Ingo Websites, Image Circulation, And Visual Representations Of Development In African Countries: Exploring Local Perceptions

Ruby Pappoe

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INGO WEBSITES, IMAGE CIRCULATION, AND VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF
DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICAN COUNTRIES:
EXPLORING LOCAL PERCEPTIONS

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Alfred, and my mother, Mary, both of whom have been a constant source of support and encouragement throughout my graduate education.
INGO WEBSITES, IMAGE CIRCULATION, AND VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICAN COUNTRIES: EXPLORING LOCAL PERCEPTIONS

by

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DISSENGATION

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Abstract

This project critically examines the visual and digital representations of African countries on Savethechildren.org, Oxfam.org, Mamahope.org, and Waterislife.com, using Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and focus group interviews. Grounded in interdisciplinary conversations within rhetoric and composition, intercultural technical communication, postcolonial studies, and development studies, this project reveals how inequalities of the past continue to exist in both visual and digital forms on international NGO websites. It shows that although these organizations seek to promote development and social change in low- and middle-income communities in Africa, the online content they use not only engender but keep in constant circulation the same inequalities they seek to address. I argue that although some of the organizations, particularly Mama Hope and Oxfam, attempt to promote community engagement and challenge development-related stereotypes by incorporating local voices in their content, these voices are minimized through fragmented and individualized representations. This project presents implications for how researchers, teachers, and web designers can move towards more culturally-sensitive approaches in the theorizing and designing of visual and digital communication in intercultural contexts.
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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ECA................................................................. Ethnographic Content Analysis
INGO.................................................................. International Non-Governmental Organization
NGO..................................................................... Non-governmental Organization
UK................................................................. United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UNICEF........................................................ United Nations Childs Emergency Fund
USA...................................................................... United States of America
Chapter One:
Introduction and Research Background

INTRODUCTION

As an international student from Ghana, West Africa, I have a keen interest in the discourses and representations of poverty and development in African countries created and disseminated by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in the development field. With the increasing growth of the World Wide Web and various social media platforms, INGO advertising as well as hyperlinks to their websites are becoming ever more present on our screens. This, in addition to the heavy reliance on visual images within these advertisements and websites, makes INGO messages a powerful tool in shaping the global public’s perceptions of development in different parts of the world, especially in Africa. Moreover, the development field and its public communications have become one of the major avenues by which people living in underdeveloped regions are encountered by other cultures. For this reason, we must engage with INGO discourses and representations, specifically what messages they emphasize in their public communications and how these messages are disseminated on the web.

The use of visual images to represent people, places, and ideas has long been an integral aspect of INGO communications. But with the ever-growing visual culture of the 21st century, many INGOs now rely more on the visual to communicate with little or no textual information attached. This practice resonates with Gillian Rose’s (2001) argument that “the visual has become central to the cultural construction of social life in Western societies” (p. 6). Thus, a lot of the worldviews people imbibe are based primarily on what they see and how they see.

The visual images produced by the international development field occupy a big portion of what Arjun Appadurai (1996) has called “mediascapes,” which is the global flow of ideologies
through the media. These ideologies influence people’s understandings and perceptions of other people, the world, and their place within it. The ideologies conveyed through these images, as Appadurai notes, many times create a certain image that is often skewed about distant cultures. And the continent of Africa is one of the regions that has been negatively affected by such ideologies. For example, a random survey conducted with American students about words they associate with Africa revealed terms such as poverty, coups, ignorance, drought, famine, tragedy, and tribalism (Keim and Somerville, 2017). As these are common images portrayed in international media reports and INGO messages about African countries, this survey not only emphasizes how discourses from international sites have contributed to the negative image of the continent, but also how international communication outlets often influence one another in creating, circulating, and recirculating such skewed discourses and images.

This study examines how African countries are visually represented on four INGO websites (savethechildren.org, oxfamamerica.org, mamahope.org, and waterislife.com) to show the visual and digital practices used on these sites and how they continue to negatively impact the image of Africa and its people. Drawing on interviews with African readers, content analysis, and critical discourse analysis, alongside postcolonial and decolonial theories and development scholarship, I explore the sites’ web representation/presentation practices and their consequences. By including African participants in the study, I highlight the important role of local/native people in evaluating development messages and practices as well as finding more sensitive alternative practices. Therefore, my goal in this study is to reveal how hegemonic and colonial narrative patterns continue to inform the design and use of INGO websites, with the aim to call for and identify culturally-sensitivity and diverse approaches.
Three main components emerged from the analysis. The first is how images on the sites are used in the naming and construction of people and places, and the way these practices shape viewers’ reading and understanding of the information presented. Second is what is included and not included in the written descriptions on the webpages. The last component looks at the extent to which the INGOS represent the voices and roles of the local people involved in the interventions being depicted. One of the things I do in this study is to compare and contrast the organizations and their sites to show the differences and similarities in their messages and practices. I do this to show the different ways that different types of INGOS (i.e. small and big, old and new, etc.) design their websites to portray their work in the African countries they work and for what purposes.

In the rest of this chapter, I’ll give an overview of the interdisciplinary conversations that informed this study, the theoretical framework, and a summary of the following chapters. While this project is situated within the wide range of studies on development representations of the Global South, it is an interdisciplinary exploration stemming from the fields of rhetoric and composition, postcolonial studies, technical communication, and intercultural communication. It opens a space for scholars working in these fields to begin to pay more attention to the visual construction of race, culture, and nation-state experiences and identities in digital contexts.

**INGOs and representations: an overview**

Scholarship on INGO representations of African countries is often traced back to Jørgen Lissner’s (1997) thesis entitled *The Politics of Altruism*. Considered to be one of the first studies to identify and draw attention to the harmful consequences of images used in INGO advertising, Lissner’s thesis argued that the use of visual images such as those of malnourished children and starving babies was “negative” and “pornographic.” That is, these images were demeaning, undignified, and untruthful. He explains that through the control of photography, such images
transform people into objects of charity without giving regard to the delicate and deeply personal aspects of “people’s bodies, their misery, their grief, and their fears” (Lissner, as cited in Lidchi (2015), p. 277). Lissner added that this kind of imagery is also reflective of the unequal power relations between those representing (the North) and those who are represented (the South). Furthermore, he argued that such images impacted the practice of development itself in the sense that “negative images of development encouraged negative development practice and vice versa” (Lidchi, p. 276). As a result, instead of pursuing the social justice goals of development, INGOs promoted an idea of charity based primarily on messages in which the rich are persuaded to give to the poor.

The issues raised by Lissner became even more visible during the Ethiopian famine in the mid-1980s when the international community was inundated with images of starving and dying people. Writing about this event, Henrietta Lidchi (2015) notes that while these images garnered millions of dollars for the NGOs involved, they also “dehistoricized, depoliticized, and trivialized the complex and life-threatening issue of famine by reducing it to an issue of money and food” (p. 282). Furthermore, by picturing people in masses without giving regard to the identity of the specific individual subjects affected, the fundraising campaigns objectified the people of Ethiopia.

Lidchi cites a news reporter from Zimbabwe as criticizing thus,

images represent people…. Images should not be applied en masse, but to individuals; to people with dignity, with an identity. Why images lose their identity, they become a way of looking down on people…. It seems to be that if you respect someone you want to learn their name…. you want to know them as individuals. But the ways that…. African people [were portrayed]is as if they were not people at all” (Nyoni, as cited in Lidchi, p. 283).
The quote above not only illuminates how charity and development images often implicate the people involved but also demonstrates some of its cultural and material effects. Furthermore, the fundraising campaigns and images circulated by INGOs during the period of the Ethiopian famine revealed how INGO practices operate within diverse political and historical contexts. For example, the ideological positioning of the West as superior to the non-West was manifested by the visual portrayal of INGO donors and workers as active subjects addressing the crisis, whereas Ethiopians were portrayed as passive recipients of aid with no contributions to make to the issues affecting their lives. For decades, this was the main imagery that dominated the development field.

Recent studies have shown new approaches in development representations, with scholars noting however that the old narrative patterns mentioned in the above paragraphs still exist. An example is Nandita Dogra’s (2012) *Representations of Global Poverty* which reveals how historical processes, especially of colonialism, “still linger and inform the ways of seeing and representing ‘Other’ cultures” in the development field (p. 12). Dogra conducts an in-depth study of several INGOs to explore current development practices. She finds the theme of difference as a major component of current development discourse. Explaining this theme, she notes that INGOs often employ discursive strategies of decontextualization and dehistoricization to construct developing countries as different and separate from developed countries (p. 92). A major result of this practice is the failure to show the global connections between European colonialism and current global poverty (p. 124).

The preceding discussion has demonstrated that the issues of representation in INGO public communications are as pressing today as they were in the 1980s, especially because these issues have to do with issues of power, social justice, and global-local identity of cultural groups.
Also, as some of these organizations are beginning to adjust their practices in response to scholarly criticisms of their work, we need to examine how and the extent to which they are doing so.

**Development representations in Rhetoric and Writing Studies (RWS)**

Although not much work has been done on this topic in RWS, a few scholars have sought to look at global development dynamics within the purview of rhetorical theory. For example, Rebecca Dingo and J. Blake Scott’s (2012) edited collection, *The Megaherotics of Global Development*, examines rhetorical strategies employed by INGOs, governments, and multinational corporations to further their own economic, political, or technological agendas. According to Dingo and Scott, the collection shows how colonial discourses such as saving ‘natives’ from their ‘backward’ cultural practices continue to permeate government policies and INGO advertising (p. 5). As well, these discourses have become common sense. That is, unquestioned and unrecognizable. According to them, it is this common sense effect that gives these discourses “the “mega” power to shape practices across the globe” (p. 5). The collection calls on RWS scholars to pay attention to such common-sense arguments and rhetoric embedded in development discourses.

One of the chapters in this collection by D. Robert Dechaine examines how the rhetoric of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is used by transnational corporations to justify and legitimize their own business interests. Similarly, other chapters by Matt Newcomb and Tim Jensen and Hesford also illuminate how development discourses are affected by “extrarhetorical forces to inflect both global forms of power and their more specific translocal (re)articulations” as they continually travel across time and space (p. 7).

In another study, Dingo (2012) examines the use and misuse of global institutional rhetoric and their effects on women, particularly in developing countries, to see how rhetorics travel and how their meanings change across the contexts in which they are used. One of the rhetorics that
she looks at is the theme of empowerment which appears in current development communications and advertising. She finds that these appeals are often fleeting and gendered, drawing particularly on uneven geopolitical relationships. Similarly, Wilson (2011) notes that such appeals tend to rely on “neoliberal narratives in which the ‘empowerment’ of ‘developing world’ women via the market is [seen as] the ‘solution’ [to global poverty]” (as cited in Dingo, p. 323). Another aspect of the theme of empowerment is the frequent use of images of happy children, which tend to obscure relations of exploitation at work within development institutions.

This dissertation builds on these studies by looking at how INGOs particularly construct a discourse of continuous poverty within their online platforms to keep the flow of their viewership and donations. I also look at how INGOs seeking to use their online platforms to promote the agency and voices of local people involved in development depict this aspect of their work. Very little has been done on this particular aspect of INGO practices. Thus, I aim to fill this gap through this dissertation, and by doing so, to further explore how the rhetoric of empowerment operate within current development organizations.

I am particularly interested in INGO websites because although INGO websites have proliferated in the last decade especially, there exists little to no thorough investigation of their makeup. Yet, INGO websites play a crucial role in the discursive construction of discourses about developing countries on the web. Studies that examine INGO websites tend to focus on specific aspects of these messages or pull out individual images from these websites to examine. By comparing the entire content of the websites of different types of organizations, this study shows how INGO websites individually and collectively influence one another as well as contribute to the circulation of certain images about people living in developing nations.
AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study has two main purposes. First, to examine how images of Africa are created and used within INGO websites, as a way of understanding the discursive processes used by organizations to construct and maintain certain arguments about the continent. Second, to explore native/local readers’ perceptions of INGO representations of African countries. Here, I aim to understand the perspectives and experiences of people from the countries involved in development and to explore how we might approach the search for more sensitive practices in development visual communication. It is for this reason that I interview African participants as part of the study data. Although I also interviewed participants from different nationalities, I highlight “African participants” here because this study draws from a decolonial theoretical framework that stresses the importance of co-creating knowledge with experts from local communities (Smith, 2012). As a result, this study is participatory, not only paying attention to the social justice goals of intercultural technical communication, but also responding to the field’s call to “identify new practices that can be used to encourage cultural competence within institutions…” (Williams, 2014, p. 1-2). Towards this end, I ask the following research questions:

1. How are African countries represented on the websites of Save the Children, Oxfam, Mama Hope, and Waterislife? a. How do the sites represent issues of poverty and development in the communities depicted? b. What are readers’ perceptions of the representations?
2. What effects might these representations have, and how can they be improved?
3. What are the implications of this study for research, pedagogy, and practice in rhetoric and composition, intercultural technical communication, and development studies?

Various interpretations of visual images show that the meanings of an image are made at three different sites, namely “the site(s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself,
and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences” (Rose, 2001, p 18). In this study, I aim to fully examine the range of meanings or different interpretations invested in the visual images that appear on the four websites. Thus, I combine different methods of analysis to critically look at all three sites of their meanings, namely the site of the meaning of the images themselves, the site of the web context within which they are reproduced, and the site where the images are interpreted by the study participants. The third site noted here is an important part of this dissertation because only a few studies have involved African participants to evaluate INGO practices (Ademolu, 2018). Furthermore, the studies that explore audience perceptions of INGO practices tend to focus on Western audiences rather than audiences who are involved in development or who are from the countries involved in development. The methods that I used are ethnographic content analysis (ECA), critical discourse analysis (CDA), and focus group discussions (for which I obtained IRB approval).

**Theoretical Framework**

The study draws on both postcolonial and decolonial conceptual frameworks to look at the political, historical, and cultural dynamics of INGO messages and practices where African countries are concerned, as well as explore socially just approaches to finding new ones. Taking as a point of departure the tendency for INGO representations to be deeply implicated in historical discourses of colonialism, using postcolonial/decolonial frameworks allows me to trace the broader contexts within which INGO communications and interactions with the people they serve take place. Specifically, I draw from the notion of ‘othering’ by postcolonial theorist, Edward Said (1978) and the emphasis on listening to local voices to reevaluate current institutional practices promoted by decolonial scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012). I use perspectives from these scholars as analytical tools to examine portrayals and narratives of African countries created on
the INGOs’ websites, while also looking at what kinds of practices and interventions might help INGOs to move away from those that promote Euro-American-centric thinking.

Recognizing the tensions between postcolonial and decolonial frameworks, I show through my analysis that, when woven together, both theories help to not only challenge hegemonic practices, but also assert the importance of native/local voices in knowledge making, especially about people from non-Western cultures. In line with my goal of exploring alternative practices for INGO visual and digital communication, I employ asset-based community development (ABCD) (Mathie and Cunningham, 2008) framework to examine how the websites visually and textually showcase community involvement as part of their organization’s goals. In the paragraphs that follow, I discuss these three theoretical frameworks (postcolonial and decolonial theories and the ABCD approach) grounding my study. In my discussion, I will show the differences and similarities between postcolonial and decolonial thinking as well as important critiques and limitations of each.

**USING A POST/DECOLONIAL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Postcolonialism is concerned with how writings about people who were/are colonized reflect a colonial hegemonic ideology. Said’s (1978) ground-breaking book, *Orientalism*, examined how the Middle East was constructed by the West as the “Orient,” that is, an opposition to the West. His exposition exposes what Gurminder Bhambra (2014) describes as “the ways in which relations of power underpin both knowledge and the possibilities of its production” (p. 120). Focusing on how Western writers create knowledge about other cultures, Said explains that certain roles and meanings are assigned to foreign people, places, and objects through rudimentary classifications that acquire validity as they are reproduced and disseminated around (p. 19). The result of this is the creation of a restricted range of interpretations—stereotypes, preconceived
ideas, and essentializations—that “shape the language, perception, and form of the encounter between East and West” (p. 23). In other words, this engenders a structured and narrow way of writing and thinking about, as well as interacting with non-Western people.

Said’s exposition highlights two points that are pertinent to my analysis in this dissertation. First, is the issue of binarism in Western writings about other cultures, where the ‘East’ is often classified as everything that the ‘West’ is not. As Said brought to the fore, this is a social construct meant to construct and maintain relations of difference between the ‘East’ and ‘West.’ It is this binary construction of Western and non-Western cultures that makes postcolonial scholars critical of INGO representations. The second point concerns the political agenda promoted through such writings. For, this notion of difference is constructed to legitimize the West’s domination over non-Western people. In other words, by constructing other people and places as inferior, lacking or having certain character traits, or incapable of doing certain things, the West emerges as superior and having the capability to dominate over these people and places. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (2013) express this point in the following quote,

the Orient is not an inert fact of nature, but a phenomenon constructed by generations of intellectuals, artists, commentators, writers, politicians, and, more importantly, constructed by the naturalizing of a wide range of Orientalist assumptions and stereotypes. The relationship between the Occident and the Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (p. 153).

As noted in the previous discussions, the development field is one of the spaces in which colonial hegemonic paradigms are replicated. This makes Said’s emphasis on how the colonial past influences our way of creating and understanding the world particularly useful to this dissertation. As Anshuman Prasad and Pushkala Prasad (2003) argue, postcolonial theory is sensitive to and
“seeks to understand (neo)colonialism and other related phenomena by… investigating the role… not only of Western political and economic practices, but also …of Western culture, knowledge, and epistemology” (p. 284). Additionally, Said’s thoughts on the “Othering” of non-Western cultures by the West is necessary to evaluate INGO communications because of the focus on global/local interactions and the issues that emerge from this.

While postcolonial theory provides a critical lens to interrogate and expose hidden assumptions within the ways that people make sense of the world, it has been critiqued for having a tendency “to remain firmly in the realm of the cultural” (Bhambra, 2014, p. 115). That is, scholars critique that postcolonial theory has done little in finding actionable ways to help change situations. Related to this point is another critique that postcolonialism has not paid much attention to “the question of how and whether the colonization of Indigenous peoples might fit within a postcolonial frame” (Na'Puti & Rohrer, 2017). Furthermore, there is the critique of a lack of attention from postcolonial theorists on creating avenues for local/native voices to be heard. However, a few postcolonial scholars like Homi Bhabha (1994) has argued for the re-articulation of Western discourses of modernity “from the perspectives of other geographical locations and through a consideration of processes of colonization and enslavement” (as cited in Bhambra, 2014, p. 120).

In this study, I address these gaps in the postcolonial theory by employing a decolonial approach that emphasizes the need to involve local/native perspectives in evaluating and reevaluating dominant discourses. This point forms one of the main components that set decolonial theory apart from postcolonial theory. However, like postcolonial theory, decolonial theory pays attention to colonialism and its effects; “how colonialism has worked and continues to work to subjugate, commoditize, and otherwise exploit culture, knowledge, and other resources of unenfranchised people, groups, and nations” (Agboka, p. 303). In line with the emphasis on
local/native perspectives, decolonial theorists stress the need for scholars to explore research avenues that would help effect actual changes in policies and practices. This includes forging new paths that would not only change people’s material conditions, but also allow them to be seen in a different light.

As decolonial theorists argue, an important part of doing this work is building capacity around local/native expertise. This point resonates with the ideas propounded by Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1992), in his book, *Decolonizing the Mind*. According to him, the mind was an important area of domination in colonialism, the mental universe through which “how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world” was controlled (p. 16). And this includes their mental outlook and attitudes toward their own histories, languages, knowledges, and experiences. wa Thiong’o, therefore, shows the need for us to challenge those colonial mental attitudes that have been so naturalized and internalized by beginning to value our own shared languages and experiences. Within the context of the decolonial approach I employ in this study, this means to value the shared experiences and contributions that local/native people can bring to knowledge making.

The decolonial approach that I draw on is from Smith’s (2012) book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*. One of the main points that Smith highlights in this book is the importance of native perspectives for questioning dominant knowledges and practices as well as the significant contribution of research in facilitating this. As she notes, “research is a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other” (p. 2). Through research, colonial encounters are framed and managed, with only one side of these encounters being pushed forth (p. 8). Thus, research provides a way of ‘writing back’ or ‘talking back’ through collaborations between native researchers themselves or between native
researchers and non-researchers (Mutua & Swadener, p. 101). In sum, this decolonial approach promotes the agency of those who have often been silenced by opening a space for their voices and experiences to be heard so that new knowledges can be co-created with native expertise.

In applying this framework to my work, I conducted focus group discussions with African audiences to understand their perceptions, feelings, and sensations about the images used on the websites. This enabled me to better understand the issues of power, identity, cultural nuances, diversity, and uneven representations that occur within INGO online environments. This dissertation, therefore, highlights the “cultural knowledges and competences” (Rose, 2001, 192) that native audiences especially can bring to postcolonial critique and knowledge making.

