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SWITZERLAND IS AN ANOMALY

The construction and negotiation of Switzerland's destination

image in YouTube travel vlogs

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SWITZERLAND IS AN ANOMALY. THE CONSTRUCTION AND NEGOTIATION OF SWITZERLAND'S DESTINATION IMAGE IN YOUTUBE TRAVEL VLOGS

ABSTRACT

Travel vlogs, as a type of user-generated content, participate in the shaping of destination image (DI). This digital reality, often seen on the platform YouTube, eases the production and consumption of tourism, in which meaning-making processes take place, such as the framing of travel destinations in different contexts. DI is thus made sense of through vloggers' and followers' perceptions and evaluations, which influence the messages conveyed in and through vlogs. However, despite the existence of previous research on the power social media have on travellers' behaviours and destination management organizations' advertising strategies, only a few touch upon the creation and discussion of narratives arising from vlogs' content. There is a particular lack of focus on viewers' negotiations of the framed DI in vlogs, especially missing out on their engagement in the comments section. For this reason, using Switzerland as a case study, this thesis aimed to answer the following research question: *How and in what ways do non-Swiss travel vloggers shape the destination image of Switzerland on YouTube, and how do their viewers negotiate these in and through their engagements in the comment section?* With a netnography approach, Hall's (1980) coding and decoding model and other helpful theoretical concepts, 26 vlogs and respective comments were analysed and coded. The findings revealed that Switzerland's DI is shaped by different framings tied into experiences, narratives and subjective negotiations of it. The results not only allowed to answer the thesis question but also highlight the theoretical information given and the relevance of the realm of vlogs, in connection with broader themes such as digitalization and tourism management.

Keywords: Destination image, travel vlogs, user generated content, electronic word of mouth, hyperreality, destination management organization, netnography

INDEX

1. INTRODUCTION.....	4
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	8
2.1. Globalisation, digitisation and web 2.0.: the digital tourism.....	8
2.2. Travel vlogs as UGC	10
2.3. Vlogs, destination image and DMOs.....	12
2.4. Setting and negotiating destination image online.....	15
3. METHODOLOGY	18
3.1. Data gathering	19
3.2. Data analysis plan.....	21
3.3. Additional insights from MySwitzerland.com	22
3.4. Ethics.....	23
4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS	24
4.1. Sublime and romantic landscapes	24
4.2. Fairy tale look-a-like hyperrealities.....	27
4.3. Raw and adventurous Switzerland	30
4.4. Consuming local realities: culture and traditions	31
4.5. Cosmopolitan, urban and costly lifestyles.....	35
5. CONCLUSIONS	40
6. DISCUSSION	44
7. REFERENCES.....	46
8. APPENDIX.....	56

1. INTRODUCTION

“We have just arrived in paradise on Earth. Over the next few days, we're going to be exploring some of the most beautiful Swiss towns that you can find” (Flying The Nest, 00:01). Would not one want to know what does this paradise on Earth look like? This is how travel vloggers catch viewers’ attention and raise the bar for their expectations. Travel vlogs, and more generally vlogs, are a not-so-new video format that has been spreading worldwide since the digital revolution and the rise of Web 2.0. Especially thanks to the social media YouTube, vlogs have been growing rapidly and becoming one of the most popular online content platforms (Irfan et al., 2022). What makes them diverse and appreciated among people is the type of format: unfiltered and self-made videos of day-to-day topics and extraordinary experiences, in most cases presented without ulterior motives besides the wish of giving information and entertainment to the audience. Indeed, the word vlog stands for “video blog: a record of your thoughts, opinions, or experiences that you film and publish on the internet” ([Cambridge Dictionary](#)). There can be a variety of vlogs, for example beauty products reviews, sports-related, music reviews, tutorials, “get ready with me” videos, shopping haul, exploring cities and so on. But this study focuses on travel vlogs, considered powerful and useful sources for travellers and the tourism industry. As travel vlogs are a kind of user-generated content (UGC), they facilitate the spread of, arguably, more realistic and unfiltered knowledge about travel destinations and they are a point of reference for whoever wants to have an overview and a better perception of a place’s context (Abbasi et al., 2022).

There are various research in regards to the marketing potential these videos can have and their impact on promoting cities to prospective tourists (Elliot, 2016; Ong & Ito, 2019; Devasia & P.V., 2022; Abbasi, 2022; Li et al., 2022; Irfan et al., 2022). These studies are based on the idea that Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) can strongly benefit from vlogs as they can either use them as a source of information or as a form of implementation in their strategic marketing plans. There are indeed videos and vloggers sponsored and supported by DMOs or by tourist attractions and services, such as hotels, restaurants or travel agencies. However, in these cases, it could be argued that the image given of a destination may be forced or too polished with the goal to make it as attractive as possible to the public. In consequence, not necessarily DMOs generated content is perceived as fully realistic (Adeloye et al., 2021). This is why UGC such as travel vlogs, which aim to entertain and give a glimpse of one’s life and journeys to others, are more researched and consulted when doing a “reality-check” of destinations. Because vlogs represent an informal and conversational “video format featuring a person talking directly and intimately to the camera

and relating their feelings and life experiences in a raw and unfiltered way” (Li et al., 2022, p.486), it is expected that the viewer feels more reassured in seeing the benefits and perks of a place from a common person’s point of view, rather than from a commercial or organisational one.

As mentioned, vlogs allow those who watch them to be entertained and at the same time to clarify their doubts about the considered topic. In this case, travel vlogs not only fulfil people’s interests, but they reflect a specific perception of the visited place. The destination image reflected in vlogs is important and it may differ from what DMOs show in their advertisements. What vlogs portray is, or it should be, authentic and honest because this is the essence of vlogging and it is what the audience seek when looking at these type of videos (Abbasi et al., 2022). The credibility of vlogs creates thus an automatic reaction of word of mouth from and among the audience. This phenomenon, when happening online, is better called electronic word of mouth (eWom), which is particularly relevant as it creates a sturdy image of destinations depicted in vlogs, influencing travellers and broadly the tourism sector (Adeloye et al., 2021).

Travel vloggers tend to display fascinating and peculiar sceneries and features, increasing like so the popularity of their videos and attracting many curious travellers. A country that easily catches travellers’ attention, thanks to its stereotypes and well-known sceneries, is Switzerland. It is indeed often labelled as "a perfect country" or "a paradise", and if vlogs can be considered the voice of the people or something close to the opinion of the population, it sparks interest to understand if these stereotypes are real or not and how foreigners truly see Switzerland. Yet, the country is only ranked the 19th most visited destination in Europe with 3,6 million inbound international tourists in 2021 ([UNWTO](#)). Though it is not in the top ten most touristic European countries and despite having a territory of only 41 285 km² with approximately 9 million inhabitants ([Federal Statistical Office](#)), its dense and diverse cultural richness still attracts a great number of tourists that correspond to a little less than one-third of the Swiss population. Being situated in the heart of Europe, Switzerland’s location plays a key role in its beneficial competitiveness with the neighbouring and as well as touristically relevant countries: Italy, France, Germany, Austria, and Liechtenstein. With more than 1500 lakes, 60% of the territory covered by the Alps, and thirteen UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Switzerland is considered among the ten most competitive and favourable countries in the world to enable a resilient and sustainable development of the tourism sector (Uppink & Soshkin, 2022).

Indeed, what distinguishes Switzerland from next-door countries is the high concentration of diverse landscapes, cultures, and languages representing one single national identity. Among the 26 cantons, German, French, Italian, and Romansch are the official languages spoken, though over 60% of the Swiss population speak (Swiss) German as their first language. Multilingualism is thus particularly representative of Switzerland, as various foreign languages contribute to the country's linguistic diversity as well, such as English and Portuguese ([FDFA](#)). Moreover, Swiss cultural diversity is also reflected in art, creativity, and traditions. The country offers internationally recognized museums that attract millions of visitors yearly, famous European open-air music festivals, film festivals hosting international guests, and well-known historical carnival parades. Yet, what probably catches a visitor's interest, at first sight, is the landscape, such as the mountains that for the last two centuries have been the playground of the famous character Heidi ([FDFA](#)). The popularity of the alps, lakes, and traditional villages reinforces the clichés of Switzerland as an Alpine tourist destination, not only for winter sports and hiking enthusiasts but for casual urban tourists too. Thus, to pick up the thread of travel vlogging, Switzerland not only provides beautiful sceneries for the content creators' videos but, at the same time, many more activities and adventures to discover and showcase to the audience. The country may not be a mere picturesque heaven, as it can supply different contexts and layers of its identity.

Based on the just mentioned information and assumptions, this research specifically aims to answer the question: How and in what ways do non-Swiss travel vloggers shape the destination image of Switzerland on YouTube, and how do their viewers negotiate these in and through their engagements in the comment section? I decided to use this study case for the research because, from a broader perspective, social media are nowadays very influential elements in people's lives, behaviours and decisions, and vlogs are part of that world. Because of the constant changes and growth of Web 2.0., it is relevant to investigate vlogs. There are various existing research about vlogging, though the focus is largely on how the destination image in vlogs can bring benefits to DMOs for business purposes (Huertas et al., 2017; Peralta, 2019; Tiago et al., 2019; Ong & Ito, 2019; Diwanji & Cortese, 2020; Jakopović, 2020; Zhang, 2020; Rahman et al., 2021; Irfan et al., 2022), how travel vlogs can influence people's travel decisions based on interviews or surveys (Agapito et al., 2010; De Ascaniis & Morasso, 2011; Adeloye et al., 2021; Abbasi et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2022; Nguyen Duy Yen, 2022), or lastly more broadly how social media such as Instagram shape tourism and traveller's opinions (Ráthonyi, 2013; Hays et al., 2013; Dredge et al., 2019; Martínez-Sala et al., 2019; Liang, 2020; Daxböck et al., 2021; Devasia & P.V., 2022). This

shows how the actors involved, like DMOs, potential travellers and vloggers are often kept apart and not necessarily studied together in the same research. The presence of the three players in one study can be intriguing to look at because they (in)directly influence each other. As it is explained in follow-up sections, the role of the vlogger is vital for viewers and the spread of word of mouth, which at the same time it can catch the attention of DMOs and their branding campaigns.

Because it is difficult to find a study that combines all these elements in one frame, I consider my research academically relevant as it looks at: firstly, travel vlogs (UGC) with the precise aim of understanding what depiction of Switzerland vloggers decide to share with others. Therefore, it is interesting to look as well at what elements and areas of the country are more likely to be featured in video blogs from a foreigner's point of view. For example, the most popular destinations in the country are the regions of Zurich, Bern, and the alpine cantons of Graubünden and Valais ([FDFA](#)). It may result that some of these regions are more subjected to appearing in vlogs with respect to others, highlighting the statistical level of higher interest from tourists towards these specific areas. Here it is assumed, as further explained in the methodology chapter, that vloggers are not supported or sponsored by DMOs marketing strategies to create the vlog. Secondly, the paper engages with comments under each vlog, which is an approach that in vlogs-related research is hardly ever considered as interviews or surveys are mostly preferred. Yet, comments are a great source for people to share their opinions and discuss the content of the videos. Thirdly, to better understand the relationship between vlogs, DI and DMOs, I included in the theoretical framework insights directly from the Swiss organization MySwitzerland regarding vlogs and social media. To summarise, this paper studied closer vlogs' content and the comments that viewers, or potential travellers, leave under each travel vlog to examine how people frame and negotiate Switzerland's destination image and which are the reactions that arise from it.

It follows an overview of the theoretical framework used throughout the whole study: from broader processes of globalisation and digitisation concerning the reality of Switzerland, to more specific concepts related to the realm of travel vlogs such as User Generated Content (UGC), Electronic Word of Mouth (eWom), Destination Image (DI) and other helpful theories used in similar research. Next, it is explained the methodology of the thesis to understand better the steps taken towards the analysis process. After that, there is indeed a section dedicated to the exposition and discussion of the gathered data supported by in-depth and critical argumentations. The thesis ends with conclusions leading to answering the research question, followed by limitations of the latter and advice for possible future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Globalisation, digitisation and web 2.0.: the digital tourism

As for the case of the country studied in this paper, the birth of tourism in Switzerland dates back to the end of the 18th century thanks to the Grand Tour. It was a period in which many young English aristocrats would travel around Europe to refine their knowledge and to live a direct experience in the places they studied in books (Papa, 2003). Switzerland's central location, though often feared for its treacherous Alps, would constitute a mandatory stop on the way to Italy. Yet, by the end of the 18th century, it became a travel destination for many renowned writers and artists, such as Sterne, Goethe and Andersen. The initially feared Swiss landscape became a scenario of inspiration for romantic poems and glorious novels. In addition, since the 19th century, the race to the top of the insidious Alps began. English members of the aristocracy would conquer the Swiss highest peaks, founding the still nowadays notorious Swiss Alpine Club (SAC) in 1863 ([Swissinfo](#)). Yet, mass tourism in Switzerland began in the mid-19th century thanks to Thomas Cook and its all-inclusive package travels around Europe. But not only, thanks to authors, doctors and travellers' storytelling Switzerland became known as the European sanatorium, thanks to the health benefits of the fresh mountain air, clean water and simple lifestyle (Mombelli, 2010). The exposition to more tourists due to the idyllic Swiss landscapes, the popularity of winter sports and the health component, brought the country to modernize and improve services and transport networks throughout the 20th century, such as railways across the mountains and hotel chains spread among the territory ([EDA](#)).

It is indeed during the second half of the 20th century that the process of globalisation can be said to have taken place. This occurrence is essential to mention as it later led to the formation of digitisation, without which travel vlogs may not exist today. Globalisation is thus a distinguishing ongoing process of and in the contemporary society. It can be broadly defined as a process that goes beyond national boundaries characterised by the increasing worldwide interconnection of cultural, social, and economic capitals (Cassimon et al., 2018). More specifically, it is said that globalization refers to the detachment of symbolic goods from a place turning into more fluid and irregular global flows (Singh, 2004). These flows, according to Appadurai (1990), are categorised into five dimensions: ethnoscaples, technoscaples, financescaples, mediascaples and ideoscaples. The "scapes" indicate the different globalization processes, such as the growing movement, scale and volume of people, money, ideas, information and technology (the aforementioned symbolic goods). Tourism has been particularly affected by these exponentially spreading flows, starting with the advent of the

Grand Tour in the 18th centuries, followed by the growth of moving masses and migratory events between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, caused by wars and geopolitical disruptions. Until reaching the end of the 20th century with the democratisation of travelling and the expansion of leisure time.

