Voluntourism in Malaysia:

A study of intimacy in the 'do-good' industry

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Contents

ABSTRACT

This thesis is about the experiences and impacts of volunteer tourists' activities in Malaysia. Focusing on the interpersonal relations between travellers and members of local host communities, this research aims to explore the effects of intimate connections on groups of people from diverse backgrounds. The intention is to understand how affective interactions among individuals have contributed to the emergence and proliferation of volunteer tourism, or 'voluntourism' – a form of alternative tourism and a by-product of the enmeshing between development and tourism. The thesis examines voluntourism within global frameworks of power that influence practices and approaches that are neoliberal, paternal, and to some degree neo-colonial in nature. Drawing on ethnographic interviews and participant observation from three months of fieldwork, it is found that altruistic motives of volunteer tourists (or 'voluntourists') are shrouded by desires to build interpersonal relations with others. Intimacy happens predominantly among voluntourists and staff members of hosting organisations, thus suggesting that the focus on formation of intimate relations (especially) with individuals of similar social standing may overshadow, and to a certain extent even contribute to the unequal power structures existing in volunteer tourism.

KEYWORDS: Voluntourism, volunteer tourism, alternative tourism, neoliberalism, intimacy

CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that the following thesis is my own work, except where acknowledgement has been made to the work or ideas of others. It has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

(SITI MUNAWIRAH AHMAD MUSTAFFA)

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GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

GDP – Gross domestic product

LGH – Little Green Home

NGO – Non-governmental organisation

UNWTO – United Nations World Tourism Organization

WGI – World Giving Index

INTRODUCTION

Getting close and personal

> So far, out of all my volunteering experience throughout my travels in Nepal, India and Malaysia, I would say this (volunteering) experience in Malaysia has been the best one. I have learned so much here, from the people I help, and by just living here with Kartini and other volunteers. I used to be disgusted at the thought of having to wash hair of the homeless people but when I actually did it, it kind of changed me. It was a touching experience. I felt like I was able to connect with them, especially as it involved bodily contact.
>
> (Joseph[1], 31, LGH volunteer from Norway)

Joseph nonchalantly described his experience with a smile, despite being somewhat hesitant about sharing his thoughts just a few minutes earlier. As I jotted down our conversation at the dining table after lunch, my head turned to view the interior of Little Green Home (LGH) – a social enterprise founded by 42 year old Malaysian woman Kartini Varadan. An old property belonging to Kartini's late father located within the outskirt of Kuala Lumpur, the one-storey terrace house, which was once a family home during the mid-1980s prior to her parents' passing, has undergone massive changes since its foundation as a social enterprise cum volunteer hostel in 2013. The entire place has been refurbished through active contributions made by Kartini herself and countless volunteers that have spent their time and energy there. A former marketing executive of a reputable media company that has been involved in various corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs implemented jointly with other corporations and NGOs, Kartini is no stranger to community work. Such exposure has been among the major factors motivating her to form her own organisation, with the aim of helping target groups in need of assistance.

[1] Names of research participants and organisations have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals and organisations concerned, as requested.

Since 2013, LGH has housed hundreds of volunteers – who, like Joseph are mostly young backpackers from developed nations such as Europe, United States of America, United Kingdom, Australia and even some Latin American countries such as Ecuador and Columbia. Their reasons for flying to Kuala Lumpur are primarily to gain a unique travel experience while making active contributions for the locals through community work in exchange for free accommodation and food. Volunteering activities with LGH include providing hair wash and haircuts for homeless people from poor parts of Kuala Lumpur, giving swimming lessons to children with disabilities, beach cleaning, doing renovation and upgrading work to sustain LGH buildings, tree planting at various locations in the Klang Valley, and teaching English language to refugee children at a nearby learning centre.

Through a simple search via Google, potential volunteers who intend to join volunteering programs in Malaysia, specifically its capital city Kuala Lumpur, can discover the opportunities at LGH at websites such as Workaway, Helpx, as well as the official webpages of LGH and its collaborating organisation, EcoLodge. Being tourists, their commitment to community work is usually only for a short time, allotted to only a fraction of their entire travel plan. Even so, volunteers (or 'voluntourists' – a shortened terminology for volunteer tourists) are highly regarded by many organisations, including LGH, as their presence and contributions are deemed to bring positive change towards local communities (Mostafanezhad 2014). Hence, the involvement of volunteer tourists in helping disadvantaged people also fits within what is more generally regarded as development assistance (Georgeou 2012).

On a Thursday night, volunteers have the opportunity to provide free hair wash and haircut services to the homeless at a public space situated next to a bank, not too far from the famous Chinatown and within the central area of Kuala Lumpur – where the presence of the

target group is most visible. Generally used as a parking lot during day time, the space is filled with long tables after 10pm where food is served by volunteers of 1SoupKitchen – an NGO that does collaborative projects with LGH in assisting the homeless in Kuala Lumpur by providing free meals. Rattan mats are spread on the floor as the homeless seat themselves across from a big screen, brought by the volunteers from which, a movie will be played. At the entrance to the lot, Kartini and the volunteers arrange six stools and one folding long chair next to an outdoor water tap – three stools for the shampooing process, one for blow-drying, an additional two for shave and cut, and the long chair is reserved for rinsing. As the equipment is being set up, an average of 40 to 50 homeless men, women and children form a long line, in anticipation of having their hair washed, and sometimes cut. The hair wash service begins with the lathering process of three individuals seated on three stools. The earliest person to complete this process will move on to the folding chair to have their hair rinsed with water hosed from the tap as they lie down. Once the rinsing is done, these individuals will have their hair blow-dried with an electric hairdryer connected to an outdoor power box. Any person who needs a haircut or a shave may proceed to the two volunteers standing with an electric razor and a pair of scissors[2]. As the program normally requires only seven people to conduct the work, volunteers take turns if they come in a large group.

According to Kartini, LGH is the first and only organisation in Malaysia that implements the Homeless Hairwash program, with as many as 240 homeless individuals receiving such assistance in a month. In addition to encouraging interactions between the homeless and the volunteers, the program also aims to empower the marginalised through improving their physical appearance so as to enable them to find work (and to lessen dependency on charitable organisations). It was during one of those nights when I first met

[2] It should be noted that the volunteers in charge of the haircut and shaving process are delegated by Kartini due to personal experience in conducting such tasks. However, their lack of professional experience means that any haircut or shave will be conducted in a basic manner.

Amirah, one of the pioneer volunteers for 1SoupKitchen. During our conversation, the 37 year old account executive commented:

> It is necessary to have volunteers as they are responsible for instilling awareness among the public. The issue with homelessness has always been going around here in KL and yet not much has been done in addressing the problem. What is even worse is that people seem to swipe this matter under the rug and pretend that it never exists. This is where the volunteers come in. We take our actions to the street, by giving food to the homeless, washing their hair, even hanging out with them. We want to show the public that these people are just like all of us, too. That it's not okay to be homeless and hungry. And it's even more not okay to see them as dangerous, further isolating them without getting close and trying to understand their problems. I think the greater issue here lies with the mentality of the public. This is why we need volunteers and we are more than pleased to have international volunteers because it's a statement that even outsiders are concerned, too[3].
>
> (Amirah, 37, 1SoupKitchen volunteer from Malaysia)

As explained by Amirah, part of the problem lies with the mentality of many middle class Malaysians who appear apathetic towards the issue of helping those in a less privileged position. This has resulted in many organisations offering volunteering opportunities to non-Malaysians, with some even being promoted as part of tourism – an industry "built on distinctions between strangers and friends, with inherent potentials for both oppression and empowerment" (Swain 2009, p. 505). As such, a growing uptake of these opportunities shows that tourism is no longer composed solely of visits to historical sites, but can also involve being part of a social justice agenda (Mostafanezhad 2013; Spencer 2010). Volunteer tourism, or 'voluntourism' – where contrasting elements of altruism and consumption are combined –

[3] Throughout this thesis, quotations from some respondents have been edited for clarity, whilst ensuring that no meaning or emphasis is lost in doing so.

is arguably the outcome of the growth of tourism and diversification within niche markets, as well as the increasing global impact of new social movements such as the environmental movement or empowerment of the underprivileged (McGehee 2012; Spencer 2010). Gradual transitions within the tourism industry reflect a growing number of travellers who no longer want to be associated with commercial leisure consumption; rather, they are the morally conscious individuals who seek to address issues that are environmental or social (Lyons & Wearing 2008; McGehee & Santos 2005).

A glance at voluntourism

Dominance of neoliberalism has become increasingly apparent in tourism since the 1980s, resulting in the commodification of cultures that are regarded as foreign and 'exotic' (Wearing, Grabowski & Sahabu 2013). Such capitalisation has made mass tourism subject to criticism for promoting a travel experience that is not only superficial, but also to some extent exploitative of the locals in host destinations. As a result, people seek an alternative experience which allows space for intimacy, as well as understanding the 'other' (*ibid*).

The intimacy of the encounter between strangers and friends makes voluntourism capable of delivering both positive and negative outcomes, thus leading to a questioning of the capacity for voluntourism operators to uniformly contribute to broader social justice agendas (Mostafanezhad 2013, p. 63). Having the liberty to travel, indulge in leisure activities while at the same time making social contributions through voluntary work, growing numbers of mostly young people are signing up for volunteer programs abroad. The increasing number of volunteering projects welcoming foreign volunteers and tourists alike reaffirms the idea of development assistance entailing outside intervention. Although foreigners may benefit a host destination in many ways through contribution of money and skills, there are also diverse implications for the voluntourists, the recipient communities, and the host organisations,

particularly structural inequality at both a personal and a political level (Conran 2011; Mostafanezhad 2014).

To better understand this range of implications in the context of voluntourism, this thesis aims to explore forms of intimate connections created by international volunteers and local host communities wherein the politics of 'doing' good' appear to "culminate at the sentimental" (Conran 2011, p. 1463). As a core aspect of being human, emotions such as intimacy, compassion and even love have a heavy influence on the volunteer tourist's experience (Conran 2011; Hoffman 1998; Mostafanezhad 2014; Solomon 1990). It is through intimate connections that volunteers are able to fashion their own identities and narratives, as they identify with other volunteers and to an extent with host community members (Mostafanezhad 2014; Wearing & Neil 2000).

Moreover, intimacy within voluntourist experiences creates a mix of emotional and economic discourses and practises, producing "a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behaviour and in which emotional life – especially that of the middle classes – follows the logic of economic relations and exchange" (Illouz 2007, p. 5). This is particularly true in consumer culture, where affect is deemed as a "primary technology for consolidating the job of consumerism" (Vrasti 2011, p. 7). Whilst voluntourism contributes to the well-being of recipient communities as well as the individual volunteer's identity, its rising popularity for combining leisure travel with voluntary work has turned it into part of the commodity culture, where organisations involved in the sector have shifted from non-profits to the commercial (Barbieri, Katsube, & Santos, 2012, 2012; Wearing & McGehee 2013).

The unique approach to traveling found in voluntourism has been a key factor in the increasing numbers of volunteers (usually from developed countries) contributing their time and skills to assist host communities in developing countries (Vrasti 2013). Combining volunteering work abroad with tourism, the nature of voluntourism is often short-term, spanning between a period of one week to several months (Barbieri *et al* 2012; Daldeniz & Hampton 2010; McLennan 2014; Palacios 2010). Activities vary from teaching, providing medical assistance to host communities, building homes and schools, to even conducting environmental conservation work (McLennan 2014; Palacios 2010; Sin 2010). Popular destinations for voluntourism activities include Thailand, Cambodia, South Africa, and Costa Rica (Conran 2011; GoOverseas 2015; ProjectsAbroad 2009; Sin 2010). This increase has direct benefits for a number of small NGOs and social enterprises who act as both hosts and facilitators between volunteers and recipients of their assistance.

Sustaining operations through contributions (monetary, skills, or otherwise) from volunteers has long been a common practise for non-profit organisations and social enterprises such as LGH to keep their projects ongoing. The specific set of knowledge and skills possessed by volunteers (who often comprise of university students, recent university graduates, or young adults in between jobs) are often sought after by organisations that are in charge of the development of a particular area, where such knowledge and skills are found to be scarce (Ruhanen *et al* 2008). The experiences of volunteer tourists are therefore crucial in ensuring the sustainability and positive results of voluntourism. This is because like any other forms of tourism, voluntourism is built on both experience and service quality, which combine elements of the personal (i.e the tourist experience) and the practical (i.e traits of a place) (Chan 2011, p. 72).

Over recent decades, voluntourism has proliferated enormously. One key causal factor is the increasing concern and awareness around the world over global injustices and inequalities, which have led to the formation of new social movements (Mostafanezhad 2013). Some of these movements have been subject to religious influence, with a growing interest prevailing among young Christians towards addressing various issues of concern (Wearing, Grabowski & Sahabu 2013). Correspondingly, 'helping out' and 'making a positive difference' have become among the most common reasons why foreigners decide to undertake volunteer abroad programs (Barbieri *et al* 2012; Daldeniz & Hampton 2010; McLennan 2014; Wearing & McGehee 2013). In addition, there is a further appeal found in the act of 'giving back' – wherein volunteers gain an experience perceived as invaluable for personal growth in return for the assistance they provide as well as the interpersonal relations they build (Georgeou 2012, p. 20).

Despite the good intentions, however, voluntourism can also be associated with indirect forms of neo-colonialism, or Western imperialism, and paternalism (Conran 2011; McLennan 2014; Palacios 2010; Sin 2010). According to Hindle *et al*, much of the international volunteering projects that we see today have evolved from what were once missions undertaken primarily by "missionaries and soldiers, colonialists and explorers, teachers and entrepreneurs" (2007, p. 10). Conran (2011) suggests that this legacy, which upholds the hegemonic presence of the West, has in turn led to the perception of Westerners as being synonymous with images of wealth, modernity and the capability of 'saving' those in less developed countries. Some label this perception as Eurocentrism, which is a concept that refers to "the bias that non-Western societies maintain in their conceptions due to a Western cultural influence" (Palacios 2010, p. 16). In many parts of the world, Western values and experience are highly regarded and "almost instinctively, set as the standard for judgments" (*ibid*).

