunteering trip in any capacity, thus I was able to approach my research without any preconceived notions of how international volunteering, and specifically voluntourism, might affect an individual. Thus, I did not hold any positive or negative personal experiences that could impact my research. However, I have known many

peers who have travelled abroad to volunteer, and one peer who travelled with Carleton's ASB program. Throughout my research I did my utmost to ensure that I was not allowing personal bias to interfere with the research specific to Carleton University's ASB program. Further, I ensured I did not ask her any information, or speak to her about my research project. This personal bias was a challenge to overcome; however, without prior conversations with my peer who traveled with Carleton's ASB program, I would not have conducted this rigorous graduate level research.

4.0 Findings

The findings of this study are divided into two main sections: a description of the key word analysis and a description of the text analysis. The key word analysis outlines quantitative findings; however, the findings for this analysis were not indicative of any prominent trends associated with the language of the alternative due to the fact that very few of the key words were found on the ASB websites. The second analysis looks to the general language used on the websites to find where, and how, language that implies “the alternative” was used. These findings were more conclusive and two key themes were discovered. First, the websites promote the idea of ASB trips as life changing – students will experience something radical that will change their life. Second, the theme of “out-of-the ordinary” was present on each website; ASB trips are so unique and an alternative to everyday life, that they are indescribable to people who have not experienced them. The following section will outline both analyses in further detail.

4.1 Key Words

The discourse analysis that was conducted on each website produced very few results. For a full outline see figure 2.0 below. Out of the 14 key words that were chosen, only 4 were found on the websites. These words were: different, alternative, unique, and other. “Alternative” was the most frequently used, with Carleton using it 24 times; however, each use of the word in this instance was in reference to the Alternative Spring Break title. It is also imperative to note that the implied meanings behind each of three remaining words changed depending on how they were used on the websites. Although “other” appeared 8 times on Ryerson’s ASB website, only 4 instances had an implied meaning of alternative.

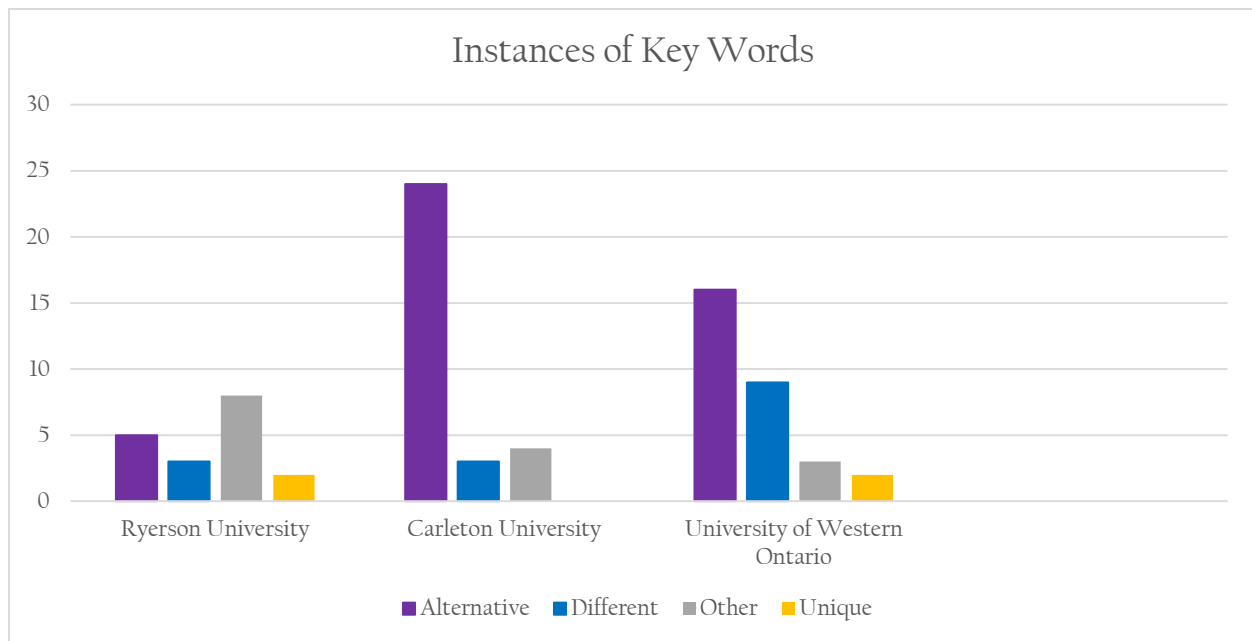


Figure 2.0 – Instances of key words on each university’s ASB website. This chart shows the prevalence of each word, without their implied meaning