The 21st century is instead characterised by a particular influence of globalisation on the techno and mediascapes. The process related to these two scapes is better known as digitisation, which in the past twenty years has been significantly relevant for tourism and the ways it is consumed and perceived (Sharpley, 2018). The spread of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) functions as “a catalyst due to faster transfer of information and increased networking activity that amplify the effect of globalization” (Mihajlović & Čolović, 2014, p.108). Because of the compression of time and space, ICT impacts deeply the tourism sector, leading to transformations and new practices of it. For example, travellers can book more easily their holiday as there are online travel agencies and websites to consult to plan a trip, there are online travel communities sharing tips and tricks for tourists and so on. In general, it could be said that technology facilitated the process of arranging a holiday, starting from the desire of travelling somewhere to being on-site and checking the best Italian restaurant around the area (Vanikka, 2013).

This fast-paced online tourism reality is nowadays mostly represented by an exponential growth of online communities and the consequential electronic word of mouth (eWom), also known as the “power of recommendation” (Martínez-Sala et al., 2019, p.1345), which is the act of providing information, knowledge and opinions based on one’s personal experience. This is what is called Web 2.0. (O’ Reilly, 2005 in Constantinides & Fountain, 2008), or the era of the social media. This new era, which took place in the early 2000s and grew particularly in the last decade, is characterised by applications and online tools that empower the individuals (Murugesan, 2007). It could be said that before the advent of social virtual worlds such YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok, the internet surfers would for the most part retrieve information only, while with Web 2.0. they are given the possibility to freely create and share content (Liang, 2020). There is a higher engagement online and more communication between users, as they are not passive receivers any longer. People have become more active contributors as they distribute opinions as a form of collaboration with other users, emphasizing like so the importance of online collectivity. The content that is shared and provided by online participants is named user-generated content (UGC) and it can take various forms like post, tweet, blog entry, reel on Instagram, Tik Tok video, vlog,

comment, review etc. Yet, the most popular content are videos and photos posts that revolve around social media like Instagram, Tik Tok and YouTube (Briciu & Briciu, 2020).

In this new digital scenario Swiss tourism, though it kept on growing during the past decades for its alpine activities, cheese, chocolate, handcrafted watches and also for its economic strength on a global scale ([EDA](#)), needed to face transformations. Tourism needed to be balanced between the traditional romantic narratives of the country and the modern technological changes. For instance, the confederation and tourism offices have been challenged to keep attracting tourists, maintaining the Swiss essence and at the same time adapting it to new digital realities (Bader et al., 2012). It is part of the confederation's tourism policy to exploit the opportunities presented by digitalisation. For example, to have a well-built online market presence to maximize the benefits for the users, enable information to interested partners to increase the value produced by its use, and access online communities and UGCs as much as possible as they represent sources of knowledge transfer ([EDA](#)). Moreover, the official Swiss tourism board MySwitzerland itself builds its successful marketing on four pillars, two of which are digital marketing and key media management ([MySwitzerland](#)).

The adoption of these new digital strategies is also the result of increased competition among countries. Due to the standardization and homogenization produced by globalization, there is a necessity to diversify cultural and entertainment offers to stand out as travel destinations (Richards, 2001). By employing technology and social media trends, such as vlogs, countries and cities try to diversify and make their offers more attractive to tourists, providing a higher-quality destination image. This growing cultural competition is another occurrence that shows the influence that digitization has on tourism.

2.2. Travel vlogs as UGC

The mushrooming of social media platforms is thus not only having an impact on internet users but also on sectors and activities that need or want to develop and use this online reality to their own advantage. Like tourism, which is highly influenced by Web 2.0 and the competitiveness among countries. This research studied the social media of YouTube and its successful UGC of travel vlogs, as products of Web 2.0 and sources of benefits (or drawbacks) for tourism. A travel vlog is a video of someone travelling somewhere and virtually taking the viewers on the same journey by filming it. The characteristic of these videos is their authenticity, coming firstly from the person who films. With a genuine and honest subjective point of view, the so-called vloggers share their travels, insights, and

thoughts about a destination with the community that follows them online. This behavior makes the video reliable, catchy, and easily influential on others (Nencioni, 2012). People are intrigued by this type of content because it transpires as direct and open, just like the personality of the creator and the visited place itself. It allows the viewer to relate to the vlogger and the content, and to feel as if it was like watching a friend's video.

Compared to other forms of UGC, like blogs and photography posts, travel vlogs can be said to be an extent of gatekeeping. Vloggers help the viewers to have a more appealing and entertaining tool for researching what places look like, what are the to-do activities and what travelling in specific areas is like (Abbasi et al., 2022). Like so, vlogs and vloggers seize the control of information about travelling, exercising power to a certain extent on the decision-making of the audience. Though the videos are not live nor lived on-site by the viewer, they provide helpful information and generate a natural feeling of face-to-face interaction (Adeloye et al., 2021). Viewers not only like vlogs for the possibility of doing a “reality-check” with the travel destinations they are interested in before going there, but they can grasp a clearer sense of the context. Yet it is to highlight the subjectivity present in the performance of vlogging. Even if vloggers may want to give the viewer an “unfiltered” travel journey experience, they still construct a specific representation of the destination. However, future travellers can be drawn to experience the same things, avoid certain activities or areas and in general, follow all the tips and tricks shared by the vlogger. For these reasons, vlogs have been the centre of attention for tourists to be encouraged to embark on similar as seen on YouTube journeys (Liang, 2020).

Nonetheless, Goffman (1990), would argue that the digital and online nature of vlogs does not “enable the individuals to do face work and impose their impression upon others” (Nguyen-Trung, 2015, p.57). The Canadian sociologist sustains that even if virtual communities are built around individuals, the missing physical face-to-face interaction stimulates the user to perform an online identity. This process may lead vloggers to present themselves frontstage, in the vlog, with a version of themselves that follows rules, and social conventions and gives the best to the audience. For this reason, the supposed authenticity entailed in vlogs might be debatable. Yet, on the other side, some would state that virtual identities are still created by a human, existing persons, and not artificial intelligence. Like so they can be just as real as backstage identities and behaviours, which are considered by Goffman the true representations of the self. Hence, there is space to question how authentic and genuine vloggers and their content are. However, not only viewers might perceive the content creator's identity as not so far-fetched from its true essence (Bullingham & De

Vasconcelos, 2013), but also it is to keep in mind that vlogs, just like in any other “job”, are the results of social performances and dynamics happening in between a thin line of front and backstage.

Continuing the debate, not necessarily everyone sees the content as truthful. Travel vloggers can be also criticized for creating unreliable content and spreading false/unfair representations of a place (Adeloye et al., 2021). This potential untrustworthiness that viewers find in vloggers and their videos comes from a personal judgement and perceived lack of credibility. It does not mean that the vlog is the voice of truth, nor that the viewer who accuses of “fake news” is the spokesperson for everyone. Simply, it highlights the relevance of both vloggers and the online community because they can positively or negatively influence others. For these reasons, when talking about online communities is automatic to talk about eWom. This term is particularly helpful to understand why the analysis of the comments under each chosen vlog is academically relevant. EWom applied to the context of travel vlogging could be defined as an online public opinion about tourism and travelling shared by users about products, services or experiences (Rellores et al., 2022). In this paper's case study, not only eWom can be generated by the vlogger as an opinion leader and gatekeeper (Ong & Ito, 2019), but mostly from followers and vlog’s viewers. The comments section is a space of engagement in which eWom is received, negotiated and discussed.

It is thus relevant to look into travel vlogs, comments and eWom in this study. These elements may be beneficial to reduce the risk of misinformation when making travel plans. Researching online netnography means exploring the challenges of using UGC, such as vlogs, for the formation of destination image and the negotiation of it, for example, through the spread of different electronic words of mouth (Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2021). By looking at the elements that frame Switzerland in travel vlogs, and connecting them to the reactions provoked, it can be better understood how vloggers try to achieve realistic representations of the country and how their audience, in turn, negotiates them. There might always be one person in disagreement, but the fascination of online communities is that they have the power to effectively communicate messages and spread them, allowing users to comprehend different points of view (Irfan et al., 2022)

2.3. Vlogs, destination image and DMOs

Talking about perceived authenticity and how places are portrayed in vlogs, it cannot go unmentioned the influence these videos have on shaping ideas and expectations among viewers, especially in connection to the later analysis of Switzerland’s representation in vlogs

and how people negotiate it. Sharing personal insights about a place automatically creates a destination image around it, or at least it contributes to add information to an already existing one. In fact, travel vlogs have been studied closely in relation to the concept of destination image (DI) (Agapito et al., 2010; Hays et al., 2013; Aprilia & Kusumawati, 2021; Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2021; Egger et al., 2022).

In tourism, vlogs can help to enhance or diminish the conveyed online image of a destination, which is understood as “a multi-dimensional phenomenon, [that] goes beyond beliefs and knowledge of the destination [... but it also] includes feelings and emotions that the destination may evoke” (Rahman et al., 2021, p.4). As previously mentioned, vlogs can have a strong impact on what people think of the depicted place. They can be more motivated to travel somewhere, feel reassured and probably advise the destination to other tourists (Manap, 2013). Because online communities are united by shared thoughts, ideas, and experiences, they are the ones who make online DI even a “thing”. If there was not an influential vlogger sharing with thousands of people his travel journey, one single person would not have the same power to make a change. Thanks to the era of participation (Web 2.0.), one’s beliefs and feelings, when shared among others, can turn into eWom and become strong statements and ideas. This is what happens with travel vlogs and DI. The vlog’s destination image, as in this paper’s case for Switzerland, is the result of not only what the vlogger shows, but as well as what those who engage with it think. For this reason, looking at comments is particularly relevant to see the shapes a destination image can take.

The just mentioned eWom is strictly related to DI, its perception and its spread. There is the assumption that eWom is a supplier of reliable opinions because, just like the traditional word of mouth, it is thought that the suggestion, comment, or review given is not based on malicious motives. Even though the online sphere could be criticised for being a space without a full guarantee of information, lack of privacy, anonymity and trolling (Albon et al., 2018), virtual communities feel like friends and peers to whom ask for suggestions. For this reason, eWom attracts people’s attention, especially when it is known that the opinion given is not based on monetary encouragement or marketing intervention (Adeloye et al., 2021; Devasia & P.V., 2022). This tool, in connection to vloggers’ sharing their first-hand experiences, helps spread a feeling of honesty and authenticity of the represented DI.

Hence, it is undeniable that online engagement from millions of users has an impact on creating destination images and the promotion of tourism (Jakopović, 2020). Not only potential travellers are influenced by travel videos, but destination management organizations (DMOs) too. They can be a point of reference for tourism marketing agencies and spark

interest because of the extensive engagement with the audience and mostly because “visual presentation has been the most effective and meaningful communication element of advertising and branding” (Trinh & Nguyen, 2019, no page). However, DMOs do not necessarily need travel vlogs to create trends and increase the branding of destination images, nor that online users are the ones in power to contest and resist DMOs’ advertisements. UGC such as vlogs are rather to be considered one of the many options DMOs have to grow and improve DI. An example of this is the Swiss DMO MySwitzerland, with which I conducted a written interview (see Appendix A for the interview). They argued that they rarely watch vlogs, but if this happens, it is to search for inspiration for their tourism advertisements. Social media managers consider vlogs a sort of a waste of time as they prefer using other tools and social media through which they can better monitor online community engagement and competitors. They do not particularly think of vlogs as first source of reference because it is not part of their core advertising business as a national tourist organisation. However, they regularly use social media to research new trends, analyse comments and study the web community. They mentioned preferring seeking information and inspiration in short video formats like reels, TikTok or YouTube shorts for a matter of time and because it is easier to identify trends and consumers’ preferences. Hence, MySwitzerland does not retrieve as much useful information and insights into travellers’ journeys to Switzerland as it would from other platforms. Vlogs appear to be not as effective for the DMO.

Nonetheless, MySwitzerland’s example does not take away the fact that travel videos give free access to DMOs to information and knowledge for internal investigations on their services to create more personalised ones (Devasia & P.V., 2022). The interaction among the community, like in the comment section for example, works not only as a feedback source for the content creator but for DMOs as well (Rellores et al., 2022). They can look at the comments to see if the DI given in the video is appreciated, considered truthful and if it is what people expect from the place. Moreover, DMO can potentially adjust or adopt policies based on the viewers’ opinions and reactions. In this regard, the Swiss tourism organisation expressed particular care about its online community. The representative said that they read all the comments under their own and travellers’ posts to profile at best end consumers. They stated that comments are a crucial source for their community management, but that the eWom that may come with it is not as vital. The DMO’s spokesperson said that recommendation is not their main key performance indicator as they rather focus on creating campaigns that allow them to acquire new visitors. Yet, it was mentioned that “just as this is

not a strategic KPI it does not mean that we do not appreciate WOM” (interview MySwitzerland).

These direct insights come into play because they allow to look at vlogs more critically and understand that a company’s thoughts and choices do not specifically depend on travel vlog’s content and perception. There is though still space to believe that, thanks also to proven research, these types of videos and their close connection to DI can instigate a “migration of market power from producers to consumers and from traditional mass media to new personalised ones” (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008, p.232). They may or may not benefit DMOs, but they surely influence creativity, innovation and competitiveness in tourism (Mihajlović & Čolović, 2014; Dredge et al., 2019).

Lastly, it is to say that potential travellers do not want to be pawns of a marketing scheme that does not provide truthful representations of the destination (Adeloye et al., 2021). Therefore, travel vlogs that do not collaborate with DMOs on purpose for advertising a place, are mostly considered more successful than DMOs content. The travel videos chosen for this research were explicitly selected, among other criteria, for their non-collaboration with DMOs to “forcedly” stimulate tourists to travel to the interested destination. If vloggers would be sponsored by any DMO to make a video about a place, they may fall into the trap of having to make everything look astonishing and incredible, possibly taking away the opportunity for an honest and unfiltered perception (Zhang, 2020). At the same time, the perceived destination image and the viewer’s attitudes towards it may vary based on the type of video and its purpose.

