

# “Authentic” Culinary Experience in YouTube Travel(V)log: Eating the “Other”

S M G Tambunan  
Universitas Indonesia

{shuri.mariasih@ui.ac.id}

**Abstract.** YouTube travel vlogs have been transformed into a medium of sharing experiences in visiting countries around the world while tasting the local food as a part of seeking the authentic thrills. In this paper, a YouTube video from 4 European, American and Australian couple Travel(V)loggers broadcasting the vloggers’ experiences in tasting Indonesian food is analyzed. The main issue of the analysis is how young “White” or “First World” couple travelers are depicting the “Third World” countries. However, in the practice of representation in these vlogs there is an ambivalence because what is being presented is not independent of cultural ideologies within which the vloggers are situated. In other words, their own social, cultural and political context affecting what they consider as familiar taste in food. This article highlights how this symbolic gesture of eating the “other” further problematize the hierarchical dichotomy of “self” and “other” particularly as they travel to Indonesia

**Keywords:** *Travel Vlogs, YouTube, Culinary Practices, Authenticity, Self and Other*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism, social media and culinary practice are substantial in the global and modern everyday lives of the urban dwellers. On one hand, as tourists travel around the world, they create narrations and images which they circulate online through their social media posts [1]. These cultural texts are then available for consumption by other tourists which eventually construct new and sometimes alternative imaginations on touristic aspects. In other words, by sharing their images and narrations, tourists are active agents in this ongoing consumption and production process. The development of digital media has transformed the landscape of how touristic experiences are imagined particularly those related to culinary experiences. If in the past, we rely heavily on television tourism programs or tour guides in a form of books or brochures to know about what kind of food we could taste in a particular country, social media and other digital media, such as YouTube, have provided a different way of disseminating this type of information.

YouTube has been discussed in many academic debates ranging from research focusing on its historical trajectory in the development of digital technology. Existing research looks at the site’s first stages towards popularity in 2005 and the initial criticism or contestations by big media companies resulting copyright claims between 2006 and 2007. Most recent discussions on YouTube is the recent use by both content creators such as how it is used for tourism

purposes. Digital technology is changing the way touristic spaces are presented to the potential tourists that will visit that place [2]. They are now able to watch a video of someone swimming in the blue ocean in the Maldives, island hopping in Greece or diving in Raja Ampat, Indonesia, without having to leave home. “Through sites such as YouTube, tourists can now get an immediate and a very real sense of where they want to go by viewing videos that other tourists have uploaded” [2, p. 3]. There is a growing power of individual consumers in tourism marketing and YouTube travel vlogs produced by real tourists are claimed to be more effective in comparison with videos by official tourism organizations.

The chosen case study exemplifies this very idea of how YouTube as a user generated content digital technology is now utilized as a medium for travelers from “First-World” countries to share their experiences in visiting other countries around the world while tasting the local food as a part of seeking the authentic thrills. As a researcher, I understand that the dichotomy of first-world and third-world needs to be critically examined as if we are trapped within this dichotomy, we are actually affirming the binary opposition and the hierarchy between the developed and developing countries. The vloggers, in my research, also often use this term in showing how sometimes the problem they sometimes choose to talk about in their vlogs are “First-World problems.” For example, when *Flying the Nest* was having problems with their camera and they choose to divert their travel plans to make sure they are able to fix their camera before they continue their travel. Furthermore, categorizing the travel vloggers as “White” is indeed used to show the intersectionality of the travel vloggers positioning or in other words, where they come from, their social class, their nationality and their race have categorized them differently from the individuals they encounter when, for example, they visit Indonesia. I found it necessary to identify these travel vloggers as “first-world” and “white” travelers to, first and foremost, contextualize them in this discussion even though I am always reflective in not characterizing them with constructed attributes of, for example, “white privilege.”

## 1.1 Research Method

In this article, YouTube a video from 4 British, American and Australian couple Travel(V)loggers broadcasting the vloggers’ experiences in tasting Indonesian food are analyzed by treating the videos as audio-visual materials. The main research method is digital ethnography and textual analysis. First of all, the research has been a participant observation of the four travel vloggers by following them on their YouTube channel. The chosen vlog is then analyzed by watching it several times and dissect it according to the main issue. Selected parts of the vlog are further analyzed in accordance to the idea that there is an imbalanced power relation between them as “white” travelers and the culture they are experiencing, in this case Indonesian culture. Furthermore, in line with the digital ethnography method, the comments on each vlog and how these travel vloggers respond to these comments are also analyzed. Comments that reflect the interaction between the vloggers and the commentators and followers are interpreted. This is similar to conducting a participant observation in ethnography,