The two words that accurately implied the notion of alternative were “different” and “unique”. Western uses “different” 9 times on the pages that were analyzed: it is used when speaking of a different way of spending Reading Week, and in reference to the different cultures that students will encounter while abroad. Carleton uses the word “different” 3 times with an implied meaning of “alternative.” On Carleton’s ASB Homepage, the first thing that is asked of the reader is if they are “ready for something different? Something incredible?” The key word ‘different’ is also used by students in the Testimonials section of the webpage. One student describes being “immersed in a different culture...” and encountering “different faces.”

The other key word that was used throughout the webpages to imply the alternative is the word “unique.” Ryerson uses the word to reference the unique opportunity that an ASB trip is for students – an ASB trip is an alternative to other opportunities that might be available to students for study abroad or vacation. The word “unique” is also present on Western’s website: in their

testimonials section a student chose the word unique to describe their experience with ASB to imply it was an alternative to a typical Reading Week; and, in their program overview, ASB references their trips as being a unique learning opportunity.

4.1.1 Limitations

The key word discourse analysis that I undertook did not yield the expected results. Due to the emphasis on “alternative” that is implicit in the ASB program by virtue of advertising the alternative nature of the trips in the program name, I expected that a discourse analysis of key words would yield a high number of results. However, I failed to account for two key realities of this research: First, a key word discourse analysis is not an exhaustive research method, and to rely solely on this type of analysis is to limit oneself to the multiplicity of ways that language can be used. Secondly, although words have a fundamental definition, and the words chosen for this analysis were synonyms of the word “alternative,” this does not negate the fact that other words and phrases that are used in a specific context can imply the “alternative.” It is for this reason that a discourse analysis of the text, looking to phrases that have an implied meaning of alternative, was also done in order to understand the broader language that was used in reference to the ASB program.

4.2 Text Analysis

In addition to the key word discourse analysis, I also conducted a text analysis of the ASB websites. This specific discourse analysis looked to the general language used on the webpages to see whether any language was used that implied “the alternative.” Through the analysis, two key themes emerged that were present on all three websites. First, the idea that an ASB trip is a once-in-a lifetime experience. Secondly, that an ASB trip is an out-of-the ordinary

experience. Both these themes speak to the idea of ASB trips as alternatives to everyday life, Reading Week, and general tourism activities.

4.2.1 Out-of-the Ordinary

One of the resounding themes that was uncovered during this discourse analysis was that ASB is an out-of-the ordinary experience. This theme was found on at least two pages of every website, and was most prominent in the testimonials pages, as well as the pages outlining ASB trips. In this analysis, I searched for short phrases that captured the essence of alternative in order to highlight the overarching message of “alternative-ness” that ASB was trying to “sell” to their “consumers” (the students). Some of the key sentences that were found are as followed:

“I honestly didn’t know how to explain how I felt or how to describe what had just happened to me” – Testimonials, Ryerson

“ASB is something special. Special because it is an out-of-this world experience...” – Testimonials, UWO

“To this day I still find it hard accurately explaining the trip” – Testimonials, Carleton

These three excerpts from the testimonials section of each university’s webpage, demonstrate the emphasis that students place on the uniqueness and “out-of-this world-ness” of ASB trips. They imply, and at times explicitly state, that ASB trips are so far from their ordinary lives that they are unable to accurately explain the trip to people who have not experienced one. Furthermore, the fact that each university chose to include these testimonials on their websites implies that a key image ASB wants to emphasize to potential participants is that each trip is an alternative experience to anything students have previously encountered.