2.4. Setting and negotiating destination image online

Talking about the construction and reception of DI, it is relevant to explain more in detail what possible elements and concepts are part of these processes, both from the perspective of vloggers and viewers. Various research about travel vlogs and generally social media and their influence on DI, focus on the storytelling of places by content creators. This may entail studying the narration based only on the words and the attributes used to describe specific locations (Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2021); or elaborating on the more technical instruments and methods used in the filming process, such as point of view, light contrast, angle, camera, shooting pattern etc (Zhang, 2020). However, this study considered meanings that are created and attributed through the combination of words and respective connotations, and more or less elaborated visuals. It signifies that following Stuart Hall’s encoding and

decoding model (1980, see Figure 1), vloggers encode their content with meanings that are perceived and negotiated by the audience.

Applying Hall's theory (1980) to this paper's case study, it results that vloggers are the producers, and the viewers are the encoders in the communication process. Vloggers encode in their videos, messages attached to the images and words used to describe Switzerland. In doing so, specific representations of Switzerland are portrayed and communicated to others. While the viewers/commentators, when exposed to the encoded messages, can interpret them based on what Hall (1980) calls: frameworks of knowledge, relations of production and technical infrastructures. Or in simpler words, they interpret vlogs' content parallel to their social background, experiences, values, pre-knowledge about Switzerland, ideological understanding etc. Because each of these elements depends on the context and they may change from individual to individual, the representations of Switzerland given by vloggers may be decoded differently by different audiences. Thus, the audience is not a passive agent, but rather an active one as it can not only decide which medium to expose itself to but also interpret on its terms the messages conveyed.

Automatically, the meanings entailed in the encoding and decoding process are not necessarily the same. It means that the codes of the encoder and the decoder may not correspond and be asymmetrical. There are degrees of (mis)understanding involved in the processes of dissemination and interpretation of messages (Aligwe et al., 2018). Yet, some messages are embedded in widespread social practices, and they barely need to be interpreted because they are naturally decoded. This shows that there are codes which are dominant and legitimised by social structures, meanings, and beliefs (Hall, 1980). To exemplify, usually dominant codes are stereotyped images or practices which are normally accepted, such as taking pictures pretending to sustain the Pisa Tower with bare hands. Or more in correlation to travel vlogs, for example, it is rooted in many people's thoughts, and consequentially considered standard activity, that trying national food is a way to feel more local and experience authentic adventures.

To close this subchapter, it must be mentioned the three different types of decoding that the audience can carry, as they will be appearing often throughout the analysis section. First, there is what Hall (1980) called the dominant or hegemonic decoding position, which means that the decoder interprets the message symmetrically to what the encoder meant to convey. Regarding vlogs, it can be said that this situation occurs when the viewers interpret and accept the representation given of Switzerland within the framework set or designed by the vlogger. Here the concept of dominant codes comes in handy, as usually when encoders and decoders

3. METHODOLOGY

Because matters of ontology and epistemology should always precede the choice of a specific research method (Tribe, 2009), it is firstly relevant to dedicate a few lines to that before diving into the explanation of data sampling and analysis. The discussions arising in this paper about vlogs, the distribution of travel experiences, the production of destination images and the perception and negotiation of these, all stem from ontological beliefs and observations. As for this research, it is implied, but here made explicit, that the reality of things (for example vlogs and their content) is something that is actively constructed and made meaningful out of their mere existence by people. Based on this ontological stance, it is built the epistemological layer. That is wanting to learn more about these meanings, created and disseminated thanks to the interactions between one's environment and lifeworld, to obtain knowledge about them. Specifically in this paper, to investigate and get the knowledge of the constructed meanings of Switzerland in travel vlogs and related comments, it is necessary to look at how people actively ascribe them based on the perceptions and practices associated.

To do as just described it was used a qualitative approach, which usually entails making sense of and specifying the created and ascribed meanings by describing their features and characteristics (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). More in specific the research was based on a qualitative online content thematic analysis based on a coding system. This method is appropriate to this paper as it is flexible and applicable to different formats, in this case, video blogs, and it allows emphasize the content, such as words, themes and patterns, rather than quantifiable data like statistics, variables and probabilities (Bryman, 2012).

As the data considered to answer the research question are vlogs and comments, the methodology applied as part of the qualitative thematic approach is netnography (Kozinets, 2020). To better explain, netnography is an online ethnography, and in this precise context of travel vlogs, it means seeking to comprehend how online reviewers are negotiating upon cultural, social, and personal aspects of the experienced and perceived vlogs' content (Kozinets, 2020). The advantages of this method are its flexibility, transparency and immediacy of available data. It allows the gathering of direct and usually unfiltered opinions from diverse points of view. It was not followed a classic ethnography procedure, as I did not participate in the comment section nor engaged with other users, but I merely watched vlogs, read and collected the reactions to them. This is what Bryman (2012) defines as the first type of netnography: "study of online interaction only with no participation" (p.663).

3.1. Data gathering

The research is based on the analysis of two types of User Generated Content (UGC). The first is YouTube vlogs and the second is online comments of the selected vlogs. As previously mentioned, the paper focuses on travel vlogs about Switzerland generated by non-Swiss vloggers. An outsider's gaze on Switzerland can be much more interesting, as a Swiss vlogger may not pay attention to certain elements when walking around the old city of Bern for example, as it is not necessarily new or different from day-to-day surroundings. However, it could be criticised that, because Switzerland is culturally diverse, it is not sure that a Swiss person has seen and travelled everywhere in the country. Yet, foreigners can perceive more representative aspects of a place, do more first-time experiences and share thorough insights about those elements that for them depict Switzerland.

On the one side, I selected 26 vlogs, in which English is spoken or used as the main language to communicate. Additionally, the videos are not supported or sponsored by DMOs. That means that the creators did not produce the content to explicitly benefit tourism in the displayed areas. Yet, even though YouTube policies require youtubers to disclose if the content “has a paid product placement, endorsement, or other commercial relationship” ([YouTube Help](#)), it is to argue that I cannot be fully aware of possible collaborations with any DMO. Thus, if no mention is made of DMO sponsorship, I assume that the vlog does not have a tourism marketing purpose.

As a general mention, I decided to use vlogs rather than YouTube shorts, Instagram reels or TikTok videos as a vlog should provide more prosperous and diverse content thanks to its length, generally of a minimum of ten minutes. Vlogs allow the creators to share with their audience more insights into different aspects of one's life and correlated topics. Conversely, a shorter-length type of platform aims to entertain an audience that scrolls up and down hyper-personalised material (Herman, 2019; Feldkamp, 2021). Same as vloggers, the users of these other UGCs share their thoughts, opinions, challenges to partake in, product reviews and much more, but the span of attention for the content is much lower and less rich in content. If someone is researching more detailed information about what it is like travelling in Switzerland and what the landscapes look like, vlogs may help more in finding abundant diversified answers.

It follows more detailed information about the variables taken into consideration when choosing vlogs to answer the first part of the research question: How and in what ways do non-Swiss travel vloggers shape the destination image of Switzerland on YouTube?

First, the vlogs were collected based on the research on YouTube using “Swiss (travel) vlog” and “Switzerland (travel) vlog” as keywords. Sometimes vloggers do not necessarily specify that their vlog is about traveling, but I checked that their content entailed traveling, visiting a city, virtually showing and bringing along the audience somewhere in Switzerland. The channels varied from solo, family and friends content creators, mostly with a European or American nationality. Yet, few of them also represented the Asian continent. Vlogs shift from amateur and simple clips to more cinematographic and elaborated shots, maintaining still in both cases the essence of self-made travel videos.

I obtained thus a total of 26 vlogs (see Appendix B) based on the following criteria: 1) non-Swiss creators; 2) length of a minimum of 10 minutes and maximum non-specified; 3) more than ten thousand visualisations; 4) engagement in the comment section. Vlogs do not have a precise duration, though there is a general idea that, depending on the matter, they should last more than five minutes and can go up to an hour-long ([HookSounds](#)). I decided to use vlogs that lasted at least ten minutes to have a bare minimum of material to analyse. I did not find it essential to specify the maximum length because most vlogs last 10 to 60 minutes. In total, I achieved and analysed 10 hours and 50 minutes of video content. Vlogs were published between 2018 and 2023, but more than half of them date back to 2022 when travelling became possible again after the covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, I chose the criteria of a minimum of ten thousand visualisations because it translates into a great number of people interested and attracted by the content and with a highly probable engagement with it as well.

On the other side, to answer the second section of the research question, how viewers negotiate destination image of Switzerland in and through their engagements in the comment section, the following steps were taken. The comments under each vlog were sorted based on the “most popular” filter, as it means there is a shared appreciation for the comment or a high engagement with it. The first one hundred comments were taken into consideration and if relevant, the answers and interactions to these comments were later analysed as well. If vlogs had less than one hundred comments, the number of written comments was considered. Moreover, if some comments were not in English, these were translated. As a disclaimer, comments that stayed very much on the surface, did not relate to the content or emojis were not used for the analysis. Yet, even if the comment is short and simple it may still be useful for the data. Still, a possible downside of the comments is the discussed reliability of them. It may be difficult to tell apart the truthfulness and scope of what is written, falling into misunderstandings and misinterpretations. The possible anonymity of the identity of the users

could also raise problems of mistrust, but at the same time, it allows equal space to share an honest opinion avoiding personal attacks and judgements (Chen & Pain, 2017).

Comments are indeed a great set of data and quick resource respect, for example, interviews as they furnish immediate reactions from those who watched the vlogs. The commentators are not predisposed to writing politically favourable reviews, just like interviewees would do as they may feel pressured to do so because of the interviewer's presence. Yet, it will be better discussed further on that thanks to community policies, comments are also somehow regulated, especially negative and disturbing comments get reported and deleted. Nevertheless, online users can share their opinions, which are usually honest and transparent because, in the social media realm, people are not afraid of writing their thoughts online thanks to the relative anonymity provided online. The comment section is a space where vloggers check the appreciation level of the content. Moreover, comments are easily accessible, although it is later discussed to what extent is ethical to use them for research.

3.2. Data analysis plan

Moving towards the more practical side of the research, in order to analyse the data collected it was used a coding process. Coding means to specify what the data is about and to “identify[-] one or more passages of [the content] that exemplify some thematic idea and linking them with a code, which is a shorthand reference to the thematic idea” (Gibbs, 2007, p.18). By coding, it is possible to compare findings, distinguish recurrent patterns and extract relevant information to answer the research question. Thus, after selecting vlogs I watched and transcribed ad verbatim what the vlogger says, paying attention as well at the visuals. The transcription facilitates the coding and helps to have better “proof” of what is said in vlogs. Some videos do not have talked scenes or voiceovers but subtitles instead. In these cases, the subtitles were taken into analysis and transcribed.

Afterwards, I moved on to collect comments under each video and transcribe (or copy-pasting) them. Once both vlogs and comments data were gathered, I started coding the material. The process of coding consisted in identifying and reporting patterns or themes in the data. More in specific, I first generated initial codes based on interesting and relevant features of the data. Secondly, I grouped these initial codes into overarching themes and related subcategories such as landscape, adventure/activities, food, lifestyle, locals, facts and feelings (see Figure 2 for an example). Based on these themes and their features, I conducted a deeper analysis and discussed the findings leading to an answer to the research question.

Additionally, talking about the coding system, throughout the analysis of the findings it was applied Stuart Hall's (1990) coding and decoding model, which was thoroughly explained in the theoretical framework. This model helps to better support and explain how vloggers and viewers engage with the content. It not only shows what kind of negotiations are made but also the influence vloggers have on other travellers' meaning-making processes.



Figure 2. Thematic map of overarching theme landscape and subcategories

3.3. Additional insights from MySwitzerland.com

As read already in chapter 2.3, to include a more concrete layer to the theoretical part of the research, it was of interest to look briefly, as it is not the focus of the paper, at what the official DMO of Swiss tourism ([MySwitzerland](https://www.myswitzerland.com)) think of travel vlogs about Switzerland. Although many papers studied already the influence that vlogs can have on DMOs (Peralta, 2019; Tiago et al., 2019; Ong & Ito, 2019; Diwanji & Cortese, 2020; Jakopović, 2020; Zhang, 2020). I think having had a practical and direct opinion about them from MySwitzerland added value to the theory, functioning as well as a source of inspiration for possible future research and being a third, even if not main, actor of the study.

Besides looking into various Swiss regional tourism sources and different advertisement formats, I preferred focusing on retrieving the already given information only from MySwitzerland. The DMO promotes the whole territory and addresses all regions, avoiding having monothematic content in their social media. This way of doing matched my decision to consider vlogs of any area and region of Switzerland, without having to select videos that included only specific locations. Hence, I proceeded by exchanging a few e-mails with MySwitzerland and asked the correspondent to answer some open questions via e-mail regarding the topic of vlogs (see Appendix A). Though the communication was in Italian and German, the questions were asked in English to facilitate the analysis. Because this part of the research is not essential to answer the research question, I did not use a precise interview methodology. Simply the answers to the questions asked were used as background and

backup information to give a more concrete example of the theoretical side of the relationships between DMOs and vlogs/social media.

3.4. Ethics

It is fundamental to mention the ethics involved in all three previous sections. Since the private and public spheres online are becoming more and more interchangeable and blurred, ethical issues arise when it comes to conducting research with online resources. Both vlogs and comments represent public material and easily accessible data, as the internet is largely a public sphere. For this reason, it is argued that “data that have been deliberately and voluntarily made available in the public Internet domain [...] [it] can be used by researchers without the need for informed consent” (Hewson et al. 2003, in Bryman, 2012, p.679). The issue involved here is not so much on the consensus of using the content, but more on the anonymity of it. It could be problematic not for the vlogs, but for the comments. However, because a coding system is used, the findings portray general patterns and themes, and if examples are used to support argumentations, these are kept anonymous as the nickname of the users is irrelevant to the research. While regarding the questions asked MySwitzerland in appendix A there is explicit approval by the DMO to consent to the use of the answers for this research.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

From a thorough scrutinization of the vlogs' transcriptions and content, it results that what is likely to be most talked about or shown by vloggers are the following topics: landscapes, adventure/activities, food, lifestyle, facts, feelings, and locals. Each of these dimensions is part of the core representation of Switzerland in vlogs. Because they are very much intertwined and sometimes overlap, to avoid repetitions and for a more organized and analytical analysis, it was best to categorise them into higher themes as will follow. In the next pages, each of these categories is discussed based on the theoretical framework previously touched upon and by using examples extracted from the gathered data. In addition, the discussion of each theme is not only based on the content of vlogs but on the accompanying comments too. That is because the comments' matters also referred to the same topics raised in the vlogs. Following Hall's theory (1980), the audience who engaged in the comment section is encoding what they have seen in vlogs, which means it is interpreting and reacting to the elements used to represent Switzerland. As it is exemplified further in the analysis, it must be said that the audiences do not necessarily explicitly say "Yes I agree" or "No I disagree" with the encoded messages, instead they express their opinions and thoughts based on their own experiences and knowledge. Like so, they refer or hint at an agreement, disagreement, or negotiation to the encoded destination image of Switzerland.

