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## Projecting destinations via organic tourist videos: the role of appearance, production and content

Ilma Aulia Zaim<sup>a</sup>, Dimitrios Stylidis <sup>b,\*</sup>, Konstantinos Andriotis<sup>c</sup> and Anthony Thickett<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Business and Management, Bandung Institute of Technology, Bandung, Indonesia; <sup>b</sup>Department of Economics, University of Crete, Rethymno, Greece; <sup>c</sup>Department of Marketing, Enterprise and Tourism, Middlesex University London, London, UK; <sup>d</sup>Department of Marketing, Enterprise and Tourism, Middlesex University London, London, UK

### ABSTRACT

Although organic tourist videos on social media have been established as prominent agents of destination image formation, the influence of social media posted vlogs on potential tourists' destination image remains insufficiently explored. Meanwhile, it is crucial to comprehend the underlying mechanisms that shape this process, especially how potential tourist forms their conative image of destination. Video elicitation interviews using two unsponsored YouTube videos of Raja Ampat, Indonesia were conducted with domestic (Indonesian = 31) and international (British = 30) potential tourists. Findings indicated technical aspects of the videos influence potential tourists' perceptions of the video authenticity and credibility. Consequently, this shapes their impression of the destination and their desire to seek further information. The study offers a holistic understanding of the role of technical elements of organic travel vlogs on audience engagement and image formation of prospective tourists from two different nationalities. It also contributes new insights into the implementation of destination branding and marketing practice via authentic, credible and responsible vlogs that help boost community benefits.

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### KEYWORDS

Destination image; YouTube; tourist videography; potential tourists; British; Indonesian

## Introduction

The development of the Internet and Information Communication Technology (ICT) has resulted in significant changes in the tourism industry, including the distribution of tourism-related information and the way people plan and travel (Cheng et al., 2020; Datiko, 2024). Social media, as internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content, are playing a significant role in that sense (Dale, 2020). Travel experiences shared online via video platforms such as YouTube have thus become one of the primary sources of travel-related information that individuals refer to for destination related information (Liu et al., 2020). YouTube, for instance, recorded 2.7 billion users in 2024, 400 million more than 2020. The volume of tourist generated videos has rapidly expanded on social media and online platforms, far exceeding those produced by official tourism organisations (Decrop et al., 2020). Google data show that the amount of time people

spend watching travel-related content videos on YouTube is continuously increasing. For example, recent data also show that the watch time for travel videos on YouTube in Canada increase 30% year over year (Think with Google, 2023).

Information sources like tourist videos (vlogs) available on social media serve as agents of destination image formation (Kumar et al., 2023; Lodha & Philip, 2019; Terzidou et al., 2017). Destination image refers to individuals' opinions, beliefs, ideas and perceptions of a tourist destination (Gartner, 2016). It is considered a significant factor in the decision to visit a tourist place, especially among potential tourists who lack first-hand experience with the destination (Martins, 2023; Stylidis et al., 2017). The broader category of potential tourists includes various segments such as potential and pre-tourists (Cherifi et al., 2014). As a focus of this research, those without prior experience with the destination demonstrate greater potential to be influenced by information/image exposures via vlogs (Stylidis & Cherifi,

**CONTACT** Dimitrios Stylidis  d.stylidis@mdx.ac.uk

\*Present address: Department of Management Science & Technology, Democritus University of Thrace, Kavala, Greece.  Email: dstyli@mdx.ac.uk

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2018). Destination choice as such appears often to be based on visual representations of the place (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013), which enhance peoples' knowledge and cultivate positive feelings towards it (Pan et al., 2014). The videos available online are either tourism-induced with a destination-sponsored content such as promotional or travel influencer videos (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020); or organic (Gunn, 1972), that is, generated by tourists. Beyond the amount of exposure, Gartner (1994) also highlighted the susceptibility or openness and level of trust in (perceived credibility of) these sources, spanning from overtly induced to organic. For some studies like Gretzel (2018), sponsored travel influencer videos are more likely to attract audiences' attention and engagement. In contrast, other researchers suggest that potential travellers perceive organic tourist-generated videos as more genuine than the sponsored ones (Liao et al., 2020).

A large volume of studies has broadly established the prominent role organic tourist videos available online play in shaping destination image and visitation intention (e.g. Liu et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2014). While vlogs may exist at scale and are widely engaged with, this does always seem to determine destination image formation and decision-making. For example, Tham et al. (2020) demonstrated the limited influence social media have on destination decisions, which is present only when specific context-conditions co-exist. Secondly, the underlying mechanism related to vlogs' credibility and capacity to frame image, such as audiences' level of engagement is still under-researched in the tourism marketing literature (e.g. Cheng et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021). Engagement, gradually replacing concepts such as involvement and participation (Schau et al., 2009; Sharma & Sharma, 2023) is often used to denote processes, co-creation, interactions and/or relevant marketing-based forms of service exchange (Brodie et al., 2011).

Additionally, tourists' and potential tourists' destination image formation process is considered to be different (Cherifi et al., 2014; Styliadis & Cherifi, 2018). The vast majority of past research, however, has focused on tourists, further highlighting the need for additional research on those lacking previous destination experience to understand the impact of such elements on their image formation process. The ultimate goal being to establish a tendency to visit a destination in the future (Maghrifani et al., 2022). Lastly, the lions' share of tourism research on short videos has used quantitative instruments (Cheng et al., 2020), making it difficult to unpack the depth of consumers thoughts and behavioural manifestations due to the known limitations of surveys (Xiao et al., 2023). Tourism is a highly visual experience, and people tend to depend more on

knowledge and visual representations of destinations and travel experiences to gain information and to assist in travel related decision-making (Zhou & He, 2024). Given the rapid development of organic travel videos online (Gretzel, 2018; Lodha & Philip, 2019; Xiao et al., 2023), understanding the impact of vlogs on potential tourists' image formation process is imperative for destination competitiveness and sustainability.

Our understanding, in particular, of the many possible ways video selection, technical elements, and visual representations (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013) shape audience engagement, source credibility and thereafter destination image remains limited. Meanwhile, there is a critical need to understand the mechanisms through which tourist videos shape destination images. Exploring this technical area will not only give better insight on how crafted visual representations on travel videos made by tourists can technically influence potential tourists' travel decisions, expectations and desired experiences at the destination. Therefore, the current study aims to explore the influence of social media posted vlogs on potential tourists' destination image formation, with an emphasis on why/how some vlogs appear more influential than others. To achieve its aim, the study emphasised on the less examined elements of video appearance, production, and content; and how such aspects drive domestic and international audiences' selection and engagement with organic tourist-generated videos. A dichotomy between domestic and international potential tourists is needed given the often reported differences in image across different nationalities (Iordanova & Styliadis, 2017), as people residing in different geographic regions most likely hold different images of a place (Gartner, 2016).

## Literature review

### *Destination image formation*

Tourist destination image is formed upon impressions or perceptions, which are built from gathering information through various information sources (Yilmaz & Yilmaz, 2020). Such sources commonly include family, friends or travel agents' opinions, travel websites and social media platforms, promotional material (brochures) and general media including newspapers, TV, magazines, and books. Several frameworks on destination image formation have been proposed (e.g. Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Gallarza et al., 2002; Gunn, 1972; Kislali et al., 2020; Tasci et al., 2007). Gunn (1972) was among the first to highlight the influence of various information sources on destination image, classifying them as: (a) induced (sponsored), formed through promotional activities

orchestrated by the destination (e.g. paid advertisement); and (b) organic, generated via information sources that are beyond the control of the destination itself (e.g. news, history books, personal vlogs). Fakey and Crompton (1991) later proposed a third type of image termed complex, as a result of visiting the chosen destination. Drawing on Gunn's (1972) work, Gartner (1994) suggested a continuum of eight destination image formation agents, spanning from overt induced to organic. The first four are positioned into the induced end of the spectrum, the fifth is termed autonomous, while the last three comprise the organic end.

