The thesis of Richard Chambers is approved:

_________________________________________  
Professor David Blumenkrantz  
Date

_________________________________________  
Professor David Grewe  
Date

_________________________________________  
Dr. Melissa Wall, Chair  
Date

California State University, Northridge
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DEDICATION

This thesis project is dedicated to my loving fiancée, Judy Lam, with my gratitude for her support, tolerance and inspiration throughout my long journey. This accomplishment would not have been possible without her.
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ABSTRACT

Armenian Youth and the Social Construction of Reality:
A Video Documentary on the Land and Culture Organization

By
Richard Chambers
Master of Arts in Mass Communications

The purpose of this journalistic project is to show, through the use of a video documentary, the ways in which the Armenian youth living in diaspora have learned about their homeland through the use of social construction of reality theoretical framework. The United States is home to 483,000 Armenians, the second largest Armenian diaspora population in the world. Many of these people are now second and third generation Armenians with little connection to their homeland. Through the use of media, shared stories, and education, they have attempted to maintain their link to what it means to be Armenian.

Eight Armenian American youth traveled to rural Armenia to reconnect with their roots through the Land and Culture Organization which was captured as a short format video documentary. Through interviews, the volunteers described their own journey,
covering their initial perceptions of what they expected of Armenia, their work on rebuilding a historical church, the relationships they built with the villagers, what they learned from this trip and what they hoped to leave behind.

There is a contrast between the volunteers’ perceptions of Armenia compared to what they experienced in Armenia. They were able to experience real culture and hear first-hand stories, and participate in rebuilding a church which will endure for centuries to come. For these volunteers, this journey was a life-changing experience.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

With unlimited access to media, we are constantly presented with narratives. These narratives may agree or contrast with our beliefs and ideals. As individuals, we have no choice but to decide what we accept as truth or what to discard as trivial and this is the challenge that we are faced with on a daily basis.

For communities that are living in diaspora – those who are separated from their ancestral homeland – they hear about their native lands though the media, shared family stories, and education in schools. One such population is the Armenian community.

The total population of Armenians throughout the world is estimated to be around 11 million. According to the 2011 population census by the National Statistical Service of the Republic of Armenia (2013), there are approximately three million Armenians living in the Republic of Armenia. There are approximately eight million Armenians living outside of the current national boundaries of Armenia. Russia has the largest amount of Armenians outside of Armenia followed by the United States. There are approximately 483,000 Armenians living in the United States based on the 2011 United States Census Bureau (2012a). Armenians have spread throughout the world due to several tragic events that have taken place during the 20th century.

Overview

The purpose of this project is to create a video documentary about second and third generation Armenians' perceptions of Armenia based on their socially constructed views of Armenia in comparison to their first-hand experiences of Armenia. I traveled to Armenia as a part of the Land and Culture Organization (LCO) project in July 2015. LCO
was born on the premise that diasporic Armenians not only have a moral responsibility to preserve their ancient culture and heritage, but that they must also take an active role by physically working on the lands of their ancestors. The volunteers who participate gain knowledge about their ancestors to ensure that their heritage continues for future generations.

This thesis consists of a video documentary that examines the July 2015 LCO campaign to Shikahogh, Armenia. The goal is to contribute to our understanding of diaspora Armenian youth’s perception of Armenia by telling the personal stories of these volunteers.

Research Question

The objective of this thesis and video documentary is to gain a better understanding of diaspora Armenian youth’s perception of Armenia. Avni (2013) states, “Diaspora traditionally refers to a geographically scattered community that yearns to return to its center - the homeland” (p. 229). I will explore the following questions through video interviews with volunteers before, during, and after their campaign with LCO to the remote village of Shikahogh in Armenia (Appendix A).

- As diaspora youth who have never visited their homeland, what did the volunteers expect about Armenia?
- What type of work did the volunteers do in Armenia?
- What did the volunteers learn from their experiences in Armenia?
Significance

This topic is significant because the media shapes our perspective of the world. Living through an experience and learning about an experience results in two very different perspectives. The volunteers will tell personal stories about their journey in Armenia and the impact the trip had on their lives. I chose to travel with LCO to show how we have experiences by actively doing rather than passively learning by hearing from the media and other sources. There are several organizations that take people to Armenia to work on their homeland, however, LCO is unique in that it offers an immersive experience that takes volunteers into the rural villages where everyday life is still a challenge.

Additionally, little research exists on the Armenian diaspora youth’s perception of Armenia. There is a great deal of literature surrounding other diaspora groups, with the Jewish diaspora being among the most researched in academic journals. As the children of the diaspora enter their second and third generations away from their homeland, it is critical to hear their stories of how they perceive their home country. From this, we can begin to understand the struggles and perceptions that Armenian American youth have when they view their homeland.

In 2000, the ancestry reporting from the U.S. Census Bureau (2012b) recorded that the largest population of Armenians in the United States reside in Glendale, California. Approximately 53,000 of the 200,000 residents identified as Armenian. Additionally, eight percent of the 40,000 students at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) are of Armenian descent (Chandler, 2015). Due to CSUN’s close
proximity to Glendale and the student body of the campus, the topic of Armenians in diaspora is relevant to the local population and the campus community.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, I begin by explaining the theoretical framework of the public sphere and the social construction of reality. Next, I explore the sociology of youth in Armenian culture. Finally, I describe LCO and the volunteer work done in Armenia.

The Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas, Frank Lennox, and Sara Lennox (1974) introduced the now widespread understanding of the concept of the public sphere, which is a process of participation by which people have verbal contact with one another. The public, as described by Habermas, Frank Lennox, and Sara Lennox (1974), is brought into being when citizens can assemble and associate with the freedom to express and publish their opinions. One has no power over another in a true public sphere and the interests of the public are more likely to be served. Public spheres can be found in churches, cultural associations, independent media, political parties, non-profit organizations, and community associations, among others (Habermas, 1992; Sholar, 1994).

These public spheres can be compartmentalized from a macro level to a micro level. Cunningham (2001) referred to these micro level subcategorizations as sphericules which can be examined in more detail. Diasporic communities can be examined as a sphericule. Their cultural expressions are a struggle for survival, identity, and assertion among the prevailing dominant culture (Cunningham, 2001).
Through a form of long-distance nationalism, *sphericules* can cross national boundaries by use of social media and web technologies (Appadurai, 1996). This allows for previously separated communities to engage with one another to help create a sense of connectedness. This connectedness allows the diasporic *sphericules* to exert influence on their host country which can lead to positive change, but can also bring about a false sense of unity.

**Social Construction of Reality**

Every day we are bombarded by articles from the internet, reports that we hear on television, and stories that we hear from family and friends. We also live our lives disseminating the information that is presented to us. From this, along with our own personal experiences, we begin to shape our perceptions of the world around us. These collective experiences can be constituted as knowledge, while the “here and now” of our everyday life reflects the realism of our consciousness. This is the foundation of the social construction of reality, a concept developed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967).

“Social construction is not a form of knowledge but a way to think about and research questions in communication” (Bartesaghi & Cissna, 2009, p. 129). Human beings are both the creators and the products of their social world (Adoni & Mane, 1984). We both shape and are influenced by the world around us, a world that we create. According to Bartesaghi, & Cissna (2009), we make our own environment through “languaging,” which can be defined as communication that occurs through transmission or through ritual (p. 129). Transmission is the direct exchange of information. This can
occur through spoken or written messages. Ritual is communication that is based on building relationships and directly talking to each other through sharing stories about one’s culture. Both these forms of communication involve more than direct messages being exchanged and are thus open to interpretation. Due to this, communication is contingent on relationships, a construction of reality, consequential to the communicators.

One such human contrived means of constructing a shared reality is the media (Adoni & Mane, 1984). The material presented in mass media, in whatever form it may be, is determined by other individuals’ collective experiences that they have chosen to share in the public sphere. Berger and Luckmann (1967) stated that people can only accept what they believe to be real. Adoni and Mane (1984) adds that, “the process of reality construction is defined as social because it can be carried out only through social interaction, either real or symbolic” (p. 25). To experience what we do not know, to learn new information that we cannot experience ourselves, we turn to the media to provide this knowledge.

