

Digital Cultural Brokerage on YouTube: Narrative and Identity in Khoubaib Koussai's Travel Vlogs

الوساطة الثقافية الرقمية على يوتيوب : السرد والهوية
في مدونات السفر المصوّرة لخبيب قوساي

Le courtage culturel numérique sur YouTube : récit et identité dans
les vlogs de voyage de Khoubaib Koussai

BAYAOUI BOUDJEMAA ET ABDELKADER BOUDERBALA

Université Kasdi Merbah Ouargla, Algérie

Route de Ghardaïa, Boîte Postale BP 511, 30 000 Ouargla, Algérie

bayaoui.boudjemaa@univ-ouargla.dz

ID ORCID 0000-0003-0709-7725

bouderbala.abdelkader@univ-ouargla.dz

ID ORCID : 0009-0005-6721-0744

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Résumé

In the context of platformized digital culture, travel vloggers have emerged as influential cultural mediators who help shape global perceptions of places, peoples, and identities. This article offers a critical analysis of narrative construction and identity representation in travel vlogs through a case study of the Algerian vlogger Khoubai Koussai. Based on a critical qualitative content analysis, the study examines five widely viewed videos selected for their geographical, cultural, and narrative diversity. The theoretical framework combines digital narrative studies, postcolonial approaches to the representation of the Other, and scholarship on the attention economy. The analysis shows that Khoubai's videos are structured by a double logic. On the one hand, they build a shared-humanity narrative centred on hospitality, empathy, and the moral value of encounter. On the other hand, the pressures of platform visibility favour an aesthetics of simplification that translates complex social realities into emotionally efficient and visually marketable formats. The article concludes that the digital traveller occupies a negotiated space between intercultural mediation and algorithmic commodification, making travel vlogging a revealing site for studying contemporary cultural brokerage.

Mots-clés

digital narrative, representation of the Other, travel vlogs; YouTube, attention economy, postcolonial studies, cultural brokerage

الملخص

في سياق الثقافة الرقمية الممنهجة عبر المنصات، برز الرحالة اليوتيوبرز بوصفهم وسطاء ثقافيين جددًا يساهمون في تشكيل التصورات العالمية عن الأمكنة والناس والهويات. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقديم تحليل نقدي لآليات بناء السرد وتمثيل الهوية في مدونات الفيديو السياحية، من خلال دراسة حالة الرحالة الجزائري خبيب كواس. وتعتمد الدراسة على تحليل نوعي نقدي للمحتوى شمل خمس فيديوهات ذات نسب مشاهدة مرتفعة، اختيرت قصدًا لما تمثله من تنوع جغرافي وثقافي وسردي. ويجمع الإطار النظري بين دراسات السرد الرقمي، والمقاربات ما بعد الكولونيالية لتمثيل « الآخر »، وأدبيات اقتصاد الانتباه. وتُظهر النتائج وجود منطق مزدوج يحكم هذا المحتوى: فمن جهة، يبني خبيب سردية للإنسانية المشتركة تُبرز

الضيافة والتعاطف وقيمة اللقاء؛ ومن جهة أخرى، تدفع شروط الظهور المنصاتي إلى جمالية تبسيط تُعيد تأطير الوقائع الاجتماعية والثقافية المعقدة داخل صيغ بصرية جذابة وسهلة الاستهلاك. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الرحالة الرقمي يشغل فضاء تفاوضياً متوتراً بين الوساطة الثقافية والمُنتجة الخوارزمية للمعنى، بما يجعل مدونات السفر موضوعاً كاشفاً لتحولات الوساطة الثقافية في العصر الرقمي.