Western and Ryerson University describe their ASB trips as being out-of-the ordinary by emphasizing the local when describing the trips they offer. For example, Ryerson offered a trip to India in May of 2017 and highlighted the “Indian style toilets” as being a key aspect of the trip, describing that “as per the tradition of the Mannan tribe, [Indian style toilets] are not connected to the rest of the house, but outside in a separate building” (India, 2017). Although this information is important for students to know prior to their departure, Ryerson chose to emphasize the traditional toilets by mentioning them and the general sanitation situation in the Indian community that students were staying in 5 times on the one page that describes the India trip. Western emphasizes the local in terms of the local cuisine. When describing the type of food available to students, Western highlights local cuisine at the top of the list. The ASB trips organized by Western will thus allow students to experience food that is out-of-the ordinary, and in doing so, allow them to have an alternative experience than their peers over reading week.

Language that emphasized the “alternative” was also found on Carleton University’s FAQ page. Reading Week is typically a week where students spend an extra week off classes to study and prepare for the remainder of the semester. Carleton makes it clear that an ASB trip is far from a regular Reading Week. Carleton does this by highlighting that students will not have any time to study during their trip. Although this is a simple statement, it suggests the alternative by implying that one of the key aspects of a regular Reading Week (studying) will not be a part of the student’s Alternative Spring Break.

4.2.2 Life Changing

Another prominent theme found is that ASB trips are an experience of a lifetime that will change one’s life due to the unique nature of the trip. Language that implied ASB trips are life changing was found on all three websites. Ryerson most emphasizes this theme in their “About”

section. Ryerson describes their trips as “exciting and life changing” and as an “experience of a lifetime.” The first instance is a clear choice by Ryerson’s ASB program to describe ASB trips as life-changing, and the second quotation implies the idea that ASB trips are an alternative experience to everyday life.

Ryerson, Carleton and Western all chose to include language on their testimonial pages that imply ASB trips are life changing, and thus imply the notion of ASB trips as an alternative experience. The following three examples demonstrate this theme:

“The experience [ASB trip] I received was truly once in a life time.” – Carleton University

“[ASB trips are] truly life changing and indescribable” – University of Western Ontario

“We [the students] were unaware of how impactful and transformative this experience [ASB trip] would be for us.” – Ryerson University

It is evident that all three websites chose testimonials that highlight the fact that due to the otherworldliness of these trips, students can expect to have their lives changed by being a part of one.

4.3 Summary

These findings suggest that a key theme on each ASB’s website is the idea that ASB trips are an alternative to everyday life. Be it that the trip will change a student’s life due to the unique nature of the experience, or that the trip is so different to everyday life that it is impossible to explain it to their peers, the language of the alternative was identified on numerous occasions. The following section will analyze these findings in the context of the academic literature outlined in the literature review of this MRP.

5.0 Analysis

Mass tourism has been critiqued by scholars as perpetuating the colonial legacy of countries in the Global South, while also enforcing Western hegemony and power (Wearing, 2001; Simons, 2004; Hall & Tucker, 2004; Butcher & Smith, 2015). In response, some scholars have argued that voluntourism can be seen as an ethical alternative to tourism (Wearing, 2001; Butcher & Smith, 2010; Butcher & Smith, 2015); however, many of the same arguments made by scholars against tourism are discussed in the same vein in the academic literature regarding volunteer tourism. Therefore, it becomes pertinent to uncover if voluntourist organizations are promoting their trips in their marketing material as an alternative experience, and if by doing so they are promoting their trips as an alternative to mass tourism.

ASB does not use the language of alternative to insinuate that their trips are an alternative to mass tourism, but rather uses the image of “alternative” to illustrate to potential participants an alternative experience to their everyday life. In doing this, ASB fails to adequately inform participants of the linkages between tourism and voluntourism. Ryerson, Carleton and Western’s ASB programs use the language of the alternative to advertise a positive, alternative experience to everyday life for students, and in doing so they allow the neocolonialist and neoliberalist tendencies of voluntourism to persist in their trips.