“We walk around with media-generated images of the world, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues” (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992, p. 374). Schrape (2011) argues that some forms of media allow us to showcase the very best or very worst of our lives. We can select what content we want to put online to be shared with the world. The people viewing this content have a very narrow perspective of these posters’ lives. This allows posters to create their own “reality” that other people will use to define them. The system is designed to make the whole process seem so normal and natural that the very art of social construction is
invisible (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992). This is one example of how people can believe information that they have not experienced firsthand and accept it as truth.

Social construction can also happen without deliberate intention. In order for people to explain a situation to one another, there needs to be context, in other words, a topic of conversation needs to be framed. Framing plays a role in analyzing discourse that holds together and gives coherence and meaning to a diverse array of symbols (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992). The process of framing can shape the story being told and needs to be tailored to the audience for maximum effect. While framing, a presenter could choose to include or leave out critical details to help in the presentation of a story. This, however, leads to the omission or inclusion of information which changes the reality of the original event.

Despite this, people only know tiny regions of social life (Gitlin, 1981). They find themselves relying on the media for concepts, recognition of values, symbols, and even language (Gitlin, 1981). According to Potter (2013), we create most of our opinions from very little information which gives us a superficial understanding of issues. The media allows us to create these opinions based on intuition or on anecdotal information.

“Without a good understanding of the media, their messages, and the effects, people can develop misunderstandings and misrepresentations about their world” (Potter, 2013, p. 20). The media has the potential to give us a false sense that we are knowledgeable. This influence has the possibility to last an entire lifetime and can either be a positive or negative influence. “We emphasize the production of images rather than facts or information because a more subtle form of meaning construction is at the heart of the
issue” (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992, p. 374). People experience a world through social media, experience this world as real, and then believe in it so much that we think it within ourselves (Bartesaghi, & Cissna, 2009).

Counterviews

While the theory of social construction is fairly widely accepted in the field of mass communications, there have been several authors who have challenged this framework. Motyl (2010) states, “The conundrum of theories of social constructivism is that social construction is a social construction, that is to say, a social science concept 'imposed' on the non-self-consciously constructivist behaviors of people, who by and large do not believe that they are engaging in construction” (p. 64).” This points to the social construction of reality as a circular event that justifies itself. Motyl (2010) goes on to say that, at worst, social construction is much too broad to be of any use to theorizing the world. Sica (2015) described an interview with Luckmann to which Luckmann stated that the word ‘construction’ was a poor choice for the theory. We, as individuals living in a world around us, do not construct our own reality, we merely interpret the world. This gives us far less power to create the world that we live in. We are pursuing trivial items and restating the obvious - that people matter, that history matters, and that life is the product of people living (Motyl, 2010).

Documentaries as a form of Social Construction

Documentaries are representations rather than recordings or real world situations (Marquis, 2013). According to Roscoe and Hight (2001), documentaries are within
themselves constructed with certain views to produce certain images of the world. They take a stance that what is portrayed is real rather than fictional. "A documentary can never be the real world, that the camera can never capture life as it would have unraveled had it not interfered, and the results of this collision between apparatus and subject are what constitutes a documentary" (Bruzzi, 2000, p.7). Representation has become a problem in modern documentaries (Nichols, 1993).

The dichotomy between truth and fiction leads to the difficulty in thinking about “truth” in documentaries (Williams, 1993). Despite this, Nichols (1993), suggests that documentaries are a means to offer facts and explain social work and motivating mechanisms. Documentaries can only offer a small amount of content in a short time span, thus selective filming and editing will occur. The viewers, as much as the creator of the documentary, need to be aware that what they are seeing is a small representation of a larger situation.

Cinéma vérité, often referred to as truthful cinema, began in the late 1950s in France (Aquino, 2012). In traditional documentaries, the camera is considered invisible, while in cinéma vérité, the presence of the camera is acknowledged. This allows the documentarian to not only capture events as they unfold, but also allows them to be part of the creative process. The talking head interview is one form of this process since it is a deliberate act that has been constructed by the documentarian. The interviewees are still free to speak their minds, however, the documentarian is still able to shape the path and direction of what is recorded through their selection of questions.

According to Lipscomb (1964), “the cinéma vérité is a special kind of film journalist who is trying to record what really happens more truly than a reporter taking
notes” (p. 62). It is recognized that the documentary being created is not completely objective – that some bias or skewing exists – since a piece is being crafted based on the views of the documentarian. Documentarians place themselves in the path of the story or events as they happen and unfold in order to tell the story that they want to be told.

The Diaspora

The term “diaspora” is a term that has evolved over the course of the last century leading to two definitions of the word. The term diaspora originated from a Greek word meaning the scattering of seeds and refers to the formation of deterritorialized nations (Joseph, 2011). Traditional definitions of diaspora center around the creation of boundaries, such as the community and nation-state, and focus on roots and the homeland (Anthias, 1998; Bhatia & Ram, 2009; Joseph, 2014; Mavroudi, 2007). The diaspora originally referred to the Jews, who are regarded as the oldest diaspora (Safran, 2005). It is the reference to the forced relocation of a population with the hope that one day, the displaced people will be able to return home. Emphasis is placed on the ancestral homeland and the sense of victimhood (Safran, 2005).

Postmodern conceptualizations of diaspora are based on ideas of fluidity, movement, routes, and the destabilization of homogenizing boundaries (Anthias, 1998; Mavroudi, 2007). The need to reassess the definition of diaspora emerged from globalization. The works of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy focus on the notion of the mutual shared understanding of the diaspora which allows for a collective cultural identity that transcends the notion of “race” (Anthias, 1998). Vertovec (2000) characterized the diaspora as a triadic relationship consisting of a mode of cultural production, social
forms, and collective consciousness. This allows for the focus on the difference and sameness of connective cultures across different homogeneous ethnic groups (Anthias, 1998). From this, according to Clifford (1997), the diaspora can construct alternative public spheres by forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national space.

The word diaspora has evolved from a very static definition to a much more dynamic inclusive definition. Diaspora has come to embrace not only immigrants, but also ethnic and religious minorities and other categories of groups who wish to be part of society on their own terms (Safran, 2005). They have a consciousness that emphasizes a sense of identity such as pride in one’s heritage yet, as Joseph (2014) describes, these identities are formed through cultural forms – music, fashion, film, literature, sports – all of which have the power to unite. Thinking of diaspora as a process rather than as a condition allows us to focus on how members of the diaspora produce both fixed and fluid identities (Smith & Gergan, 2015).

Much of the literature fails to acknowledge that diaspora can also reproduce the essential notions of place and identity that they are supposed to transgress (Mavroudi, 2007). Diaspora can socially construct their own reality and interpretations of their homeland and their culture. It is a blend of the host nation as well as their cultural roots.

Armenian diaspora has been based around the collective identity of kinship and religion, and the homeland has been regarded as a sort of “sacred space” and idealized as the only place where they can survive as a distinct cultural and/or religious community (Safran, 2005).
Armenian History

“The sun never sets on the Armenian diaspora,” states Tololyan (2000, p. 107). Over the past thousand years, Armenia has grown and contracted in size several times. Each contraction of the physical bounds of Armenia has resulted in the displacement of the Armenian people. The most recent shift of boundaries occurred during the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The defining event for the Armenian diaspora is the 1915 genocide, carried out by the collapsing Ottoman Empire and followed by the expulsion of approximately 1.5 million Armenians (Koinova, 2009; Tololyan, 2000). This event created what is considered today as the modern Armenian Diaspora.

