

POSTCOLONIAL TOURIST NARRATIVES IN VIETNAMESE TRAVEL VLOGGING: AN ANALYSIS OF KHOAI LANG THANG'S KENYA SERIES

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Abstract: This study examines postcolonial tourist narratives in Vietnamese travel vlogs through an analysis of Khoai Lang Thang's Kenya series, a widely circulated example of humanitarian-framed travel storytelling in contemporary Vietnamese digital media. The series brings together generosity, affect, and the creator's self-presentation, making it a productive site for examining how goodwill and representational asymmetry may coexist within digital travel narratives. To illuminate how this mode of storytelling organises meaning, the study adopts a postcolonial narrative lens attentive to the entanglement of tourism discourse, benevolent affect, and digital self-presentation. Drawing on multimodal close reading across seven videos, the analysis focuses on recurring representational patterns emerging through camera perspective, narrative voice, editorial choices, participant positioning, and affective cues. More specifically, it examines the construction of the traveller's narrative authority, the representation of Kenya through imaginaries of hardship and wilderness, the positioning and agency of local residents within filmed encounters, and the ethical implications of transforming these encounters into digital travel narratives. The findings show that the vlog constructs a benevolent and morally credible narrative persona for the creator, while the representation of Kenya and its residents remains structured by unequal relations of visibility and interpretation. Although some local participants demonstrate agency by questioning, resisting, or negotiating the conditions under which they are filmed, final narrative authority remains largely concentrated in the creator through selection, editing, and commentary. These practices may reproduce postcolonial asymmetries even when the narrative is framed through empathy and goodwill. By situating Vietnamese travel vlogging within broader discussions of postcolonial criticism, tourism imaginaries, and narrative ethics, the study extends cultural narrative analysis to multimodal platform-based storytelling and foregrounds the ethical and political implications embedded in everyday practices of digital travel representation.

Keywords: tourism imaginaries, postcolonial representation, travel vlogging, narrative authority, narrative ethics, digital storytelling

Introduction

In the context of contemporary digital media, travel vlogs have become a popular form of travel storytelling on online platforms. Through the combination of moving images, direct narration, and personal experience, travel vlogs not only record journeys but also participate in shaping how viewers imagine different places and communities. With their wide circulation on YouTube, these stories contribute to the construction of cultural imaginaries of the world, particularly of places perceived as distant or different in terms of geography, culture, and economic conditions.

In tourism studies and cultural anthropology, such collective imaginaries are often approached through the concept of *tourism imaginaries*. Salazar (2012) regards *tourism imaginaries* as shared and socially

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circulated assemblages of representations that mediate how people perceive places and communities. Salazar and Graburn (2014) further demonstrate how these imaginaries are produced and negotiated through discourse, images, institutions, and tourist encounters. At the same time, postcolonial approaches developed by Said (1978), Fabian (1983), and Pratt (1992), together with the study by Echtner and Prasad (2003), show that tourism representations may continue to reproduce exoticising gazes, allochronism, and unequal power relations in relation to non-Western destinations. Recent studies of vlogging and travel vlogging have approached this form from various perspectives, including narrative structure and audience responses (Li, 2025), cultural dissemination and national image construction (Whyke, Chen, & Lopez-Mugica, 2022), as well as the self-presentation, authenticity, and micro-celebrity status of content creators (Liang, 2021).

These approaches help identify travel vlogs as products of tourism media, but they pay less attention to how *tourism imaginaries* are organised within the multimodal narrative structure of vlogs. Within this structure, vloggers do not merely record their journeys but also select and interpret the story through camera perspective, commentary, questioning, and editing. Consequently, the rights to narrate and interpret, as well as the capacity for self-representation, are not distributed equally between vloggers and the local residents who appear in their content.

This gap is particularly significant when a subject from Vietnam narrates Africa. The narrator's non-Western position does not automatically eliminate the possibility of reproducing postcolonial structures of representation. Narratives framed through empathy or goodwill may still sustain asymmetries in the rights to look, select, and interpret. From this perspective, the article examines Khoai Lang Thang's Kenya vlog series as a case study. The series was selected because it contains numerous direct encounters between the vlogger and local residents, while frequently organising these experiences through emotional frames of proximity, empathy, and moral responsibility.