Baloglu and McCleary's (1999) well-known destination image model further identified key determinants shaping the cognitive, affective and global image of a destination: (a) personal factors, which refer to socio-psychological aspects, such as age, education, values, motivations and personality; and (b) stimulus factors, referring to information sources, previous experience and distribution. However, less attention has been given in their model to the conative (behaviour) image formation. Kislali et al.'s (2020) framework suggests that induced images shaped from traditional and new media, alongside the organic images formulated via word-of-mouth recommendations and user-generated content, construct image. Such image is filtered via destination offerings and personal motivations alongside personal social-cultural characteristics, leading to conative image formation. Overall, the rapid technological developments have radically changed information exchange and human interactions (Chen & Lin, 2019), also affecting the nature of destination image formation agents. Several researchers have underlined the prominent role tourist videos play in this regard (Gretzel, 2018; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009), including sponsored and organic travel vlogs, further discussed in the following section.

### *Induced/sponsored vs. organic videos (vlogs)*

Sponsored travel videos seem to positively modify tourists' destination image (e.g. YeonKyung, 2021). Gretzel (2018), for example, confirmed the impact of sponsored travel influencer videos on building destination image and attracting tourists to the destination. 'Mini-celebrities' in social media are commonly used in this process, as they appear capable of influencing their followers' decision-making processes, offering access to a large number of social media followers or subscribers (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020). For example, Hokkaido Tourism Organisation invited a Singaporean influencer to endorse Hokkaido by sponsoring his trip around the island (Ong & Ito, 2019). The

shift in YouTube from organic videos to professional-generated content has been accelerated after its acquisition from Google and the use of the AdSense technology (Kim, 2012). Such change has driven content creators to post unique and attractive videos, facilitating the birth of mini-celebrities who accumulate attention capital (Ong & Ito, 2019).

The wider use of influencer videos raises questions though related to ethics and authenticity, linked to tourist object and perceived image (Wellman et al., 2020), and the notion of 'tourist gaze' (Urry, 1990). Influencer marketing practice aims at imbuing or reinforcing a sense of authenticity in the tourist experience related to the destination (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020); while in reality, it is sponsored and far from purely organic. As such, despite its effectiveness in reaching out large audiences, the issue of authenticity threatens the credibility and effectiveness of such practices (Wellman et al., 2020). Without new 'credible' information, there will be resistance to image change in the short term (Gartner, 1994). When credible sources look truthful and believable, they are more likely to exert an effect on peoples' images (Veasna et al., 2013). In line with the tourism literature, increased source credibility can positively affect peoples' perceptions of a tourist destination (Aaker & Keller, 1990; González-Rodríguez et al., 2022) (See Figure 1). For example, Quang and Trang (2016) reported that the recommendations offered by trusted friends exert a greater impact on tourists' intentions than advertising, due to increased trust and reduced perceived risk.

Another critical question is related to whose image is projected, and how is this perceived by the target audience. Studies have identified gaps between projected and perceived images due to representative dissonance (Chhabra, 2012) and lack of image congruency (Ferrer-Rosell & Marine-Roig, 2020). These are either resulting from some destinations' attempt to promote an image which deviates from reality (Nair & Raju, 2017), or from incongruities between DMOs' projected images and tourists' perceived images (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). A study of foreign tourists' destination image of India by Dar (2019), for instance, revealed that there were some image incongruities between the 'Incredible India' campaign and the actual image during tourists' visit to the country. Stepchenkova and Zhan (2013)'s photo elicitation study in Peru also reported that destination marketers tend to promote culture, whilst tourists are more interested in the daily life of Peruvians.

In contrast to sponsored and promotional video, tourist-generated content is believed to offer more

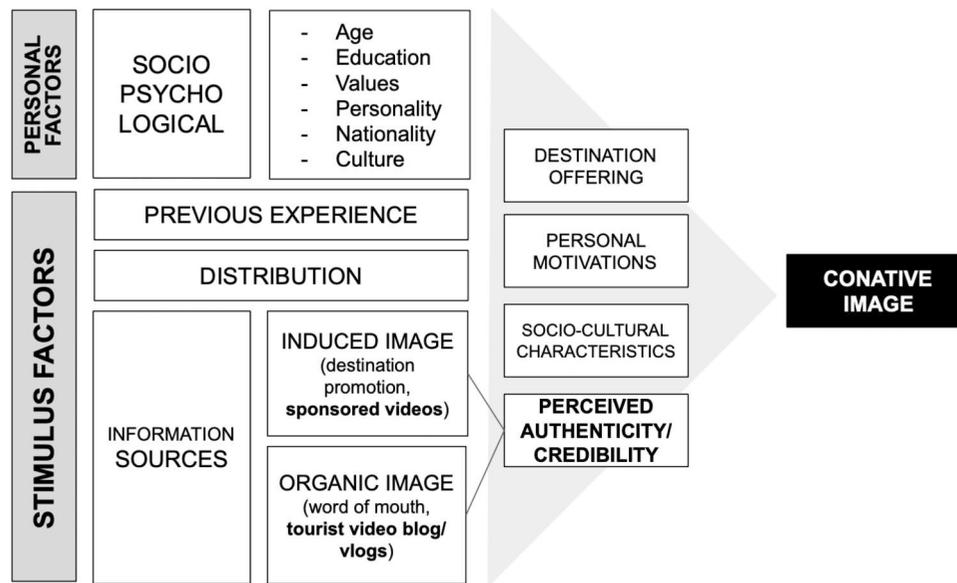


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

genuine and authentic information (Liao et al., 2020). Travel vlogs mainly record tourists' travel stories and destination-related information with videos instead of text and photos, involving many travel aspects such as activities, accommodation and food (Peralta, 2019). This type of visual information featuring personal experiences receives several times more engagement from the audience than other posts such as text on Twitter (Cheng et al., 2020), although many of them use editing functions to polish their images (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015). Such increased credibility of travel vloggers was recently found to positively affect audience wishful identification with them (Le & Hancer, 2021). Researchers thus suggest that organic tourist videos attract audiences' attention and involvement (Gretzel, 2018), but the mechanism via which such result is achieved remains unclear. The level of perceived credibility and authenticity could offer a tenable explanation of this process, but additional research is required to establish their role as such. Similarly, further research focusing on production features could provide additional insights and a more nuanced understanding of why certain vlogs are more influential than others.

Digital technologies widely available nowadays assist video creators to add visual effects, adjust colours, and even angles aiming to enhance video quality and exceed audiences' expectations (Karasavvidis, 2019). Video quality denotes viewers' evaluation of image quality and flow (Dobrian et al., 2011), facilitating tourist gaze. Choi et al.'s (2015) study, for instance, on editing techniques in promotional video, highlighted the role of colour and balance used in marketing, arguing that video colours affect consumers' feeling

and behaviour. Xu et al. (2021), who analysed audiences' engagement through a real-time comment system while watching 25 user-generated vlogs in a Chinese video sharing platform (Bilibili), identified five categories of video content that drive audiences to comment: frame aesthetics, video editing, fandom, humour, and tourist experiences. The production quality of the video (e.g. blurriness) appears also to determine customers' perceptions of its content and their intention to share the video (Hautz et al., 2014).

