

TRAVEL VLOGS AS CULTURAL NARRATIVES: VIETNAMESE TRAVEL IMAGINARIES IN THE DIGITAL STORYTELLING OF KHOAI LANG THANG

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Abstract: This study examines Vietnamese travel vlogs as digital cultural narratives through which socially circulating ideas of travel are made visible, reproduced, and negotiated. It begins from the observation that tourism imaginaries remain under-theorized in the Vietnamese context, where ideas of travel are dispersed across youth-oriented practices and informal discourses such as *phượt* (independent or backpacking-style travel), “*xê dịch*” (mobility and wanderlust), online travel forums, journalism, and social media. Rather than treating travel vlogs merely as records of individual journeys, the article approaches them as narrative and audiovisual spaces in which broader cultural understandings of mobility, difference, and intercultural encounter are articulated. The study employs narrative discourse analysis and close multimodal reading of seven Kenya travel vlogs published on the Vietnamese YouTube channel Khoai Lang Thang. The vlog series is analysed alongside a purposively selected body of Vietnamese journalistic and online discourse concerning travel from 2012 onwards. The analysis attends to recurring narrative motifs, verbal commentary, visual framing, aesthetic selection, interactions with local residents, and selected audience responses. The findings identify three prominent tourism imaginaries: mobility and exploration, exotic difference and romantic hardship, and reflexive recognition. The first frames travel as freedom, movement, and self-directed discovery; the second constructs distant destinations through wilderness, risk, cultural difference, and hardship; and the third shows how encounters with others enable Vietnamese travellers and audiences to recognize and reassess their own cultural identities and social positions. The study argues that travel vlogs do not create these imaginaries from the outset but render existing cultural patterns more visible and intensify their circulation through digital storytelling. By connecting tourism imaginaries with travel vlogging and Vietnamese digital culture, the article contributes a culturally situated account of how travel is narrated, valued, and understood in contemporary Vietnam.

Keywords: cultural narratives, travel imaginaries, digital storytelling, Vietnamese travel culture

Introduction

In a widely shared contemporary understanding, tourism is often associated with economic development or the service industry of the destination. However, if we trace tourism back to its underlying motivations, a different story emerges one connected to narratives, imaginaries, and the desire to explore the world. According to Amirou (1995), imaginaries of difference and Otherness sometimes mythologized or exoticized often play an important role in initiating tourism. Before becoming a global industry, tourism began with the desire to seek experiences different from everyday life and to encounter unfamiliar forms of living.

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In the contemporary context, the development of technology and digital media has enabled stories and imaginaries of tourism to be produced, circulated, and reproduced more widely than ever before. Social media platforms, online archives, and digital broadcasting formats allow travel experiences to be recorded and shared in various forms. Among these, travel vlogs have become a popular form of tourism narrative in the digital media environment. Through the combination of language, images, sound, and personal performance, vloggers not only document journeys as private experiences but also participate in the representation and circulation of imaginaries of places, landscapes, cultures, and people.

In tourism studies, Noel B. Salazar uses the concept of tourism imaginaries to refer to socially circulating systems of images, symbols, and interpretations through which people imagine and understand the world through tourism (Salazar, 2012). This approach is particularly appropriate to the contemporary media context, in which travel experiences are increasingly connected to the circulation of images, stories, and symbols of destinations. It makes it possible to examine not only how places are narrated in tourism discourse, but also how such imaginaries shape tourists' expectations, emotions, and behaviour.

However, this approach has rarely been applied to tourism research in Vietnam. In Vietnam, tourism has long been approached primarily as an economic sector, a service industry, or an instrument for promoting the national image. Meanwhile, cultural imaginaries of tourism, such as *phượt*, *xê dịch*, the exploration of distant places, the search for authentic experiences, or encounters with culturally different communities, appear clearly in journalism, online forums, social media, and youth culture, but have not yet been systematized as socially and culturally structured imaginaries.

This gap lies not only in the absence of academic research directly addressing tourism imaginaries in the Vietnamese context but also in the dispersed and relatively limited nature of in-depth materials concerning local tourism discourses. Imaginaries of tourism exist mainly in non-academic sources such as journalism, online forums, travel blogs, and social media content. Although these sources are often fragmented and are not constructed as coherent theoretical systems, the recurrence of certain motifs within them still makes it possible to identify relatively stable understandings of mobility, cultural difference, and the value of travel experience within a segment of contemporary Vietnamese discourse.

From this perspective, the article approaches travel vlogs as a form of digital tourism narrative through which several tourism imaginaries circulating in contemporary Vietnamese tourism discourse can be identified and analysed. Through the case of a seven-video Kenya travel series on the YouTube channel Khoai Lang Thang, the study examines how imaginaries of mobility, difference, and cultural encounter are represented, concretized, and amplified through digital storytelling. The article does not argue that travel vlogs create entirely new frameworks for imagining tourism. Rather, it proposes that vlogs make visible and reinforce imaginative motifs that already exist within broader cultural discourses.