At its core, the decolonial theory emphasizes social justice in research. Smith writes that scholars need to pay attention to “social issues within the wider framework of self-determination, decolonization and social justice” (p. 4). This involves continuously exploring ways to ask and seek answers to social issues. She argues that although deconstruction is important in a decolonial framework, it is only part of a larger goal, a goal that involves developing resources that would help improve current conditions (p. 3). In line with this goal, I aim in this dissertation to move beyond critique to offer alternative approaches that can help development and intercultural website designers aiming to promote social justice in their work. I begin by deconstructing the visual communication guidelines developed by INGOs, illuminating how these guidelines are in themselves western-centered, and as such do not help to critically challenge existing practices. This reveals the need for INGOs to involve the perspectives of people from the regions they serve in their efforts to develop new communication guidelines.
**USING ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (ABCD) APPROACHES**

To further contextualize and complicate the political and cultural dynamics that operate within INGO online environments, I employ a community research framework that has recently been useful to development scholars interested in promoting community agency. This framework, therefore, helps to better understand the assumptions and inequalities embedded within INGO representation and presentation of community involvement in their work in particular. As Garcia Canclini (1995) writes, inequality can no longer be described using “simple and polarized” terms such as “dominant or dominated” or “empires and dependent nations” (as cited in Steeves, 2008, p. 418).

Asset-based community development (ABCD) framework was first developed by John Kretzmunn and John McKnight (1996) as an alternative to traditional needs-based approaches in which development institutions (NGOs, donor groups, and government social workers) intervene on behalf of a community to rectify problems (as cited in Boyd et al., 2008). Kretzmunn and McKnight observe that these interventions often focus on the communities’ problems and deficiencies rather than their assets and capacities (the existing resources and strengths of local communities). As noted on DePaul University’s ABCD institute website, this emphasis communicates dependency, denies community wisdom and agency, and does not lead to effective community development (DePaul ABCD Institute, 2019). While this framework was initially used within urban community development contexts in the United States of America, it has over the years been a basis for development, organizing, and resistance among rural and indigenous communities in other parts of the world.

One of the influential works on the ABCD framework is Alison Mathie and Gordon Cunningham’s (2008) book *From Client to Citizens: Communities Changing the Course of their*
Own Development. In this book, Mathie and Cunningham explore ABCD approaches in development projects taking place in different parts of the world. They argue that components such as local assets and mobilization which are critical to community prosperity and survival have been undermined by traditional approaches to development, and the ABCD approach can help to reclaim these components. At the core of their book is the emphasis on collective agency, which they explain as building “community unity,” “organizational capacity,” “local innovation” and “the ability to mobilize assets (p. 3). The authors add that this does not mean ending external assistance, but rather finding the right balance between supporting local community assets and “improving access to basic services as an entitlement of citizenship (p. 2). This makes the ABCD approach suitable for examining how community projects are represented by the INGOs I am studying in this dissertation.

Like postcolonial and decolonial theories, the ABDC approach allows scholars to critically examine the underlying assumptions at work within the way development institutions interact with and portray the communities they serve. Furthermore, the ABCD framework’s value for community agency resonates with decolonial theory’s emphasis on promoting local voices in our research. Thus, I use this framework to further stress the need for INGOs to “reconstruct the way they think and talk about less-privileged communities, and see aspects about them that may be hidden from view in other places” (p. 1). This involves reevaluating those representations that focus on problems and lack, while thinking about ways to highlight more of the local resources and contributions that are often brought to the development field. This, I argue, is crucial for changing dominant development discourses and practices, especially for those organizations aiming to effect this kind of change. I apply the ABCD framework to my analysis by drawing out five tenets from the framework to look at how the idea of community and community engagement
are represented on the sites. These tenets are by no means exhaustive, but provide a starting point for intercultural communication and development scholars to begin to think of how an ABCD approach to INGO visual communications and website design might look like.

1. How are the roles of community partners portrayed? I.e., as agents participating in the process of the interventions or as beneficiaries just sharing their stories?
2. How do INGOs showcase local assets, resources, and/or leadership?
3. What actions for continuous community growth are provided?
4. To what extent do INGOs show their support for the building of local assets and capacity?
5. To what extent do the messages help viewers to understand the socio-cultural and political contexts of the communities depicted?

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

This dissertation examines representations of African countries on INGO websites to understand the visual and digital practices used on these sites, and how the image of Africa and its people is affected by these practices. In this first chapter, I provided an overview of development scholarship within the field of development and rhetoric and writing studies. I continue with this discussion in chapter two, the literature review, where I first review the existing scholarship on theories of representation. Then, I revisit previous studies on related topics, specifically discourse and ideology, the concept of circulation, and representations of cultural identity in digital contexts. The chapter concludes with a review of scholarship on development representations of African countries.

In chapter three, the methods and methodology, I present the methodology for the study, discussing the three methods of analysis that I employ (ethnographic content analysis (ECA), critical discourse analysis (CDA), and focus group discussions) and their strengths and
weaknesses. The chapter also provides a detailed discussion of the INGOs, an overview of their websites, and the specific content within these websites that I focused on for my data collection. I conclude with a discussion of my positionality and reflexivity as a researcher. Chapter four, the analysis of participants’ responses, addresses the first research question by discussing the findings from the focus group interviews. Five main themes emerged from participants’ interpretations of the websites: focus on lack and deprivation, the theme of difference, inaccurate naming and labelling of visual images, simplification and lack of context, and media influence.

Chapter five continues with the analysis of my findings. The chapter answers the second research by exploring the effects of the sites’ representations on the image of Africa and its people. To complicate the analysis as well as show how INGO images travel globally, I look at how the sites’ visual images are recirculated on other online platforms of the organizations. Chapter six, conclusions and implications, summarizes the findings and main points of the study. It also answers the third research question by discussing the implications of the findings for research, pedagogy, and practice in rhetoric and writing studies, intercultural communication, and development studies. I end with the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter has discussed the background of the study and the interdisciplinary conversations within which it is situated. It has also explained the aims and objectives and the theoretical frameworks guiding the research. Throughout these discussions, I have shown that this study is interdisciplinary, situated within the fields of rhetoric and writing studies, postcolonial studies, and intercultural communication. I also noted that this project aims to highlight the importance of local perspectives in addressing issues of representation, power, inequality, and
social justice in current development practices, especially within online contexts. In the next chapter, I further contextualize the study with a review of related literature.
In this chapter, I provide an overview of the concepts of representation, circulation, and development by reviewing how they have been theorized and studied across various disciplines. Specifically, I discuss current approaches, processes, and issues explored by scholars in rhetoric and composition and other related fields such as cultural studies, development studies, and intercultural communication. The review also looks at current conversations on how transformative practices might be achieved in development communications, examining the different approaches, opportunities, and challenges broached by researchers and practitioners within postcolonial and development studies. Through this literature review, I make a case for the importance of cultural sensitivity in development communications, one that is sensitive to both (neo)colonial and intercultural power dynamics inherent in development practice.

**WHAT IS REPRESENTATION?**

Representation is a process of naming and giving meaning to things, people, and places. In postcolonial studies, the concept has received a significant amount of attention to illustrate the ways that representations influence how people understand and relate to the world around them. In *Can the Subaltern Speak*, postcolonial scholar, Gayatri C. Spivak (1990) makes an important contribution to the concept by connecting it to politics, such as having someone else speak for another. Arguing that “the person who speaks and acts is always a multiplicity” (p. 108), Spivak highlights how representations, especially of marginalized groups from developing countries, are closely linked to political positioning. By so doing, she draws attention to the unequal power relations—gender-wise, culturally, geographically, historically, and socioeconomically—involvement in such representations, and the possibility of ‘othering.’ As MacKenzie (2018) notes, the one who represents is always inscribed by the interests of their particular social group.
Drawing on Gramsci’s hegemony and Foucault’s concepts of discourse and power to illuminating the process of ‘othering,’ Said’s (1978) Orientalism shows how the ‘West’ created and manipulated the image of the Orient or the ‘Other’ through Western academic, literary, and philosophical writings, which constructed the Orient as the binary opposite of the West, different and inferior to it. Particularly essential to this project is how the West’s centuries of writings about the Orient have created stereotypes that are replicated in current writings about groups from this region.

In his book Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, Hall (1997) explains the relationship between visual images, language and discourse, and how they work together as systems of representation. Hall describes representation as the process by which members of a culture produce and exchange meaning through language. Language (verbal, visual, sound, or non-verbal), then, functions as an integral part of representation. Specifically, it operates as a system of signs and symbols that enables people to express their thoughts, ideas, and feelings to others. According to Hall, there are two sign systems. The first is conceptual maps which enable us to make meaning by connecting people, objects, events, and abstract ideas with a set of concepts or mental representations that we hold in our minds. It is through these connections that we make meaningful interpretations of our world. The second is language in that we translate our shared conceptual maps through a common language (p. 18). We can translate our thoughts into words, sounds, or images because of the existence of common languages. From this understanding, Hall emphasizes that it is the people in a culture that give meaning to things, not things that produce meaning:

It is by our use of things, and what we say, think, and feel about them--how we represent them--that we give them a meaning … In part, we give things meaning by how we represent
them—the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them (p. 3).

The quote shows that it is through constant use and specific interpretation that we produce, exchange, and reify meanings. These meanings in turn shape what we do and how we behave, leading to real, practical effects (p. 3, 44). By drawing attention to the ‘how’ of meaning-making, Hall argues that representation involves the use of specific language choices and strategies, “representation implies the active work of selecting and presenting, structuring and shaping … not merely the transmitting of an already-existing meaning but the more active labour of making things mean” (Hall, 1982, p. 64). Because of this, we need to pay attention to representations, especially those of underprivileged groups. This is because, as several scholars have noted, representations of underprivileged groups are often skewed, leading to a narrow, limited view of them (Smith, 2012; Adichie, 2009; Said, 1978; Pimentel & Gutierrez, 2014). As Ella Shohat (1995) says,

Each filmic or academic utterance must be analyzed not only in terms of who represents but also in terms of who is being represented for what purpose, at which historical moment, for which location, using which strategies, and in what tone of address (p. 173).

THEORIES OF REPRESENTATION

An important question of representation regards the relationship between the thing represented and the representation which from Hall’s definition translates as the relationship between meaning, language, and representation. This question has to do with whether things carry their own, fixed meanings or whether meanings are created in language. Hall notes three approaches—reflective, intentional, and constructivist—each of which has implications for understandings about reality and the role of speakers in meaning-making (Berlin, 1987, p. 4). The three approaches are reflective, intentional, and constructionist, which I discuss below.
The reflective approach posits that meaning is found within objects, people, or ideas themselves as they already exist in the material world. As such, language functions as a mirror that is used to reflect or imitate the true meaning that is already there, fixed, and independent in the world. This approach is used to explain things like works of art or documentary photography which sometimes mirror nature or social events. As Hall notes, this view is problematic because it is impossible to remove representations from the culture that produces them (p. 24-25). Furthermore, representations, especially visual representations, involves re-presentation, that is, depicting the idea in a new form or environment. Arguing from the opposite end, the intentional approach explains that meaning resides in individuals whose intentions determine reality. Like the reflective approach, this one also ignores the fact that language use depends on the shared linguistic codes and conventions already produced by society.

The third approach, constructivism, is what has shaped much work in cultural studies, and which I aligned this study to. This approach emphasizes the social and historical construction of meaning. As a result, we can better understand Said’s (1978) theory on the historical construction of otherness referenced at the beginning of this chapter. According to constructivists, “things don’t mean” (Hall, 1997, p. 25). Rather, meaning is constructed by individuals as they engage with the language and concepts within their society. As a result, knowledge is never objective or real, but a fabrication of the actual thing or idea. Constructivists further explain that while the material world does exist, it is not the material world that conveys meaning, but the social and historical systems of representation. For this reason, when constructivists consider the meaning of something, it is not just the material quality of the sign that they are after, but their symbolic function. That is, what they stand for, symbolize, or represent within their specific sociocultural contexts.
Following the views above, constructivists argue that reality is multiple because meaning is “always subject to change” (p. 32) as individuals construct and reconstruct (negotiate or subvert) meaning. An important element of the constructivist approach is that it takes into consideration the interpretational role and ‘co-authorship’ of individuals in meaning-making. As a result, it creates a space for the multiplicity of interpretations that different speakers may bring to the production of knowledge. It is based on these assumptions that I align my study to the constructivist approach.

Other scholars have provided alternative approaches to knowledge construction. For example, John W. Creswell (2003) provides four primary alternative knowledge claims for research design which includes the constructivist approach. These are post-positivism, constructivism, advocacy/participatory, and pragmatism (p. 6). Each of these knowledge claims provides specific assumptions for how and where meaning is derived. For the sake of this research, I’ll briefly explain the advocacy/participatory approach which I intertwine with the constructivist approach to conduct this study.

According to Creswell, the researchers oriented towards the advocacy/participatory knowledge claims “believe that inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political agenda” (p.9). This is in the sense that knowledge-making should include “an action agenda” that may bring about actual change in practices, an element that is often missing from the constructivist position. As reflected in its name, advocacy/participatory stance is collaborative because meaning-making is “completed “with” other rather than “on or “to” others” (p. 11).

As I will further explain in the next chapter, I situate the project within the constructivist and advocacy/participatory frameworks to first highlight the constructed nature of development
representations and their realities, then center participants’ multiple views and experiences as integral parts of examining and challenging dominant narratives.

**Representations, Discourse, and Ideology**

Constructivists argue that representations are powerful, not only because they mediate our knowledge of the world, but also because they “obstruct, fragment, and negate that knowledge” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 188, also Foucault, 1972). This shows how in representation, speakers do not only construct knowledge, but also manipulate and control that knowledge by obstructing or negating other forms of knowledge so as to influence people’s consciousness and beliefs (Watson & Hill, 2015). This, according to van Dijk (1995), is the work of ideology through discourse. And we see this a lot in visual media representations.

According to Foucault (1972), discourse refers to “the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements” (p. 80). Meaning, discourse provides “a language for talking about or representing” something (Hall, 1997, p. 44). By this, we understand that discourse determines the processes, relations, and structures of the material world, regulating people’s thoughts about what is or is not an acceptable way of talking about things (Fairclough, 2003, p. 176). According to theorists of discourse, ideas are not independent of the world but are produced in different modes of communication through systemic practices of representation. On the other hand, ideology is seen as effects within discourse, where cultural productions and practices create beliefs and values that particularly work to reflect the interests of power (Rose, 2001, p. 70). As Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress (1988) argue, ideology is knowledge that is constructed in such a way as to “sustain [the] structures of domination” in a society (p. 3). It creates subjectivities and perpetuates social inequalities. This is because ideology always entails complex processes of
recognition that influence individuals’ understanding of their relationship to the world (Althusser, 1970). But, as Louis Althusser notes, this is ‘imaginary’ in a sense that ideology does not reflect ‘the real’ world but merely ‘re-presents’ it. Ideology can express itself in both blatant and subtle forms like stereotypes, normative beliefs, and common perceptions (van Dijk, 1995, p. 276).

The discussions above provide a deeper understanding of the way knowledge about the world, including commonsensical and taken-for-granted assumptions, are constructed through discourse. As Fairclough (1989) notes, the everyday conventions that speakers draw upon in discourse are backed by ideological assumptions that come to be taken as what Gramsci (1971) calls ‘common sense’ (p. 77). The issue with common sense views is that present that which is cultural and specific as natural (i.e. ‘this is how things are’) (Proctor, 2004, p. 60). Due to this intimate relationship between discourse and ideology, scholars of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) take the ideological aspect of discourse as a given. They explore how discourse (written, visual, oral, or gesture) creates, circulates, reinforces, and reflects societal norms and beliefs which contribute to existing power relations (Huckin et al., p. 119). These insights, therefore, provide the tools to understand and unravel the ideologies embedded within development discourses and representations.

Understanding the discourses and ideologies embedded within visual (i.e., photography or audiovisuals) representations of race is particularly important. This is because of the particular tendency to read photography and tele-visuals as natural or beyond the realm of critique (Hall, 2001, p. 132). However, as Roland Barthes (1977) argues, although photographs mechanically reproduce what is in front of the lens, they are not objective. Rather, we must understand photographs as carrying associations of the settings they come from and inscribed by multiple layers of conventions intimately linked to the particular points of view of that setting. Barthes
explains that images signify two levels of meaning: the literal or denoted meaning and the implied or connoted meaning (p. 276-9). The second level of meaning, the connoted meaning, is what we must pay particular attention to as it is discursively shaped by conceptual classifications of the social world. For example, the angle and position taken by a photographer demonstrate the discursive nature of images (i.e., the choice of subject, composition, vantage point, image focus, etc.). These also point to the power relation between the photographer and the observer (Lutz & Collins, 1993, p. 188).

Similarly, both Kress and van Leeuwen have demonstrated the dimensions and effects of ideology and manipulation in visual composition. Like Barthes, van Leeuwen argues that visual images “provide interpretations [and] ideologically colored angles” that work by “suggestion” and “connotation” (p. 136). These manipulative processes are often realized through strategies of exclusions and absences, enabling authors to transform, reimagine, repurpose, and even disfigure meaning. In Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication, Kress also emphasizes that the semiotic resources used in visual compositions are always related to the ideological and ontological structures within a given society. This makes visual images integral parts of our public knowledge systems and structures. With the growth of the World Wide Web, social networking sites, and digital technologies, the production, distribution, and effects of visual images have only quickened and intensified. In the next section, I look at current studies on the production and distribution of discourse in the fields of rhetoric and composition and communication.

**Representations, Circulation, and Technology**

Over the past two decades, scholars have brought attention to the production and circulation of discourse (ideas, images, artifacts, bodies) across time and space to expand
understandings about how discourse flows through society. Circulation describes the study of discourse in motion. In rhetoric and composition, scholars such as John Trimbur (2000), Jim Ridolfo and Danielle DeVoss (2009), Bryon Hawk (2011), Rebecca Dingo (2012), Laurie E. Gries (2015), and Gries and Collin G. Brooke (2018) have explored the processes of circulation in writing, media production and delivery, and transnational feminism. In communication, scholars such as Lester Olsen (2009), Mary E. Stuckey (2012), and Jason E. Black (2012) have used rhetorical circulation to examine archival data including texts, photographs, and pictorial representations. Attention to circulation, these scholars argue, unravels the widening cycle of the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of information (Trimbur), as well as the complex delivery systems, both print and online, through which discourses are disseminated, reinterpreted, and transformed. Although circulation has been explored by CDA and cultural studies scholars, these new studies bring particular attention to “rhetoric’s dynamic movement and fluidity,” the role of digital technologies and globalization in this work, and the need to “rethink composing strategies for writing in a digital age” (Gries, 2013, p. 333).

According to Laurie E. Gries (2018), circulation is both “a cultural process” and a rhetorical process” wherein discourses and their effects become more persuasive as they travel through the world and enter into various associations” (p. 12). Dingo (2012) demonstrates this phenomenon in her study of the transnational circulation of public policy on gender and development. Through her analysis of common development terms such as mainstreaming, fitness, and empowerment, Dingo reveals how the meaning of these terms shift as they become entangled with neoliberal forces. This leads to the perpetuation of neoliberal economic and political structures. Dingo, together with the other authors cited above, shows that by tracing the spatio-
temporal movements of discourse, including the distinct possibilities enabled by the digital spaces of circulation, rhetoricians can expose the histories and consequences of public arguments.

I advance scholarship in this area by exploring the digital (re)production and circulation of images on the INGOs’ websites, in addition to my examination of the visual representations. In particular, I examine the continuous practice of pulling images (often of past events) out of their specific contexts, repurposing them, and redeploying them to create certain impressions about poverty and development in African countries. I look at the broader digital environment of the websites to understand how practices of labeling, captioning or the absence of it, textual descriptions, fragmentation, and temporality, when remixed with development images of Africa, strengthen and renew their meanings in such a way that ultimately reinforces dominant representations. Through this analysis, I show that we need to examine the processes of digital circulation via INGO websites which replicate colonial categorizations and descriptions of people from developing countries and hinder other understandings about them. In the next section, I look at current studies on digital representations of cultural identities to gain a deeper understanding of the opportunities, motivations, and consequences of communication about cultural identities in online spaces.

**Digital representations of cultural identities**

The increase in global production, consumption, and circulation of texts via the web, coupled with the complex processes of power and ideology involved in these exchanges, has motivated technical communication scholars to explore the cultural impacts of technical documents (Salinas, 2000, 2002; Scott, Longo, & Wills, 2006; Williams and Pimentel, 2014; Mukherjee & Williams, 2015). A component of this scholarship that is pertinent to this study is online presentation and representation of race and cultural identity. Pivotal in discussing this topic
is Williams’s and Pimentel’s (2014) edited collection, *Communicating Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in Technical Communication*, which demonstrates how “race and ethnicity inform the production and distribution of technical communication” within the United States (p. 1).

This issue is particularly evident in the chapter by Pimentel and Katie Gutierrez which explores how mainstream television advertisements of Mexican food often draw on common Mexican stereotypes to sell their products (p. 89). To illustrate, the authors examine three Mexican food commercials, revealing stereotypes that portray Mexicans as divided or as violent wrestlers. The authors note that although these commercials have been banned from airing on television, they are still accessible via YouTube and as a result, the racial discourses circulate globally. Further, YouTube’s comment section helps to generate new racist discourses about Mexicans as it gives “identifiable individuals the liberty to express their racist views with little or no consequence” (p. 97). This work shows how YouTube helps to discursively maintain and intensify racist messages both through its viewing and commenting section. This research, therefore, demonstrates the role of technology in producing and reproducing racial inequalities, and the need for institutions to scrutinize and monitor technology usage (Herndle, 2009).

