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Selfies are a regular part of tourism. Marcos Mesa Sam Wordley/Shutterstock

The problem with shaming people for Auschwitz selfies

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Selfies have become the modern day equivalent of postcards, a way to share our travel experiences with family and friends on social media. It's one thing to strike a goofy pose and snap a photo for Instagram on a beach or town square, but what if you are visiting a Holocaust memorial site?

Taking fun, playful, even silly selfies at dark tourism sites such as Chernobyl Japan's "suicide forests" or concentration camps has become a regular occurrence. It is widely regarded as controversial and distasteful.

In 2017, Israeli-German artist Shahak Shapira launched a project aimed at shaming visitors taking selfies at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Germany. The project was called Yolocaust – a portmanteau of internet slang Yolo (you only live once) and Holocaust. It juxtaposed historical photos of Nazi murder victims with visitors' photos of themselves, juggling and jumping, posing and playing at the Berlin memorial.

Ever since, online vigilantes have been empowered to shame Holocaust-site selfie takers on social media. Many have used "yolocaust" in comments as shorthand for censure, judgement, and moral panic.

We analysed hundreds of these posts, captions and comments to see how the selfie-takers are perceived and punished by others online. We examined posts with location tags at the Auschwitz Memorial Museum in Poland and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin.

Based on our analysis, we think it may be better that young people engage with Holocaust sites in their own way, rather than not engaging at all. We also suggest that some commenters may be just as guilty as the selfie-takers, using their comments to show themselves in a positive light. Paradoxically, this is precisely what they are shaming the selfie-takers for doing: centering themselves, using the Holocaust as a prop.

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Vigilantism and public shaming has been around for centuries – think angry villagers with pitchforks raised. Vigilantes take it upon themselves to prevent, investigate and punish perceived wrongdoings, usually without legal authority.

Online vigilantes (often called "digilantes") punish others for perceived transgressions online. They act when they feel that someone has committed a crime or social wrongdoing on the internet as a form of cancel culture. There is, of course, a fine line between constructively questioning someone's choices and publicly shaming them.

Who gets shamed?

We found that it wasn't just any photo (we also looked at non-selfie tourist photos) that attracted online shaming. Some people were more likely to receive negative comments than others, depending on age, gender, cultural identity, photo pose, facial expression and the captions accompanying the photos.

Younger, more conventionally attractive people – especially women, and especially people posting in English or German – attracted many negative comments. In contrast, older and less conventionally "sexy" selfie-takers, men, and those posting in, for example, Italian or Russian tended to be ignored.

Some of these patterns appear related to how young women are often sexualised and demeaned online, especially when it comes to the selfies of women holding their bodies in "model-like" poses. To some commenters, it appears more acceptable to shame those who society already deems unserious and flippant.

Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is part of the urban architecture — and a popular spot for tourists. Michaelangeloop/Shutterstock

Location was also important. While the Berlin Memorial saw plenty of tourist behaviour deemed "disrespectful" by commenters, it was rare to encounter selfie-taking at Auschwitz. This may because Auschwitz is a paid visitor attraction offering structured tours.

In contrast, the Berlin memorial is an art installation, always open and part of the streetscape. Its purpose and meaning may not be immediately apparent. This leaves room for the possibility that some Holocaust-site selfie-taking is an innocent, accidental part of tourism in Berlin.

Another predictor of negative comments was the captions on the photos we examined. If the caption was flippant or suggested a lack of serious engagement with Holocaust history and memory, the photo attracted more critical comments. Those who made some attempt to justify or even intellectualise their selfie-taking were often excused censure.

In one example, a young woman is pictured jumping between the concrete slabs of the Berlin memorial. But her picture is accompanied by a careful caption that explicitly questions whether her behaviour is ethical.

She writes, "One part of you comes out, simply wanting to explore the structure for what it is physically. Another part of you says that you cannot take part in anything that brings you joy here". As the caption appears to neutralise the fun selfie, her post escapes critical comments.

Think before you shame

Although the Auschwitz Memorial Museum tells visitors not to take selfies, and while playful selfie-taking seems disrespectful, we don't think it should be banned, as some online commenters have called for.

We argue that it is more important to keep alive — however clumsily and imperfectly — the memory of the more than six million Jews and millions of others who were killed by the Nazis. Perhaps this is best done through people living their ordinary, complex, messy and often joyous lives, precisely as the Nazis' victims could not.

We also think it is important to question the motives of digilantes themselves. Some seem to be using their comments to display their own moral superiority, rather than trying to educate or influence the behaviour of the selfie-takers.

Before you join the ranks of the digilantes and comment on something you think is disrespectful, think about why you're doing it – these images, their captions and the comments show that there is often more nuance to "ethical" behaviour than can be captured in a photo.