

Seeing Beyond Stereotypes: Symbolic Representations of Pakistan in Travel Vlogs

¹Dr. Tahir Aslam, ^{*2}Dr. Afshan Abbas

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, Air University, Islamabad

²Lecturer, Department of English, International Islamic University, Islamabad

Abstract

In the current digital world, travel vlogs play a significant role in shaping perceptions and images of tourist destinations. With the emerging trend of using social media for communication and influencing viewers, travel vloggers shape viewers' perception and their travel choices. Researchers have conducted narrative and content analyses to study their effect and role in tourism; however, the use of multimodal features for meaning-making and the symbolic representation of tourist destinations needs to be explored, particularly in the Pakistani context. This study employs the Visual Grammar framework (2006) by Kress and van Leeuwen to examine how meanings are constructed symbolically in travel vlogs about Pakistan. The study examines the top ten travel vlogs, based on their view count on YouTube, to study how symbolic processes, symbolic attributive, and symbolic suggestive portray different facets of Pakistan's beauty, culture, and values. Ten frames from the selected travel vlogs, representing the recurrent themes of hospitality, natural beauty, cultural identity, and calmness, were analysed. The study reveals that the travel vloggers thoughtfully use visual features such as colour choices, lighting, framing, and gestures to construct a persuasive symbolic narrative. These narratives of the travel vlogs frequently challenge the predominant stereotypes and portray Pakistan as a highly hospitable, culturally rich, and visually appealing peaceful tourism destination. This research presents a significant understanding of the use of visuals in tourism discourse, underscoring how meanings are made symbolically in the portrayal of countries and travel destinations.

Keywords: Travel Vlogs, Symbolic meanings, Visual Grammar, Tourism destinations, Stereotypes

Introduction

In the present digital age, prospective travellers find the emerging travel vlogging reliable, and it affects their choice of travel destinations. Young travellers, especially, are quite curious to explore travel destinations through their modern devices. A traveller discovers tourist destinations, interacts with local people, enjoys cultural food and landscapes and shares his review about all this on his social media account, making a vlog (Peralta, 2019). These vloggers also receive their viewers' feedback through their travel stories posted on social media (Carson, 2007). Travel vloggers highlight the typical features of the destinations and shape the perception of the viewers and ultimately their choice of tourism destinations. Nielsen Global Survey of Trust in Advertising (2015) states that 81% of potential tourists consider travel accounts authentic endorsements. Thus, travel vlogs have a significant potential for tourism promotion, and travel vloggers are considered travel influencers.

Moreover, travel vloggers interact with their followers through their vlogs about the destinations they visit and explore, and they recommend that their followers visit those places. Axon Marketing and Communications' study (2018) maintains that prospective travellers' purchase decisions and choice of destinations are influenced by these travel vloggers. According to the study, 85% of the viewers followed at least three influencers in travel, fashion and lifestyle. These influencers significantly shape the travellers' decisions regarding buying services and choosing destinations and hotels.

Researchers have explored several aspects of vlogs on tourism and travelling. They have analysed the travellers' motivations, choices and characteristics (Carson, 2008; Wegner 2008), their buying decisions (Litvin et al., 2006), and similarly, the impact of travel vlogs on destinations and travellers' behaviour. (Bergmeister, 2015; Bosangit et al., 2009; Thurm, 2014). These studies suggest that travel vloggers play a vital role in destination promotion and have a strong influence on travellers' decisions as they find the

verbal endorsements based on experiences more authentic than traditional marketing by companies (Lange-Faria, Elliot, 2012).

Purpose Statement

Travel vlogs significantly influence and shape the perception of tourism destinations and prospective tourists' decisions; nevertheless, how meanings and messages about destinations are conveyed symbolically is inadequately examined. Particularly, travel vlogs about Pakistan remain unexplored regarding the symbolic meanings conveyed by the travellers in these vlogs. This research aims to discover the construction of symbolic meanings in travel vlogs about Pakistan using Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar framework. Focusing specifically on symbolic processes within visual representations, the study investigates how travel vloggers portray Pakistan's cultural, social, and natural aspects to evoke deeper meanings and associations. This research contributes to the discourse on visual semiotics in digital media by highlighting how symbolic meanings in travel vlogs shape viewers' perceptions of Pakistan as a travel destination.

Research Questions

- i. How do symbolic processes play their role in visual representations and meaning-making about Pakistan's cultural, social, and natural aspects in their vlogs?
- ii. In what ways do the symbolic meanings conveyed in travel vlogs about Pakistan influence viewers' perceptions of the country as a travel destination?

Literature Review

Several researchers have explored travel accounts employing different approaches. Gurung and Goswami (2017) have studied travel vlogs created by both local and foreign travellers through content analysis, highlighting the elements that shape Sikkim's image as a tourist destination. Similarly, Liang (2020) studied how tourism destinations are promoted through travel vlogs. He identified the aspects such as culture, mode of travel, vlog format, language, social media channel, source of information and experience with destination as important factors considered for

travel destination. Moreover, Peralta (2019) investigated the role of Facebook vlogs in shaping destination images.