4.1. Sublime and romantic landscapes

When thinking about Switzerland, highly probable, the first thing that comes to mind is mountains. Indeed, in the selected vlogs, the landscape does not function as mere background, but rather as the protagonist. Multiple scenarios depict Switzerland, such as high peaks, clear blue lakes and quiet villages. Vloggers did not hold back from highlighting these latter in their videos, by encoding specific messages and narratives. Starting from the places visited, the ones that recur the most are in the cantons of Bern and Valais. Some of the most known villages to international eyes are in these regions, such as Lauterbrunnen, Interlaken, Gstaad and Zermatt. These landscapes are difficult not to notice and visit as they compose the picture-perfect postcard from Switzerland. Yet, many other cantons were visited, like Geneva, Luzern, Zurich and Graubünden (see Appendix C, thematic map 1). The common ground of these places is the flora and fauna. Whether it is a soaring peak, a crystal-clear lake or an agile chamois, vloggers' reactions are of shock and disbelief. The clips of the mountains do not need filters or skilled cinematic shots because they shine on their own. Vloggers limit themselves to capturing immaculate scenery. Mountains are often compared to skyscrapers

that go “sky high into the heavens” (Daniel Marsh, 09:45) and create intense and breathtaking moments of incredulity (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Screenshot from vlog. View from the top of Mount Titlis (Bea Alonzo, 04:48)

Lakes, rivers and waterfalls are not of less importance. The highest Swiss waterfall appears majestic in the village of Lauterbrunnen where the cleanest water runs through the valley. Vloggers seem to have never seen places like that, where the grass is surprisingly green, and the colour of lakes looks photoshopped. They feel overwhelmed by the power of nature to the point that it is “so much to take in” (Katie Horan, 05:32). Many adjectives are used to try to describe the spectacle of these natural wonders (see Appendix C, thematic maps 2 and 3), but oftentimes vloggers feel like they do not have the right words to do so, preferring to let the images speak for themselves.

In this regard, commentators agreed with vloggers’ representation of the country as a paradise on Earth, or as someone wrote as a “country of angels” (Yooil). They are “amazed by how much beauty there is to see” (Elena Taber), using all kinds of positively connoted adjectives to describe it (see Appendix C, thematic map 4). Viewers felt moved by such peaceful and stunning territories to the point of getting teary-eyed. Among the commentators, Swiss people and residents mentioned feeling proud of their country and homesick, especially for those who left it a time ago. Many viewers felt jealousy towards vloggers for being in Switzerland and enjoying their time there, wishing to be in their shoes. Others felt like taking a trip down memory lane of past travels in the country and the memorable adventures they went on. For many of these people, Switzerland feels like it has not changed at all neither did the feelings they conserve towards it, because “Switzerland gets in your blood” (Maddie Castellano).

The elements that so far depict Switzerland, frame this latter into what were the 18th-century canons of romantic natural beauty. As mentioned earlier in the introduction, authors,

artists and musicians travelled to Switzerland for its sublime and poetic sceneries, which designated nearly mystical enlightenment for the elevation of the self (Buckton-Tucker, 2010). Even though vloggers are far from being 18th notorious writers and painters, they seem to be experiencing that same feeling of “romantic travelling”. The content creators’ perceptions of the close-to-perfect Swiss landscapes reflect the acknowledgement of the greatness and power of nature, just like artists and travellers of the late 18th century would describe in their works (Devanthery, 2015).

Yet, the portrayal of a sublime and perfect Swiss beauty is sometimes contested and negotiated by vlogs viewers. For example: “There's no such a thing as perfect. Every country has its own beauty” (Brett Conti). In this case, even if the person acknowledges that there are beautiful sceneries in Switzerland, it does not mean that it is flawless or the most perfect country in the world, as many sustained. Or another viewer said that, even if he/she mentioned positive aspects of Switzerland, like its stunning landscape, one must love outdoor activities to be able to fully enjoy the time spent in the country. These types of negotiations allow to understand that, although there can be a general (dis)agreement, each perception of Switzerland remains strictly subjective. It is evident by exemplifying the beauty and perfection of the country, which is ultimately measured and compared with the beholder’s knowledge and frame of reference of these two concepts.

Carrying on with what were the 18th/19th ideals of romantic travels to captivating territories, another element that taps into this treatment of nature is music. In fact, the music that accompanies the clips in each vlog is just as important. The musical background reflects the atmosphere that vloggers try to express with words and visuals. The choice falls mostly on peaceful and instrumental soundtracks, usually inherent in the genre of jazz or country, recapturing the romantic idealisation of nature as a bearer of peacefulness and freedom. Nonetheless, musicians in the romantic area used to “translate” their feelings while being immersed in nature into compositions.

Only when there are adventurous activities such as bungee jumping, zip lining or go-karting down a mountain, the tunes are more rhythmic and joyful. But sometimes, even music seems to interfere with the ambience. Indeed, vloggers decide to leave the sounds of nature as the only musical support: a river that flows, chirping birds, bleating goats, the sound of cowbells or Swiss horns sounds. It is rather rare to hear sounds of traffic, louder noise or crowds of people talking, even when vloggers visit bustling cities like Zurich or Geneva. Even though Switzerland is highly classified in the list of European travel destinations, it is hard to see packed-of-tourists clips of the visited places. Even if these may be an editing

decision, vloggers seem to be incorporating among their videos the intent to include as much as possible the feelings and atmosphere ascribed to Switzerland. Doing so, they add layers to the online projection they give of the country, as for this example they try to mould and establish authenticity through this apparent Swiss calmness (Rahman et al., 2021).

The audience seems to appreciate the musical selection because it feels more immersed in the peaceful atmosphere of the surroundings shown in vlogs. Many, among which Swiss people themselves, mentioned to be feeling relaxed and serene by looking at the landscapes, highlighting as well how wonderful the tones of nature are. Others negotiated on their terms the fact that not only do the sceneries transmit tranquillity, like vloggers communicated, but they also allow the mind to heal and find peace. Through musical choices the content creators stimulate the decoding process of viewers, immersing and directing them towards a previously encoded romanticisation of the sceneries.

Moreover, the sounds of traditional Swiss instruments, such as the alphorn or the accordion, gave some viewers a more intense “Swiss feeling” (Karl Watson). It is indeed common to associate Switzerland with the alphorn, which nowadays is played in festivals, parades, and on the national day and it is often used for classical music compositions too. Even though it has lost its original function of communication and call tool for the shepherds and herdsmen, it still conserves its traditional Swiss essence combined with its contemporary attractivity for tourists. While the accordion, known better as Schwyzerörgeli, is a symbol of Swiss folk music with its colourful three-quarter time dances together with the influence of polka, mazurka, foxtrot and marches ([MySwitzerland](#)). These elements frame Switzerland to appear as a country strongly attached to its customs and eager to share them with international audiences.

4.2. Fairy tale look-a-like hyperrealities

To stay on the romanticism’s features and atmospheres that transpire from vlogs, Switzerland often comes across as even more than a romantic aesthetic. It is in fact often compared to a place of fairy tales (see Appendix A, thematic map 5). The country is described by vloggers as a magical and enchanted village where every corner is perfect and looks hand painted. Not only Switzerland reminds visitors of the magical Disneyland theme park, but it also recalls movies such as *The Sound of Music*, *Polar Express* and *The Lord of The Rings*. The not-so-imaginary Swiss landscapes seem too dreamy and perfect to be real. This approach to Switzerland has not changed since its beginning in the 18th as a tourist destination. The Swiss philosopher Rousseau describes his homeland with what were thought

to be utopian characteristics that would give people peace and harmony by escaping the hustle and bustle of industrialization (Trincherio, 2021). In vlogs, people say they feel like they have been transported into a different world with picture-perfect houses, scenarios that just came out of travel brochures and postcards you would send to your family. The kind of Swiss stereotypes that authors have romanticised for centuries, and for which the country is known, do live up to the expectations, or better, apparently, they even exceed them. The heavenly landscape appears flawless, nearly anomalous.

In the comments section, people tend to agree with this encoded fairy tale representation of the country once again. For many, Switzerland looks like a magical and enchanted place, to the extent that one may feel like “a game character in a beautiful land” (Brett Conti). The viewers highlighted elements such as the charming wooden houses and the snow-globe lookalike views that remind them of a wonderland. These elements stem from the aforementioned Swiss romantic aesthetic, whose imaginaries and awe-inspiring sceneries lead to a subsequent extension of an enchanted world. The picturesque and sublime contribute to the meaning-making process of more surreal and nearly utopian frames. The Swiss features are therefore elevated to be part of the epitome of romanticised contexts, such as fairy tales or Disneyland (Cushing, 2014).

In addition, strictly connected to this last association of Switzerland with magical theme parks and nearly unrealistic and hard-to-believe landscapes, it comes in handy Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality (1981). On a more theoretical level, the French sociologist sustained that the specific example of Disneyland presents to people a world of escapism and automatically achieved happiness, in which experiences are much more involving and intense than the “banality” of everyday life. Theme parks as such, created and simulated on mixtures of cultural and imaginative stories, build multiple layers of “fake” or “surreal” meanings to the point that people do not interact with the “real reality” anymore. The result is the so-called hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1981). As it can be noticed it happens, to a certain extent, the same thing with the elevated romanticised representations of Switzerland. Vloggers and viewers extensively idealise the Swiss sceneries and reality when they mention for example the feeling of being in a game, movie, or wonderland.

The French sociologist’s concept has a negative and pessimistic view of hyperreality resulting in his opinion from advertisements, television and the media (Reijnders, 2011). In this paper’s case, he would argue that vloggers are sustaining and depicting simulations of the country that lead to a hyperreality of it. Looking from Baudrillard’s perspective vlogs would be critically assessed as false frames of reference for the audience, especially because

vloggers sustain to give a fair and honest view of their journeys to others. The sociologist would claim that they are actors and producers of performed simulations of travel experiences, which are taking primacy over other, arguably more “authentic” realities. Yet, the core idea of Baudrillard that technology deconstructs the "real reality" could also be, in turn, criticised (Christanti et al., 2021).

It is undeniable that vloggers have the power to idealise a certain image of Switzerland by exaggerating, perpetuating and maybe even constructing specific elements related to it, such as mystical and fairy sceneries. However, it does not mean that they intend to deceive people or, most importantly, that they are obliging the audience to take that (possible) hyperreality as truthful. Vlogs are not necessarily simulations of realities; they can be mere representations too, as there is a thin line between representations and simulations. Because of the strong influence of the media, people may tend to be wanting to experience the hyperreal (simulations), rather than getting in touch with the authenticity of places (representations). But contrary to what Baudrillard (1981) thinks, vlogs and social media do not characterise the end of interpretation, rather they enhance the possibility of negotiating the content via one’s subjectivity. Even if vloggers claim that Switzerland is a paradise on Earth or a fairy tale, it is still up to the viewers to discuss what they are watching and make sense of it on their terms (King, 1998). For these reasons, vlogs are still an important source of information for the decision-making process of a traveller and, more broadly, social media are part of the new contemporary realities of tourism.

To conclude this section, it is interesting to look at the opinions of those commentators who are residents or Swiss citizens. They commented that thanks to vloggers, they could see the country from a different perspective. By watching the videos from a tourist’s point of view, they realised how much they tend to undervalue and forget how marvellous the country they live in is. This way of encoding the representation of Switzerland is a compromise between agreeing with the fact that the sceneries are spectacular but at the same time adapting this statement to one own reality. In this case, residents and Swiss people admit that they appreciate people enjoying their time in the country, and they feel luckier and more grateful after watching how tourists get blown away by it.

Still, not everyone compromises the encoded meanings the same way, because, against Baudrillard’s thoughts (1981), there is the freedom of refusing to assume that everything is truthful. Few said they got used to what Switzerland looks like and would prefer seeing places such as Los Angeles because it has landscapes that Switzerland does not have, like the beach. One user mentioned: “As a Swiss i can confirm it's a great place to live in, but it's hard to

appreciate it like a tourist if it's all you know” (Brett Conti). The comment underlines that even if locals can re-appreciate their homeland through a visitor’s eyes, they are still locals, and for some, it is hard to fully feel in awe the same way tourists do. This example brings up an important concept in tourism, which is the “other”, considered to be a different imagination of places, experiences or behaviours from the mundanity of an individual (Seaton, 2009). In this case, the subjectivity that arises from the comment section underlines that “othering” someone or something is ultimately based on one’s main frame of reference, such as Switzerland as a territory and lakes and mountains as landscapes. For this reason, the viewer is drawn away from everything normal to him and attracted to what is exotic, unknown, diverse, and more desirable, like a sandy beach in California.

4.3. Raw and adventurous Switzerland

Talking about framing Switzerland as a magical theme park, various vloggers mentioned and showed that Switzerland, thanks to the many activities it offers (see Appendix C, thematic map 6), resemble “one giant amusement park” (Brett Conti, 08:32) suitable to everyone: expert hikers, newbie backpackers, families, city life lovers and more relaxed tourists. Yet, the main attraction in this amusement park is not a frightening rollercoaster, rather it simply is nature and its raw essence. Early on during the Grand Tour era natural elements were indeed not only reasons for poetical inspiration but also for adventurous activities too. Indeed, Switzerland, among other motives such as health benefits and its renowned chocolate, has become most popular for the conquest of high peaks and alpine tourism. Still to this day, the preferred way to travel and explore the country is hiking.