الكلمات المفتاحية

السرد الرقمي؛ تمثيل الآخر؛ مدونات السفر المصورة؛ يوتيوب؛ اقتصاد الانتباه؛ دراسات ما بعد الاستعمار؛ الوساطة الثقافية

Résumé

À l'ère de la culture numérique de plateforme, les youtubeurs voyageurs s'imposent comme de nouveaux médiateurs culturels capables d'infléchir les perceptions globales des lieux, des peuples et des identités. Le présent article propose une analyse critique des mécanismes de construction narrative et de représentation identitaire dans les vlogs de voyage, à partir d'une étude de cas consacrée au vlogger algérien Khoubai Koussai. Fondée sur une analyse qualitative critique de contenu, l'étude porte sur cinq vidéos à forte audience, retenues pour leur diversité géographique, culturelle et narrative. Le cadre théorique articule les études du récit numérique, les approches postcoloniales de la représentation de l'Autre et les travaux consacrés à l'économie de l'attention. L'analyse met au jour une double logique : d'une part, un récit de l'humanité partagée valorisant l'hospitalité, l'empathie et la rencontre ; d'autre part, une esthétique de la simplification, favorisée par les contraintes de visibilité des plateformes, qui reformate des réalités complexes en récits émotionnellement efficaces et visuellement consommables. L'article montre ainsi que le voyageur numérique occupe un espace de négociation tendu entre la médiation interculturelle et la marchandisation algorithmique.

Mots-clés

récit numérique, représentation de l'Autre, vlogs de voyage, YouTube, économie de l'attention; études postcoloniales, médiation culturelle

Introduction

In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, the media environment has undergone a structural transformation that has altered not only the circulation of information but also the ways cultural meanings and social identities are produced, negotiated, and consumed. At the centre of this reconfiguration stands YouTube, which José van Dijck (2013) characterises as part of a broader culture of connectivity. The platform has evolved from a repository of amateur videos into a global media infrastructure in which visibility, recommendation, and monetisation are algorithmically organised.

Within this environment, travel vloggers have moved from the periphery of media culture to a position of considerable symbolic influence. They are no longer simply travellers recording spontaneous impressions; increasingly, they operate as micro-media institutions that script, edit, brand, and distribute highly curated narratives addressed to transnational publics. As such, they participate in the construction of destination images, the circulation of cultural imaginaries, and the framing of relationships between the Self and the Other.

The central problem addressed in this article concerns the ambivalent role of these new intermediaries. On the one hand, travel vloggers may challenge older media stereotypes by offering direct, affectively charged, and apparently human-centred representations of distant societies. Their narratives can foreground everyday hospitality, shared vulnerability, and unexpected forms of proximity, thereby contributing to intercultural curiosity and symbolic repair.

On the other hand, this mediation takes place under the pressures of the attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2001). In such an environment, value is tied less to analytical density than to emotional capture, narrative velocity, and visual attractiveness. The platform's recommendation logic may therefore encourage creators to privilege the exotic, the surprising, the spectacular, or the affectively consumable. In this sense, travel content risks transforming cultural difference into a marketable visual commodity and reproducing simplified versions of alterity.

This tension is especially relevant in the case of the Algerian vlogger Khoubai Koussai, whose channel reaches large Arab audiences and whose videos combine cinematic production values with highly personalised storytelling. His positionality is analytically productive: he speaks from within an Arab and Muslim horizon of enunciation, yet he also represents communities encountered abroad for a large digital public. He thus appears simultaneously as traveller, narrator, translator, and broker of cultural meaning.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to answer three related questions. First, what narrative and visual strategies structure Khoubai's representation of culturally heterogeneous destinations? Second, how are the identities of the traveller and of the represented Other discursively constructed in these videos? Third, to

what extent does this content offer complex cultural understanding, and to what extent is it shaped by the entertainment imperatives of the platform economy?

Rather than judging a person, the article uses this case as an analytical lens to examine a broader contemporary phenomenon: the production and circulation of cultural meaning under platform conditions, and the opportunities and distortions generated by new forms of digital cultural brokerage.

1. Theoretical Framework and Critical Literature Review

This study is grounded in a multidisciplinary framework combining digital narrative studies, postcolonial approaches to representation, and theories of symbolic mediation. The aim is not merely to describe travel videos as media objects, but to analyse how they organise perception, produce value, and structure relations between visibility, identity, and cultural difference.