The article asks the following research question: How do travel vlogs organise narratives about destinations and people, and what postcolonial imaginaries may emerge in this process even when the story is presented as a benevolent and humane experience? The study analyses the Kenya series across four dimensions: the construction of the traveller as a subject with narrative authority; the representation of Kenya as a tourism space; the position and agency of local residents; and the role of affect and humanitarian discourse in meaning-making. In doing so, the article extends discussions of *tourism imaginaries* and postcolonial representation to Vietnamese travel vlogging, while examining the distribution of narrative rights, interpretive authority, and the capacity for self-representation among the participating subjects.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Tourism Imaginaries and Postcolonial Tourism Representation

Salazar and Graburn's (2014) concept of *tourism imaginaries* helps explain how people imagine destinations, communities, and tourism experiences. These scholars understand them as shared and socially circulated assemblages of representations. They not only reflect reality but also shape how tourists perceive and experience a place. Images, stories, discourses, and media products make such imaginaries visible and enable their wide circulation.

From a postcolonial perspective, the construction of tourism imaginaries is often associated with power relations between the observer and the represented community. Said (1978) shows that the construction of the “Other” is connected to the power to describe, classify, and produce knowledge. Pratt (1992) also points out that travellers often interpret the places they visit from the position of the narrating subject. Tourism discourse may therefore sustain stereotypes of exoticism, primitiveness, deprivation, or instability.

Fabian (1983) refers to an important mechanism in this process as the denial of coevalness, or *allochronism*. Accordingly, the observer places another community in a time different from their own present. This form of representation makes local people appear closer to the past, nature, or a more primitive condition, while simultaneously reinforcing the image of the tourist as a modern subject.

However, the relationship between tourists and local communities is not entirely one-directional. The concepts of *counter-gaze* and *host gaze* show that local residents also observe, evaluate, and respond to tourists. They may negotiate their appearance before the camera or adjust how they present themselves. Stasch (2014) and Theodossopoulos (2014) show that tourist encounters often contain multiple positions and competing interpretations. Tourism representation is therefore a process of negotiating meaning, although the rights to look and narrate remain unevenly distributed.

Travel Vlogging, Influencer Culture, and Multimodal Storytelling

Travel vlogs combine travel storytelling with the conditions of production and circulation associated with platform media. Vloggers appear directly in the story, interact with the destination, and guide the viewer’s experience. Travel vlogs therefore both narrate journeys and construct the image of the content creator. Recent studies have often focused on storytelling, destination image, authenticity, and audience responses. Li (2025) emphasises the role of storytelling in organising tourism experiences. Whyke et al. (2022) show that vlogs can contribute to cultural dissemination and national image construction. Research on influencer culture also examines how creators construct personal images, maintain intimacy, and produce a sense of authenticity for their followers (Abidin, 2018).

In travel vlogs, viewers approach destinations through the vlogger’s emotions, responses, and choices. First-person narration, handheld filming, and direct interaction often create a sense of naturalness, although the final content still undergoes selection and editing. Travel vlogs therefore do not merely present a tourism space but also construct a consistent creator persona.

Travel vlogs are also a form of multimodal narrative. Moving images present space and relationships among subjects. Commentary directs how viewers understand what appears on the screen. Music, ambient sound, subtitles, camera angles, and editing rhythm further shape emotion and the prominence of particular characters or events. The vlogger is therefore not only able to record footage but is also granted the capacity to select, arrange, and interpret material deliberately in order to produce a plausible imaginary of the destination.

Narrative Authority and Narrative Ethics

Narrative authority refers to the narrator’s ability to select, organise, and interpret events. In travel vlogs, this authority derives from controlling the camera angle, selecting encounters, editing material, and providing commentary. Through these practices, the vlogger becomes an intermediary between the destination and the viewer. Narrative authority is also connected to credibility. Travel vloggers often

establish credibility through direct experience, personal emotion, and interaction with local residents. However, what the audience sees remains the result of selection and editing. Local residents may speak, negotiate, or refuse to appear, but they do not control the final structure of the story. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between agency within the encounter and control over how that encounter is represented.

Narrative ethics helps examine the responsibilities attached to this authority. Booth (1988) views narrative as an ethical relationship in which stories guide how readers or viewers evaluate characters and actions. Phelan (2007) emphasises the relationship among the story being told, the act of telling, and the values communicated through that act. Two dimensions of Phelan's framework are particularly relevant to travel vlogs: the ethics of the telling and the ethics of producing. The first concerns how camera angles, commentary, scene sequencing, and the distribution of attention guide viewers' emotions. The second focuses on the narrator's responsibilities towards those whose lives and experiences become the material of the story, including consent, privacy, and the capacity to present their own perspectives.

