



## International Journal of Language Studies

ISSN: 3078-2244 (Online)

2026, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 83–98

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60087/ijls.vol3.n3.006>

Journal homepage: <https://ijlangstudies.org>



# Vietnam in Ten English-Language Travel Blogs by Western-Origin Writers: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Affordability and Cultural Spectacle

Nguyen Thi Nguyen 

University of Finance – Marketing, Viet Nam

\*Corresponding author: Nguyen Thi Nguyen — e-mail: [nt.nguyen@ufm.edu.vn](mailto:nt.nguyen@ufm.edu.vn)

## Abstract

*Vietnam has become a familiar subject in English-language travel writing, often presented through images of affordability, natural beauty, and cultural difference. This study examines how Vietnam is represented in travel blogs using Critical Discourse Analysis, with particular attention to two recurring narratives: affordability and cultural spectacle. Drawing on a corpus of ten popular travel blogs, the study identifies repeated lexical choices, phrases, and discursive strategies that shape these portrayals. The findings show that Vietnam is commonly constructed as an affordable destination through language that emphasizes low prices, good value, and budget-friendly travel. At the same time, it is represented as a place of vibrant, exotic, and visually striking cultural experiences, often described through sensory and aesthetic details. These representations reveal underlying ideological assumptions and reinforce unequal power relations by positioning Vietnam as a space to be consumed by international tourists. Accordingly, the study seeks to better understand how travel discourse produces a simplified and selective imagined identity of Vietnam. In doing so, it contributes to both discourse studies and tourism research.*

**Keywords:** Vietnam; travel blogs; Critical Discourse Analysis; digital travel writing; tourism discourse; representation

Article information: Received: 16/06/2026;

Accepted: 12/08/2026;

Published: 25/09/2026

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). Published by the International Journal of Language Studies. This is an open-access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

## 1. Introduction

The proliferation of digital media has fundamentally altered how tourists view destinations. We increasingly rely on travel blogs where regular people share their experiences with the world instead of flashy brochures. These blogs are more than just impartial diaries, yet we typically consider them to be more "real" or authentic than traditional advertisements. These narratives have a significant impact on how tourists view other cultures and locations, as noted by Thurlow and Jaworski (2010). They create a vision of a destination in their thoughts and set expectations for what to see, rather than merely describing a journey.

Furthermore, Vietnam provides a particularly relevant context for examining these representational processes. In English-language travel writing, the country is frequently associated with cultural diversity, authenticity, affordability, and visually appealing landscapes. Feasibly, previous research has shown that Vietnam is represented through positive themes such

as cultural richness and a strong sense of destination identity (Tran, 2023), while other accounts have drawn attention to recurring portrayals involving affordability, exotic difference, and scenic appeal (Nguyen, 2022). Such representations may enhance Vietnam's attractiveness as a tourism destination, but they can also simplify a socially and culturally complex country into a limited set of recognizable and marketable images. In particular, repeated emphasis on low prices and cultural difference may encourage readers to understand Vietnam primarily through what it offers to the international traveller.

This view of tourism discourse is closely related to Hall's (1997) constructionist view of representation. Hall says, "Representation is the production of meaning through language" (p. 16) and stresses that representation is an active process of making meaning, not a transparent reflection of a reality that exists independently of it. Besides, it is noticeable that many blogs are written from a Western perspective, often treating Vietnamese people and their culture as props for the traveler's experience. This creates a dynamic where the traveler gets to be the "expert" narrator, while local voices are pushed to the sidelines. It's a modern echo of "orientalism" that is the old habit of framing non-Western cultures as a mysterious or "other" world to be explored and consumed (Said, 1978, p.15).

Although previous studies have examined the representation of Vietnam in tourism discourse and travel blogs, less attention has been directed to the relationship between economic and cultural forms of destination value within the same discourse. In particular, affordability and cultural difference are often treated as separate destination attributes, even though travel narratives may connect them in ways that make cultural and sensory experience appear especially accessible because of comparatively low economic cost. The present study addresses this relationship by examining two recurrent and potentially intersecting discourses: the construction of Vietnam as an affordable destination and its construction as a site of cultural spectacle. Rather than assuming that these representations are uniformly reductive or exoticizing, the analysis also considers counter-evidence, reflexive moments, and differences among individual texts.

To achieve these aims, the study is guided by four research questions: (1) How do travel blogs construct Vietnam as an affordable travel destination? (2) How do travel blogs construct Vietnam as a cultural spectacle? (3) What ideological assumptions and power relations underpin these constructions? and (4) What tourism imaginary of Vietnam emerges from the intersecting discourses of affordability and cultural spectacle?

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Tourism Discourse and Representation***

One of the major goals of tourism is to benefit not only an economy but also to bring a discursive practice through which destinations are constructed and interpreted. It is worth noting that language plays a central role in defining our imagining of places, often before they get there. As Urry and Larsen (2011, p.14) argue, tourists engage with destinations through what they call the "tourist gaze," a socially organized way of seeing that is shaped by media, cultural expectations, and prior representations. That is to say that the tourist gaze is determined not only by "practices and material relations" but also "discourses and signs" (Urry & Larsen,

2011, p. 14-15). In this sense, discourses such as travel blogs contribute to pre-structuring how readers perceive a nation by selecting and framing its particular aspects.