A number of studies on tourist travel vlogs has confirmed that audiences who are engaged in the stories and images of the vlogs, are more likely to travel to the actual destination, establishing their role in shaping peoples' destination image (e.g. Cheng et al., 2020; Lodha & Philip, 2019). Lodha and Philip (2019) concluded that travel vlogs help students in Bangalore to choose accommodation and food. Most studies, however, have examined behavioural intentions rather than actual behaviour; as such there is no guarantee that such intentions will translate into actual visits (Shani et al., 2010). Additionally, research on customer vlog engagement perspective is limited (Cheng et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2023), especially in the context of non-visitation. Cheng et al. (2020) identified two research gaps in this context: first, previous studies focused on the link between vlogs and audiences' consequential behaviours (e.g. intention to visit), overlooking the mechanisms that shape this process. Next, with increased attention on influencer marketing on social media (e.g. Lou & Yuan, 2019), organic vlogs remain largely underexplored, especially with regards to audiences' vlog-watching experience.

A third research gap is that most studies did not distinguish if viewers between previous tourists and potential tourists (e.g. Cheng et al., 2020), although there is evidence that destination image changes after visitation to the destination takes place (e.g. Kim et al., 2019). Kim et al. (2019), for instance, who studied South Korean tourists' image of Vietnam at three different points in time (before, during and after), concluded that tourists' cognitive and affective images improved after visiting the place. Such results indicate that compared to potential tourists, tourists have more realistic images due to direct experiences and familiarity with the destination (Iordanova & Styliadis, 2017), and thereby seem less dependent on tourist-generated videos as travel information sources in destination image formation. To address these research gaps the following research questions are proposed RQ1: What vlog production features influence potential tourists' engagement with them? RQ2: Why and how do vlogs influence potential tourists' destination image formation and intention to visit?

Studies further suggest that individuals from different cultural backgrounds demonstrate different perceptions and preferences in the travel related decision-making process (De la Hoz-Correa & Muñoz-Leiva, 2019; Iordanova & Styliadis, 2017). Research, in particular, suggests that nationality influences preferences on the information sources used (e.g. De la Hoz-Correa & Muñoz-Leiva, 2019), destination image (e.g. Sun et al., 2023), and travel-related behaviour (e.g. Özdemir & Yolal, 2017). For instance, Sun et al. (2023) reported differences in the way Chinese and Western tourists perceive Hangzhou, China. Others further suggest different cross-cultural perceptions in perceiving visual attributes (e.g. Goh et al., 2013). The vast majority of previous research on organic tourist videos and their impact on decision-making, however, has focused on a single nationality. Considering tourists' nation characteristics being critical in tourism marketing – as campaigns are more effective when cross-cultural differences are understood (Zhou & He, 2024) – the influence of nationality seeks further examination. Therefore, a third research question is proposed to further guide this research: RQ3: Does vlog engagement and perceived image differ among individuals from different nationalities? Given the exponential rise of tourist videography practice available online, tourist vlogs should be further explored to understand their role in framing the organic image of tourism destinations. Addressing therefore these questions provide prudent knowledge of the links between watching experience, destination image and travel intention.

## Research methods

Considering the need to understand individuals as 'social actors', along with the complexity of the issues under investigation, the study follows the constructivist paradigm and a qualitative research design (Saunders et al., 2019). A video elicitation method was used in this study. This involves interviews facilitated by video stimuli to allow individuals to reveal their thoughts, meanings, or experiences (Zehe & Belz, 2016). Such approach was deemed suitable in assisting the study to best achieve its aim and respond to the research questions raised.

### Study setting

The research setting is Raja Ampat, an archipelago in the northwest tip of West Papua, East Indonesia, with a population of 64,000. As this study focuses on potential-tourists, domestic (Indonesian) and international (English) potential tourists to Raja Ampat, Indonesia were selected as study participants. Since 2016, the United Kingdom has been selected by the Indonesian government as a target market of international tourists to visit Raja Ampat. The Indonesian government also aims to increase the number of domestic tourists, considering that their volume is low when compared to other destinations in the country (Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy of Indonesia, 2021).

### Video selection process

The researchers selected the videos uploaded on YouTube by tourists, following the procedure proposed by Zehe and Belz (2016).

#### Step 1: appropriateness of stimulus

Given the focus of the study on organic tourist vlogs, two unsponsored Raja Ampat videos available on YouTube were deemed suitable to facilitate (stimuli) the video elicitation interviews process. One domestic and one international tourist video were used, as they best reflect the two population samples (domestic potential tourists, international potential tourists). The YouTube platform was preferred, as people tend to spend a large amount of time watching travel-related content videos on YouTube. During the coronavirus pandemic, searching for 'virtual tour' videos on Google, for example, increased by 500% globally (Think with Google, 2023).

### Step 2: search and Selection

The two tourist generated videos were selected based on the following criteria: (1) short duration (between 3 and 4 min) to maximise viewer engagement (Chen et al., 2015); (2) destination-related content, following the list proposed by Stepchenkova et al. (2015), for pictorial destination image attributes; (3) fully visual, without any narrations or subtitles – to prevent distraction caused by incomprehensible languages; (4) upload date (within the past 5 years); and (5) popularity, assessed via the total number of video views. The video selection and filtering processes were challenging due to the high volume of videos available, and the fact that search results on Google or YouTube vary because of their complex and unique search engine algorithms. To eliminate bias related to user past preferences (browsing history), video search was conducted on a ‘private browsing’ mode on Google video search; the latter features more filtering options as compared to the YouTube search engine. Various keywords were used including Raja Ampat and tourism, travel, destination, beach. Out of the 578 Raja Ampat tourists’ videos available online, only 12 (five international and seven domestic ones) met the selection criteria previously specified. The last stage of the process was manually performed, by reviewing the video content; videos depicting the highest number of pictorial destination image attributes were selected (Stepchenkova et al., 2015). The video A was captured by an international tourist named TravelTheWorld ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgNdM-GyBV0&t=108s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgNdM-GyBV0&t=108s)); while video B was posted by a domestic traveller called Limba Ringga88 ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=xW6L08U5w6o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xW6L08U5w6o)).

The two videos were pilot tested prior to finding the full set of participants. Three pilot interviews were conducted before the main data collection to verify that the interview procedures and guide work well (time needed, interaction, questions, videos). This pilot test helped researchers to establish the suitability of the interview procedures. From the pilot test, there were no changes made for the primary data collection, and no pilot data was included in the final data-set.

### Ethical considerations

Several ethical aspects were considered in this study. First, the researchers applied for and were granted ethical approval from their institutions’ ethical committee to conduct this research. Second, they received permission from the video creators (YouTube channel TravelTheWorld and Lingga Rimba88), informing them in advance about the scope of the study and the exact

use of videos in this research. Lastly, the researchers explained the aim and procedures of the study to participants, who were reassured about protecting their anonymity and confidentiality. All participants read the participation sheet and signed the consent form.