Likewise, Ishani Mukherjee and Maggie G. Williams (2015) find in their study of authenticity and intercultural communication in two nonprofit websites that while the websites promote respectable social justice initiatives to uplift the local artisans they are representing, the online representations “minimize the artisans’ agency and voices” (p. 93). Because of this issue, the authors note that nonprofits “ought to construct online presentations that give voice and agency to those artists that they seek to uplift” (p. 93). Intercultural technical communication scholars need to help in this work by exploring ways to help institutions amplify the voices and perspectives of underprivileged people and communities (Jones, 2016; Agboka, 2013, 2014).
In the field of communication, Melissa Johnson and Larissa Carneiro (2014) have examined digital and visual representations of cultural identities on ethnic museum websites. In their analysis, the authors found that the use of symbolic elements such as colors, typefaces, appearance, and web prototypes, all come together to project a certain cultural image about the people being represented. Because this projection can either help to challenge or reinforce negative stereotypes, authors need to be critical about how they use these symbolic elements. For example, institutions need to reconsider the use of prototypical visual representations and categorizations such as using a certain image to symbolize a group of people (Johnson & Sink, 2015, p. 214). Such descriptions oversimplify cultural identities and perpetuate stereotypes (p. 223). Johnson and Willian Sink encouraged institutions to use a variety of representations on their websites to provide a more nuanced understanding of cultural identities.

Scholars in rhetoric and composition have similarly demonstrated the importance of approaching cultural identities in intercultural/cross-cultural contexts from a more robust understanding (Monberg, 2009). According to Terese G. Monberg, we need to write about communities in such a way that looks at and recognizes the diversity within groups and communities, revealing different, “more textured” stories and dimensions (p. 40). This includes recognizing “communities not just as places of need but as places where… members often “confront exigencies that demand new knowledge production on their part in order to tell an alternative story about identity, capability, and place” (p. 42). In asking us to rethink dominant ways of constructing cultural identities, other scholars have also called for “new practices that can be used to encourage cultural competence within institutions and communities” (Williams & Pimentel, 2014, p. 1-2). Practices that take into consideration the historical, material, and political contexts and effects of cultural productions. The next section reviews scholarship on development
representations to explore critical issues, challenges, and concerns, especially regarding the
construction of African people and communities.

**Representations of Global Development**

**What is development?**

Several scholars have noted that the idea of development is fraught with both conceptual
and ideological contradictions (Escobar, 1995; McEwan, 2008; Esteva, 2010; Wainwright, 2011).
For example, a popular understanding of the term ‘development’ is economic growth and progress.
While some development initiatives have helped people, especially in disaster and emergencies,
one cannot ignore the global-local tensions and exploitation that development processes have
engendered in many developing countries (Sachs, 2010; Maren, 1997).

Providing a critical understanding of the term, Wolfgang Sachs (2010) argues that
development is more than a socio-economic endeavor or a technical performance. Rather, it is “a
particular cast of mind;” a perception which models reality” (p. xvi). In other words, development
creates and shapes a certain perception of reality about people, places, and events. As Arturo
Escobar (1992) and Philip McMichael (2004) point out, the discourses of development entail
particularly powerful ideological assumptions about people and places which ultimately control
how certain people can be seen and what can be known about them. This point is particularly
important in showing how development discourses often position both beneficiaries and
audiences.

Development (visual) representations have received enormous scholarly attention which I
will divide into two for the sake of this dissertation. The first and major component of this
scholarship has to do with the visual imagery and messages of development representations.
According to scholars, the imagery and language used in development advertisements are
“informed by and reflect the long history of colonialism” (Dogra, 2014). The second component regards the approach of development which often positions people as victims rather than agents. These two components are very much interconnected. As Lissner (1973) argues, the imagery employed in development communications reflects on the priorities, frameworks, and assumptions expressed in development.

**Development visual imagery and messages**

Several scholars have demonstrated that development representations often draw on colonial narratives including simplifications, classifications and stereotypes, homogenizations, and infantilizations (Dogra, 2014; Escobar, 1995). Escobar, for instance, argues that through “discursive homogenization,” development discourses have constructed a hegemonic form of representation that erases “the complexity and diversity of Third World peoples” (p. 53). As a result, the use of terms such as poverty, famine, and illiteracy have become signifiers of development, already stereotyped and categorized (p. 12). Portrayals of Africa epitomize how development imagery homogenizes entire continents. Africa is particularly infantilized and constructed as a “prism of misery” through images of sick children (Bleiker & Kay, 2007, p. 144).

Further, the continent is often written about as though it were one country (Wainaina, 2006). Women, who are commonly used as symbols of development, are often classified as “uneducated” and “needy,” having lots of problems with little freedom to act (Mohanty, 1991, p. 56). Also, women are often seen with children, a practice that reinforces the “needy” and “vulnerable” stereotypes. According to Chandra Mohanty, these representations are problematic because they construct a certain image of an average ‘Third World woman’ based solely on statistics and certain established categories. Additionally, these representations, like most mainstream development representations, “assume Western standards as the benchmark against
which to measure the situation of Third World” countries (Escobar, 19995, p. 8). The result is the reinforcing of colonial stereotypes and unequal relations, leading to “the perpetuation of the hegemonic idea of the West’s superiority” (p. 8).

Another common theme in development imagery is the theme of ‘difference,’ promoted through the emphasis and exaggeration of ‘distance.’ When it comes to African countries, the constant use of images of “unchanging villages” constructs a stark division between the continent of Africa and the West (Cohen, 2013; Dogra, 2014; Ademolu, 2018). Scholars have demonstrated how this binary representation creates a spectacle of tragedy that ‘dehumanizes’ people through the absence of their agency (Chouliaraki, 2006) and limits public responses to social issues (Hesford, 2011). Besides, it does not provide audiences with a critical understanding of the complexities within issues of global poverty.

Development approaches

According to scholars, development representations take the form that they do because they are underpinned by certain Western-centric concepts and assumptions. Among these is the idea that imagines the non-West “in terms of lack, not content” (Kalonaityte, 2010, p. 36; Also, Mathie & Cunningham, 2008). It is this idea that leads INGOs to see beneficiaries as victims in need of ‘saving.’ Connected to this idea is INGOs’ assumption that local people are incapable of addressing their own problems (Hanchey, 2018). This assumption creates a dependency-based power relationship between INGOs and local communities in which the roles of local leaders and contributors within the development process are completely ignored. Another common assumption that INGOs depend on is the idea that aid workers know it all and do not need any contributions from local people (Dogra, 2012). For example, in her interviews with INGO workers to find out the extent to which local voices are incorporated into the image-making process, Dogra discovered
that often feedback from local partners was sought primarily for logistics purposes, not for input into the messages. The response from one of the INGO informants she spoke to was that “we listen to them a lot but there’s enough knowledge within this building and within communications for us to be able to approve material” (Dogra, 2012, p. 128). As Dogra notes, this reflects both the issue of power asymmetry between INGOs and local partners as well as the lack of local voices in development processes.

Furthermore, INGO communication practices are heavily influenced by the legacy of orientalist writing. This legacy is reflected in the common practice of using familiar visual categories and linguistic terminologies to describe different countries without attending to specific situations and experiences in each country. An aspect of this issue is the tendency for INGOs to employ “narratives of exotic cultures” to garner financial support from donors. According to Hanchey (2018), while these narratives may not be initially harmful, they help promote messages of ‘us/them’ (p. 277).

The issues raised about development imagery and messages have led INGOs to consider certain actions and approaches. These include more focus on advocacy and development education efforts in order to address the issue of clashing priorities. Thus, since the early 1990s, many INGOs began to produce a wide variety of materials on global development issues and problems. Some have also taken up advocacy roles such as lobbying, public education, and communication campaigns (Dogra, 2014). Further, both governmental development agencies and INGOs have adopted participatory communication approaches as part of their communication campaigns (Ngai, 2017). Phyllis B. Ngai’s discussion of the participatory approach highlights its distinct perspectives and emphases—from a focus on changing people’s behavior through providing them
with new ideas to an emphasis on social change, and then to an emphasis on people’s involvement in their own development.

The third approach was influenced by Paulo Freire’s seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and became popular in the 1980s following the increased interest in INGO imagery during and after the Ethiopian crisis of 1984. The approach is still being used today, emphasizing the importance of two-way interpersonal communication between aid workers and beneficiaries. It also emphasizes key concepts such as self-reliance, empowerment, community-based development, participative democracy, and horizontal processes (Ngai, p. 233).

Apart from these efforts, major INGOs in Europe, the United States, and Australia developed guidelines for best practices in visual communications that emphasized respect for human dignity. In Europe, INGOs like Save the Children, Oxfam, and Christian Aid developed their own internal codes of practice. Additionally, the General Assembly of European NGOs (Dóchas) developed a shared code of conduct on images and messages related to the Third World in 1989 to be used across organizations. The code incorporated three main values: respect for people’s dignity, equality of all people, and solidarity with all people. To help INGOs implement these values, seven guiding principles were provided:

1. “Choose images and related messages based on values of respect equality, solidarity and justice;
2. Truthfully represent any image or depicted situation both in its immediate and in its wider context so as to improve public understanding of the realities and complexities of development;
3. Avoid images and messages that potentially stereotype, sensationalise or discriminate against people, situations or places;
4. Use images, messages and case studies with the full understanding, participation and permission of the subjects (or subjects’ parents/guardian);
5. Ensure those whose situation is being represented have the opportunity to communicate their stories themselves;
6. Establish and record whether the subjects wish to be named or identifiable and always act accordingly;
7. Conform to the highest standards in relation to human rights and protection of the vulnerable people” (Code, 2006).

Like the other actions by INGOs, the code was developed to help change hegemonic development practices and challenge stereotypical representations. An important part of this change was the call to “diversify voices, perspectives, and representations” by including critical reflections from local partners and contributors (Illustrative Guide to the Code of Conduct). This call led to the recent interest in ‘positive’ imagery among several INGOs. For example, INGOs like Oxfam, Plan, Action Aid, and Care now combine their messages with the more positive theme of empowerment (Smith, 2004; Dingo, 2012). Such messages seek to show people in more ‘active’ and self-reliant ways. Similarly, small organizations like Mama Hope are increasingly incorporating appeals to agency and empowerment in their fundraising campaigns (Hanchey, 2016).

While these efforts have led INGOs to express more concern about issues related to representation and development practice, there is still a lot of work to do. For one, images of extreme poverty and helplessness continue to dominate INGO advertisements (Dogra, 2012, p. 129-31; Ademolu, 2018). What’s more, INGOs continue to operate on negative and erroneous assumptions about foreign populations that require attention. Examining how images of children are used by major INGO signatories to the shared code of conduct, Manzo (2008) shows that INGOs’ continuous reliance on the iconography of childhood to advertise humanitarian ideals simultaneously constructs and undermines the values of dignity and solidarity espoused by the code. She argues that images of children are paradoxical in their approach. While they are used to
represent humanitarian ideals of innocence and the need to protect, they, at the same time, represent one part of the world as helpless, dependent, and inferior (p. 635). Manzo’s argument highlights how common development principles such as the principles of humanity reproduce the very problems that they purport to eradicate. What this means is that there is a need for alternative representation and development practices that are not based on Western ideals of development or humanitarianism.

**Towards Transformative Practice in Development Communications**

Throughout this literature review, I have demonstrated the power of representations, particularly visual representations in our society to highlight the integral role that development representations play in public understandings of poverty and development in other parts of the world. I have shown that development representations produce and reproduce hegemonic discourses which lead to stereotypical images of people living in developing countries. This in turn shapes the ideologies circulated and recirculated globally about these countries. The review of the various studies also reveals that while some INGOs have made efforts to address the issues of representations engendered by their messages, the continues reliance on dominant certain development assumptions and beliefs, do not allow for transformative outcomes. As well, the lack of local voices in these efforts is a critical gap. While issues of representation within the INGO field is more complex than simple, due to the tensions and differing goals that exist within institutions, too often the approaches used by INGOs have reinforced unequal power relations between development workers, donors, and Western countries and those who are served. This undercuts the social justice initiatives that many INGOs purport to promote.

In my analysis, I will examine some of the assumptions and beliefs currently used within the development field to show their Western-centric influences. This includes the Western principles of humanitarianism shaping the practice of development itself. But these are the same
principles from which the shared code of conduct developed to help improve INGO communications was established. As Manzo (2008) rightly argues, the humanitarian principles used in development are inherently paradoxical, and for this reason, will always have hegemonic effects. For example, when the code of conduct calls on INGOs to challenge stereotypes by presenting “a realistic portrayal of the lives people lead and the role of [local] NGOs,” it frames the issue only as a matter of accuracy and truth which INGOs have to determine and construct based on their own values and interests (p. 643). The code does not take into account the fact that INGOs are imbricated in international power relations which often have a greater influence on their values and interests. Thus, the code provides little impetus for organizations to actually change dominant practices.

Through my analysis, I demonstrate the need for INGOs to move beyond appeals to humanitarian principles in their efforts to address issues of representation within their work. Rather, INGOs need to first change the deficit-based approaches often employed when looking for ways to help address the needs of less-privileged communities. Another important point of reevaluation is the need for INGOs to find creative ways to balance humanitarian appeals with sensitivity to (neo)colonial and intercultural power dynamics in which their work is enmeshed. Some scholars have recently pointed out the need to decolonize western-centered assumptions in development practice so as to refocus attention on the different levels of power relations operating within the organizations (Hanchey, 2018). Paying attention to the different power dynamics undergirding INGOs’ practices can lead to a more critical understanding of the complexities that need to be considered as we look for transformative approaches. Similarly, Cheryl McEwan suggests the need for scholars to continue to reveal the different manifestations of inequalities involved in development and challenge its Eurocentric foundations. According to her, this work
should also involve research that seeks to “create intellectual space to allow the subaltern to speak, rather than always being spoken for…” (as cited in Ziar, 2011, p. 1299). This means exploring collaborative research avenues that would help INGOs to recognize the dynamic sociohistorical influences that inform their practices and to see what transformative approaches that are based on social justice might look like.

This study takes a participatory approach to development research by drawing on interviews with African participants to examine four INGOs’ visual and digital representations of African countries. By doing so, I aim to illuminate local perspectives on development messages and their effects, while exploring more culturally sensitive alternatives. In my analysis, I explore the websites’ content on Africa (i.e., visuals images, labels placed on the visuals, surrounding texts, and how often the contents are updated) to probe the broader rhetorical environment of INGO online spaces. This allows me to tie INGO communications of their work on the web to the construction and representation of culture in digital contexts. Throughout the analysis, I investigate how INGOs are attempting to foster diversity and inclusion in their work by paying attention to the ways in which the voices and roles of local people are communicated.

In the next chapter, I’ll discuss the study’s methods and methodology, particularly highlighting the importance of involving the voices of African people in development conversations where African countries are concerned.
Chapter Three:

Methods and Methodologies

This study examines how African countries are visually represented on four INGO websites (savethechildren.org, oxfamamerica.org, mamahope.org, and waterislife.com) to show the visual and digital practices used on these sites and how they continue to negatively impact the image of Africa and its people. In this chapter, I discuss the methods of analysis that I used to both gather and interpret the data. I employed a ‘mixed-methods’ approach not only to explore the different levels of meanings embedded in the visual images, but also to more fully explain and contextualize my findings. I chose three methods that will allow for a critical understanding of the issues and complexities of the subject matter: focus groups, content analysis, and discourse analysis. By including focus group data in my methodology, I expand understandings of the issues related to development representations of Africa through documenting the views and experiences of African readers. As well, I show how involving the views of people from Africa in these conversations can help create more egalitarian approaches.

Research Questions

1. How are African countries represented on the websites of Save the Children, Oxfam, Mama Hope, and Waterislife? a. How do the sites represent issues of poverty and development in the communities depicted? What are readers’ perceptions of the representations?
2. What effects might these representations have, and how can they be improved?
3. What are the implications of this study for research, pedagogy, and practice in rhetoric and composition, intercultural technical communication, and development studies?

Using Focus Groups

In a report on the review of the Code on Images and Messages, Siobhán McGee (2005) notes that an important gap in The Code is the absence of native/local perspectives. While INGOs have made some efforts in finding new strategies to improve their visual communications, there is
very little attempt to explore the views of people from the Global South. Thus, one of the primary objectives of this study is to bring African people’s views into the conversations regarding development representations of Africa. To do this, I conducted a focus group discussion with African students at UTEP to understand their own experiences with development images. I also conducted two focus group discussions with US students to compare their responses with the African students’ responses.

Given that I wanted to understand individuals’ common (as well as different) views and opinions about the topic, I needed to choose a method that allowed for rich and spontaneous expression of thoughts from participants. As a result, I chose focus group discussions to enable me to explore participants’ interpretations of the data within a more natural and conversational setting. The interviewing process in focus groups takes a human-centered approach of asking open-ended questions in less-structured forms of talk, with reflexive individual/collective narratives and interactions. As Maria Kyriakidou (2015) rightly notes, it is through this type of discussion that “common sense discourses are more vividly [articulated,] negotiated and illustrated” (p. 219). Rose (2001) writes that interview methods, of which focus groups is a part, allow researchers to explore “the ‘cultural knowledges and competences’ that audiences bring to the act of interpretation” (p. 192). This is exactly what I wanted to discover from the focus groups: participants’ ‘cultural knowledge and competences’ as well as their lived experiences regarding issues of representation, and the value of this to research and public practice. Because viewers are the main recipients of the impact of cultural productions, their responses and reactions to these cultural productions provide a deeper understanding of the cultural work that is carried out by these productions.
Furthermore, in visual analysis, interview methods help researchers to explore images at the site of audiencing, which, according to Rose (2001), is an important aspect of a visual’s meaning. In particular, we need to explore the sense people make of images because:

First, how audiences react to a visual image can be used, as Ang (1985) did, to produce a particular understanding of that image. Second, exploring how different audiences react to the same image, as Morley (1980) did, can demonstrate the complexity of the decoding process” (p. 193-194).

In the case of this study, participants’ responses revealed certain concerns about the visual representations and websites’ communication practices that could not have been produced by the other methods. For instance, involving an African audience in the interpretations allowed me to examine the material effects of INGO representations about Africa from the perspectives and experiences of African people, rather than the perspectives of western frameworks. This allows me to use a participatory framework that interprets the data together with participants. Through the focus groups, I was able to understand the feelings, concerns, and perceptions of people whose identities are affected by INGOs’ representations. More importantly, this created a space for African audiences to contribute to efforts being made to improve INGO communications on global poverty and development.

Exploring how the different groups of participants responded to the images, as well as what influenced their responses gave both depth and breadth to the analysis. More importantly, it allowed me to see the groups’ different cultural and intellectual experiences that shaped their views. And it is through this understanding that I advocate the need to incorporate critical visual awareness in the classroom, particularly professional and technical communication classes, to develop students’ understanding of the sociocultural dimensions of visual documents (Chapter 7).

Focus group sample

Initially, I wanted to interview staff members of the INGOs as part of the US audience, but I could not proceed with this given how much trouble it can be to get INGOs to participate in a
research project about their work. After speaking with my supervisors about this issue, they advised that it would be best to focus on everyday consumers of INGO representations who are available and can freely share their views about the representations. My chair also noted that this will enable me to compare and contrast the empirical realities of African and non-African audiences. This is important to explore multiple views on the topic, and understand what experiences shape these views. Thus, through these suggestions, I recruited undergraduate students at UTEP. Although UTEP’s student population comprises more Latinx than Whites (who are usually the target audience of INGOs), development representations are situated within the vast global media space where consumers encompass a wide variety of people. Additionally, in this study, I am particularly interested in exploring different consumers’ multiple perspectives.

Regarding the African audience, I used purposeful sampling for the choice of participants so as to reflect the objectives of the research (Koerber & McMichael, 2008) and select individuals that are especially knowledgeable about the topic (Palinkas et al., 2015). Due to the experiences of participants, purposeful sampling provides more productive and information-rich narratives. I chose to recruit participants from the African student population at UTEP because of their considerable diversity in terms of age, gender, education experiences, and country of origin. Another reason why I chose this group was the global awareness they bring to the conversation because of their exposure to different people and cultures. As a result of this, their responses were indeed informative and rich. I specifically recruited participants from the African Student Organization (ASO) on Campus. All the students who participated in the study were international students, born and raised in Africa.
Planning the focus groups

In total, I conducted 2 focus group discussions with 16 participants. 13 of these were African-raised undergraduate and graduate students (Group 1), and three were undergraduate students of Latinx and African American backgrounds (Group 2). I also conducted a pilot focus group with three graduate students from the Rhetoric and Writing Studies (RWS) program to help me assess problems with time and technology during the main study. However, after examining the results from the pilot study, I decided to include it in my analysis for two reasons. First, the results provided valuable and relevant insights from individuals with different backgrounds and experiences on the topic that added more depth and breadth to the data. Second, this group of participants—being RWS graduate students who are familiar with critical theory—served as a good comparative group with which to compare and contrast the responses from the other participants. Since I approached the pilot study with the same rigorousness as the main sessions, this decision did not require me to make any changes to the results or reconduct the session. Including the participants from the pilot focus group, there were 14 African participants and 5 non-African participants in total. According to the literature in focus group research, a minimum of four people representing a particular group is an acceptable number of participants (Krueger and Casey, 2008). Also, five participants are an acceptable number of users for usability testing (usability.gov).