These issues become more complex when the vlogger constructs the image of a benevolent traveller. Empathy and generosity may reflect genuine ethical concern, but they may also strengthen the narrator's credibility. This study therefore examines travel vlogs as multimodal narratives, as practices that construct tourism imaginaries, and as spaces in which narrative rights are distributed. The article focuses on four dimensions: the vlogger's narrative authority; the construction of Kenya; the position of local residents; and the relationship between benevolence and representational power.

Materials and Methods

Case Selection and Research Corpus

This study selected Khoai Lang Thang primarily because he is a Vietnamese travel vlogger who produces content mainly for Vietnamese audiences. The shared linguistic and cultural background enables the researcher to identify more accurately the nuances of narration, emotional expression, and communicative conventions in the videos. Selecting a domestic case also facilitates the examination of how Vietnamese audiences receive and discuss digital travel content.

Khoai Lang Thang is also a creator with considerable recognition in the field of travel vlogging in Vietnam. The channel maintains a relatively professional mode of production, combining on-site footage, personal narration, interaction with local residents, and post-production editing. This case therefore has significance beyond a single piece of individual content and reflects several common features of contemporary travel vlogging.

The corpus consists of seven videos in the Kenya series, from episodes 9 to 15 of the African journey. The study selected the entire section on Kenya in order to trace recurring motifs throughout the series rather than selecting isolated scenes. The videos also document numerous direct encounters between the vlogger and local residents, thereby providing suitable data for analysing how the destination, the narrator, and local subjects are positioned within the narrative.

Data Preparation and Units of Analysis

The study approaches each video as a narrative. The data include moving images, the vlogger's commentary, conversations with local residents, subtitles, sound, camera angles, and editing sequences. The main units of analysis are narrative segments and direct encounters between the vlogger and local residents.

During data preparation, the study recorded the episode number, timestamp, context, participants, spoken content, and multimodal features of relevant segments. This analytical log supports the comparison of recurring motifs across the seven videos and links analytical claims to specific locations within the corpus.

The study employs an interpretive qualitative approach, combining multimodal close reading with comparison of recurring motifs across the entire series. First, the seven videos were reviewed to identify how the vlogger positions himself, how Kenya is described, the position of local residents, and the role of emotion. The study then analysed representative segments in detail through speech, camera perspective, visual distance, commentary, editing sequence, and participants' responses.

The comparison of segments across the seven videos produced four analytical dimensions: the vlogger's narrative authority; the construction of Kenya as a tourism space; the position and agency of local residents; and the relationship between benevolence, humanitarian affect, and representational power. The concepts of tourism imaginaries, postcolonial representation, and narrative ethics were applied to interpret these motifs.

Analytical Rigour and Researcher Positionality

The study enhances analytical transparency by comparing examples across multiple videos and examining the speech, images, editing, and context of each segment together. It also attends to cases that do not fully conform to the dominant motifs, especially when local residents actively ask questions, negotiate, or respond to the camera.

The postcolonial conclusions presented in the article are interpretations grounded in the representational structures of the videos rather than claims about the vlogger's personal motives. Some content choices may also arise from storytelling requirements, the need to attract viewers, or the conditions of the journey.

The researcher shares a linguistic and cultural background with the vlogger and most of the channel's audience. This position facilitates the recognition of linguistic and emotional nuances, but it may also create shared assumptions about the narrator's goodwill. The study therefore focuses on the data presented in the videos and avoids speculating about intentions beyond the corpus.

Results and Discussion

Constructing Narrative Authority: The Benevolent Traveler

In the Kenya vlog series, the travel narrative is organised around the vlogger's perspective as the central character of the journey. Unlike forms of travel documentary that adopt an external observational position, travel vlogs are often constructed as first-person narratives. In this structure, the traveller is

simultaneously the narrator, the guide of the experience, and the principal point of reference for interpreting the events that occur during the journey. The camera moves according to the vlogger's perspective, and most situations in the videos are presented through his observations, responses, and interpretations. Consequently, the audience's experience depends not only on what happens during the journey but also on how the narrator selects, records, arranges, and interprets those events.