In conducting textual analysis, images and dialogs are analyzed in accordance with the main research problem: how these YouTube travel vloggers are depicting the Indonesia through their culinary adventures. Food, in this sense, is used as a signifier of the Indonesian local culture even though arguably, to find the authentic in local food is no longer feasible due to the rapid transformation of culinary practices all over the world in response to the global-local dynamics. Food, in this sense, is used as a signifier of the local culture even though arguably, to find the authentic in local food is no longer feasible due to the rapid transformation of culinary practices all over the world in response to the global-local dynamics. This search of authenticity in local

food that the vloggers insist upon is due to vlogs' popularity as a more authentic medium since they bridge or even narrow the distance between whoever producing the media (the vlogs) and the audience. The article highlights the depiction of what these vloggers consider as authentic and representative of the local culture from the food they eat. Findings reveal that their symbolic gesture of eating the "other" by videoing their experience in tasting local Indonesian food further problematize the hierarchical dichotomy of "self" and "other." The article is divided into two sections of analysis: self-representation of YouTube vloggers as global travelers who leave their well-established lives to experience the world and the adventures in tasting unfamiliarity that leads to the process of "othering."

## 1.2 Results and Discussion

The four YouTube couple vloggers represent themselves in their YouTube channels as global travelers that leave behind a steady income job to travel full time and vlog their travels exemplifying a new-fangled craze because there are so many similar couple vlogger. The back stories are quite similar as narrated by *The Endless Adventure* in their about us section on their channel page: "We've traded in our steady paychecks and permanent home for a life of travel and adventure. Come along and see the world with us!" This whole notion of leaving home, in the case the United States, and trying a new life as a traveler shows how the significance of adventure is constantly underlined as the main motivations of young travelers. For young tourists, their main motivation was to explore other cultures and also by experiencing excitement [3]. Going into the unknown and embracing the unfamiliarity of the places that are going to visit become the main premise of their adventures. Furthermore, this adventure needs to be recorded, disseminated and archived via YouTube vlogs to enhance the experience and excitement.

Vlogs are indeed becoming more popular as we often encounter amateur vlogs in YouTube daily, such as beauty vlogs, travel vlogs or even educational vlogs. YouTube's slogan, "Broadcast Yourself," definitely has encouraged vlogging, which could be explained as a user-created form of online video production. There are minimum requirements for a video to be categorized as a vlog [4]. First of all, there has to be "the head-on close-up" in which the vlogger talks to the camera (audience) and this is the most popular common visual perspective of a vlog, which is the point-of-view of the vlogger. Meanwhile, vlogging as a combination of "webcam culture and personal blogging" and the product is an audio visual archive discussing the "real" depiction of the vlogger's everyday lives [5]. This is arguably could be hand-in-hand with reality television which focuses on the observations of a person's daily life experiences. Therefore, vlogging and YouTube in away encapsulate television production methods.

There are a number of motivations for vloggers to pick up the camera and record their everyday lives, but one of the biggest motivations is that for content creators, their YouTube channel is practicality an income generator. These vloggers earn their living and are able to travel all year long without having steady income because they earn money from this "recreational" activity. First of all, the great source of income for them is through a Partner Program and signing up for AdSense. When the vloggers have at least 1000 subscribers and more than 4000 watch hours in the 12 months, they are able to make money out of their YouTube channels which they have used as one of the ways they can support their travels. They receive an amount of money based on the number of views and also when there are ads that are being shown and how many times the audience/viewers click the ads. The travel vloggers have also gained quite a large number of subscribers and they started making and selling merchandises, such as shirts or other items with their logo on it.

Besides addressing themselves as global travelers who leave their comfort zone to seek on new adventures, in their narrations they also emphasize how they want to embrace the different cultures and going beyond exoticizing the others. Way Away on their about us page states that:

“We're Josh and Ashley, an American couple who've appointed themselves as the US' unofficial cultural ambassadors. We believe that people around the world are more similar than we tend to believe. It is our goal to inspire you to travel and experience other people and cultures around the world. Let's celebrate our similarities and enjoy our differences!” (taken from [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCxn5zB\\_-HOiBGzdMSRiq\\_HA/about](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCxn5zB_-HOiBGzdMSRiq_HA/about))

By stating that they are “cultural ambassadors” from the US, they are pre-mediating viewers or subscribers view on them and how they position themselves as more than just tourists. By stating that they want to celebrate similarities as they believe that people in the world, which could be translated people from first/third world countries or developed/developing countries are basically human beings with a lot of similarities. All four vloggers in the videos reflect on this idea that they are not merely tourists who want to see and observe, but they want to experience and engage actively with the unfamiliar.

Besides portraying themselves as global travelers, in their vlogs, one type of adventure they do is to try to local dishes or meals and this will be the moment when the unfamiliar becomes a big challenge in their adventurous and cultural ambassador spirit. I would argue that in their other vlogs, for example when they visit local villages and non-mainstream tourist spots in one country and their “low maintenance” travel style in which they rarely complain about for example the dirty streets or the low quality sanitation in the poorer countries they visited. However, when it comes to food adventures, at least in the videos that are chosen as the corpus of this research, the sense of “othering” could be vaguely seen in the vlogs.