### Sampling and data collection

Criterion-based purposive sampling was deemed as the most appropriate sampling strategy. In this approach, sample units are purposely selected, based on specific sample criteria, which are YouTube users, potential tourists, and 18+ adults. Considering data saturation in qualitative research, whereby the last interviews did not generate any new meaningful insights (Saunders et al., 2019), 61 interviews were conducted in total: 31 with Indonesians and 30 with UK residents. Previous destination image studies that used a qualitative approach also conducted between 8 and 32 interviews (e.g. Terzidou et al., 2017). However, it must be noted that this selection of participants might affect the generalizability of the findings. Future studies might benefit from employing a more diverse sampling method to mitigate the bias.

All interviews were conducted in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia; and in London, capital of the United Kingdom. Participant recruitment in Jakarta was carried out by involving Trinity Traveler (277.2 K followers on Twitter, and 107 K followers on Instagram), a well-known Indonesian travel writer, blogger and author of 13 travel books, who posted the participant recruitment leaflet on her social media accounts. Recruitment in the UK was facilitated via posts on social media platforms (e.g. Facebook travellers’ groups), publishing the research project page at various research participant recruitment platforms (callforparticipants.com, findparticipants.com), displaying the poster on digital screens across a UK University campus, and placing posters at two other universities (SOAS University London and University College London), and the Indonesian-British cultural exchange institution in London. In all settings, the researcher provided respondents with a Google Form link to select appointment date, and ensure that they meet all eligibility criteria.

In both Jakarta and London, convenient and easily accessible locations were preferred to host the interview process. A private meeting room centrally located in the case of Jakarta, and a room in the British Library in Central London. Face to face interviews were conducted in Jakarta and London by one of the researchers. To eliminate procedural bias, the same supporting research instruments were used in all cases: a laptop to play the

videos; noise cancelling headphones; a dual-headed mini microphone for clear and good quality voice recording, to be used by both researcher and participants alike throughout the interviews. All interviews followed the same procedures. The researcher first explained the aim and procedures of the study; participants read the participation sheet and signed the consent form; followed by conducting the video elicitation interviews. Participants were not informed at any point whether the videos are sponsored or organic. Interviews were conducted in two languages: (1) Bahasa Indonesia for Indonesian interviewees, and (2) English, for interviewing British participants.

The semi-structured interviews started with some ice-breaking questions such as 'How many times do you travel in a year?' followed by questions about the participants' travel experiences and information sources to explore potential tourists' sociodemographic profiles and information search behaviour. Next, the researcher displayed the two designated videos on the default YouTube interface on the laptop to replicate behaviour when selecting YouTube videos to watch. Participants were invited to watch the two videos and were given the freedom to select which video to watch first. The layout was also designed to enable participants to navigate the video selection by self-clicking. Video A (international) was placed on top and video B (domestic) was placed on the bottom of the YouTube page (see Figure 2). After participants watching both tourist-generated videos, the researcher asked questions regarding the video itself and the selection process: how/why they chose which video to watch first; what they thought about the

quality of the video, etc. Next, the interviewees were invited to disclose their images of Raja Ampat after watching the videos, based on questions used by Cherifi et al. (2014) and Iordanova and Styliadis (2017). Interviews lasted on average 45 min per person.

### Data analysis

All interviews were first transcribed verbatim, including verbal and non-verbal expressions, such as pauses, laughter, sighs, etc., to capture the original nature of the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews in Indonesian were translated into English retroactively by one of the researchers (native speaker) to ensure that their idiomatic meanings were the same. All the data were analysed using thematic analysis facilitated by NVIVO 12, which enabled the researchers to store all the interview transcriptions of each city in one database. Following Styliadis and Cherifi (2018) the analysis was conducted as follows: (a) identification and categorisation of first-order concepts based on common themes (e.g. duration, storyline/narration, technique, shooting equipment, music); (b) relationships among the categories previously identified were explored leading to higher-order themes (e.g. video production); (c) such themes were contrasted leading to the final aggregate dimensions (e.g. video production, video representations; being part of video content). This study used investigator and theoretical triangulation to clarify the precision of themes by reviewing the data from different perspectives (Saunders et al., 2019). To keep the confidentiality and to ensure the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms such as INDO/

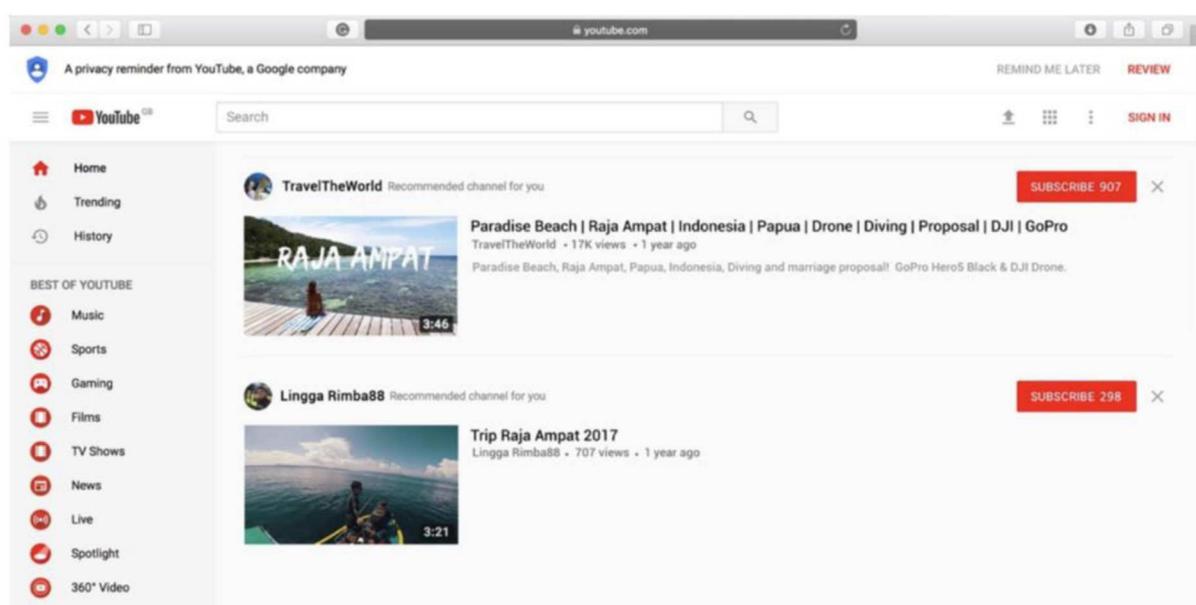


Figure 2. Video elicitation layout using default YouTube interface.

BRIT-participant number, gender, age (INDO-01, Female, 42 / BRIT-01, Male, 30) were used throughout the process.

The key characteristics of the study participants are presented in Tables A1 and A2 in the Appendix 1 (see supplementary data link on first page). In sum, 45% of the Indonesian participants were aged between 21 and 30 years old. In terms of gender, 71% of them were female. Regarding occupation, 39% were employees, followed by students and freelancers (26% and 23% respectively). Similar to the Indonesian participants, the majority of the British sample were 21–30 years old. Regarding gender, there was greater balance between male and female participants in the British sample. As the sample was dominated by the 21–30-year-old age group, the majority of the British individuals who took part in this study were students (47%), followed by employees (20%), freelancers and unemployed people (13% each).