Participants were recruited in three ways through email invitations, word-of-mouth, and a personal network of friends. Participants in Group 1 were recruited through email invitations and personal contacts, participants in Group 2 were recruited through word-of-mouth invitations from two first-year RWS classes and around campus, and participants in the pilot session (Group 3) were recruited through personal contacts. (See Appendix A for participants’ characteristics). I planned to recruit at least 5 undergraduate students for the study, but only a few of the students
who signed up came for the discussion. This was partly due to the fact that only a few students seemed interested in the subject matter. Also, the time of recruitment was not very favorable. The recruitment took place in the summer when most students are not on campus, and the few that are present are usually preoccupied with tight class schedules. In terms of location, Groups 1 and 2 were conducted at the University Writing Center’s (UWC) conference room and Group 3 was conducted in the English department’s User-Experience Research Center.

The focus groups were conducted between May and June 2018 after I received IRB approval for the project. Before conducting the discussions, I closely perused the websites’ content to get a sense of the information provided to viewers and identify the pages that participants will analyze. All three focus sessions were audio-taped. With the suggestion and guidance of one of my supervisors, I incorporated a usability testing software called Silverback in Group 1 to help record participants’ non-verbal reactions and navigations on the webpages. Silverback is a guerilla video testing tool that users can download and run on their laptops or computers to capture their experiences and reactions on specific websites. With the help of my supervisor, I provided three Mac computers for the discussion which was used by six of the participants. Incorporating this visual data collecting tool in my methodology enhanced the discussions as it created a collaborative space for participants to explore and discuss the sites together. During the sessions, I noticed that anytime something came up that participants wanted to know more about, they would often look for the information together on the computers. Also, the software enabled me to visualize participants’ facial expressions, bodily gestures, and other non-verbal reactions as they encounter and interpret the visual representations on the websites. This information enhanced my analysis by revealing further information about participants’ views and perceptions about the
representations. I informed participants about the video software and how I might use it in my findings before we began the discussion.

**Conducting the focus groups**

The three focus groups were asked the same set of questions for each website. In order to avoid ‘leading questions’ (Bryman & Bell, 2011), my supervisor advised that I ask general and broad questions that will probe broader conversations and allow participants to express their opinions on their own. As a result, I centered the discussions around the topic of stereotypes rather than my specific research questions, asking participants their opinions about the ideas they felt the representations conveyed about Africa. This strategy proved successful as it engendered conversations on larger, more complex issues.

Before the start of the discussions, I reiterated the study’s focus to participants and explained the discussion process to clarify the expectations of participants. I encouraged participants to openly give their views about the visual images and communication practices used on the websites, and feel free to ask questions. The discussions then started with a general conversation about participants’ thoughts and knowledges about Africa and African people. This conversation was useful in allowing me to understand participants’ familiarity with mainstream media and development representations, as well as how these shape people’s perceptions. This was followed by the perusal of the websites and the discussion of the questions. We discussed one website at a time to allow for easy comparison across the websites as the discussion unfolded.

Participants and I explored the websites using the projector in the room, laptops, or both of these tools. In all the sessions, I allowed participants a few minutes to examine and browse through the websites on their own before beginning the discussions. On several occasions, participants indicated other links and pages that were not part of the discussion but they felt important to
I appreciated this a lot since it allowed participants to make informed suggestions about how the websites could be improved. This was one of the main reasons why I decided to have participants explore the entire contents of the sites as they have been presented on the screen rather than having them examine printed copies of the sites’ images only. By examining the entire design of the webpages, participants were able to holistically assess the websites, considering both the visual and written strategies employed by the organizations.

The semi-structured nature of the discussions helped to create a more relaxed and conversational atmosphere, allowing participants to indicate what other issues they considered important (Creswell, 2008). Thus, the responses and narratives produced were authentic and spontaneous (Johnson & Longhurst, 2010). Participants were encouragingly articulate and forthcoming in their responses. A couple of participants in Group 1 even expressed an interest in knowing if and when their ideas help to improve the websites in any way.

**USING ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTENT ANALYSIS (ECA)**

I used content analysis to identify and categorize the electronic data. Content analysis is a qualitative research method for studying documents and media artifacts by coding and interpreting meaning. I specifically used David Altheide’s (2011) Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) which emphasizes reflexivity in the analysis (p. 23). Meaning, ECA, like ethnographic research, allows researchers to study the products of social interaction by looking at one feature in the context of other features. The researcher must carefully compare the symbolic qualities of the documents for emergent patterns, emphases, and themes (24). This is then followed by an interpretation of the data’s underlying cultural context. ECA, therefore, emphasizes the importance of understanding a visual image’s cultural significance. That is, “the way that elements of a text always refer to the wider cultural context of which they are a part” (Rose, 2001, p. 55). This makes
ECA useful to my study as it allows me to examine the sociocultural processes such as orientalism, global development, and colonialism that give meaning to the images’ effects. Altheide compares and contrasts ECA with Quantitative Content Analysis (QCA) in the table below:

Table 3.1: Comparison of Quantitative Content Analysis (QCA) v. Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) (Reproduced from David Altheide’s *Qualitative Media Analysis*)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research goal</th>
<th>QCA</th>
<th>ECA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflexive research design</td>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>Always</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis</td>
<td>Serial</td>
<td>Reflective; circular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progression from data collection, analysis, interpretation</td>
<td>All phases</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary researcher involvement</td>
<td>Data analysis and interpretation</td>
<td>Prestructured categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>Random or stratified</td>
<td>Purposive and theoretical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prestructured categories</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training required to collect data</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>Substantial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of data</td>
<td>Numbers</td>
<td>Numbers; narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data entry points</td>
<td>Once</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative description and comments</td>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>Always</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concepts emerge during research</td>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>Always</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>Statistical</td>
<td>Textual; statistical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data presentation</td>
<td>Tables</td>
<td>Tables and text</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the information above, I combined numbers, narratives, and textual analysis in the presentation of my findings. The data analysis process of ECA follows “a recursive and reflexive movement between concept development-sampling-data, collection-data, coding-data, and analysis-interpretation” (p. 26). This allows for a methodologically explicit and systematic analysis, although not rigid. I employed ECA to categorize and code the visual images on the websites. I also coded the accompanying written text. The themes that I identified were then compared with the themes from the focus groups, allowing me to balance the methods and give a richer account of the findings. Using ECA helped reduce the large bulk of data from the websites.
to manageable categories, but it did not allow for a detailed examination of the nuances within the images.

To dig deeper into issues of power, ideology, and institutional practices that shape the production of the images, I employed discourse analysis, specifically Critical Discourse Analysis CDA, as part of my methodology.

**Using discourse analysis**

CDA offers an interdisciplinary approach to the study of texts (be it written, visual, or spoken) by paying attention to “discourse and relations between discourse and other social elements” (Fairclough, 2012, p.9). Theo van Leeuwen and Ruth Wodak (1999) explain that this relationship is dialectical in a sense that while discursive situations, institutions and social contexts shape and affect discourse, on the other hand, discourses influence social and political reality” (p. 92). In other words, discourse constitutes society and culture just as it is also constituted by them. Van Leerwen and Wodak identify four ways in which discursive acts are constitutive, and these make CDA most suitable for my analysis.

1. Discursive acts construct identities and groups of people, and the relationships between these groups.

2. They can justify or restore a certain social status quo.

3. They are instrumental in perpetuating and reproducing the status quo.

4. They may have an effect on the transformation or even destruction of the status quo (oppositional discourses) (p. 92).

These elements teach us to see the important role that discourse plays in social life, and the need to take discourse seriously, especially visual images. Fairclough (2010) argues that the image is “an increasingly important feature of contemporary discourse” (p. 71). While ECA mainly looks
at the cultural context in which texts circulate, CDA pays particular attention to the larger social and political contexts (Huckin et al., 2012, p. 107). It looks at how discourses are often constructed to convey very particular visions of people or relations between groups of people, and in a way that normalize these visions. Thus, scholarship on CDA seeks to reveal the composing features and processes involved in this work, to take it apart for people to see and understand how social realities are constituted. By so doing, CDA takes a constructivist approach to emphasize the constructed nature of meaning and reality. Constructivists hold that “things do not just mean.” Rather, meaning is produced in language as roles are assigned to things (Hall, 1997, p. 27). For this reason, “‘self-evident’ truths are actually the product of complicated discursive practices” (as cited in Dogra, 2014, p. 19). Using CDA enabled me to unravel some of these ‘complicated discursive practices’ in both the visual representations and web design practices of INGOs.

van Leeuwen’s and Wodak’s (1999) notion of ‘recontextualization’ was very useful to my analysis. Recontextualization refers to the process of redefining meaning through strategies of deletion, rearrangement, substitution, and addition. This concept helps us to understand how discourses are realized and legitimized, not by actually giving a clear account of events within their relevant contexts, but by re-presenting information in a way that “foster and maintain a set of social relations that serve the interests of power and consumer capitalism” (Machin, 2013, p. 353-54). We see this strategy on the four websites where, in reporting information about the countries they work in, INGOs do not give a full and clear account of situations and their contexts. Instead, they rely on the imagery of past emergencies to continuously convey a message of disaster and poverty. I use the concept of recontextualization in conjunction with Lester Olsen’s (2009) notion of rhetorical recirculation to further examine the repurposing practices employed in the organizations’ visual communications. As evidenced from the previous chapter, very few of the
studies on international development have critically examined the image repurposing and transformation strategies that are employed by development organizations. We must examine and reveal these practices to obtain depth of understanding regarding the things that INGOs are still doing which negatively impact people’s lives.

An important element of discourse analysis which is most useful in visual analysis is paying attention to strategies of inclusion and exclusion used in a visual (Wodak, 2009; Rose, 2001; van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999). This means to look carefully at what information is included or excluded, and what arguments are highlighted or not highlighted as a result of these. While collecting and analyzing the data from the websites, I paid particular attention to exclusions, omissions, or avoidances in the information. As both CDA (van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999) and rhetorical circulation (Olsen, 2009; O’rourke, 2012) scholars note, these strategies are often used to reinforce certain arguments and influence audiences in particular ways. By paying attention to these strategies, I show how INGOs keep the public from getting to know other aspects of global development, specifically the contributions of local people, NGOs, and contributors.

**Visual Data Collection**

The study focuses on the official websites of the four INGOs (savethechildren.org, oxfamamerica.org, mamahope.org, and waterislife.com). I chose these organizations because they provide a good range of the different types of INGOs working in Africa by representing two aspects of these organizations: large/older INGOs and small/newer INGOs. Besides, information on their websites show that all four INGOs are engaged in some kind of community development program in different African countries.

Because material on the websites didn’t seem to change much, the data collection process was not a difficult task. I gathered my data from January 2018 to May 2019, with the majority of the
data being collected in the spring and fall of 2018. There were few instances where material on the websites were changed, deleted, or archived, but most of these remained. For example, Waterislife updated its website in March 2018, with major changes appearing on their homepage and “About” page. A few of the pages, like the page titled, “Approach” was deleted altogether, but I had already downloaded this page. They also changed some of the images used representing the countries they work in. Sometime last year, Oxfam also deleted some of the links containing information about the African countries they work in. I was able to still access the information I wanted with the help of the search bar on their website. For each website, I collected data from their:

- Homepage
- About page
- “Where we work” page, specifically the pages regarding the African countries they work in
- Other pages containing information that is relevant to my study. For example, pages talking about the organization’s programs, annual reports etc.

As well, I collected information from each INGO’s social media sites including Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

I collected the data by taking screenshots of the pages with my laptop. This allowed me to keep the images and their appearance considerably intact without altering them before using them in my work. Using screenshots also allowed me to show the images as they have been designed on the websites. In a few instances, I used a full-page Screen Capture tool instead of my laptop’s screen capture key, particularly in situations where I needed to show the majority or all of the content on the page I’m saving. As a result, most of the images reproduced in this dissertation are the original screenshots I took, with minor adjustments to their sizes.
ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

Save the Children and Oxfam are among the big INGOs in the global development sector. In terms of the type of work they do, they both work in development and emergency or disaster-related situations. Save the Children was founded in 1919 by two sisters, namely Eglantyne Jebb and Dorothy Buxton. According to their website, the organization focuses on “giving children in the U.S. and around the world a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn and protection from harm” (savethechildren.org, 2018). As a large INGO, Save the Children works in 120 countries, including 21 African countries.

Oxfam was founded in 1942 by “a group of Quaker intellectuals, social activists, and Oxford academics” (oxfamamerica.org). The organization describes itself as “a global organization working to end the injustice of poverty. We help people build better futures for themselves, hold the powerful accountable, and save lives in disasters” (oxfam.org, 2018). Their website states further that Oxfam fixes the injustice of poverty by “help[ing] people build better futures for themselves,” “hold[ing] the powerful accountable,” and “sav[ing] lives in disasters” (oxfamamerica.org, 2018). Like Save the Children, Oxfam works in several countries worldwide. A list of countries on Oxfam’s website shows that the organization works in about 29 African countries, but only a few of these African countries have been highlighted for viewers to click and read about them.

In contrast to the two organizations discussed above, Mama Hope and Waterislife are small and newer INGOs established in the 2000s. Unlike Save the Children and Oxfam, these two organizations focus primarily on development situations. Mama Hope is a US-based INGO founded in 2008 by Nyla Rodgers. Describing itself as “an advocate for global communities,” Mama Hope “work[s] in service of grassroots leaders who have big dreams to change the world”
(mamahope.org). Their mission is to “help communities achieve lasting, self-directed prosperity by challenging a broken aid system — one that perpetuates poverty and disempowerment” They do this by “directly supporting projects in education, health, women’s empowerment, agriculture and beyond — that are 100% community-led” (mamahope.org). Mama Hope works in 9 countries including 5 African countries.

Waterislife is also a US-based INGO founded in 2009 by Ken Surritte. According to their website, their mission is “to provide clean water, sanitation and hygiene programs. Save lives [and] transform communities” (waterislife.com). A recent update of the organization’s mission reads that its goal is to provide “safe drinking water to 1 billion people by December 31, 2020” (waterislife.com). The organization works in 15 countries in different parts of the world, including five African countries. Like Mama Hope, Waterislife reports that they use a community-driven approach in their work:

Through community-driven and community-engaged programs, Waterislife aims to save lives and transform communities. Waterislife works closely with nonprofit organizations, local governments and community partners to focus on an integrated approach that ensures households, schools, and medical facilities have access to safe water, proper sanitation and hygiene programs (waterislife.com).

As I discuss my findings, I will engage with the mission statements and development approaches noted by the organizations to evaluate the extent to which these are realized in the images and messages.

Sites’ structure

The structure used on each website’s homepage is significantly different. While Save the Children’s and Oxfam’s look more sophisticated and denser in information, Mama Hope’s and
Waterislife’s look simple with relatively few links. The arrangement on all the homepages is easy to navigate. Regarding visuals, all four INGOs use a lot of images or videos which show different events and situations in the places they work, or different aspects of their programs. I noticed that Mama Hope tries to avoid these types of images by using images of people engaged in different activities. In terms of currency, Save the Children and Oxfam update their homepage often, particularly the banner image, but Waterislife and Mama Hope do not. Here are screenshots of the organizations’ home pages (I have cropped off the bottom sections of these screenshots because they were too long to occupy a page of the document).
Figure 3.1: A screenshot of Save the Children’s homepage (savethechildren.org). Accessed May 1, 2019.
Figure 3.2: A screenshot of Oxfam’s homepage (oxfamamerica.org). Accessed May 1, 2019.
MAMA HOPE is an advocate for global communities. We work in service of grassroots leaders who have big dreams to change the world.

Figure 3.3: A screenshot of Mama Hope’s homepage (mamahope.org). Accessed May 1, 2019.
Figure 3.4: A screenshot of Waterislife’s homepage (waterislife.com). Accessed May 19, 2019.
For the specific webpages about Africa, all the websites have a professional and polished appearance, except Waterislife’s written text, which looks a bit unorganized in some of the pages. The information provided on these pages remains almost permanent with little to no updates, except the date at the bottom of the page which is updated to reflect the current. Oxfam’s webpages, however, seem to have a more current feel because new stories are occasionally posted on the webpages. On Save the Children’s pages, I noticed that the section titled, “Emergency Alert,” which appears on several of the pages, was updated during the Cyclone Idai disaster that happened in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi. I gathered from this update that this particular section of the pages is updated only when there is a new emergency. The information remains the same until another disaster happens. Lastly, regarding design and stylistic features, all the organizations but Oxfam have a similar structure: a banner image at the topic, followed by a series of texts, then some images or visual links towards the end of the page. As mentioned above, Oxfam uses a structure similar to a news website, where they update viewers about their work by posting different ‘stories from the field.’

**Data analysis**

**Focus group data analysis**

I used Express Scribe Transcription Software to transcribe the data. Then, I went through the transcripts a few times to familiarize myself with the narratives. Using a qualitative data analysis technique called “phenomenological research” (Creswell, 2007), I coded and analyzed the transcripts for emerging themes. According to Creswell, phenomenological research describes several participants’ understanding of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon, exploring the common aspects of these experiences common (p. 57-58). This means using the individual’s experiences to “grasp the very nature [and meaning] of the thing” (p. 58), as opposed
to focusing on statements that connect to the researcher’s own expectations and experiences. From this perspective, I made sure to relisten to the narratives and examine the meaning produced in the sentences in order to transcribe the actual words used by participants. I coded thematic commonalities as well as differences, linking the themes to my research questions and theoretical frameworks (Paley, 2016).

I first identified preliminary codes from the data by noting specific words, phrases, sentences, and issues that were common or looked meaningful. This helped me to identify common patterns across the three focus groups. After this step, I went on to code for 1) participants’ understanding, ideas, and opinions about how African countries are represented in relation to issues of poverty and development (Chapter 4); 2) participants’ opinions about how the representations impact the identity of African people; and 3) participants’ ideas and suggestions for improving those aspects of the websites’ visual communications that they felt needed to be improved (Chapter 6). In addition to these, I coded the different ways participants viewed each of the four websites in terms of which ones they felt were more stereotypical or “promising” in their representations. This allowed me to compare and contrast the INGOs. As encouraged by the phenomenological research approach, I also coded the data based on insights from my theoretical frameworks. In this regard, I looked for the thematic discourses of difference, power, and ideology (Said, 1978; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999) and concerns about local people’s agency or perspectives (Smith, 2012; Cunningham & Mathie, 2008). I recorded my coding process in a journal that I reviewed often to familiarize myself with the narratives that were emerging. After identifying overarching themes and patterns, I defined and redefined them in a way that best reflected participants’ responses.
Visual data analysis

Rose (2001) writes that to critically understand how visual images work in our society, we must:

1. “Take images seriously”… because “they are not entirely reducible to their context. Visual representations have their own effects” (p. 15).

2. “Think about the social conditions and effects of visual objects” because “cultural practices like visual representations both depend on and produce social inclusions and exclusions” (p. 16).

3. Consider our “own way of looking at images” because “ways of seeing are historically, geographically, culturally and socially specific” (p. 17). This makes it necessary for researchers to reflect on how they critic visual images.

These criteria ask us to pay attention to the visual effects that emanate from the images themselves, the socio-cultural context of images, and the ways of seeing that viewers, including researchers, bring to bear on images. It is based on these insights that I chose my methods of analysis. While the focus groups provided the opportunity for me to investigate the images’ meaning from the views, thoughts, and experiences of multiple audiences, ECA and discourse analysis allowed me to examine different contexts that shaped the images’ meanings and effects. ECA was used to carefully examine the visual content, features, and qualities of each image. By combining these methods, I gained a deeper understanding of the different levels of meaning invested in the images which strengthened and enriched my analysis.

After collecting the focus group data, I went back to the websites to gather and code the images on the webpages, including the ones that participants discussed and the ones they did not discuss. I first developed coding categories and variables (see below) based on elements in the
images that participants mentioned in their responses, my own research questions, and other common elements discussed in previous studies (Lutz & Collins, 1993; Ali, James & Vultee, 2013; Fehrenbach & Rodogno, 2015). I then coded each image by 1) examining and attaching the most relevant code(s) to it, and 2) comparing the coded images to identify sub-themes and patterns for each website. I did this by counting and recording the frequency of certain visual elements. I focused on important frequencies that align with the study’s focus and theoretical frameworks. I looked for 1) the different kinds of situations represented, 2) the types of people used, 3) how local perspectives are represented, and 4) how the images are combined with written texts.