First of all, many scholars have argued that in intercultural interactions, food is considered as a language of solidarity and an innocuous tool to interact with the other culture. However, we should always question this seemingly easy acceptance of other (different) culture by using food [6]. There will always be power dynamics involved in any form of intercultural interactions or exchanges. “A contribution to the shared feast might be acceptable because it doesn't speak, to make demands or criticisms of the host culture. Like music, it is readily appropriated because it is sensuous, not intellectual. Food is offered/offers itself for consumption, appropriation” [7, p. 321]. In the surface, it might look harmless and do not have any ideological underpinning because as we enjoy a feast, one would not “made demands” or throw criticism to the host culture. However, as findings in this research have uncovered, culinary practices are not free from ideological stance and imbalanced power relations.

In culinary tourism, which is a term used in reference to exploratory eating by a tourist in a new place or country, eating unfamiliar food is basically a cultural interaction with “Otherness.” In consuming this “Otherness,” these travel vloggers are consuming something very distance with what they usually consume in their home countries [7]. Flavors become a signifier or the unfamiliar, for example when the travel vloggers constantly say “Wow, that's spicy” or “Oh good it's not that spicy” on their vlogs as they try Indonesian food. Their culinary adventures become more than knowing or experiencing another culture, just like they write in their vlog description or what they narrate in their vlogs. It is more on how they perform “a sense of adventure, adaptability, and openness to any other culture.” In “Indonesian STREET FOOD TOUR! - Feat. Flying the Nest, Kinging It and The Way Away! (Ubud, Bali)” vlog, the four couple vloggers were shown to have gone to a local market where there are no tourists in Bali and all of them were sent to buy food. One of the vlogger from *Flying the Nest* said “She did

grab all with her hands, so I'm kind of scared to eat it" (11:38-11:49). The mixed rice she bought was from a market food stall and the lady who sold the food use her bare hands to prepare the food. *The Endless Adventure* vlogger replied "We got to eat adventurously" (11:50-11:51). Once again, as mentioned earlier, their culinary adventure is representing their sense of adventure, being able to adapt to different and unfamiliar contexts and wanting to try new things. Therefore, "... privileged cultural perspective translates eating abroad into a cosmopolitan status for these travellers" [8, p. 78].

Furthermore, in the same video I analyzed in the previous paragraph, the vloggers navigate themselves through the local market found it difficult to find the food they are able to consume. *Kinging It* vloggers, who are vegan, said that it was difficult for them to find any vegan options particularly because of the language barriers and no one was able to explain to them the ingredients of the food. The same goes to *Flying the Nest* vloggers who also do not eat meat. In the comments section, there were several viewers who were frontally questioning the vloggers:

"Dear Flying The Nest couple. Indonesian here. I personally think that the language barrier is almost unavoidable when you go to foreign country, Balinese people is on the other hand the most advance when it comes to speaking english compared to other region here in Indonesia, so hearing you guys complain abt how these food seller didn't speak english at all making it harder for you to find vegan food is quite depressing like you can just google how to say frikkin vegetables in Bahasa and asked them whether they sell vegetable-based food. You went to our country, frikkin adapt to it instead of expecting all people to speak your language." (taken from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLTv\\_CwIbw0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLTv_CwIbw0))

As explained earlier, one of the significant features of YouTube that differentiates it with other medium, such as television, is the direct interaction with the viewers. The comment above show how the Indonesian viewers expect the vloggers to use google translate instead of making a point that nobody speaks English in the local market. Another viewer wrote that the vloggers are "guests" and they should not complain that nobody speaks English. According to this viewer, the problem is: "... it's you the one who doesn't 'speak Indonesian."

My analysis on the vlogs show that trying local food does not have anything to do with how food could make the travel vloggers feel like they belong or not belong to another culture. I would argue that as "first-world" travelers, they are culinary tourists that have a privileged position where they could play with estrangement and belonging through the food they eat in their travels. "In this sense, culinary tourism is always relative and what counts as "Other," "different," "exotic," or "novel" can only be named in relation to what it is "Other" or "different" from. In this sense, culinary tourism is also always specific, depending on who is eating, who is feeding, the cultural context of consumption, and the kinds of power relations that are produced across the table" [8, p. 78]. In other words, feasting on the unfamiliar food, which might be too spicy or not hygienic enough for these travel vloggers, their culinary adventures are all about "eating the Other" or consuming something very different with their own culture as a part of the aforementioned excitement in their global travels.

## 2 CONCLUSION

By looking at how YouTube travel vloggers represent their take on tasting and eating unfamiliar food in their vlogs, research findings show that the exotization of the "other" is still a re-occurring theme in YouTube travel vlogs. The culinary tourism these vloggers did in Indonesia exemplifies how being adventurous in trying very local dishes and how adaptable

they are in eating food with very different flavours with what they are used to. As a part of the global trend, travelling full time and archiving their travels via YouTube while earning money from their vlogs are alternative spaces for intercultural dialogs and interactions which is an inevitable result from globalization. However, even though food is often considered as a safe zone in which cultural interactions will lead to nothing but acceptance and solidarity, this research shows that even food will never be free of any ideological underpinning. The power dynamics are yet to be overthrown in the dichotomizing force between the “self” and the “other.”

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