1.1. From Narrative to Digital Narrative: Structure, Performance, and Platform

Narrative remains a fundamental human mode of ordering experience and making the world intelligible (Bruner, 1991). Yet the migration of storytelling into digital environments has profoundly altered the material and communicative conditions of narration. As Janet Murray (2017) argues, digital narratives are procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopaedic. In the context of YouTube, narrative does not reside exclusively in verbal storytelling; it is produced through editing rhythms, music, thumbnails, titles, subtitles, camera movement, pacing, and audience-oriented framing devices.

Travel vlogs, in this sense, should be approached as composite narrative performances rather than as simple travel diaries. They are structured by montage and anticipation; they rely on affective hooks; and they frequently distribute meaning across image, sound, gesture, and platform metadata. Following Rettberg (2014), one may therefore treat them as text-machines in which multiple semiotic layers converge to generate a coherent experiential effect for viewers.

At the same time, these performances are shaped by platform architecture. YouTube is not a neutral hosting space but a sociotechnical system governed by metrics such as click-through rate, retention, and watch time. The attention economy thus exerts pressure on creators to stabilise recognisable formulas, intensify emotional salience, and foreground visual singularity. A crucial question, therefore, emerges: how do algorithmic incentives affect narrative decisions about the representation of cultures, places, and social others?

1.2. Representing the Other in the Digital Age: From Orientalism to Consumable Difference

The representation of the cultural Other remains a central question in media and postcolonial theory. Edward Said's (1978) account of Orientalism demon-

strated how the Orient was discursively produced through regimes of knowledge that aestheticised, essentialised, and subordinated alterity. Although digital platforms differ historically from colonial media, contemporary scholars continue to warn against new modes of simplification and symbolic domination that may be described as digital orientalism.

In this framework, the camera is never innocent. Through filming, framing, and selection, the travel vlogger mobilises what Urry and Larsen (2011) term the tourist gaze. This gaze is socially organised and bound to asymmetrical relations of power, mobility, class, and access. Even when the content creator is from the Global South, filming remains an act of symbolic mediation: the creator chooses what becomes visible, interpretable, desirable, or memorable to a broader audience.

bell hooks (1992) further complicates this issue through the notion of “eating the Other”, that is, the reduction of difference to a consumable sign of excitement, flavour, and self-expansion. Under this logic, the Other is appreciated not in their complexity, but insofar as they can enhance the traveller’s own narrative and the viewer’s affective experience. Travel vlogs may therefore oscillate between genuine encounter and the commodification of cultural difference.

1.3. Narrative Identity and Cultural Brokerage: Constructing the Self through the Encounter

From a Ricoeurian perspective, identity is not a fixed essence but an ongoing narrative construction (Ricoeur, 1991). Individuals come to understand themselves through the stories they tell about action, memory, continuity, and change. Travel vlogs offer a particularly revealing site for this process because they simultaneously narrate a destination and stage the traveller as a recognisable subject: curious, courageous, moral, cosmopolitan, humorous, or vulnerable.

In anthropological terms, the travel vlogger may be conceived as a cultural broker, namely an intermediary positioned at the boundary between different symbolic worlds. Such brokerage is never neutral. It is shaped by positionality, cultural capital, social background, and the expectations of the intended audience. In Khoubuib’s case, his Arab-Muslim location grants him proximity and credibility vis-à-vis a large Arabic-speaking public, while also placing him in the role of interpreter of non-Arab and non-Muslim lifeworlds.

Recent work on travel vlogging suggests that these narratives often privilege self-performance over contextual depth. Destinations can become stages upon which the creator confirms mobility, authenticity, bravery, or openness. The challenge for analysis, therefore, is to examine how far the represented place retains discursive density, and how far it is absorbed into the traveller’s self-narration.

2. Methodology

This article adopts a critical qualitative content analysis approach. The purpose of this method is not simply to inventory visible elements, but to interpret latent meanings, recurrent framings, and the ideological work performed by audiovisual discourse (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). The analysis, therefore, attends to the relation between narrative form, visual selection, and the representation of identities.