In terms of travel experience and frequency, most of the Indonesian participants (61%) travel up to 5 times in a year. All Indonesian participants mentioned some domestic destinations that they have visited in the last 3 years. Almost one out of three Indonesians have travelled internationally, particularly to Indonesia's neighbour countries in Asia. About one-third of Indonesian participants have also travelled to European countries, such as France and the United Kingdom. At least 60% of the British participants travel up to 5 times in a year. All British participants have travelled to some domestic destinations and over two-thirds have travelled overseas in the last three years. European countries such as France, Spain, Germany and Italy were the most visited destinations for British travellers.

## Findings

This research aimed to explore the influence of social media posted vlogs on potential tourists' destination image formation, with an emphasis on why/how some vlogs appear more influential than others. Results of the thematic analysis indicated that video display and video content are the main elements of organic tourist videos that drive potential tourists to engage with them. Destination image formation initiates at the pre-watching stage via video thumbnail and order of appearance and is further shaped by the visual representations portrayed on the videos.

### **RQ1: what vlog production features influence potential tourists' engagement with them?**

#### **Video display (selection at the pre-watching stage)**

The interviews revealed that 'user interface', namely (a) cover thumbnail, (b) video title and information, and

(c) position, are the three elements of video display that were considered significant at the pre-watching stage (see Figure 3). Nearly two-thirds of all participants chose video A to watch first as they found its 'cover thumbnail' more appealing than video B. The design of the cover thumbnail leads to a preliminary image construction, indicating that destination image formation starts before individuals even watch a video. For example, one interview noted: *'The (video A) cover thumbnail looks more interesting than the other one and the colour looks more appealing, so I can imagine that the ocean is so beautiful there'* (INDO-08, Female, 54). About a dozen of participants stated that they chose video A because of its video title. Participants read the title to get an idea of what they were about to watch; as one interviewee highlighted, she wanted to see the paradise of Raja Ampat: *'I was attracted to the name "Paradise", whereas underneath (video B), nothing. So, I thought that was a good choice'* (BRIT-29, Female, 70). Half of the participants reported selecting video A because of its 'position'. As it was placed above video B, video A was perceived as more relevant to what they expect to see about Raja Ampat. *'If I am searching for something, obviously the top one would be the most relevant... I was thinking perhaps it (video A) would show me what I was looking for about the destination'* (BRIT-11, Female, 28). It thus appears that videos placed above others are perceived as most relevant to the viewers' interests, cultivating thus some expectations about the destination and its image.

In contrast, only a few participants chose video B to watch first. Interestingly, these participants selected video B because the cover thumbnail was less appealing; this led people to the assumption that it is an unsponsored tourist video, and thus more authentic. One British said, for example, *'It seemed that the image was slightly darker, and it seems maybe the video on the top (video A) was professionally produced... I thought maybe this (video B) is more real so let's click on that one first...'* (BRIT-03, Male, 46).

#### **Video production (watching stage)**

The findings indicated that core video elements that influence audiences' engagement during the watching stage are related to video production (see Figure 4). The video elicitation interviews, in particular, revealed five elements of 'video production' that maintained potential tourists' engagement/involvement while watching the videos: (a) duration; (b) storyline/narration; (c) technique; (d) shooting equipment, and (e) music. In particular, about one-third of participants of both nationalities revealed their disinterest in watching tourists' videos on YouTube due to their

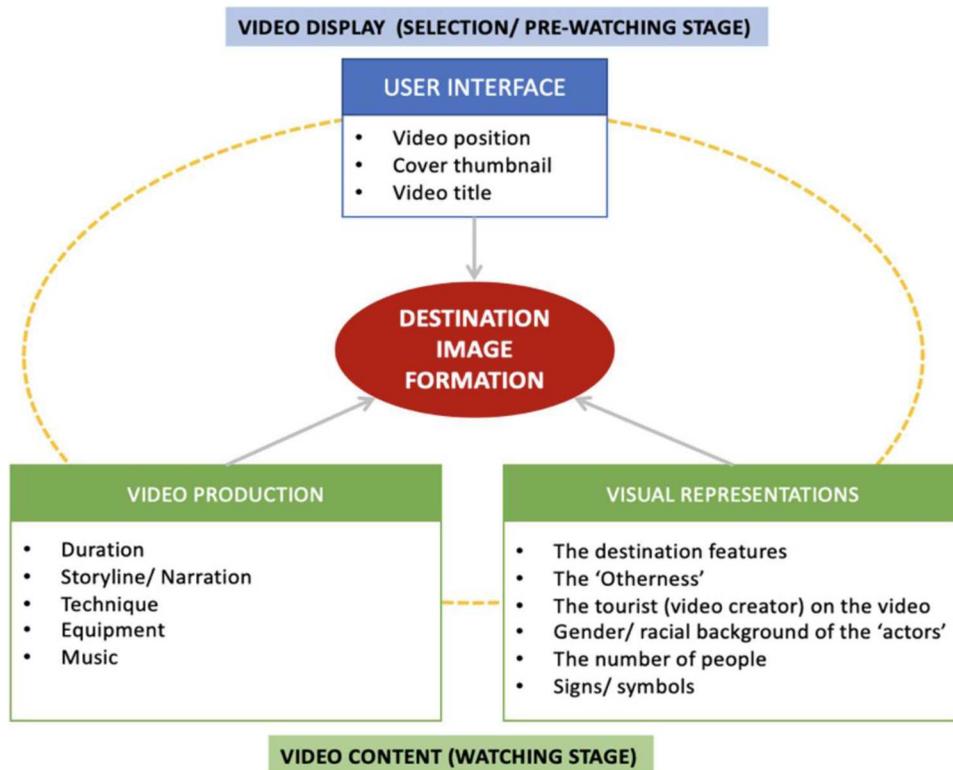


Figure 3. Video elements that drive engagement.

long duration. For instance, *'spending 15 min or half an hour watching someone's vlog isn't interesting to me'* (INDO-13, Male, 27). Likewise, a British participant said, *'I usually will not watch if it's more than 10 min'* (BRIT-23, Female, 19).

The interviews also disclosed the prevalence of 'storyline' or 'narrative' as elements of a good quality video. Two-thirds of Indonesian participants and about one-third of British participants commented on the storyline

of video A. *'It doesn't have a clear story; it's very confusing'* (INDO-13, Male, 27). On the other hand, most participants from both nationalities positively assessed the storyline in video B:

The video (video B) has a clear storyline, and that's what I want to see from travel videos. It showed the trip journey in sequence. I like that kind of travel video; it feels like we are travelling along with him. (INDO 16, Female, 24)

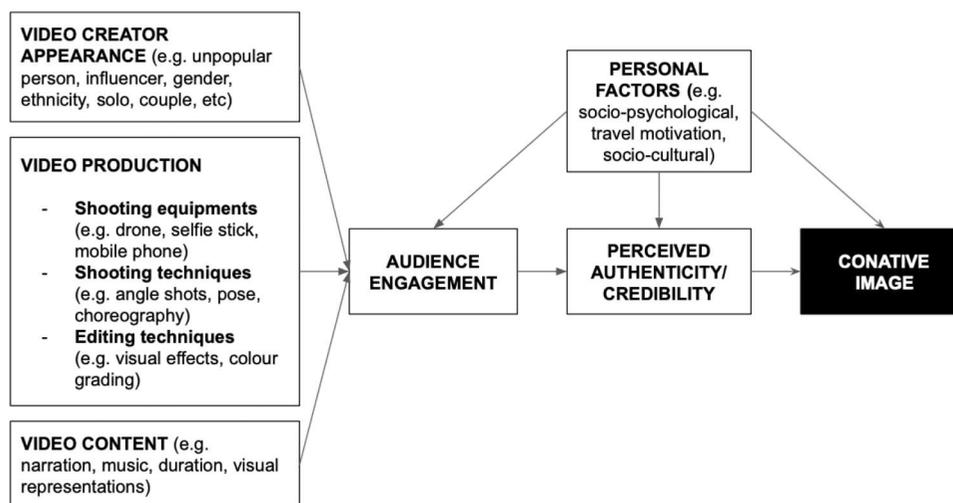


Figure 4. Destination image formation through tourist video/vlog.