Thurm (2014) employed an e-ethnographic approach to analyse the influence of travel blogs on tourist destinations, while Elliot (2009) examined travel vlogs to understand customer-to-customer (C2C) promotions. Cheng, Wei, and Zhang (2020) found that the reliability of a source significantly influences consumer engagement behaviour (CEB). Banyai and Glover (2012) reviewed research methods used in travel blog studies, identifying content analysis and narrative analysis as the most commonly applied approaches for investigating online travel stories. Through empirical analysis, Chen, Cuo, and Pan (2021) established that certain factor such as vloggers' appeal, their interactivity, perceived effectiveness and potential amusement, positively influence travellers' travel planning decisions. Moreover, recently Zhou et al. (2024) reported that travel vlogs to be more impactful than the promotional videos particularly created by destination marketing organisation. Travel vlogs are more inspiring and influence travel decisions. Similarly, travel vlogs are considered more reliable travel accounts as they show real and immediate experiences.

The review of existing literature reveals that findings of most studies are based on narrative and content analysis to study the influence of travel vlogs on tourism destinations. However, limited research has explored visual features, such as symbolism in meaning-making, within travel vlogs. This study aims to fill this gap by analysing how vloggers utilise symbolic processes to convey their perspectives and shape the perception of tourist destinations.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study explores how symbolic meanings are constructed in travel vlogs about Pakistan employing a qualitative research approach. It utilises the Visual Grammar framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), particularly analysing the construction of symbolic meaning under the conceptual image of the Representational Metafunction. The study focuses on deeper meanings conveyed through visual features and reveals visual strategies in travel accounts to influence the audience's perception of Pakistan.

Data Collection

The sample includes the top ten travel vlogs (based on their number of views) about Pakistan made and published by foreign tourists on their YouTube channels. The view count indicates more extensive audience engagement and significant impact. For analysis of the symbolic meanings, the data were collected in the form of screenshots/frames from the vlogs, focusing on the main themes.

Sampling

Ten frames, symbolically representing particular themes, were taken from the vlogs. The sampling process is based on purposive sampling, focusing on frames showing clear symbolic meanings. The common themes identified are:

- Hospitality and Friendliness
- Social Interaction
- Cultural Identity
- Scenic Beauty and Landscapes
- Peace and Calmness

Data Analysis

The research study employs the Visual Grammar framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). The following main features guide the analysis:

- **Symbolic attributive processes** – Identifying objects, gestures, or settings that contribute to meaning.

- **Symbolic suggestive processes** – Examining the implied or connotative meanings through composition, colour, lighting, and framing.
- **Salience and modality** – Understanding how emphasis and realism shape symbolic meanings.
- **Interaction between visual and verbal elements** – Exploring how captions, text overlays, or verbal commentary reinforce symbolic interpretations.

Symbolic Meanings in Visual Analysis

The visual analysis of the symbolic process in travel vlogs reveals how these vlogs communicate deeper symbolic meaning beyond the apparent representation of Pakistan. Several symbolic elements are used through cultural signs, composition, and visual frames to indicate a dominant narrative of Pakistan's image as portrayed by foreign tourists. Visual features, including cultural cues, social interactions and cultural aspects, strengthen Pakistan's image as a diverse and welcoming tourism destination.

Symbolic Attributes in Vlog Representations

1. Hospitality and Friendliness

One common theme in travel vlogs is the portrayal of friendliness and hospitality of Pakistani people. Most travellers interact with local Pakistanis and frame their contacts in a way that symbolises the generosity and welcoming nature of people. Happy and smiling faces, handshakes and embraces and shared eatables and meals are focused through close-up shots symbolising friendships, trust and safety. In frame 1, for instance, foreign travellers are affectionately welcomed by a Pakistani vendor, highlighting the quality of hospitality. Similarly, frame 2 shows a group of locals offering tea to the traveller, depicting warmth and kindness.



Frame: 1



Frame: 2

Moreover, the local cultural background, warm lighting and happy gestures in these frames enhance the emotional effect, showing the heartfelt generosity and hospitality. These visual symbolic features coincide with the larger cultural accounts that reinforce the worth of the host-guest relationship in Pakistan. Similarly, the frequent depiction of values shapes Pakistan's image and makes it engaging for the audience.

2. Social Interaction and Cultural Exchange

Symbolic processes are identified in the depiction of the travellers' interaction with the Pakistani community. Interaction with local vendors, guides and conversations with local citizens symbolise active and diverse social and cultural exchange. In different frames, the close shots and eye-level angles position the viewer as part of the conversation and create a sense of inclusion. The traveller, in frame 3, is engaged in friendly conversations with local vendors who are quite curious and happy. Similarly, frame 4 shows the traveller as a guest at the locals' enjoying a meal together, highlighting respect and cultural exchange.