A further point to consider is that digital platforms have further intensified the process of delivering representations. In this vein, it is generally agreed that among these are travel blogs which blend personal narrative with informational content, creating a hybrid discourse that appears both subjective and authoritative. According to Dann (1996), he states that “phrase comes before gaze” (p. 2), which means tourism language tends to rely on persuasion, often using emotionally appealing and simplified descriptions to attract readers. In travel blogs, this can manifest through repeated emphasis on affordability, beauty, or cultural uniqueness. These recurring patterns are not incidental; they form part of a broader system of representation that privileges certain meanings while marginalizing others (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2010).

Moreover, representation in tourism discourse often involves processes of selection and omission. Destinations are reduced to recognizable and marketable images, which can lead to stereotypical portrayals. As Hall (1997) notes, representation is not a reflection of reality but a process of meaning-making that constructs reality in particular ways. Vietnamese tourism research has also highlighted street food as an important site of authenticity and destination experience (Luong, 2026).

## ***2.2. Theoretical Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)***

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a useful framework for examining how language both reflects and reproduces social power relations. Underlying this view is desire to mention Fairclough (1995) whose CDA framework views discourse as a form of social practice that is shaped by and contributes to ideology. This approach is particularly relevant for analyzing travel blogs, where seemingly personal narratives may still reproduce broader cultural assumptions.

In the line with that view, van Dijk (1998) further emphasizes the role of discourse in shaping knowledge and ideology, particularly through the control of information and perspective. In particular, bloggers in travel blogs often act as cultural intermediaries who interpret destinations for their audiences. This position grants them discursive authority, which can influence how readers understand places. However, this authority is not evenly distributed; local voices are frequently absent or filtered through the blogger’s perspective, reinforcing asymmetrical power relations.

In fact, Fairclough’s (1995) three-dimensional model is widely used in CDA. It conceptualizes discourse at three interconnected levels: the textual level, which focuses on linguistic features such as vocabulary and grammar; the level of discursive practice, which examines how texts are produced and consumed; and the level of social practice, which situates discourse within broader socio-cultural and ideological contexts. This framework enables researchers to move beyond surface meanings and explore how representations are embedded within wider structures of power.

Within this broader CDA framework, van Leeuwen’s (2008) approach to social-actor representation provides a more specific analytical resource for examining how travellers and local people are positioned in the blogs. Van Leeuwen emphasizes that “Representations

include or exclude social actors to suit their interests and purposes in relation to the readers for whom they are intended.” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 28). His framework draws attention not only to whether particular social actors appear in discourse but also to the roles, agency, visibility, and categories through which they are represented. Social actors may, for example, be activated as agents who act and evaluate, or represented more passively in relation to the actions and experiences of others. They may also be categorized according to social functions or identities rather than represented as individually differentiated participants.

### ***2.3. Representations of Southeast Asia and Vietnam in Media***

Previous research has shown that Southeast Asia is often represented in Western media and tourism discourse through themes of exoticism, authenticity, and simplicity (Bergmeister, 2015; Liu, 2025; Hampton, 2005; Quang et al., 2024; Tran, 2023) these representations are closely linked to what Said (1978) conceptualizes as orientalism, a system of thought that constructs non-Western societies as fundamentally different and often inferior. Within tourism contexts, this can translate into portrayals of destinations as timeless, traditional, and culturally rich, yet lacking modern complexity.

Within this broader regional pattern, tourism often transforms culture and heritage into economic resources. Hampton’s (2005) study of heritage tourism in Borobudur, Indonesia, shows how cultural heritage in Southeast Asia can become closely tied to development strategies, local livelihoods, and global tourism markets. Such destinations are not only valued for their historical or cultural significance, but are also packaged for international visitors through ideas of accessibility, uniqueness, and affordability. This economic framing reflects wider global inequalities, since what is considered “cheap” or “good value” is often defined from the perspective of tourists from wealthier countries. As a result, Southeast Asian destinations may be praised for offering rich cultural experiences at low cost, but this praise can also reinforce unequal relations between visitors and host communities.

Vietnam fits clearly within this regional context, as it is frequently portrayed as an attractive, diverse, and culturally rich destination. Tran (2023), for example, shows that British travel blogs construct Vietnam through themes of authenticity, cultural richness, friendliness, and affordability, using both written descriptions and visual images to create a positive destination image. Similarly, Quang et al. (2024), in a netnographic analysis of TripAdvisor reviews of the Cu Chi Tunnels, identify several factors shaping tourists’ experiences, including underground exploration, war-history content, tour-guide narratives, shooting activities, and crowd size. Taken together, these studies illustrate how online tourism discourse selectively foregrounds particular destination attributes and visitor experiences, although the emphasis varies by genre and site. Such selectivity may leave other dimensions of contemporary Vietnam, including internal diversity and broader processes of social and economic change, less visible.

## **3. Data and Methods**

### ***3.1. Research design and corpus construction***

This study employs a qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) of a purpose-built small corpus to examine how Vietnam is represented in English-language travel blogs, focusing

on the intersecting discourses of affordability and cultural spectacle. CDA is used here to examine how recurrent linguistic choices contribute to particular representations of destinations, travellers, and Vietnamese social actors, drawing particularly on Fairclough's (1995) view of discourse as social practice and van Leeuwen's (2008) approach to social-actor representation. Recurrent lexical and evaluative patterns were first identified across the dataset and subsequently examined in their wider textual contexts. The analysis was informed by the view of discourse as a form of social practice, with linguistic choices understood as contributing to particular ways of representing destinations, social actors, and tourist experience. In doing so, the dataset consists of ten English-language travel blog posts about Vietnam, comprising approximately 41,211 words after cleaning. Individual posts range from approximately 1,709 to 9,966 words.