Most vloggers did trek routes discovering the beauty of lakes and huts at high and lower altitudes. Among the most visited mountains, there is the Top of Europe Jungfraujoch, which offers not only vast views of the Aletsch glacier but also hosts an ice palace, trails about the history of the Jungfrau region and a Lindt Museum. Even though hiking is the most present activity in vlogs, nature contributes to creating more fun and high-adrenaline adventures such as tricycling down a mountain (see Figure 4), zip-lining, paragliding over Interlaken, bungee-jumping from the dam where one of James Bond’s movies was shot, or canyoning down natural water slides. Not also to forget that the country is considered a winter location mecca for ski, snowboarding and sledge fanatics. Thus Switzerland, when framed in this natural amusement hyperreal park, is described by vloggers as being best explored and enjoyed when adventures meet nature. Peaks of adrenaline and incredulity are reached during these

journeys, transformed later into bittersweet moments of reflection on the vloggers' way back home, who claim that "you got to be in Switzerland to feel alive".

A large number of commentators shared with vloggers the same passion for hiking and adrenaline chasing, highlighting like so Switzerland and its features as a perfect hub for the outdoors and extreme sports. The fun and the excitement that transpire from vlogs make viewers "feel[-] like dropping everything and booking a flight" (Jovane PJY). They would ask in the comments for advice and detailed information to better plan their trip. These kinds of comments create a concatenation of eWom in which users engage in a meaningful and informational exchange of opinions. They indicate the strong power vlogs have over the travelling intentions of the viewers and confirm that UGC gives prominent inputs to the audience and grows their overall desire to travel (Rellores et al., 2022). Additionally, Swiss locals and residents negotiated the encoded adventures by adapting them to their day-to-day life. Most comments regard the fact that there is no need for them to take a plane to live new adventures as Switzerland offers so many free outdoor activities. Moreover, for a local to see how visitors get excited about being in touch with the raw countryside of Switzerland, "shows how much there is still to be discovered even for a native" (Elena Taber). Some mentioned that having spent most of their life in Switzerland, they feel somehow ashamed for taking for granted the natural escapism and high-adrenaline realities they are surrounded by and from which they should take advantage daily. In the end, even for locals "the best way to explore is just going for a walk or a stroll" (Kritika Khurana, 06:51).



Figure 4. Screenshot from vlog. Tricycling down the mountain (Brett Conti, 11:24)

4.4. Consuming local realities: culture and traditions

Switzerland is however a place not only for outdoors athletes and enthusiasts. In fact, vloggers framed the country in many other different ways. Another important context in

which Swiss representations acquire meanings is the more traditional one: vloggers and the audience get closer to locals' reality and customs. Starting first with food tourism, another main activity in which content creators participated. Wine tasting and eating cheese fondue appeared to be inevitable bucket list activities to check off during the vloggers' stays, even when this entailed eating melted cheese during the warmest seasons, because "you cannot go to Switzerland without trying their cheese fondue" (Bea Alonzo, 07:15). Additionally, as Switzerland is mainly known for chocolate too, vloggers appreciated visiting chocolate factories and confectionery stores such as Läderach and Lindt & Sprüngli, mentioning to have never eaten such tasty chocolate ever in their life. Other kinds of Swiss chocolate appeared as well in vlogs like Caotina, Toblerone, Créad'Or and Ovomaltine, which would be a quick and tasty snack for vloggers. Still, Switzerland proposes many more delicatessen to complete the vloggers' Swiss food experience. For example, raclette, rösti and zürcher geschnetzelt, variety of sausages, schnitzel, and different kind of pies, usually apple or berries flavoured. Highly probable there were many more traditional dishes to discover, but because vloggers mostly visited cantons in the Swiss-German part of the country, the food was more or less the same in each vlog.

Whether typical food is tried in remote huts, biergartens, local stores or five stars hotels, the desire of experiencing Swiss traditions and roots does not change. Eating and trying Swiss food and drinks reflect the vloggers' craving to get to know Switzerland better by eating traditional dishes. Food tourism is indeed known to be a practice that brings visitors closer to the country they are visiting. It allows them to live an authentic experience and create a more meaningful and deep bonding with local customs and flavours (Autio et al, 2013).

Additionally, in some videos, vloggers were positively surprised by the kind of vending machines one can find in Switzerland (see Figure 5). Rather than containing classic sweets and savoury snacks, many of these machines would have vegetables, meat, marmalade, and cheese inside. Aside from reflecting the kind of food that may be typically eaten by the Swiss, it is also a fun way to attract tourists to try local goods. Lastly, even though food was the major component in vlogs, to accompany the end of many vloggers' hikes, there was usually beer. Some would be Swiss-produced like Calanda and Feldschlösschen, while others not. But a few vloggers, under the advice of a hut waiter, tried a beer often consumed by the Swiss, which is a mix of beer with Sprite, also known as Radler.

Compared to landscapes and nature, the comments section lacks opinions about food, which may not be perceived as much across and through the screen. Those who engaged with it agreed with the yumminess of fondue and the high quality of chocolate. Some argued which

brand of chocolate they think is best and others gave foodie expert advice on how to experience eating fondue at its fullest. While few strongly sustained that oppositional to the encoded positive images given in vlogs, Swiss food is by far the worst they have ever tried.



Figure 5. Screenshot from vlog. Vending machine with vegetables (Ben Morris, 03:22)

It follows another manner for tourists to gaze upon the Swiss culture, which is to retrieve and share information on a more historical level, allowing like so the audience to better contextualize visited places and learn something new. Among nature-related information, vloggers reminisced, though briefly, that poets and writers, astonished by the scenery, would use Switzerland as inspiration for their works. It is for example mentioned that Arthur Conan Doyle decided to end Sherlock Holmes' life in the village of Meiringen, while J. R. R. Tolkien got inspired by the beautiful valley of Lauterbrunnen to create Rivendell and the misty mountains in his *The Lord of The Rings*. It is talked about the neutrality of Switzerland, that it remains "peaceful by any means necessary, even if that means [to] blow up a bridge" (Brett Conti, 00:21). And among other things it is mentioned with surprise that in the country four official languages are spoken and that the currency used is the Swiss franc.

Nonetheless, vloggers did not access this information thanks to a tour guide or a local, as from the videos' content it did not appear that vloggers participated in guided tours of the cities and villages visited, rather they preferred exploring on their own. Here it could be argued that maybe some vloggers somehow wanted to relate to the romantic idealisation of solo travelling: exploring the self in the grandeur of nature to permeate in it, undisturbed by the presence of others. Still, the bits and pieces of information given about Switzerland, translate into a poor interest in the multicultural and historical side of the country, reflected as well in viewers' reactions. Few commentators showed interest in opining about Swiss facts. Some confirmed the literary inspirational sceneries of Switzerland, mentioned the obviousness of Switzerland being neutral and not being part of the EU and gave territorial

information such as “the tunnel is called The Gothard hahaha and it links Ticino to the swiss german part [...]” (Helen Owen).

Lastly, in order to feel and transmit more “Swissness” in their videos, a few vloggers drew their interests not only towards cultural practices but also towards the Swiss citizens themselves. Generally, Swiss people are described as friendly, sweet and welcoming. It transpires that Switzerland is not a country where the nightlife is very active and chaotic, but rather tranquil like its people. They are said to be early in everything: waking up in the morning, eating dinner and closing their shops. Some vloggers’ journeys reflected the importance the Swiss give to traditions and what these consist of. They would entertain themselves and tourists during the national day with dances in traditional dresses, yodelling, playing Swiss horns and guiding processions of goats. Or simply, they would “just casually chilling on their patios and playing the accordion” (Cathy Ding, 20:00). In addition, they are considered very clean, punctual, and precise in everything they do and create.

Still, only a handful of viewers negotiated this Switzerland’s framing, probably since vloggers did not interact on camera with locals nor they expressed themselves about them. Few agreed with the content creators, saying that the locals are kind people, pleasant, and quietly confident but particularly direct. This low engagement with locals and their “silencing” results in a strong presence of the tourist gaze. In this case, the concept of tourist gaze applies to the fact that vloggers depict and represent places, and sometimes people, they gaze upon (Urry, 1990). This subjective process fixes temporarily ideal representations of Switzerland that could be further negotiated by the audience. However, on the other side, the local gaze, which is meant not only Swiss gazing at tourists (Maoz, 2006) but also as Swiss being directly involved in vlogs, is not displayed. It may not strictly influence the decision-making of potential travellers when they watch the videos, but it could help to mediate differently, for better or worse, the destination image of Switzerland.

To sum up, in this category, Switzerland’s cultural and traditional sides are framed in different contexts which are more or less engaged. However, the interactions and responses rate is lower than other previously mentioned themes, revealing that the types of tourism practices carried out by vloggers in Switzerland are mostly related to leisure, relaxation, being in nature and hiking. Very few engaged with historical spots through which they have deepened their and the audience’s knowledge, such that the Lion Monument (Löwendenkmal) in Luzern “was made to commemorate Swiss soldiers who died during the French Revolution” (Yooil, 21:33). Nevertheless, this absence does not mean that the historical component is lacking in the Swiss tourism offer, but vloggers preferred directing their

holidays towards other interests, which still allowed them to get closer to the Swiss culture, traditions, and customs.

4.5. Cosmopolitan, urban and costly lifestyles

This last framing touches upon the broader and more international encoded features of Switzerland. It is already considered a highly multicultural country for its own diverse cultural and linguistic origins, which are shown in everyday life, such as in the food offered. The local cuisine reflects neighbouring countries' traditions, but it gives space to many international dishes too, such as Thai, Iranian, Italian, Indian, Japanese, vegan and vegetarian food (see Appendix A, thematic map 7). Vloggers were for example surprised by how good Asian food was. Highly probable because Switzerland is mostly promoted for its traditional products and not for overseas' cuisine. But it could also be argued that, because of the cultural gap between Europe and Asia, it is hard to bring in Switzerland the right combination of flavours and cooking skills of a different territory with different traditions.

However, Switzerland can also be considered a cosmopolitan travel destination for other reasons, such as its attractiveness for world-widely known pop cultural references and its more urban and sophisticated lifestyle. Because vloggers are tourists, taking selfies and instagrammable shots are also part of the Swiss adventures. Spots like the old town of Bern, the gold coast of Zurich, and the Kapellbrücke of Luzern are on the list of some classical stops. But many vloggers highlighted the Instagrammability of places like Lauterbrunnen, or Iseltwald and its famous dock where the K-drama movie *Crash Landing On You* was filmed (see Figure 6). This strictly ties to media tourism, which is the practice of travelling to places because of the associations with popular movies, tv shows, novels or music genres (Reijnders, 2011). In this research's data, Switzerland is indeed often associated with international pop cultural references, either by vloggers or viewers: James Bond, Sherlock Holmes, *The Sound of Music*, *Polar Express*, and the just-cited *Crash Landing On You*.

Yet, among these mentions the only one that represents a real motivation for tourists to travel to Switzerland, and not just a casual and accidental visit to these movie or book-related areas, is the K-drama *Crash Landing On You*. Truly, many vloggers, mostly Asians, were drawn to visit Iseltwald, a small village in the canton of Bern, where a notorious scene was shot. Travellers are motivated to take pictures in the same location as a result of their interest in the movie and the story associated with that spot. The directors, by choosing Switzerland as a scenic background, unconsciously ascribed a new meaning to Iseltwald's landscape and a new fascination with it for tourists, who want to physically experience the imaginaries of the

movie (Jewelle & McKinnon, 2008). This practice can reinforce a destination image, by adding new layers of value and meaning to it.

The exposure of Switzerland to a larger and more international audience, enhance its notoriety on different levels. As for this case, it brings positive benefits for tourism as well as a profitable strategy for DMOs, which could make good use of movies as such to promote locations like Iseltwald. The village itself in fact, as a vlogger mentioned, does not have much to offer besides its already beautiful landscapes. Still, it has become more touristic and popular among classic Bernese areas thanks to the K-drama movie. Additionally, media tourism creates a sense of community among fans. In the comments section, a large number of people were enthusiastic or envious about vloggers visiting Crash Landing on You spots, desiring as well to one day be able to visit them. Like so, just like alpine, winter sports or food tourism, even media tourism is a key variable in tourists' decision-making process. It is even more inclined to be an influential factor if shared with thousands of viewers on social media, like YouTube or Instagram.

The interesting dynamic that is created here is that by visiting seen on (social)media places, the worlds and images projected on the screen or described in books become more real and de-mediatized when seen and experienced with own eyes. Nevertheless, by taking pictures and videos and sharing them, they once again become part of mediatic realms. Vlogs themselves give access to the behind-the-scenes of this process, or especially to the Instagrammability of places. For example, it is showed what it takes to get the perfect picture at Iseltwald in the same spot where a movie scene was shot: long queue, rude tourists or waking up early in the morning to find fewer people. This point of view, which underlines the implicit idea that vlogs are realistic and unfiltered, reminds the audience that the reality of social media does not always match the reality outside the digital life.



Figure 6. Screenshot from vlog. Crash Landing On You spot in Iseltwald (Leesa You, 06:01)

However, media tourism is not the only factor that puts Switzerland on a more cosmopolitan level. Even though travel vlogs mostly depict the wild, natural and adventurous side of the country, the “big” city and luxurious lifestyle are also part of some vloggers’ journeys. Switzerland is widely known indeed for its high economic standards and related costly activities. Few vloggers dedicated their time to shopping in designer stores, eating in Michelin stars restaurants and staying in fancy hotels. These opposite and contrastive scenarios, even if less present, appear especially when cities like St Moritz, Gstaad and Zurich, typically known for being expensive and eclectic areas, are visited. Vloggers commented that these types of cities, populated with holiday apartments, hotels and full of rich people, create a sense of exclusivity for those who are not as extravagant (or rich) as those who live there. Gstaad for example is, designated in one of the vlogs as a playground for billionaires, represent the peak of the expensive Swiss lifestyle: Maserati as rental cars, Tesla as taxis, people walking around with million francs worth watches, wearing designer clothes while drinking 15 francs orange juice. Switzerland is undeniably an expensive country, but the concept of "expensive" can be interpreted from different angles, as further on it is discussed especially from the viewers’ perspective. It is unnecessary to spend a lot of money to have fun and enjoy yourself like some vloggers proved, but as one suggested “you’re gonna miss out on a lot if you don’t” (Ben Morris, 09:50). Moreover, some vloggers’ comments or reactions to the Swiss lifestyle may induce and persuade viewers to think that there are no compromises or negotiations for the country to be less costly.