Today, over half of the world’s Armenians live outside of Armenia. According to Mkrtchuan (2009), over eight million Armenians live outside of Armenia in almost 60 countries. After the 1915 genocide, Armenians spread to neighboring countries, to Europe, and to North America. The number of Armenian-Americans is estimated to be approximately one million (Zarifian, 2014). This number is only an estimate due to two court decisions. Halladjian et al. (1909) and United States v. Cartozian (1924–1925) allowed Armenians to become naturalized US citizens on the basis that they were white (Chahinian & Bakalian, 2016). The only way to count the Armenian population in the United States is on the long form census which has the option to note the languages spoken in the household, thus making the exact number of Armenians in the United States elusive.

For the Armenians who stayed, half of the survivors joined their co-nationals in a tiny segment of historical Armenia that remained under Russian domination where it became the Republic of Armenia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.
(Tololyan, 2000). This has led to a split in the Armenian community. There was a minority of Armenians who stayed in their country; the majority of the Armenians left their community to seek out other opportunities. The Soviet period only added to this divide, and it was not until the fall of the Soviet Union that the process of reconnecting could begin.

“A sense of belonging to an ethnic group can give individuals feelings of pride in its unique character, continuity with the past, and survival beyond the self,” writes Cohen (2004, p. 99). This is very true of the Armenian culture. There is a deep rooted theme in the culture to bind together that transcends spatial distance. In addition to kinship, language, religion, race, cultural traits, a sense of shared history serves to reinforce and perpetuate this subjective feeling of belonging (Cohen, 2004).

Current State of Armenia

After the end of World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh was under Azerbaijani control (Baser, 2008). In 1920, the Caucasus countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia - had a very brief independence before being absorbed into the Soviet Union (Baser, 2008). In 1921, the Soviet Union assigned the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan (Mooradian & Druckman, 1999). The Armenian government was not pleased with this decision and attempted to challenge this decision over the course of Soviet rule with no results.

Armenians had been the majority in Karabakh region and they made up 74 percent of the population as of 1987 (Melander, 2001; Waal, 2013). The Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh grew resentful that the province was part of Azerbaijan rather than
Armenia (Melander, 2001). It was not until the waning days of the Soviet Union, which allowed the discussion over Karabakh to finally erupt into violence.

In February 1988, the local Soviet government of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region of Azerbaijan, petitioned that the Nagorno-Karabakh borders be redrawn within the Soviet Union to transfer the Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh region to fall within Soviet Armenia (Waal, 2013). This brought open demonstrations to Stepanakert, the largest city in Nagorno-Karabakh. During the protests, two Azerbaijanis were killed which sparked the beginning of unrest and conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Melander, 2001). Small skirmishes led to a full war between the two countries over the disputed territory. The Nagorno-Karabakh war became the first and arguably the most violent conflict between post-Soviet republics (Mooradian & Druckman, 1999).

The war lasted between 1988 to 1994 and killed approximately 15,000 Armenians (and 15,000 Azerbaijani) and turned some 300,000 other Armenians (and 650,000 Azerbaijani) into homeless refugees (Human Rights Watch, 1994; Tololyan, 2000). The heaviest fighting erupted after the fall of the Soviet Union when Soviet troops withdrew from the region (Human Rights Watch, 1994). The war ravaged both countries. In the end, the economy and social infrastructure of each country was virtually destroyed (Mooradian & Druckman, 1999). The capital, Yerevan, was stricken with water shortages and rolling blackouts. Some of the villages in the country lost access to everything. The hardest hit regions were the territories where the Nagorno-Karabakh war took place, and it was these areas that were in the need of the most help. Despite this, neither country
surrendered. The situation eventually resulted in a ‘mutually hurting stalemate’ resulting in a truce and ceasefire in May 1994 (Mooradian & Druckman, 1999).

Armenia de facto won that war, which ended with a ceasefire, however, no truce established a peace accord (Koinova, 2014). The Nagorno-Karabakh war resulted in a quasi-state sector to be created in which the Armenian-inhabited region was placed in Azerbaijan as a secessionist statelet (Tololyan, 2000). In 2005, a census conducted in the Nagorno-Karabakh recorded that the population was 99.7 percent ethnic Armenian and that there were only six Azerbaijani living in the territory (Waal, 2013). To this day, ongoing skirmishes continue. The Nagorno-Karabakh region is still very much an actively contested area with the militaries of each side still engaging in small firefights. There is neither war nor peace, ceasefire violations are ongoing, and people continue to die (Baser, 2008).

Baser and Swain argued (2008) that Armenian diaspora are generally blamed for Armenia’s hostile relations with Azerbaijan. Armenia is extremely dependent on diasporic support and is more permeable to the preferences of overseas Armenians (Baser & Swain, 2008). The drawn out conflict, with American Armenians projecting their interests and the desire to reclaim ancestral lands only helped to fuel the conflict (Baser & Swain, 2008).

In addition to the strife in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, on December 7th, 1988, a large earthquake killed 25,000 people and left 520,000 homeless in Armenia (Tololyan, 2000). The earthquake that struck Armenia in 1988 was the first opportunity for foreign aid to enter the country since it became a Soviet occupied territory. The Armenian diaspora extended enormous assistance by re-building hospitals, schools, paving new
roads, establishing joint ventures, and restarting industrial enterprises (Baser & Swain, 2009).

The villages adjacent to the Nagorno-Karabakh region are some of the areas that Land and Culture Organization, along with other international organizations, have been focusing on to help rebuild.

Armenian Diaspora

Cohen (2004) states that the while the diaspora are scattered across the globe they still attempt to maintain a connection with others in their ethnic group and with the country of origin. Historical Armenia, at its peak, stretched from the Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea. At present, a majority of these lands fall within the territory of other countries, such as Turkey, Azerbaijan, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Even if an Armenian person is from one of these present nation states, they are still considered an Armenian by blood. However, the importance of a “homeland” is a significant authoritative source of value, legitimacy, and identity (Lukose, 2007).

A common theme in the Armenian discourse is the need to preserve their culture and heritage through education and mobilization of the younger members of the community (Cohen, 1996). Armenians tend to maintain their cohesiveness through the church, political parties, charitable organizations, and a network of newspapers (Cohen, 1996). Informal ethnic education generally includes organized cultural, religious, and social programs outside of the classroom format (Cohen, 2004).

In the 1930s and 1940s, there was a realization by Armenian Americans that the knowledge of the Armenian language was a prerequisite to belonging to the Armenian
culture (Chahinian & Bakalian, 2016). Armenian Americans sought to preserve their culture and language through schools. As of 2016, there were 24 Armenian schools in the United States (Chahinian & Bakalian, 2016).

At present, we are in our second and third generation of Armenians living in the United States. These Armenians have received knowledge of the Armenian history and culture through either formal or informal education. For the second and third generation Armenians that do not go to church or to Armenian schools, they are usually aware of the Armenian genocide. Yacoubian (2014) writes, “Having experienced genocide, the sense of victimization has been present in the collective identity of Armenians regardless of their individual relocation experiences” (p. 64). Whether or not an Armenian is aware of their past, the genocide has left a collective mark on all Armenians. The experience of genocide, direct or through cultural narratives, can be considered the main ingredient of a common racial heritage for Armenians (Yacoubian, 2014).

Family stories reflect themes of unity, strength, and endurance while preserving and enhancing ethnic memories (Manoogian, Walker, & Richards, 2007). Genocide victims use oral history and the act of storytelling to pass down their experiences and memories. In particular, due to the Armenian emphasis on women’s duties and on strong family ties, Armenian American women feel responsible for creating connections between family and ethnicity (Manoogian, Walker, & Richards, 2007). The genocide left many Armenians with few material possessions (Manoogian, Walker, & Richards, 2007). These stories are all that the diaspora have to describe their suffering and their homeland.

This sense of victimization has been transferred from one generation by way of cultural narratives, a critical contributor to the Armenian perception of sharing a common
ethnic heritage with other Armenians all over the world (Yacoubian, 2014; Ziemer, 2010). It has been through shared stories that Armenians socially construct the reality of being Armenian for the youth. The construction of history and culture is a major task facing all ethnic groups for meaning and community (Ziemer, 2010). These stories are the basis of how second and third generation Armenians perceive their homeland. The awareness of multiple attachments and identifications fuel the desire to connect oneself with others who share a similar belonging (Ziemer, 2010). This leads to a romanticized view of Armenia which differs from the current state of the country.