Table 3.2: Coding categories and descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situation or issue depicted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of people shown</td>
<td>e.g., adults or children, women or men, aid workers or local contributors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action or activity of people in the image</td>
<td>posed, or engaged in an activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action or activity of aid workers in the image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Development’ activity shown</td>
<td>e.g., well drilling, children reading in a classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group or individual focused</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>indoors or outdoors, classroom, refugee camp, farm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surroundings shown</td>
<td>urban or rural setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expressions</td>
<td>smiling, happy, sad, crying, ill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People’s appearance or dressing</td>
<td>clean, dirty, barefooted, native dressing or ‘Western’ style</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After developing the sub-themes from the individual websites, I then compared them for overarching themes. There were a lot of similarities in the messages, but there were also differences which I carefully recorded. I went back and forth, adding, deleting, and refining the
themes to ensure that the analysis was thorough. This process helped to reduce the visual data to a manageable size, making it easier for me to double-check the themes with those from the focus groups. Additionally, examining and recording the codes for each image made it easier to understand their specific messages and build on participants’ responses.

Regarding the accompanying text on the webpages, I coded this by recording the frequency of the use of words and expressions. I first identified patterns of repetition about certain words, phrases, situations, events, and statistics. Then, I coded for information provided about local people, contributors or community partners. Paying attention to the patterns of repetition, particularly in the written text, revealed how INGOs employ repetition as a strategy to strengthen the narratives they construct about African countries.

The last step involved the application of CDA perspectives to the data. I examined the ideological positions that the images realize and articulate, how they produce and reproduce dominant perceptions of Africa, and how they even undermine alternative discourses seeking to change the status quo. As Gunther Kress and van Leeuwen (1998) succinctly note in Reading Images: The grammar of visual design, images operate “within the realm of the realizations and instantiations of ideology, as means – always – for the articulation of ideological positions” (p. 14).

**POSITIONALITY AND REFLEXIVITY**

Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (1996) writes that “all researchers are positioned” by specific social structures such as age, gender, race, class, nationality, and intellectual predisposition that shape and inform their own research process and interpretations. Creswell (2008) adds that the researcher’s positionality also affects how research participants perceive, respond to and engage with the researcher. Throughout the study, I was conscious about the different ways my cultural
and ethnic identities as an international student from Ghana, West Africa could potentially affect my data collection and interpretations, or how participants would respond in the focus groups. It was based on this concern that I chose to study the entire content belonging to African countries on the websites without making selections or pulling out specific images to examine. This allowed me to consider the variety of visual images and their accompanying design and textual features that have been used to represent the various African countries. It was only during the focus groups where we did not have the luxury of time to go through all the webpages on Africa that I allowed participants to choose which pages and content they found interesting and wanted to discuss. But even then, before participants moved on to explore the specific pages and content they chose, I gave them the opportunity to first see each site’s page that contained a photo gallery of all the African countries the organization works in.

My identity as an African significantly informed how I narrowed the study, particularly my decision to focus on images of African countries rather than other developing countries. This decision is not only because Africa tends to be the place that most INGOs work in, but also because my experiences and knowledge as an ‘insider’ allow me to better understand the socio-cultural dimensions and consequences within the representations. However, when it came to the interpretation of the findings, I was mindful of my analysis, carefully allowing the data to speak for itself.

Further, my identity as secretary and member of ASO was instrumental in helping me access and recruit the African participants for the first focus group. For instance, it was easier for me to access the organization’s official portal and send a group email invitation to all the members of the organization before individually contacting some of them. I made sure to inform the
leadership of the organization about my work and seek their permission to use the portal before proceeding to send out the email.

Another important aspect of my positionality was the level of connection I had with the African participants in focus group one. I know several of the participants on a personal level, and while this allowed me to forge a rapport with participants during the recruitment and discussions, I was careful to not let that interfere with how I facilitated the discussions. My local ‘insider’ knowledge enabled me to answer participants’ questions about situations or events related to Africa that came up in the conversations. Also, as an insider, I was able to understand aspects of participants’ non-verbal communications that were expressed during the discussions. While this insider positionality contributed to the strength and legitimacy of my research process and analysis, it was sometimes challenging. In particular, it made me overly sensitive about the focus group process. Initially, I was concerned that my identity may make the US participants uncomfortable in expressing their opinions about the representations, but I completely forgot about this concern when the discussion started. I went into the focus groups not particularly knowing what to expect apart from gaining a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences with some of the development narratives they have seen on their televisions or on the web, but the conversations engendered more information and insights that have enriched the study.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explained how I combined different qualitative research methods to collect and analyze my data. I showed how this research design allowed me to explore the different interpretations of the visual and written texts used on the websites. I particularly highlighted how incorporating focus groups methods into my research allowed me to show the value of audience experiences, particularly audiences from the countries often represented in development messages.
I also provided an overview of the four websites and explained why I chose them. The chapter ended with my reflection on the practicalities involved in the research process, some of the challenges I faced, and how I negotiated these challenges. In the next chapter, I present the themes that emerged from the focus group discussions, incorporating findings from the other two methods of analysis.
Chapter Four:
Participants’ Perceptions of how African Countries are Represented on INGO Websites

Drawing on the focus group discussions with both African and non-African participants, this chapter analyzes the major themes that emerged from the participants’ responses. The chapter addresses the first research question: 1) How are African countries represented on the websites of Save the Children, Oxfam, Mama Hope, and Waterislife? a. How do the sites represent issues of poverty and development in the communities depicted? b. What are readers’ perceptions of the representations? As I mentioned in chapter 3, the focus group discussions focused on the visual images appearing on the sites. Participants were asked whether or not they found the images stereotypical, and why. The chapter is divided into three sections following this introduction. The first section presents the responses from the African participants. The second section discusses the responses of the non-African participants. In the third section, I compare and contrast the websites, noting similarities and differences in their representations. The chapter demonstrates how participants’ cultural backgrounds, academic experiences, and exposure to global issues were significant to their interpretations of the websites.

African Participants

In their responses to the sites’ content on Africa presented in the focus groups, participants noted that the African countries have generally been misrepresented and stereotyped by the INGOs. The themes that emerged from their responses include predominant messages of lack and deprivation, theme of difference, inaccurate labelling and naming of visual images, lack of context and simplification, and the influence of the international media. While some participants acknowledged the organizations’ monetary objectives and how this influences the kinds of visual representations they prefer to use, others noted that the images were unethical and detrimental to the image of the people depicted.
Predominant messages of lack and deprivation

One of the major themes that emerged from the responses of the African participants is that they felt the sites’ images of Africa focused mostly on the “worst” parts of Africa through depictions of dirty, sick, deprived, malnourished children. Responding to Save the Children’s page, titled “Africa,” where images of children have been used to represent the different African countries the organization works in (see figure 4.1), some of the participants noted that the representations work together to make African countries look bad in their entirety. The result is the perpetuation of a one-sided view of Africa. Explaining why she feels the images are stereotypical, one participant said:

Well, majorly because even when they put pictures of ones smiling, they still make them look dirty and ragged and poor because most of the ones that are smiling happily, they either have dust on their face or eye bags like they have been crying. There are details to pictures that you could get better pictures than that. Everywhere in Africa is not messed up. There are pretty places in Africa. You go to Ghana you see fine places; you go to Nigeria you see pretty places, but there are also the poor places there. Like here [America] there are pretty places here but there are poor places here too. So, why make Africa look bad? (Priscilla, Focus Group 1).
Figure 4.1: Save the Children’s “Africa” page. Accessed December 11, 2018.
In the above, Priscilla perceives that the overarching message conveyed by the image gallery of African countries is that of lack and deprivation. As a result, although Save the Children includes images of smiling children in their representations to probably communicate more positive messages, these images have not such effect. According to Priscilla, images of smiling children as used by Save the Children still connote stereotypes by focusing on the children’s dirty, sad, and crying faces. In this way, Priscilla draws attention to the role of the camera gaze in constructing images of African Children in certain ways. Her response resonates with recent research examining popular representations of images of smiling children in INGO representations (Salvatici, 2015). Like Priscilla commented, Silvia Salvatici notes that these images are used as sights of development benevolence, especially in ways that often reinforce INGOs as saviors.

Challenging the representations, Priscilla notes that “everywhere in African is not messed up” as the organization depicts. Some participants, however, expressed a different opinion, noting that the organization’s monetary goal is foregrounded in the kinds of images used:

I also think you have to look at the objective of the organization, what their goal is, and why they put these kinds of images. So, if I wanted a donation for a kid who is genuinely in distress, wants certain basic amenities and then I present him or her with nice good-looking pictures, who is going to look at that and say this kid needs help? So, that's the objective. …That is why I am saying we should look at the angle with which they are posting these kinds of images (Esther, Focus Group 1).

A similar view was expressed by another participant:

In support of what Esther said, the idea is to save the children so if they look good then why would you save them? So, I think we should'n look at Africa in general but with respect to the particular website that we are looking at (Oscar, Focus Group 1).
Another participant responded with further explanation about why the images are problematic:

Yes, but sometimes they don’t want to appeal to anything. Like for instance, go to the internet right now and type Nigeria, Lagos, you can never see something appealing. They try to give you the worst of it. Basically, they don’t want you to feel like there is anything good in Africa. So, I think sometimes, yes, she's right they try to get your emotions by bringing those pictures, but most cases they try to make Africa look tattered and that is really, really not good. (Mandy, Focus Group 1).

In the above, Mandy critiques the constant pathetic appeals in poverty and development messages generally, and their influence in shaping viewers’ understandings of African countries. While the representations are intended to draw the audience’s emotions towards giving to support the organization, these appeals have deeper material effects. Besides, Mandy brings attention to the global influence of INGO messages as the images are circulated and recirculated online via the web. To illustrate her point, Mandy searches the internet for “Africa” and “Nigeria,” her country of origin, during the discussion to show how the images flow through the web and influence people further long after they have been disseminated by the INGOs (see figure 4.2).
Making similar observations about the one-sided theme of lack and deprivation on Waterislife’s website (see figure 4.3), another participant said,

Well, they chose the not so good portion to take the picture. They want to show us that these children are poor, they live in a desert, they have nothing to eat. What they are living in is a little hut with the clothes outside. So why didn't they take it next to the building with the trees and the grass… So, they chose to show us the not-so-good and it is stereotypical (Mary, Focus Group 2).
Besides echoing the sentiments of some of the participants referenced earlier, Mary adds that the representation draws on depictions of rurality to portray “Kenya” as deprived. This is realized through the visual emphasis on elements commonly associated with African countries, such as village huts and desert lands.

For some participants, stereotyping is also realized through categorization, specifically the way the various African countries have been visually categorized without providing enough information to explain each country’s context. According to Randy, representing certain countries with images that categorize them as extremely poor and deprived is stereotypical and does not convey an adequate understanding of these countries. He notes,

Looking at the site what I am able to discern, what I understand, at first glance is maybe levels of the severity of poverty. From this page, Kenya seems to be the poorest because the child there is crying and that might not be the case. Uganda’s child there is very, very happy so somebody may look at that from that angle and say okay, so this is what is actually going on. Kenya is the poorest and, in that order, right? So, it’s a little unfair and may not be the case so let’s look at that one too (Randy, Focus Group 1).

Other participants also talked about how stereotypes are reinforced through the frequent use of women and children which depicts African women and their families as vulnerable. According to
Fred, “especially when it comes to issues of refugees or people in need, you don’t see any man with kids around him but you see a mother with the child and they talk about women and children that are in dire situations” (Focus Group 3). Further discussing this topic, participants noted that seemingly positive messages intending to portray African women as hardworking are not completely removed from visual depictions of suffering and rurality. Below is an image from Oxfam about “celebrating strong mothers from around the world” (see figure 4.3).

![Image](oxfamamerica.org/explore/stories/celebrating-strong-mothers-from-around-the-world/)

**Figure 4.4:** An article on Oxfam’s “Ghana” page celebrating Mother’s Day 2018. Accessed December 11, 2018.

Majority of the participants noted that this image stereotypes African women by representing them as struggling and suffering more than the other women included in the rest of the story. While this particular image, which is also the image used as the banner image for the story, showcases an African woman carrying a bucket of water on her head and a baby on her back, the other women are portrayed playing or just sitting with their children. As a result, participants viewed the representation as essentializing African women. As evidenced in Oscar’s response,
Yeah, she's struggling, yeah. I mean what is the celebration about this? Someone with a baby at her back and carrying water at the same time. The caption says that “on Mother's Day Oxfam salutes the powerful women we've met.” I believe that they could have done something better (Oscar, Focus Group 1).

It's sad, you know it's sad and disheartening when you see some of these things because the whole idea is to celebrate someone and when you look at this picture there is nothing worth celebrating about it. It's like someone who is in total distress (Oscar, Focus Group 1).

Albert complicates the point with his view that:

I think we should also view it in perspective that regardless of the situation, the mother is strong for the child. She's not leaving the child behind to pursue this and that. So, that is maybe the message. It's just (...) that they are showing it that way (Albert, Focus Group 1).

The one-sided discourse discussed in the responses above reflects what writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s (2009) notion of the “danger of the single story.” According to Adichie, the danger of the single story is when we “show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again and that is what they become” (p. 27). In other words, when we reduce the complexities of people’s lives and situations to a single narrative through stereotypes. In this case, as the participants observed in their responses, the Africans on the websites are portrayed all together as pitiable victims of poverty.

As the preceding analysis has demonstrated, Save the Children reduces the situations in the African countries they serve to “a single narrative.” Adichie stresses further that the consequence of the single-story narrative is that “it emphasizes difference” and creates stereotypes that make an incomplete story “become the only story.” From this view, the danger of employing such limited representations of African countries is that not only do these images reduce the complexities of African people and the problems they are facing, but they also become the only stories about Africa that donors take away from the website.
Messages of difference

Another recurring theme from the African participants’ responses is that participants felt the representations promote difference between the various groups represented on the sites. This occurs in two ways through messages that promote difference between the West/’us’ and the non-West/’them’ (Africans) and message that promote difference between African countries and other developing countries. Regarding the first point, participants noted that the representations tend to juxtapose wealthy Western families with poor and needy African children, emphasizing their racial and socioeconomic differences. Commenting on Save the Children’s website, Fred notes,

Well, I do agree that the purpose of the organization would determine what gets put out there. On the other hand, it doesn't take away the fact that it projects certain people in a certain light as those in need. Here we see black and brown people as those who are lacking and then we see those who are capable of giving as those who do not belong to this category of people. For instance, if you are on the first link the quotation there says that “humanity owes the child the best it has to give.” So, humanity as a whole, all of us… But when it talks about the sponsors, those who are giving, it shows the image of another group of people. In this instance, we have a white man and a white daughter you know as sponsors. So, it seems as though a certain category of people lack something… those who are capable of helping are considered as a particular group even though it [the quote] says humanity as a whole can give the child (Fred, Focus Group 3).

Fred’s response also shows how Save the Children’s quote about humanity’s responsibility to the child contradicts their representations, which identify a certain group of people as donors. On Waterislife’s website, another participant noted that places in the United States that are
experiencing crisis are not depicted as helpless as the places in Africa have (see figures 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7).

Figure 4.5: The top section of Waterislife’s “Northern Ghana” page. Accessed December 11, 2018.

Figure 4.6: A video on Waterislife’s “Northern Ghana” page. Accessed December 11, 2018.

Responding to Waterislife’s website, Aden explains in the following:
This website is more stereotypical than the other one because water crisis is a global problem. And this has places of Flint, Michigan and other European countries. And Flint, Michigan had a serious water crisis with lead poisoning that killed a lot of people but if you go through the pictures of Flint, it shows very happy people, unlike the African countries. The picture for the Northern Ghana, it’s like they don’t even get water to take a shower, and I think that is not good. Even though it says it's a problem it is not depicting how bad the situation is [the images of Flint] (Aden, Focus Group 1).

Figure 4.7: An image on Waterislife’s “Flint, Michigan” page. Accessed December 11, 2018.

In addition, participants perceived that among the developing countries represented on the websites, Africa is particularly portrayed as in more precarious ways through depictions of lands affected by famine and drought. One of the participants said,

The funny thing is the differences in the pictures for Africa and the pictures for other places. If you look at China, China looks cool but if you look at Africa, everything is dry. There is no tar and that’s not the only place in the entire Africa. Most of the places you see of Africa, the ground is not even tarred (Priscilla, Focus Group 1).

Another participant said,
Look at the images of Mexico, Honduras, and Haiti. Happy picture (Andrew, Focus Group 1).

Oscar further reiterated the point,

This is something, and you see this runs throughout the whole websites. It is not only one particular website. When you look at all the websites, if it is something about Africa then it’s bad, but if it’s other countries then it's good (Oscar, Focus Group 1).

As participants were discussing this issue, I asked them why they think this is happening as they perceive it to be. Rick’s response is quite telling. In his words:

I think they are trying to use the pictures of Africa to pull the funds and then after that they distribute it to the other countries because people will see the pictures of Africa and say that we need to help Africa more than the other countries (Rick, Focus Group 1).

In Rick’s opinion, images of Africa are a sought of rhetorical assets used by INGOs to create certain understandings about African countries as being the poorest and the neediest. This is supported by the accompanying texts on some of the websites which describe the African countries as being the “poorest” places to live, suffering the “worst” drought and other common development tropes. For example, the “Emergency Alert” statement appearing on some of Save the Children’s webpages on Africa describes the whole continent as “drought-ravaged Africa,” although only three African countries are mentioned at the beginning of the report to be experiencing the drought emergency. Rick’s response also suggests that the images and messages of Africa are exploited by INGOs to attract donations.

Furthermore, the participants’ responses illustrate that Africans are essentialized in ways that promote ethnocentrism more than helping to develop the communities. Because these images of famine and drought are repurposed and redistributed as symbols of entire countries, they reinforce the image of rurality, drought, and famine as symbols of countries in Africa, thereby marginalizing these countries.
Inaccurate naming and labelling of visual images

Another point that participants raised is the inaccuracies within the representations and how this contributes to the generalization of community problems to entire populations. This is realized through the lack of specificity of the location names given to the images. Specifically, the use of images to represent countries rather than the specific communities they show. Participants responses illustrate that the accuracy of place naming is an integral part of how African people are depicted to the global public, since how a place is named influences how viewers see and understand that place and the people belonging there. Touching on this topic, participants critiqued the labels and headings added to the images because they take the specific locations being shown in the images for granted. (i.e., “save children in Burundi,” “save children in Kenya.” see figures 4.8 and 4.9).

![Image of Save the Children's Burundi page](https://example.com/burundi_page)

**Figure 4.8:** The top section of Save the Children’s “Burundi” page Accessed December 11, 2018.

Responding to the image above, Aden comments that:
For me, I think they [the images] could have been more qualified. As in, being specific. When people go to websites, they look at pictures. Most people hardly read to capture the statistics that are provided. So, that would mean majority of the children in those countries are being affected but actually that isn’t the issue. … that is why I am saying they should have qualified it more. They should have been more specific. Most people do not read the statistics there. They will not look at it. That would mean that across Africa, we are all suffering like that, and that is why we fled from Africa to this country. But that is not the reason, I wasn't going through this, that wasn't why I came here. Qualify it. You need to make it specific. Even looking at the picture [representing Burundi] Teenage pregnancy in Burundi, that means majority of the kids growing up experience such things, and it [the generalization] sometimes affects them negatively (Andrew, Focus Group 1).

As Andrew kept on reiterating in his response, the lack of specificity of the names assigned to the images leads to the homogenization of African countries. For example, regarding the figure above, placing the label “Burundi” on the image creates the impression that the issues of refugee and civil unrest mentioned in the text cut across the entire country when this is not the case. This shows how in addition to the visual effects being conveyed, the pattern of image reproduction used on the site negatively impacts the people represented. This illustrates Rose’s (2001) argument that technologies of circulation such as websites influence how people interpret visuals.

Another important points that Andrew highlights are the fast nature of online reading as well as how this makes it easier for people to assume that the problems depicted on the websites cover the entire country or continent being shown. Because people only scan through web content, they are less likely to read the accompanying text to see which specific groups are mentioned. The representations are therefore misleading, and they do not provide an authentic representation of the countries indicated. In other words, when images of specific communities, events, or people are labeled as to represent entire countries, those representations are not authentic as they promote skewed understandings about these countries.
Another participant who is from Kenya also commented on Save the Children’s image of Kenya (see figure 4.9), emphasizing the problem of generalization and how the representation gives a limited understanding of the people, communities, and their sociocultural experiences. According to him,

When you look at this, it is capturing one community out of 42 communities. It's one community that practices pastoralism that has this situation of moving up and down because of drought…

Second, there is like “43% of Kenyans...” I think in that case they could say “43% of this community…” That will be more specific and more accurate because you will find that more than 90% of the people have access to better healthcare and things like that, but (…) make some communities in that situation (Albert, Focus Group 1).

In the above response, Albert provides more insights into the socio-cultural context of the community depicted. This provides more understanding about the food crisis mentioned in the text, while also emphasizing how the visual projection provided on Kenya does not fairly represent the country’s poverty and development situation. As seen from the figure, the representation
completely ignores these details. In addition to this, Albert points out how the statistics provided in the text further generalize the problems depicted as they do not provide any contextual information.

Several scholars have noted the tendency of both INGO messages and international news of Africa to generalize about community problems within specific African countries (Ademolu, 2018; Steeves, 2008). Participants’ responses in the above illustrate some of the ways that INGO messages continue to perpetuate this problem. Commenting on the absence of location names, which is repeated across the websites, one participant expressed mistrust about the credibility of the INGOs’ images. Specifically, whether they are truly images taken from the countries they have been attached to:

How would someone on this website know that this picture is from this country? That's one thing I want to know. It can be that they have just got it from one country and they have spread it across all the other countries (Amand, Focus Group 1).