Nevertheless, probably due to their own reasons and to make vlogs more relatable for a wider audience rather than a niche one, most vloggers remained humble and visited places that did not involve caviar in their shopping list. But what has often been emphasized is the price of food when eating out in restaurants and when buying coffee and baked goods, whether this was in Gstaad or Iseltwald. Indeed, many suggested their audience grocery shopping to save money and still be able to afford good quality food. Some vloggers were astonished by the shiny look of the exposed vegetables and fruit in supermarkets, the great taste of dairy products they would not normally buy in their home country, and the quantity of public fountains with free drinkable water. Some other vloggers mentioned the cost per night of their hotel rooms, usually not less than 150 francs, and gave a tour of them, stating that finding cheap deals is either luck or a matter of planning. From traditional mountain chalets to more modern rooms, the Swiss traditional touch is never lacking: wooden walls, posters of mountains, chamois horns, and tartan pillows. An additional aspect concerning this costly Swiss lifestyle and standards is the type of transportation. Those who travelled around

Switzerland with the car found the rental price shockingly expensive even for the high-quality car they would get. While those who travelled using public transportation, even if they had to spend between 100-200 francs for a Swiss travel pass, they were satisfied by the efficiency, cleanliness, and availability of these latter, to the point that they would “eat a meal off the floor is that clean” (Mary Bedford pt. 2, 05:18).

Most vloggers proved there is no need to be filthy rich to visit Switzerland and experience outside its countryside, its urban reality too. But generally, they still complained about the large amount of money they spent during their stays. Still, they argued that they understand that beauty comes with a price and that the well-being they felt throughout their holidays is because the way of life is more than average and the quality of food, cars, hotels and landscapes is extremely high. Some vloggers expressed the desire to go back to Switzerland, live, marry or even retire there. While others, even if they enjoyed their stay, would not visit again for the sole fact that it was the most expensive trip they have ever done.

Different opinions arose from the audience's reactions to these encoded meanings and images of the Swiss lifestyle (see Appendix A, thematic map 8). Firstly, many viewers thanked vloggers for being transparent and honest about the expenses, as it is something that travellers expressed wanting to know more about to carefully organize their visit. But the majority of people agreed that Switzerland is a pricey country with ridiculous and extortionate costs. Some mentioned that it is a shame that it is such a cash-grab country and, because of it, many felt restricted to wanting to travel there. Several commentators compared Switzerland to other countries (UK, Norway, Los Angeles, New Zealand), explaining that it is not the only expensive country in Europe or the world, contrary to what others sustain, and that thus it is not something out of the norm. Or in the opposite direction, the comparison resulted in ironically highlighting that the “amazing experiences” Switzerland offers are something inside the norm. Like one stated: “I can have the same when I go to any big city in winter” (Ben Morris).

Several people negotiated the concept of expensive by putting it in perspective to the experiences they had in the country. Most of them argued that it may indeed be expensive, but that there is a whole range of cheaper options that make one journey much more affordable: grocery shopping, cooking at home, sleeping in hostels or Airbnb, or travelling on regional trains like the locals, which are even “much more fun for the true traveller!” (Helen Owen). Lastly, as some vloggers did, various viewers debated that although Switzerland is costly, its quality is above and beyond, making it worthy to be visited and experienced. They added as well that throughout their stays they always felt safe, they could leave their things around and

that they remained amazed by how Swiss people take good care of their country: elements that probably in cheaper destinations would not be present and visible as such.

Nevertheless, what is most curious is how the Swiss citizens or residents negotiated these ideas of expensive lifestyle. The general opinion that arose from the comments is that it is well-known that prices are high, but they are justified by the high salaries and living standards compared the most European countries. They would not deny or completely disagree with what vloggers showed in their videos or what other viewers opined, yet they explained from a local perspective how things work. Moreover, many added that the vloggers mostly travelled in dense touristic areas where it is implicit that services and goods are over-priced. Because of it, few emphasized the difference between being a tourist and a local, such as: “as anywhere cost of living looks different for tourists and residents. With time you adapt and find multiple ways to minimize costs. Many great things are actually for free or quite affordable” (Ben Morris).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Thanks to technological advances tourists are nowadays no longer outsiders who only gaze, but they are active (online) participants, consumers and producers of travel experiences. YouTube vlogs are one of the many formats in which travellers can capture journeys, express thoughts, virtually involve fellow travel enthusiasts and motivate others to partake in similar voyages. The desire to travel and live authentic and realistic experiences is one of the reasons why UGC like vlogs are usually considered a safe space and source whose content is perceived as transparent and reliable (Irfan et al., 2022). Because of these characteristics, vloggers are like storytellers who allow their audiences to participate and negotiate the narrations they decide to share. Through this “creative” process DI of places is shaped, embellished and debated (Agapito et al., 2010). Indeed, DI is not only composed of vloggers’ videos and personal insights shared with the viewers but also of what these latter think and feel when they watch the clips. DMOs can play an important role in elaborating DI too, as they have a strong informational and promotional influence on consumers. However, as the advertisements are usually directed towards a specific niche, contrastively vlogs tend to be more neutral and less constructed on a consumer profile. Automatically they may be preferred over tourism organisations' commercials.

This research studied indeed a case of DI formation and the results, reactions and negotiations that come with it. The study worked towards finding an answer to the question: How and in what ways do non-Swiss travel vloggers shape the destination image of Switzerland on YouTube, and how do their viewers negotiate these in and through their engagements in the comment section? Via a netnography (Kozinets, 2020) approach and Stuart Hall’s (1990) encoding and decoding model it was analysed the content of 26 videos and related comments of the Swiss travel vlogging community. By encoding and decoding vlogs’ content and the audience comments, it was possible to understand which negotiations of Switzerland’s framings were put into practice, comprehend the format of travel vlogs itself and the use that is made of it as well (Xie et al., 2022). In addition, the application of various theoretical concepts such as eWom, DI, hyperreality and tourism practices permitted me to engage with a more in-depth and analytical analysis.

The different overarching frames that arose from vloggers’ travel and cultural practices and commentators’ opinions are the pieces that compose the destination image of Switzerland negotiated in travel videos. The DI is mainly composed of the following framings: romantic and hyperrealistic enchanted sceneries, outdoor and “raw” activities to get the flow of adrenaline going, cultural and traditional features such as food, customs and locals

themselves, and lastly, cosmopolitan and expensive lifestyles. A larger focus of vloggers' practices and viewers' discussions is directed at the Swiss countryside rather than the big city life, hinting at travellers' main points of interest. Yet, even when more European look-a-like cities like Zurich or Geneva are visited, the difference with the mountains villages lies in the activities related to a place, rather than in the atmosphere or the landscape. There is indeed a noticeable contrast between outdoor or adventurous activities and luxury, shopping, more frivolous ones. This opposition adds frames to the Swiss DI as a country that, thanks to a variety of sceneries and experiences, can satisfy all kinds of tourists. However, sublime nature and calming sensations are a constant for Switzerland whether one is travelling in a cosmopolitan city or a village in the valley. For vloggers and spectators, the sense of peace of mind when (virtually) being in Switzerland persists even in more crowded areas, reminding the very first reasons why writers, musicians and doctors started visiting the territory back in the 18th and 19th centuries: fresh air, clean water and a general feeling of wellbeing.

It follows that these different encoded Swiss framings evoked different ways of decoding them. Most of the decoding processes corresponded to a dominant reading (Hall, 1990), which means that those who commented on the vlogs agreed with the vloggers and their perception of Switzerland. Yet, a great number of people decided to decode the intended messages and significance adapting them to their own contexts. Even if they agreed on certain elements as statements of the country, they would argue slightly different thoughts based on their frameworks of knowledge, relations of productions and technical infrastructure, as Hall (1990) would say.

Hence, the answer to the research question could be metaphorically depicted as a kaleidoscope. Vloggers are given a kaleidoscope (YouTube platform and vlogs) in which they insert a specific image of Switzerland. By sharing it with their viewers they have the power to project the picture of the country in different versions by twisting the mirrors of the kaleidoscope. Doing so, the destination image of Switzerland gets slightly altered by the combination firstly of a subjective yet strongly present opinion of the vlogger, and secondly of the "subjective mirrors" of the commentators. Although many different DI can be produced, the image is still recognizable, because it resulted in a level of symmetry during the encoding and decoding process. These findings support the idea that vlogs create and stimulate DI, and by virtue of it, this study proved that the outcome of different elements and narratives interacting with each other frames Switzerland in specific yet negotiable manners (Jakopović, 2020). Hence, Switzerland appears and is perceived as a dreamy aesthetically pleasing country where magnificent landscapes can be found, leaving without having eaten

fondue is a crime, money is an important variable but not the one altering the experience, and lastly, where being a resident must be considered a blessing.

Furthermore, as just concluded, from this study it emerged that specific DI are framed and debated because vloggers are opinion leaders and gatekeepers of travel information. It was attested that through their vlogs they can shift viewers' attention to specific locations and influence attitudes, decision-making and behaviours based on what vloggers communicate (Devasia & P.V., 2022). In the decoding process, many commentators felt like wanting to travel to Switzerland or start planning their journey there thanks to the vloggers' representation of Switzerland and the information attached to it. The convincing and realistic traits of these videos are motives for potential tourists to want to live the same experiences. Especially the spectrum of feelings arising from vloggers and viewers affected the cultivation and spread of eWom that followed the encoded framings of Switzerland (Rahman et al., 2021). The emotional outcomes are vital to create a stronger bond with the audience and incentivize them to travel to the same places (Silaban et al., 2022). The destination image of the country dynamically changes if individuals associate it with personal feelings and overall sensations. Through vlogs, a DI of a place becomes multi-dimensional and goes beyond mere stereotypes and assumptions. In addition, contrary to what Goffman sustained (1990), notably thanks to this category, social interactions do take place, even if there is no physical co-presence of vloggers and viewers. Whether vloggers are acting their role as content creators and influencers or not, they appear to be giving honest and transparent performances, which may be not so different from their backstage and non-virtual selves.

As noted, the themes that were not brought up as much as others, were automatically less discussed in the comments section as well. The frames that involved historical facts and interactions with locals did not receive from vloggers the same attention as other categories, and consequentially neither from the audience. While the themes of sublime landscape and cosmopolitan lifestyle were the focus of many vlogs. Like so, vloggers may have unintentionally directed the viewers to (unconsciously) highly engage with them. It shows the power that is held in the hands of online communities and internet leaders such as vloggers, and how much they can influence the flow of recommendations, information and opinions.

Lastly, as often mentioned at the beginning of this research, vlogs are preferred over other types of online sources for their directness and authenticity in conveying messages and images, even if the video makers still perform frontstage the role of the vlogger. Yet, the reactions to the Swiss travel vlogs analysed confirmed that when a vlogger appears honest, straightforward, and unfiltered to its audience, it shows, and it is strongly appreciated.

Goffman (1990) may be not entirely wrong in assuming that a frontstage identity is the best version of oneself, but it does not necessarily mean it is faked and romanticised to please the audience. Many comments were indeed directed to the on-camera authenticity of the vlogger and its realistic content, arguing that vlogs feel more real than travel documentaries or that they are “much better than all those ads from tourism associations” (Elena Taber). Observations as such prove that vlogs can be a source of credibility and travel reliability, outweighing advertisements of destination management organizations (Martínez-Sala et al., 2019).

In this regard, the relevance of eWom and online communities for destination management organizations is crucial, even though MySwitzerland considers it not as influential for its key performance indicators. Yet, this research shows that if multiple persons decided to share their opinion on vlogs as more genuine and realistic than some tourism advertisements, it does have its relevance. Vloggers give DMOs free and accessible sources to improve by looking at why vlogs are considered better than official destinations promotions, what elements vlogs have that advertisements do not and how to implement all of this in their marketing strategies. To conclude, this study showed what kind of destination images, in the case of Switzerland, can be elaborated via travel vlogs and the negotiation of these latter’s content. From one side, thanks to its efficiency, vlogs may increase the attractiveness of a country, the number of potential visitors and attract new audiences. On the other side, because it is important for DMOs to make strategic and competitive decisions to acquire new customers (Mihajlović & Čolović, 2014), vlogs seem to be getting outweighed in their turn by shorter video formats like Instagram Reels, TikTok and YouTube shorts (MySwitzerland).

6. DISCUSSION

To wind it up it must be mentioned few points that limited a more in-depth research. Firstly, the chosen platform. It is to bear in mind that YouTube's main goal like many other social media, is to establish a safe place in which creators and online communities have "the freedom to share a broad range of experiences and perspectives" ([Youtube Community Guidelines](#)). For this reason, it was already considered and expected that the comment section would not have presented particularly negative and "radical" opinions against the dominant hegemonic codes of Switzerland. YouTube policies serve indeed as guidelines to protect content with an educational, scientific, artistic, documentary, or entertaining purpose ([YouTube](#)). Moreover, only a small part of those who watch vlogs tend to interact in the comments and not all comments bring high-quality feedback. Yet, users and content creators read comments as they are considered added informational, entertaining, and social exchanging values (Schultes et al., 2013). In this research the commentators were mostly people who enjoyed the content and shared positive opinions, creating a sort of echo chamber effect among the reactions of those who interacted. Even if this may have limited a more contrastive and engaging analysis, it was still possible to critically investigate a spectrum of different opinions.

In addition, many vlogs that had a high level of online engagement, both in the number of views and comments, were not able to be considered part of the data due to a language barrier. Various videos were in Korean, Chinese or mostly in one of the languages spoken in India. Without subtitles or direct translation, it was not possible to get more insights into what Switzerland look like from an Asian's perspective. In my study, some vloggers were coming from Asia, yet the majority were European or American. For a future study, it could be intriguing to consider also the nationality of vloggers as a variable of analysis to understand stereotypes, ideologies and narratives attached to possible pre-existing ideas attached to one origin.

Furthermore, it must reflect that the ways in which Switzerland was framed initially by vloggers and later by viewers are pre-constructed on existing beliefs, knowledge and highly probable on already seen vlogs/posts/reels and read information about Switzerland. Reasons for which the stereotypes Switzerland is usually known for are often brought up and less negotiated than maybe new or not so world-widely renowned features, such as the more historical and cultural aspects. Nevertheless, even if the contexts in which the country was framed reminded of clichés when thinking about Switzerland (i.e. mountains

and lakes), there still had been the possibility to explore them on deeper layers of meanings (i.e. 18th romanticism influence on the perception and experience of nature).