On this basis, the article poses the following central question: What tourism imaginaries can be identified in contemporary Vietnamese digital tourism discourse? From this question, the study develops two specific research questions. First, what recurring motifs in journalism, online forums, and digital media can be conceptualized as tourism imaginaries? Second, how does Khoai Lang Thang's Kenya travel vlog series reproduce and circulate these imaginaries through narration, visual selection, and tourism encounters?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Tourism Imaginaries and the Cultural Construction of Travel

In tourism studies, Noel B. Salazar uses the concept of tourism imaginaries to refer to socially shared sets of images, symbols, and interpretations concerning people, places, and tourism practices. These imaginaries do not neutrally reflect reality; rather, they are formed and circulated through media, promotion, travel narratives, and tourists' experiences (Salazar, 2012). Before directly visiting a destination, tourists have often already encountered images and stories about that place, and these pre-existing imaginaries contribute to shaping both their expectations and the ways in which they later interpret their experiences.

An important aspect of tourism imaginaries concerns the construction of difference. Tourism is often associated with a desire to leave everyday life behind and encounter spaces imagined as novel, authentic, or exotic. Amirou (1995) argues that curiosity toward Otherness is one of the major motivations underlying tourism. However, the emphasis placed on wilderness, poverty, tradition, or backwardness may also produce symbolic hierarchies between tourists and destination communities.

This mechanism is related to the concept of the tourist gaze, according to which the ways tourists observe destinations are always influenced by pre-existing cultural codes and discourses (Urry & Larsen, 2011). It may also be associated with allochronism or the denial of coevalness, in which other communities are positioned within a symbolic temporality different from that of the observer (Fabian, 1983). In tourism discourse, destinations may therefore be represented as pristine, insufficiently modernized, or situated outside the familiar rhythms of tourists' everyday lives.

Nevertheless, tourism encounters are not exclusively one-directional. Studies of the host gaze and mutual gaze show that local people also observe, evaluate, and imagine tourists. This makes it possible to understand tourism imaginaries not only as ways of imagining destinations, but also as structures through which tourists come to recognize themselves and the cultural communities to which they belong.

Travel Vlogging and Digital Tourism Storytelling

Travel vlogs allow individuals to directly record, edit, and publish narratives of their journeys, thereby combining personal storytelling with tourism discourse and platform-based media. Formally, vlogs draw on multiple meaning-making modes, including speech, moving images, music, environmental sound, written text, and bodily expression. The vlogger often functions simultaneously as traveller, narrator, central character, and editor. Handheld camerawork, direct address, immediate reactions, and the retention of unexpected moments all contribute to a sense of intimacy and authenticity.

However, travel vlogs are not unmediated records of reality. Every video is the result of a process of selection: which places are filmed, who is allowed to appear, which scenes are retained, how experiences are sequenced, and what language is used to interpret them. Travel vlogs should therefore be understood as constructed narrative products in which creators organize experience into stories shaped by particular viewpoints, emotions, and systems of value.

Research on online travel videos has shown that user-generated content can participate in the construction of destination images and the mediation of tourism experiences (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Travel vlogs may also be understood as a form of digital storytelling, in which meaning emerges through the coordination of narration, images, sound, and editing. In addition, vlogs exist within an interactive environment. Audiences can comment, share, and propose their own interpretations. Comment sections therefore do not merely respond to the content but may also extend and restructure the tourism imaginaries presented in the videos

Tourism Representation and the Vietnamese Context

Research on tourism representation has shown that tourism texts do not merely describe places; they also organize particular ways of seeing the world. Decisions about what is presented as beautiful, authentic, dangerous, impoverished, or worth experiencing reflect broader systems of value and relations of power. Motifs of pristine nature, hospitable communities, simple ways of life, or supposedly unexplored regions may enhance the appeal of destinations, while at the same time reducing their complexity.

In digital environments, this issue becomes even more significant because vloggers often appear as approachable individuals rather than official media institutions. The sense of intimacy between narrator and audience may lead personal interpretations to be received as natural and trustworthy descriptions, even though the narrator's cultural norms continue to shape how landscapes, people, and experiences are evaluated.

Although tourism imaginaries, the tourist gaze, and digital travel storytelling have been studied in a range of international contexts, the ways tourism is imagined in Vietnamese discourse have not yet been systematically examined from this perspective. Tourism research in Vietnam has mainly focused on economics, destination management, marketing, tourist satisfaction, and national image promotion. Meanwhile, imaginaries associated with *phượt*, *xê dịch*, the exploration of distant places, difficult experiences, and cultural encounters circulate primarily through journalism, online forums, and social media.

Although these sources are dispersed and do not form a unified theoretical system, the recurrence of motifs concerning freedom, exploration, youth, authenticity, hardship, and cultural difference can still provide a basis for identifying several tourism imaginaries circulating in contemporary Vietnamese tourism discourse.