In Thailand, for example, Western volunteers tend to find themselves in a more privileged position whose friendships and contributions are sought after by the Thai host communities (Conran 2011, p. 1465). A similar obsequiousness towards Westerners is also obvious in Malaysia, where some dive tourism organisations prefer to recruit international volunteer instructors. In addition to being able to afford training courses, international volunteers are perceived as more skilful and knowledgeable in the diving business, which thus undermines the locals people's capabilities in attaining similar job opportunities (Daldeniz & Hampton 2010, p. 13). One might argue that in addition to local apathy, the adoption of a Eurocentric mentality by host organisations has caused a dependency on international volunteers, as well as the undermining of the locals' capacities in assisting their own communities (McLennan 2014; Palacios 2010).

The contention that voluntourism constitutes a form of neo-colonialism – an exercise of one's influence over the other through political, economic (and even cultural) intervention – is not without basis (Cloke, Crang, & Goodwin 1999, pp. 333-339; Palacios 2010). In the case of medical voluntourism in Honduras, for example, McLennan (2014) has found in her observations that the heavy involvement of international volunteers in health care programs has resulted in the dependency on foreign assistance among local communities. Consequently, such dependency exacerbates the unequal power relationships formed between international volunteers and the host communities, where the latter is often found to lack the autonomy to take charge of their community's health and well-being (*ibid*, p. 169). Despite their altruistic mission to provide assistance and treatments which are otherwise unavailable (such as new surgical techniques) in the country, medical voluntourists in Honduras find themselves deeply entangled in cultural clashes and conflicting interests. It appears that the repercussions such as dependency trait caused by outside intervention by medical voluntourists are strongly linked

to the notion of power, which is attributed to volunteers coming from more advanced societies.

Similarly, the belief that "they (Western volunteers) know better than us (local staff)" exists in a volunteer program at a Vietnamese-based organisation called Know One Teach One (KOTO) (Palacios 2010). In this program, a Eurocentric attitude is apparent on the host organisation, where inputs and ideas of international volunteers are given priority (*ibid*, p. 16). Despite the fact that many volunteers attempt to 'go local' in order to experience the similar lifestyle and empower the local communities, the privilege possessed by the volunteers are still apparent to the locals and the act of 'disempowering' themselves may in fact be a strong demonstration of power (Georgeou 2012, p. 20). This is because being deferential provides volunteers the opportunity to use their experience with host communities to "bolster status and sense of self", without necessarily resulting in the act of relinquishing or even explicitly transferring some power to their hosts (McKenna 2014, p. 9). Additionally, the fact that many host organisations rely on the resources contributed by volunteers only serves to uphold the perception of Western superiority over what is regarded as underdeveloped and Third World (Ingram, 2010; Scheyvens 2002).

Apart from being perceived as a representation of paternalism, it has also been argued that voluntourism has contributed to the expansion of neoliberal practices and policies (Georgeou and Engel 2011; Scheyvens 2011; Vrasti 2013). As alternative tourism began to emerge within the niche market area, voluntourism found itself reaching towards commercialisation where volunteering experience became a form of goods and services sold by organisations, both for for-profit and non-profit organisations (Coghlan & Noakes 2012). Short-term, flexible voluntourism with an itinerary mainly decided by the tourists themselves is generally regarded as a form of commodified tourism where motivations are dominated by

the ideals of a destination and local experience to be consumed (Wearing & McGehee 2013, p. 125). The experience of helping the local community through providing education or health service, and living with them in a foreign country has been marketed to individuals who are interested in getting involved and can afford to do so (Conran 2011; Scheyvens 2011; Wearing & McGehee 2013). The practice of commercialisation is often justified as a way to secure financial stability which can over time reduce the dependency among charitable organisations that rely on external funding. As a result of the aspiration to solve imminent social issues on the rise, where needs are often not adequately met solely through charities and funding, many NGOs began to adopt the sense of entrepreneurship (Coghlan & Noakes 2012, pp. 12-13).

At the same time, as the popularity of voluntourism rises, 'doing good' is no longer seen as solely a selfless action grounded upon the genuine desire of helping those in need. Instead, it also opens doors to new experiences and skills which are beneficial for volunteers who seek ways to enhance their employability (Scheyvens 2011; Vrasti 2013). The commodification of experience and contribution of skills in helping the less fortunate is particularly resonant with Foucault's theory of "self-as-enterprise", where the volunteer is perceived as his / her own entrepreneur who adds values to the voluntourism market and to his / her own credentials as a global citizen (Kelly 2013, pp. 14-15; Vrasti 2013). As a result, volunteers benefit greatly from voluntourism activities at the expense of local community members, whose needs and expectations are often overlooked (Scheyvens 2011).

While being aware of the potential paternalistic dimensions, one cannot disregard the genuine goodwill of globally conscious individuals who seek to address the existing social injustices, or underestimate the capacity of volunteering programs in driving positive changes for local communities (Conran 2011, p. 1465). Whether voluntourism is utilised as a platform

for assisting access to better livelihoods and cross-cultural understanding, or as a means to exploit the resources of a host nation, can boil down to the nature of the intimate connections that it fosters. As suggested by Conran (2011), the negative impacts of voluntourism are not directly caused by voluntourism activities per se. Rather, these impacts result from structural inequality between volunteers and host communities that are often uncontrolled and overlooked due to factors such as the overwhelming focus on forming intimacy between them. The question then arises as to how these intimate connections between international volunteers, local NGO staff and recipient communities, may be weaved in such a way so as not to overshadow, or to some extent perpetuate power hierarchies.

This thesis examines the manner in which even the most altruistic intention and actions can become enmeshed within the interplay of power structures, economic exchanges and intimate connections. Whether intimacy in voluntourism contributes to unequal power structures or merely conceals them, is a question that this research aims to explore further. Previous studies on voluntourism focus on the experiences and identities of volunteer tourists, as well as the contention of voluntourism as being marketed for the purpose of expanding neoliberal practices and policies (Barbieri *et al* 2012; Georgeou and Engel 2011; Wearing & McGehee 2013; Weeden & Boluk 2014; Vrasti 2013). While there have been several studies on intimacy in voluntourism (see Conran 2011; Mostafanezhad 2014), little research on the subject has been conducted in the Malaysian context, nor on the experience and impact of connections formed by volunteer tourists in Malaysia through participating in voluntourism.

In order to explore the complex nature of intimate connections in the sphere of voluntourism in Malaysia, it is important to first outline the historical context of tourism and development. In Chapter 1, the evolution and intersection of concepts and practises of development and tourism are introduced, which together led to the emergence of alternative

tourism, particularly voluntourism. To further understand how voluntourism has become so prominent, I turn attention in Chapter 2 to the politics of affect, where human emotions and connections have over time become dominant in reforming the global service industry. Voluntourism is utilised here as a key example. In Chapter 3, I illustrate why intimacy is central to tourist experiences, and explore its place within larger power structures. By examining intimacy in voluntourism, the purpose of this thesis is not to foreground a critique on voluntourism *per se* for its role in perpetuating unequal power relations between international volunteers and host communities. Rather, by exploring the intimate connections formed in voluntourism, this thesis aims to provide a greater degree of understanding of these complexities that inform even the subtlest form of action, speech, or even written policy of the voluntourists and aiding organisations, and how they underscore the realities of voluntourism that we see today.

Methods

In seeking to examine connections formed between the volunteer tourists and the local communities, the findings of this thesis are based on three months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Kuala Lumpur at Little Green Home from January until March 2015. LGH provides assistance to underprivileged communities through the active contribution of international volunteers. As a Malaysian and a person in my 20s, who has had the experience of living abroad, my involvement at the organisation provided me a dual perspective as both an insider as well as an outsider on voluntourism in Malaysia. Conducting a qualitative fieldwork allows me to focus on "exploring the nature of social or cultural phenomena, rather than aspiring to test hypotheses about them" (Sørensen 2003, p. 850). In optimising data collection through ethnography, it is essential for me to make explicit use of my own "positionality, involvements and experiences" (Cloke *et al*, 1999, p. 333). This approach

allows me to gain social and cultural insights through embracing my own previous experience as a volunteer, as I observe and interact with my participants (Barbieri *et al* 2012, p. 512).

My interest on the topic of voluntourism, specifically within the contexts of intimacy and power relations has much to do with my past experience as a volunteer in Malaysia and Cambodia over the last five years. The experience of working with groups of people from diverse backgrounds at several non-profit organisations has allowed me to observe the dynamic of the relationships formed between them, and how these affected aspects of their life from decision-making to personal experience. Being a local Malaysian helps to substantiate this experience further, as the level of understanding and empathy of one's own country of origin extends beyond those of a non-local (Rabe 2003). As a person who was born and raised in Kuala Lumpur, having witnessed massive changes within Malaysia for over two decades has naturally equipped me with a deep understanding and insight as to how the place and its people respond to external inputs and factors. Such understanding and insight therefore become useful in this current opportunity to further explore the ongoing transformation of the nation's culture and people within the scope of voluntourism.

Tackling the issue from the angle of intimate connections between participants of voluntourism, the aim of this research is to unravel the processes and practices which shape the everyday experience of the people involved with great detail (Smith 1987, p. 151). With this method, everyday events, experience and social relations are drawn upon as data which enables me to construe their interconnection to the subjectivities of power as well as other matters revolving around voluntourism such as neoliberal practices (Ngo 2013, p. 51; Taber 2010, p. 11).

Using a qualitative research methodology, my data collection comprised of informal, semi-structured interviews with a total number of 18 participants, together with participant observation in diverse settings where volunteers lived, spent their leisure time, and performed community work. Participants range from volunteers, the director of LGH, members from collaborating oganisations, as well as members of vulnerable groups such as homeless individuals. All volunteer tourists who participated in this research were between 18 to 35 years old, an age range commonly found amongst voluntourists, likely because these are the ones who have less major life commitments and more impulsivity in travel (Söderman & Snead 2008, pp. 118-119). Although the majority of the volunteers I encountered are from Western continents such as Europe and America, several also came from non-Western countries such as China, Algeria and Morocco. The research methods and contingencies that I applied received ethics approval through the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (ref: 5201401077).

Information gathered from participating in daily activities such as sitting for a meal together, to the conduct of community work and cultural activities were recorded both in writing and a sound recorder. Additionally, online sites for LGH, Workaway, Helpx, EcoLodge, and other media platforms were accessed to gather information on historical and marketing aspects of the organisation and its collaborators. The data collected from observations and interviews were analysed to understand the intertwining between power structures and intimacy among the voluntourists and the local people, and how they affect the results of voluntourism activities for benefiting communities.

Within the anthropological framework, participant observation is given much emphasis, where the researcher is placed in the research context for certain period of time (Conran 2011; Palacios 2010). The duration provided allows for apprehension of local

knowledge that will be practical in addressing problems of everyday life within that context (Conran 2011; McKenna 2014, Sin 2010). However, a short timeframe, added by the fact that this method primarily relies on the observer's interpretation can serve to limit the objectivity and reliability of participant observation (Barbieri *et al* 2012, p. 512). Therefore, to reduce a sense of bias, I felt it was crucial to also discuss my observations and findings with Kartini and other volunteers (see Palacios 2010). Such discussion and findings would allow input balanced by opinions and suggestions made by participants, rather than solely based on my own observations. A large portion of my data comes from these discussions and interviews conducted with participants. Their answers helped me understand key issues pertaining to voluntourism that are often abstract and cannot be quantified. In reference to Jennings, interviews are "an interpretivist paradigm, which holds an ontology (worldview) that recognises multiple perspectives in regard to the research focus, an epistemological stance that is subjective in nature and a methodology which is predicated on qualitative principles" (2005, p. 104). Accordingly, the statements given by my participants reveal the complexity of human engagement and motivation found within the simple act of volunteering (Georgeou 2012, p. 1).

Rather than focusing solely on the volunteer tourists, I find it important to observe and interview other participants involved in voluntourism, particularly the stakeholders. This is because much of past literature on voluntourism has focused on the volunteers, examining their experiences and motivations (Wearing & McGehee 2013). Additionally, in qualitative research, elements such as 'fairness' and 'representativeness' are highlighted, meaning that there should not be any marginalisation of certain voices (Chan 2013, p. 504). The perspectives of local communities matter in revealing the outcomes of voluntourism, mainly because their position as the recipients of development assistance can determine the effectiveness of the intervention.

It should also be noted that issues concerning power and privilege, which are some of the key themes to this research, are often perceived in a negative manner, and, from my observations, tended to cause discomfort among participants whenever they were brought up during discussion and interviewing sessions. In fact, the tendency among participants to request for anonymity and to be wary about the possibilities that their statements might offend organisations involved in voluntourism is already an expression of power distinctions in the sector (Sin 2010, p. 986). In order to minimise the intensity of these sessions, my interviews were conducted in an informal manner, at venues that are most convenient for my participants such as the dining room in LGH and nearby coffee shops. My request for interviews were made after getting acquainted with the participants, or even upon establishing friendship with them through getting involved in their conversations, doing the same daily activities such as eating, or washing their hair (in the case of the homeless). In this way, I was able to create a bond between myself and my research participants so as to allow them to feel comfortable in sharing their thoughts and experiences.

To increase the feeling of mutual trust and a sense of connectedness, language is an important medium that enables the flow of the bonding process (Thomas & McDonagh 2013). The significance of a specific language is not solely due to it being used as a tool that channels thoughts and feelings. Language also serves as a mirror that reflects upon different power structures (see Mandal 2000; Peter *et al* 2013). Throughout my fieldwork, whilst interviews with the volunteers and Kartini were conducted in English, my approach is slightly different with the homeless individuals as well as Amirah, the volunteer from 1SoupKitchen, due to the language spoken. In a postcolonial country such as Malaysia, where English is not the native language, social upbringing, level of education and racial exclusivity are often indicated through the usage of English in everyday conversations (*ibid*). My conversations

with Kartini in English are not only evident of her well-educated background. Despite Malay being the official language of Malaysia, it is common for non-Malays such as Kartini (who is a Malaysian Indian) to converse in either English or her forefather's tongue (Tamil) on a daily basis.