Within this structure, the vlogger first appears as a subject who witnesses the journey. The spaces, people, and situations encountered during the trip are approached through the narrator's experience, allowing the audience to see the tourism world through the traveller's eyes. However, the narrator does not merely witness events but also retains interpretive authority over what is seen. Encounters with local residents are often presented through brief interactions led by the vlogger. His questions, commentary, and responses play an important role in directing how viewers understand the circumstances of the individuals involved. Even when local residents are able to share their own stories, the meanings of those stories are still largely mediated through the narrator's commentary and emotional responses.

This authority becomes particularly evident in editorial decisions concerning who may appear fully within the frame and who is excluded from direct visibility. In Episode 9 of the series, "The First Days in Kenya," when the vlogger is stopped by a person wearing a police uniform who checks his documents and subsequently asks for money, the person's face is blurred from the moment he appears and remains obscured throughout the conversation (17:25–18:00). Similarly, in Episode 10, "Trouble at an African Flea Market," the face of a ride-hailing driver is also blurred during an interaction in which the driver asks the vlogger to cancel the trip on the application and pay him directly in cash (1:20–1:40). Significantly, in the same videos, many passers-by and other individuals who appeared earlier are not blurred at all. Facial blurring is therefore not a technical choice applied uniformly to all participants but a selective editorial decision.



Figure 1: Selective facial blurring of an individual in police uniform as a mechanism of moral exclusion and the constitution of an authoritative reality



Figure 2: Editorial anonymization of a driver during a conflictual interaction, illustrating the asymmetry of the gaze and the maintenance of the vlogger's status as a virtuous traveler

At the surface level, this technique may be understood as a way of protecting the identities of individuals whose conduct is presented as inappropriate in the videos. At the discursive level, however, facial blurring also demonstrates the narrator's power to control the presence of characters within the story. As Baptista (2014) argues, defining the boundaries of social categories is always an act of power: when a subject possesses the ability to determine who belongs to a particular category, that subject simultaneously establishes a discursive order in which individuals are classified and positioned. In the case of travel vlogs, blurring the faces of those regarded as "bad" may be understood as a mechanism of symbolic exclusion. Instead of appearing as complete individuals with identifiable identities and visible expressions, they are deprived of recognisability and remain only as moral signs within the story narrated by the narrator.

This also demonstrates the asymmetry of the gaze within the structure of travel vlogs. The person holding the camera possesses the power to record, edit, and classify the characters in the story, while those who appear before the lens have almost no control over how they are represented. As Stasch (2014) shows in his study of film crews visiting the Korowai community in Papua, the camera does not simply record reality but also participates in constructing imaginaries of the "Other" through choices of camera angle, framing, and editing. In many cases, these choices contribute to maintaining a distance between the observer and the observed, thereby reinforcing familiar imaginaries of cultural difference. In the context of travel vlogs, the power of the camera allows the narrator not only to record encounters but also to establish a classificatory order in which "good" and "bad" characters are arranged according to the narrator's narrative logic.

However, the narrator's narrative power does not depend solely on the ability to control images. It is also reinforced by the traveller's moral position within the narrative structure of the vlog. In many segments of the series, the vlogger expresses emotion in response to the difficult circumstances of local residents and demonstrates sympathy towards the people he encounters during the journey. These emotional expressions contribute to constructing the narrator as a *benevolent traveler*—a compassionate and sympathetic traveller.

In research on contemporary tourism, Baptista (2014) describes this phenomenon through the concept of *virtuous tourism*, in which tourism experiences increasingly become associated with the performance

of moral values such as compassion, empathy, and the desire to help others. In storytelling forms such as travel vlogs, the narrator's emotional expressions are not merely personal responses but also become a form of symbolic capital that strengthens the narrator's credibility. When the narrator appears as a compassionate character, the audience tends to receive the story through the moral lens that the narrator establishes.

This mechanism helps explain why the narrator's narrative power is often accepted naturally by the audience. When the narrator is perceived as a subject acting out of empathy and goodwill, his editorial or interpretive decisions—such as classifying the characters in the story or blurring the faces of people considered to have behaved inappropriately—are more readily received as reasonable and legitimate choices. In other words, the narrator's power lies not only in holding the camera but also in the moral position he constructs throughout the storytelling process.