5.1 Neocolonialism

Voluntourism has been critiqued as an extension of colonialism that perpetuates the essentialism of individuals living in volunteer-receiving communities and the wider communities in the volunteer-receiving countries (see: Palmer, 2002; Simpson, 2004; McKinnon, 2006; Sharps & Briggs, 2006; Sherraden *et al.* 2008; Raymond & Hall, 2008; Conran, 2011; Zavitz &

Butz, 2011; Tiessen 2012; Perold *et al.* 2013; Hawkes 2014; Butcher & Smith, 2015; Howard & Burns 2015). In voluntourism, volunteers have a perceived superiority over the community members of the countries they visit, and it is this power imbalance that is the epitome of neocolonialism (Said, 1978; McKinnon, 2006; Sharps & Briggs, 2006; Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2010). The way in which ASB's trips are marketed can be directly linked to the power relations that are emphasized in the academic literature regarding voluntourism and neocolonialism.

5.1.1 A Place of Adventure and Picturesque Beauty

Colonized countries were once seen as a place of “remarkable memories” (Said, 1978, p. 1) and adventure (Ogden, 2008). These images have continued into the 21st century and are present on each ASB website that was analyzed. Through their marketing material, ASB perpetuates the idea that their trips are an alternative, out-of-this world experience for students. In keeping with colonial overtones, the countries that students visit are advertised as a place of beauty and adventure. ASB trips to countries in the Global South were described as being a “crazy adventure” (Ryerson), an once-in-a-lifetime experience (Western, Carleton), a chance to visit “exotic locales” (Ryerson), and place to have an “out-of-this world experience” (Western). This language creates an image of the Global South as picturesque, invigorating, and exciting, without properly explaining the places the volunteers visit – through the images that are created by reading the ASB volunteers' testimonies, one questions whether ASB volunteer are properly immersed into local communities, and if they truly understand the lived-realities of local community members. The purpose of these trips to “exotic locales” seems to be nothing more than an opportunity to create exciting memories for the students.

The neocolonial linkages that can be found within ASB's marketing material are exacerbated by the fact that in their testimonials students claim that they are unable to explain their trips to people who have not gone on an ASB trip.¹⁴ What is concerning here is that by marketing their trips as an experience that will be unexplainable to their family and friends – a trip that breaks the bounds of regular tourism by allowing students to interact with local people – ASB in turn markets the lives of human beings in the communities that are visited as unexplainable. This marketing strategy is prevalent within the tourism industry, whereby the promotional material of tourism companies will market non-Western people as “Other” in order to market their trips as mysterious (Caton & Santos, 2009). The linkages between tourism marketing and ASB marketing showcase the similarities between the two. Despite ASB being marketed as something alternative to anything students have experienced before, many of the foundational aspects of ASB are strikingly similar to the colonial linkages discussed in regards to tourism.

5.1.2 The Colonial Veranda

In the past, citizens from colonizing countries who chose to visit or move to a country colonized by their country of origin had the advantage of experiencing ‘new’ and ‘exciting’ countries without having to ever fully immerse themselves in that culture. This would allow colonial travelers to experience the country without ever truly being a part of the country. Ogden (2008) describes this distance between the colonial and local as the “colonial veranda” and asserts that this occurs to students who travel to study or volunteer abroad. The colonial veranda is occurring on ASB trips – students are given a week or a month to volunteer in a different cultural context than what is their norm; however, they are unable to properly understand that

¹⁴ See Findings, section 4.2.1, for examples.

culture. Upon their return home, students are unable to explain their trips to their peers and family (as noted in the above section), which exemplifies the fact that many volunteers are unable to properly immerse themselves in the cultures of the communities they visit; local people's lives are viewed as "out-of-the ordinary" (Testimonials, Western) and volunteers are always aware that in a very short period of time they can go back to 'the ordinary.' For example, the "Indian style toilets" that Ryerson students are told repeatedly that they will have the opportunity to use and build for a month will remain in India after the students leave – the realities of the communities that volunteers visit remain long after the volunteer has gone home. In a study conducted in Vanuatu, one community member was quoted as saying that volunteers, due to their short term nature, were as effective as a "floating bag" (Trau, 2015, p. 38).