On the other hand, although Amirah has similar educational and social background to Kartini, the fact that Amirah and I belong in the same ethnic category, i.e Malay makes it more 'culturally' comfortable for us to converse in our mother tongue, namely the Malay language. The use of the Malay language between conversing parties in contemporary Malaysia has socio-political implications, depending on the ethnicity of the parties involved in the conversation (López 2014; Powell 2002). Where both parties are ethnic Malays, the conscious choice of using Malay is often a display of cultural acquiescence and removal of any sense or perception of intimidation (John 2015).

However, being a Malaysian and having the fluency in both the local language (Malay) and English do not automatically allow me an insider's status, particularly in voluntourism, where the input of foreigners is often given more weight. This situation will be explained further in the following chapters, more specifically Chapter 3. Having had the opportunity of living and studying abroad, particularly in a Western country such as Australia, this project will also be a reflection about researching one's own culture and exploring the insider / outsider's status of an Australian educated ethnographer in her country of origin (Akbar, 2012).

CHAPTER 1
TOURISM AND DEVELOPMENT

LGH is located less than 12 kilometres from the Kuala Lumpur city centre, bearing a stark difference from the capital city's metropolitan area. The centre's landscape is made of sky-high apartments and condominiums, fancy hotels, gigantic shopping malls, the historical Central Market, and the world-renowned Petronas twin tower. In contrast, the volunteer hostel's location is filled with low cost flats, small shops, street vendors, and small houses replacing what was once a tin mining site in the late 1950s. Even so, the surrounding neighbourhood of LGH still holds a certain rustic charm which many volunteers see as 'the unnoticeable, yet interesting' side of Kuala Lumpur – an 'off-the-beaten' track travel experience, as some would call it.

Changing forms of tourism

According to the World Tourism Organization, tourism is defined as "the activities of traveling to and staying in places outside a person's usual environment for varying purposes such as leisure or business which normally take no longer than a year" (WTO 1995, p. 1). The concept of leisure travel is claimed to have its beginnings from as early as 1244BC as a form of indulgence catered primarily to the privileged (particularly from the European continent) such as spa visits and the Grand Tours, among others (Towner 1995; Wearing 2001, p. 4). Over time, what was once regarded as a recreation mainly for the elites has transformed into a more inclusive activity for the middle and working class. Such change is argued to have been symbolised in 1841, when a direct rail line from London to Brighton was first introduced, as a result of Thomas Cook's innovations (Weaver 2014, pp. 58-59). As the general public is provided with more options to access different modes of traveling and the tourism economy began to expand, travel becomes a consumable product to be sold to individuals who are interested in exploring a different environment and cultural experience (Wearing 2001, p. 4).

By the end of the 1980s, tourism has become a major industry in over 125 countries (Richter 1989, p. 3). The international expansion of tourism has made it a highly important sector that contributes significantly towards national development through foreign exchange and employment opportunities, especially in developing regions (*ibid*). Subsequently, in less than a decade, international tourism movements rose from 598.6 million people in 1997 to 842 million people in 2006, exhibiting a 40 per cent increase (Cochrane 2008, p. 1). The evolution of tourism has an especially profound effect on Southeast Asia, where tourist revenues were found to expand at a dramatic rate between 1980 and 1995 (Teo & Chang 1998, p. 120). Contributing factors such as economic improvement, political stability and heavy marketing have possibly led to the flourishing of tourism in Southeast Asia as the fastest growing in the world (Teo & Chang 1998). In 2015, the World Tourism Organization reported that almost 10% of the global GDP is represented by the tourism industry alone (UNWTO 2015; UNWTO & EIF 2015, p. 1).

The growing perception of traveling as a necessity has transcended our mode of connecting with each other across the globe. The evolving ways of connecting, initiated by globalisation and technological advancement, have profoundly changed the service industries that were once built upon close proximity between the producer and the consumer (Clancy 1998, p. 127). These transformations have created the possibilities of conducting service trades even in far flung parts of the world, which have successfully raised the service industries' capacity to accumulate more than USD1 trillion in revenues during the late 20th century (*ibid*). As a result, Direct Foreign Investment (DFI) has also increased in tandem. In 1993, a United Nations report found that the service industry accounted for more than half of annual DFI flows and nearly half of the world's DFI stock (*ibid*). A person traveling for leisure is one key element to this growth.

Constituting the largest service industry in the world, as well as the single largest item in international trade of services, tourism has logically garnered the interest of transnational corporations, whose interest has been demonstrated through their dominant positions in hotels, airlines, travel agencies, tour operators and restaurant chains (Clancy 1998). The advancement of communications technology has allowed service trades to be conducted anywhere without limitations set by geography or distance, as every transaction for transport and accommodation can be computerised. As a result, tourism becomes an industry made up of a huge series of overlapping services and goods ranging from accommodation to handicrafts (*ibid*). Relevant to this thesis is the fundamental importance of the interpersonal relations required by many sectors of the service industry.

Globalisation and the growth of affective economy

Since the late 20th century, the complexities of human interaction and emotions have become deeply embedded within styles of economic production in response to globalisation. Hardt points out that "humanity and its soul are produced in the very processes of economic production" (1999, p. 91). Over time, with the increasing interconnectivity across the globe, global economic capital has increasingly been produced through means of intangible relationships formed between differing entities. As such, immaterial labour, otherwise known as the "affective labour", holds significant roles in re-defining the modern economy, where forms of labour are no longer limited to the material and physical. For the past several decades, services and immaterial labour have been progressively commodified following the increasing demands of the expanding variety of consumers, and have since become the norm within the global capitalist economy. Where material nature of economic production has merged with the communicative action of human relations, the very act of production becomes deeply embedded in social relationships, as further argued by Hardt:

> "Whereas in the first moment, in the computerisation of industry, for example, one might say that communicative action, human relations, and culture have been instrumentalised, reified, and "degraded" to the level of economic interactions, one should add quickly that through a reciprocal process, in this second moment, production has become communicative, de-instrumentalised, and "elevated" to the level of human relations" (1999, p. 96).

The prominence of affective labour in the global economy means that the concept of trust is given much importance, especially for customers who find themselves in unfamiliar settings (Clancy 1998, p. 132). This can be demonstrated through the example of a tourist staying at a guesthouse where the locale cannot be inspected prior to its consumption. To lessen the risk of being dissatisfied, reviews and brands are created to entice and reassure potential customers. This is especially apparent in the case of tourism. The creation of brands and reviews has thus led to the formation of franchises, as well as their expansion within the national and international networks, where the product being marketed and sold is often in the form of an intangible asset (*ibid,* p. 134). With the inclusion of trust, the production of brands and feedback become testament to the increasing complexity of global capitalism today which reshapes the world's developmental possibilities and limitations.

Development and the evolution of tourism

As service industries and social networks increasingly globalise, the unrelenting quest for connectivity has resulted in people from diverse backgrounds crossing beyond the borders of their homelands for the purpose of encountering new experiences with 'otherness'. As part of the larger phenomenon of the growth of affective economies, the tourism market has itself continued to expand. The industry's capability in materialising the possibilities of wealth through foreign trade as well as cultural exchange has driven the expectation that tourism will remain the largest global industry for a considerable period of time (Richter 1989). Importantly, the expansion of people movement into less developed countries has caused an

overlapping between tourism and development industries, which in turn creates new opportunities for people to engage in diverse and 'niche' markets (Spencer 2010).

Providing assistance to those inhabiting the less developed areas is one example of development. According to Escobar, the concept of development was borne out of the presence of a system that integrates economic growth, trade liberalisation, and the establishment of multilateral financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund within the same network (1988, p. 430). The founding of these global financial institutions in 1944 was for the purpose of facilitating global economic growth through the introduction of economic policies such as fixed currency exchange rates and the institutionalising of national economic planning (*ibid*). As international assistance became institutionalised, development was no longer regarded as "a social construct or the result of political will, but rather the consequence of a 'natural' world order that was deemed just and desirable" (Rist 2007, p. 486). A growing interest in newly independent states among the industrialised North has led to the formation of Global North-South relations, whereby outside state intervention is justified as an attempt to improve the conditions of impoverished nations (Georgeou 2012, p. 26). With the aim of eradicating poverty or its likelihood, aid money is channelled to recipient countries to assist those in need of the benefits of development and sustainable living. Despite the ubiquitous nature of development in the world today, its exact definition is not clear-cut and is subject to both criticism and acclaim (Rist 2007; Spencer 2010, pp. 38-39).

Undeniably, the reason for generating development incentives is a noble one, particularly during the post-World War II period, where the intention was to help improve the lives of the poor (Escobar 1987). However, rather than empowering all impoverished populations, the development apparatus has been criticised for being a tool to lure developing

nations into siding with the ruling elites of the Global North for the benefits of the latter (Rist 2007, p. 486). The materialisation of 'development' into reality has an especially adverse effect on developing countries that are often the target of programs and interventions from giant corporations as well as governments from wealthier countries where paternalistic approaches come into play (Georgeou 2012). Even as economies expand around the world, the gap between the rich and the poor is growing. One historical drawback of development is that it can further exacerbate the gap between the society that is deemed more advanced and the ones considered to be less developed (Escobar 1987; Rist 2007). Consequently, defining development as solely economic growth carries a strong neo-colonial tendency among states and multinational corporations that often intervene in their own interests, rather than genuinely wanting to assist entities that are at a less advantageous position (*ibid*). Being a product of the West, development discourse arguably demonstrates the superiority of the 'developed West' over the 'undeveloped Third World', which further places the latter in a perpetuating state of dependency (Ingram, 2011). It is within this complex landscape that tourism is also engaged.

The links between tourism and the arena of development is a relatively recent phenomenon. Since the 1980s, tourism has become a tool for poverty reduction; particularly among developing countries as an alternative to traditional aid (Spencer 2010, p. 35). As prices of primary commodities continue to fluctuate in global markets as a result of economic cycles and socio-political factors, developing countries such as Malaysia have begun to see tourism as a more pragmatic tool in sustaining a nation's wealth (Mosbah & Khuja, 2014). The practicality and appeal of tourism for mass consumption has developed to suit the constant curiosity and need to explore 'the other'. Natural sites such as beaches as well as cultural diversity of a nation or society have become among the well-known promotional

taglines used by commercial mass tourism agencies with the attempt to lure tourists that seek the exotic experience (*ibid*).

Tourism significantly provides an embodied encounter with other people and daily experience which present learning point and mutual support (Conran 2011, p. 1466). This is because local communities that want to use tourism for boosting their economy and getting support for local issues may find their agendas to be compatible with the tourists' agendas. Hence, the touristic space is found to be a profitable site of articulation and one that is deeply embedded in both material and affective economies (*ibid*; Spencer 2010).

In Malaysia, tourism efforts began in earnest since the 1960s. Even so, the sector was not highly prioritised at that time as the country was still heavily dependent on primary resources such as petroleum, rubber, tin and palm oil (Mosbah & Khuja, 2014, p. 2). It was not until 1972 that the Tourism Development Corporation of Malaysia (TDC) was set up as a special development authority to assist in generating the national income through tourism (*ibid*). However, it was only in the 1980s that the Malaysian tourism sector was given recognition for its potential contributions to the nation's social and economic development, following the global tourism boom and the fall in primary commodity prices. Since then, the government has established initiatives such as the five-year Malaysian Plans (MPs) which were supplemented with a National Tourism Policy (NTP) in 1992, the National Ecotourism Plan (NEP) in 1996 and the Malaysian Tourism Transformation Programme (MTTP) in 2010, for the purpose of developing the tourism sector (*ibid*).

Bringing significant economic wealth through increments in foreign exchange earnings and expansion of employment opportunities, tourism is now the largest service sector in Malaysia and the nation's second source of economic growth (Bhuiyan, Siwar &

Ismail 2013, p. 11). Statistics in 2005 showed that tourism became a key foreign exchange earner, being second only to the manufacturing sector (*ibid*). In 2006, 10% of total exports in Malaysia were from the tourism sector, earning US$18.1 billion in export revenue. The tourism industry was further developed through the formulation of the Malaysian National Tourism Policy (NTP) in 1992 by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism. The policy was focused on community-based tourism, cooperation and coordination in tourism development and identification of potential tourism assets and diversification of new products (*ibid*, p. 16).

Having had a long history of multiculturalism as well as being closely located to major tourist attractions such as Indonesia and Thailand, the rising popularity of Malaysia as a favourite tourist destination in the world comes as no surprise. The Malaysian tourism industry is currently the country's second highest gross domestic product (GDP) contributor, delivering approximately 8 to 10 percent of the country's gross domestic product (Mosbah & Khuja 2014, p. 1). From 2009 to 2012, the number of tourists arriving in Malaysia increased from 23.6 million to over 25 million in total, thus putting the country in the list of top ten spots for travellers. The Ministry of Tourism reported that almost two million jobs were created by the tourism sector and tourism-related industries in 2011 (*ibid*).

Tourism has been a pathway towards development in developing countries due to its intrinsic characteristics – such as high labour accessibility, absorption and mobility – which are potential contributors towards economic improvement (Liu & Wall 2006, p. 160). The demand for leisure consumption within tourism has led to a greater need for human capital which in turn generates employment possibilities for poorer regions where other modes of improving the economic status are scarce (*ibid*). Towards the end of the 20th century, when problems such as economic recession, increased cost of living, and rising unemployment rates became globally endemic, natural and cultural resources from developing regions became

sources of potential benefits that can be utilised through tourism – a sector where lucrative aspects lie in interconnectivity as well as mobility. These appealing attributes have rendered tourism a success in promoting economic growth within many regions, particularly in countries that have long relied more on traditional economies (Richter 1989).

To help further develop tourism in developing countries, bilateral and multilateral donors play an important role in providing financial and technical support (Lee 1987). The rising need for human and social capital has thus resulted in the recognition of the entire services sector (which includes tourism) as having the greatest potential for increased productivity as compared to other industries combined in the modern economy (*ibid,* pp. 2-3). Already regarded as one of the main important service industries in the world, tourism is expected to become the leading and the single largest industry of the world, which means people will continue to seek out new experiences in ever larger numbers (*ibid*).

Emergence of alternative tourism

The tourist's search for authenticity through making contact with the 'other' (which is often absent in mass tourism), combined with a country's need for economic growth has led towards the emergence of alternative tourism (Spencer 2010). Alternative tourism may include, but is not limited to voluntourism, solidarity tourism, sustainable tourism, and short-term mission trips (McKenna, 2014). As a combination of tourism and altruistic mission, voluntourism has successfully gained attention worldwide, and its significance has been established within development agendas (Vrasti 2013; Mostafanezhad 2014). Whilst the growing interest in voluntourism can be perceived as a trend, voluntourism can also be said to be a "cultural commentary on the appropriate response to global economic inequality" (Mostafanezhad 2014, p. 2).