From this perspective, the figure of the *benevolent traveler* functions as an important mechanism through which travel vlogs avoid the sense of imposition commonly associated with colonial forms of looking in the past. Instead of appearing as an external observer, the narrator is presented as a well-intentioned traveller seeking to understand and connect with the surrounding world. However, this very mechanism may also conceal asymmetries within the narrative structure of the vlog. When the narrator is regarded as a morally trustworthy subject, audiences tend to accept the narrator's way of telling the story without frequently questioning the interpretive power he holds. Thus, the figure of the benevolent traveller not only reinforces the narrator's narrative authority but also helps shape how audiences understand encounters with local residents throughout the journey.

Constructing Kenya as a Hardship Imaginary and Wilderness

In the Kenya series of Khoai Lang Thang, a prominent imaginary emerges in the way destinations are presented as spaces of hardship and instability. Experiences related to being asked for additional money, warnings about insecurity, or stories about complex social environments all contribute to shaping an image of Kenya as a place where the traveler needs to remain cautious. In many cases, such situations may simply be understood as personal experiences during a journey. However, when they are narrated repeatedly with generalized remarks and, importantly, when they are circulated through a vlogger with significant influence among audiences, they gradually produce a hardship imaginary—an imagination of the destination associated with wilderness, scarcity, instability, and difficulty. Salazar also notes that many tourism representations of developing countries tend to repeat familiar myths about “the Other,” in which destinations are portrayed as spaces that have not fully entered the order of modernity and still bear traces of deprivation or instability (Salazar, 2014). In many cases, these imaginaries unintentionally reproduce a binary model in which the world is divided into spaces of “civilization” and “non-civilization.”

This tendency is also related to what Theodossopoulos describes as a form of primitivization in tourism discourse, in which the represented subjects are framed as lacking civilization or development (Theodossopoulos, 2014). When travel narratives focus on difficult or dangerous situations in local environments, they easily reinforce an implicit contrast between the traveler who represents a modern and stable world and the social environment of the destination, where familiar norms of urban life appear not to function in the same way. As a result, imaginaries of the destination may gradually incline toward an image of disorder or instability. From this perspective, the outcome of such representational processes echoes earlier colonial myths. It transforms “the Other” into a media and moral-consumption

product, sustaining the belief that the audience's own world represents the standard of stability, while other places become spaces to be witnessed, assisted, or interpreted by the vlogger.

A representative example in the Khoai Lang Thang series appears in the safari trip at the Masai Mara reserve in episode 15. In a notable scene, the camera records a lion feeding on its prey at a very close distance. When the camera shifts to the skeleton of the animal, still marked with traces of blood, he comments:

“The distance between us and these lions is very close, everyone, only about four or five metres... This skeleton has just been eaten; you can still see that this leg has flesh on it and the colour of blood... This is the first time I have truly witnessed life and death in the wilderness.”

(Khoai Lang Thang, P15: Săn sư tử và bộ lạc Châu Phi, 14:15–14:50) (Narration 1)

Here, the safari experience is not narrated merely as an activity of observing nature, but is condensed into a moment of direct confrontation with the cycle of survival in the wild. Details such as the extremely close distance between humans and a predator, or the image of the skeleton still marked by blood, create a strongly affective image and contribute to producing imaginaries of wilderness and danger. In tourism discourse, representations of wild nature often play a central role in constructing the exoticism of destinations. In this case, the landscape of Masai Mara is narrated as a place where the cycles of survival predation, death, and decay remain visibly present before the traveler. It is precisely the immediacy of these elements that contributes to the attraction of the safari experience, as it allows travelers to encounter a world perceived as fundamentally different from the familiar routines of urban life.

According to Fabian (1983), in many discourses about non-Western societies, these spaces and communities are often placed in a “different time” (allochronism) relative to the modern world of the observer. When Masai Mara is presented as a place where the life and death of the natural world unfold directly before the eyes of visitors, this space may gradually be perceived as a region located outside the familiar orbit of modern life. In this sense, the safari experience is not merely an act of observing nature, but also takes on the character of a journey into another world—a space where the primordial conditions of life remain visibly present.

It is precisely at this point that the postcolonial dimension of tourism discourse becomes noticeable. In many popular imaginaries of African tourism, the continent is frequently associated with symbols such as wild nature, environmental harshness, and primordial conditions of survival. These images are not entirely inaccurate in empirical terms, yet when they are repeatedly reproduced in travel narratives they may contribute to reinforcing a familiar imaginary of Africa as closer to nature, less governed by modern structures, and therefore more “exotic” in the eyes of the observer.