Voluntourism is only possible because it is short-term; students sit apart from host community members, believing that they are truly experiencing the culture of said communities; yet, they are not with the host community for a long enough period of time to truly understand the structural inequalities that host communities face (Vodopevic, 2011; Polus & Bidder, 2015; Trau, 2015). In this way, ASB students sit apart from the local people, perpetuating (perhaps unknowingly) the notion of the white, Western, volunteer as inherently superior to the local peoples. Thus, the local people are referred to as "them" and the student volunteers form a cohesive "us" who observe without understanding, a fundamental issue in short-term volunteering (Caton & Santos, 2009; Mostafanezhad, 2013a).

5.1.3 *We're Here to Help*

A recurring theme found on the ASB websites was the idea of students spending reading week or month of May doing something alternative to everyday life, while simultaneously helping those in need. For example, Ryerson advertises their program as “exciting and life changing” for the students *and* the people in host communities because of the work that the volunteers do. This recurring theme relates directly to the helping imperative that is found within voluntourism literature. As Enders and Gould (2009) assert, “the notion of ‘helping the other’ is historically and institutionally embedded in power” (p. 428) – Ryerson students uphold the status-quo of White privilege through ASB’s acknowledgment that one of their main purposes is to provide aid to under-resourced communities. As Heron (2007) aptly writes “altruism becomes our [Canadians’] passport to the South” (p. 46). By virtue of wanting to “do good,” individuals from the Global North feel they have the right to go abroad and help others. Many of the pages on the websites analyzed speak directly to the idea of an alternative experience where students will change lives through helping, such as:

“Are you ready for something different? Something incredible? The experience of a lifetime? Alternative Spring Break (ASB) is an extraordinary service-learning initiative ... enabling them [students] to engage in meaningful community service and critical reflections.” (Carleton, Homepage) ... “their [students] community service work directly benefits the community organizations...” (Carleton, FAQ)

[ASB goals are to] develop mutually-beneficial partnerships between Western students and community organizations locally, nationally and globally” and “to encourage active participation in the community and increase students' civic engagement” (Program Overview, Western)

The idea that ASB trips are an alternative opportunity for students to change the lives of people in the communities they visit holds true to the argument found in scholarly work that voluntourism is an opportunity for youth from the Global North to change their lives by helping the seemingly less fortunate local peoples in the Global South (Palmer, 2002; Godfrey, Wearing

& Schulenkorf, 2015; Polus & Bidder, 2015; Kontogeorgopolous, 2017). This is in keeping with Heron's (2007) work on development workers as a whole, where she speaks to the idea that the most important aspect of development work has become the development worker themselves and their desire to help (what helping can do for them). However, the helping imperative that compels so many to do development work and participate in voluntourism perpetuates the power struggle inherent in the history of many of these post-colonial countries; voluntourists use altruism as their motivation to travel overseas, yet they fail to recognize that this perpetuates the cycle of Northern entitlement. The ideals, values and way of life of the voluntourist from the Global North are seen as "preferable and right" (Heron, 2007, p. 3), which grants the voluntourist (perhaps unknowingly) an entitlement over those they seek to help.

The ASB programs run through Ryerson, Carleton, and Western use the discourse of the alternative to market their programs as an alternative to everyday life, where students will have the opportunity to help others who are less fortunate than themselves. They market these programs as a tool through which students can practice development and help others; however, this depiction essentializes local peoples into one group that students, somehow, have the capacity and knowledge to help, while simultaneously romanticizing the volunteer-receiving communities as a place of adventure for the students. The individuals that ASB volunteers seek to help must automatically become the "Other" by virtue of the volunteers' imperative to help these individuals; without classifying them as the "Other," volunteers would not believe they were in need of help, thus would have little incentive to volunteer overseas (Heron, 2007).