Moral effects of alternative tourism are not only limited to economic or social exchanges, but include a moral obligation to the natural environment (Germann Molz 2013, p. 214). As highlighted by literature on alternative tourism, the moral economy which forms the base for alternative tourism is structured with the intention to resist capitalist exchange and production in tourism as well as to incite social relations that are more meaningful, authentic and intimate (*ibid*). Founded on the desire to create intimate embodied interactions with people and environment, alternative tourism is often thought of as another form of altruism or a new social movement.

There are two important predictors which determine participation and support for social movements, namely social networks and consciousness-raising (McGehee & Santos 2005, p. 761). Social movement activities are reinforced through linkages of one or more social relationships (or social networks). These linkages are founded upon common ground, namely the awareness and concern towards particular issues and inequalities (*ibid*). In turn, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are important catalysts for linking volunteer tourists with local communities (Barbieri *et al* 2012, p. 510). In fact, the concern for the social and environmental implications of tourism development, and contribution towards community development instead of profits, has made NGOs responsible for the decommodification of tourism (*ibid*). Decommodifying tourism and promoting alternative philosophies such as community development and nature-centred values are thereby important concepts that define the distinctive nature of alternative tourism, allowing it to reshape tourism into something more of a socially responsible activity (*ibid*).

Factors such as motivations, choice locations, types of accommodation and how the activity is being managed are to be taken into consideration when distinguishing alternative tourism from mass tourism (Dearden & Harron 1994, p. 82). Providing more local

opportunities through businesses that are smaller in scale with minimal negative impacts, alternative tourism is perceived to fit better within developing nations than the mass tourism model commonly favoured among governments and multinational corporations (*ibid*). By promoting initiatives that encourage tourists to stay with locals, whether through homestay or volunteering programs, the host communities would supposedly be able to gain financial benefit directly from these tourists, instead of the revenue being distributed through large scale hospitality facilities (Barbieri *et al* 2012, p. 514). Apart from accumulating financial gain, McGehee and Santos claim that alternative tourism such as voluntourism has the capacity to instil consciousness in participants' lives, where environmental, cultural and social problems of a destination become the subject of examination (2005, p. 765). Such forms of consciousness are viewed to be synonymous with authenticity, which is one of the key attributes of alternative tourism. On the other hand, mass tourism is critiqued for tour packages that are found to be an illusory presentation of what a place and culture would be like – something what tourists expect to see – which some perceive as "staged authenticity" and "re-construed ethnicity" (Richter 1989, 186). These unreal images shown to visitors often create misleading impression of the conditions of a place and its people, causing a delusion among visitors and further impoverishing citizens of host destinations within limited stereotypes (*ibid*).

Given its potential as a new social movement with the focus on addressing social and environmental inequalities, alternative tourism is thus sometimes perceived as a better alternative to the traditional development aid (Spencer 2010, p. 41). Promoting small businesses established by host communities, alternative tourism can not only help to address poverty but also serves to empower these groups of people. Unlike commercial tourism that is usually based on "brief encounters between locals and foreigners that are 'artificial, asymmetrical, and unidirectional'", alternative tourism embraces the close connectivity

between these two differing entities (Nash 1981, p. 468; cited by Spencer 2010, p. 2). These connections, that are built and strengthened within a longer period of time, allow for a better understanding of the host country's social, cultural and political situation. Mass tourism, on the other hand, is often found to leave the marginalised communities neglected, with the host communities, who are supposedly benefiting, having little to no ability in constructing such tourism (Lyons and Wearing 2008, p. 5). Dominated by multinational corporations profiting from high-spending consumers with limited traveling time, mass tourism is typically considered as highly consumptive, proliferating at the expense of the host nation's natural and cultural environments (*ibid*). Package tourists are characterised as lacking the sensitivity and understanding of local culture, and solely having the idea of a place based on what has been advertised and sold through advertising and mass consumption (Vrasti 2013, p. 6).

Despite these distinctions that endorse alternative tourism, as I will discuss further, the extent to which attempts at instilling social awareness and sensitivities among tourists towards host communities as well as encouraging responsible travelling, within alternative tourism, actually benefit local communities remains unclear. The concept of alternative tourism built on attempts of 'doing good' has been criticised by Butcher (2003), who argues that such tourism evokes a sense of moral superiority among moral tourists, which creates new barriers between individuals based on moral grounds. Furthermore, the anti-globalisation approach cultivated through ethical consumption only amounts to romanticisation of the 'underdeveloped', which is also another form of consumption sought by tourists (*ibid*).

As numerous countries around the world embrace the expansion of unregulated market exchange and privatised social services, neoliberal practices and policies have since continued their capitalistic approach into the voluntary sector for more than three decades (Conran 2011, p. 1455). Additionally, the growth of NGOs since the 1980s parallels the

intensification of neoliberalism, suggesting that neoliberalism's influence on aid and development has led to the manifestation of paternalistic practice, where the needs of donor states are greatly prioritised, rather than the aid recipients through the creation of development programs (Conran 2011; Georgeou and Engel 2011, p. 302). To what extent new tourism may contribute to, or rectify these inequalities, particularly in the Global South, remains in question. Much of the open ended conclusion has to do with the fact that there is a gap within the tourism literature in regards to the host communities' experiences (see Wearing & McGehee 2013; Sin 2010). On one hand, locals have the advantage of generating income through tourism business. However, apart from economic support, moral tourism (including voluntourism) is also about exchanging and developing less tangible elements such as the "emotional, educational, and affective elements that build on identity affirmation" (Spencer, 2010, p. 136). In turn, Conran's (2011) argument on intimacy as overshadowing the structural inequality found in voluntourism cannot be disregarded, especially within the context of development where intangible elements such as intimate connections are bound to take place.

Spencer suggests that the capability of moral tourism in addressing structural inequalities is evident from the tourists' tendency towards having the desire to learn about cultural and environmental issues while on holiday (2010, pp. 63-64). However, it should be taken into account that whilst new tourism may initially be a display of moral inclination, rather than a marketable product, the presence of the two dimensions may coalesce at some point (*ibid*). What I want to examine in more detail in what follows is the significance of altruism as a motivating factor specifically for volunteer tourists. As moral tourists, though they may have the interest to understand the cultural and social context of the country they are visiting, the interest or intention in itself may not be enough to address structural disadvantage faced by a community within the host country if it is not accompanied by actions that can help fulfil ongoing needs of that community within the local context.

CHAPTER 2
PROLIFERATION OF THE 'DO-GOOD' INDUSTRY

> Each time I hear the word 'voluntourism', I would imagine some unemployed hippy / backpacker running away from their developed homeland, with no real goals in life apart from overstaying at some cheap country and contributing as little to some small-scale local NGO. (Zee, 26, EcoLodge staff from Malaysia)

The emergence of voluntourism

A volunteer is commonly defined as "someone who offered service, time and skills to benefit others", more typically in developing countries (Lyons and Wearing 2008, p. 148). In the context of voluntourism, a volunteer tourist refers to an individual who seeks responsible traveling experience through a combination of short-term volunteering programs abroad with leisure travel (Alexander & Bakir, 2011, p. 18). Travel itineraries of a volunteer tourist include helping the less privileged or doing environmental conservation work, among others (Wearing and McGehee 2013, pp. 120-121). Despite being everyday individuals with typically middle to upper class background, volunteers are also key actors whose participation mirrors and reshapes the organisation of international humanitarianism in the Global South (Conran 2011; Mostafanezhad 2014).

There are different assertions regarding the exact period that marked the beginning of voluntourism. In fact, several scholars in tourism studies note that the practice of 'saving the world' through traveling can be traced back to the 16th century - at a time where colonial missionaries were on the rise and the 'Grand Tour' was first introduced among the British and the Europeans, before expanding to other (Western) countries such as Australia and the United States (Mostafanezhad 2014, p. 32; Wearing & McGehee 2013, p. 120). Whilst much of colonialism might have been borne out of the intention to dominate, it also fostered a

Western humanitarian sensibility, which is claimed to have emerged as early as the late 17th to early 18th century in England and America (Halttunen 1995). A rising sympathetic concern for fellow beings encountered during travel led to new cultural practices of compassion and empathy which have been identified as civilised actions (*ibid*, p. 303). At the time, the humanitarian sentimentality and practise were reflective of how the West perceives and understands the world, with their actions justified by the need to be morally responsible for those inhabiting in what they regarded as the poorer, undeveloped side of the world (Mostafanezhad 2014, p. 113).

The practise of going overseas to spread religious teaching and improve the living conditions of the 'other', whether through teaching or assisting, laid the earlier foundation for contemporary development (Mostafanezhad 2014, p. 32). Prior to the 20th century, it was the missionaries who held an important position within the sector, which explains why some of the largest international volunteering organisations such as the World Vision and Habitat for Humanity have been strongly connected to Christian networks (*ibid*). However, from the middle of the 20th century, the concept and practise of development linked to a volunteer network have evolved into a more secularised version to fit into contemporary times (Hoffman 1998, p. 13). The changes can be traced back to the establishment of the Red Cross in 1864. Ever since then, volunteering has become more internationalised and grown beyond the church (Georgeou and Engel 2011, p. 299). The evolution of the practise of helping others through traveling in contemporary times is especially apparent on how it forms part of the alternative tourist experience, particularly among the volunteer tourists that we see in present day Kuala Lumpur, as explored in this thesis.

Links with international development agencies, which supports the expansion of voluntourism network, can be traced back to President Truman's speech in 1947, where he

called for development and peacemaking initiatives following the end of World War II. As a result, organisations such as the Peace Corps and Australian Volunteers International (AVI) were founded in 1961 and 1963 respectively. Whilst organisations in the past required exchanges which are longer in duration (from two to three years), the length of the period for volunteering work has shortened over time to several months and even weeks (*ibid*).

It did not take long until the expansion of voluntourism began to reach participants from non-Western continents such as Asia and Africa (Sin 2010; Wearing & McGehee 2013, p. 120). By the late 20th century, voluntourism can no longer be regarded as a phenomenon exclusively taking place in the West. The increasing variety of participants was evident during my fieldwork, where some of the volunteer tourists I encountered at LGH are citizens of countries such as Morocco, Algeria, and China. Participation and study of the phenomenon have rapidly grown over the last twenty years, with traveling for an altruistic mission fast becoming a trend since the early 2000s (Georgeou & Engel 2011, p. 297; Wearing & McGehee 2013, p. 120). Interested participants have the options to go for (usually) short-term or long-term projects that range from environmental conservation work to development oriented projects outside of their home countries at the location of placements (Mostafanezhad 2014). Many of those who volunteer claim that their volunteering experience has made them more enthusiastic about serving communities, both within their local hometown or abroad (Conran 2011, p. 1466). Volunteers have an important role in providing support for local issues, be it economic or political. More generally, their capacity in addressing issues faced by needs-based communities and creating awareness, aided by a strong network has made them become a part of new social movements and / or the development sector.

The 'do-good' phenomenon

There has been a growing interest towards volunteering in Malaysia in recent years, but overall the phenomenon is still fairly new. In year 2012, Malaysia ranked 76 out of 146 countries across the globe in terms of 'giving behaviour', with only 26% of the population contributing their time for volunteer work (WGI 2012[4]). An article published by one Malaysian online media platform called The Rakyat Post suggests the absence of exposure and teaching on the subject as being the key factor for the low spirit of volunteerism among Malaysian citizens (2014). The following year saw a slight improvement with the rank rising to 71, but in 2014, Malaysia jumped to 7th place, making it as one of the top 20 countries as being the most generous, with the percentage of Malaysians who participate in volunteering work increasing to 41% of the entire population (WGI 2014). According to the World Giving Index report, the recent occurrence of typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013 has been the main factor that drove the rising generosity as fellow Malaysians felt the great urge to help a neighbouring country (*ibid*, p. 5).

Arguably, the natural disaster in Philippines was not the only factor that led to the increment of generosity in Malaysia. Whilst the psychological implications that explain the rising interest in philanthropy among Malaysians remain debatable, what the reports show is that doing good for those in need, specifically in the form of volunteering work that was once regarded as a Western practice has fast become a trend in the country. The Rakyat Post (2014) further suggested that the presence of international volunteers who contribute their time and skills in Malaysia has motivated young Malaysians into doing similar work. Fathiah, the coordinator of Asian Students Environmental Platform at University of Malaya (UM) found that in the case of giving help, observants who witness generosity often find themselves also wanting to help out and share the burden (*ibid*). Although voluntourism is still a new

[4] The World Giving Index report is based on surveys and interviews conducted by Gallup. See https://www.cafonline.org/about-us/publications/2014-publications/world-giving-index-2014

phenomenon in Malaysia, the participation of international volunteers in places like LGH has implicitly made an impact on the 'do-good' phenomenon in the country. The positive response driven by volunteer tourists has been acknowledged by my participants, Amirah and Kartini, who noted how the presence of international volunteers during the Homeless Hairwash program has attracted more Malaysian volunteers to take part in assisting the homeless.

