



The Moralisation of Volunteer Tourism

Speaker:	Dr Kaylan Schwarz Nanyang Technological University
Chair:	Dr Sin Harnng Luh Department of Geography, NUS
Date/Time:	Friday, 23 March 2018, 3:30pm – 5pm
Place:	Earth Lab, AS2-02-03, NUS

Abstract

This presentation explores how a group of 27 UK-based undergraduate students made meaning of their experiences as they prepared for, participated in and reflected upon a 10-week international volunteer excursion in Kenya.

First, through an inspection of repeated semi-structured interviews, this presentation examines participants' attempts to highlight distinctions between themselves and other volunteers – a grouping they referred to broadly (and derogatorily) as 'voluntourists'. In short, participants sought to stake the moral high ground by differentiating between their own volunteer project choice and (1) projects which were shorter term, (2) projects which provided unskilled forms of labour and (3) projects which masqueraded as volunteering, but where the balance of time was actually spent 'on holiday'. These accounts exhibit a competitive tone (a strong propensity to define and distinguish oneself from others) and help to illuminate the criteria and values upon which these young people evaluated their experiences overseas.

Next, through an inspection of visual content uploaded to social media, this presentation considers the dilemmas volunteers faced at the moment of snapshotting and during the album editing process, including debates over which images were discarded and why. In short, participants took measures to avoid 'stereotypical' volunteer photography (including selfies and portraits of emaciated children), determined not to perpetuate the voyeurism they associated with 'voluntourism'.

Overall, this research is positioned as a sociological inquiry into the impression management strategies adopted by young travelers. It is theoretically informed by the dramaturgical perspective of Erving Goffman, engages multiple re-articulations of John Urry's 'Tourist Gaze' and is further contextualised within Jim Butcher's 'moralisation of tourism'.

About the Speaker

Dr. Kaylan Schwarz is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Division of Sociology at Nanyang Technological University. She completed her PhD at the University of Cambridge in 2016. Kaylan positions herself as an interdisciplinary sociologist, specialising in social media, tourism and youth cultural studies. She is theoretically informed by dramaturgical perspectives, whiteness studies and late or liquid modernity. Methodologically, her expertise lies in qualitative approaches: narrative inquiry, visual methods, social media analysis and overseas field work.

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