Materials and Methods

Research Materials and Case Selection

The study draws on two groups of materials. The first consists of Vietnamese newspaper articles, online forums, and digital content published from 2012 onwards that directly address discourses of *phượt*, *xê dịch*, exploration, difficult experiences, and cultural encounters. Because tourism imaginaries have not been systematically studied in the Vietnamese context and in-depth materials remain relatively scarce, these texts were selected purposively. They comprise the most relevant publicly accessible sources that could be identified, rather than a statistically representative corpus. This group of materials was used to identify recurring motifs in Vietnamese tourism discourse.

The second group consists of a series of seven travel vlogs about Kenya published on the YouTube channel Khoai Lang Thang. The channel was selected because it is one of the most popular travel vlog channels in Vietnam and is characterized by a storytelling style based on personal experience, direct interaction with local people, and the frequent combination of images, commentary, and the narrator's emotions. The Kenya series was selected because it encompasses a range of spaces and encounters, including urban areas, local markets, disadvantaged residential communities, wildlife reserves, and indigenous communities. This diversity makes it possible to observe how imaginaries of mobility, difference, and cultural encounter are expressed within a single journey.

All seven videos in the series were included in the analysis. For each video, the study recorded the title, publication date, duration, and relevant segments using timestamps. Selected audience comments were also used as supplementary data when they directly responded to or extended interpretations presented in the videos. These comments are not treated as representative of the audience as a whole, but are used only to illustrate modes of reception that generated notable levels of resonance.

Analytical Procedure

The study combines narrative discourse analysis with close multimodal reading. The analytical process was conducted in two stages.

In the first stage, newspaper articles and online materials were read in order to identify recurring motifs in the ways travel was narrated and evaluated. Related motifs were grouped into broader semantic fields, including freedom of movement, youthful exploration, difficult experiences, cultural difference, and encounters with other communities. These groupings were then conceptualized as provisional tourism imaginaries.

In the second stage, the Kenya vlog series was analysed to examine how these imaginaries were concretized through digital storytelling. The analysis focused on five dimensions: the vlogger's commentary, visual selection, narrative structure and sequencing, interactions with local residents, and audience responses in the comment sections. Relevant video segments were viewed repeatedly, with verbal and visual elements compared against one another. Particular attention was also given to instances that reinforced, modified, or complicated the imaginaries identified in the first stage.

This approach does not assume that vlogs merely reflect pre-existing imaginaries. Rather, it treats travel vlogs as spaces in which imaginaries are represented, amplified, and at times renegotiated through narrative choices and audiovisual expression.

Analytical Rigour and Researcher Positionality

The reliability of the analysis was strengthened through comparison across multiple types of data, including journalism, online forums, videos, and audience comments. Interpretive claims were not based on isolated examples, but on the recurrence of motifs across different sources and video segments. The study also attended to instances that did not fully conform to the identified imaginaries in order to avoid imposing a single interpretive framework on the data.

As a Vietnamese researcher familiar with discourses of *phượt*, *xê dịch*, and travel vlog culture, the author is well positioned to recognize linguistic nuances and culturally specific frames of reference

within the data. However, this positionality may also create a tendency to treat certain interpretations as self-evident. For this reason, the analysis is anchored in specific textual passages, timestamps, and visual choices, while the conclusions are limited to the corpus examined rather than generalized to Vietnamese society as a whole.

Results and Discussion

Tourism imaginaries are generally identified through recurring patterns in the discourses and practices of tourism within particular cultural contexts (Salazar, 2012). From this perspective, the present study examines tourism discourses circulating in contemporary Vietnam. Because research directly addressing tourism imaginaries in the Vietnamese context remains limited, non-academic sources provide an important entry point for observing how tourism is narrated, evaluated, and associated with particular systems of value in media discourse. The article therefore seeks to identify recurring patterns through which tourism is imagined in popular culture. These patterns do not exist as isolated statements, but may be conceptualized as broader tourism imaginaries reflecting how Vietnamese people imagine mobility, culturally different places, and encounters with unfamiliar communities.

On this basis, the article proposes three prominent tourism imaginaries: the imaginary of mobility and exploration, the imaginary of exotic difference, and the imaginary of cultural encounter. These imaginaries are not derived solely from Khoai Lang Thang's Kenya vlog series, but emerge from the recurrence of multiple discursive patterns within the broader culture of tourism in Vietnam. The Kenya video series is therefore used not as the site in which new imaginaries are produced, but as a case demonstrating how imaginaries already present in social life continue to be reproduced, concretized, and amplified through travel vlogs.

The following sections present these three imaginaries in two stages. First, each imaginary is established through recurring expressions in Vietnamese tourism discourse. Second, the Kenya video series is examined to clarify how these imaginaries are narrated and represented within the digital media environment.

Mapping Vietnamese Tourism Imaginaries

In the Vietnamese context, tourism discourses in newspapers, travel forums, and online communities provide an important source for observing how tourism is imagined in social life. A notable example is the discourse surrounding *phượt*, a form of independent travel broadly comparable to backpacking, commonly associated with long motorbike journeys that place greater emphasis on exploration than comfort. Many articles describe *phượt* as an opportunity to “discover new lands, new customs, and new people” (Wetrek, n.d.), while long journeys and challenging routes are often presented as part of the appeal of the experience (Dân Trí, 2008). Such narratives suggest that, in many popular Vietnamese discourses, tourism is understood not only as an activity of leisure or sightseeing, but also as a journey centred on movement itself and as a highly individualized experience.