> People get curious when they see so many 'mat sallehs[5] getting involved in activities like Soup Kitchen and Homeless Hairwash. Then just start taking part after that.
>
> (Amirah, 37, 1SoupKitchen volunteer from Malaysia)

It is also interesting to note that celebrity humanitarianism has been a factor in the widespread of interest in volunteering since the mid-1980s, albeit perhaps not the main contributor towards its proliferation (Daley 2013, p. 376; Mostafanezhad 2013b). The association of celebrity humanitarianism with technological developments in the social media has helped to "reshape public engagement with politics", particularly in Western societies (Daley 2013, p. 376). Similar phenomenon is also apparent in Malaysia, whereby prominent figures are often called to get involved with the causes of non-profit organisations. Kartini described that whilst there are those who genuinely want to get involved in altruistic acts, the rising popularity of doing volunteer work has a lot to do with it being a trend, especially among the younger generations:

> Malaysians tend to volunteer if they find the causes to be trendy and cool, where the involvement in certain causes would make them appear more appealing and interesting to their peers. You know, a couple of years ago, we organised a cleaning activity at the Batu Caves

[5] A colloquial term used by Malaysian in referring to people with Caucasian background

> area on Thaipusam day[6]. You know how dirty the place gets during that festival so we brought lots of plastic bags. We picked up every single bit of trash, including smashed pieces of coconuts. Guess what happened next? We made headlines. People noticed. The following year, all these media press and even Marina Mahathir[7] herself became interested in doing similar activities with us. And when someone like Marina decides to take part, everyone else just follows.
>
> (Kartini, 42, LGH director)

The 'coolness' factor for some volunteering programs has a lot to do with how they have been marketed to the public. Over the years, it can be found that campaigns involving the participation of well-known figures successfully incite a reaction among the masses. Mostafanezhad notes how celebrities reshape the political economy of international humanitarian interventions by having prominent roles in representing organisations that demand actions for social justice, and in facilitating solidarity among concerned individuals (2014, p. 6). Exuding overt influence on admirers through their remarkable achievements and strong presence, the involvement of celebrities within the humanitarian context is a statement of their capability to relate to any every day individual. Unsurprisingly, the involvement of famous figures within the humanitarian and philanthropic arena has successfully garnered a substantial amount of positive reaction from viewers, who, in turn express their interest in getting involved (Mostafanezhad 2013b).

The association of influential figures with the 'do-good' industry and the increasing desires to help others while having a unique travel experience are only part of the ever expanding intersection between development, tourism and technological advancement fuelled by neoliberal tendencies. Unlike mass tourism, voluntourism provides a more solid platform

[6] Thaipusam is a festival celebrated among the Tamil-Hindu community which falls on the Tamil month of *Thai* (January / February) each year. See http://www.wonderfulmalaysia.com/malaysia-thaipusam-hindu-festival.htm
[7] Marina Mahathir is the daughter of former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir and a well-known activist. See http://www.expatgomalaysia.com/2014/10/01/27-famous-malaysians-you-should-know/

for people to engage with each other on a more personal level. This engagement presents a great opportunity for individuals who are genuinely interested in engaging themselves in addressing issues of social injustice as it allows them to mix passion with recreational activities (McGehee 2005, p. 764). Formation of a group of individuals with similar goals and values does not only foster a deepening bond between like-minded individuals, but it also creates a platform for network building and raising awareness through the experiences shared (*ibid*). The appeal found in voluntourism is not only due to its rising popularity on a global scale, but also the supposed uniqueness of a voluntourism experience which is filled with networking and consciousness raising opportunities (*ibid*). As I will describe in the case of LGH, the constant interactions among volunteers, as well as with members from other collaborating organisations help to establish intense connections that broaden cross-cultural understandings.

The proliferation of 'doing good' for the community

The growing awareness of existing inequalities, both on a national and global scale has sparked various new social movements among concerned individuals who wish to help out those in need. In the recent decades, solidarity among those who care enough to want to make an impact has been created through technological advancement of connectivity and mobility on an international scale. Emotions such as feeling of empathy enter a larger public space rather than being regarded as a private matter belonging to an individual (Ahmed 2004, p. 117; Ruddick 2010, pp. 28-29).

People seek ways to connect with others who feel the same way as they do because shared emotions create a sense of belonging. Looking at the case of volunteer tourists, for instance, we can see that they generally share similar sentiments – sympathy towards those living in poverty in the Global South, the need to give back to society, and a greater degree of

sensitivity towards the locals living in host countries that they travel to (Conran 2011; Vrasti 2013; Wearing 2008). At LGH, for instance, almost every participant told me about wanting to learn more about the Malaysian culture while helping the underprivileged groups as the main reason for their involvement in volunteering work. Being part of a volunteering program, specifically LGH in this case, provides an avenue for mutual support among volunteers. Ahmed (2004) finds that the intangible attribute of emotions which do not reside solely within one body or person is what binds a group of people feeling similar emotions together:

> "In such affective economies, emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments. Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective" (p. 119).

Emotions have the capacity to fuel actions and bind people together, which explains why such form of affect has become so inextricably intertwined in the economic sphere (Illouz 2007). Further adding to this claim, Clough suggests that the value of a product is factored on its capability of invoking enough emotions that result in actions, particularly among consumers (2012, p. 23). These findings are relevant to the growing popularity of voluntourism, where causes are promoted in such a way that evokes a certain interest, or a shared emotional response amongst people from different parts of the world. As a result of these incitements, individuals may find themselves having the urge to partake in volunteering projects abroad as a means to address particular issues of concern, all the while being engaged in the experience. Mostafanezhad refers to this extension as the "global economy of repair", in which she explains that "redemption for various immoralities such as environmental degradation, global economic inequality and chronic poverty is now possible through

consumption" (2014b, p. 113). In a popular humanitarian gaze[8] – a composite formed by the intersection of humanitarianism, popular culture and tourism – moral consumption is made central to the supposedly altruistic mission, and possible through the formation of (mainly) middle-class individuals in search of meaning and fulfilment (*ibid*).

Beyond the opportunities to connect and partake in activities aimed towards helping the less privileged or preserving the ecology, the concept of alternative lifestyle fostered by voluntourism has an especially significant appeal to individuals who seek self-sufficient living (Vrasti 2013, p. 63). Some volunteers find contentment through participating in voluntourism, particularly because of the chance to disengage themselves from leading a conventional lifestyle that is perceived as highly consumptive. This perspective is important to Mikhaela, a 25 year old volunteer from Slovenia, who said:

> I would love to live a life that does not involve any form of monetary exchange. So long as we exchange goods, I believe that dream may be plausible. This is why I have decided to become a volunteer at LGH as this place provides that kind of life that I dream of living, where I provide my time and labour in exchange for food and accommodation.
>
> (Mikhaela, 25, LGH volunteer from Slovenia)

Whilst Mikhaela may not represent all volunteers, she echoes the desire of many of those who decided to sign up for a volunteering program abroad; namely, to experience a lifestyle that is different from the familiar settings of their homeland. Diverging from the familiar is found to be not only liberating for volunteers, but it also provides voluntourism with a touch of 'authenticity'. Such sentiment is shared by Erik, a volunteer from Italy:

[8] Popular humanitarian gaze is a concept which refers to the relational act of spectatorship in voluntourism. See Mostafanezhad (2014, p. 7).

> My reason to volunteer at LGH is mainly because it gives me a travel experience that is different from what any typical traveller would get. Spending my time as a volunteer at LGH helps me see the different sides of Malaysia, particularly Kuala Lumpur. I also had the chance to mingle with other volunteers and locals alike through participating in providing swimming lessons to children with disabilities and giving hair wash to the homeless. You don't get to experience any of that if you were to travel as a tourist who merely stays at hostels or guesthouses and only sightsees.
>
> (Erik, 29, LGH volunteer from Italy)

By getting into close encounters with the locals and living an alternative lifestyle, many volunteer tourist participants claim that their travel experience is a lot more 'real', unlike mass tourism that is deemed as created solely for what mass tourists expect to see. The construction of what is regarded as 'authentic' or 'alternative', however, has its own set of contradictions as these attributes are often used as key selling points of neoliberal capital (Vrasti 2013). To increase appeal for recruitment purpose, many organisations promote volunteering programs as a way of escaping the 'real world' or to indulge in an 'authentic lifestyle'. Ironically, the 'authenticity' of an experience is not only embraced upon monetary exchange, but also often includes the everyday practice of these volunteers from their homeland. This combination of the Western lifestyle with the 'exotic' in turn produces a fusion experience that in fact re-defines the concept of authenticity. In an interview with David, the founder of EcoLodge – a Malaysian-based social enterprise and one of LGH's long-term collaborators – the interviewee described:

> A lot of our ads that promote voluntourism are worded in such a way to attract potential volunteers (particularly those with Western backgrounds). So, we use terms such as 'explore', 'party', 'beach', 'drinks' or 'social' to get more people on board because we know they still

> need to have those things, despite living in an environment that is completely new, foreign and different from what they have been familiar with.
>
> (David, 40, EcoLodge founder)

These terms, as explained by David, are meant to entice volunteers into contributing their time and skills within rural, conservative areas of Malaysia, where mainstream forms of entertainment are scarce. In this regard, authenticity is not solely confined to mingling with the locals and getting exposure to local cultures, but may also refer to a fusion lifestyle of the local and foreign.

Voluntourism in Malaysia

Whilst the number of tourist arrivals in Malaysia continues to grow annually, the country is a less popular destination compared to some Southeast Asian counterparts, particularly in the area of voluntourism. Moreover, Malaysia's sudden surge up the ranks of the World Giving Index (2014) seems to suggest that the expansion of non-profit organisations and social enterprises, and the participation of international volunteers did not leave a significant mark until recently. Frequently visited online platforms that offer volunteering abroad opportunities such as Projects Abroad (2009) and Go Overseas (2015) continuously report that countries such as Thailand, Cambodia and Philippines remain popular voluntourism destinations in the Southeast Asia, while Malaysia is absent from the list. Through conversations with the volunteers from LGH, the statements they provide suggest that Malaysia is more often perceived as a transit point, prior to further embarking to neighbouring states such as Thailand and Indonesia. 29 year old Erik from Italy admitted that:

> As much as I enjoy being here in LGH and having to explore Malaysia, I am planning to leave for Thailand and spend more time volunteering there. The main reason why I flew here (Kuala

> Lumpur) in the first place is because it is a lot cheaper and easier to fly here from my hometown in Milan.
>
> (Erik, 29, LGH volunteer from Italy)

Jan, a 21 year old student from Germany also shared similar sentiments as the main aim of his Southeast Asian adventure was to explore Indonesia. The interviewee said:

> I can only find cheaper flights from Berlin to Kuala Lumpur and decided to go for it. So, it is a good idea to spend a couple of weeks in Malaysia and volunteering at LGH before I leave for Indonesia.
>
> (Jan, 21, LGH volunteer from Germany)

Hence, while authenticity is an important attribute in alternative tourism, costs are also among the key factors that lure travellers on a limited budget such as Erik and Jan. Referring to recent statistics provided by the UN Data (2014), only 3.8% of the Malaysian population lived below the national poverty line in 2009. The percentage subsequently decreased to 1.7% in 2012. On the other hand, the situation in Thailand, for example, is a contrasting one as the figure amounted to 19.1% of the Thai population in 2009. Mostafanezhad suggests that poverty is an 'appealing' trait that drives the increasing flock of volunteer tourists into specific countries as it provides the 'feel-good' sensation of having the chance to 'make a difference' in a place considered as poor and filled with hardships (2013a, pp. 326-327). Moreover, as high poverty rate usually connotes low cost of living, many volunteer tourists then opt for volunteering programs in these countries, which are assumed (by these individuals) to require less money spent, especially where they intend to stay for a longer period of time (Scheyvens 2002).

The little money spent on traveling hence sparks another question as to how contributions, monetary or otherwise made by the alternative tourists, specifically the volunteer tourists, may be measured in improving the livelihood of host communities that they are living with. Despite living in a particular area for a longer time without spending a great amount of money, volunteer tourists may benefit host communities in diverse ways through their participation (Barbieri *et al* 2012, p. 514; Palacios 2010). Anep, a 36 year old recipient of the soup kitchen and hair wash services who had been homeless for three years exclaimed how the programs organised by LGH in collaboration with 1SoupKitchen have helped him in many ways, where he said:

> The program has been helpful as I can never afford a haircut and it has been hard for me to find a place to wash my hair properly. Also, I have difficulties in getting food everyday so the soup kitchen helps. I feel at ease with the foreign volunteers and have no issues with them coming to this area to help out. I just wish I can speak good English so I can have a conversation with them.
>
> (Anep, 36, beneficiary from Sabah, Malaysia)

Similarly, Sara, a 22 year old who had to live off the streets due to lack of income shared a similar opinion where she stated:

> I come here often because it's hard to find a job and I can't support myself, so the volunteers have been very helpful in providing free food and hair wash service to people like us. And I like mingling with them, despite having the difficulties in conversing with some of them (who are non-Malaysians) due to language barriers.
>
> (Sara, 22, beneficiary from Pahang, Malaysia)

Likewise, 32 year old Samsul, told me:

> I don't come from a rich family, and I'm originally from Sabah. I came to KL with the hope of making money but it's a lot harder than I thought. So I became homeless for almost two years. I'm not sure how I can be on my own if it wasn't for these NGOs.
>
> (Samsul, 32, beneficiary from Kedah, Malaysia)

The funding provided by collaborating organisations, as well as the money paid for selected volunteer packages by participating volunteer tourists may support the local communities and ensure the sustainability of the volunteering agency. At LGH, for example, the money paid to volunteer will be used to sustain the house as well as the volunteering activities which involve transportation costs and goods needed by the assisted groups. In exchange for their time and skills provided during their stay, volunteers that come to LGH are provided with accommodation and meals. Such exchange is not only common in voluntourism, but it is usually necessary for local hosts to accommodate these visitors within more familiar local settings of the host communities (Barbieri *et al* 2012, p. 514). As volunteers are expected to serve the communities, as well as to immerse themselves in the local culture, the simple accommodation provided by hosts organisations such as LGH is also used as a space that allows for cross-cultural learning to take place (Palacios 2010).

At the same time, it is useful to acknowledge that the reality of the situation in voluntourism does not necessarily match up to the goals and ideals initiated by volunteering organisations. David from EcoLodge explained that the interest and support for voluntourism has dropped in recent years due to the growing number of criticisms thrown against it, such as arrogant attitudes among volunteers and organisations, cultural clashes, lack of local understanding, and mismatched assistance with the needs of target groups. Additionally, the objectives of voluntourism appear to have their own set of contradictions. Many volunteers may comprise of individuals who are sensitive and empathetic towards popular global justice

agendas that instil anti-capitalistic approaches, among others. However, as pointed out by Conran (2011), promotion of global justice agenda often comes in a form of commodified products and services, which only upholds neoliberal global capitalism tendencies that voluntourism seeks to resist (p. 1456). Viewed from this aspect, the capability of voluntourism to alter structural inequalities has been compromised as a consequence of its commodification.