Coming Home

As more generations live outside of Armenia, a rift develops between diaspora Armenians and Armenians living in Armenia. Mkrtchyan (2009) states, “The long-standing separation from their historical homeland marked a number of changes in the national identity and norms of behavior of diaspora Armenians, and increased the social distance between Armenians, who live in another part of their historical homeland” (p. 702). This disconnect has led diaspora Armenians to look for new ways to reconnect with their homeland. One of these ways is through cultural tours.

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines cultural tourism as “a discerning type of tourism that takes account of other people’s cultures” (Loukaitou-Sideris & Soureli, 2012, p. 50). Cultural tourism involves the promotion of local historical places, artifacts, natural resources, and activities as culturally authentic tourist destinations (Pierre, 2009). Cultural tourism has become one of the most powerful economic, social, cultural, ecological, and political forces of the
modern world, shaping the ways in which locals and tourists relate to and understand self, other, place, and time (Avni, 2013). Hearing about a place is not the same as experiencing a place first hand. Pierre (2009) states that this is a global phenomenon that has emerged with the deployment of “culture” as a national commodity. Cultural tourism has been rising in Armenia since the fall of the Soviet Union.

While there is little research on Armenian cultural tourism, there have been many writings about Israeli cultural tourism, to which there are many parallels. According to Kelner (2010), tourism reestablishes a new context in which people can produce themselves through interactions with other people and in a new environment. Diaspora Jewish tourists act on Israel and as they draw on the symbolic, interactional, and material resources that Israel provides to them to act in Israel; they are creating themselves anew in partnership with Israel (Kelner, 2010). The diaspora returning to their home country allows them to create a new and personal bond with their country, which is a stronger bond than any learned history. Tours introduce new dimensions of complexity that may have not been previously experienced or recognized (Kelner, 2010). These programs call travelers’ attentions to their own feelings of otherness in the countries where they live, and generate feelings of ownership, belonging, implication, and responsibility to a country where they do not live (Kelner, 2010).

Avni (2013) writes that cultural tourism serves as a locus for mediation on what it means to be diaspora - belonging to two homes simultaneously. Cultural tourism lends itself to cultural immersion. Cultural immersion is often a tour that lasts for several weeks and allows participants to connect with local residents through housing or through language. Tourism is a passive experience whereas immersion is an active experience.
There are several programs that allow for cultural immersion in Armenia including Birthright Armenia and LCO. Homeland visits represent a socializing activity that materializes a persistent connectedness between place, culture, and people (Avni, 2013).

Immersion tours are structured approaches that morally and existentially transform travelers upon their return home (Avni, 2013). The participants who partake in tours will return back home at the end of their expeditions with the possibility of being a changed person. The immersions tours allow participants to create a new reality and new perspective of Armenia that will complement the socially constructed view of Armenia. This new perspective has the possibility to allow for a greater connectedness to the homeland. However, the desire for a homeland does not necessarily translate into making the homeland into one’s home (Avni, 2013). Participants might return to their home in the diaspora, but it is up to them to decide how involved they want to be with their home country after an immersion experience.

Land and Culture Organization

The Land and Culture Organization (LCO) United States affiliate is a relatively small organization. Keeping the size and presence of LCO small has allowed the organization to operate outside the influence of politics in Armenia. There are no academic or scholarly materials regarding LCO. The following section is based on materials from the LCO website and oral conversations with the President of LCO, Haig Manjikian (personal communication, May 31, 2015), and the Treasurer of LCO, Hilda Manjikian (personal communication, May 31, 2015).
For the last several years, LCO has been sending volunteers to Shikahogh (Appendix B), a remote Armenian village in the southern part of the country. Shikahogh lies near the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region adjacent to Azerbaijan. LCO has been restoring a 17th century church in Shikahogh that was close to ruin.

LCO has focused on rebuilding churches rather than other structures such as schools or hospitals because Armenia has been a deeply rooted Christian country. Armenians were the first people to establish an official state religion, Christianity, in 301 AD (Samuelian & Zendjidjian, 2008). Churches have served as permanent and visible monuments, not just for Christianity, but as markers to establish villages or cities as part of Armenian territory. Some of the churches that LCO has worked on have been over one thousand years old. LCO has been focusing on rebuilding churches, particularly in the border areas, to leave a marker of what was historical Armenia.

LCO finds its volunteers through word-of-mouth and from past volunteer references. LCO seeks out sponsors to help fund the organization. These sponsors, in turn, help offset the cost of travel in Armenia for the volunteers; however, each volunteer is responsible for their own airfare and $500 fee to cover the lodging, meals, and weekend tours in Armenia. The volunteers must stay with the group for the duration of the campaign.

Each summer, the volunteers assist local craftsmen in rebuilding the village’s church and surrounding site. LCO works with an Armenian architect who subcontracts out specialized work, such as masonry or tiling. In turn, these subcontractors hire local villagers who work as apprentices. This allows local villagers to develop new skills and helps villagers find jobs, which are extremely scarce in the remote parts of the country.
The volunteers stay in a village for a short period of time, usually three weeks. As unskilled young adults, the volunteers assist the subcontractors in the same way that the villagers assist the subcontractors. LCO ensures that the work the volunteers do is done safely and with the supervision of the LCO group leader. The volunteers can work on moving stones, shoveling rocks, mixing cement, digging dirt, clearing debris, and other similar tasks. While these tasks are manual labor, the volunteers know what they are getting into, and they feel as if they are leaving an imprint on a local relic.

LCO typically works in small groups. There are between 10 to 15 volunteers with one or two group leaders. The volunteers can range in age, but they are typically young adults between 18 to 24 years old. The group leaders are usually past volunteers who have traveled with LCO before and know what to expect on each campaign. In addition to providing group oversight, the group leaders are also responsible for daily work logistics and providing a safe work environment.

The volunteers stay in the village where they are working. This allows the volunteers to live on the land they are restoring with the people they are helping. The volunteers eat the same food as the villagers and a local cook is provided by LCO. The volunteers also stay in a singular dwelling near the work site. In Shikahogh, the volunteers stayed in a residence that had electricity and running water (provided by garden hoses). The volunteers used an outhouse, washed and hung their own clothes, and showered outdoors, the same as any villager in Shikahogh. While it takes the volunteers time to adjust to their living conditions, it allows the volunteers to integrate better with the villagers and their lifestyle.
It is up to each volunteer to apply themselves to each LCO campaign. Some volunteers never adjust to the village lifestyle, while some volunteers seek out villagers to ask them questions about their lives. While each volunteer's experience is different, every one of them walks away from the trip with a new understanding of Armenia and the life people live outside of the capital of Yerevan.

Summary of Literature Review

Humans are creators of their own world and this leads to a social construction of reality. The media serve as one source of influence. Family and friends serve as another source of information. This perception can become skewed based on the input one receives and it is up to the individual to make sense of the world around them.

As children, the stories we hear have a lasting impact on our lives. For Armenian Americans, living as diaspora, the only source of what it means to be “Armenian” comes from schools, churches, the media, and the stories of the past from family. This may lead second and third generation Armenians to have a romanticized view of their homeland through a socially constructed reality.

LCO takes second and third generation Armenians to Armenia so they can experience the country for themselves. This allows the diaspora youth to see what it means to be Armenian. These volunteers spend time in the remote villages, living off the land, living with the villagers to show the struggles facing present day Armenia. The purpose of this experience is to inspire the volunteers to reconnect with their country and to bring new understanding and appreciation to the stories that their families told of their home country.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes my preparation, the equipment used, the timeline for filming, and my interviewing and editing process for the video documentary. I also explain the limitations I faced while making this documentary.