It is worth mentioning that texts were selected through purposive, criterion-based sampling. Besides, candidate posts were identified through targeted web searches using search terms related to Vietnam travel, backpacking, budget travel, itineraries, and first-hand travel experiences. Candidate posts were manually screened against the corpus inclusion criteria before inclusion in the final dataset.

Furthermore, a post was included when: (1) Vietnam was the principal destination discussed; (2) the cleaned text contained at least 1,000 words of substantive content; (3) the text contained a substantial experiential or narrative component, such as first-person travel experience, personal observation, evaluation, or description; (4) authorship was publicly identifiable; and (5) publicly available biographical information indicated a Western-origin background. What's more, anonymous texts, posts shorter than 1,000 words, predominantly institutional or promotional materials, and texts consisting mainly of logistical lists without meaningful experiential or evaluative content were excluded. Source URLs of full corpus are reported in Appendix A.

### 3.2. Data preparation and coding

The substantive body of each article was extracted and cleaned of navigation menus, advertisements, social-media controls, cookie notices, repeated website material, and unrelated links. It should be noted that headings and substantive references to prices, food, accommodation, transport, people, landscapes, cultural practices, and travel experiences were retained. Furthermore, the author also assigned each text a stable identifier (B1–B10).

In terms of coding procedure, the author conducted it in a single contextual round. More specifically, the primary coding unit was the clause or sentence containing the relevant expression, while the surrounding paragraph—and, where necessary, the full article—was consulted before a final coding decision was made. Furthermore, another key point to consider is that multiple codes could be assigned to one unit when distinct discourse functions co-occurred. Crucially, context overrode keyword presence: words such as *cheap*, *local*, *authentic*, or *beautiful*, and monetary figures, did not trigger coding automatically. Appendix B includes boundary cases demonstrating, for example, that a neutral price is not necessarily affordability discourse and that *local* may function purely as a service or geographical descriptor.

Along these lines, the author used the coding scheme with four affordability codes: low cost/economic accessibility (AFF1), price/monetary evaluation (AFF2), comparative

value/purchasing power (AFF3), and budget-consumer positioning (AFF4). Given cultural spectacle, the author operationalized codes through aesthetic spectacularization (CS1), sensory intensification (CS2), authenticity/tradition/locality (CS3), difference/contrast (CS4), and everyday life as tourist gaze (CS5). POS1 captured traveller positioning through pronouns, directives, recommendation, and autobiographical authority, while SA1 captured the representation and agency of Vietnamese and tourist social actors.

An integrative cheap-paradise framing (CPF) code was applied, within the same coding round, where affordability explicitly co-occurred with positive experiential value. Its four forms distinguished low-cost abundance (CPF1), affordable luxury/enhanced value (CPF2), affordable aesthetic or sensory experience (CPF3), and affordable authenticity/localness (CPF4). CPF is an analytical label rather than a phrase assumed to occur in the blogs themselves.

A further consideration is that analysis also actively retained counter-evidence. The author coded cases as NC-A (when they involved affordability concerns, such as overcharging or price–quality trade-offs), NC-C (when they captured challenges to uniformly authentic or spectacular representations, including commercialization and unfavorable comparison) and NC-R (when they were reflexive moments in which bloggers qualified their own tourist or Western perspective.)

### ***3.3. Analytical procedure and transparency***

The analysis combined concept-driven and data-driven reading. In this respect, the author paid more attention to language relating to affordability, authenticity, locality, sensory and aesthetic evaluation, and cultural difference. Then the author also repeated reading in order to identify patterns of traveller, including: positioning, comparison, social-actor representation, and reflexive qualification to emerge.

At the linguistic level, she focused on analyzing evaluative lexis, intensification and superlatives, monetary quantification, comparison, pronouns and directives, authenticity/locality markers, sensory and aesthetic framing, contrast, social-actor role allocation, and reflexive or metadiscursive qualification. These formal features served as observable evidence for discourse interpretation rather than as ideological categories in themselves. However, it is also worth noting that all claims were checked against their wider textual context. Recurrent patterns were distinguished from text-specific observations, and negative cases were used to delimit rather than suppress emerging interpretations. More precisely, Appendix B provides the complete coding scheme, while Appendix C presents illustrative coding decisions from linguistic form to discourse interpretation.

An additional point is that the study uses publicly accessible travel-blog material and involves no interaction with authors or collection of private information. Hence, stable source IDs, URLs, and paragraph locations are retained to facilitate verification. Yet, because the corpus is small and purposively constructed, the findings are presented as discursive tendencies within these ten texts, not as statistically representative of all Western or English-language travel writing about Vietnam.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

#### ***4.1. Vietnam as an affordable travel destination***

Affordability discourse occurred in nine of the ten texts, with B9 as the clearest exception. Across these nine blogs, affordability was constructed through four recurring processes: explicit evaluation of low cost, monetary quantification, comparative value, and the positioning of the reader as a budget-conscious consumer.

At the most explicit level, evaluative adjectives and superlative constructions present low cost as a distinctive destination attribute. B2 describes Vietnam as “one of the cheapest places in the world to visit,” “It’s a really easy place to travel on a budget as you can do so many unreal things for a small fraction of the price it would cost at home” and “One of the biggest selling points for Vietnam is how cheap it is!,” while B1 calls it “famously affordable.” B3 similarly characterizes Vietnam as “a very affordable country” and “one of the cheapest in Southeast Asia”, or “such a low price” is in B10. We can see that these instances do more than communicate price information. The blog writers used intensification and comparison to show that affordability becomes part of Vietnam’s perceived competitive value as a destination.