Perhaps the contention may be true. The intersection of tourism and development combined with growing globalisation, which provides leeway for the monetisation of volunteering experience is also apparent at LGH and many other organisations involved in the 'do-good' industry. Volunteers are required or at least expected to provide monetary contribution for an experience that allows them to be, and feel, connected with others through the act of helping the less privileged. Despite so, a greater awareness of the "self" and "others", as well as personal growth attained from participation in voluntourism may still lead to a possibility of instilling public consciousness, as explored in the following Chapter (Barbieri *et al* 2012; p. 513; Wearing & Neil 2000).

CHAPTER 3
INTIMACY IN VOLUNTOURISM

Getting involved at LGH

Signs with names such as Russia, Thailand, Canada, and Egypt pointing in different directions were perched right at the entrance of LGH, welcoming international guests who will spend the following weeks as volunteers. On a typical hot afternoon, some volunteers may find themselves preparing mosaic tiles which will be used to decorate the backyard, before treating themselves to cold drinks inside the house with Kartini's two dogs lying lazily not too far away. Those who have confirmed a longer time commitment with LGH would wake up much earlier than the rest, spending their mornings and afternoons on weekdays at a nearby refugee school as substitute teachers to assist refugee children with English. While Thursday morning is spent on providing swimming lessons to children with special needs at a swimming club nearby, Thursday night is the highlight of volunteering at LGH. Known as the Homeless Hairwash night, Kartini and the volunteers would drive to the central of Kuala Lumpur, within the vicinity of the famous Jamek Mosque to provide the marginalised individuals with hair wash and haircut services.

On weekends, Kartini and the volunteers would go on a retreat to a nearby river as part of a bonding session between them. If plans were carefully made in advance, all participants of LGH would camp out at a beach or a village area located within a province of at least four hour bus ride away. The weekends have always been something that the volunteers look forward to as they provide bonding sessions between people who were once strangers before entering LGH. Intense yet personal, memorable experiences such as these provide invaluable learning points to both volunteers and members of host communities in voluntourism (Conran 2011).

Founded in 2013, LGH was aptly named after being painted green in its entirety, symbolising the ideals of green and peaceful living. Those who are not familiar with the area of its location may have difficulties in finding the social enterprise cum volunteer hostel due to it being situated in the outskirt of Kuala Lumpur at least half an hour's drive away from the city centre. Despite its compressed space, LGH has the capacity to accommodate up to 18 volunteers who have the option to choose from its five dormitories. Such limited space, combined with the high numbers of people that dwell inside, in turn provides opportunities for varying degrees of interactions among the volunteers, creating an atmosphere that is both intimate and inclusive. Throughout the time spent on placement at LGH, faces and numbers of volunteers changed from every one or two weeks. Sometimes, as little as two newcomers would arrive and spend their next three weeks volunteering for the organisation. Other times, the numbers of new people would jump to ten within a week, which makes a livelier environment in the house, yet more work for Kartini in delegating tasks and crafting plans for all of them.

Short-term commitment among volunteers is not solely apparent in LGH. At international NGOs such as the Red Cross, for example, the duration of volunteering projects which previously lasted on an average of two to three years has over time decreased to several months and even weeks (Georgeou and Engel 2011, p. 299). As the industry generates more interest, volunteering projects are packaged as sellable products for tourists who want to make a difference while traveling, and no longer exclusively confined as an initiative of NGOs that seek to recruit potential aspiring volunteers (*ibid*). In meeting the demands of interested participants and to optimise financial and labour gains from them, it is only practical for organisations such as LGH to implement short-term volunteering programs, which require minimum two weeks of volunteering from each volunteer. This is because the unpaid nature of volunteering work makes it difficult for most potential volunteers to spend more time and

money living in a chosen destination. According to Kartini, a volunteer's length of stay should not be the sole measurement for the success of a volunteering project.

> Although we've made it clear on our website that volunteers should commit for at least two weeks, there have been several instances where volunteers came to stay here (at LGH) for a week or even less. We could have turned them down, but we don't have the heart to do it as they appeared to be very eager to help out. It's just that their time in KL was very limited. We also want to make our volunteering opportunities open for everyone. We want people to keep coming. Sometimes, several days or a week can make a difference.
>
> (Kartini, 42, LGH director)

In this instance, the intensity of social engagements helps to make up for the shortage of time in bringing impacts to host communities. It is due to the temporary nature of traveling that drives volunteer tourists into wanting to make the most of their limited time by engaging themselves in volunteering activities, and building connections with other participants. It has been argued that embodied emotions of intimacy are the valuables that volunteer tourists seek and appreciate the most during the time spent volunteering abroad as they are regarded as the most beneficial and memorable part of their experience (Germann Molz 2013, p. 213). As central attributes of a 'moral encounter' in voluntourism, experiences filled with intimacy and warmth are sought to be consumed by participants (Conran, 2011). Adding weight to that, intimacy is also perceived as synonymous with authenticity (Conran 2011; Germann Molz 2013). This is because intimate encounters such as forming close friendship with the locals or even the simple act of holding a child seem to validate a sense of genuineness in voluntourism activities (Conran 2011; p. 1459).

Searching for the intimate

At LGH, interested applicants need to go through a Skype interview with Kartini prior to commencing their volunteering activities at the organisation. Whilst skills and experience are important in defining a good volunteer, many hosting organisers such as Kartini herself also look for certain personality traits among potential volunteers that are deemed as likeable, which explains why Skype interviews are crucial in determining the potential volunteer's character. Recruitment processes demonstrate the substantial impact that the internet has on today's service industry, particularly in the ways we communicate and connect, as well as its central role in the "commodification of intimacy and in shaping new movements and geographic and electronic landscapes of intimacy for individuals who are otherwise geographically dispersed" (Constable 2009, p. 53). Communication and connection can be facilitated more easily, which makes recruitment processes a lot easier, particularly in the case of voluntourism.

Globally, spaces of affective labour have been redefined by electronic communication which leads to new opportunities and possibilities for intimate encounters and individual businesses (Constable 2009, p. 53). Through technological advancement, geographic boundaries are blurred as connections, mobility, emotions and experience become products that can be searched and consumed with a simple 'click'. This simple act of connecting has therefore made the online social media as the most relevant creation in the 21st century as it serves as an avenue for unlimited consumption. In the case of voluntourism, interested participants are provided with options in regards to searching for their choice of organisation and country to volunteer. Those who wish to get involved in addressing global injustices may find others who share similar mindsets by browsing through webpages that provide working or volunteering opportunities, and which include many testimonies. Similarly, those wanting

to attain a unique travel experience may find themselves searching for various opportunities abroad.

Although intimacy entails engaging with other people, it implies more than just close interactions between persons (Alexander & Bakir, 2011, p. 15). Rather, it is a form of connection built through actions that are deemed as meaningful between individuals involved (*ibid*). Berlant contends that intimacy includes "an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way" (1998, p. 281). Intimacy can be understood as an "embodied experience that arouses a sense of closeness and a story about a shared experience" (Berlant 1998; Conran 2011). Unlike many social interactions, intimate connection involves an emotional bond established at a deeper level, thus giving the impression of "being – physically and/or emotionally close" (Constable 2009, p. 50). Tanner suggests that emotion is a key attribute in defining intimacy due to it having prominent appearance in an environment that is both social and relational and the capacity to create a drastic effect on the being, process and functioning of an organisation (2005, p. 125). Importantly, involvement is more than just situational, as people seek to identify with the other (Conran 2011, pp. 1459-1460). Building on trust and the nature of interactions between volunteers and the local communities that they are assisting and / or living with, one can see how important intimacy is within the scope of voluntourism, as confirmed by many volunteer tourists themselves:

> I am glad for the fact that I came across LGH on the Internet by chance. Volunteering at this place allows me to make some of the most amazing friends. I don't think I would ever have the chance to meet Kartini or any of the other volunteers if I were to stay at a backpacker's hostel.
>
> (Tania, 23, LGH volunteer from USA)

> Voluntourism is a great way to meet people and experience new things, especially as my partner and I just flew out of Barcelona, after spending a few weeks doing housesitting work at a guesthouse there. You can call it volunteering work, but less personal, I guess. Over here (in KL), we get to connect with the locals and other volunteers at LGH.
> (George, 32, LGH volunteer from UK)

> You tend to stay at a place because of the people, and that's how my travel itineraries are made. Initially, I thought of spending a couple of weeks here (at LGH) but since I've made some plenty of awesome friends here, I suppose I could give it another two weeks more. I really like the type of volunteering work that we do here.
> (Carlos, 25, LGH volunteer from Spain)

In this context of close connection, photography becomes one crucial tool in documenting the intimate experience between volunteer tourists and their host communities (Mostafanezhad 2014, p. 115). At LGH, almost every volunteer I encountered had a photo-taking device ranging from a DSLR camera to a smartphone in their possession. In wanting to retain the memories created with other volunteers and Kartini, some of them made it almost habitual to capture sights and everyday occurrences within and outside of LGH. Although some of the moments captured may appear mundane to me as a local – such as having a lunch together from a banana leaf laid on the floor, or the neighbours' children running on the street outside of LGH – it is moments like these that are deemed valuable and allow these volunteers to form their views of the 'other'. To some extent, however, their habit of taking photos also raises issues of privacy, as Kartini herself described:

> It is understandable that many of the volunteers want to keep their memories alive so they take pictures of anything that seems interesting with their cameras and smartphones. But at the same time, you need to realise that it is risky, and to some extent, disrespectful for people like

> the homeless or refugees, especially when you intend to upload the photos you took on your Facebook profile. This is why I conduct briefings on photography etiquette before we leave for the refugee school, the swimming lesson for children with disabilities, and the Homeless Hairwash. We don't want to cause any offense. But I do make some exceptions if the intention is to promote LGH. Anyone who still wants to take photos over the course of those programs should let me know first. I just need to make sure they either pixelate certain parts of the photo or shoot within an angle that does not show any obvious facial features of the individual concerned.
>
> (Kartini, 42, LGH director)

Developing cross-cultural understanding

The restrictions placed by LGH are not meant to limit the intimate experience, but rather, can be perceived as a way of instilling sensitivities towards local cultures. Similar manner of developing awareness among international volunteers towards local norm was also apparent on the dress code imposed by LGH. To avoid unwanted attention, particularly among host communities whom are perceived as conservative, female volunteers (including myself) were not allowed to wear revealing clothes when walking around the neighbourhood area of LGH or throughout the course of conducting volunteering work. Abiding to restrictions imposed by hosting communities is a display of acknowledgement and appreciation for the local knowledge and customs, which becomes part of the learning experience for outsiders (McKenna 2014, p. 1).

As mentioned, there is a common perception that voluntourism is a vehicle towards building cross-cultural understanding, particularly between international volunteers and the host communities (Palacios 2010; Spencer 2010). However, although the attitude of deference results in the establishment of mutual understanding and learning, it does not necessarily meet the expectations required, or at least anticipated, in a volunteer-host relationship. Throughout

my time at LGH, intimate bonds were more apparent among the volunteers themselves who could socialise frequently, whereas the interactions made with host communities only occur within an allocated timeframe. In an interview with Richard, a volunteer from Australia, the participant noted that:

> Most volunteers spent their free time exploring the nightlife or interesting places in Kuala Lumpur or around Malaysia. However, from what I notice, many of them did not really bond with the locals they work with or assist, unless those locals happen to be Kartini herself or her friends.
>
> (Richard, 34, LGH volunteer from Australia)

Lukasz, a volunteer from Poland also shared similar sentiment:

> I wish we would be able to spend more time with the local communities that we are helping. It would be nice. But I guess it all depends on how Kartini organises everything for the volunteers.
>
> (Lukasz, 32, LGH volunteer from Poland)

Richard's observation and Lukasz' opinion suggest that the ease of intimate connections are a reflection of differential cultural affinities in voluntourism. Based on my field observation, it seems that although many volunteers aim to connect with other people and learn different cultures through participating in volunteering programs, close relations occur more among the volunteers themselves who are found to be of similar social standing, rather than with the local communities they were helping. Whilst the shortage of time may give rise to the intensity of intimate connections, the very nature of 'short-term' timeframe appears to limit the volunteers from developing their understanding, and expanding their sense of engagement beyond the space they share with those in similar footing – namely,

other volunteers. Undeniably, voluntourism is a good model which allows for cross-cultural exchange and personal development to take place between tourists and host communities, beyond just providing financial support to the recipients (McKenna 2014; Palacios 2010). However, one might question the extent that development tourism guarantees the continuity of genuine cross-cultural connection and understanding without overlapping with sentiments that may render a particular community somewhat reduced to cultural stereotypes.

As mentioned, alternative tourism is grounded in a moral economy, where financial support is channelled towards supporting the locals instead of big corporations. However, the aim to do something morally good has given the impression of alternative tourism as being superior to mass tourism, while connections with host community members become products consumed among volunteers in voluntourism (Butcher 2003; Mostafanezhad 2014, p. 102). Critics and researchers on voluntourism often point out the uneasy relationship formed through intimate connections between the volunteer tourists and local host communities, as well as commodification of the voluntourism experiences through payment of volunteering fees (Conran 2011; Germann Molz 2013; Sin 2010; Sinervo 2015). Focusing on intimacy as a desirable element in the voluntourism encounter may in fact conceal a compromised position of voluntourism experiences, as it allows for the continued expansion of neoliberal capitalistic tendencies through its commodification (Conran 2011, p. 1467; Germann Molz 2013, pp. 213-214). Furthermore, the nature of embodied and personal sentiment allows intimacy to simply dismiss cultural critique (Conran 2011, p. 1459). As contended by Berlant (1998a, p. 641), ‘‘when sentimentality meets politics, it uses personal stories to tell of structural effects, but in so doing it risks thwarting its very attempt to perform rhetorically a scene of pain that must be soothed politically’’. This is especially true, where, as suggested by Hoffman, despite being motivated by the “emotional willingness to share in that suffering with *the ‘other*[9]*”*”,

[9] The Italic font used connotes that a small part of the quote is edited to clarify the point being made.

feelings of compassion may not necessarily compensate for issues of poverty (1998, pp. 9-10).