To add one last observation, following MySwitzerland opinion that vlogs are not as relevant as other formats to follow trends and attract new visitors, I think it could be interesting in future research to compare official DMOs advertisements with tourists' posts, vlogs, reels etc and ask the audience which narrative they prefer (DMO or amateur one), which social network, format and why. Research as such could be developed on eWom, DI, concepts of authenticity, online trends, gaining followers or new tourists, communication efficiency and generally motivational reasons.

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8. APPENDIX

APPENDIX A. MYSWITZERLAND ONLINE WRITTEN INTERVIEW

1. Does MySwitzerland watch travel vlogs (about Switzerland) to see what people visit, advise, or discourage about Switzerland?

a) If yes, is the content of the vlog a useful source to understand tourists' behaviours/preferences? Does the vlog help MySwitzerland to improve tourism plans, marketing strategies, and advertisements?

sometimes, our social media managers watch those blog in order to get ideas for our monthly content plan – but this is just for inspiration and not on a regular basis

b) If not, why? And would MySwitzerland consider watching vlogs in the future as a source of information for the improvement of its tourism strategies?

it takes a lot of time and we have other tools (monitoring social media posts from competition for instance, and monitoring what our community asks and wants) as well as a content strategy that we use to come up with content

also we do not want to go into competition of VLOGGERS, as this is not our core business, being a national tourist organisation is not the same than being a content creator

2. Does MySwitzerland watch/consult other types of social media to look at what people (dis)like about Switzerland? If yes, which ones? Does MySwitzerland think that these platforms are more effective than YouTube vlogs?

most important for us is radaring our community – for that we use the tool Emplify and analyse all the comments our community is writing online

in addition, our social media content managers use social media on a personal basis regularly – so they know some of the most important trends online

but here we do not focus on youtube VLOGs, we rather seek inspiration in short video format such as TikTok, Insta Reels or YouTube shorts as otherwise it takes just a lot of time

3. Does MySwitzerland ever read comments under travellers' videos/posts to retrieve useful feedback to implement for its own advertisements and tourism marketing?

yes of course, 100% all of them -> we work with a community strategy on all social media platforms and monitor everything what our community does, this is highly important for us and helps us a lot to understand our end consumer

4. Does MySwitzerland ever read comments under its own advertisement videos/posts to search for feedback?

yes, same goes for own advertisement -> see answer number three. Community management is adopted as well as for own advertisement as for user generated content.

5. How important is electronic/online word of mouth for MySwitzerland?

Main focus of Switzerland Tourism is to inspire NEW guests to travel to Switzerland. So recommendation is not the main KPI – we rather focus in our campaigns on acquiring new people. But still, we think that WoM can help – so just as this is not a strategic KPI it does not mean that we do not appreciate WOM.

6. Does MySwitzerland think that the online representation of Switzerland given by tourists (via Instagram, YouTube, TikTok etc) enhance or diminish the real image of the country?

In our opinion it should enhance the real image of the country as we stick to real pictures and real stories – we do not fake nature 😊

7. In travel vlogs only certain cantons and areas are more likely to be visited such as Zürich, Bern, Luzern, and Geneva. Why does MySwitzerland think other cantons are not as known among international tourists? Does MySwitzerland think it is because these other cantons are not advertised as much by the national and regional tourism offices?

Some places are just more famous, as they are more iconic than other, niche places. There are various reasons for it:

- power of marketing (how much budget is available to market the destination)
- product development (either for niche tourist groups or for bigger audience)
- popularity in e.g. Bollywood or Hollywood movies and other famous placements
- strategy whether it is a place and has activities for national or international tourists

BUT: Switzerland Tourism is responsible to promote whole Switzerland, so in our content we are taking care that we address all regions and that we have no monothematic content planning when it comes to social media communication.

MySwitzerland authorizes Maura Stöckli, enrolled at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, to use these answers as data for her Master's thesis in Tourism, Culture and Society.

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Signature and date



Natalie Schönbächler

Signature and date



17.04.2023

APPENDIX B. SWITZERLAND TRAVEL VLOGS CHART

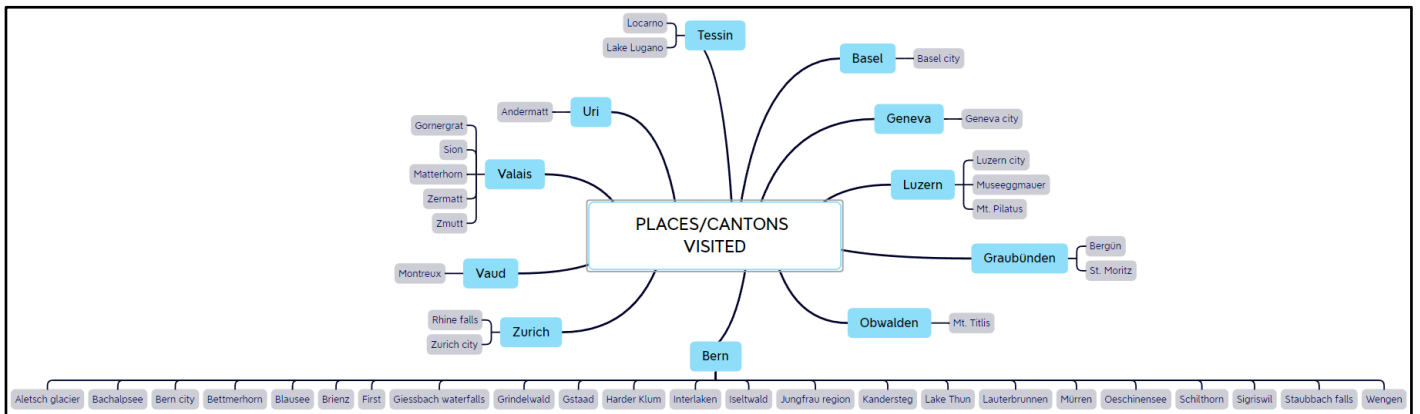
<i>No.</i>	<i>CHANNEL</i>	<i>TITLE</i>	<i>PUBLISHED DATE</i>	<i>No. VIEWS</i>	<i>No. COMMENTS</i>	<i>No. LIKES</i>	<i>VIDEO LENGTH</i>
1	Brett Conti	THE MOST PERFECT COUNTRY ON THE PLANET	22 Sept. 2021	3.567.477	5.026	95.956	18:51
2	유학일기 yooil	(eng) My first time in SwitzerlandCH Travel vlog	31 Oct. 2021	2.000.602	1.017	58.551	29:46
3	Bea Alonzo	Our 1st Time in Switzerland! (Lucerne, Grindelwald & more!) Bea's Europe Diaries part 5 Bea Alonzo	10 Dec. 2022	844.525	1.071	17.034	26:07
4	Karl Watson	SWITZERLAND CH Grindelwald to Zermatt A Summer In Europe - Ep 1	10 Feb. 2022	843.329	999	12.490	1:10:06
5	Helen Owen	We Took Switzerland's Most Scenic, Luxurious (& expensive) Train to St. Moritz! VLOG	30 Jan. 2022	683.382	298	9633	29:38
6	MollyMae	COME TO SWITZERLAND WITH US ♡ ONE OF MY FAV TRIPS EVER (€\$) MOLLYMAE	21 Sept. 2022	676.289	626	18753	35:52
7	Jovane PJY	(eng) Switzerland Travel Vlog 2022 CH 🇨🇭 瑞士vlog 🇨🇭 tourist spots, foodie, shopping 全	31 March 2022	231.538	197	4715	27:16

		世界上最美的国家 					
8	Jovane PJY (pt.2)	(eng) Switzerland Travel Vlog 瑞士自由行CH Paragliding hotel Cabana food hunting vlog  	7 Apr. 2022	137.548	114	4787	34:57
9	Kritika Goel	SWITZERLAND TRAVEL VLOG CH Ep 1 Visiting Zürich, Rhine Falls & Sledding in the Swiss Alps!	30 Apr. 2022	173.526	265	3680	15:50
10	Kritika Khurana	Sisters' Trip To Switzerland!   VLOG: Pt. 1!	18 Dec. 2022	110.268	225	4127	14:34
11	Daniel marsh	Our Switzerland Journey: chThe World's most spectacular destination's	1 Feb. 2023	79.000	444	4619	17:24
12	Maddie Castellano	 SWITZERLAND VLOG Lauterbrunnen, Interlaken, Lucerne	31 May 2022	40.438	42	897	24:51
13	Flora Hamilton	SWITZERLAND TRAVEL VLOG Chocolate factory, exploring Geneva and Montreux, food spots, solo travel	17 June 2022	27.302	42	672	10:39
14	Jamie Obeña	switzerland vlog pt. 1 we stayed in switzerland for 8 days, is it really THAT beautiful???	14 Nov. 2022	23.703	90	561	13:08

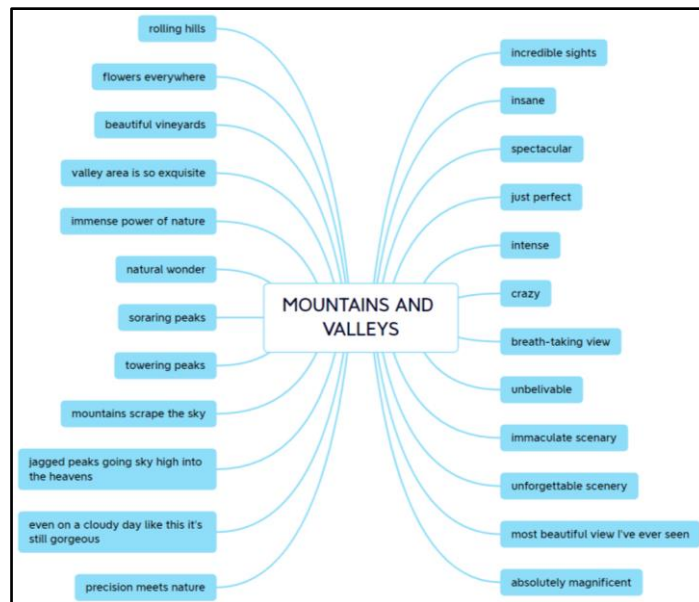
15	Leesa Yu	SWITZERLAND IN 4 DAYS VLOG + my tips & our itinerary	8 Aug. 2022	23.500	59	441	19:23
16	Mary Bedford	SWITZERLAND VLOG PART ONE MARY BEDFORD	19 Feb. 2023	21.399	28	451	46:16
17	Mary Bedford (pt.2)	SWITZERLAND VLOG PART TWO MARY BEDFORD	20 Feb. 2023	15.667	23	416	42:00
18	Holly Gabrielle	MY FIRST TIME IN SWITZERLANDCH	27 Nov. 2022	17.208	78	650	27:56
19	Cathy Ding	My first adventure in Switzerland! CH Travel Vlog + Top Things to Do	9 Jul. 2022	13577	38	241	26:42
20	Ben Morris	I Visited the World's Most Expensive Town (Billionaires Secretly Live here)	27 Dic. 2022	1. 301. 972	743	26. 802	14:30
21	Flying The Nest	The Most Beautiful Swiss Towns (the perfect Switzerland road trip)	28 Aug. 2022	391. 494	540	10. 448	16:18
22	Elena Taber	I Backpacked Solo Through Switzyerland!	24 Aug. 2018	651. 480	1. 413	22. 192	14:02
23	Lost LeBlanc	Can the iPhone shoot Travel Vlogs? Switzerland 4K	16 Apr. 2020	522. 076	869	13. 371	15:28
24	Katie Horan	MY FIRST TRIP TO SWITZERLAND TRAVEL VLOGch: Hiking the Swiss	17 Oct. 2021	14.747	38	538	14:07

		Alps, Lucerne & Cheese Fondue!					
25	Chloé Kian	Vlog I went to the Swiss Mountains Alone	19 Set. 2020	302.020	584	11.052	29:07
26	Sanne Vloet	Switzerland Travel vlog // Bungee Jumping, Travel Skincare routine + Locarno Film Festival	3 Set. 2021	122.210	149	3785	16:41

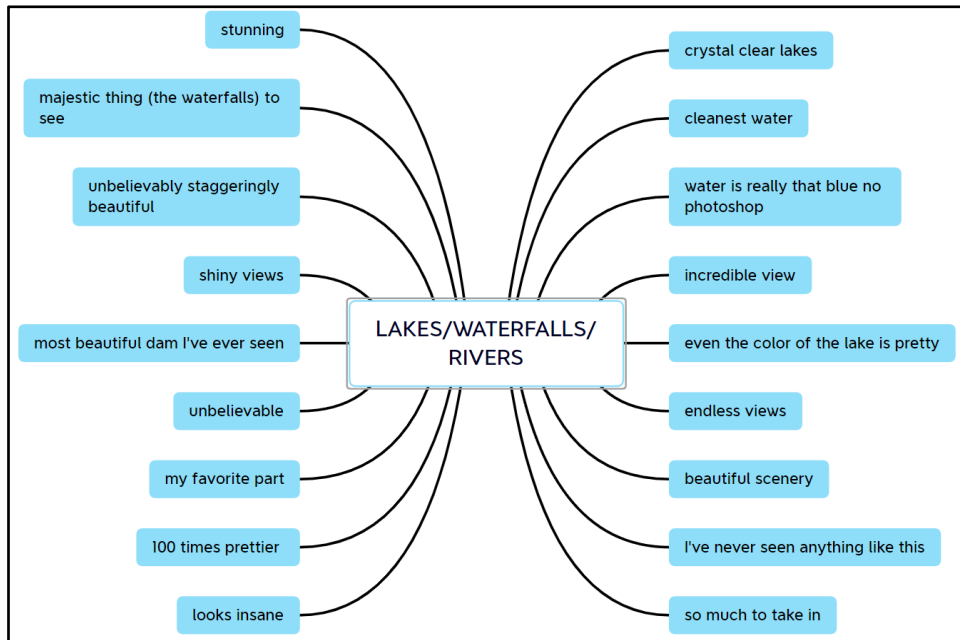
APPENDIX C. THEMATIC MAPS – VLOGS AND COMMENTS’ CONTENT