Preparation

I came into the Mass Communications graduate program with very little experience in the field of journalism. My area of expertise has been focused on multimedia, which consists primarily of graphic design, web design, photography, and videography. I earned my undergraduate degree in this field, from CSUN, in 2010 where upon I began my professional career in multimedia design. Over the last five years, I have worked at CSUN as a staff member, serving as an Academic Multimedia Content Developer for the Career Center and as the campus wide Multimedia Producer of video content for Marketing and Communications.

In 2013, I was offered a part-time faculty position in the CSUN Mike Curb College of Arts, Media, and Communications in the Cinema and Television Arts Department (CTVA). I currently teach one class, CTVA 464, which is the fundamentals of digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) video production and editing. I not only teach students how to use a camera to capture a visually interesting story, but also mentor them to help prepare them for real world situations that they will face upon graduation. As a
practitioner in this field, I can attest to the challenges that one will face looking to stand out among the myriad of other students graduating from film school.

In addition to my staff and faculty positions at CSUN, I am also a freelance photographer and videographer specializing primarily in wedding documentation. This began in 2012 once I had a strong and diverse enough portfolio and continues today. For videos, I emphasize telling the story of the wedding day by interviewing the bride and groom. Their story, coupled with the material shot of the actual wedding, weaves together to tell an engaging yet personal story for each couple.

My past experiences, combined with the information that I have learned in the Mass Communications graduate program, has laid the foundation for the video documentary I am creating for this thesis.

Involvement with LCO

I learned of LCO through a series of events that spanned several years. The current president of LCO in the United States is Haig Manjikian. The treasurer is Hilda Manjikian. The two have been married for a number of years and both are in their late sixties. I met them through their daughters, one of whom was my co-worker during my time that I worked at the CSUN Career Center. In 2010, when I first heard of LCO, I did not think much about filming videos for them at that time.

It was not until my application to the Mass Communications graduate program did it dawn on me that I might be able to partner with LCO to create a video documentary. I realized that I that the opportunity to not only create a documentary for the graduate program, but also to create meaningful video content for this organization. I
approached Haig and Hilda in the spring of 2014, and they were very enthusiastic about this idea. I also pitched this idea to the head of the Mass Communications graduate program, and she also seemed very enthusiastic about this project.

I began collaborating with LCO, through Haig and Hilda, in the summer of 2014. They agreed to help sponsor a part of my trip to Armenia. They would cover my expenses in Armenia for basic food and lodging. I was responsible for airfare and all other expenses. In return, I planned to create a 20-minute documentary and several other shorter, two to three minute vignettes of the trip to Armenia. These videos would help reinforce the mission of LCO for their potential base of volunteers which consists of the second and third generation Armenians. The videos are narrative rich, visually interesting pieces designed to better explain what actually happens on a LCO campaign.

Participants

Eight volunteers signed up to participate in the 2015 LCO summer campaign to Armenia. The campaign began on July 13th, 2015 and concluded on July 31st, 2015, spanning about three weeks. Seven of the volunteers were Armenian Americans living in the Los Angeles area, all of whom were second or third generation Armenians born in the United States. One participant was from Australia and was not of Armenian heritage. All of the volunteers were between the ages of 19 and 32.

Everyone voluntarily joined the Summer 2015 LCO campaign. LCO typically has 10 to 15 volunteers, however, due to several late cancellations, they had a lower number than usual of eight volunteers. Additionally, there were seven female Armenian American volunteers only one male Australian, non-Armenian volunteer. In the past,
there was a greater balance between gender in the LCO expeditions, so this was uncommon as well.

Four of the eight volunteers spoke Armenian - Sevana, Lori, Ani, and Lilit. These four volunteers had also attended Armenian schools while growing up. The other four volunteers did not speak Armenian - Alexandra, Christina, Allison, and Michael. Three of these four volunteers were of Armenian heritage but did not attend Armenian school and only knew a few keywords. The Australian volunteer, Michael, had Armenian friends while growing up, but no formal exposure to Armenian schooling or culture.

I met all of the volunteers approximately one month before the beginning of the 2015 campaign. I observed them during an informational session which explained the campaign. After watching and listening to their conversations, I chose to focus my interviews on three volunteers: Lori, Ani, and Lilit. Lori had traveled with LCO on a previous campaign. Ani, Lori’s younger sister, was going to Armenia for her first time. Lilit had never traveled to Armenia and was the youngest member of the group. All three women spoke Armenian and had attended Armenian school. I felt that these three volunteers would give me three unique perspectives since they all had backgrounds that were similar in some ways yet different in others.

Equipment

In Armenia, there was only one camera used to record all of the interviews and b-roll footage. I selected the Canon C100 Mark II as my camera system. I own this camera and it was purchased several months prior to leaving for Armenia in preparation for this project. The C100 Mark II can easily be operated by one person, it has autofocusing
capabilities, and records video in 23.976 frames per second, which gives a similar look to that of traditional film.

Several lenses were selected to provide different focal lengths while recording the footage. There was one wide, one medium, and one telephoto zoom lens to cover every possible situation which I might have encountered. The wide angle lens was useful in small places, where I could not move far from a subject or when I wanted to capture the grandeur of a large space. The medium angle lens was my primary lens since it most closely mimics the same focal length of the human eye. The telephoto lens was used the least, but was useful in allowing me to record tighter and more personal moments.

Sound was recorded using a wireless lavalier microphone, which could be clipped onto the interviewee. The wireless transmitter, attached to an audio field recorder, allowed me to record and monitor sound while simultaneously recording video footage. The C100 Mark II also recorded sound so I captured redundant audio as a fail-safe.

Most of the footage was shot on a tripod to have a clean and steady look. In addition to the tripod, I also used a “slider” which could mount to the top of the tripod. This allowed me to push the camera from side to side along the x-axis or from front to back on the y-axis (Appendix C). This allowed for shots to have some subtle movement rather than being static on a tripod.

Time Frame

The process of creating the video documentary portion of the thesis spanned several years. The initial planning to see if this idea was feasible began in spring 2014. This concept was still wavering until May 2015, when I had my first group meeting with
all of the LCO volunteers. From there, I began moving forward to purchase the plane
ticket and any remaining video support equipment. The LCO campaign was nearly three
weeks, from July 13th, 2015 to July 31st, 2015.

The process of transcribing all the interviews spanned several months after my
return. The transcriptions allowed me to methodically lay out a story that I could piece
together on paper before bringing it into a non-linear video editing application on the
computer. I spent a year editing the documentary from November 2015 to November
2016. I focused on telling a story not just through the dialogue from the transcripts, but
also through the visual footage from the trip.

The most time-consuming video editing process was working with a music
composer to score the piece. I met with my composer on several occasions to discuss the
mood behind a given scene. Matching my vision with the composer’s music took months,
from June 2016 to September 2016. The outcome of this collaborative process was music
that captured the emotions of the volunteers which added to the story being told.

The last component of the video were the subtitles. It was important to me that the
video be accessible in both English and Armenian. This process took a month to
complete. I reached out to one of the volunteers’ father to translate the English to
Armenian. Open caption versions in both English and Armenian were created for the
final project.
Interviews

The interviews were filmed with a limited crew, which was usually just me. I would ask the questions, however, I was always behind the camera. To maintain proper eye line for the interviewee, I had another person present during the interviews. This other person, another volunteer whom the interviewee was comfortable with, would sit across from the interviewee to provide the proper eye line for the camera (Appendix D).

Each interview was set in a private space which allowed the interviewees the ability to speak freely and without judgement from others. Each interview session was short, approximately 10 to 15 minutes, to keep the interviewees as comfortable as possible. Having short interview sessions also allowed the interviewees to stay on topic and not drift due to fatigue or nervousness.

In addition to the interviews, extensive footage was shot and recorded in Armenia during the LCO campaign. For nearly every question that was answered by the interviewees, there was corresponding footage that was paired with their interview. This footage was overlaid on the interviews as b-roll. This b-roll served as the visual storytelling component for the documentary.