At the same time, Wearing argues that though experience may be commodified in voluntourism, it also allows the traveller to formulate a sense of self (2000, p. 403). Experience is substantiated through connections which "may involve a re-negotiation of the individual's identity" (*ibid*, p. 405). This is because the experience is structured through a process that calls for re-examination of the 'social self' – a process that can affect the values and to some extent identities of participants (*ibid*, p. 408). Certainly, the desire for intimacy and closeness that voluntourism participants experience may be noble and their intentions may well be sincere. At LGH, the volunteers told me that the connections they make allow them to be more understanding and compassionate towards the issues pertaining to homelessness, refugees, and the natural environment in Malaysia which then compel them into wanting to help more:

> I always thought of Malaysia as a country that is considerably well-off compared to the rest of Southeast Asia (apart from Singapore) but joining LGH made me realise that there is more to the country than merely a destination for beautiful beaches and the twin towers. I guess I'm more aware of the presence of the homeless and the refugees and their issues in KL now. (Erik, 29, LGH volunteer from Italy)

> I've always been interested in environmental conservation research and I think Malaysia is a good place for that, especially with the stark contrast in cultures and environment. I'm definitely looking forward to doing something similar after my stint with LGH.
>
> (Helen, 30, LGH volunteer from UK)

Although reaching better cross-cultural understanding may not be sufficient to evoke a radical structural change, it still has the capacity to raise consciousness (Lee & Woosnam 2010). Volunteers find that getting involved in voluntourism often leaves them with a sense of achievement, whether by making a difference or merely gaining a volunteering experience. As such, their participation often results in their wanting to make future plans volunteering at other places. Such achievements are also significant in reforming the volunteer's identities as the greater awareness they have of the integral part which the 'other' plays in their volunteering journey will increase the scope for self-realisation in their identities (Wearing & Neil 2000, p. 20). It was found that being "one of them" through sharing the self with the others would serve to provide a multitude of dimensions to the identity (*ibid*).

For example, providing free hair wash and haircuts to the homeless has been the highlight for many volunteers who spend their time at LGH and based on their comments, can be seen as encouraging a different sense of self for those partaking:

> I guess washing the hair of these homeless people made me more open to the idea of getting close to people like them – you know, the ones that many of us tend to be afraid of because we always think they're dangerous when they're not.
>
> (Joseph, 31, LGH volunteer from Norway)

> I thought it was a good community initiative and I was also impressed by the food service. It feels good to be involved as I felt like I was helping people.
>
> (Richard, 34, LGH volunteer from Australia)

The idea came about during the initial formation of LGH, not too long after Kartini resigned from her past employment to focus on developing the social enterprise further. Her reason to create the program was simple – to bridge the gap between the marginalised and the

mainstream through allowing a space for close contact between them. Despite the service having only been introduced at the end of 2013, it has garnered a positive response, both with the public being more aware of the issue of homelessness and the homeless. This, in turn, has led to the increased number of interested everyday individuals who wish to take part in the program with the aim to understand the marginalised community. Since the program started, 45 of the homeless people have managed to gain employment. Kartini elaborated further:

> Most of the organisations that assist the homeless organise weekly soup kitchens where they get free meals at night. Although these programs are beneficial for them (the homeless), I feel that we need to do something that can empower them. Solely feeding them creates a cycle of dependency and I want them to have the capacity to help themselves. This is why I started the Homeless Hair Wash project in the first place. I saw that many of the homeless have been trying to find a job but have difficulties in doing so, mainly because of their appearance. They do not have the financial means to make themselves look presentable, so I thought washing and cutting their hair for free would at least help to make them look good. On the other hand, I believe this activity creates a bond between the volunteers and the homeless themselves, which indirectly curbs the social stigma surrounding the homeless.
>
> (Kartini, 42, LGH director)

Unfortunately, even if the politics are far beyond the immediacy of the sentimental, engagements amongst people involved in voluntourism might inadvertently contribute to, or to some extent reinforce the structural foundations underpinning the inequality which they had sought to subvert in the first place. Although voluntourism has the potential to drive positive impacts on host community members, the real challenge lies in the task of addressing structural inequality partly because the mission to do so is often actually overshadowed by the focus on intimacy of the embodied encounter. While unintentional, prioritising intimacy means volunteers are arguably contributing to the “neoliberal expansion of cultural logic and

economic policies of neoliberal global capitalism" (Mostafanezhad 2014, p. 86). Centred upon economic growth and individual choice, some suggest that neoliberal practice and discourses in voluntourism can further cultivate power structures (Mostafanezhad 2014, p. 51; Vrasti 2013, p. 1). From this perspective, issues pertaining to inequality which NGOs seek to address are not assisted by prioritising the formation of intimate connections (Conran 2011). The systemic nature of inequality therefore makes the task of addressing its problems and challenges a very complex one for voluntourism, especially due to the very fact that "the politics of personal feeling cannot address the institutional (or structural) reasons for injustice" (Woodward 2004, p. 71).

Others, on the other hand, see more positive outcomes. McGehee, for instance, argues that despite lacking an overtly political mission, voluntourism retains the capacity to promote activism in the future due to the uniqueness of the experience it offers, complemented with strong support network created among participants that allows room for exchange of ideas (2005, p. 764). As a result, the new networks created may increase the likelihood for participation and support for social movements. Therefore, the forming of bonds among volunteers is crucial in increasing the possibility for participation in social movements and in turn their global prominence.

The phenomenon then begs the question: does voluntourism require that tourists possess a powerful sense of altruism? Wearing suggests that the reasons for volunteering abroad may not necessarily be borne out of pure altruism and that despite possessing generous motives, volunteers still have some underlying forms of selfishness in their reasons to volunteer (2001, p. 70). Voluntourism is growing because more people are searching for "meaning, fulfilment and a sense of purpose in life" and voluntourism is the best way to have those desires met (Mostafanezhad 2014, p. 113). Moreover, it is not uncommon for volunteers

to get involved for the purpose of enhancing their soft skills and to further develop their career aspirations, which make up for personal gain (Vrasti 2013). Whilst not necessarily resulting in an immediate action taken, experiential enlightenment that tourists tend to have in a foreign place tend to evoke a call for sympathy and awareness (McGehee 2005, p. 764). On the other hand, the experience can also be oriented to the tourists' own sense of personal and professional growth, i.e identity and self-entrepreneurship.

With the ever growing criticisms against voluntourism as being a form of paternalism and even self-interest, the debate on genuine altruism versus personal egocentric mission remains ongoing. As others have noted, intimacy is the core aspect of the voluntourism experience for participants, and is certainly the case at LGH. It is equally true that too much focus on forming intimate bonds with other individuals involved in voluntourism does not address structural issues faced by community members in need. Instead, doing so will only aggravate the problems as it overshadows the inequality that voluntourism is supposed to address. It also masks the extent to which voluntourism is itself subject to market forces.

Doing good: Commodifying the emotional and the intimate

> Voluntourism is still a business, regardless of the altruistic act**.** Although a large part of the funds goes to the local community, the staff members need to support themselves too.
>
> (David, 40, EcoLodge founder)

David, an English expatriate who founded EcoLodge, is not alone in his sentiment, which reflects the objectives of many other NGOs and social enterprises. The rising popularity of voluntourism has led to the participation of various commercial organisations in the market, thus transforming the organisations involved from non-profit to commercial. These changes are recognised as a process of commodification (Wearing and McGehee 2013, p. 123). When NGOs begin to collaborate with corporate bodies, there is a risk of diverting

from the main goal to support local communities as they become more engaged in the process of commodification of the voluntourism experience (Coghlan & Noakes, 2012; Lyons and Wearing 2008). In the process, experiences produced through intimate encounters in voluntourism are turned into marketable products aimed at potential volunteer tourists. The possibility to monetise such experience creates a desire among NGO coordinators to profit from non-profit ventures (Conran 2011, p. 1461). In turn, this process has specific consequences. At LGH, for instance, words such as 'homeless hairwash' and 'refugees' are commonly used on the organisation's official website and Facebook profile to lure potential volunteer tourists seeking an experience abroad that is both gratifying and unique.

The affective encounter among volunteers and host community members can perpetuate a politics of aesthetics within voluntourism whereby "the moral response to economic inequality becomes the consumer response within the intensely emotional culture that has emerged within the culture of capitalism" (Mostafanezhad 2013, p. 161). This then results in what is termed 'emotional capitalism', where the practise of 'doing good' becomes consumable, through blending of the intimate and the emotional with economic discourse (*ibid*). As we have seen, the overlapping between the continuous expansion of neoliberal globalisation and the manifestation of consumer consciousness has promoted the culture of voluntourism, especially among the middle and upper class youths from the American and European continents (Conran 2011, p. 1456). As a result of such neoliberal expansion, discourses on the various areas of development, such as environmental sustainability, cultural survival and poverty reduction are increasingly capitalised in tourism development (*ibid*).

Projects which appear to be driven by altruism also have the tendency to cultivate romanticisation of poverty and the greater 'exotification of the other' (Vrasti 2013). The basic way of living among communities that still hold on to traditional beliefs is often used as the

main selling point for an ideal getaway for outsiders who are in search of a unique, off-the-beaten-track type of travel experience. Rather than creating globally concerned individuals who assist in the improvement of the local living conditions, voluntourism has in effect created a 'celebration of poverty'. Volunteer tourists, including those coming to LGH often do so for the purpose of wanting to have an emotional, life-changing experience that involves a time spent with the marginalised groups. This ideal of 'it's ok to be poor' has in turn entrenched the Global North / South differences more generally. Rather than focusing on ways to assist in improving quality of livelihood, the impoverished attributes of a place and its inhabitants are fetishized as 'the exotic other' – a distinctiveness that has become yet another commodity for tourists to adorn themselves with (Vrasti 2013, p. 78). It also becomes clear that while tourists may want to help poor 'exotic' people (inadvertently constructing stereotypes), motivations are multi-dimensional and include self-interest.

Voluntourism: reproduction of a global hierarchy?

Motivations imbued by self-interest, however, tend to be overlooked in voluntourism, especially where programs are implemented in a country that has a history of European colonisation such as Malaysia. From my observations, being a 'mat salleh' in a country like Malaysia has long been an advantage as these visitors tend to receive warmer response from the locals who are keen on forming friendships with them and learning their culture as well as language. This is particularly apparent among Western volunteers at LGH, whose presence at public places such as a reserve park, night markets or even restaurants would almost inevitably be received with stares. To some extent, some of these volunteers would be approached with a 'Where are you from?' question, followed by a tinge of excitement and interest from the person approaching. Helen, a volunteer from the UK acknowledges the friendliness of Malaysians towards her – an experience which differs greatly from her

hometown – as the main reason for her to stay in Kuala Lumpur for much longer than six months.

> I really like it here. Initially, I came here because I was interested in the natural conservation projects but it's the people that make my time here worthwhile. The neighbours who live a few houses away from LGH always wave at me. Sometimes they even offer me a few cigarettes and some beer, and we would sit together by the roadside and chat for a bit.
>
> (Helen, 30, LGH volunteer from UK)

In contrast, I do not find volunteers from non-Western countries such as China, India or Algeria having similar experience. The Eurocentric mentality is not something new, as it has also been prevalent in other (non-Western) countries for years. Vrasti notes how Western tourists in Ghana tend to gain many advantages due to their skin colour. Being able to make new friends without much effort has been among the more noticeable benefits for volunteers whom she interviewed (2013, p. 106). A similar case is also acknowledged by Conran (2011), who finds host communities in Chiang Mai to be particularly responsive towards the '*farangs'* (a colloquial term used by Thai people in referring to Western foreigners). Despite being associated with "self-indulgence, immorality and recklessness", *farangs* are simultaneously portrayed as being "modern, progressive and privileged" (*ibid*, p. 1465). The desire to build interpersonal relations with them has the tendency to overshadow "critical thinking about the agendas of development for which volunteers stood" (*ibid*).

Preference for foreign volunteers, particularly from developed nations has also been made clear by Kartini at LGH. Despite being well-connected to many Malaysian volunteers and specialists in community work, the non-Malaysian volunteers would always be approached first in conducting tasks such as marketing work. When asked about her preferred choice of volunteer to assist with the organisation, Kartini answered:

> I prefer hiring international volunteers to help out with running LGH as they are more familiar with the concept of sustainability which has long existed in their countries (in Europe). The concept is still new and foreign in Malaysia, so a lot of the organisations (here) are still working on creating the right model for sustainable development.
>
> (Kartini, 42, LGH director)

Voluntourism experiences are thus imbued with intimate, yet power laden exchanges that are often concealed by "intimacy, goodwill, and compassion", which bears similarity to that of the colonial encounter (Conran 2011, p. 1465). The power difference exuded by voluntourism is seen in subtle forms of representation. For example, Griffin describes that "local communities are often portrayed as grateful recipients of goodwill in respondents' stories, with described benefits often unchallenged or assumed" (2013, p. 860). This claim is evident on some of Kartini's unpleasant experience with the volunteers, where she said:

> Some of these volunteers can be really arrogant, with their self-entitled white men attitude. Once, we had this guy from xxx country who complained about the homeless people not thanking him for washing their hair. Who are you to demand gratitude from others? As a volunteer, you are not supposed to expect anything in return for the time and energy you spent to help others. You do good because you want to do good.
>
> (Kartini, 42, LGH director)

Attitudes to being engaged in voluntourism flags the issue of what is gained as much as what is given. As Vrasti notes, encountering individuals with varying personalities, as well as exposure to foreign cultures and languages provide an opportunity to sharpen personal and professional skills of a volunteer tourist (2013, p. 112). Using the self as enterprise, tourists flock to a foreign environment, with the mission to attain a certain set of skills by

volunteering, which then can be applied to any career they intend to venture into. Volunteering in Ghana is a clear example of how altruism may "extend to a space outside modernity, a space that in the Western imagination is usually associated with chaos and danger" (*ibid*, p. 114). Whether or not volunteering abroad can prove to be fruitful or futile, being able to live in a certain area (especially those considered as 'third world') and to overcome the difficulties that exist within it is a unique attribute that is deemed as appealing and even marketable to peers and / or future employers (*ibid*, p. 130). Likewise, in Malaysia, having the exposure to marginalised groups through involvement in grassroots projects at LGH, for instance, is an opportunity for foreign nationals to "demonstrate their cognitive and communicative skills and become the transgressive, risk-taking subjectivities multinational capital thrives on" (*ibid*):

> I chose to come to Malaysia for the purpose of finding a job as I heard that it's a lot easier for (Western) foreigners to get a paid job in Malaysia compared to other Asian countries. I thought it would be a good idea to start by volunteering at LGH first, to be safe, and then just use my networking skills from there.
>
> (Lukasz, 32, LGH volunteer from Poland)

From this vantage point, voluntourism activities might also be considered as reproducing forms of global hierarchy as the program tends to benefit the international volunteers more than the local community members themselves, in terms of professional and personal experience. McLennan gives the example from Honduras, where medical assistance provided by international volunteers has fostered dependency among local community members (2014). Many of the medical assistance programs are dominated by international staff and volunteers, whereas locals only act as healthcare recipients. Additionally, Western medicine is viewed as better and more advanced than local medicine. As a result, this form of intervention often constitutes cultural clashes as the needs of host community members are

not adequately considered. In other words, ‘assistance’ becomes a manifestation of paternalism, rather than development as it is done so based on how outsiders analyse the problems and solutions, in contrast to how the locals perceive them (McLennan 2014).