Lastly, the responses reveal that inaccurate representations affect INGOs’ credibility with African people, particularly those wishing to support the organizations or get involved in the work they are doing. As recent research has illustrated, such representations make it harder for audiences who identify with the places depicted to be involved in development (Ademolu, 2018). In the current study, some participants noted that they wouldn’t want to support those organizations that do not accurately represent African countries. While INGOs may consider Western audiences as their main donors, there is the need for them to pay more attention to issues of accuracy, as this can help them establish credibility with African people aiming to collaborate with development organizations to bring about social change. Having natives get involved in INGO work can engender impactful collaborations between INGOs and local people.

**Lack of context and simplification**

Lack of context was another point that participants extensively discussed. This occurs in three main ways through the lack of details about the problems depicted, simplification of their
solutions, and “random” images that do not provide any particular information about the issues depicted. Referring to Save the Children’s image representing Burundi (see figure 4.8), one participant noted that the written information provided does not give viewers a sufficient understanding of the contexts of the causes mentioned. According to Amand, “maybe there are more things to that problem, but they are just showcasing only one part of that problem (Focus Group 1).

Speaking about the simplification of development solutions, one of the participants mentioned a disconnect between the issues depicted and the interventions being promoted. Commenting on Waterislife’s images of “Northern Ghana” (see example in figures 4.4 and 4.6), Esther explains how several of the representations do not provide adequate information about the water issues going on in the communities. She also perceived through the pictures that the organization does not give attention to the water resources the communities already have which may help to develop better solutions. She notes below:

There is one thing I noticed. I agree that water is what humans need, but then you are talking about the lack of water in a certain place. You should be looking at the pictures of different water resources and what the issue is. This one, for instance, I can see that it’s turbid water, it’s not clear, and not potable. But then, aside from this which is a video, all the other pictures really don’t tell me anything. Maybe you are treating water, but if you are treating water at that small scale, what is it going to help the community. The other picture that makes a bit of sense is the one where they are drilling. So, then you can see there is something being done to improve water, giving the people water so that makes sense. This picture, for instance, doesn't tell me anything. It doesn't relate to anything (Esther, Focus Group 1).
Esther’s response raises very interesting points regarding the organization’s intervention and the way that it is not a long-term solution. She further explains:

Why I have a problem with this is, you are not showing maybe the technology or know-how to tap these kinds of water for the people. You are giving them drums, and the filters. Where are they going to get the water? You haven't really done anything for them. You've given them drums, filters, and they'll go back to that murky water and then fetch that water and filter it. How will that filter last? So, I think the images are not putting out the right information, or the right... I wouldn’t want to donate anything if I see this website. Right now, you are not giving them anything (Esther, Focus Group 1).

Expressing a different opinion, Oscar said,

In every country, it’s the responsibility of the government to help with the infrastructure and development… so then these people [the organization] the aim is to help … We have to look at the context. They are just trying to help out (Oscar, Focus Group 1).

In response, Esther noted that “but I think it is not a long-term solution as they have presented it” (Focus Group 1). It is an interesting point that Esther raises here regarding the contradiction between Waterislife’s mission statement and the interventions they are advertising on their websites. While the mission states that Waterislife “aims to save lives and transform communities” (Waterislife, 2018), Esther notes that the straw filters being provided to the communities do not help to actually transform the communities as noted in the organization’s mission.

Another participant mentioned the way that the solutions have been simplified. In his response to Save the Children’s representation of Kenya (see figure 4.9), Albert noted that information regarding how aid is implemented is excluded from the site. According to him, because the pastoral community that often experiences drought is always moving up and down, it
is not clear whether the funds are being collected to help the community stop the movement (Albert, Focus Group 1). Instead, the problem has been oversimplified with a few unsubstantiated statistics and the image of a dirty little boy crying and being fed. By doing so, the complexities of poverty in Kenya are ignored, and donors never get to learn about the details of these situations.

Another point that participants raised that connects to the topic of context is the idea of “random” images. As seen in Esther’s interpretations in the above, participants repeatedly said that Waterislife’s representations do not provide adequate and enough information about the problems or interventions depicted. Mary added,

So, what are they trying to get us to look at, you know, a bunch of people? The kids in the background, what are the kids doing? Are they drinking water? How does this picture say you are giving me water? … It’s not showing me anything (Mary, Focus Group 2).

Mary again expressed similar concerns about the images on Mama Hope’s website,

It's very stereotypical because of the group picture. It's not a bad thing, taking a group picture. It's just that it is very common. You don't see too much of the work that is being done and the progress that is being made. You just see hey, they are poor and we did the work here (Mary, Focus Group 2).

These responses highlight that the “random” images lead to passive portrayals of people because of the way that these images depict people in idle positions. These, we can learn from these responses that when aid organizations do not critically think about how they use images of people on their websites, there is the tendency for the images to follow common stereotypical narratives of developing countries. Therefore, there is a need for aid organizations to be more sensitive to the consequences of the images they circulate online.
**Media influence**

One of the participants brought attention to the influence of the international media on INGO representations, noting the role of discourse circulation in shaping cultural representations of group identity. According to Rick,

> I think this website is doing what every other media is doing. When they think of Africa, they think of famine. Africa is filled with people who are poor, Africa suffering from diseases. So, that’s the image they have in their minds already. So then if you are making a coverage of Africa and you do not bring these things, nobody will give you the attention. That is the idea that people have already so give them what they want to see and they'll pour in the money (Rick, Focus Group 1).

Another theme connected to the influence of the media on INGO representations that participants mentioned was the idea of network. According to participants, the four organizations’ representations of Africa as “linked up:”

> Everything is linked up here. From Save the Children to whatever we are seeing here… The pictures are all linked up (Andrew, Focus Group 1).

Esther added,

> Yes, it even surprises me because these are different [organizations] but yet still there is still a link there (Esther, Focus Group 1).

What is important in these responses is how these websites and their representations, coupled with the information of Africa on other online sites, come together to create a network of ideas that shapes the thinking, writing, the activities of people about Africa. This reflects Appadurai’s (1996) notion of mediascapes, which create an image of a distant culture that is politically skewed.
NON-AFRICAN PARTICIPANTS

There were varied responses from participants in this group. While some of the participants felt that the representations were stereotypical and one-sided, others felt that they were not stereotypical because the images are true depictions of the challenges happening in the communities and viewers can “feel” it. In addition to these views, some participants noted that the representations were not showing extreme levels of suffering like other images of Africa they have previously seen in the media. The participants talked about the theme of difference, poor and helpless children, and passive depictions of community. Talking about Save the Children’s images of Africa (see figure 4.1), one of the participants notes that the representations are one-sided because they focus exclusively on lack and draw on stereotypical classifications that project certain African countries as mainly filled with hungry and suffering children. According to Felix,

I will say that yeah, this presents one worldview. And the focus is on the lack rather than the sufficiency. For example, there is a child who is shown us wanting more food, hunger for example, and a certain child is associated with a certain country, for example, Somalia… a skeleton type of a child is shown as opposed to other children from other countries. So certain countries are stereotyped, and you can see that in addition to hunger, there is also the lack of, you know, education… Africa is projected as a land of poverty for example, and lack of education, lack of medicine. There are some children who are shown to be suffering from certain diseases…. There might have been, for example, happier children (Felix, Focus Group 3).

Felix raises some interesting points in his response that reflect insights expressed by Mathie and Cunningham (2008) in their work on Asset-Based Community Development framework. First, he critiques the visuals’ language of deficit that constructs the countries as helpless and deprived.
While this appeal is intentionally used by INGOs to motivate donors to act, Felix’s point about ignoring the people’s “sufficiency” suggests that the representations hinder alternative, more positive aspects of the African countries. For example, people’s resourcefulness in confronting the issues that affect their lives. As a result, he draws attention to the point that the overarching message of lack emanating from the picture gallery limits people’s understanding of the continent as it does not provide a complete picture of the experiences of people therein.

Second, like one of the African participants noted, Felix also sees that the representations classify certain African countries as extremely poor, specifically Kenya and Somalia, in ways that reproduce stereotypes about these countries. Felix’s point about the representations’ focus on lack rather than sufficiency resonates with Mathie’s and Cunningham’s argument that the field of development needs to move “away from deficits and problems and on to people’s assets and strengths” (p. 2). According to Mathie and Cunningham, this shift is crucial because “an exclusive focus on what is lacking or absent often drains away energy for change” (p. 2). This quote reveals that the practice of highlighting people’s problems to attract funds from the public not only reinforces the ‘victim’/’savior’ narrative, but it also takes away key elements needed for social change. These elements include local innovation, organizational capacity, and unity (p. 3). One of the participants, however, disagreed that the images were stereotypical. She expresses,

I disagree with that. I think that the campaign is to gather funds for a cause and so you have to show the cause. I mean if you are going to be selling tourism trips to a great place in Africa then you will use different images. This is for fundraising. This is to sponsor a child for you to send money so, the purpose is to show the lack instead of you know, the opposite (Florence, Focus Group 3)

She further noted,
Yeah, I mean you are asking someone to send money or to sponsor a child and this is why because there is no clothing, because there is no money, because there is not enough resources, and so I am showing you that there isn't enough. There is a lack, there is a need and you can feel it (Florence, Focus Group 3).

Florence’s point about how the visuals evoke certain feelings in viewers reflect Hall’s point about the tendency of people to “read photography and televisuals as natural or beyond the realm of critique” (Hall, 2001, p. 132). Another interesting point that Florence’s comments draw attention to is how, although several of the images used by Save the Children are of past events (i.e., the image representing Kenya is dated 2010), they are still having an impact on viewers’ perceptions about the African countries in the present (Barthes, 1977). Viewers are unaware that some of the situations depicted may have changed, but to them, the countries are still in lack. This illustrates how images use images of disaster or emergencies to produce and reproduce stereotypes of Africa through constant repetition and familiarity of those images on the web (Bhabha, 1994). (I discuss more on this in the next chapter).

Some of the participants noted that Save the Children’s images seem diversified in the way that it depicts different kinds of situations and includes images of smiling children. The participants felt that the images did not depict extreme levels of suffering and deprivation like the ones they have seen elsewhere in the media. As Liz explains,

I think what I really noticed after staring for a while was that I think whoever did the advertising really did a good job because every picture is natural in a sense that everyone is not the same. So many of the children are happy. I think they shot everyone right then in there. That's my perspective because they are not trying to portray a whole pity kind of party (Liz, Focus Group 2).
Another participant added,

Yeah, I did notice that too. The kids, they look pretty healthy. And that is not very typical of what we see in these kinds of ads (Amelia, Focus Group 2).

The participants also mentioned depictions that promote difference between West/East and the stereotypical image of impoverished and orphaned children. Talking about Save the Children’s website, Felix notes that:

A very significant difference is even when children are smiling from Africa why is it that he or she has to be with an animal for example as opposed to the white family that is just in front of the computer for example (Felix, Focus Group 3).

Like the African participants, respondents in this group talked about stereotypical elements within the visual images that they felt were commonly associated with African countries. For example, Amelia thought that Waterislife’s image in figure 4.2 is stereotypical because of the way that the children have been portrayed passively, and they are barefooted, “I feel like it's stereotypical because they are just out there not wearing shoes” (Focus Group 2). Liz added that the image draws on popular depictions of African countries with images of poor children, “I think the first thing people think of Africa is kids who are impoverished and have to live in orphanages and so it might be a little stereotypical” other one (Focus Group 2).

**Differences in Participants’ Views and Perceptions**

An interesting contrast between the two groups of participants that emerged from the focus groups is the different reasons participants gave to their viewpoints. For example, the African participants who felt that representations were okay noted that this was because of the INGOs’ monetary objective which influences the kinds of images used. However, these participants were careful to mention that this does not mean the images are not problematic. This finding

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demonstrates that INGOs’ monetary objective was often influential and foregrounded in the African participants’ interpretations of the images. Trying to relate to the INGOs’ monetary interests, one of the participants started his response by saying, “in my humble opinion, if they want money” these are the kinds of images they’ll use (Oscar, Focus Group, 1). Seeing that the monetary goals of the INGOs seem to be a concern to his fellow participant, Andrew responded, that's what we will think but that's not, it should be mixed. Look at Honduras, they are going through the same issues, but their pictures are not very bad. Don't just narrow it because you need money. So, you'll really want to show the only bad side to attract people. That will go a long way to affect us. Yes, you'll get the money, but have you thought about the future? That means the stereotype keeps on. You keep perpetuating that image. (Andrew, Focus Group 1).

For participants in the non-African group who opined that the images are not stereotypical did not perceive that the images were problematic. Florence, for example, noted that she “like[s] the images the way they are” because they help to show what is lacking in the places depicted (Florence, Focus Group 2). This suggests that Florence’s views are based on the feelings of sympathy for those she believes are suffering.

Furthermore, both the African and non-African participants with rhetoric backgrounds demonstrated their awareness of critical-cultural issues in their interpretations, just as one of the African participants majoring in Geological Science expressed concern about the underground water resources that Waterislife can help the communities to tap into instead of the straw filters they are distributing to the communities. In this sense, the participants’ academic and professional backgrounds were implicated in their understandings of the representations and the kinds of impact they might be having on people’s lives.
**CONCLUSION**

My analysis of participants’ responses regarding the four websites has shown that participants perceive the sites’ current visual images of and other content on Africa as not balanced. This makes the messages detrimental to the image of the African people and communities depicted. The African participants repeatedly expressed concern about the representations’ focus on suffering and deprivation, as the sites’ were replete with images of dirty children, extreme deprivation, and rurality. The issue of simplification and inadequate contextual information of both the problems and interventions communicated on the sites was also raised by participants. Related to this issue was the lack of specificity in the labelling of the visual images used to represent each African country. According to participants, this practice contributes to the generalization of African countries as entirely poor. Another theme discussed in the analysis was the theme of difference, often portrayed through juxtaposing rural images of African communities and modern images of Western development workers and donors. The influence of the international media on INGO communication practices was another point that participants noted, which demonstrates the need to pay more attention to the transnational networks through which certain ideologies about certain cultural groups travel. Interestingly, participants found images intended to promote empowerment, such as those of smiling children and group photos of development workers and local members, problematic because they felt that the representations still draw on Western-centered assumptions of Africa. One of the participants noted, for example, that Oxfam’s portrayals of hardworking African women draw on common assumptions of African women as struggling mothers who have to care for their babies in a poor environment with little resources.

Applying Smith’s (2012) decolonial approach to the study, specifically the emphasis on creating knowledge with local experts, opened a space for the African participants to challenge
and complicate predominant ideologies about the places they come from. For example, because of the generalization of African communities as entirely deprived on some of the sites, participants kept on emphasizing that there are “pretty places” in Africa too. They even went on to resist the superiority complex of the United States of America implicated in the sites’ messages, noting that there are also poor places in the USA. The African participants also raised concerns that have received little attention in development scholarship. One of these concerns relates the issue of accuracy in development representations. While previous research has argued that we need not pay much attention to the issue of accuracy (Hanchey, 2016), participants’ responses illustrate that accuracy, especially in terms of ensuring specificity in the labelling of visual images and the naming of geographical locations, is very important in INGO representations. This is because the way that the visual images are used on the sites tend to erase both the specificity and diversity of African countries. This issue is more pronounced when one considers the little time web visitors have to read and capture the right information.

Through the perspectives offered by the postcolonial theory, the analysis has revealed how the sites’ content replicate colonial discourses in the present by relying on certain past narratives of African people to advertise their work. Specifically, Said’s (1978) views on the Othering of distant cultures by Western writers help us to understand how the ways in which INGO websites are created and used work to other the communities and cultures being written about. In the next chapter, I’ll build on these findings by analyzing different aspects of the absences and erasures in the sites’ representations to uncover the discourse structures that are used in INGO messages.
Chapter Five:
Exploring the Impact of INGO Representations: Absences, Erasures, and Image Circulation

In the previous chapter, I discuss the themes that emerged from the three focus group discussions with both African and non-African participants. As noted in the previous chapter, participants’ responses across the three focus groups emphasized that the sites’ representations were realized mainly through the presence/inclusion or absence/exclusion of certain characters, settings, and contextual information. While some participants felt that the representations were real and show what is actually happening, a majority also perceived that the representations were replete with absences which lead to the focus of lack, deprivation, and messages of difference within the websites. This chapter builds on these findings by further examining the absences and erasures in the INGOs’ sites, focusing on issues of accuracy, diversity, representations of local involvement, and representations of social change. It answers the second research question: What effects might these representations have on Africa and people, and how can they be improved?

Following this introduction, I provide a brief overview of the theories shaping the analysis in this chapter. Next, I discuss four main absences and erasures on the sites’ content on Africa: absence of Africa’s specificity, absence of Africa’s diversity, absence of local involvement, and the paradoxical absence of social change. By examining these absences, I aim to reveal INGOs’ digital composing practices that continue to harm marginalized African communities and reinforce Western assumptions about Africa. By so doing, I show the “cultural practices and rhetorics through which particular representations and interpretations gain validity and power” (Queen, p. 476). I also illustrate how INGOs construct a mistaken narrative in which African communities are seen as unchanging and continuously suffering in poverty. While this point reinforces some of
the findings from previous research on the topic, it particularly brings attention to the role of the digital in sustaining this narrative as images of past disaster and emergency used to represent African countries are repeated and revived over and over again on the web.

In the last section, I look at the global circulation of images by INGOs, specifically how the images are recirculated via the web to illustrate the global influence of INGO visual messages. Throughout the analysis, I investigate the extent to which the INGOs’ representations demonstrate the community-involvement approaches presented in their mission statements or current INGO codes and recommendations.

**DISCOURSE AND ITS EFFECTS ON PEOPLE AND PLACES**

The analysis in this chapter starts with Mitchell’s argument that representations not only construct knowledge, but also “obstruct, fragment, and negate that knowledge” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 188). Obstruction, fragmentation, and negation of knowledge are often realized through mechanisms of exclusions, omissions, or silences through which that knowledge is transformed. Exploring this idea further, van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) argue that “representation always involves recontextualization” (p. 96). This means that rather than giving a full or clear account of events, representation involves transforming the actual idea, people, or event represented through processes such as addition, deletion, substitution, and abstraction (p. 96-98). The authors’ emphasis on representation as a partial account of events rather than a clear presentation of information helps us to understand the dynamics by which INGO websites make certain arguments about developing countries while avoiding others.

Similarly, scholars examining the circulation of discourse in global contexts have brought attention to how meanings are impacted and transformed as they come into contact with more powerful forces and discourses. Notable among these is Dingo’s (2012) and Mary Queen’s (2008)
studies on rhetoric and transnational feminism. Queen, for example, proposes that we examine the global circulation of texts through the frame of “fields” because it “helps us visualize the effects of forces” (p. 474). Drawing from physics, Queen notes that fields encounter various “interacting forces” -- historical, ideological, cultural, geopolitical-- that have “very real effects on objects” (p. 474). Likewise, Dingo draws examines the contexts within which gender policies and initiatives are circulated to show how these policies and initiatives “shift and change depending upon the contexts in which policymakers and development experts use them” (p. 8). Her analysis demonstrates how popular development initiatives manifest materially in rather different and often negative ways based on the contexts in which they are interpreted and deployed. As will be evinced in the analysis, although some of the websites try to portray local people in positive ways, the overarching message of lack, along with the homogenization of African countries using overgeneralized labels and messages, obstructs these positive images.

**ABSENCE OF AFRICA’S SPECIFICITY**

The sites’ pattern of visual production and design reveals a major absence—the absence of place specificity—which erases Africa’s specificity. As participants noted in the previous chapter, this happens as the specific names of the communities depicted in the images are taken for granted. Also, information about the context of the situations depicted by which one can understand the particular communities affected and why they are affected, are excluded. This is not only with African countries, but other developing countries as well. According to Leslie Steeves (2008), this pattern of INGO visual representations of Africa “serve[s] to both link and reinforce Eurocentrism and racism” (p. 422).

On Save the Children’s website, the absence of Africa’s specificity is particularly exaggerated as there is no single mention of the specific locations and communities depicted. The
few mentions of the names of the communities can only be found on the browser’s source code, which is hidden from people’s view. Similarly, Waterislife provides little information about the specific locations they work in. Only on their “Ethiopia” page did they indicate the specific name of the community, “Omo Valley,” being represented. All the other pages regarding Africa on the site do not mention the names of the communities or the people depicted. In contrast to this, however, another place in America which is also facing water crisis is named with much more precision: “Flint, Michigan” (see figure 4.7).

Mama Hope, however, is the only organization among the three that names all the images with some specificity on their “Where We Work” page before adding the name of the country. For example, Akili Girls’ Preparatory School, Kenya; Anza, Tanzania; Crater Creations, Kenya; Suubi Health Center, Uganda; and United Hearts Children’s Center, Ghana. The names reflect the actual community projects being supported by the organization. These labels are accompanied by representations that try to portray the community leaders in charge of the projects in more positive ways. To this extent, Mama Hope’s visual representations work against the common problem of generalization in development.