Importantly, the construction of such imaginaries does not necessarily originate from the conscious intention of the storyteller. In the case of Khoai Lang Thang, recording moments that leave a strong impression during a safari may simply be a way of sharing a memorable experience with the audience. However, when such experiences are narrated and circulated widely on digital media platforms, they can still contribute to shaping how viewers imagine the destination. Through images and stories like these, Kenya gradually appears in the imagination of audiences as a space of wild nature and intense sensory experiences.

From this perspective, travel vlogs are not merely records of personal journeys but also constitute links in the broader process of producing and circulating tourism imaginaries. By selecting particular

moments to highlight—such as the lion hunting scene at Masai Mara—videos like those of Khoai Lang Thang contribute to forming certain images of the destination in the minds of viewers. These imaginaries do not necessarily reflect the full reality of Kenya, yet they still play an important role in shaping how audiences imagine the country as a space characterized by wilderness, harshness, and difference from their familiar everyday world.

Negotiating Encounters with the Other

Encounters between tourists and local residents are rarely entirely equal exchanges in representational terms. In many cases, tourists not only participate in the interaction but also act as interpretive intermediaries, transforming direct experience into a meaningful story for their audiences. Local residents may be fully aware of their position within the tourism system and actively respond to how they are filmed or represented. Such moments may temporarily challenge the asymmetrical structure of the encounter before the narrator reorganises their meaning in the final edited version.

A representative example appears in Episode 9 of the Kenya series, “The First Days in Kenya,” when Khoai Lang Thang stops at a roadside cake stall and asks the vendor whether he may film her (19:45–22:15). On the surface, this question represents a gesture of courtesy commonly found in travel vlogs, where the narrator attempts to present himself as a tourist who respects local people and recognises their right to privacy. However, the cake vendor’s response quickly reveals another dimension of the encounter. When she learns that Khoai Lang Thang is filming a travel vlog, she immediately responds that if he earns money from the video, he should pay them:

“You make money from it, so you should give us some.”

She then continues by asking directly:

“Will you pay?”

(Khoai Lang Thang, P9: Những ngày đầu ở Kenya, 19:25–22:15) (Narration 2)

This response transforms the encounter from a simple interaction into a negotiation over the use of images. Rather than remaining passive before the camera, the woman demonstrates a clear awareness of the economic value of appearing in the video. For her, the act of a vlogger filming is not merely the documentation of a travel experience but also an activity with the potential to generate profit. From her perspective, requesting payment is not an act of begging but a reasonable exchange: if her image becomes part of content that can generate revenue, then she too should receive some benefit from that process.

This moment reveals an important aspect of tourism encounters: while travel vlogs are often presented as personal narratives of experience, local residents may be fully aware that they are becoming part of a system of content production with economic value. Rather than accepting the role of an object being observed, the woman in this case performs a form of counter-gaze, responding to the tourist’s gaze by placing conditions on the act of filming. The encounter thus becomes a negotiation over representational rights and the value of images.

At that moment, the familiar asymmetrical structure of travel vlogging is temporarily reversed. The person holding the camera—usually the subject who controls the situation—finds himself in the position of having to respond to the demands of the local resident. Yet this reversal of power exists only briefly within the direct interaction. Immediately after leaving the stall, Khoai Lang Thang turns to the

camera and explains to the audience that paying for filming is the appropriate thing to do, since in the past many people have exploited images of local residents for profit or for misleading representation.



Figure 3: The vlogger explaining the motives behind local demands for payment, serving as an authorial mediator between the destination and the audience

This constitutes an important step in the narrative structure of the vlog. The initial interaction—a negotiation of an economic nature concerning the use of images—is subsequently reinterpreted by the narrator through commentary. This process may be understood as a form of authorial translation, in which the actual encounter is transformed into a story that fits the interpretive framework of the storyteller. Through this translation, the narrator re-establishes the authority to define the meaning of the encounter. The direct interaction—where the local resident raises demands and challenges the right to film—is restructured into a moral narrative about the responsibilities of travelers toward local communities. Within this interpretive framework, the narrator appears as a benevolent traveler, a traveler who is aware of past injustices and seeks to behave responsibly when engaging with local residents.