Frame: 3



Frame: 4

The vlogs are recorded in a way that shows the travellers moving through the hustle and bustle of markets, drawing the audience into the local cultural diversity. Similarly, background music and market gossip enrich the authenticity of the travellers' activities as they explore the local culture. The choice of cinematic elements reflects the travellers' engagement and interaction with locals, experiencing their lifestyle beyond just exploring places in Pakistan.

3. Landscape and Scenic Beauty – a Symbol of Peace

The travel vlogs regularly feature the country's scenic beauty and vast landscapes, symbolising harmony, peace and calmness in Pakistan. The drone images of green valleys, tranquil streams and lakes, and peaceful historical landmarks present a symbolic counter-narrative to Pakistan's negative image as portrayed by electronic and print media. Frame 5 features a spectacular aerial scene of a snow-capped mountain reflecting a sign of peace and freedom. Moreover, frame 6 shows the vlogger and a local dancing by a tranquil lake symbolising calmness and unexplored natural scenic beauty, presenting Pakistan as an underexplored tourist destination.



Frame: 5



Frame: 6

These well-framed shots enrich the symbolic meanings conveyed in the travel vlogs. The scenes captured through wide angles from high lookouts develop a sense of amazement and majesty, highlighting Pakistan's unexplored beauty. The use of an attractive colour scheme, such as luxurious green valleys, blue lakes and golden and red-hot sunsets, enhances the emotional influence on the viewers, presenting the landscapes almost illusory. Furthermore, little or no human appearance in certain frames in these vlogs reinforces the sense of solitude and calmness, making Pakistan an attractive travel destination.

4. Architectural and Cultural Symbols

Framing cultural landmarks such as forts, mosques, and markets symbolise Pakistan's rich cultural heritage. The focus on calligraphy, elaborate designs, and traditional clothing symbolises national pride and heritage. For instance, in frame 7, the close view of the Badshahi Mosque underscores the Islamic culture. Similarly, frame 8 shows a traditional bazaar highlighting exciting handicrafts that symbolise economic and artistic heritage.



Frame: 7

These frames from the travel vlogs, through close-up shots, highlight details of the texture to underscore the quality of the local craftsmanship reflected in the artefacts. The interaction between shadow and light, especially in historical and cultural sites, creates a dramatic effect, making these places look holy and timeless. The artistic design, integrating echoes of the prayer call and the rhythmic beats of drums, further enhances the mystical symbolism of these landmarks.



Frame: 8

5. Representations of Peace and Calmness

Certain travel vlogs underscore serenity and peace by employing visual practices such as soft lighting, slow-motion effects, and nature-oriented camerawork. Such elements work as a symbolic supplement to Pakistan's perception as a tourist destination of peace, undermining the preconceived image of uncertainty and insecurity. For example, in frame 9, there is a single traveller near the Arabian Sea, which highlights the calmness and personal freedom. Similarly, frame 10 shows the courtyard of a mosque, bright with evening cool lights, presenting a holy sense and serenity.



Frame: 9



Frame: 10

The intended use of such techniques is to employ a balanced coverage of spiritual places and move the camera slowly across natural scenes, attracting the audience's focus to an all-encompassing theme of tranquillity. The reflection of natural sounds, including the water flow and twittering of birds, enriches the introspective attributes of the frames. These techniques aesthetically shape the perception of Pakistan as a country and

tourist destination where travellers have adventure and find peace at the same time.

Conclusion

The selected travel vlogs, through symbolic elements, create a diverse image of Pakistan. Using composition, framing and visual elements thoughtfully enriches the symbolic meaning-making process, enabling viewers to view Pakistan through the prism of cultural richness, hospitality, beauty and peace. These symbolic depictions play a significant role in framing global perceptions about Pakistan, emphasising its positive features and enhancing intercultural understanding.

These travel vlogs about Pakistan, through visual storytelling, offer more than simple documentation. They demonstrate a persuasive and engaging experience that inspires the audience to view Pakistan through a new lens. Through social interaction, spectacular scenery and historical and cultural sites, the symbolic features integrated into these travel accounts serve as powerful means of reframing Pakistan's perception as a country and as a tourist destination.

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Appendix: Links to the Vlogs

- Vlog 1: <https://youtu.be/CWeWxl7ruGE>
 Vlog 2: <https://youtu.be/Dv75wGwQ2t4>
 Vlog 3: <https://youtu.be/9Pt4GvdtcpY>
 Vlog 4: <https://youtu.be/wTuV0B7n5Zg>
 Vlog 5: <https://youtu.be/506DaT8MmB8>
 Vlog 6: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0U0TISCikhU>
 Vlog 7: <https://youtu.be/YzuELjSBPKE>
 Vlog 8: https://youtu.be/ZH22VpMp_wc
 Vlog 9: <https://youtu.be/7VpJ6oPD7wQ>
 Vlog 10: https://youtu.be/S_NUHA4mElg

Credit authorship contribution statement

Dr. Tahir Aslam: Writing –review & editing, Conceptualization. **Dr. Afshan Abbas:** Writing –review & editing, Writing – original draft
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