The interviewees were given a brief overview of the project, but were not presented with the questions before the interview. This was done to prevent the interviewees from overthinking their responses. I was looking for genuine, honest answers that had not been self edited. Their spontaneous answers allowed me to see whether they were responding to their perceptions of reality or their first-hand experiences.
The Interviewees

The first set of interviews took place in Los Angeles a month before the LCO campaign began. I chose to focus on Lori, Ani, and Lilit. I found out, through several degrees of separation, that I happened to know one of their friends. Due to this coincidence, the volunteers were more open to discussing their experiences and expectations for the campaign. I asked them a series of questions which had similar themes but differed for each individual person based on their responses (Appendix E).

I interviewed the volunteers at several intervals during the LCO campaign. In addition to interviewing them before they left for Armenia, I interviewed them once they arrived in Armenia. I interviewed them on three different occasions during the trip which was usually at the end of each week. Interviewing the volunteers on multiple occasions allowed me to compare their answers and to document their growth and development during the campaign.

Lori, Ani, and Lilit were all asked the same questions at each interview session. Each brought in their own backgrounds and experiences into their interview answers. By asking the same questions to multiple people, it allowed me to compare answers from each volunteer. Each cited their own perceptions of what they thought of Armenia and their expectations for the trip. In the next set of interviews, they were asked what they thought of Armenia and the village once they had just arrived. The last set of interviews, they were asked what they thought of Armenia and the LCO campaign as a whole.

The remainder of the volunteers were more private and less inclined to be interviewed at multiple intervals. These volunteers were all interviewed once or twice during the LCO campaign but not as frequently as Lori, Ani, and Lilit.
Limitations

There were only eight volunteers that traveled with LCO for this campaign. There are typically more people who participate in the campaigns, according to the President of LCO. Having such a low number of volunteers limited the stories and experiences that I could have captured. The ability to interview more people would have had the potential to yield greater diversity in responses.

Additionally, the organization that I traveled with, LCO, could possibly influence my perspective of the volunteers. I was only able to follow one group of volunteers belonging to one organization during one campaign. Having the ability to travel with other organizations to Armenia to reconnect diaspora youth to their homeland has the potential to yield different responses. Every organization has their own mission and that shapes the entire perspective of each campaign. Further research with other organizations is recommended to have a more holistic understanding of diaspora youth returning to their homeland.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter contains the full transcript from the LCO video documentary. Sound effects and key auditory elements are listed as well. The 22-minute documentary is divided into three acts: (a) initial perceptions the volunteers had of Armenia, (b) working on the church and building connections with the villagers, (c) what the volunteers learned from the trip and what they hope to leave behind in Armenia.

Documentary Transcript

(Black Screen)

Sevana (Spoken in Armenian): The Armenian people are like a tree. The diaspora are the leaves; Armenia is the root of the tree. The leaves cannot live without the roots; and the roots cannot live without the leaves. Both need each other in order to survive.

(Wind Blows)

Sevana: I love my people. I had always since childhood wanted to come to Armenia and do some kind of volunteer work, specifically in the rural villages, to see what I could do. So now I’m here and really happy to be helping people, specifically with the church because Armenians are known to be the first Christians, so this is really deep even for someone who’s not as religious, it still hits home.

(Music Plays)

(Title Screen)

Lilit: We are going to Shikahogh this summer with the Land and Culture program. From what I have heard about it, it's beautiful, almost like in kind of a forestry idea, a bunch of
greenery. I believe it is on a higher mountain kind of idea, but that's really all that I know about it. I'm kind of excited to go and see what it's actually all about.

Ani: They have been working on a church there, the same one we'll be working on, so it's being built, and we’re gonna continue adding onto that. They have been working on that throughout these years so we're just going to help them for the three weeks that we are there.

Lori: I decided to come back with Land and Culture Organization because Land and Culture shows you such a great way of working on the land. It actually gives you that experience to touch the soil, and when you come back home, knowing in the back of your head and in your memories, that you have touched a piece of that in Armenia, your work is in Armenia, that's a big deal.

(Ambient Nature Sounds)

Garo: The mission of land and culture organization is to protect Armenia's important historical sites, mostly Armenian churches and monasteries. Most of the sites that LCO chooses are sites that are on the border areas of Armenia, usually sites that may have been more neglected than other places. So in doing this type of work, the way LCO does this is by giving an opportunity for Armenian Americans and the diaspora from all over the world, to come and do this work here. It allows them to have really solid connection to their motherland, which they'll be able to keep with them forever. The impact that they have goes way beyond the hands on work that they have here, they’ll be able to take away with them and have a deeper connection with their homeland.

(Cow Moos)
Lilit: So as far as the living conditions go here, the first day that we got here I was just in shock, I was in panic, I was ready to go home, ready to buy my flight ticket back because it was unbelievable. Coming from back home where you kind of have everything - you have a toilet that flushes, you have a shower with hot water, you have a room to yourself - and we came and all seven of you girls are in one room, half of you are on the floor. We’re all setting the dinner table together, not only dinner, but lunch and breakfast. We have an outhouse for our showers. I was just kind of in panic since it was a shock for me. But we slept that night and we woke up the next morning. And I said I'm ready to live this life. I'm going to experience it, I'm going to go all in for it, and I have zero regrets about it. It's just a beautiful feeling because we go to the spring for the water to drink every day and you are cooking the food that you villagers are growing for you. Everything is coming from the village here. It's just a beautiful feeling to know that you have everything around you, even though it might be the littlest thing, you can live a comfortable life here. And I understand now, because the first day was definitely rough. (Rocks Grinding)

Ani: We started with the alter. We took out the entire first and second layer. And it's not like you could shovel it out easily, it’s huge rocks that you'd pick up, you know, dig them out, carry them all the way outside, and dump them in this high pile. So it was a lot of work and it was heavy labor. It was hard. I didn't think it would be that hard to take out the top layer of an alter because when you look at it, it doesn't look that difficult. I'll just remove these rocks but you sweat, and you have to put a lot of energy into it. It’s very interesting to see how they do something and how easy it is for them because it’s part of their everyday life and us trying to do the same and struggling more with it.
Sevana: When the priest came to visit the church, I had met Armenian priests before. Some of the others felt really emotional about it. I, personally, for someone who’s not religious, I still - there’s something about that moment when they come, especially when they touch you, and they bless you and they bless the place you’re working and they acknowledge the fact that what you’re doing matters.

Sevana (speaking to the group): So basically he doesn't want to bother our work time but it’s important for him to come and speak to us, to thank us.

Sevana: And they tell you that if you don’t even speak Armenian, you are Armenian, your blood runs Armenian, and you’re helping your people no matter what. And he acknowledged that. And he blessed us and it was incredible to be doing it in an Armenian church that we are rebuilding ourselves. It gave it the validation I was kinda looking for. When I was coming I was like why am I working on a church? But with the whole mission statement of LCO, and when he came, it was really emotional and touching, and you kind of understand this is why I’m here. This is why I came here to do this. And you realize that this is what our culture is, this is what it’s built around. We are basically our ancestors. We’re an ancient civilization, and we’re keeping that going, we’re not letting it die out. And he on top of that, the priest that came, he gave that validation. You guys are helping keep alive that ancient culture. This is something that really has meaning behind it.

(Crickets Chirping)
Lori: So we went to the discotech, which is the little dancing club place where all the village kids go and it was really fun and it was very cool. At first it was a little awkward, but I could tell everybody was a little bit more reserved, because you’re dancing with complete strangers, like hey, what's going on. They music that they put on was excellent. They were such great dancers and slowly by slowly all of us started warming up. Like the little village boys started coming on the stage too and they’d like run away a little bit. But it was really fun and the more exposure we get to each other, the easier it will get.