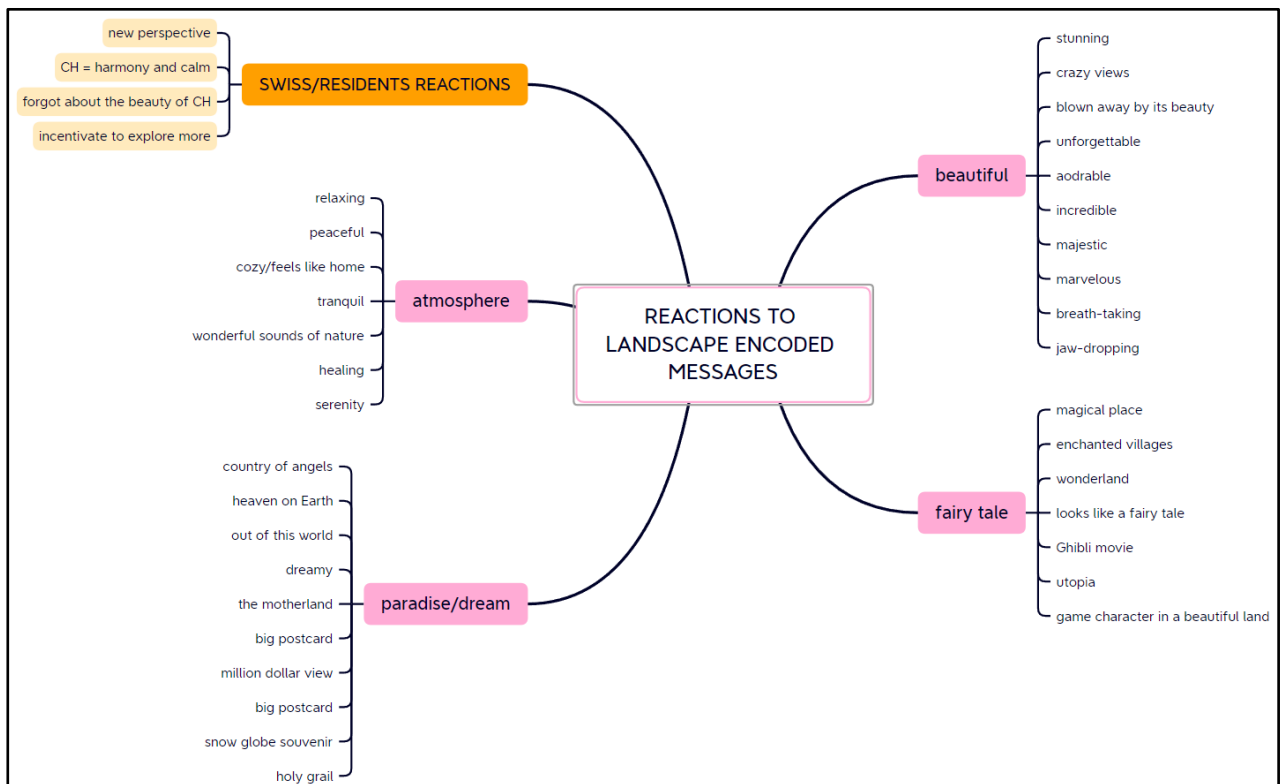
Thematic map 1. Places and cantons visited in vlogs.



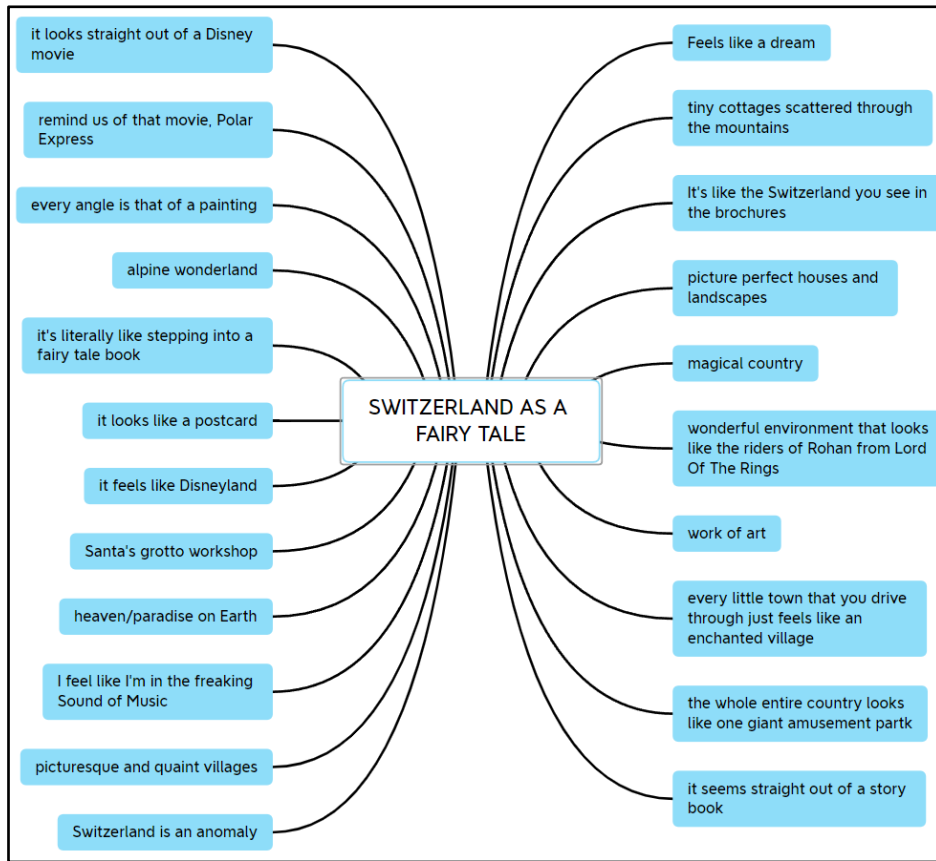
Thematic map 2. Mountains and valleys descriptions in vlogs.



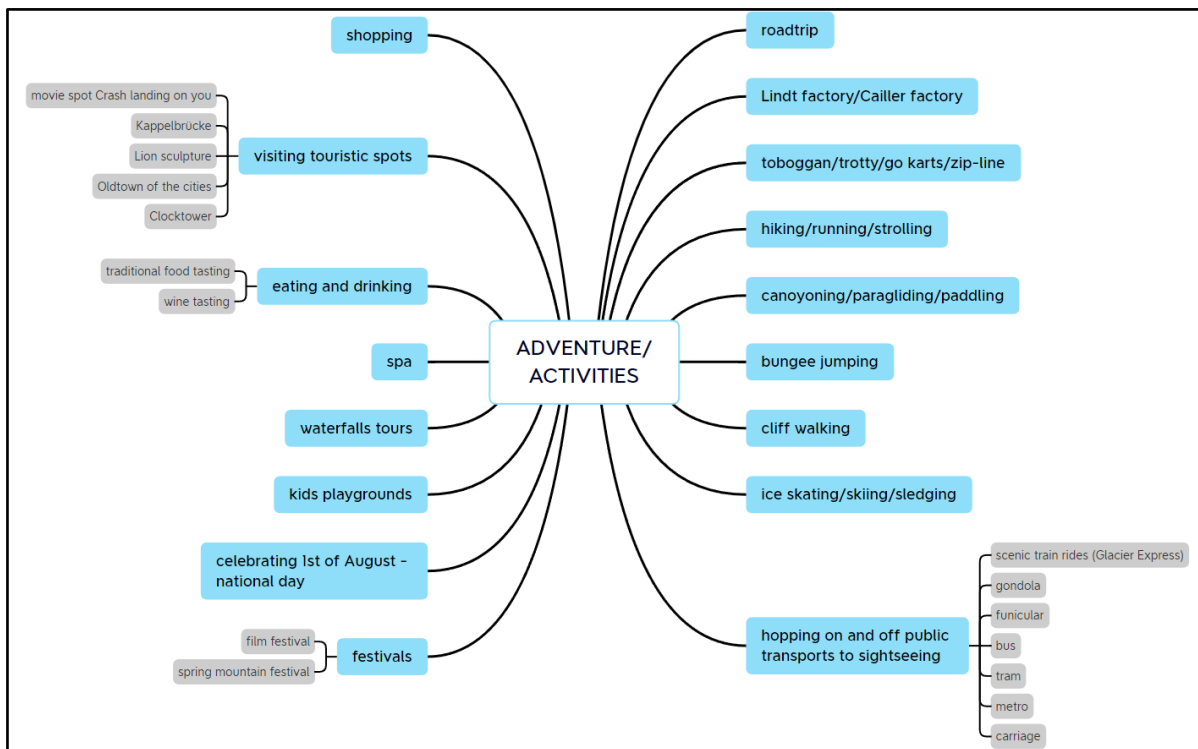
Thematic map 3. Lakes, waterfalls and rivers descriptions in vlogs.



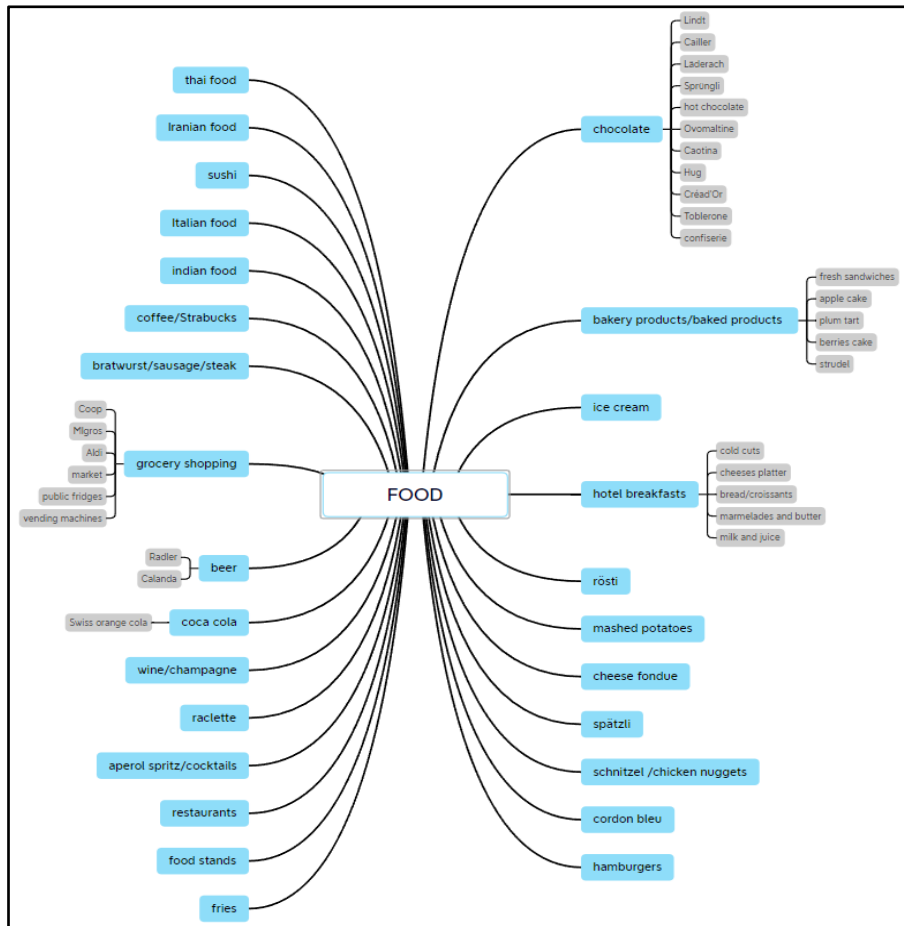
Thematic map 4. Reactions to landscape encoded messages (comments).



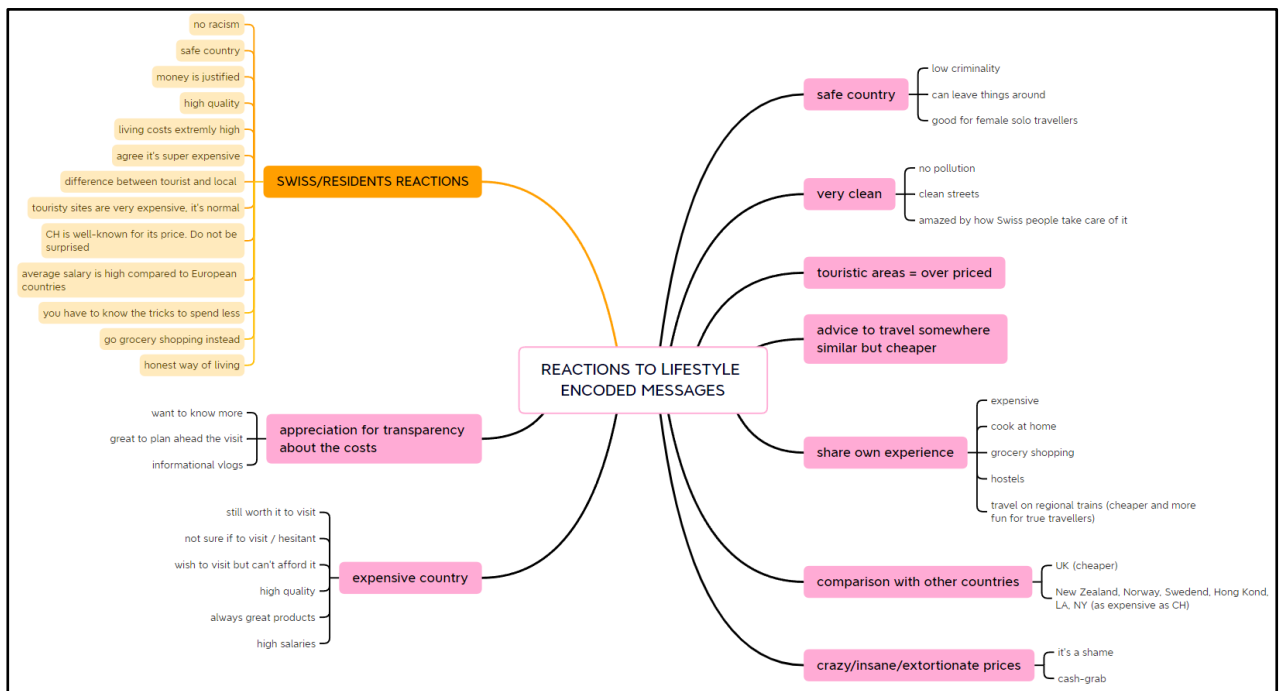
Thematic map 5. Switzerland as a fairy tale – descriptions in vlogs.



Thematic map 6. Swiss adventure/activities, descriptions in vlogs.



Thematic map 7. Food descriptions in vlogs.



Thematic map 8. Reactions to lifestyle encoded messages (comments).