5.2 Neoliberalism

In order to survive in the neoliberal marketplace, one must ensure they pursue self-enhancement in order to maintain their competitive edge in the economic sphere of society. (Lyons *et al.*, 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2014). The same is true for universities – in order to maintain their competitive advantage in the Canadian marketplace, universities must market themselves to prospective students. Since the beginning of the 21st century, universities have been spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on marketing campaigns designed to sell their post-secondary learning institutions as the best choice for secondary students. As the 21st century has progressed, the marketing has shifted from highlighting universities' strengths and has begun to highlight the added job prospects available to students after graduating from a specific university (Bolan and Robinson, 2013). This is closely tied to ASB, as it is a program run through universities and it is partially aimed at bolstering the future prospects of participants. Although neoliberalism does not inherently relate to the notion of the alternative, many of the findings outlined above serve to enhance the marketability of ASB's products (their trips), thus it is important to understand the findings from this study in the context of the oft cited thematic frame regarding voluntourism, neoliberalism.

5.2.1 Purchasing an Advantage

Through a careful reading of each ASB programs website, it becomes clear that self-enhancement, along with experiencing “something different” (Homepage, Carleton) is at the forefront of ASB participants' hopes for their trips. ASB trips are described as an alternative to a regular Reading Week, and as a unique opportunity that only a select few students will have the opportunity to experience during their undergraduate degree. By doing this, ASB sells their

product as something original, and as something that will help students gain an experience for their resumé that stands out from their peers.

Carleton and Western both emphasize career development as an important facet of the ASB experience. In their FAQ, Carleton notes that although an ASB trip is not eligible for scholastic credit, it is an experience that students can add their “Co-Curricular Record and it’s [ASB] also a great experience to list on your [students] resume” (FAQ, Carleton). Western also references a student’s ability to obtain official recognition of their trip on their Co-Curricular Record on their FAQ page.¹⁵ Furthermore, Western has three main goals for the ASB program, one of which is to ensure the program supports “academic success and career development” (Overview, Western). Therefore, it appears evident that both the organizers at Western and Carleton are aware that self-enhancement is a core motivating factor for voluntourists, and thus they have chosen to highlight that on their websites.

When ASB becomes equated with self-enhancement, it creates a system where ASB trips become a tool for success. Self-enhancement can be explicitly linked to the enhanced marketability of students; however, it can also be associated with generalized personal growth. Although personal enhancement for professional needs was less explicit on Ryerson’s website, the idea of personal growth was present. On the “About” page of the Ryerson’s ASB program, Ryerson organizers note that: “ASB is about changing the world in small steps by encouraging students to change themselves... [ASB will have] lifelong impact on students, and help shape them as the leaders of tomorrow by giving them their experiences today.” Student testimonials also bring forth this theme, for example a student who volunteered in Kenya in 2013

¹⁵ A Co-Curricular Record is a document that lists a student’s involvement outside of the classroom (volunteering, community service learning, leadership development, and involvement in scholastic activities on campus). Both Western and Carleton define it as information that can be shown to prospective employers or graduate schools to enhance your application (<https://carleton.ca/seo/ccr/> AND http://www.success.uwo.ca/experience/westerns_cocurricular_record/index.html).

noted: “ASB has provided me with *the tools I need* as I embark on a new life-changing journey [emphasis added].” Another student noted that her ASB trip to India in 2015 set her up for success in the future. Furthermore, a student who travelled to Ghana reflected on his travels and claims that without his experience with ASB he would not have had the skills necessary to teach English in South Korea for a year. Thus, these experiences build capital for the students that they can use to advance careers. The experiences abroad become a commodity that can be cashed in in exchange for other opportunities.

The ASB program at Ryerson, Carleton and Western market their trips as an avenue through which students can enhance their abilities, change themselves, and gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace by the unique nature of the trip. From unique adventures, come unique skills that allow students to stand out from the crowd. Through doing this, ASB continues to perpetuate many of the same neoliberalist tendencies found in voluntourism. Personal self-enhancement is made clear, and the students’ desire to help is commodified.