(Rooster Crowing)

(Tractor Rumbling)

Lori: Our cook, her name is Narine, took us to her house after our walk and I was not expecting what I saw. It was beautiful. It was so beautiful. I guess in comparison to where we are living, where nobody really lives, she had made it so beautifully. It was so clean, which is typical Armenian style. But the couches where just set-up and there was this deep mustard color on them, with a nice little velvety touch to it. And she had hung curtains all around the windows and it was white and it was kinda like a screen. And the tea, and the fig jam, and the honey that she gave us, I could have literally could have sat there for three days and just done that same thing. We just sat there and drink and ate everything. She showed us her fruit and vegetable trees. She went and showed us where they cooked bread and she told us we could do it too and we were really excited. It was just not what I was expecting because when you see them living in an area like this, where everything is not so done and made, but you go in there and she kept on saying like it's from the heart, it's from the heart. And honestly, that's what really counts. Whatever is from the heart you can make any home beautiful.
Sevana: My favorite thing to do is to meet people. My favorite moment was when I met an old man on a walk.

Sevana (talking to man): He says remember me.

Sevana: He’s an 86 year old man and he’s deaf but he was still communicating with me. He saw me and he said I want you to say hi to me every time you see me. I noticed a tattoo on his hand, and when I asked him about it, he said it signified three letters and which didn’t make sense to me, but he said a German had done it to him. And we put the clues together that he had fought with the Soviets in World War 2 in ‘46. He told me he got his tattoo in ‘46 and a German had tattooed him. I want to get more information from him but this just tells you that this is a rural part of Armenia. But you still see these people that fought in World War 2. It’s different when you read on the Internet or through a book, and then you get to hear the story from an actual person. It’s real culture. So my favorite part is actually getting to know the villagers who live here and experience the daily life here that we are helping.

(Man Blesses Sevana)

(Chattering)

Lori: I specifically remember talking to Sacco and he was telling me about his stories of the wars fought in, what he has gone through, and every single time I see him, he always has a story to tell and it is just so touching. Because he is what Armenia is now. He is why we are here.

Sevana (translating): In one day, 20 of them died. That’s when he got shot. There was 100 people and 20 of them died in one day and he got saved.
Lori: I'm literally getting goose bumps because without him, I wouldn't be here and the stories that he tells, it is very touching; as you can tell I am crying right now. It's interesting to see the struggle that our people have gone through and the stories they have to tell and the way that they tell it to us, being carried on with us, and it’s because people like Sacco, who have fought so hard, and they are strong enough to tell it and strong enough to be here.

(Birds chirping)

Allison: Well we have, a couple of women who have played a pretty big role in our trip here. Annhed, our next door neighbor, is always making us coffee and teas, slicing up watermelon, cracking a million jokes, she has so much energy, she is part of what makes our day so much fun and it's just her energy, her personality. Narine, she cooks the most delicious food and she can just tell that she just wants to please you. Like some days, we're working out a bunch, oh, I've been like I need some protein, I need some meat. She makes sure we get the meat. She makes all of our favorite dishes. If we really like something, she'll repeat it, like the dolmas, so delicious.

(Car Downshifting)

Lori: We went back to Yeghvard, the first village I worked at five years ago with Land and Culture and it was amazing. I was not expecting to feel the way that I did, react the way that I did, to make that same connection with everybody that I had been with five years the way that I did. And it was literally just perfect. I was so happy. And they were happy too.

(Music Plays)
Lori: And when I first stepped into the church and I saw the final outcome of what I had worked on, I got super emotional just because, first of all, because I barely even recognized the church because it had been in kind of major ruins still. Even though we did a lot of work, it was still in a lot of ruin. But I just kind of stood there and soaked it all in just being where my home was for three weeks, five years ago, was what I had dreamt of because I left a part of my heart in Yeghvard when I left five years ago, and the same thing is going to happen here. So it was truly an amazing that I was given an opportunity to do that and that I was able to reconnect with them again. It was truly an amazing experience.

Lori (addressing the children): Bye.

(Car Accelerating)

Garo: In my opinion, I think that the volunteers are having an impact in many ways. The most obvious one is just the physical work that they are doing. Specifically, for this campaign, we've torn down a section of the church that was added more recently. Someone added a bathroom, which doesn't belong to the church, so we tore that down. We cleared out and entire area around the church, a lot of rubble, cleared out that space. And in just three weeks you can clearly see the amount of hard work that we've done but the impact goes beyond that. Villagers see that people are here from America and from Australia, who have come from thousands of miles away, to work on something, in their village. And that is something that they haven't seen before Land and Culture Organization came here. It's the impact that we're having in the village, the physical work, the impact we're having on the villages here showing that there are people outside of Armenia that care about their village. And third, there is an impact that is had on the
volunteers who come here and see what it's like to live in Armenia, what is like to see to live in the village as well.

(Chattering)

Sevana: So I’m not exactly sure who's idea it was to do the Madagh, but it’s an Armenian tradition. I thought it was a nice idea and a nice gesture for the entire village, cause the whole purpose of Madagh is to sacrifice an animal and disperse it to everybody and to make sure everybody gets a piece, so I think that was a great idea. I know the day of, we were all super excited.

I think nicest moment for me on the day of the Madagh, the symbolism behind all of us touching the cross before it went up and all of us pulling it up together, I think that was a beautiful moment, and the entire village was able to witness it. It was nice because they saw we came here as a family for a sole purpose to rebuild this church and bring back something our ancient ancestors had built and we restored it and it was all together villagers and us from other areas of the world and we did that together one by one, all of us touched the cross, so it was really touching.

That was the greatest day of our entire trip. I know we're here only two more days but, I think that was the funnest day for everybody. Cause we were all together and we were all family.

Lilit: We had a lunch and we invited a majority of the villagers that we interacted with everyday and have a special bond with and we had dinner everybody just kept on saying what came to them in their heart.

Lori (in Armenian): Land and Culture brings us to Armenia. This is the real Armenia. Many people come to Yerevan and go to the cafes thinking that is what Armenia is.
Thank you so much for showing us what the REAL Armenia is. Without you we wouldn’t be here. Thank you so much!

(Audience Applause)

Lilit: It was a beautiful moment where I got to take in how it feels to be an Armenian. It's going to be the one things I do remember.

Ani: The memories that we made with all the people that we interact with in the gyugh (village), the boys we play soccer with, I hope that they'll remember that for the rest of their lives. I know that I will because like this has completely changed my life this trip. We bonded with the people living in the gyugh (village), so I hope that they'll remember us after we leave.

Sevana: I mean I came to meet new people from around the world, but mainly it’s just to take all of these memories back and to leave behind something really, really good. And that’s there is hope out there. It’s not just that people are selfish and just self-absorbed. We really want to help our lands. Like when I was speaking to Annahed, our next-door neighbor, she said, “If you are Armenian, why did you leave? Why did your family leave? Why don’t you help and come back?” And I said it’s about what we’re doing to help you and this is exactly what that is. We’re coming back. There are those people who leave and never come back and they don’t know where their roots are from. But I remember and I’m always gonna remember. I’m going to leave that behind. And I’ll be back, so that’s the greatest contribution I can make here and what I’ve left behind. It’s mainly memories and hopefully everyone will remember us forever and we can make that difference here once we leave.

(Singing)
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

This thesis had a threefold purpose: (a) to explore the frameworks of public spheres by Habermas (1974) and social construction of reality by Burger and Luckman (1974); (b) to understand Armenian youth in diaspora and their desire to connect with their homeland through cultural tourism; (c) to use the documentary to show tangible illustrations and stories of Armenians in diaspora and their visit to their homeland. LCO acted as a bridge to bring all of these examples together and is just one small microcosm of the vast network of resources dedicated to connecting those in diaspora with their roots.