Whilst voluntourism seems like an ideal way of helping those in an underprivileged position at the outset, volunteer motives are claimed as having the tendency to “fluctuate between altruism and egoism” (McLennan 2014, p. 170). Contributing time and skills, for the purpose of improving the lives of community members and to ensure the improvement carries on often comes as a secondary goal to connecting with an ‘exotic other’. Such prioritisation of volunteers’ aspirations and goals has thus begged the question as to whether volunteering abroad is in fact, a 21st century version of colonialism concealed through humanitarian acts, yet committed in such a way so as to fulfil the Western saviour complex – at the expense of community members coming from a less privileged background.

Accordingly, Scheyvens contends that even if host community members are not exploited, the fact that they do not possess similar privilege to international volunteers in terms of traveling to a place and leaving it whenever they wish to is already an inequality in itself (2011). Despite having the ultimate goal of improving the lives of underprivileged communities (especially in developing countries), many studies have found that voluntourism programs tend to primarily benefit international volunteers instead (Daldeniz & Hampton 2010; McLennan 2014; Scheyvens 2011; Sin 2010). Having the privilege of choosing a program that best suits their interests and skills, as well as the affordability to travel to any desired location, volunteers are at a more advantageous position as compared to the communities that require their aid. Therefore, ‘making a difference’ and ‘helping out’ can equate to boosting resumes for higher chance of employability, interesting travel experience,

and improvement of soft skills, rather than improving the conditions of community members that need assistance (*ibid*).

> Personally, two weeks of volunteering would be enough. I don't expect much from volunteering with LGH. I guess what matters is the memories we make throughout our travels. I'm happy enough with the fact that I get to meet other people and learn more about the Malaysian culture through this volunteering work.
>
> (Erik, 29, LGH volunteer from Italy)

> I'm going to teach English in Thailand after I'm finished with LGH. I know my English is not perfect, but hey, as long as you can converse in the language, they're still ok with it. I've already had some volunteering experience, even before coming to this house, so I guess it wouldn't be too hard.
>
> (Mikhaela, 25, LGH volunteer from Slovenia)

Additionally, as most programs require the monetary and skills assistance of outsiders, many volunteer programs are organised to cater to the needs and interests of the volunteers, thus placing the host community members with not much choice but to accept any form of help that may be available. Such case is particularly apparent among students going through their gap year, where the time provided was fully utilised in volunteer placement overseas (Fee & Mdee, 2010). According to a report made by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), soft skills and positive attitude are among the most sought after attributes when it comes to employing new graduates (*ibid*). Thus, programs that aim to build cross-cultural contacts and understanding such as volunteering abroad have increasingly come into a popular demand among youths who look forward to increase their employability within the competitive job market.

Within the globalised capitalistic world, the growth of consumer culture over the years has made it almost impossible to find anything that has not become part of a commodity exchange (Constable 2009, p. 50). As a result, social relations are no longer limited by geographical distance. However, the enmeshing of consumerism with affect means that such relations become less personal and are developed through capitalistic tendencies (*ibid*). The change and growth of market demands following the process of globalisation have resulted in the increasing commodification of intimate and personal relations. As further explained by Constable (2009):

> "…intimacy or intimate relations can be treated, understood, or thought of as if they have entered the market: are bought or sold; packaged and advertised; fetishized, commercialized, or objectified; consumed or assigned values and prices; and linked in many cases to transnational mobility and migration, echoing a global capitalist flow of goods." (p. 50)

It cannot be denied that there is a fundamental dilemma when most voluntourism placements tend to cater to the needs of the volunteers themselves, despite the programs being aimed towards the well-being of host community members. Even so, it must be noted that the focus placed on volunteers does not necessarily constitute a failure of voluntourism programs per se. A study conducted on several voluntourism projects in Sabah, Malaysia has found that programs ranging from teaching English, animal care and endangered animal rehabilitation have in turn led to more culturally-sensitive, environmentally and globally conscious individuals who practise and promote responsible tourism (Chan 2010). On the host community's part, Palacios found that the life skills and language teaching programs organised by Hanoi-based NGO called KOTO (abbreviation for Know One, Teach One) directly helped improve English language proficiency, as well as inter-cultural understanding among the host community members (2010). These benefits have also been noted by various

NGOs in developing countries such as Cambodia, Rwanda, and Thailand (Barbieri *et al*; Conran 2012; Sin 2010).

Palacios (2010) further suggests this sense of sharing with others makes voluntourism as appropriate only if it is utilised as a platform that cultivates cross-cultural understanding, rather than a discourse for development. From this vantage point, cross-cultural understanding and co-operation become one of the most important outcomes of voluntourism, and, as my own research would also suggest, should be foregrounded as one of the most specific aims in voluntourism programs, rather than assumed to be an automatic process (Raymond & Hall 2008). This is why intimacy itself is so crucial as it allows space for mutual and cross-cultural understanding between the volunteer tourists and the 'voluntoured'. However, it is also clear that the establishment of intimate connections through a network in voluntourism is not enough of a solution in addressing issues revolving around inequality, poverty or even environmental degradation per se. In the case of LGH, whilst intimate connections may serve as a foundation towards a greater network to create cross-cultural understanding and in addressing issues such as homelessness, environmental conservation, and education for refugees, prioritising such connections may reduce the attention to issues pertaining to structural inequalities that surround it (Conran 2011).

CONCLUSION

From mass tours to alternative explorations of culture and environment, the tourism industry has been through massive changes over the past centuries and decades. The growth of voluntourism is not only a result of the ever evolving tourism industry. It is also the outcome of new and globalising social movements that strive for equality and justice within economic, social and political spheres through networks formed between like-minded individuals and organisations. A by-product of the enmeshing of development objectives and tourism experiences, voluntourism is part of the larger phenomenon where elements of affect such as emotions and inter-personal relations become deeply embedded within the economics of travel. The centrality of intimate relations showcased as 'networking opportunities' and 'access to local cultures', are often used as key selling points to promote voluntourism within an ever expanding neoliberal market. By providing even the slightest sense of intimacy, these features serve to answer the consumer's constant need to be, and most importantly to feel, connected with others.

Regardless of whether altruistic motives are the main motivations that drive the need to create intimate connections, this thesis has argued that the importance of intimacy remains paramount in voluntourism, particularly for the volunteer tourists. This is because connection with the 'other' is the key defining characteristic of being a volunteer tourist. Intimacy is also crucial in establishing an understanding as to how the host community members can be best assisted to avoid voluntourism programs from merely benefiting volunteers. This is why cross-cultural understanding should be the end goal of voluntourism rather than an event assumed to occur naturally on its own. To view voluntourism as merely an act of moral consumption is to trivialise the complexities that exist within the inextricable intertwining of development, tourism, and the evolving technologies.

Certainly, intimacy has the potential to nurture and spread awareness among individuals who genuinely seek to address social justice issues such as poverty as well as wildlife preservation. At LGH, the participation of volunteers in providing free meals and hair wash to the homeless and tutoring refugee children has indirectly instilled strong feelings of empathy among the larger public towards communities that often find themselves marginalised and discriminated. Photos taken during these activities which are then shared on social media have without fail, garnered reactions from viewers who, not only realise the presence of such communities in Kuala Lumpur, but are also willing to take actions together with those who feel the similar need to address issues faced by such communities. Several of the volunteers I talked to admitted to having joined the organisation upon coming across the photos shared on LGH's social media profile. Even though only indirectly, the connections formed between international volunteers may in fact drive meaningful changes towards enabling equitable development in a world that is complex, interdependent, and globalised as they create not only awareness among a greater number of people, but also a certain degree of understanding.

The process of aiding the underprivileged through voluntourism, however, is not straightforward. The statements from my research participants, alongside my observations have together demonstrated the focus and desire on building interpersonal relations in the sphere of voluntourism as being the dominant factor underlying their motives, even when these motives are not necessarily altruistic in nature. In fact, my findings would indicate that intimacy is arguably a necessary vehicle in forging cross-cultural understanding between an individual and an 'exotic other'. But one might also argue that an overriding emphasis on forming intimate connections is a cause of concern. Other researchers have found that the overwhelming focus has a tendency to shroud the structural inequalities and power relations that remain omnipresent within the field of voluntourism. My research shows that more than

simply masking the power relations, the tendency to make personal relations central in voluntourism can also perpetuate forms of social and cultural hierarchy, as it is often the volunteers who gain more from these relations. Although voluntourism is not the solution to inequality on its own, it nevertheless has the potential to become a platform for contributing to the gradual spread of social justice at a global scale. A further potential avenue of expansion would be to actively seek more participation of the stakeholders who are receiving assistance from voluntourism to explore any differences in interpretation of common elements such as the connections being formed, power, and privilege.

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APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

For volunteers:

1. How old are you?
2. Where are you from?
3. What do you study / what did you do prior to getting involved in this volunteer work?
4. Have you heard of the term "voluntourism"?
5. What can you understand from the term?
6. Why do you volunteer?
7. Do you think you can make any difference to the communities as a volunteer?
8. How long are you going to volunteer for?
9. What is your next plan after you finish volunteering?
10. What are your expectations from this NGO?
11. Why do you choose this country?
12. Why do you choose to volunteer at this NGO?
13. What do you normally do after office hours or during weekends?
14. Do you think it is necessary to spend more time with the NGO staff and the local communities during your free time?
15. Would you choose to volunteer your time with this NGO again?
16. Does volunteering in Malaysia allow you to discover and learn more about the country?

For NGO directors / staff:

1. What do you understand from the term "voluntourism"?
2. Do you support "voluntourism"?
3. What do you look for in volunteers?
4. Do you have any preference for certain nationality of volunteers?
5. Do you select volunteers based on their availability or their skills and experience?
6. Why do you like to recruit international volunteers?
7. What difference do you think can international volunteers make in your organisation?
8. Do you spend a lot of time with the volunteers?
9. What do you and the volunteers normally do together outside of working hours?
10. Do you think volunteers should pay to volunteer?
11. Based on experience, do you think volunteers have contributed much within a very short period of time?

For community group:

1. What do you think of the volunteers?
2. Have you benefited from anything?
3. What do you like most about the international volunteers?
4. Do you have a preference as to where your teachers / carers are from?
5. Do you spend a lot of time with the volunteers?
6. What do you do during the weekends?
7. What do you and the volunteers normally talk about?
8. What do you and the volunteers normally do together outside of working / school hours?
9. Do you think you learn more from the international volunteers in any activities you do together?

APPENDIX 2: ETHICS APPROVAL

Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research)

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MACQUARIE University
SYDNEY·AUSTRALIA

23 January 2015

Associate Professor Chris Lyttleton
Department of Anthropology
Faculty of Arts
MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY NSW 2109

Dear A/Prof Lyttleton

Reference No: 5201401077

Title: *"Voluntourism in Malaysia: A study of power relations among NGOs through 'doing good'"*

Thank you for submitting the above application for ethical and scientific review. Your application was considered by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC (Human Sciences & Humanities)) at its meeting on 28 November 2014 at which further information was requested to be reviewed by the HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) Executive.

The requested information was received with correspondence on 26 December 2014.

The HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) Executive considered your responses at its meeting held on 21 January 2015.

I am pleased to advise that ethical and scientific approval has been granted for this project to be conducted at:

- Macquarie University

This research meets the requirements set out in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007 – Updated March 2014) (the *National Statement*).

Details of this approval are as follows:

Approval Date: 21 January 2015

The following documentation has been reviewed and approved by the HREC (Human Sciences & Humanities):

Documents reviewed	Version no.	Date
Macquarie University Ethics Application Form	2.3	July 2013

Correspondence from Ms Siti Munawirah Ahmad Mustaffa responding to the issues raised by the HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities)		Received 26/12/2014
Appendix B: Research to be Undertaken Outside Australia		
MQ Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF) - English	1	19/12/2014
MQ Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF) - Maylasian	1	19/12/2014
Fieldwork Interview Questions		
Correspondence with Yellow House KL requesting permission to conduct research on-site		8/09/2014 – 5/12/2014
Correspondence with PACOS Trust requesting permission to conduct research on-site		22/09/2014 – 24/09/2014
Department of Anthropology Application for Pre-Fieldwork/Fieldwork Vacation Scholarship		

This letter constitutes ethical and scientific approval only.

Standard Conditions of Approval:

1. Continuing compliance with the requirements of the *National Statement,* which is available at the following website:

http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/book/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research

2. This approval is valid for five (5) years, subject to the submission of annual reports. Please submit your reports on the anniversary of the approval for this protocol.

3. All adverse events, including events which might affect the continued ethical and scientific acceptability of the project, must be reported to the HREC within 72 hours.

4. Proposed changes to the protocol must be submitted to the Committee for approval before implementation.

It is the responsibility of the Chief investigator to retain a copy of all documentation related to this project and to forward a copy of this approval letter to all personnel listed on the project.

Should you have any queries regarding your project, please contact the Ethics Secretariat on 9850 4194 or by email ethics.secretariat@mq.edu.au

The HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) Terms of Reference and Standard Operating Procedures are available from the Research Office website at:

http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/human_research_ethics

The HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) wishes you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely

Dr Karolyn White
Director, Research Ethics & Integrity,
Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee (Human Sciences and Humanities)

This HREC is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007) and the *CPMP/ICH Note for Guidance on Good Clinical Practice*.