5.2.2 Strategic Alliances

As the growing demand for voluntourist packages has grown, so too has the concern over the rising number of for-profit voluntourist companies (Coghlan & Noakes, 2012; Molz, 2017). The ASB programs run through Carleton, Ryerson and Western are non-profit,¹⁶ which would seemingly allow the program to live outside the neoliberalist economic system that runs the global market place. However, upon further research it was found that the key organization that ASB Carleton partners with in the Global South is a for-profit organization, Me to We (Buchmayer, 2017). As Coghlan and Noakes (2017) note, many voluntourist organizations that

¹⁶ Although I was unable to find information of the nature of ASB’s business, based off the cost analysis I conducted of each website (and the fact that they are all student-run), it would seem that they are not a for-profit organization.

are non-profit will form “strategic alliances” (p. 126) with for-profit organizations in order to better adjust in any given host community, and in order to access financial resources in said community. This is worrisome, due to the fact that when voluntourist organizations become entrenched in the market, either on their own or through strategic alliances, their products (trips) are liable to become commercialized into the neoliberal market where social concerns are overridden by consumer preference (Coghlan & Noakes, 2017). By entrusting for-profit organizations as key partners, ASB Carleton directly enters into the neoliberal market, forgoing the needs of the host communities, and focusing more on the marketability of a given community.¹⁷

5.2.3 Future Research

An interesting difference was noted in the analysis of the discourse in regards to self-enhancement. Western and Carleton both offer one week programs abroad that are heavily marketed as an alternative experience to a student’s everyday life. Ryerson does much of the same; however, they have evolved from a one-week program to a month program. What is interesting is that the organizers of Western and Carleton both highlight the enhancement of a student’s Co-Curricular Record as an incentive to sign up for an ASB trip (that is, the impact that ASB trips can have on a student’s future career); however, the organizers of Ryerson highlight personal growth, and self-enhancement for career purposes is more clearly mentioned in student testimonials. On the other hand, students from Carleton and Western highlight the personal relationships they build on their ASB trips with community members. This is very interesting to note, as self-enhancement is often found in the academic literature to be a key motivator for

¹⁷ Of note: from the information I was able to uncover, neither Western nor Ryerson are currently in partnerships with any for-profit organizations. This is a very interesting fact, and definitely something that both programs are doing (either knowingly or unknowingly) to distance themselves from the neoliberal tendencies of voluntourism.

young people to volunteer abroad (Vrasti, 2013; Mostafanezhad, 2014; Kontogeorgopolous, 2017); however, it does not seem to be a motivator for many of the students on the one-week trips (through Carleton and Western). True relationships on the other hand are spoken of in the literature as something that only occurs during longer volunteering trips (Devereux 2008; Lough *et al.*, 2011; Tiessen & Heron, 2012; Howard & Burns 2015); however, these relationships are emphasized in the testimonials of the programs that offer exclusively one-week programs.

In future research, it would be interesting to uncover if this is simply a finding based off the small sample size of this study, or if it is a theme found in numerous volunteer abroad programs. And if so, what implications does this have on the marketing material of the programs, as well as the impact it has on communities where volunteers travel? Is ‘making a difference’ or ‘making friends’ more harmful than using your volunteer experience partially as a mechanism to acquire marketable skills? These questions would serve well for the basis of a follow-up research project.

6.0 Conclusion

Voluntourism, although a growing phenomenon worldwide, is plagued with many historical ties that perpetuate neocolonial linkages. It is thus extremely difficult for volunteers, who are often white and from North America, to travel for 1 to 4 weeks to a country in the Global South without inadvertently attaching privilege to their travels. They are inherently privileged in their ability to help the “Other,” and those they “help” can become tools for the enhancement of the volunteer. Community members that receive the volunteers’ “help” are often told what is right and wrong (what is “developed” and “undeveloped”) by strangers who do not speak their language and whom they will likely never see again.