Furthermore, monetary quantification was also used to reinforce this representation when numerical information is accompanied by explicit evaluation. B2, for example, describes a private room costing USD 7.50 as “really good value for money,” or “For under \$9 USD a night, you can get a bed in a dorm and a full breakfast buffet,” while B8 evaluates relatively inexpensive motorbike rental as “extremely good value for money.” Here, price is not presented neutrally; it is interpreted through the traveller’s expectations of value.

This relationship is especially visible in B1’s phrase “affordable luxury.” Rather than treating cheapness and luxury as opposites, the blog presents Vietnam as a place where comparatively limited expenditure can provide access to experiences normally associated with higher cost. B7 produces a similar effect by converting inexpensive food prices into pounds and describing them as bargains. Such currency conversion makes Vietnamese prices legible within the economic frame of an international audience and shows that affordability is relational rather than absolute.

The blogs also position readers as consumers expected to manage economic opportunities and risks. Second-person directives and recommendations encourage travellers to save money, choose lower-cost options, bargain, or avoid overcharging. B5 warns readers about inflated taxi and market prices, while B1 recommends street food and local companies and B8 explains how choices of accommodation, food, and transport affect daily expenditure. The projected traveller is therefore not only a visitor but also an economically competent consumer expected to optimize value.

A particularly important pattern is the association between affordability and authenticity or locality. B2 describes street food as “more authentic,” “incredibly cheap,” and representative of “how the locals eat.” B4 links seeing the “real Ho Chi Minh” with spending less money, while B8 suggests that travellers who “eat like a local” can substantially reduce food expenditure. In such cases, economic and cultural value reinforce one another: the experience presented as more local or authentic is simultaneously constructed as financially advantageous.

This finding develops Tran's (2023) observation that Vietnam is represented through both positive evaluation and cost competitiveness. In the present corpus, affordability is not simply one favorable destination attribute among others. In several texts, low-cost consumption is itself represented as a means of gaining access to a more culturally valued experience. However, affordability is not constructed as universal or uncomplicated. B2 observes that tourists may "pay more" than locals; B3 warns that "you get what you pay for"; B5 discusses overcharging; and B6 recounts inflated taxi and restaurant prices. B8 also contrasts extremely cheap accommodation with "astronomically priced" luxury resorts. These counter-cases indicate that economic accessibility is represented as conditional on location, product, traveller knowledge, and purchasing position. The dominant discourse is therefore one of comparatively accessible travel rather than uniformly low prices.

#### ***4.2. Vietnam as a cultural spectacle***

Unlike affordability, cultural-spectacle coding occurred across all ten texts. This representation was produced primarily through aesthetic evaluation, sensory intensification, authenticity and locality claims, contrast, and the tourist observation of everyday life.

It should be emphasized that aesthetic evaluation is among the most visible mechanisms. That is to say that B3 repeatedly uses stunning to describe landscapes and cultural sites, while B10 accumulates "scenic motorbiking routes, stunning beaches, buzzing cities, and even theme parks," and B6 describes Vietnam with "epic natural sites, mouth-watering food, insanely bustling cities, distinct culture." Such evaluative accumulation organizes diverse places and activities into a repertoire of desirable tourist experiences.

Additionally, the construction is not exclusively visual. B1 invites readers to "soak in the sensory overload of markets and street food," and experience "squeezing onto the tiny plastic stool for the best bánh mì of your life". The imperative positions the reader as an embodied participant, while sensory overload transforms markets and food into an intensified experience. Similar references to bustling streets, traffic, food, movement, and urban atmosphere extend what Urry and Larsen (2011) describe as the tourist gaze beyond visual observation toward a multisensory form of tourist attention.

In respect with authenticity, it provides another important representational mechanism. Particularly, B4 distinguishes the "real Ho Chi Minh" from more conventional tourist spaces, while B6 contrasts "authentic experiences" with tourist traps and overcommercialized attractions. Such distinctions between real/touristy, local/commercial, and authentic/staged resonate with MacCannell's (1973) account of the tourist search for apparently less mediated cultural experience. It is worth mentioning that the analytical issue is not whether particular places or practices are objectively more authentic. Rather, authenticity is discursively produced through acts of classification. Bloggers use experiential authority to identify certain foods, neighborhoods, activities, or encounters as more real or local than others. The ability to make these distinctions is itself a form of evaluative authority.

This dynamic is particularly visible when everyday Vietnamese life becomes part of the tourism experience. B7 describes children, vendors, office workers, and other residents as "snapshots of local life" and values observing street eating as a means of seeing "how people really live." B9 similarly presents homestays as opportunities to live with local residents and

learn about rice cultivation, fishing, music, and dance. Through verbs of seeing, observing, living with, and learning from, ordinary social practices become culturally meaningful objects of tourist attention.

At the same time, the corpus does not represent Vietnam as simply timeless or traditional. B1 states that “Vietnam moves fast, but it’s traditional at its core,” while other texts contrast countryside and urban intensity, traditional architecture and high-rise development, or local neighborhoods and tourist districts. Cultural appeal is therefore frequently produced through contrast rather than through the absence of modernity.