2.1. Corpus and Sampling Strategy

A purposive sample of five publicly accessible videos from Khoubaib Koussai's YouTube channel was selected. The sample was designed to maximise variation while remaining analytically manageable. The choice of videos was guided by three criteria: geographical and cultural diversity; high visibility and circulation within the platform ecology; and representativeness of the creator's recognisable narrative style, which combines personal commentary, cinematic montage, and encounter-based storytelling.

The selected destinations cover distinct symbolic configurations: Mauritania, Yemen, India, Japan, and Tunisia. Together, they make it possible to compare the representation of proximity and distance, conflict and normality, poverty and technological modernity, Arabness and non-Arabness, as well as the narrator's shifting position across different contexts.

Table 1. Corpus of analysed vlogs

Video title	Destination	Duration	Publication year	Approximate views
"I Traveled to a Country with No Internet"	Mauritania	21:01	2022	5.5 million
"I Traveled to the Most Dangerous Country in the World"	Yemen	22:18	2021	10 million
"I Traveled to a Country Where They Worship Cows"	India	22:50	2019	9.8 million
"I Traveled to the Country of the Future"	Japan	20:31	2020	8.2 million
"The Cheapest Arab Country I Traveled To"	Tunisia	18:45	2022	5.1 million

2.2. Unit of Analysis and Analytical Procedure

The primary unit of analysis was the video, understood as an integrated narrative whole. However, each vlog was also broken down into scenes and shots for closer examination of framing, sequencing, voice-over, direct address, and recurring motifs. The analytical procedure unfolded in three stages.

First, repeated viewing facilitated the production of descriptive notes and open codes related to manifest content, such as food scenes, interactions with locals,

aerial views, transport sequences, ritual scenes, and direct camera commentary. Second, axial coding grouped these observations into broader interpretive categories, including the narrative of generosity, the aestheticisation of deprivation, the visual coding of danger, the production of exotic intensity, and the rhetoric of shared belonging. Third, selective coding identified the dominant analytical pattern across the corpus, namely the coexistence of a shared-humanity narrative and an aesthetics of simplification.

The quotations and scene descriptions reproduced in the analytical tables are used as illustrative cues. They do not function as exhaustive transcripts but as compact markers of the rhetorical and visual tendencies identified during analysis.

2.3. Analytical Trustworthiness and Ethical Reflexivity

To strengthen interpretive consistency, the analysis relied on recurrent memo writing, category comparisons across videos, and repeated returns to the corpus to test the stability of emerging interpretations. The goal was not statistical generalisation but analytical plausibility and transparency. Because the corpus consists of publicly accessible audiovisual material, no direct intervention with participants took place. Nonetheless, the study maintains ethical reflexivity by avoiding personal judgment and by treating the creator's work as a cultural text rather than as a private individual biography.

3. Results and Qualitative Analysis

The analysis reveals two broad and interrelated dynamics. The first may be described as a shared-humanity narrative: Khoubaib repeatedly foregrounds hospitality, generosity, emotional resonance, and the moral value of human connection. The second is an aesthetics of simplification: complex places are often condensed into strong narrative formulas, visually legible contrasts, and emotionally efficient stereotypes. The following tables synthesise the corpus-level findings.

The quotations and descriptive cues below are presented in detached form inside the analytical tables so that the empirical material remains visually distinct from the interpretive commentary.

Table 2. Mauritania—From technological absence to moral authenticity

Category	Analytical synthesis	Illustrative cue / theoretical anchoring
Narrative structure	The vlog is organised as a journey into apparent remoteness. The title mobilises deprivation (“no internet”) as a hook, then converts that lack into an ethical lesson about human connection and simplicity.	Illustrative cue: A destination presented as outside the ordinary world, then revalued through intimacy and desert hospitality.