These ways of narrating travel do not appear in isolation, but recur across a range of tourism discourses, from journalism to online travel communities. Their repetition and circulation contribute to making them familiar imaginaries of tourism in social life. Examination of these discourses reveals that many Vietnamese travel narratives revolve around several recurring patterns, which together form broader frameworks for imagining tourism.

First, many accounts emphasize leaving familiar spaces in order to explore new places, with movement and personal experience positioned at the centre of the travel narrative. These descriptions point to an interpretive framework in which tourism is imagined as a journey of mobility and exploration. In this article, this framework is conceptualized as the mobility and exploration imaginary.

Second, many discourses describe tourism as engagement with unfamiliar or little-known spaces, while simultaneously romanticizing the hardships and challenges of the journey. Articles about *phượt* often suggest that routes that are “deeper, farther, and more rugged” are more attractive to travellers (Wetrek, n.d.), while overcoming difficult conditions is treated as an important component of a valuable travel experience. These descriptions indicate an imaginative logic in which hardship and challenge become signs of authentic tourism. This phenomenon can also be understood through the concept of allochronism in research on tourism imaginaries. As Ferraris (2011) notes, tourism discourse often situates destinations in a “different time,” emphasizing elements of the past or of a supposedly “primitive” way of life in order to create a sense of difference from the modern life of the traveller. In the Vietnamese context, distant regions may therefore produce an imaginary in which tourism is associated with the experience of spaces perceived as different and extraordinary. This framework is conceptualized here as the exotic difference and romantic hardship imaginary.

Finally, tourism also creates spaces of encounter between travellers and people from different cultural contexts. In many travel narratives, interaction with local residents or international tourists, often popularly referred to as “*Tây ba lô*” or Western backpackers, is represented as an important part of the journey. These representations suggest that tourism is frequently narrated as a process of encounter and mutual recognition between cultural communities, in which communication and hospitality play significant roles. Research on backpacker tourism has identified similar patterns, with many young travellers viewing tourism as an opportunity to construct new personal identities through exploration and interaction with other cultures (Cohen, 2004; Elsrud, 2001; Sørensen, 2003). In this article, this framework is conceptualized as the cultural encounter and recognition imaginary.

These imaginaries do not exist independently of one another, but often intersect within popular travel narratives, jointly shaping broader understandings of tourism in contemporary Vietnamese media and culture. The following sections examine how these imaginaries are reproduced in travel vlogs through the case of Khoai Lang Thang’s Kenya video series.

Mobility imaginary: youth culture and “*phượt*”

In Vietnamese media and popular culture, one of the most prominent tourism imaginaries over the past two decades has been the discourse surrounding “*phượt*” or “*xê dịch*.” The term “*phượt*” is believed to have become widely used around the period of 2006–2007, particularly within youth online forums. Unlike many other tourism-related terms, this word is not a borrowing from a foreign language (for example, “*Tây balo*,” which is commonly used to describe backpacking-style travel). According to several journalistic accounts, “*phượt*” is considered youth slang that first emerged in direct social interactions before spreading more broadly into the media sphere. Although the precise origin of the term remains debated, its rapid circulation suggests that *phượt* is first and foremost a cultural phenomenon formed within communities, reflecting how many young Vietnamese imagine the meaning of travel.

In popular discourses found in newspapers and social media, *phượt* is often understood as a form of self-organized travel in which participants actively choose their own means of transportation, routes, and ways of experiencing the journey instead of joining pre-arranged tour packages. However, what makes *phượt* a distinctive tourism imaginary does not lie only in this element of independence. More importantly, *phượt* is associated with a symbolic system of values that reflects how young people imagine travel and their experiences of the world. This imaginary can often be seen as structured around three main characteristics: the freedom of the journey, the exploratory identity of youth, and the emphasis on the experience of movement.

First, *phượt* is often imagined as a form of travel characterized by freedom and relatively unconstrained by the organizational norms of the tourism industry. While organized tours are usually associated with fixed itineraries and pre-arranged services, *phượt* is described as a flexible journey in which participants can make decisions during the course of the experience itself. Within this imaginary, the act of choosing one's own experiences and accepting the uncertainties of the journey becomes an important part of the meaning of travel.

This characteristic can be clearly observed in many contemporary travel vlogs. In the Kenya travel video series on the YouTube channel Khoai Lang Thang, the narrator frequently makes decisions about his experiences during the journey rather than following a predetermined schedule. For instance, in episode 9, when experiencing the Kitengela Glass Bridge in Nairobi, Khoai Lang Thang recounts that before stepping onto the bridge he had to sign a liability waiver because of the potential danger involved in the activity. After reading the content of the waiver, he says:

“If it feels dangerous then I won't go; otherwise... well, let's try.”

(Khoai Lang Thang, P9: Những ngày đầu ở Kenya, 45:25–45:50) (Narration 1).