This interpretive process demonstrates how tourism encounters are reconfigured through narrative authority. Although the woman actively negotiated the economic value of her image, the final version of the story received by the audience emphasizes the moral dimension of the situation. The initial negotiation is therefore transformed into a lesson about respecting local people, rather than being interpreted as an expression of their participation in the image economy of tourism.

From a postcolonial perspective, this moment reveals a familiar mechanism within many tourism discourses. Encounters between travelers and locals may expose tensions regarding power and interests, yet the authority to define the meaning of the interaction often remains in the hands of the storyteller. Local residents may challenge the tourist's gaze during the moment of encounter, but in the final narrative they still largely appear as characters within the traveler's story.

This does not mean that local residents are entirely deprived of voice. The encounter at the pastry stall shows that they may be fully aware of their position within the tourism system and may actively respond to being filmed. However, within the structure of travel vlogs, such responses often exist only as brief

moments within the direct interaction. Once the encounter is transformed into narrative, the authority to choose how the story is told and how the experience is interpreted still largely rests with the narrator.

At this point, travel vlogs do not merely record encounters between individuals from different contexts but also participate in shaping how those encounters are understood within the imaginaries of tourism. Through the perspective of the storyteller, everyday interactions between travelers and locals are transformed into stories about experience, morality, and cultural discovery. This narrative transformation of encounters contributes to sustaining an asymmetrical structure in the retelling of travel experiences, in which the traveler retains the central position in interpreting the world through which they move.

Negotiating Narrative Ethics in Travel Storytelling

Narratives about destinations are not merely communicative activities but also ethical acts. When travel vlogs shape how audiences imagine other communities, decisions concerning filming, editing, and interpretation carry particular consequences for the subjects who appear in the story.

This dimension is first evident in the vlogger's editorial choices. As discussed in Section 4.1, blurring the faces of individuals considered to have behaved inappropriately both protects their identities and expresses the narrator's moral judgement. Through the power to decide who may appear fully and who is excluded from direct recognisability, the narrator participates in establishing the ethical frame of the story.

This mechanism is also related to what Phelan calls *authorial translation*. In travel vlogs, commentary helps audiences understand the encounters taking place on screen. However, this interpretive process may also overshadow the voices of those appearing in the video. Instead of presenting the meanings of their own actions, local residents may be assigned functional roles such as victims, service providers, or supporting characters in the traveller's story.

Returning to the example of the negotiation at the cake stall in Figure 3, the encounter is initially framed as an economic negotiation. The vendor clearly demonstrates her agency by recognising that travel vlogging is not merely an act of documenting experience but also an activity capable of generating profit. However, when the narrator turns to the camera and explains the situation to the audience, the interaction is restructured in a different way.

This moment marks a shift from economic logic to ethical logic in the storytelling process. The initial encounter, in which two subjects negotiate the value of an image, is reinterpreted by the narrator as a story about the tourist's ethical responsibility towards the local community. Within this interpretive frame, the narrator appears as a *benevolent traveler*, a compassionate traveller willing to act fairly towards communities that have previously been exploited.

However, this shift also raises important questions concerning the ethics of producing narratives. If narrating tourism encounters can generate symbolic capital and economic benefits for content creators, what obligations does the narrator have towards the people who appear in the story? In a postcolonial context, this question becomes especially important when tourism narratives are associated with images of hardship or poverty at the destination. When such images are narrated as part of the tourism experience, they may unintentionally transform local difficulties into a form of symbolic capital that increases the appeal of the story.

Furthermore, narrating non-Western destinations also risks reproducing the denial of coevalness described by Fabian (1983). From a postcolonial perspective, this is one of the key mechanisms through which symbolic distance and unequal positions between the travelling subject and the represented community are maintained.

These issues show that the narrative ethics of travel vlogs do not lie only in telling positive or emotionally moving stories. They also depend on the narrator's capacity to reflect on their own power. Several scholars have proposed approaches for reducing asymmetry in tourism narratives. Rupert Stasch, for example, emphasises the importance of methodological symmetry, which requires attention to the perspectives of both travellers and the communities they visit. In the context of travel vlogs, this means that narrators need to recognise that they are not only observers but also objects of the *counter-gaze* exercised by local residents.

Tourism narratives should also acknowledge the agency of local people more clearly. Instead of presenting them merely as victims or as background to the tourist experience, travel vlogs may create opportunities for them to express their own perspectives and identities. This is especially important in situations where local residents actively participate in the tourism economy, such as when they negotiate the value of appearing in a video.