Key Takeaways

Based on the volunteers’ stories, the LCO campaign appears to have provided meaningful experiences that allow them to understand what it means to be an Armenian. Throughout several instances, the volunteers compared the differences between reading or hearing stories about Armenia and their real experiences in Armenia. Reflecting back on the works of Berger and Luckman’s (1974) social construction of reality, one comment from Sevana is particularly notable. Sevana (personal communication, July 17, 2015) said, “It’s different when you read on the Internet or through a book, and then you get to hear the story from an actual person. It’s real culture.” When volunteers have realizations such as these, LCO’s mission for Armenian diaspora youth to gain a better grasp of their culture has been fulfilled.
The volunteers were excited to be in Armenia for the duration of the trip. Once they adjusted to the living conditions in the village, they were able integrate into the local lifestyle and culture. This immersion is a key component to cultural tourism as stated by Anvi (2013). They lived on the land, and they worked with the land. This allowed the volunteers to develop a sense of ownership to their country. They were able to metaphorically leave a piece of themselves behind in their motherland.

Cohen (2004) stated that diaspora attempt to maintain a connection with others in their ethnic group and with the country of origin. For the volunteers, being diaspora was a recurring issue that was raised by the locals of the village. The volunteers were asked why they left and why they do not stay and live in Armenia. The situation that the volunteers faced was an interesting dichotomy. The volunteers have established lives in the United States, especially since they are second and third generation Armenians. The standard of living is much higher in the United States compared to the villages of Armenia. The volunteers had to justify to the villagers why they chose not to move back to Armenia and give up the comfortable life that they have grown accustomed to in the United States. The volunteers said they would come back and visit, but could not justify giving up their lives in America. Conversely, the villagers wanted their children to leave the village and move to the capital of Yerevan where the standard of living is much higher. If opportunities could not be found in Yerevan, then they are told to look elsewhere, such as Russia.

In the village of Shikahogh, there are no jobs. There is no way to generate money. The villagers only live off the land. The village is faced with the struggle of maintaining
its way of current life or eventually dissolving as younger villagers leave to look for employment.

On one hand, the villagers ask their children to leave in pursuit of better lives. On the other hand, the villagers also question why Armenian Americans do not immigrate back into Armenia help rebuild the country. The villagers appear to have different contradicting expectations of their children versus the volunteers. The pleads were so strong, in fact, that the volunteers felt the need to defend themselves and their actions - their very lifestyles - in an attempt to navigate this discussion. In the end, the volunteers would return to visit but would not return permanently until the condition of the country had improved. It is questionable who will bring about this change or improvement to the country.

In speaking with the volunteers towards at end of the campaign, they said that they all wanted to return and that they all will take a piece of the real Armenia away with them. They felt proud that they were able to make a difference by reconnecting with their roots and that they were able to leave a lasting contribution, by working on the church, in their homeland. The amount of connection and pride varied among the volunteers, but it resonated the strongest with those who were featured in the documentary.

Completion

In August 2016, LCO held a ceremony to celebrate its completion of the restoration to the Shikahogh church. The event was covered by Asbarez (2016), a major Armenian media organization. The LCO President and Treasurer, the same people who were on the previous campaign, were in attendance. Lilit, a volunteer from the 2015
campaign, was also in attendance. The completion of the Shikahogh church marked the 20th church that LCO has restored over the last several decades.

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Future Research

I began this program with no formal training in journalistic practices or theory. While my background in multimedia production helped prepare me for the documentary portion of the thesis, I learned a tremendous amount about how to conduct research and apply theory in the program. The greatest skill that I learned was understanding media literacy. I have always been skeptical of what I have heard in the media, and this program, coupled with the research I have done with my critical theory, has helped me understand how people come to believe what they know based on their input source. I have been able to link my own vague personal feelings with grounded theoretical models that can be empirically defended. I feel proud of what I have been able to learn, and am grateful for the opportunities that this program has offered. I look forward to applying my acquired knowledge in future academic pursuits.

Working in the field of multimedia production, I have always wanted to produce a short format documentary for a meaningful purpose. Having the opportunity to partner with LCO was a perfect opportunity. The mission of LCO is something that reflects my own inner struggle. Being of Caucasian and Asian decent, I have often wanted to reconnect with my Asian roots since I know so little of my background. Being a part of the LCO campaign allowed me to see Armenian Americans reconnect with their roots, and I feel empowered that I can reconnect with my own roots in the future. Being behind
the camera gave me the ability to peer into this world and to tell the story of the LCO campaign and hear the stories of the volunteers.

The project was challenging since I was only able to join one LCO campaign to work on rebuilding one church. I would have preferred to go to Armenia multiple times, document several LCO volunteer group, and capture the complete reconstruction of an Armenian church. The documentary was just one small contribution compared to the many projects LCO has worked on. There could have been a much richer story if the story spanned years rather than weeks. However, it was challenging for me to compact a three-week campaign into a roughly 22-minute documentary.

I focused my interviews on a few key individuals for the documentary during the editing process. There were several volunteers who were only featured in the b-roll footage and their interviews were not included in the final product. This was done to keep the story succinct and to allow the audience to build rapport with a few key volunteers. I intend to create smaller two to three-minute video vignettes which will be posted onto the LCO website so all of the volunteers can have a voice.

Additionally, I was the only person to film and edit the project. Had there been additional crew or cameras, there could have been the potential to get a greater diversity of shots. I had to select which groups I would follow as they were often split into small groups. Having additional crew to cover all of these small groups would have yielded greater shot opportunities in the footage since they might be able to capture moments as they unfolded that I missed.

I believe further documentation could take place with LCO in the future. My focus was on one LCO campaign and one set of volunteers. There is a LCO branch that is
based in France. Their campaigns run parallel to the American branch of LCO. Comparing French Armenians’ to American Armenians’ perceptions of their homeland would allow for a richer study of social construction. This project could be expanded to document other diaspora youth, from Israel or Korea for example, returning to their respective homeland as well. There are many possibilities to study this topic on a global scale.

Final Thoughts

I found it pleasantly surprising how cooperative and open the interviewees were to share their stories. Being immersed with them - staying in the same accommodations with them, having my meals with them, and conversing casually with them off camera - put the volunteers at ease when it came time for the interviews. It was critical to build rapport with them in order to have honest and open responses. I rarely have the opportunity to get to know the people who I interview in this way. I believe that these circumstances led to very genuine responses.

LCO is only one small example of the good acts that can be carried out by an organization. It is through the dedication and passion of a few individuals in LCO that allows for diaspora Armenian Americans to reconnect with their homeland. This is just one of many examples of cultural tourism and it serves as a way for individuals to reconnect to their roots in an increasingly globalized and diversified world.
References


Avni, S. (2013). Homeland tour guide narratives and the discursive construction of the diasporic. Narrative Inquiry, 23(2), 227-244. doi: 10.1075/ni.23.2.01avn


Appendix B

Shikahogh Map

Republic of Armenia and Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) Republic

Public Domain Graphic
Appendix C

Camera System and Slider Picture
Appendix D

Interview Camera Placement
Appendix E

Interview Question Set

First Interview - Conducted before the volunteers left for Armenia

1. How did you hear about this opportunity?
2. How did you decide to go on this trip?
3. What types of things do you think you'll learn on this trip?
4. Tell me about what you hope to gain from this experience.
5. How do you think this trip will affect how you feel about your Armenian heritage?

Second Interview - Conducted in Armenia

1. Tell me about when the priest came to bless the church, the conversation with Narine, throwing out the trash, shoveling cement, working on the altar, clearing the stones, the discotech, relaxing.
2. What runs through your mind as you are working on the above task?
3. Tell me about a memorable moment that has happened so far.
4. Describe the living conditions.
5. How do you feel your contribution will make a difference?
6. What do you hope to leave behind in Armenia?
Third Interview - Conducted in Armenia

1. Tell me about when throwing out the trash, shoveling cement, working on the altar, knocking down the wall, clearing the stones, relaxing, Tatev, Yeghvard, our living conditions, the feast.

2. What runs through your mind as you are working on the above task?

3. Tell me about a memorable moment that has happened so far.

4. How do you feel your contribution will make a difference?

5. What do you hope to leave behind in Armenia?

6. Tell me what you knew about Armenia prior to this trip.

7. How has the media shaped your perspective of Armenia prior to this trip?