This decision suggests that the travel journey is imagined as a personal experience in which the participant can weigh options and make choices independently, rather than simply following a pre-designed itinerary. As soon as he steps onto the bridge, his reaction - “Why do I feel so shaky out here... should we go back?” (Khoai Lang Thang, P9: Những ngày đầu ở Kenya, 45:50–46:05) (Narration 2) - further emphasizes the immediacy and spontaneity of the experience. Moments like these reflect an imaginary in which the value of the journey lies in the willingness to try and to experience, even when the journey contains elements of risk.

Second, the *phượt* imaginary is closely connected with the way youth is imagined as a period of exploration. This can be clearly observed in discourses that have long existed in Vietnamese blogs and forums (such as *tinhte.vn*, *wetrek*, *phuot.vn*), where *phượt* is often regarded as an activity characteristic of young people - those who are not yet constrained by the stable responsibilities of adult life. These imaginaries also appear clearly in the storytelling style of Khoai Lang Thang. One noticeable feature in many of his videos is that the opening section is often constructed like a short “trailer,” in which the narrator highlights the special value of the experience that is about to unfold. In episode 15 of the Kenya series, in the very first seconds of the video, Khoai Lang Thang stands in the middle of a desert landscape and exclaims:

“Wow, this really is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, everyone.”

(Khoai Lang Thang, P15: Săn sư tử và bộ lạc Châu Phi, 00:04–00:07) (Narration 3).

This motif reveals a consistent discursive strategy in the way this travel vlogger constructs the value of travel experiences. Expressions such as “once in a lifetime” or “a place you have to visit at least once” function as a form of soft imperative: they transform the journey from a personal choice into an experience that ought to be attained in one’s life.

In the context of the *phượt* imaginary, this motif is particularly noteworthy because it links travel to a very specific imagination of youth. More precisely, the characteristics commonly associated with young people - being in the process of growing up, needing to explore themselves and life, and possessing both the passion and physical advantage that youth affords - closely correspond to the qualities attributed to imaginaries of *phượt*. For this reason, the formula does not merely encourage the desire to travel but also reinforces a widespread imaginary within the youth culture of mobility. At this point, travel vlogs do not simply reflect existing imaginaries of tourism but also contribute to their reproduction. By repeatedly employing discursive formulas such as “once in a lifetime,” the vlogs of Khoai Lang Thang simultaneously promote travel experiences and reinforce the imagination of tourism as a sequence of rare and meaningful experiences closely connected with the exploratory spirit of youth.

Third, the *phượt* imaginary places particular emphasis on the value of the journey and the act of movement. In many common descriptions, *phượt* is often associated with long routes, distant trips, or journeys toward places that are less familiar. Within this imaginary, moving across different spaces becomes a core element of the travel experience rather than merely a means of reaching a destination. The video series of Khoai Lang Thang clearly illustrates this experiential structure. In episode 12, he spends nearly ten minutes walking through the Kibera slum in Nairobi (3:05–12:26), recording narrow alleys, the daily life of residents, and short conversations with local people. For Khoai Lang Thang, such experiences are necessary in order to understand a place, even from the position of a traveler. During dinner in this area, he continues to compare his experience with familiar habits in Vietnam:

“I’m having dinner here where everyone eats with their hands. It might not fit with the way we usually eat in Vietnam... but it’s an interesting experience and not something you can easily have here in Africa.”

(Khoai Lang Thang, P12: Ở lại khu ổ chuột khét tiếng băng đảng Châu Phi, 40:43–41:05)
(Narration 5).

Through these storytelling strategies, travel vlogs such as those of Khoai Lang Thang can be seen as a form of media that contributes to the circulation and reinforcement of a tourism imaginary associated with the spirit of *phượt*. The emphasis on personal experience, immediate emotions, and the journey itself suggests that travel vlogs do not only represent specific trips but also reproduce the ways in which many young Vietnamese imagine the meaning of exploring the world in the context of contemporary digital media.

Exotic imaginary: encountering the Other

Alongside the tourism imaginary associated with the youthful spirit of mobility, another imaginary that appears prominently in Vietnamese tourism discourse is the understanding of travel as an encounter with “the Other”—spaces, landscapes, or ways of life perceived as different from the familiar everyday experiences of Vietnamese people. In popular tourism discourse, the value of a journey is often associated with the exploration of environments described as wild, dangerous, or culturally unfamiliar: “On the one hand, there is the overcoming of monotony, anomie, and meaninglessness of everyday life with more satisfying experiences—escapism and the desire for exoticism or difference” (Salazar, 2012). Such imaginaries not only make destinations more appealing but also shape how tourists imagine the world before and during their journeys.

