

KONY 2012

A NEW

THE CHILDREN

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Invisible Children

Popular Culture and Narratives of
Humanitarian aid
created by: Connor Roy

**INVISIBLE
CHILDREN**





WE ARE INVISIBLE CHILDREN

We partner with local peacebuilders across central Africa to end violent conflict.

GIVE NOW

♥ DONATE

**INVISIBLE
CHILDREN**

Invisible children is a not for profit organization with the goal originally created in 2004 to spread awareness and raise funds to stop Joseph Kony and his LRA army from committing atrocities in several African countries. It was created by Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey, and Laren Poole in 2004, with their first major act of activism being the April 2007 "Displace Me", where 67,000 activists throughout the United States slept in the streets in makeshift cardboard villages, hoping to raise awareness about those displaced by the Ugandan government.

**INVISIBLE
CHILDREN**

A Brief History Of Joseph Kony & The LRA

JOSEPH KONY & THE

Joseph Kony is the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, An internationally wanted War Criminal, and self-proclaimed profit of the Acholi people. He was the target of the viral video *Kony 2012* by the Non-Profit Organization, Invisible Children. Kony is responsible for multiple atrocities and massacres in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Central African Republic. His use of child soldiers and indiscriminate attacks against civilians is what lead to Invisible Children publishing Jason Russell's video about him.

1986 1987 1988 1993 1994

Yoweri Museveni is elected president of Uganda and, in reaction, multiple rebel groups rise up in northern Uganda



Joseph Kony assumes leadership of a rebel group called the Holy Spirit Movement, later renaming it the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)



The LRA begins to attack local villages and abduct children to fill its ranks

Peace negotiations between the LRA and the Government of Uganda are attempted but unsuccessful

The LRA expands into southern Sudan and the government in Khartoum

provides them with safe haven

1996 2001 2002

The Government of Uganda forces at-risk communities into camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs)

Aboke abduction: The LRA abducts 139 female students from St. Mary's College, a Catholic boarding school. After negotiations, 109 of the girls are released

Operation Iron Fist: Uganda, with support from Sudan and the United States, raids LRA bases. The LRA retaliates with new civilian murders and abductions

President Museveni refers the LRA to the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate if the LRA is guilty of international war crimes

2004 J F M A M J J A S O N D

JOSEPH KONY & THE LRA



2006 J F M A M J J A S O N D



Raska Lukwiya, an LRA commander who was indicted by the ICC, is killed in battle

LRA leaves northern Uganda

Juba Peace Talks formally begin between the LRA and the Government of Uganda

J F M A M J J A S O N D

JOSEPH KONY & THE LRA

Kony doesn't show up to sign the final peace agreement that comes from the Juba Peace Talks

Kony again fails to show up to sign the Final Peace Agreement

LRA steals supplies and abducts more than 100 people in Central African Republic during the Juba Peace Talks

Christmas Massacre: LRA kills more than 400 civilians in DR Congo in retaliation for Operation Lightning Thunder



Artifact 1: Graphic Art Posters & Challenging Narratives of Western Guilt, Saviourism, and Othering.



The imagery in the graphic art campaign used to spread awareness for Kony 2012 utilizes thematic elements similar to the USA elections to garner awareness. The colours, text, and imagery are capitalizing upon the red and blue colours that the democratic and republican parties use for their electoral campaigns. This was done purposefully and plays into a narrative found in many popular humanitarian aid campaigns that play into the politics of pity, namely western guilt. By utilizing themes from a democratic election, the inferred message to audiences is that it is the duty of democratic and “just” nations to help the less fortunate. By playing to the idea of western guilt, the creators are showcasing the disparities between the audiences’ lives and the lives of the children suffering in these countries. Using themes such as justice, such as in the leftmost poster, play into this narrative further. Creating a narrative that people living in such a fortunate situation have the privilege to help, creates the issue of self-glamourizing activism. Helping out in movements that become viral, acts as a double-edged sword. Some consumers of this messaging will use a movement that is a hot topic of discussion to garner social capital, but in reality, they may be unlikely to disperse any real economic capital towards the issue. Kony 2012 did a great job of creating media attention directed toward the issue that Joseph Kony posed to African nations. The campaign was designed to create a figure that would be uniformly recognized as evil. One of the posters depicted has a silhouette of Kony in front of Osama Bin Laden and Hitler. To quote the lead graphic designer of Invisible children, “Our intention was to make a brand out of a man who nobody knew about. We were basically starting at zero so the campaign’s aesthetic needed to be noticeable and unforgettable. We looked at fame from a historical perspective and were inspired by everything from past political campaigns to artists like Andy Warhol.” -Tyler Fordham, Invisible Children’s Lead Graphic Designer. This was one positive of the campaign, as the typical issue of proximity to the problem at hand was bridged by the sheer amount of virality the campaign accrued. The main critique of this part of the campaign and its use of democratic and freedom thematic elements is its reliance on guilt to be the driving factor leading to change. The poster that links both political parties with the caption “something we can all agree on”, attempts to close the gap between political ideologies in the name of peace. This one symbolic message may seem to be well-intentioned, however, it creates a narrative of “us” and “them”. By uniting Americans to the call for peace on behalf of the afflicted African Nations dealing with Kony’s brutalities, it creates a narrative of both “us” and “them” but also plays into Saviourism as well. In order for future organizations to create humanitarian aid campaigns free of problematic narratives, adhering to guidelines that avoid the aforementioned popular narratives would lead to increased validity.

