



FROM VIEWS TO VISITS: THE ROLE OF YOUTUBE INFLUENCERS IN SHAPING TRAVEL DESTINATION CHOICES IN JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

Social media play a key role in how people choose where to travel with influencers shaping many of these choices. This study investigates how YouTube influencers shape travel destination related interest in Japan by analyzing viewer comments on two highly popular itinerary travel videos. Viewer comments were collected using Python scripts and prepared for analysis through standard data-cleaning procedures. The analysis combines transformer-based language models and aspect-based sentiment analysis to examine sentiment, emotions, key destinations and itinerary-related themes in viewer comments. The findings show that itinerary-focused influencer content generates mainly positive sentiment and emotional engagement, along with planning-related viewer responses such as itinerary consideration, destination-specific questions, and reflections on past or intended future travel. The study offers practical insights for the tourism industry, policymakers and destination management organizations (DMOs) by showing how influencers' content supports destination visibility and interest formation, with implications for promoting lesser-known destinations and managing overtourism.

KEYWORDS

sentiment analysis, YouTube comment mining, social-media influencers, large language models, user-generated content

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social media play a significant role in shaping travel destination choices and travel planning, with public dependence on digital platforms continuing to grow worldwide. The number of social-media users has

increased from 2.73 billion in 2017 to 5.17 billion in 2024 and it is projected to exceed six billion by 2028 (Slotta, 2025).

In recent years, travelers are increasingly using social media not only for entertainment but also as a primary source of travel inspiration and planning.



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Consumers now engage with social media in a more interactive way, increasingly sharing their experiences and opinions about the products and services they use in daily life (Cambria et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2017). Such traveler-generated content, commonly referred to as user-generated content (UGC), plays an important role in tourism decision-making because it reflects peer experiences rather than institutional promotion (Abad & Borbon, 2021; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

The spread of information and communication technologies and social media have made it easier for travelers to share experiences, images and reviews online, increasing the visibility and influence of UGC in destination representation and tourism communication (Lian & Yu, 2017; Lund et al., 2018; Marchiori & Cantoni, 2012; Pantano & Di Pietro, 2013). Among visual social-media platforms, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube have become particularly influential in tourism contexts due to their ability to combine imagery, narrative and interaction. These platforms not only inspire potential visitors but also provide practical information relevant to trip planning. As a result, many travelers increasingly rely on recommendations, reviews and experiential narratives shared by influencers and peers when forming destination preferences (Hussain et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2025).

Prior research suggests that social-media influencers contribute to shaping travel and hospitality decisions by affecting perceptions of destinations, accommodation options and tourism brands through experiential storytelling and practical, experience-based content (Khaled et al., 2025; Topbaş & Oktay, 2024).

To guide this study, a conceptual framework (Figure 1) is based on the customer-journey perspective of travel decision-making. This perspective views destination choice as a process that develops in stages, beginning with initial exposure and progressing through evaluation, planning consideration, experience

and post-visit sharing. In this view, travel decisions emerge not as spontaneous reactions, but as outcomes of gradual reflection and consideration over time (Solomon, 2019).

The first stage is exposure. Viewers encounter influencer content that may generate initial interest in a destination. At this stage, individuals make initial impressions as they interpret travel-related information encountered online (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2008). As interest develops, viewers may begin to think more deeply about possible travel plans and may consider destinations, routes or timing, and express questions or trip planning ideas. These actions represent intermediate stages where initial inspiration progresses into structured planning considerations.

After the trip, individuals may contribute to electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) by online sharing of travel experiences and opinions, which can influence future audiences' perceptions and decisions (Litvin et al., 2008). The progression between stages is not strictly linear. Individuals may revisit earlier stages, reconsider options or refine their plans as they continue engaging with travel content.

In 2024, Japan experienced record inbound tourism, creating both economic opportunities and management challenges. Popular destinations such as Kyoto, Nara and Mount Fuji faced congestion, with over 30% of international visitors reporting overtourism-related issues ("Japan faces overtourism challenges...", 2024; Japan Tourism Agency, 2024). The *White Paper on Tourism in Japan* suggests promoting regional destinations through engaging digital content as a key strategy to disperse tourist flows and enhance distinctive local experiences (Japan Tourism Agency, 2024).

Although a growing body of research has examined how social-media influencers shape travel decision-making, less attention has been given to how audiences express their thinking of the travel journey after exposure to influencer content. Much of the existing literature concentrates on influencer characteristics, branding strategies or effectiveness, while audiences are often positioned as passive recipients rather than active interpreters and evaluators (Abidin, 2016; Hudders et al., 2021). Based on the customer journey framework, this study explores how viewer comments reveal audience travel thinking rather than actual travel decisions.