A clear storyline in tourists' videos of the whole trip assist in increasing engagement with trip experiences at the destination, offering quasi first-hand destination image experience; a vital factor that influences mental imagery.

About one-third of interviewees commented on the 'background music' played in the videos. For example, *'The background music (of video A) fits well with the video. (...) The music represents the ocean; when the lyrics said ocean, I saw the dolphins, so it's perfectly matched'* (INDO-01, Female, 42). A British participant also highlighted the *'music and sound transition'* in video B, as he said, *'My favourite scene in this one was when he dives backwards into the water and when he goes underwater it sounds as if you're underwater'* (BRIT-08, Male, 22).

Most participants understood that tourists (video-creators) have edited the travel videos to enhance their visual aspects, often leading to an unrealistic presentation of the original images (see Figure 4). Over a half of British and about three-quarter of Indonesian interviewees acknowledged the video production 'techniques' and stressed that the 'visual effects' and 'colour grading' of each video negatively affected their perceived authenticity of the video. Colour grading is the process of manipulating or refining video colours by adjusting and balancing colour tones to achieve a specific visual look and to evoke certain emotions or mood (Bonnell et al., 2013). This study reveals that too much editing could make the destination look unreal or even 'too good to be true', which negatively affects travel intentions of potential tourists. For example, considering Video A:

It (video A) looked too perfect because it had been edited a lot. It was great, but at the same time it did not look genuine. (...) Yeah you can see the colour and the effects, all too perfect (INDO-31, Male, 25)

Similarly, another Indonesian noted:

The colour grading made it look very hot. (...) Basically, I don't really like the beach, so when I see the video looked very hot, I feel like I don't want to go there (INDO-06, Female, 35).

Additionally, the use of sophisticated equipment and shooting techniques such as angle shots can make the video look professionally produced, which raised further doubts about its scope and credibility; an influencer marketing practice. For example, apart from commenting on the angle shots that were captured by a sophisticated camera (not a mobile phone), an interviewee pointed the absence of the shooting tool appearance on the video, suspecting that the scenes were professionally shot; hence perceived as sponsored.

Moreover, certain facial expressions, body pose and wide-angle shots in the video were viewed as staged, as these cinematographic techniques are typical of commercial videos (Johnson & Radosh, 2016).

I mean the people that were in the video (video A) looked kind of staged; they're they weren't holding camera or anything and also, there was, like, wide angle shots like underwater shots, and that isn't someone with an iPhone. It has been choreographed. It has been funded (BRIT-20, Male, 19).

Many participants from both samples shared positive views on the use of 'shooting equipment' such as 'drones' in both videos, as it offers a broader perspective of the place from a bird's-eye view, thereby contributing to destination image formation. For example, *'The drone scenes gave me an idea of how big Raja Ampat is. I've always thought that the area is small, but apparently, it's very big'* (INDO-04, Female, 20). Some participants further acknowledged the use of 'GoPro' in video B. As one interviewee expressed, *'They used their GoPro, and so you get a proper shot of what they see'* (BRIT-14, Female, 22). While none of the British participants commented on the 'selfie stick' used in video B, about half a dozen Indonesians argued that the use of a selfie stick made the video looked more genuine and credible. As one interviewee said, *'The selfie stick made it feel like we were watching him travelling so we can feel the experience, and it looked more natural'* (INDO-02, Female, 21).

### **RQ2: why and how do vlogs influence potential tourists' destination image formation and intention to visit?**

The interviews identified six elements of video content that seem to affect potential tourist impressions/ images of the destination and cultivate a desire to search further and potentially visit the destination: (a) destination features; (b) 'Otherness'; (c) the tourist (video creator's) appearance in the video; (d) gender and racial background of the 'actors'; (e) number of people appearing in the video; and (f) signs/symbols.

Destination features presented in the video, such as a nature, infrastructure and accommodation, influence potential tourists' image of the destination. For example, the visual representation of 'tourist accommodation' shapes the participants' cognitive and affective image of Raja Ampat. As two interviewees responded: *'(...) the resort is very nice; we can see the beach and the sunset through our door'* (INDO-12, Female, 26); *'I saw huts rather than brick buildings and hotels. (...) It seems very welcoming'* (BRIT-02, Female, 28). About one-quarter of the Indonesian participants shared an

improved image of the underwater scenery. *'After watching the videos, now I am more convinced that the underwater scenery is beautiful, and the sea biodiversity is very rich'* (INDO-22, Male, 24). Others also mentioned activities like diving; for example, *'If you are a diver, this destination is worth a visit because it's the best place for scuba diving'* (INDO-14, Female, 25). It further becomes evident that the videos have constructed a more detailed image for some British potential tourists who viewed the general infrastructure in Raja Ampat as 'underdeveloped'. As one respondent mentioned: *'It seems very rural, so not much in terms of infrastructure or technology. It seems underdeveloped'* (BRIT-09, Female, 21).

The findings also indicate that 'Otherness' is an attribute valued by potential tourists. Over two-thirds of both nationalities emphasised their interest in the local people in video B, who are perceived as the 'Other'. For example, a British participant stressed: *'Seeing them also shows their culture and you want to learn a bit more about their culture as well'* (BRIT-21, Female, 20). The visual representation of the people of Papua in both tourists' videos seem to evoke interviewees' interest in seeing and learning about local culture, as ethnicity and the culture of indigenous people become subjects of the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990).

It's fascinating to see the people from the East (Indonesia), with their unique way of life in the coastal area. (...) They look stronger, and I think they are healthier than us. (...) They live in the coastal area so they might eat a lot of fish (INDO-20, Female, 28).

Participants also commented on 'tourist/video creator appearance in the video', which revealed some interesting interpretations. Responding to the Western tourist couple's appearance in video A, nearly half of the participants from both nationalities associated 'couple' with 'honeymoon'. Consequently, over half a dozen participants perceived Raja Ampat as not relevant to them, because *'I'm single, so I don't even need to be romantic'* (BRIT-02, Female, 28). Moreover, about one-quarter of the participants perceived video A as a commercial one, as honeymoon has often been associated in tourism promotion with the image of a Western couple at exotic destinations or tropical beaches (Bulcroft et al., 1997).

The video with the couple. (...) It seems very cut off and very excluded. Which, again, for me, I can't quite work out if that's true or not. I think it's an ad. (...) Because they are the only people, yeah, in the, like, you know, you're there on the beach and there's nobody. There's no one else on the beach and it's, like, is that really how it is? (BRIT-27, Female, 27).