Category	Analytical synthesis	Illustrative cue / theoretical anchoring
Visual representation	Wide desert shots, warm chromatic textures, and close-ups of tea, faces, and domestic gestures build an atmosphere of authenticity. The landscape is aestheticised as emptiness and purity.	Theoretical anchoring: Tourist gaze; visual romanticisation of scarcity.
Linguistic discourse	The lexicon privileges simplicity, purity, generosity, and emotional truth. Technological lack is reframed less as an infrastructural deficit than as a sign of uncorrupted life.	Illustrative cue: Human connection is framed as more important than digital connection.
Representation of the Other	Mauritanian subjects are represented positively, yet largely through the trope of noble simplicity. Structural context remains weak, and poverty risks being converted into a moral spectacle.	Theoretical anchoring: hooks's critique of consumable alterity; romanticisation of deprivation.

Table 3. Yemen – Humanisation through the rhetoric of danger

Category	Analytical synthesis	Illustrative cue / theoretical anchoring
Narrative structure	The vlog begins by activating a dominant stereotype of Yemen as a dangerous space, then seeks to displace that image by revealing human warmth and resilience.	Illustrative cue: The narrator presents himself as someone willing to “see the truth” beyond fear.
Visual representation	The video juxtaposes aesthetic shots of Old Sana’a and vernacular life with visible traces of destruction. Children’s faces and scenes of everyday interaction function as signs of hope.	Theoretical anchoring: Platform drama; mediated construction of reality.
Linguistic discourse	The verbal discourse alternates between danger and admiration. Risk heightens narrative tension, while Yemeni generosity is elevated into the key moral message of the episode.	Illustrative cue: The traveller’s courage and the people’s resilience mirror one another.
Representation of the Other	The representation is empathetic, yet it tends to compress Yemenis into the figure of the generous victim. Political complexity, conflict genealogy, and internal heterogeneity remain largely backgrounded.	Theoretical anchoring: benevolent simplification; soft digital orientalism.

Table 4. India – Exotic intensity and the economy of visual surprise

Category	Analytical synthesis	Illustrative cue / theoretical anchoring
Narrative structure	The narrative privileges immersion in strangeness and sensory overload. The title selects a highly visible religious marker and uses it as a threshold of curiosity for the intended audience.	Illustrative cue: The destination is introduced as a place of wonder, oddity, and radical difference.
Visual representation	Dense crowds, saturated colours, ritual scenes, and accelerated montage contribute to an image of India as vibrant, chaotic, and spiritually intense. The visual field is driven by high sensory contrast.	Theoretical anchoring: tourist gaze; destination image construction.
Linguistic discourse	Language emphasises amazement, culture shock, and spiritual energy. Complex religious practices are translated into accessible emotional formulas rather than contextualised explanations.	Illustrative cue: Not understanding itself becomes a source of fascination.
Representation of the Other	Indian subjects are frequently approached through the lens of spectacle, spirituality, and alterity. Ordinary social life recedes behind what is most visually dramatic or culturally legible to outsiders.	Theoretical anchoring: Said's orientalism; consumption of exotic difference.

Table 5. Japan – Positive stereotyping and the fantasy of futurity

Category	Analytical synthesis	Illustrative cue / theoretical anchoring
Narrative structure	Japan is framed as an anticipatory model of order, cleanliness, and technological advancement. The narrative develops as a movement through an imagined future made visible in everyday infrastructure.	Illustrative cue: The destination is narrated as if one had travelled “ahead of time”.
Visual representation	Symmetry, speed, precision, and orderly circulation dominate the visual grammar. Trains, crossings, service systems, and automated environments are selected as emblematic signs.	Theoretical anchoring: aesthetics of simplification; visual efficiency.
Linguistic discourse	Admiration structures the commentary. Japanese order and discipline are foregrounded through repeated comparison with spaces implicitly coded as more chaotic.	Illustrative cue: Collective order is repeatedly interpreted as evidence of a national mentality.

Category	Analytical synthesis	Illustrative cue / theoretical anchoring
Representation of the Other	The representation is favourable but reductive. Japanese people appear as efficient and disciplined, yet at times almost over-mechanised. The result is a positive stereotype rather than a complex social portrait.	Theoretical anchoring: idealised otherness; essentialising admiration.