Counter-cases further complicate a uniformly exoticizing interpretation. B1 acknowledges the commercialization of Sapa; B6 discusses tourist traps and overcommercialized sites and evaluates some Vietnamese beaches less positively than other Southeast Asian destinations. Most notably, B4 qualifies the description of urban “craziness” as “what Westerners are calling craziness,” explicitly marking the category as culturally situated rather than objectively given.

These examples suggest a qualified relationship with the tourist-gaze framework. The blogs frequently foreground sensory intensity, authenticity, difference, and observable local life, but they also contain moments of modernization, commercialization, comparison, and reflexivity. Cultural spectacle is therefore recurrent, but not homogeneous or uncontested.

#### ***4.3. Ideological assumptions and power relations***

Three recurrent asymmetries emerged from the analysis: economic privilege, evaluative authority, and the allocation of social roles.

First, the discourse of affordability presupposes a particular economic standpoint. Expressions such as “dirt cheap,” “affordable luxury,” and “good value” derive their meaning from the purchasing power and expectations of the travelling subject. Currency conversion into dollars or pounds further situates Vietnamese prices within an external economic frame. This asymmetry becomes explicit when B2 distinguishes between what tourists and locals pay and when B3 suggests that vendors may perceive tourists as possessing greater financial resources. Affordability is therefore partly relational to differential purchasing power rather than an inherent property of Vietnamese goods and services. Yet this economic asymmetry is generally translated into questions of consumer competence rather than broader socioeconomic analysis. Besides, the blogs tend to ask how travellers should respond: whether they should bargain, avoid scams, choose local food, or pay more for better quality. The traveller consequently remains the principal economic reference point.

Second, the corpus constructs an asymmetry of evaluative and epistemic authority. First-person experience provides bloggers with the basis from which they recommend, classify, and generalize. Expressions such as I recommend, you should, and you can, together with distinctions between “real,” “authentic,” and “touristy” Vietnam, transform personal travel experience into destination knowledge. From a CDA perspective, such routine evaluative acts matter because discourse contributes to establishing who is authorized to define people, places, and experiences (Fairclough, 1992). In the corpus, distinctions between authentic and tourist-

oriented Vietnam are usually articulated by the travel writer rather than by the Vietnamese actors being represented.

Third, social-actor representation reveals a traveller-centred organization of experience. Vietnamese participants are frequently categorized relationally as locals, vendors, drivers, guides, or hosts. B3, for example, describes “traditional tribal villages” as places “you can tour,” while B7 presents residents’ everyday activities as “snapshots” of local life. In van Leeuwen’s (2008) terms, the issue lies not simply in whether social actors are included, but in the roles and forms of agency through which they become relevant to the discourse. Across these patterns, the international traveller commonly occupies the position of the person who moves, observes, evaluates, chooses, pays, and narrates, while Vietnamese social actors may function as facilitators, sources of authenticity, or objects of tourist observation.

This configuration is nevertheless not absolute. Vendors and transport providers are also represented as negotiating economic actors rather than merely serving tourists. B1 encourages support for local companies, B4 links the use of local boats to supporting local communities, and B6 reflects on how his own expectations may have shaped an earlier negative perception of Vietnam. In addition, B5 and B8 have substantial experience living in Vietnam, complicating any simple opposition between Western tourist and Vietnamese local.

The power relations visible in the corpus are therefore better understood as asymmetrical but negotiated. Traveller-centred economic and representational authority is recurrent, but it varies across texts and is occasionally questioned by the bloggers themselves.

#### ***4.4. The Tourism Imaginary of Affordable Spectacle***

Following Salazar (2012), tourism imaginaries can be understood as socially circulating frameworks through which destinations and experiences become meaningful and anticipatable. In the present corpus, the recurring convergence of economic accessibility, experiential abundance, sensory intensity, and cultural difference produces what may be termed an affordable-spectacle imaginary.

At the coding level, this convergence is captured through cheap-paradise framing (CPF), identified in nine of the ten blogs. The term is an analytical label rather than a phrase attributed to the bloggers themselves. It refers to passages in which relatively low economic cost is explicitly connected to another positively evaluated form of destination value.

It should also be noted that there are four identified forms. CPF1, low-cost abundance, occurs where affordability is combined with an accumulation of desirable attractions or experiences. B10, for example, links mountains, jungle, and beaches with “such a low price,” while B6 presents natural attractions, food, cities, culture, and low cost as mutually reinforcing reasons for travel. In regard to CPF2, affordable luxury or enhanced value, is most clearly represented by B1’s phrase “affordable luxury,” where relatively low expenditure provides access to experiences framed as premium or high quality. Turning to CPF3, affordable aesthetic or sensory experience, appears where economic and aesthetic value are directly coordinated. B10’s phrase “dirt cheap and beautiful” is particularly revealing because cheapness and beauty are grammatically presented as parallel positive attributes. The last key consideration is CPF4, affordable authenticity or localness, connects economic advantage with perceived cultural

proximity. B2's inexpensive and "more authentic" street food, B4's cheaper access to the "real Ho Chi Minh," and B8's recommendation to "eat like a local" all demonstrate how low cost can become associated with culturally valued experience. Together, these patterns suggest an imaginary in which Vietnam is represented as a destination where cultural and sensory difference is available at comparatively low economic cost. Difference is therefore not primarily constructed as a barrier to travel. Instead, it becomes part of the perceived experiential value offered to the internationally mobile visitor.