In research on tourism imaginaries, scholars have shown that imaginaries of destinations are often constructed through processes of exoticization—that is, by emphasizing the difference and foreignness of a place in order to increase the appeal of travel. Ferraris (2014) argues that tourism discourse frequently locates destinations in a “different time” from that of the tourist, a phenomenon known as *allochronism* (Fabian, 2014). This mechanism contributes to transforming destinations into spaces imagined as “primitive,” “wild,” or not yet fully modernized. It thereby creates the impression that travel involves discovering a world fundamentally different from the tourist’s everyday life. As the anthropologist Rupert Stasch suggests, the exotic imaginary is structured by multiple elements, including wild nature, the sense of danger or risk involved in the journey, and cultural differences within local life (Stasch, 2014).

These imaginaries can be clearly observed in Khoai Lang Thang’s Kenya travel series, in which tourism experiences are frequently narrated by emphasizing the differences between the destination’s natural and social environments and the familiar everyday world of Vietnamese viewers.

First, the imaginary of the Other is often constructed through images of wild nature. Salazar (2012) also addresses this seemingly contradictory imaginary: on the one hand, human beings leave the wilderness in pursuit of civilization; on the other hand, they continue to long for that primordial space and even discover an irresistible attraction in what they once abandoned. In Episode 15 of the Kenya series, while visiting the Masai Mara reserve, Khoai Lang Thang records a lion feeding on its prey at very close range. When the camera shifts to the prey’s skeleton, which still bears traces of blood, he exclaims:

“The distance between us and these lions is really close, everyone - only about four or five meters... This skeleton has just been eaten; you can still see that this leg still has meat and the color of blood on it... it’s the first time I’ve really seen, in the literal sense, life and death in the wild.”

(Khoai Lang Thang, P15: Săn sư tử và bộ lạc Châu Phi, 14:15–14:50) (Narration 6).

This scene functions as what might be described as an “arresting image,” producing an affective shock that directly engages the senses and materializes an evolutionary vision of a natural state that is “brutal and short,” a condition largely removed from the “civilized” routines of urban life (Tonnaer, 2014). The difficult-to-resist attraction here emerges from the position of the traveler, who is able to stand in relative safety while consuming the danger and death of the Other - in this case, wild nature - thereby transforming it into what might be called a “durable spiritual investment” that helps overcome the monotony and perceived meaninglessness of everyday life. Ultimately, it is precisely the vitality of the

wilderness that turns a basic act of survival into a fascinating and soul-stirring experience, where the traveler finds the sensation of truly “living” through witnessing the fragile boundary between life and death. In retrospect, this represents a very common way of attributing meaning to tourist destinations, or, more precisely in analytical terms, the construction of tourism imaginaries through images of wilderness and emotional shock.

Second, the imaginary of the Other in tourism is also often associated with a sense of danger or risk within the journey. These reactions suggest that the travel experience is narrated as a moment of confronting risk, in which the participant must decide for themselves whether to continue the journey or not. Within tourism imaginaries, such moments are frequently interpreted as signs of a memorable journey, because it is precisely the presence of danger and uncertainty that makes the experience appear more extraordinary than the routines of everyday life.

Alongside images of wild nature and the sense of danger, the exotic imaginary is also constructed through encounters with socially different environments. In episode 12 of the Kenya series, Khoai Lang Thang spends a day experiencing life in Kibera, one of the largest slums in Africa. A representative example appears when he visits a small shop selling handmade jewelry made from animal bones. While considering whether to buy gifts for his mother and friends in Vietnam, he comments:

“I was thinking of buying a few things for my mom and friends back in Vietnam, but people might see these kinds of jewelry here as quite... bold in style. So anyone who wants to wear something like this would have to know how to match it with the right outfit. So... maybe not.”

(Khoai Lang Thang, P12: Ở lại khu ổ chuột khét tiếng băng đảng Châu Phi, 14:40–14:57)
(Narration 7)

What is noteworthy here is not the decision to decline the object, but the way he evaluates and interprets this cultural artifact through a familiar frame of reference drawn from everyday life in Vietnam. The phrase “khá là cá tính” (“quite bold” or “rather distinctive”) functions as a form of understatement, but it also reveals an implicit act of comparison: the object is perceived as something too different from the aesthetic norms commonly associated with contemporary Vietnamese life. In other words, cultural difference here does not appear as an intrinsic value of the object itself, but is instead recognized through the degree to which it deviates from the familiar standards of the narrator.

It is precisely at this point that the video segment reveals an important mechanism of tourism imaginaries. The “Other” in tourism is not an inherent characteristic of the destination itself, but is often constructed through a process of comparison between the destination and the familiar world of the traveler. In this case, Khoai Lang Thang is not simply describing a souvenir; he is unconsciously placing that cultural object within a very specific frame of reference: the aesthetic world of his “mother and friends in Vietnam.” Because the object cannot easily be integrated into that familiar world, it appears even more clearly as a sign of foreignness.

The imaginary of the “Other” in Vietnamese tourism discourse does not represent a completely open reception of unfamiliar cultures. Instead, it operates as a process that is both curious and selective: travelers seek out experiences of difference, but at the same time they continuously measure and evaluate those experiences through the familiar standards of their own cultural environment. It is

precisely this process of comparison that allows the destination to appear both as a space of difference and as a mirror through which the traveling subject more clearly recognizes their own cultural world.