Like Mama Hope, Oxfam does a good job of identifying the precise locations of the image in the accompanying image captions, although not all. For example, in one of their stories about “celebrating strong mothers from around the world,” the image caption states, “Elsa, a mother of three, fetches water from a newly constructed hand pump in Mussanga, Mozambique” (Oxfam.org).

The way the people depicted are represented is also noteworthy. The people in the pictures are not named, suggesting that poverty in Africa is generic and common to all African people. Apart from the few image captions like the one noted in the paragraph above in which the names
of the people are mentioned, the majority of the representations do not identify the people. This also suggests that the individual stories and voices of the people are not given regard.

The lack of accuracy in the naming of the specific location of the images also erases the specificity of the continent of Africa and its diverse groups and cultures. Naming is a critical issue when it comes to representing communities in African countries. This is because of the way Africans have been historically homogenized in various institutional contexts including colonial writings, the international media, and INGO messages. Manifestations of this problem can be seen on the websites as the wrong images are used to represent some of the African countries. For example, on Waterislife’s site, the African participants in Focus Group 1 brought attention to an image of the Maasai people in Kenya which has been used as one of the visual representations for “Northern Ghana.” Furthermore, on Save the Children’s site, an image that was previously used to represent Zimbabwe (see figure 4.1) was later used to represent the Democratic Republic of Congo. While these may be considered mere oversights, it demonstrates how the specificity of African countries is taken for granted on the websites.

**ABSENCE OF AFRICA’S DIVERSITY**

The issue of place specificity cannot be separated from considerations of diversity. This is because as illustrated in the preceding paragraph, the lack of specificity leads to homogenization. Lack of diversity is achieved in two ways. First, through the use of single and familiar images as symbols of entire countries/regions which homogenizes African countries. And second, through the use of familiar development tropes and categories to describe African countries, people, and communities.
Images as country/region symbols

As evidenced in the images shown in the previous chapter, the use of single and familiar images to represent diverse populations is digitally entrenched on the websites. As development images of Africa are inaccurately labeled with the names of countries rather than the specific names of the communities they depict, these images are used to conflate diverse groups of people into one, stereotypical image. Through this communication pattern, African countries are overgeneralized and portrayed in simplistic and undifferentiated ways. Sometimes, the entire continent is also overgeneralized and simplified with one particular image. In this way, specific community problems become the identity of an entire continent.

Within the websites, the bold placement of the names of the African countries on/beneath the images particularly create a powerful narrative of sameness (see figures 4.1 and 4.3 for example) This narrative is reinforced as these images and their accompanying labels are reused as navigational links (see figures 4.1) and supporting visuals for multiple news stories on global poverty.

Regarding the circulation of the images on other sites, the images are often reconfigured and recirculated for different fundraising campaigns about global poverty on the INGOs’ social media sites. As seen in figure 5.4, Save the Children reconfigures images from their websites with new messages for their Go #Lunchless Campaigns. The image, which is used to represent Kenya on their website (see figure 4.2), now becomes the symbol of East Africa. This shows how development images of Africa are reconfigured and repurposed by INGOs for purposes beyond the images’ specific and immediate references. Similarly, Waterislife and their partners, Vitamin Tea, redeploys images of children from different communities in Africa to be used as supporting visuals for their campaign on global water crisis. Children from nameless African communities
become the symbols of the “663 million people [who] lack access to safe water” (see figure 5.5 below).

Figure 5.1: An image from Save the Children’s Facebook page advertising their Go #Lunchless campaign for the Child Hunger and Famine Relief Fund. Accessed August 16, 2019.

Figure 5.2: An image from Waterislife’s Facebook page advertising their donor partners, Vitamin Tea. Accessed September 05, 2019.
These representations reduce the diversity and complexity, not only of the people but also of their everyday experiences and situations, since the messages that are foregrounded therein ignore other aspects of the people’s lives and experiences. Previous studies have critiqued both development representations (Dogra, 2012) (Escobar, 2011) and Western news on Africa (Brookes, 1995) for homogenizing African countries and the continent into one or a few familiar and ethnocentric image, often the negative image of famine, sick children, disaster, or civil war. When this happens, African countries are stereotyped as mostly poor and under-developed. Furthermore, viewers learn little about the actual people and communities experiencing the situations depicted, as well as the different contextual socio-economic factors affecting these situations.

Familiar categories and descriptions

In this section, I look at the accompanying text on the webpages and the messages and impressions they create about the places depicted or add to the images’ visual effects. Explaining the role of the surrounding text in development representations, Lidchi (2015) notes that “this linguistic message locates the visual image and navigates the reader through it … although it does not describe the photograph, it seems to amplify it” (p. 287). The analysis below illustrates that in describing the causes of poverty, INGOs’ textual messages describe African countries as simply “the hardest places to live on earth” due to violence, corruption, overpopulation, and natural disasters, thereby ignoring other experiences happening within these countries.

For example, Save the Children describes the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as “one of the worst countries in which to be a child. Home to one of the world’s poorest health systems, one in five children in the DRC dies of preventable diseases before their 5th birthday. Increasing numbers of families and children are being displaced due to violence and conflict…”
(Save the Children, 2019). In this description, we see how Save the Children describes developing countries solely based on common development tropes and assumptions. Similarly, a message on Waterislife’s page regarding the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) says, “living in the war-torn county of Democratic Republic of Congo, Uzima, a friend to Waterislife, faced hardships beyond imagination” (Waterislife, 2019). Aside from the “war torn” label used in describing the country, the statement also refers to the country as a “county.”

As seen above, these descriptions draw on partial messages and myths about the African countries to portray them as unchanging. ‘Partial’ in the sense that the representations are narrow-sighted, drawing only on messages of poverty to identify people and places. ‘Myth’ in that but the messages draw on ideologies that have come to mean ‘truth’ about the places depicted. They also draw on colonial narratives in the way that they focus on what the organizations are doing for the people without the people’s contributions. It is based on these reasons that the African participants emphasized statements that not everywhere in Africa is poor, and not everyone in Africa is fleeing from violence (Andrew, Focus Group 1).

The form of repetition of these dominant descriptions cannot be overlooked. These messages are constantly repeated all across the INGOs’ online communication platforms, on their Facebook, Twitter, and press releases with only slight changes. In this way, Africans are stereotyped as unchanging rather than fluid and dynamic. As Homi Bhabha argues (1994) in his description of colonial discourses, representations of rigidity work together with the constant repetition of these discourses so that they appear real, natural, and familiar (p. 66). From this point, Bhabha draws attention to the material power of representations and the way that their repeatability helps sustain colonial discourses. For it is these same old images that are redeployed by INGOs to create new fundraising campaigns and advertisements about global poverty in Africa.
A common mechanism used in these descriptions to project Africa as unchanging is through the constant allusion to past crises. As illustrated in the textual references above, the messages tend to highlight and revive past tragedies and epidemics stereotypes. Hence, they create the impression the situations are unchanging, although the real lives and situations of the people are marked by change (Steeves, 2008). What is ignored in these references to past events, however, is the role of capitalism and geopolitical structures in contributing to some of these crises.

Lidchi (2015) notes that appeals to past crises, particularly those that were horrifying, is a common trope used in development campaigns. This is because retelling these events enable organizations to connect old events with new ones and evoke the memories and feelings associated with those past events so as to motivate the audience to respond (p. 252). By so doing, the narratives of those past events become more and more ‘natural’ and common to the groups represented.

An important observation is how these predominant descriptions undermine the ‘positive’ imagery that some of the websites’ attempt to show. A very good example of this is evident from Save the Children’s images representing Uganda and Liberia. For Uganda, the image depicts a healthy-looking young girl in a classroom setting with a broad smile on her face (see figure 5.6). The other young girls behind her are also smiling. Similarly, the image representing Liberia shows the smiling faces of a healthy-looking mother and child. The first image suggests an improvement of education for young girls and the second suggests an improvement in healthcare. To this extent, both images try to portray the people in more positive ways, the children are not dying and they seem to be in a good condition, one with the mother and the other in school. However, this positive and differentiated imagery is obstructed by the overarching message of victimization and
helplessness in the surrounding text. As illustrated in the figures, the text used in both representations tells the same narratives of “struggle,” “disease,” and “violence.” and food crises.

A similar process of fitting images of ‘active’ and ‘self-reliant’ people into dominant development descriptions can be seen on Oxfam’s website. While some of the images that participants and I analyzed on this website seek to promote empowerment by showing people at work on different community projects, the discourse of poverty emanating from the site’s surrounding obstructs this imagery of empowerment. Specifically, the story headings, image captions, and the stories themselves--. For example, the first image in figure 5.4 specifically shows community engagement and local people’s involvement in development. As one of the participants in Focus Group 2 noted, we also see healthy adults, not sick children. To this extent, these images try to work against common representations of African countries as helpless and childlike (Escobar, 1995). However, these stories emphasize Oxfam as the primary voice helping these communities; we hear very little from the community leaders and contributors depicted (I discuss more on this later in the chapter).

Figure 5.3: The top section of Save the Children’s “Uganda” page. Accessed April 12, 2019.
By creating these contradictory narratives around these images, the INGOs immediately shift viewers’ attention from the ‘positive’ message that is intended, and toward the dominant narratives of war and disease. The result of these familiar descriptions is that they hinder alternative narratives about African countries that INGOs may try to promote. The question then for INGOs is whether continuing to use familiar categories and descriptions in their messages can help challenge the contradictory messages and interpretations that they evoke.

In *Networking Arguments*, Dingo (2012) shows how “arguments [on development] are networked across histories and to happenings seemingly outside of a semiclosed rhetorical situation—a single occasion” (p. 70). Specifically, she demonstrates how seemingly positive development discourses, including visual representations, are reinterpreted and ‘fitted’ into colonial discourses which obstruct the positive imagery of these development discourses. In the case of the INGO websites, the analysis shows that although some of the images employed seek to portray Africans in a positive light, these positive meanings are interrupted by the overarching
messages of extreme poverty and vulnerability dominating the surrounding text and most of the content of the websites. This shows how “ideologies from the past traffic in texts of the present… and often remarginalize particular groups of people” (Dingo, 2012, p. 101).

**LOCAL INVOLVEMENT AND INGOs’ ETHICAL AWARENESS**

This theme looks at the extent to which the four websites represent the voices and roles of local people in development, both visually and textually, in light of their current appeals to community involvement or local self-reliance found in their mission statements and other documents. These appeals have to do with representing people in more positive ways and promoting local efforts and agency in development. As a result, I also consider how the INGOs describe the African communities, whether as agents of their own development or as passive and incapable. Although it is not easy to know this from just the sites’ content, I’ll make inferences from the websites as to how they demonstrate ethical awareness of the politics of representation. For the two big INGOs, Save the Children and Oxfam, I’ll do this in relation to the principles espoused in the INGO code of conduct since they are signatories to the code.

Waterislife states within their “Our Story” page that their projects are “community-driven and community-engaged,” and that they work “closely with nonprofit organizations, local governments and community partners” (Waterislife). On their page regarding “Northern Ghana,” we see the following text,

… one of the most rewarding things I do is working with the children in the schools developing and managing of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) projects in Ghana. I also coordinate all the country programs with Waterislife and its partners. When we have Waterislife teams come to Ghana it is exciting for all the villages we visit. The children have many questions and want to know about life in the US… We have drilled wells here.
In some areas we excavated rain water catching ponds (Dugouts) because there is no water under the ground. We have to build fences around them to keep the animals out of the water. We use nano buckets filters for household water treatment and safe storage for families to make the water safe for them to drink. Please come visit me and the work we are doing in Ghana. “Mpuhiya ka pagi” … Thank you very much” (Waterislife, 2019).

This is one of Waterislife’s sparse efforts intended to show, from a “first-hand” account, the ‘community involvement’ element of their work. Based on the constrained nature of the message, the implications meant to be drawn from it have nothing to do with showing how closely the organization works with local partners nor their roles and perspectives in the interventions, but rather to highlight the organization as the main help. The message mainly rehashes information about the aid resources provided to the community, begging the question of whether or not the message from this community partner is her own narrative. Waterislife also views the communities it supports as “struggling communities” rather than agents of their own change (Waterislife, 2018).

Additionally, the third and last sentences in particular, reinforce unequal power relations between Westerners and African people who are often portrayed as ‘primitive’ people who haven’t seen foreigners before. Furthermore, the other images and videos posted on the page mainly showcase the bucket filters that were distributed to the community, mostly women and children. Indeed, there is no sound within most of the video. The sound is activated only within the portions of the video where the children say, “water is life.” This video has 35,739 views on YouTube. In a nutshell, not much is provided about actual contributions and resources of the local partners, thereby erasing their agency.

A major theme in Mama Hope’s online content is that their “partners are Change Agents in each of their communities around the world” (Mama Hope, 2019). To illustrate this, their
website homepage video showcases various community partners engaged in different activities, describing them as “teachers,” “entrepreneurs,” “visionaries,” “healers,” “activists,” “creators,” “cultivators,” “founders” etc. This video is meant to challenge problematic stereotypes of African people in development representation by depicting the people as “leaders” who have big dreams, visions, and passions to change their communities (Mama Hope, 2019). Based on these representations, we can say that Mama Hope does well in demonstrating self-reflexivity and ethical awareness on the politics of representation. Indeed, on the YouTube page of one of the videos posted on the site, they write that they are “tired of the over-sensationalized, one-dimensional depictions of African men and the white savior messaging that permeates our media” (Mama Hope, 2015).

In addition to these, the site contains messages from some of the community partners, written from the first-person point of view, on six of their 17 pages regarding Africa. The messages describe the projects, motivations, goals, and visions of the community. One of these is a message from the founder of the Queen Elizabeth Academy, Dr. Kilines Sekwiha, who notes that “I believe that all children deserve a high-quality education so they can live out their dreams. My goal is to see our children become knowledgeable, dedicated role models and the future leaders of our country. My role in this process is simply as a catalyst; one who initiates and triggers actions for change” (Mama Hope, 2018). Despite these positive representations, Mama Hope’s content too often relies on images of children, which limits their efforts to disrupt dominant representations of Africa.

Oxfam similarly makes an effort to include local voices in their representations, especially in their “First Person Blog” stories. However, these stories are written by aid workers and the messages from community partners are presented in fragmented, consisting of disjointed
statements sparsely distributed within the stories. When brought together, these fragments of local ‘voices’ do not say much. To illustrate, one of their stories on the Zakpalisi community in the Northern Region of Ghana talks about the community’s involvement in helping fight against corrupt practices inhibiting the resourcing and completion of an irrigation system project. Yet, the only information from the leader of the community development council that we see in the story is “the project is stalled” and “we need help to get it completed” (Oxfam, 2018). This representation of local voice is not only problematic in the way that it portrays the leader as rather clueless and helpless, but also in the way that it disciplines their voices to promote the organization’s image as ‘savior.’ Besides, the lead image for the story shows the leader of the community development council addressing members of the community, but they are made up of only women and children.

As one of the signatories of the INGO guidelines on images and messages, Oxfam’s representations in the above disrupt the code’s recommendations. Arguing for the need to “diversify voices, perspectives, and representations,” the 2014 Illustrative Guide to the Code asks INGOs to show the roles of local people by including “critical reflection from partners and communities in the Global South” (Illustrative Guide to the Code, 2014). However, the messages from local people noted above do not provide critical perspectives about the roles they are performing. They instead reinforce the fragmentation of development messages and realities.

Although Oxfam tries to diversify its public communication by including images of community involvement in which people are working together with other members of the community, there is still work to be done. While Oxfam’s stories provide a bit more information about the issues involved in the situations depicted as compared to Save the Children’s site, a more robust understanding of local people’s involvement in development is lacking. This shows that
INGOs must rethink notions of inclusion in their current messages and create opportunities for more robust narratives of community engagement.

When it comes to Save the Children, local involvement is rarely seen on the site, although information from their image captions shows that they indeed work with local partners. For example, in one of their captions which I accessed from the browser’s course code, it states that “Save the Children is supporting the Ministry of Health to effectively deliver and manage High Impact Nutrition Interventions (HINI) to mothers and children in Turkana County” (Save the Children). Further information regarding how the Ministry of Health is helping is not communicated in the representations.

A form of absence of local voices, particularly on Save the Children’s website is the overt absence of adults in the representations. The organization relies heavily on images of lone and anonymous children. For example, they rarely include adult family members or local representatives in charge of the children (see figure 4.1). As previous research has shown, images of isolated anonymous children erase any sign that INGOs work with and through local partners, a practice that undermines the “partnership discourse” embraced by big INGOs like Save the Children (Manzo, 2008, p. 644). Additionally, this kind of representation also undermines the INGO code on images and messages of which Save the Children is a signatory. As stated in the Preface to the 2006 version of the code, images should show “the partnership that often results between local and international NGOs” (Dochas Code of Conduct, 2006).

Similarly, the fifth principle of the code argues the need for INGOs to “ensure those whose situation is being represented have the opportunity to communicate their stories themselves.” (Dochas Code of conduct, 2006). As noted in the previous chapter, Save the Children’s representations of donors/sponsors include Western families and their children, who are sometimes
allowed to tell their stories by themselves. However, not only are children from developing depicted without their families, but they are also portrayed as passive. The effect of this, as other scholars have also argued, is that it encourages the erroneous impression of the children’s vulnerability and dependence on outside forces (Manzo, 2008) and a breakdown of the family system in developing countries (Ali, James, and Vultee, 2013).

As the above analysis has illustrated, despite the popularity of discourses of empowerment and community involvement in development messages in recent times, the INGOs analyzed in this study continue to perpetuate negative stereotypes of African people. They also lack meaningful information about local voices which undermines their community engagement goals. These messages are disciplined through the fragmentation of local voices. These messages also tend to depict the local people as clueless about their situations.

**INGOs and Social Change**

Here, I explore how and the extent to which the four websites represent the idea of development and social change in regards to their appeals to global impact and community transformation, the interventions being showcased, and the African communities represented. In line with this theme, I look at the currency of the sites’ content and how often they are updated. For many INGOs like the four being analyzed in this study, social change is a big part of their charity identity and fundraising appeals. However, as will be seen in the following analysis, this element is minimally reflected in the sites.

The “Ken’s Story” section of Waterislife’s website talks about the founder’s passion and goal to help “solve the World Water Crisis” by providing “small portable straw filters kids can take to school, home systems using NanoTube technology, solar and wind-powered community systems, drilling, and rainwater catchment systems” (Waterislife, 2019). While the founder shows
a desire to help local communities improve their access to safe water, his narrative in this section draws on colonial narratives such as how they went around the villages giving clean water to children with “parched mouths” and how they were “treated like kings” (Waterislife, 2019). Besides this, there is little to no information about how communities are actually changing. In addition to partnering with various companies in the United States to raise funds, the organization shows an effort to partner with celebrities in the United States who are from Africa and are involved in community development initiatives in their home country. For example, on their “Democratic Republic of Congo” page, they talk about their partnership with “NBA player, Serge Ibaka” who “has a huge heart for helping the people of DRC” (Waterislife, 2019).

Yet, what is not included in these messages is information about the actual transformations and growth that are happening in the communities. In a video that shows Serge Ibaka telling his success story and his willingness to help his community, we do not see much content about the interventions being taken and how the communities are growing. One would expect that there would be some new content to illustrate this but no updates have been provided on the “DRC’s” webpage since the images and videos were posted in 2015. Indeed, several of the images on the site date as far back as 2010, although the website’s architecture was updated sometime between January and March of 2018. Therefore, Waterislife’s online representations show a “power-politics of exclusion” (Mukherjee and Williams, 2015, p. 119) that involves not showing how the communities are changing or “transforming” as stated in their missions. In the absence of this information, coupled with the lack of updates of the sites’ content, the organization is limited in the “global impact” it purports to produce. It instead creates the impression that the communities do not change, “even though their real lives are marked by change” (Steeves, 2008, p. 421).
Mama Hope, on the other hand, makes efforts in showing how the communities are changing. On their site’s “Become a change agent” page, they note that, “invest in our partners because we can show the direct impact” (Mama Hope, 2019). To illustrate this point is a piece of information within this section showing an Intercultural Center in Budondo, Uganda that the organization supports (see figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5: A section of Mama Hope’s “Change Agents” page showing their Budondo Intercultural Center project. Accessed September 20, 2019.

Here, Mama Hope does a good job of highlighting Topista’s and Sophie’s initiatives and the kinds of impact they have made in their community through the health center. However, the representations could be able to provide specific examples, reflections, and even challenges from the women or some of their collaborators in order not to simplify social change. Furthermore, there may be more community contributors and resources that were leveraged to make these achievements happen, but these details are excluded from the representations.

Another noteworthy point is that like Save the Children and WaterisLife, the content on the Mama Hope’s website remain almost static, rarely being updated with new content about the
progress of the interventions. Thus, although the organization represents the African communities in more positive ways compared to the other three, they risk depicting the communities as static and unchanging, especially because they also tend to rely on images of children.

To communicate their work and impact in the countries they work in, Save the Children has a section on their webpages that briefly describe their work in the country, the number of the communities they work in and the programs that they promote. As seen with Mama Hope’s website in the analysis above, Save the Children’s simplifies the solutions of development by excluding the entire information about how these solutions were achieved, their complexities, and the efforts of the mothers and community partners (see figure 5.6).