The romantic couple in video A as such creates a less credible and inauthentic image; whereas, in fact, none

of the tourists' videos used in this study was sponsored. As two participants said:

It looks like an advertisement to me. (...) because it shows the beautiful scenery of the place with a couple in love. (INDO-12, Female, 26)

The couple, I guess they had been paid to promote the island, so you kinda want to give the best possible representation. That's why I kinda said that it was more a promotional ad, because everything looks picturesque. (BRIT-05, Male, 21)

On the other hand, about a dozen British and one-quarter of Indonesian participants interpreted video B as a solo traveller's experience. *'It looked like a fun destination to go with your buddy to enjoy your singlehood'* (INDO-30, Female, 38). This solo travel image is perceived as 'fun' and interesting for young participants, whereby they can see themselves having the same experience as the tourist in video B. For instance, *'He looks like he's having fun, I kind of think to myself I could do that'* (BRIT-01, Male, 30).

Next, about one-tenth of male interviewees disclosed that the 'gender and racial background of the tourists in the video' further attracted their interest. An Indonesian male participant pointed to the 'Western woman' (the tourist's girlfriend) that made him engage more with video A. As he said,

I liked video A because of the pretty Western woman (laughing). We've been exposed to white people throughout the media that encourage us to get used to Western culture, and subconsciously make us tend to see white women as more attractive (INDO-11, Male, 32).

Gender representation in videos also shapes potential tourists' conative image of a place. For example, another male participant expressed his interest in the woman in video A which drives his future intention when visiting the destination. He said: *'The woman's cleavage when she was underwater and the way she spread her legs, it makes me think I would probably have sex if I went over there'* (BRIT-15, Male, 28).

However, video A also generated negative responses; some Indonesian female participants stressed that the sexy outfit of the female tourist is not appropriate in Indonesian culture: *'Some scenes and the outfit are too vulgar for Indonesians'* (INDO-29, Female, 20). Similar responses also came from the British sample, especially the older interviewees. As one participant stated: *'It's sexist, because it shows a lot of pretty ladies. (...) It looked as if they were selling dirty holidays'* (BRIT-29, Female, 70). This result indicates that sexy female representations in tourists' videos might not be perceived as morally and culturally acceptable by specific cultures (Lass & Hart, 2004).

Another theme that emerged from the interviews is ‘the number of people’ presented, which shapes the image of the destination, as such representation implies the presence/absence of social interactions (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997). Video A created an ‘isolated’ destination image for over half of the British and Indonesian participants, as it does not show other people apart from the couple. *‘It seems like the place is isolated; no one’s there other than the couple’* (INDO-21, Female, 20). On the other hand, Raja Ampat in Video B was perceived as offering abundant social interactions, as it portrays more people along the journey including local children at the destination. As one participant said, *‘This is more inclusive; there’s a lot more going on, a lot more people involved and more different types of people’* (BRIT-07, Male, 60).

Lastly, this study indicated the importance of ‘signs/symbols’ portrayed in tourist videos. About one-quarter of Indonesian interviewees noticed a scene in video B that depicts the flag and the map of Indonesia, which made them feel ‘proud’ and engaged more to the video, as it depicted destination ownership: *‘The video shows the Indonesian flag, and also the map of Indonesia on the guy’s t-shirt. (...) It makes me proud’* (INDO-02, Female, 21). A few British interviewees also acknowledged the Indonesian flag, which gave them an idea of the destination location. *‘It was in Indonesia as I saw the flag somewhere in the second video’* (BRIT-23, Female, 19).

After watching the two videos, about two-thirds of Indonesian participants in total revealed that they **‘will visit’** Raja Ampat sometime. About one-third of them demonstrated a ‘high-level of intention’ to do so in the near future. For example:

Very soon, maybe in the next couple of months. (...) Again, since I’m very competitive, my trip has got to be the farthest amongst my friends. (...) Of course, to share it on Instagram is a must. (INDO-13, Male, 27)

Another third of participants from both nationalities explained that **‘they might visit it’** exhibiting ‘medium level of intention’ due to distance and budget. For instance:

Maybe not soon. (...) Maybe in several years’ time. (...) the problem is budget. And, Raja Ampat is far; it’s not just a weekend gateway. (INDO-01, Female, 42)

I guess I’d be more inclined to put it down as, like, a place for a future visit, but again, I’d like to see a bit more research on it. (BRIT-05, Male, 21)

Lastly, half a dozen Indonesian and British potential tourists declared that they **‘will not visit’** Raja Ampat. These participants firmly said ‘no’ when asked about their

future behaviour. One Indonesian participant emphasised her impression of the visual representations on the videos, which did not cultivate her interest in visiting the destination. As she commented:

After watching the videos, I will not go. (...) The videos are very typical; they show the sea, mountain, beach, but very typical of other destinations in Indonesia. Like, you can also find similar scenery in Java, or at Thousand Island, so why should I go far to Raja Ampat? Even the jumping kids in the video is a typical scene in all Indonesian tourism videos. (INDO-03, Female, 35)

A British participant too disclosed his hesitation in bringing his whole family to this faraway destination; as he said, *‘It’s just that [there are] three of us. (...) Whereas now it’s more complex. It has to be a family trip’* (BRIT-07, Male, 60).

### **RQ3: does vlog engagement and perceived image differ among individuals from different nationalities?**

Considering the last research question, the vast majority of Indonesian and British participants share similar points of view regarding video selection (pre-watch stage). In the active information search stage, potential tourists from two different nationalities seek trustworthy sources and search for further information to feel more self-reassured. In contrast, dissimilar images were reported between Indonesian and British participants over the watching stage. Potential tourists from the United Kingdom, for example, emphasised the ‘traditional beach hut’ as an authentic cultural image of destination, whereas none of the Indonesian participants appreciated this aspect. Another dissimilarity found is the different responses provided among the two nationalities regarding the presence of a sexy Western female in video A.

To sum up, this study highlights factors that explain why some vlogs are more engaging to certain audiences and more influential in shaping potential tourists’ destination image. Depending on individual personal factors, certain vlogs may play a greater impact in shaping the conative image. For example, vlogs depicting romantic couple activities might not influence tourists who are single to visit the destination. Vlogs that were being produced using more advanced equipment and techniques may appear more engaging to certain audiences, but not to those who prioritise authenticity. Additionally, some vlogs showcasing cultural destination features might attract international viewers to visit the destination, but not domestic tourists from the featured location.

## Discussion

Based on the findings, this study provides some primary insights into the underlying mechanisms of how organic tourist videos influence potential tourists' destination image formation, particularly the conative (behaviour) image formation. Firstly, the appearance of the content creator seems to be influential in engaging potential tourists and shaping their intention to visit the destination. Past studies (e.g. Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020; Stepchenkova et al., 2015) have also underlined the 'people' dimension and the role of influencer marketing in shaping destination image. This research further revealed that the appearance of video creators (e.g. unfamiliar person) or the type of person who appears on the vlogs (e.g. couple, single, crowd) may further influence potential tourists to engage with certain vlogs and their intention to visit the destination.

Secondly, parts of these mechanisms are rooted in the technical elements of the video productions and content. For instance, past research suggests that a visually attractive thumbnail image is essential to encourage users to click on and view a video (Hoiles et al., 2017). However, this study findings further suggest that a well-designed and appealing video cover thumbnail may also weaken the organic video's authenticity and credibility. This finding is critical as sources which look credible and believable are more likely to exert an effect on image (Veasna et al., 2013). Secondly, in line with participants' responses, the optimal video length time should be between 3 and 10 min. This corroborates with past research that the longer the video, the less engaged the viewers are (Zehe & Belz, 2016). Lastly, this study indicates that background music appears to influence audience's engagement with the video, similar to video games and commercials (Zhang & Fu, 2015).