Table 6. Tunisia – Familiarity, proximity, and the extended self

Category	Analytical synthesis	Illustrative cue / theoretical anchoring
Narrative structure	The episode is structured less around radical difference than around affective proximity. Although the title foregrounds affordability, the narrative gradually shifts toward fraternity, linguistic closeness, and shared history.	Illustrative cue: Tunisia is framed as a space where the traveller feels “almost at home”.
Visual representation	Compared with other videos, the episode gives more room to handheld interactions, street conversations, and ordinary exchanges. Human proximity outweighs visual spectacle.	Theoretical anchoring: everyday authenticity; relational narration.
Linguistic discourse	Colloquial speech, mutual intelligibility, and kinship vocabulary organise the verbal texture of the episode. The discourse emphasises continuity rather than rupture.	Illustrative cue: The two societies are repeatedly framed as culturally intelligible to one another.
Representation of the Other	Tunisians are represented not as an exotic Other but as an extended or proximate Self. This reduces alterity, yet it may also obscure difference, social tensions, and internal plurality.	Theoretical anchoring: collective identity; brokerage through proximity.

4. Discussion: Cultural Brokerage in a Contradictory Space

The findings position Khoubaib as a cultural broker working within a deeply contradictory media environment. His videos frequently contest reductive media portrayals of Arab and Muslim societies by foregrounding human warmth, ordinary dignity, and interpersonal openness. In that sense, his work performs an important symbolic function: it offers a counter-image to dominant narratives of fear and estrangement.

Yet the same corpus also shows that this progressive impulse is partially constrained by the formal demands of platformed storytelling. Titles, thumbnails, and opening sequences often rely on heightened contrasts: danger versus safety, poverty versus generosity, chaos versus order, exotic strangeness versus familiar humanity. These contrasts help secure attention, but they also reduce historical, political, and social complexity. The result is not necessarily a hostile representation of the Other; more often, it is a benevolent but simplified one.

This tension is especially visible in the way authenticity is staged. Hospitality, spirituality, resilience, and simplicity are repeatedly highlighted as morally valuable signs of a culture. However, once these signs become obligatory markers of encounter, they can function as selective filters that privilege what is emotionally appealing and suppress what is conflictual, structurally difficult, or analytically inconvenient. The Other is then rendered visible, yet only within a narrow frame of recognisability.

Khoubai'b's own identity is equally complex. Because he speaks from within an Arab-Muslim horizon, he does not replicate the classic form of Western Orientalism. Nevertheless, as a successful content creator operating inside a global platform economy, he still exercises discursive power over the communities he films. The issue, then, is less one of intentional domination than of structural mediation: who gets to narrate whom, under which aesthetic constraints, and for which audiences?

Finally, the relation between the creator and his audience appears mutually reinforcing. Viewers seek emotionally satisfying representations of the world that combine novelty, reassurance, and moral legibility; the vlogger, in turn, packages complexity into narrative forms that remain accessible, attractive, and memorable. Travel vlogging thus emerges as a privileged site for observing how intercultural knowledge is simultaneously expanded and narrowed under algorithmic conditions.

Conclusion

This article has argued that YouTube travel vlogs should be read as significant sites of contemporary cultural mediation rather than as innocuous entertainment alone. Through the case of Khoubai'b Koussai, the analysis shows how the digital traveller can serve as a bridge across symbolic worlds while also reproducing, often unintentionally, simplifications required by the platform economy.

The study demonstrates that the corpus is structured by a double movement: the moral valorisation of shared humanity and the formal reduction of complexity into emotionally efficient narrative templates. This combination helps explain both the persuasive force and the analytical limits of travel-vlog discourse. The creator's success depends on his ability to make distant worlds seem accessible, yet that very process often involves selective framing, typification, and aesthetic condensation.

Future research would benefit from extending the analysis in two directions: first, by incorporating audience reception to understand how viewers interpret these representations; and second, by adding more precise transcript-based and time-coded evidence to deepen the relation between discourse, image, and platform logic. Even in its present form, however, the case makes clear that digital cultural brokerage constitutes a major object for contemporary media criticism.

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