Figure 5.6: A section of Save the Children’s “Burkina Faso” page showing their work in the country. Accessed September 20, 2019.

As seen in the figure above, the depiction of development’s impact focuses on the organization without incorporating a deeper sense of community development and the local resources leveraged. This is also reinforced by the small print used in communicating this information so that it can easily be missed by viewers. Also, images depicting change are rare. As well, Save the Children’s content lack currency. Images date as far back as 2010, creating the idea that the countries represented do not change. Based on the image captions I was able to access
from the browser source code, 4 of the images are from 2010, 1 from 2011, 5 from 2012, 4 from 2013, 1 from 2014, 2 from 2015, and 4 from 2016. The only time that Save the Children updated its African pages was during the Cyclone Idai disaster that affected Mozambique in March 2019. The image representing Mozambique was replaced with a new image of a displaced mother and child, demonstrate how disaster images are used by big INGOs to create the image of “permanent emergencies” in development countries (Tvedt, 1998, p. 226, as cited in Dogra, 2012).

Among the four organizations, Oxfam’s website uses a quite different approach in communicating development and social impact. As noted earlier, it currently posts different news stories that seek to show the “power of people” against poverty and dispel the idea of African communities as being passive and lazy.

Through the analysis above, I have shown that although global social change is a core element of the INGOs’ messages and appeals, the representations lack a sense of change. This occurs through the lack of adequate information about how communities are changing and through the lack of critical updates of the sites’ messages about Africa, both visually and textually. This makes the INGOs’ messages paradoxical in a sense that except for a simple numerical list of their achievements or images of children ‘benefiting’ from aid resources, not much of the change processes happening in communities are revealed. The absence of this information leads to people being fixed in the same hegemonic narratives over and over.

Currency is an important element to consider in INGO websites because the constant repetition of old images, particularly disaster images, works to alienate African people and communities from the ‘modern,’ creating the impression that their lives do not experience change. Furthermore, because one of the goals of INGO websites is to show readers the impact of their
work, there is the need for the INGOs to construct a more complex understanding of the communities’ lives, their resilience stories, and how they leverage local resources.

**INGOs and Image Circulation**

INGO websites are circulated on various social media platforms, including their Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter platforms. Because the visual representations on these websites are more negative than positive, and are rarely updated with information about the improvements happening in the communities, the associated stereotypes are sustained on the web. By tracing the networks of digital circulation of these development images, the analysis shows how INGO websites contribute to the perpetuation of the negative image of Africa. As noted in the above analysis, the inaccurate labels are not only used within the websites, but they are taken into other spaces where they are often reinterpreted. As figure 5.1 and 5.2 show, the images are used to support different arguments about global poverty, and then later disseminated to the global public all over again. In these recirculation occurrences, the images are repeatedly projected as symbols for the entire continent of Africa or specific parts of the continent, which then reify the associated stereotypes.

The dual temporality of visual images functions as an important element that contributes to the sustaining of African stereotypes on the web and the media at large. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes (1980) writes that “the photograph repeats mechanically what could never be repeated existentially” (p. 4). In this quote, Barthes was talking about the ability of the photograph to replay its message numerous times as though it were existing now in the present. Likewise, Lidchi (2015), drawing from Elizabeth Edwards, expresses that “all photography works on the basis of spatial and temporal dislocation” (p. 277). Though a photograph portrays a moment in the past that has ceased to exist, it nonetheless “functions in the present, transforming the “there-then” into the “here-now” (p. 277). In a nutshell, the photograph is always punctual; in the present, past,
and potential future. Therefore, the representative power of INGO images of Africa can be seen in their ability to sustain their visual symbologies and effects across time and space. Because of this dual temporality of visual images, an old image on a website becomes new to a viewer who just discovered it, but it also continues to engage viewers who have already encountered it and find it again (Chun, 2008). Therefore, as images of past disasters and emergencies remain unchanged on INGOs’ sites, so do their associated misrepresentations.

Furthermore, because the websites strategically present their images and messages in a way that makes them appear as constant occurrences, they help to reinforce the message of unchanging villages. A readily observable mechanism is the appeal to the present continuous tense. For example, throughout Save the Children’s site, we see statements like “... the current, devastating food crisis is forcing families… to migrate in search of food and water…” (Kenya), “... increasing numbers of families and children are being displaced…” (Congo), “... food insecurity… are making it difficult for many families… and it’s getting harder by the day” (Niger), “... the situation is growing worse by the day…” (Nigeria), and “... an influx of refugees fleeing famine and hunger, is adding to Uganda’s challenges” (Uganda). The effects of the present continuous tense, in constantly repeating and reifying these messages about Africa on the web cannot be overlooked.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter has discussed the absences and erasures within the sites’ content regarding Africa. As evidenced though the analysis, these are realized through the lack of specificity in the naming of the communities and locations depicted; the repeated use of familiar descriptions which lead to the homogenization of African countries; the exclusion of local voices and roles in development interventions; and the broad absence of ongoing improvements of people’s lives and actual social change on the sites. Through these absences and erasures, the representations
erroneously project the issues in the African countries as unchanging. Information about the people’s real lives, ongoing changes to their problems, as well as the local resources that are deployed to confront the problems and needs are completely excluded from the sites.

Although the different ways that the INGOs construct their websites can be recognized as influenced by logistics such as budgets, overarching goal of the organization, and maintenance issues, the communication choices employed to create these sites reinforce inequalities which should not be ignored. As several scholars have noted, such representations reflect ways of seeing rooted in discourses of colonialism, Orientalism, and deficit-based notions of less-privileged/underrepresented communities. By revealing these absences and erasures, I have pointed out the need for a more robust and balanced account of development interventions and the people involved, especially within INGO websites and social media platforms. The next chapter brings this dissertation to a conclusion. I’ll summarize the main findings, offer suggestions for improving the websites, and discuss the implications of the study for pedagogy and future research.
Chapter Six:

Conclusions and Implications

The focus of this study was to examine how African countries are visually represented on four INGO websites (savethechildren.org, oxfamamerica.org, mamahope.org, and waterislife.com), with the goal of understanding the visual and digital practices used on these sites and how these practices continue to negatively impact the image of Africa and its people. This involved examining African and non-African readers’ perceptions of the sites to explore both local and international perspectives on development practices and look for more culturally sensitive approaches. The results of this study, as evidenced through the participants’ responses and analysis, show that among the four INGOs, only Mama Hope makes efforts to represent African communities in more positive and specific ways, although this is to a limited extent. However, the bulk of the messages on the three other sites illustrate the presence of hegemonic discourses and colonial narratives through which African countries are constructed as places of continuous suffering, with little to no local capacity. This occurs through an emphasis on lack and deprivation, inaccurate naming and labelling of visual images, messages of difference, lack of context and simplification, and the influence of the international media. As the findings further illustrated, the construction of African countries as constantly poor is digitally entrenched, as the sites’ content on Africa is deeply static and rarely updated so that the same information is presented to visitors over and over.

In concluding this study, which has revealed several observations of hegemonic constructions of African countries and communities on the four INGOs’ sites, this chapter discusses implications for research, pedagogy, and practice in rhetoric and composition, intercultural technical communication, and development studies. In the paragraphs that follow, I begin with a summary of the significance of the study. Next, I offer a discussion of how INGOs can create more culturally-sensitive and diverse representations of the places they work in. This discussion is, to a large extent, based on suggestions and concerns expressed by the research
participants and other findings from the analysis. Of relevance to the ideas I offer here is community researcher, Monberg’s (2009) notion of “Writing as community” which asks scholars to construct a more robust view of communities (p. 41). As well, I draw from the emphasis on collective agency pushed forth by the ABCD approach. I present the suggestions from participants as a framework to help INGOs aiming to change dominant representations of less-privileged communities. The suggestions are also intended to help web designers working in various intercultural sites who want to create and disseminate more diverse and robust information about specific ethnic and cultural groups. I hope that this framework will be a starting point for researchers and practitioners to develop culturally-sensitive frameworks for visual and digital communication. Next, I discuss the pedagogical implications, followed by a section about the study’s limitations and suggestions for future research.

By drawing on interviews with African participants to analyze the sites’ content on African countries, this study has demonstrated how researchers can help create intellectual spaces where local perspectives on development communications can be heard (Zair, 2011, p. 1299). This kind of work is significant for a number of reasons. First, the participatory methodology I employed provided a space for African readers to offer alternative narratives about their lived experiences and socio-economic contexts which are not seen on the websites. Second, through this participatory approach, the study moves away from a focus on Western frameworks, allowing non-Western audiences to contribute to knowledge making (Smith, 2012; Grabill, 2007). Third, participants’ responses illustrate the need for INGO communication designers to seek the knowledges and perspectives of native participants when designing information for specific countries/regions. In this way, the study contributes to scholarship that has called on INGOs to include local voices in the development of visual communication guidelines (Manzo, 2006).

**Toward Robust and Diversified Representations of People and Place**

As evidenced through the findings of this study, the lack of a deeper sense of African people, their communities, and social change is a central feature in the sites’ content analyzed for
this study. Thus, rethinking assumptions of historically marginalized people and communities and the ways of writing about them, particularly in online contexts, are important considerations for INGOs, nonprofits, and development researchers seeking to change dominant narratives these groups. During the focus group discussions, I asked participants a follow-up question based on their initial responses to provide suggestions for improving the sites’ representations. Through this discussion, as well as other concerns they had initially raised, participants discussed some important considerations necessary to help create and disseminate more differentiated (rather than singular) representations of developing countries and communities. Their responses revealed the importance of cultural sensitivity and diversity in messages of global poverty and development.

1. Move away from using familiar visual images to represent entire countries

Accuracy of representation is an important part of creating robust depictions of historically marginalized groups. With that said, a lack of precision regarding the locations depicted is a big problem on the websites. For websites that use images to represent country/regions, this problem becomes more serious as it homogenizes and portrays people as monochromatic. Participants, therefore, suggested that organizations “qualify” the images by using more precise, context-specific labels and headings. In this case, that would mean indicating the specific locations being shown in the images rather than generalizing, for example, a specific disaster image or community problem to entire populations with different communities and experiences. Thus, rather than choosing certain singular images to represent a country or a diverse group of people as it has been done within the websites of Save the Children and Waterislife, diversified representations of people and place could consider the differences in situations and experiences within each country, as well as within each community so as to portray different aspects of the people.

This speaks to the importance of accuracy in visual communication, especially on the web, to avoid people misinterpreting and using the information for other purposes. This point also illustrates the importance of Ridolfo and DeVoss’s (2009) notion of “rhetorical velocity” in INGO
visual communication. According to these authors, designing visual and digital texts with rhetorical velocity in mind means to understand the speed at which information is “crafted, delivered, distributed, recomposed, redelivered, redistributed, etc., across physical and virtual networks and spaces” (par. 2) and in light of this understanding, “weigh the positive and negative possibilities of different types of textual appropriation against desired objectives” (par. 1). Rhetorical velocity, therefore, involves thinking about the future time, place, and how texts may be recomposed, as well as the consequences of this in regards to the author’s objectives (par. 2). One to apply these points on INGO websites will be for the organizations to balance the future possibilities of possible positive and negative outcomes for using and circulating images. This means to be able to consider the cultural effects of images and how they are labeled, relative to how they might be read and used by the public.

Using more precise labels also includes rethinking familiar classifications and labels such as ‘drought-ravaged Africa’ and ‘wart-torn zone’ which describe entire populations in monochromatic ways. According to participants, the visual culture we find ourselves makes it important for INGOs to accurately label their images since images are what catch viewers’ attention the most, and very few web visitors “have time to read the text that comes along with all the images” (Esther, Focus Group 1). When it comes to African countries that are already negatively stereotyped on other news and social media sites, labeling images of poverty with the names of the countries easily leads people to believe that the entire African countries are suffering when this is not the case. The nature of the consumption of information on the web, therefore, requires INGOs to be more sensitive in their visual communication, using more accurate labels and headings. Doing this can help INGOs to create more nuanced and accurate representations of communities which can help increase donors’ understanding of different places and cultures.
2. Move away from static representations to more robust and fluid understandings of social/community change

Representing people and places in more robust and diverse ways involves moving away from static, voiceless images to representations that showcase how change happens in the communities over time. One of the main reasons participants perceived the sites’ representations to be stereotypical is that the content and messages lack a sense of change. Even for participants who felt that considerations should be given to INGOs’ monetary goals and its influence on the kinds of representations they depict, they noted that the representations were one-sided, rarely showing how the communities are changing and growing. This is illustrated in the following responses:

When you are on the site, you juxtapose it to what the case was and what has been done so that you know that when you are supporting a cause, you are expecting a result (Randy, Focus Group 1).

You need to show pictures that after maybe 5 years this is what happened so in that way then it will be better. There has to be that contrast. That is something they should look into (Oscar, Focus Group 1).

I don't know why Save the Children exists as an organization right? If its purpose is to help those children suffering from these diseases or troubles, I will be happy to see the real children being helped by Save the Children you know, rather than just project them in a precarious situation (Felix, Focus Group 3).

Other participants noted the need for INGOs to go beyond showing community transformations to including information about future goals and plans of the communities, a feature which Mama Hope makes effort to incorporate on their site.

So, I think they need both pictures, not just the best of them. Even though they are doing campaigns to get the money they should show the bad stuff and then show them where they want to go. That way even the people who do not see that Africa is good can at least see
that in the future it would be good. So, they have a better opportunity to see good things (Mary, Focus Group 2).

None of them show what is the way forward. They only show what is being done or what is bad, but they don’t show the next step (Amand, Focus Group 1).

Echoed throughout the suggestions above is that a more balanced representation of communities will be significant to challenging dominant narratives of African countries. As Monberg rightly notes, a robust view of community recognizes that its histories, people, environment, “and the problems it confronts are always changing and require a continual attention to rewriting” (Monberg, p. 36). Within the context of INGO online representations, this involves regularly revising and updating the web content, including multiple contents about community projects and critical perspectives from local partners. By including more alternative stories about community change, growth, and capability, INGO representations can reveal more “deeper textures” of communities, as well as work towards a deeper sense of social change (p. 42).

3. The need to include critical perspectives from local people

Another important element of this framework is the need to create online representations that allow greater agency to the community partners and contributors involved in development. Too often messages of global poverty focus on the ‘global’ (i.e., international organization and their workers) to the neglect of the ‘local’ (i.e., the local people who do the work of coordinating development programs, developing initiatives, or bringing people together). This is reflected in the findings of this study and other previous research on the topic. This study revealed that the sites minimize or erase the voices of local people either through the exclusion of the roles of local development partners altogether or through fragmented representations of local voices.

According to Hanchey (2016), representations of local agency should promote collectiveness rather than individualism or agonistic portrayals of community advocacy. According to her, current individualistic portrayals of African agency “result in problematic assumptions among Western audiences about Africans, who they are, and of what they are
capable” (p. 25). Furthermore, both individualistic and hero/villain representations of agency go against the collective understandings of agency that is found in research on African communities (Appiah, 1992). There is a need for aid agencies to develop representations aimed at collectively bringing communities together and showing their collective capacities.

**4. Provide adequate contextual information**

In addition to labeling visual images accurately, INGOs need to provide more information about the contexts of the images so as to prevent the images from being explained with common assumptions about Africa. “Context,” in this case, means providing information about who is being depicted and what the actual issue being depicted is rather than fitting the images into dominant development messages and tropes of famine, war, and disease. For example, on Save the Children’s site, there was an extensive discussion about the image representing Burundi. This image, which shows a teenage girl carrying a baby on her back, vaguely suggests the issue of teenage pregnancy in Burundi. The accompanying text on the page only mentions the issue of refugees fleeing to neighboring countries without providing any information about the actual image. In this way, anyone can make their own assumptions about the image. This practice promotes common assumptions about African people rather than allowing donors and viewers to gain a detailed and critically-informed understanding of the situations and events happening on the continent.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING PEDAGOGY**

In the previous section, I drew implications for INGOs and nonprofit organizations aiming to change dominant depictions of historically marginalized communities. In this section, I will look at implications for visual communication in both rhetoric and composition and technical communication classrooms. As I stated earlier in this study, the findings of this research demonstrate the need for critical approaches to visual communication pedagogy in rhetoric and writing studies to help develop students’ critical awareness in visual communication.
Critical visual communication in undergraduate writing

While the significance of the ‘cultural’ has been emphasized in both rhetoric and composition and technical communication fields, this is often undermined by the lack of attention to the topic in our pedagogies. Furthermore, visual communication is often integrated into only a few phases of our curriculum. In rhetoric and composition, Charles A. Hill (2004) argues for the reason we should teach students about the cultural work of visual images, noting that students should have an understanding of:

the power of images for defining and for reinforcing cultural values and to understand the ways in which images help us define our individual roles within society. Students also need some understanding of the many ways in which the producers of images take advantage of these cultural values and use them for their own persuasive purposes (p. 116).

In technical communication, the social and cultural turns (Blake and Longo, 2006; Haas, 2012) in the field have led scholars and instructors to seek ways to incorporate pedagogies that emphasize praxis, understood as “prudential judgment, the ability (and willingness) to take socially responsible action, including symbolic action” (Miller, 1989, p. 23), and an awareness of the social and larger public context (Miller, 1991); phronesis, understood as practical wisdom to “act in the political sphere rather than the sphere of work” (Sullivan, 1990, p. 378); and techne, understood as “critical savvy,” the ability to consider the cultural consequences of visual images as part of the production and design process (Salinas, 2002, p. 172) as integral aspects of visual communication. These authors help us to understand visual communication in professional and technical communication not as objective as it was previously conceived to be, but as a “social and highly rhetorical practice” that has cultural significance (Verzosa, 2013, p. 160).
To promote critical visual literacy among undergraduate writing students, instructors can incorporate in their curriculum readings that will help students understand both the cultural contexts of visuals and their recomposing ramifications. These readings can include portions of Rose’s (2001) *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* and the New London Group’s “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures.” As well, students can read Ridolfo’s and DeVoss’s (2009) “Composing for recomposition: rhetorical velocity and delivery.” For example, instructors can incorporate questions and insights from these readings into students’ visual analysis activities and assignments, or they can develop new assignments that specifically ask students to explore the cultural and social contexts of a chosen text. As previous scholars have argued for visual communication to be incorporated into all aspects of undergraduate writing curricula, so too do we need to incorporate these readings on critical visual literacy into various aspects of student projects, not just the visual projects.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

I chose to interview African international students because I believe this group of students would have more exposure to and awareness of international/intercultural issues. Secondly, it was easy for me to get in touch with this audience and solicit their interest in participating in my research. Having said that, the study is therefore limited in its representativeness. The study’s sample is very small and does not include, for example, Africans that were born in the United States or other African immigrants currently living in the United States. Furthermore, only three African countries were represented, these being Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya. However, the study is not entirely unrepresentative of other African groups. The findings reflect some of the views of other African people within the US regarding development messages.
An area that requires further attention is exploring research avenues to collaborate with INGOs on their website design. This work should involve seeking the views of members of the communities the organizations support and represent. This will allow researchers to help develop online representational practices that can help promote cultural sensitivity within INGO and nonprofit organizations. Another important research avenue will be to examine the views of different types of African communities, including American-born Africans, about development representations and impacts. This will allow more exploration of the similarities and differences among these groups in terms of exploring their knowledge of and experiences with development representations of their countries of origin. It will also provide the opportunity to explore the responses of participants of different age groups and educational and professional backgrounds.


Monberg, T. G. (2009). Writing home or writing as the community: Toward a theory of recursive spatial movement for students of color in service-learning courses. Reflections, 8, 21-51.


Appendix

Appendix A: Tables showing participant characteristics

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Group</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Location and Date of Discussion</th>
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Vita

Dr. Ruby Pappoe was born in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana, West Africa. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in English with a minor in Sociology from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana in 2012. She proceeded to pursue a master’s degree in Rhetoric and Technical Communication at Michigan Technological University in 2013 and a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) in 2015. She received the Natalicio Fellowship Award for Outstanding Incoming Doctoral Students ($5,000) from the College of Liberal Arts upon her admission into the Ph.D. program at UTEP.

While pursuing her master’s and Ph.D. degrees, Dr. Pappoe worked as a Teaching Assistant, teaching first-year composition and professional writing. She also worked as a writing center tutor for two semesters. During the 2017-2018 academic year at UTEP, Dr. Pappoe was appointed the Assistant Director of the Rhetoric and Writing Studies Graduate Program where she worked together with the Director of the program, Dr. Lucia Dura, to coordinate new/international student recruitment and transitions and support the academic and professional development of students in the program. Dr. Pappoe also helped to update the program’s FAQ and handbook for international students.

Dr. Pappoe’s research interests include cultural rhetorics, visual and digital rhetorics, professional and technical communication, and African studies. She’s is currently interested in the presentation and representation of non-Western people, communities, and experiences in online spaces, particularly on the websites and social media platforms of international development organizations. This was the focus of her dissertation project, which aimed to explore African participants’ perceptions of development organizations’ visual representations of poverty and development in African countries. The goal of the project was to call for more sensitive approaches in these representations as well as demonstrate the need to create change around local expertise and experiences.