Other insights that this study offers are related to visual representations. First, this research extends previous discussions suggesting that the representation of ethnic groups attracts tourists' interest (e.g. Yang et al., 2016). In this study, videos depicting indigenous people evoke participants' interest in seeing and learning about the local culture, since ethnicity and the culture of a marginalised society or indigenous people are subjects of the tourist's gaze (Urry, 1990). Next, such tourist/creator's appearance in the video, facilitates viewers to fantasise themselves having the same experience and manifests the idea of the place. Through stories and images, potential tourists are invited to imagine themselves being in a particular situation at the destination, and they manifest the ideas of the place (Salazar, 2012). The discussion of the impact of

the presence of tourists in their travel videos is underrepresented in tourism literature. This research thus contributes new insights on how the presence of the video creators on screen can create meanings and images of a destination.

Other visual representations that play parts in affecting audience perception is sign/ symbolic representation. Similar to a study by Terzidou et al. (2017), this study also indicates semiotic representations convey the sense or the culture of a place, and assist in constructing destination image (Hunter, 2016). Additionally, referring to Schwartz's (2014) cultural values, it is apparent that British individuals who shared their interest in the sexy image exhibit 'hedonism', whereas Indonesians who shared their concern for the appropriateness of such visual representations demonstrate a 'conformity' value. As such, this study corroborates to some extent results produced by Iordanova and Styliadis (2017), who reported differences between domestic and international tourists regarding the image of Linz, Austria. However, Iordanova and Styliadis (2017) work included various nationalities in the international tourist group, minimising the benefit of direct cultural comparisons.

This study indicates that some video technical elements or destination offerings seemed to be more interesting for some potential tourists but some were not. For example, some potential tourists pointed out 'resort', but some others were more excited to see 'huts'. This finding provides insights into the role of personal factors, aligning with Baloglu and McCleary's (1999) framework that refers to socio-psychological aspects, and Kislali et al.'s (2020) study that included personal motivations alongside personal social-cultural characteristics. This work also pinpoints 'nationality' as a personal factor that contributes to engaging potential tourists with the video and in filtering information about the destination offering portrayed by the vlogs.

As a final point, this research assists in explaining why some vlogs are perceived as more authentic and credible by potential tourists than others. While Marasco et al. (2018) argue that the use of modern technologies, such as virtual reality, generate a positive impact on attracting viewers, this study shows that even a modest equipment such as a selfie stick, can create trust and credibility in tourist vlogs and play a crucial part in constructing a cognitive image of the destination. This process, in turn, influences the perceived destination authenticity and the perceived credibility of the video, ultimately shaping the potential tourist' behavioural intentions (conative image).

## Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the influence of social media posted vlogs on potential tourists' destination image formation, with an emphasis on why/how some vlogs appear more influential than others. To address its aim, this work investigated how various video elements affect both domestic and international potential tourists' selection and engagement with organic tourist videos, as well as how these elements leverage the credibility of the videos.

### *Theoretical contributions*

This study fills a gap in existing tourism research that has yet to acknowledge the importance of understanding the mechanisms through which tourist videos shape destination image. This research provides comprehension of how crafted visual representations on travel videos made by tourists can drive potential tourists' conative image (behaviour), such as travel decisions and their desire to seek further information.

First, this research indicates some video-related factors that influence international and domestic potential tourists' level of engagement (before and while watching) with organic tourist vlogs available online. The study sheds some light on how thumbnail design, title and position are pivotal at the pre-watching stage not only for video selection, but also in shaping the first impressions of the destination. Past research has partially explored their role in video choice, but not their prevalence in shaping the image potential tourists hold of a destination (Xu et al., 2021). Furthermore, Hautz et al. (2014) previously found that production elements, such as duration, shooting technique and equipment, shape destination image. We provide further nuance in demonstrating that production elements directly influence potential tourists' perception of authenticity and credibility, and hence the influence the vlog has on destination image formation. This study particularly revealed that the more professional the vlog looks, the less authentic and hence influential it is perceived by its viewers.

Last but not least, the findings indicated that the formation of image for potential tourists of two different nationalities stems from personal factors and further shaped by visual representations portrayed on organic tourist videos online. As past research did not differentiate tourists from potential tourists and domestic from international (Cheng et al., 2020), visual representations seem to affect impressions of the destination and foster their need to search for additional information.

### *Practical implications*

This paper provides practical directions for Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) and video creators, including tourists or amateur videographers in general who want to share their travel experience on digital platforms. Our research highlighted the value of understanding the technical aspects of tourists' videography as a tool to improve tourism destination image.

The findings offer practical directions for DMOs in encouraging tourists to create creative yet authentic video blogs to be shared on social media. To support authentic and credible destination image projection, it is important for DMOs to assure the content authenticity by encouraging tourists to share video contents with personal stories. Fostering positive impact on local communities could enhance authentic and responsible promotion that help boost community benefits. For example, DMOs can encourage local communities to invite tourists to produce videos about locally owned businesses like hostels, coffee shops and family restaurants, to be shared on their YouTube or other social media accounts, thereby contributing to sustainable tourism development.

Tourists or videographers as video content creators need to create attractive/selling yet genuine travel videos by considering the three elements of video suggested in this study. As the findings here suggest, although potential tourists highly value image authenticity, video quality is no less essential for them when choosing a video to watch amongst numerous videos on the internet. Videos using a camera angle of the tourists' eyes may be an option to enhance video authenticity, especially for virtual tour videos. Although colour enhancements may improve viewers' visual experience, over grading colour tones might create distrust. Thus, colour editing close to the actual one is recommended.

### *Limitations and future research directions*

This paper has several limitations which offer opportunities for future research. First, the study was conducted short before COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, future research is required to explore whether the results will be similar, since destination image shaped by media during the pandemic affected tourists' post-pandemic trust to the image of the destination (dos Santos et al., 2024; Firdausy, 2023). Second, this study did not specifically investigate the potential effects of tourist videos in changing potential tourists' initial mental image. Future studies are encouraged to explore how potential tourists' destination image changes before and after watching organic tourist videos online. Third, the sample was

largely collected via social media platforms, making it thus more likely to be actively engaged and receptive to vlogs. Fourth, this paper used video elicitation interviews based on tourist videos that were gathered, and selected from YouTube by the researchers. It is recommended to use the video elicitation approach based on either participants' generated videos on mobile devices; or virtual (VR) or augmented reality (AR). Such approaches might offer additional insights in destination image formation, providing a more in-depth understanding of the technical aspects of tourism videos on the way to a new digital world: the metaverse.

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## Notes on contributors

**Ilma Aulia Zaim**, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at Bandung Institute of Technology, Indonesia. Her research interests include destination image, video elicitation, and cross-culture.

**Dimitrios Styliadis**, PhD, is an Associate Professor at the University of Crete, Greece. His research interests cover place image and marketing, tourist destination image and behaviour and sustainable tourism development.

**Konstantinos Andriotis**, PhD, is a Professor at the Middlesex University London, UK. His main research interests include tourism development and planning, tourism experience and degrowth.

**Anthony Thickett**, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer at the Middlesex University London, UK. His research interests cover the deployment of participatory qualitative research techniques in tourism.

## ORCID

Dimitrios Styliadis  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9488-3160>

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