Importantly, this imaginary is organized through contrasts rather than uniformity. Vietnam can be represented as cheap yet luxurious, traditional yet rapidly modernizing, chaotic yet navigable, authentic yet commercialized, and culturally different yet highly accessible through tourism infrastructure. Such tensions do not necessarily weaken the destination image; instead, they often contribute to its narrative appeal. In doing so, the pattern is also uneven across the corpus. This is exemplified by B3, which contains strong affordability and spectacle discourses, but these do not always appear as a single integrated proposition. B9 places much greater emphasis on landscape, homestays, and cultural experience and contains little substantive affordability discourse. B6 combines positive representations of authentic experience with criticism of scams, tourist traps, and commercialization. The affordable-spectacle imaginary should therefore be understood as a recurrent corpus tendency rather than a description equally applicable to all ten texts.

This interpretation both aligns with and extends Tran's (2023) finding that travel-blog representations of Vietnam foreground positive evaluation, authenticity, diversity, and cost competitiveness. The present study suggests a more specific relationship between these features: affordability can increase the perceived accessibility of cultural difference, while cultural and sensory richness increases the perceived value of low-cost travel.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined how Vietnam is represented in ten English-language travel blogs by writers with publicly identifiable Western-origin backgrounds, with particular attention to affordability, cultural spectacle, ideological assumptions, and power relations. The findings show that Vietnam is recurrently constructed as both an economically accessible and culturally rich destination. Affordability was expressed through low-cost evaluations, monetary quantification, comparative value, and reader positioning as budget-conscious consumers. Cultural spectacle was constructed through aesthetic and sensory description, authenticity claims, contrast, and the observation of everyday life.

A central finding is that these two forms of representation frequently operate together. In nine of the ten blogs, low cost was linked to cultural, sensory, experiential, or authentic value. This convergence supports the concept of an affordable-spectacle imaginary, in which Vietnam is represented as a destination offering substantial experiential return for relatively limited expenditure.

The analysis also identified asymmetries in economic perspective, evaluative authority, and social-actor representation. International travellers are often positioned as those who observe, evaluate, choose, and narrate, while Vietnamese actors are more commonly

represented as locals, vendors, guides, hosts, or sources of authentic experience. However, counter-cases involving commercialization, modernization, overcharging, and reflexive commentary show that these representations are not uniform. The power relations in the corpus are therefore better understood as asymmetrical but negotiated.

Overall, the study contributes to tourism discourse research by showing how economic and cultural forms of destination value can reinforce one another. Its conclusions are limited by the small, purposively selected corpus and the primary focus on written discourse. Future research could compare Western-origin and Vietnamese-authored travel blogs, incorporate multimodal analysis, and examine larger datasets to further investigate how tourism imaginaries of Vietnam are produced and negotiated.

## **Funding**

This research is funded by University of Finance - Marketing, Vietnam.

## **Author Contributions**

As the sole author, Nguyen Thi Nguyen was responsible for conceptualization, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft, and writing – review and editing.

## **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## **Ethics Statement**

Ethical approval was not required because the study analyses publicly accessible travel-blog texts, involves no interaction with authors, and does not collect private or sensitive personal information.

## **Informed Consent Statement**

Not applicable.

## **Data Availability Statement**

Corpus metadata and source URLs are provided in Appendix A, and the coding framework and illustrative coding decisions are provided in Appendices B and C. Full copies of the source blog texts are not redistributed in order to respect third-party copyright.

## **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies**

During revision of this manuscript, the author used OpenAI ChatGPT for language editing, structural revision, and consistency checking. All AI-assisted text was critically reviewed and verified against the study materials by the author, who takes full responsibility for the final manuscript.

## **References**

- Bergmeister, F. M. (2015). Shaping Southeast Asia: Tracing tourism imaginaries in guidebooks and travel blogs. *ASEAS: Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 8(2), 203–208. <https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-2015.2-6>
- Bott, E. (2018). Among the piranhas: The troubling lifespan of ethnic tropes in “tribal” tourism to Vietnam. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 26(8), 1291–1307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2018.1435669>
- Dann, G. M. S. (1996). *The language of tourism: A sociolinguistic perspective*. CAB International.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Polity Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
- Hall, S. (1997). The work of representation. In S. Hall (Ed.), *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* (pp. 13–74). Sage.
- Hampton, M. P. (2005). Heritage, local communities and economic development. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 32(3), 735–759. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2004.10.010>
- Liu, X. (2025). Between self-orientalism and strategic self-image: Navigating discourse from ASEAN tourism videos. *Tourist Studies*, 25(3), 293–323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687976251368423>
- Luong, T.-B. (2026). Authenticity, memory, and destination attachment in street food tourism: The moderating effects of information quality in Vietnam. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14673584261419515>
- Jenkins, O. H. (2003). Photography and travel brochures: The circle of representation. *Tourism Geographies*, 5(3), 305–328. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616680309715>
- MacCannell, D. (1973). Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings. *American Journal of Sociology*, 79(3), 589–603. <https://doi.org/10.1086/225585>
- Nguyen, T. T. M. (2022). *British travel bloggers’ portrayal of Vietnam: A multimodal discourse analysis*
- Quang, T. D., Vo, N. M. D., Nguyen, H. V., Nguyen, Q. X. T., Ting, H., & Vo-Thanh, T. (2024). Understanding tourists’ experiences at war heritage sites in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: A netnographic analysis of TripAdvisor reviews. *Leisure Studies*, 43(4), 624–643. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2023.2249252>
- Salazar, N. B. (2012). Tourism imaginaries: A conceptual approach. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(2), 863–882. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2011.10.004>
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
- Tran, Thuy T.H. (2023). “Say Hello to Vietnam!”: A Multimodal Analysis of British Travel Blogs. *SUVANNABHUMI*, 15(2), 91 - 129. <https://doi.org/10.22801/svn.2023.15.2.91>
- Thurlow, C., & Jaworski, A. (2010). *Tourism Discourse: Language and global mobility*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Urry, J., & Larsen, J. (2011). *The tourist gaze 3.0*. SAGE Publications.

van Dijk, T. A. (1998). Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach. SAGE.

van Leeuwen, T. (2008). Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis.

Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195323306.001.0001>

### Appendix A

| ID | Blog / author                       | Article title                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Publication / update                        | Accessed   |
|----|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------|
| B1 | The Broke Backpacker / Will Hatton  | Backpacking Vietnam: Routes, Budget & Tips;<br><a href="https://www.thebrokebackpacker.com/vietnam-backpacking/">https://www.thebrokebackpacker.com/vietnam-backpacking/</a>                                                |                                             | 2026-07-26 |
| B2 | A Backpacker's World / Josh Band    | Backpacking Vietnam: Ultimate Budget Guide 2026;<br><a href="https://abackpackersworld.com/backpacking-vietnam/">https://abackpackersworld.com/backpacking-vietnam/</a>                                                     | 4 Jan 2026                                  | 2026-07-26 |
| B3 | Nomadic Matt / Matt Kepnes          | Vietnam Travel Guide;<br><a href="https://www.nomadicmatt.com/travel-guides/vietnam-travel-tips/">https://www.nomadicmatt.com/travel-guides/vietnam-travel-tips/</a>                                                        | Updated 3 Mar 2025                          | 2026-07-26 |
| B4 | A Broken Backpack / Melissa Giroux  | Perfect Vietnam Itinerary 1 Month;<br><a href="https://abrokenbackpack.com/1-month-vietnam-itinerary/">https://abrokenbackpack.com/1-month-vietnam-itinerary/</a>                                                           | Updated 7 Nov 2023                          | 2026-07-27 |
| B5 | Ahoy, Vietnam! / Anthony Giarratano | The Complete Ho Chi Minh City Travel Guide for First-Timers;<br><a href="https://ahoyvietnam.com/ho-chi-minh-city-travel-guide/">https://ahoyvietnam.com/ho-chi-minh-city-travel-guide/</a>                                 | 15 Jul 2026                                 | 2026-07-27 |
| B6 | Indie Traveller / Marek Bron        | Backpacking Vietnam: A Complete Trip Planning Guide;<br><a href="https://www.indietraveller.co/vietnam-travel-guide/">https://www.indietraveller.co/vietnam-travel-guide/</a>                                               | Republished 26 Feb 2024; edited 15 Jul 2026 | 2026-07-26 |
| B7 | Wanderlust Chloe / Chloe Gunning    | Review: Hoi An Food Tour: Vietnamese Street Food and Traditional Dishes;<br><a href="https://www.wanderlustchloe.com/hoi-an-food-tour/">https://www.wanderlustchloe.com/hoi-an-food-tour/</a>                               | Updated 13 Jan 2026                         | 2026-07-27 |
| B8 | Vietnam Coracle / Tom Divers        | Expenses for a Motorbike Road Trip in Vietnam;<br><a href="https://www.vietnamcoracle.com/expenses-for-a-motorbike-road-trip-in-vietnam/">https://www.vietnamcoracle.com/expenses-for-a-motorbike-road-trip-in-vietnam/</a> | Updated Jun 2025                            | 2026-07-26 |
| B9 | Worldly Nomads / Laura              | Backpacking Vietnam – The Ultimate Guide!;<br><a href="https://worldlynomads.com/backpacking-vietnam/">https://worldlynomads.com/backpacking-vietnam/</a>                                                                   | Not shown in collected text                 | 2026-07-26 |

|     |                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                            |            |
|-----|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|------------|
| B10 | Purses & Planes / Natalie | Ultimate 3-Week Vietnam Backpacking Itinerary (Tried & True!);<br><a href="https://pursesandplanes.com/vietnam-backpacking-itinerary/">https://pursesandplanes.com/vietnam-backpacking-itinerary/</a> | Published 24 Jun 2024; updated 12 Jan 2026 | 2026-07-26 |
|-----|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|------------|