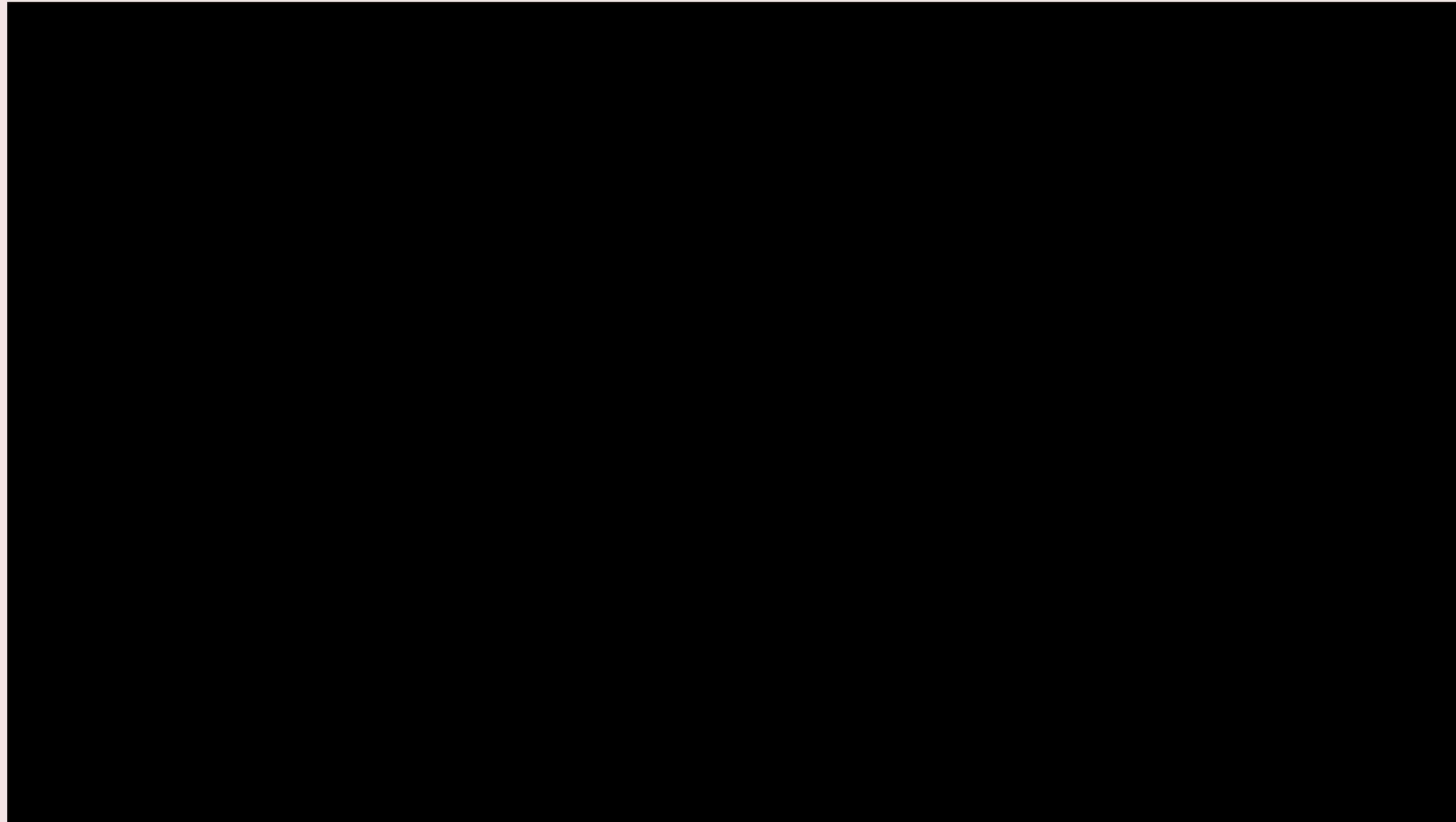
Artifact #2: Fundraising Items & Challenging Narratives of Donor -As-

Consumer



All Non-Profit organizations rely on donations to keep their operation afloat. There are a plethora of reasons why someone may donate to any certain cause. Some do it because they feel an empathetic duty to help where they can, others might be affected by the issue in some way. But where donations and becoming a consumer blend is where the lines begin to blur on what is a donation and what is a product. One critique of the Invisible children's campaign was its reliance on merchandise to increase funding. This is where the selling of products to raise funds comes in. By creating a product that is both eye-catching and tells a statement, not for profits are able to raise funds much easier. The byproduct of this however is that the cause of the merchandise begins to take on the spotlight, and not the cause itself. By removing the root cause of why the merchandise is being sold, the consumers of said merchandise begin to distance themselves from what they are supporting, and the humanitarian issue begins to simply be an idea to them. The items depicted in the images on the right and left of the text depict the type of merchandise that was sold by Invisible Children during their Kony 2012 campaign. Buying a T-shirt or a bracelet does affect the funds that will go towards supporting the goal of the fundraiser, but it distances the consumer from the topic at hand. A second common narrative of fundraising for humanitarian causes is the commodification of the suffering of others. In the case of many campaigns held by other NGOs, the ads are filled with images of starving children, crying faces, and deplorable conditions. The classic phrase of "for just X amount of money, You can help save a child/woman/village". This is what can only be described as the commodification of suffering, seeing as the product enticing consumers to spend is simply just advertising the daily struggles of those depicted. This narrative creates two issues: the first being the constant pushing of a stereotype that those living away from us in the global west are in constant need of aid. The second issue is that the idea promotes othering language, and dehumanizes the people struggling in the ads. By putting the burden of financial stability on the viewer, it relays the message that those depicted are incapable of doing anything to better their lives themselves, robbing them of their autonomy. The constant pushing of this narrative creates a racist and unfair idea of what the global south is like, and the organizations that require donations need this narrative to sell in order to continue funding.

Kony 2012 Video



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4MnpzG5Sqc>



Link to Visit Invisible
Children: <https://invisiblechildren.com/>