At this point, travel vlogs do not simply record personal experiences but also contribute to the reproduction of widely circulating tourism imaginaries. Through comparisons, interpretations, and personal reactions, videos such as those of Khoai Lang Thang help reinforce a familiar imagination within tourism discourse: the outside world appears as a space of cultural difference, where novelty and foreignness become an important part of the appeal of travel, yet are always understood and evaluated through the cultural frame of reference of the traveler.

From this perspective, travel vlogs do not merely document individual journeys but also participate in the reproduction of imaginaries of the world within the digital media environment. By emphasizing wild nature, the sense of danger, and cultural differences in local life, videos such as those of Khoai Lang Thang contribute to shaping how Vietnamese viewers imagine distant destinations. In this way, tourism becomes not only an activity of movement through space, but also a process of interpreting the world through imaginaries of difference and exploration.

Reflex recognition imaginaries

At a deeper level, tourism can be understood as a process in which subjects recognize the world and, at the same time, recognize themselves through encounters with different forms of life. Tourism therefore produces not only imaginaries of destinations, but also imaginaries of travellers and the communities they represent. In this article, this dimension is conceptualized as the reflexive recognition imaginary: an imaginative structure in which encounters with the Other lead subjects to reconsider their own language, identity, position, and values.

This concept is related to research on the tourist gaze, host gaze, and mutual gaze. Whereas the tourist gaze emphasizes how tourists observe and interpret destinations, the host gaze shows that local people also actively observe, evaluate, and imagine tourists. Tourism encounters are therefore not a one-directional movement from an observing subject to an observed object. Rather, they constitute an interactive space in which the participants jointly construct understandings of one another. Reflexive recognition, however, does not stop at the fact that subjects look at one another; it emphasizes those moments in which the response of others leads tourists or audiences to recognize their own communities anew.

A notable example appears in Episode 10 of the series, when Khoai Lang Thang visits Wakulima Market and speaks with a local guide in front of a corn stall. While discussing the agricultural products sold in the market, he explains that corn is also grown in Vietnam but is commonly called “bắp”:

“In Vietnam we call it ‘bắp.’

“Bắp... I like the language of your country.”

(Khoai Lang Thang, P10: Gặp nạn ở chợ trời châu Phi, 13:36–13:40) (Narration 8)

At the surface level, this may appear as nothing more than a brief and casual exchange. However, from the perspective of tourism imaginaries, when the word “bắp” is spoken and repeated with interest by

the local person, Vietnamese temporarily becomes a cultural sign introduced into the tourism encounter. The important point lies in the fact that, in this moment, Khoai Lang Thang is not only observing the destination but also acting as a cultural mediator. He brings an element of Vietnam - language - into the encounter, and the curiosity of the local person confirms the presence of that element. In this way, the travel vlog no longer functions solely as a medium through which Vietnamese travelers look outward to the world; it also becomes a space in which the world responds to and acknowledges the presence of Vietnam.

Another example shows even more clearly the two-way nature of tourism encounters. In episode 12, when Khoai and residents of the Kibera slum prepare a meal together, they ask him the meaning of the word “ngon” in Vietnamese. After learning its meaning, everyone repeats the word, and one mother even teaches her child to say it:

“Ngon... it means tasty.”

“Ngon! Ngon!”

“Say ‘ngon,’ my child.”

(Khoai Lang Thang, P12: Ở lại khu ổ chuột khét tiếng băng đảng Châu Phi, 39:04–39:25)
(Narration 9)

This is a very clear example of how tourism encounters produce a mutual gaze. Vietnamese, in this moment, no longer functions solely as the private language of the narrator but is introduced into another communicative space, where it is repeated, practiced, and even passed on among members of a local family. This shows that tourism encounters are not only processes through which travelers come to understand destinations, but also situations in which elements of the traveler’s culture can be received and reused within the social space of others. It is precisely this moment that demonstrates how tourism imaginaries are formed not only through observing difference, but also through seeing oneself appear within the world of others.

If the two examples above illustrate the recognition imaginary at the level of direct encounter, the comment section under the video reveals how this imaginary is extended at the collective level. Under the video about Kibera (Episode 12), many Vietnamese viewers do not simply respond to the vlog’s content but transform the viewing experience into a moment of reflecting on themselves and on Vietnam.



Figure 1: Selected viewer comments on Khoai Lang Thang's Kenya vlog (Source: Khoai Lang Thang, p12: Ở lại khu ổ chuột khét tiếng bằng đảng Châu Phi)

What is noteworthy here lies not only in the content of the comment but also in the level of engagement it receives from the viewing community. The comment gained more than a thousand likes and was even hearted by Khoai Lang Thang himself. This indicates that the reaction is not an isolated personal sentiment but has become a shared agreement among members of the audience community. The encounter with Kenya, in this case, does not merely produce an imagination of Africa but also causes Vietnam to appear as a moral and emotional point of reference.