## Appendix B

| Code status  | Code and category                                | Indicative linguistic realizations                                                                  |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Core         | AFF1 — Low cost / economic accessibility         | Evaluative adjectives; intensifiers; comparatives/superlatives (e.g., cheap, affordable, cheapest). |
| Core         | AFF2 — Price / monetary evaluation               | Currency amounts, nightly/daily costs, price ranges, cost quantification linked to evaluation.      |
| Core         | AFF3 — Comparative value / purchasing power      | Good value, worth, pay more/less, you get what you pay for, comparative constructions.              |
| Core         | AFF4 — Budget-consumer positioning               | Second-person directives, imperatives, recommendations, save/haggle/avoid, budget advice.           |
| Core         | CS1 — Aesthetic spectacularization               | Stunning, beautiful, spectacular, picturesque; evaluative repetition and accumulation.              |
| Core         | CS2 — Sensory intensification                    | Sensory overload, buzzing, bustling; sensory verbs/metaphors; intensifiers.                         |
| Core         | CS3 — Authenticity / tradition / locality        | Authentic, traditional, local, real; authenticity markers and localness claims.                     |
| Core         | CS4 — Difference / contrast                      | Adversatives, binaries, chaos/craziness, unusualness, traditional/modern contrast.                  |
| Core         | CS5 — Everyday life as tourist gaze              | watch/see, snapshots, local life, how people live; observational and visual framing.                |
| Core         | POS1 — Traveller positioning                     | I/we/you, imperatives, recommendations, epistemic stance, projected reader actions.                 |
| Core         | SA1 — Social-actor representation                | Role labels, agency/passivation, tourist/local categorization, tourability/accessibility.           |
| Integrative  | CPF1 — Low-cost abundance                        | Enumeration/accumulation + low-cost evaluation.                                                     |
| Integrative  | CPF2 — Affordable luxury / enhanced value        | Low price + luxury/quality/comfort; paradoxical or contrastive value coupling.                      |
| Integrative  | CPF3 — Affordable aesthetic / sensory experience | Coordination of economic and aesthetic/sensory evaluation (e.g., cheap and beautiful).              |
| Integrative  | CPF4 — Affordable authenticity / localness       | Authenticity/localness marker + low-cost/value evaluation.                                          |
| Counter-case | NC-A — Affordability counter-case                | Price-quality caution, overcharging, inflated prices, expensive exceptions.                         |
| Counter-case | NC-C — Cultural-spectacle counter-case           | tourist traps, overcommercialized, modernity, unfavorable comparison.                               |
| Counter-case | NC-R — Reflexive counter-case                    | Perspective marking, epistemic modality, self-correction, metadiscourse.                            |
| Boundary     | NOT-CS — Local ≠ cultural spectacle by default   | Non-evaluative service/geographic use of local.                                                     |
| Boundary     | NOT-AFF — Price ≠ affordability by default       | Neutral monetary statement without evaluative or budgeting function.                                |

## Appendix C

| No. | Source | Textual evidence                                                                | Linguistic feature                                              | Code(s)              |
|-----|--------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1   | B2     | <i>“one of the cheapest places in the world to visit”</i>                       | Superlative comparison + evaluative adjective                   | AFF1                 |
| 2   | B2     | <i>“\$7.50 per night ... really good value for money”</i>                       | Price quantification + value evaluation                         | AFF2; AFF3           |
| 3   | B2     | <i>“you will pay more as a tourist than a local”</i>                            | Explicit comparison + social-actor categorization               | AFF3; SA1; NC-A      |
| 4   | B5     | <i>“inflated prices ... overcharging at markets/street food”</i>                | Risk listing + consumer-protection framing                      | AFF4; SA1; NC-A      |
| 5   | B3     | <i>“From the stunning views ... Vietnam is stunning.”</i>                       | Repetition of evaluative adjective + enumerative accumulation   | CS1                  |
| 6   | B1     | <i>“Soak in the sensory overload of markets and street food”</i>                | Imperative + sensory metaphor                                   | CS2; POS1            |
| 7   | B4     | <i>“I could actually appreciate the real Ho Chi Minh”</i>                       | Authenticity marker “real” + first-person stance                | CS3; POS1            |
| 8   | B1     | <i>“Vietnam moves fast, but it’s traditional at its core.”</i>                  | Adversative contrast + traditional/modern binary                | CS4                  |
| 9   | B7     | <i>“so many little snapshots of local life all around”</i>                      | Visual metaphor “snapshots” + local-life framing                | CS5; SA1             |
| 10  | B6     | <i>“How you travel will hugely affect your impressions”</i>                     | Second-person generalization + modality of consequence          | POS1                 |
| 11  | B3     | <i>“traditional tribal villages, which you can tour as well”</i>                | Tradition label + second-person tourability                     | SA1; CS3; POS1       |
| 12  | B10    | <i>“mountains, jungle, and beaches ... for such a low price!”</i>               | Enumeration + explicit price evaluation                         | CPF1; AFF1; CS1      |
| 13  | B1     | <i>“less than \$20. It’s affordable luxury at its finest.”</i>                  | Price quantification + contrastive value coupling               | CPF2; AFF2; AFF3     |
| 14  | B10    | <i>“dirt cheap and beautiful”</i>                                               | Intensifier + coordination of economic and aesthetic evaluation | CPF3; AFF1; CS1      |
| 15  | B2     | <i>“more authentic, it’s incredibly cheap, and it’s how the locals eat”</i>     | Comparative authenticity + intensifier + social reference       | CPF4; AFF1; CS3; SA1 |
| 16  | B3     | <i>“you get what you pay for ... the cheaper boats might be a bit run down”</i> | Cautionary maxim + comparative adjective                        | NC-A; AFF3           |
| 17  | B6     | <i>“tourist traps and some overcommercialized sights”</i>                       | Negative evaluation + commercialization framing                 | NC-C; CS3            |
| 18  | B4     | <i>“what Westerners are calling craziness!”</i>                                 | Metadiscursive qualification + perspective marking              | NC-R; CS4; POS1      |
| 19  | B4     | <i>“you can take the local bus to Hanoi from the street”</i>                    | Service-category adjective “local”                              | NOT-CS               |
| 20  | B3     | <i>“Admission is around 100,000 VND per person.”</i>                            | Neutral monetary statement                                      | NOT-AFF              |