The Alternative Spring Break holds itself to be an altruistic organization that sends willing and excited undergraduate students on an adventure of a lifetime. Through this adventure they will not only find their true selves and have an out-of-this-world experience, but they will help others who are, apparently, less fortunate than themselves. This information is clearly stated in the websites of the ASB programs run through Carleton, Ryerson and Western, and on the surface may seem harmless; however, the ASB narrative of “helping the other” in fact categorizes the individuals living in volunteer-receiving communities as exclusively ‘needy’. It creates a narrative where those living in the Global South need help from Canadian students due to the fact that their values, cultures and everyday life are not like the lives of those in the Global North. This perpetuates the imposition of power over those in once-colonized countries and neocolonialism becomes intrinsically linked to the volunteer’s experience. As Heron (2007) notes, “We [development workers] inadvertently paint ourselves larger-than-life ... when we perceive the Southern context as needing and amenable to our interventions” (p. 43). Students who participate in an ASB trip have the opportunity to experience something that they claim is an alternative to everyday life, and they are able to return home and tell their friends and family

of their alternative altruistic vacation. However, the reality is far different. The ASB program tells students that others *need* their help, and despite having few skills, undergraduate students can somehow be their saviours.

Of course, the students are not entirely to blame. The main culprit is the marketing material of the ASB programs that describe their trips as an alternative way students can spend their Reading Week or month of May by helping an unknown and mysterious “Other.” Online marketing material conveys a message through the language an organization chooses to use – through advertising themselves as an alternative experience for students, ASB has inadvertently (or perhaps advertently) led students to believe that as ASB participants, students are automatically altruistic volunteers, going to the aid of people in need. When in actuality they are perpetuating the neocolonial linkages of past missionaries and development workers, and contributing to a neoliberal marketplace that is centered on self-enhancement at all costs.

Language can be analyzed, and through understanding the implied meaning of words, one can uncover many themes in marketing material. Despite this, a discourse analysis is not always able to find the whole truth. This research did not encompass interviews of those working for ASB, and thus was unable to ask *why* the discourse in their online marketing material was chosen. By asking “why?” one might uncover whether ASB has inadvertently fallen into the marketing trap that many voluntourists companies have, or if they have intentionally marketed their material to students in a specific fashion. In future research, a comparative-analysis between this discourse analysis, and interviews from ASB employees and past participants, could be done to uncover if the themes found in this study illicit any negative responses from the interviewees, or perhaps if the themes found in this study have crossed the minds of those close to ASB and are in fact something that they have struggled to come to terms with in the past.

While this study has highlighted some areas where this research can be expanded to understand the motivations of voluntourist trip organizers and participants, the present study has offered some important initial findings. First, this research has highlighted important narratives found in the marketing material of a popular volunteer-sending organization, and from ASB student participants. These narratives point to issues regarding neocolonialism and neoliberalism practises that require further unpacking. Further, this research confirms some of the important findings in the scholarship on volunteer tourism, specifically as it relates to the ethical and systemic challenges that are central to voluntourism.

Several recommendations arise from this study and could be employed by universities that wish to provide a more accurate and fair description of the role and significance of international service learning. These recommendations build on the idea of fair trade education (see: Hartman, Morris Paris and Blache-Cohen, 2014) and the standards of practice in international voluntary service (see: Duarte, 2015). Duarte (2015) outlines six key components of successful international service learning, which are as followed: organizational alignment, sustainable management, responsible marketing, integrated implementation, protection of people & planet, and realistic evaluation. Hartman, Morris Paris and Blache-Cohen (2014) reflect on the rise in international voluntary service, and look specifically to ways in which volunteer programs run through universities can be created to ensure Fair Trade Learning (FTL). FTL consists of three overarching principles: the Core Principles that inform readers of the general standards of FTL; Community Centered Standards that ensure the volunteer-receiving communities are treated fairly and experience positive impacts; and, the Student-Centered Standards that ensure the student's experience is maximized to its full potential.

Through understanding these recommendations, and through a careful reading of this MRP, this study has the potential to inform universities and ASB organizations of some of the pitfalls identified in this research, as well as in the broader literature. Further, this study has the potential to help universities and ASB organizers adopt some of the suggestions outlined above in future international voluntary service programs.

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