In this way, the travel vlog opens a space in which Vietnamese audiences collectively participate in constructing imaginaries about the world and about themselves. When viewers say that they feel “fortunate to have been born in Vietnam,” it shows that the Other is not merely an object to be observed but also becomes a mirror through which the community reflects upon and recognizes its own position in the world. The tourism encounter therefore does not occur only between Khoai Lang Thang and Kenyan people; it continues in the comment section, where Vietnamese viewers participate in interpreting and redefining that experience.

From a theoretical perspective, these examples suggest that tourism encounters should not be understood as a one-directional process in which the traveler imposes a gaze upon the destination. Rather, travel encounters are situations in which imaginaries are co-constructed through concrete social interactions. Vietnam becomes meaningful within the encounter not only because the narrator brings it with him, but also because others ask about it, repeat it, and acknowledge it as part of the interaction. In this sense, tourism imaginaries do not exist as fixed representations on one side but are continuously shaped through social relations, through mutual curiosity, and through overlapping interpretations among the different subjects participating in tourism.

Furthermore, this discourse also demonstrates the capacity of vlogs to transmit and construct tourism imaginaries. Unlike traditional forms of travel writing, the vlog platform allows direct feedback from both viewers and content creators. As a result, the process of constructing imaginaries does not stop at the vlog itself but continues to expand through exchanges among viewers and between viewers and the creator. Content creators can also observe how audiences respond to their videos, and based on these reactions adjust their storytelling, select different destinations, or emphasize particular aspects of the travel experience. In this way, imaginaries of tourism are no longer fixed frameworks imposed from above, but become representations that are co-constructed between the storyteller and the audience community.

Conclusion

This article begins from the observation that tourism, before becoming an economic industry, has always been associated with stories, images, and imaginaries of the world. In the context of digital media, these imaginaries circulate not only through traditional discourses but are also represented and amplified through newer forms of storytelling such as travel vlogs. Drawing on the concept of tourism imaginaries, the study approaches travel vlogs as digital narrative spaces in which understandings of journeys, destinations, and cultural identities are organized and circulated.

Through the examination of a purposively selected body of Vietnamese tourism discourse and the analysis of a seven-video Kenya series on the YouTube channel Khoai Lang Thang, the article identifies three prominent tourism imaginaries within the corpus: the mobility and exploration imaginary, the exotic difference and romantic hardship imaginary, and the reflexive recognition imaginary.

First, the mobility and exploration imaginary frames tourism as a process of movement associated with freedom, individual choice, challenge, and discovery. In the Vietnamese context, this imaginary is localized through discourses such as *phượt* and *xê dịch*, while travel vlogs reproduce it by emphasizing journeys, first-time experiences, and destinations that one “must visit at least once in a lifetime.”

Second, the exotic difference and romantic hardship imaginary constructs destinations through wild nature, risk, hardship, and cultural difference. However, the “Other” does not exist as a fixed attribute of Kenya; it is produced through comparison with the narrator’s familiar norms. Travel vlogs therefore expand opportunities for engagement with distant spaces, while also potentially reducing them to signs of wilderness, hardship, or foreignness.

Third, the reflexive recognition imaginary shows that tourism encounters do not merely produce imaginaries of destinations, but also lead narrators and audiences to recognize themselves anew. Moments in which the Vietnamese language is noticed and repeated by local people, together with audience responses beneath the videos, demonstrate that tourism encounters can become spaces in which Vietnamese identity and position are named, reflected upon, and reinterpreted.

On the basis of these findings, the article argues that travel vlogs do not create entirely new tourism imaginaries. Rather, they make visible, concretize, and intensify the circulation of motifs already present in broader tourism discourse. Unlike traditional forms of travel writing, travel vlogs also allow viewers to participate in meaning-making through comments and responses. Tourism imaginaries are

therefore not simply transmitted from narrator to audience, but are negotiated among content creators, the people appearing in the videos, and viewing communities.

In practical terms, the findings suggest that tourism content creators need to recognize more clearly that choices concerning images, commentary, and narrative structure do not merely describe destinations; they also produce cultural frameworks through which audiences understand them. Greater reflexivity in representing difference, hardship, and local life may help travel vlogs avoid reproducing reductive or exoticizing images. For tourism communication and destination promotion, identifying circulating imaginaries may also support the development of narratives that are both engaging and attentive to the complexity and agency of represented communities. At the same time, viewers should approach travel vlogs as selectively constructed narrative products rather than as direct and neutral reflections of reality.

The study has several limitations. Focusing on one channel and one specific vlog series allows for in-depth analysis, but limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized across Vietnamese digital tourism content as a whole. The journalistic and online corpus was purposively selected from the most relevant publicly accessible sources that could be identified, but it is not statistically representative of Vietnamese tourism discourse in its entirety. Likewise, the selected comments illustrate modes of reception that generated notable levels of resonance, but do not fully represent the views of the audience as a whole.

Future research could expand the corpus to include multiple vloggers, destinations, and platforms; compare domestic and international travel vlogs; or combine textual analysis with interviews involving content creators and audiences. Such directions may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how tourism imaginaries are produced, negotiated, and transformed in contemporary digital media.

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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