Finally, a responsible tourism narrative should be more transparent about the relationships of interest involved in content production. Travel vlogs are increasingly connected to sponsorship, advertising, and income from views, yet this economic dimension is rarely discussed directly within the narrative itself. Greater transparency about these relationships, similar to declarations of competing interests in academic research, may help audiences understand more clearly the conditions under which the stories they watch are produced.

Overall, producing travel vlogs in a postcolonial context requires the person holding the camera to act not only as an engaging storyteller but also as an ethical narrative subject. This means that the narrator must continually reflect on how other communities are represented and seek ways to allow local residents to appear in the story as subjects with voices and agency. Only then can travel vlogs become a form of travel storytelling that is both engaging and responsible in representing the diversity of people and cultures around the world.

Conclusion

This article examines how travel vlogs participate in the construction and circulation of destination imaginaries within digital media environments. By analysing the Kenya series on Khoai Lang Thang's YouTube channel through the perspectives of tourism imaginaries, postcolonial theory, and narrative ethics, the study approaches travel vlogs as a form of multimodal narrative. In this form, the personal story of a journey simultaneously becomes a discourse that shapes how viewers imagine distant places and communities.

The analysis first shows that the series constructs the vlogger as a subject with narrative authority. Through direct narration, personal experience, and emotional responses, the narrator becomes a credible intermediary between the destination and the viewer. This position enables the vlogger to select, organise, and interpret events throughout the journey, while establishing a moral frame within which the narrator's editorial decisions appear reasonable according to the logic of the story.

On this basis, the videos contribute to the construction of specific imaginaries of Kenya. The destination frequently appears through wild nature, intense sensory experiences, difficult living conditions, and situations of instability. These images construct Kenya as a space that is both attractive and different, in which wilderness, deprivation, and cultural difference become prominent elements of the tourism experience.

Encounters between the vlogger and local residents also take place within an asymmetrical structure of representational power. Local residents are not entirely passive. They may ask questions, negotiate the conditions of filming, and recognise the economic value of their own images. However, the power to select material, edit the encounter, and determine the final meaning of the story still belongs primarily to the content creator. Travel vlogs therefore do not merely record tourism encounters but also participate in defining their meaning through the narrator's perspective.

From the perspective of narrative ethics, the series constructs the image of a benevolent traveller who demonstrates empathy and a sense of responsibility. However, goodwill does not automatically eliminate asymmetries in narrative power. On the contrary, the narrator's moral position may strengthen his credibility and obscure the power relations involved in selecting, interpreting, and circulating the images of others. This finding shows that goodwill and representational power are not mutually exclusive but may coexist within the same travel narrative.

These observations do not seek to deny the role of travel vlogs in expanding knowledge and connecting viewers with other cultural spaces. Even content that risks reproducing a postcolonial gaze may still generate curiosity, empathy, and concern for the communities being represented. The central issue lies in awareness of the power structures that may operate in the production and reception of such content. Reflection on perspective, editorial authority, and the positioning of local residents may help creators avoid unconsciously repeating stereotypes of deprivation, primitiveness, or dependence. At the same time, a critical mode of reception enables viewers to recognise that travel vlogs do not neutrally reflect the entirety of a destination but present a version that has been selected and organised through the narrator's perspective.

This study has several limitations. The corpus consists of only seven videos by one vlogger and concerning one destination, so the findings do not represent Vietnamese travel vlogging as a whole. The article focuses on the video texts and does not directly examine audience reception or the perspectives of the local residents who appear in the series. In addition, the postcolonial reading adopted in this study is interpretive. It identifies representational structures and the risk of reproducing inequality rather than making claims about the creator's personal intentions or excluding all alternative interpretations.

Future research may expand the corpus to include multiple vloggers, destinations, and cultural contexts. Comparing Vietnamese vloggers with creators from other countries may clarify how the narrator's cultural position influences the representation of destinations. Studies of comments, audience interviews, or the perspectives of local communities may also help evaluate how these imaginaries are received, negotiated, or contested. Through such approaches, travel vlogs may be examined more fully as spaces in which tourism experiences, representational power, platform economies, and the ethics of storytelling interact.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

The author used OpenAI's ChatGPT in February 2026 to support language refinement and improve the clarity of expression during the writing process. The author reviewed and revised all AI-assisted content and takes full responsibility for the accuracy, arguments, and interpretations presented in the article.

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