YouTube long-form format enables structured narrative presentation of destinations, and its comment sections provide space for viewers to respond, question, evaluate and sometimes describe their own travel considerations, making it well suited for examining how user-generated content shapes destination image and travel decision-making (Burgess & Green, 2018; Hudson & Thal, 2013; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). These audiences' interactions create an opportunity to examine how travel-related thinking becomes visible in public discussion.

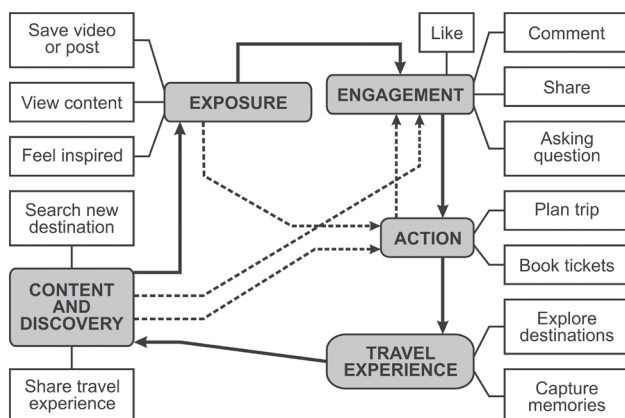


Figure 1. A conceptual framework of social-media-influenced travel decision-making
 Source: authors own conceptualization, informed by customer journey and tourism literature

Addressing this gap, the present study adopts an exploratory, case-based approach to examine viewer comments on two itinerary-focused YouTube travel videos about Japan. Itinerary-based videos are especially appropriate because their structured presentation encourages viewers to consider destinations, routes and travel timing within the decision journey. The study approaches comments as expressions of interest opinion, and planning within the travel decision-making process, rather than treating engagement metrics as direct evidence of travel behavior. By analyzing patterns of sentiment, emotional tone and common themes in audience comments, the study aims to understand how influencer content contributes to viewers' travel thinking and planning. The findings are not intended to establish causal claims or broad generalizations, instead, they offer insight into how online interaction can reveal different stages of travel planning.

The primary contribution of this study is methodological. By integrating large language models (LLMs) supported comment analysis with tourism research, the study shows how large-scale audience discussions can be examined systematically. Conceptually, this study also shows how comment-based interaction makes early stages of travel planning visible within the overall travel decision-making process.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ₁: How do viewers express sentiments, emotions and destination-related evaluations in comments on YouTube travel influencer itinerary videos about Japan?

RQ₂: What key destination-related themes and travel intentions emerge from audience comments, and how do these patterns differ across two influencer channels?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents a literature review on how social media and influencers shape tourist behavior. Section 3 outlines the methodology, while Section 4 provides the analysis, including sentiment analysis, aspect-based sentiment analysis, emotion detection and zero-shot classification of selected video comments. This is followed by discussion of potential policy implications. The last part concludes with research limitations and possible directions for future studies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF TOURIST DECISION-MAKING

Social media have increasingly influenced tourists travel behavior in recent years (Tang et al., 2024). Research consistently shows that digital platforms influence how individuals search for destinations, compare options

and plan trips (Dai et al., 2021; Matikiti-Manyevere & Kruger, 2019). Social-media platforms influence multiple stages of the tourism decision-making process, including inspiration, planning and post-trip reflection (Hudson & Thal, 2013). More recent studies confirm that social media affect both pre-trip planning and post-trip reflection, which in turn influence future travel considerations (Thi Van Hanh & Tuyen, 2023; Yang et al., 2025).

User-generated content (UGC) plays an influential role in shaping destination image. As digital media has expanded, user-generated travel content has become a key source of information and evaluation in tourism contexts (Choi et al., 2007; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Empirical studies demonstrate that UGC contributes to destination image formation (Lam et al., 2020), and destination image has been consistently linked to visitor satisfaction, revisit intention and recommendation behavior (Wang & Hsu, 2010).

The interactive nature of social media allows travelers to adjust plans dynamically based on shared experiences, recommendations and reviews (Chilembwe & Gondwe, 2020). Overall, this literature suggests that tourist decision-making is increasingly continuous and socially influenced rather than linear or individual.

Although prior research shows that social media influence destination perceptions and travel intentions, much of this evidence relies on surveys or aggregate engagement metrics. Little attention has been given to how travel-related thinking and opinions are expressed within interactive spaces where audiences respond publicly to content. In particular, limited research has examined how comment-based interactions reflect the development of interest and planning within the travel decision-making process.

2.2. THE RISE OF SOCIAL-MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN TOURISM

Building on the broader role of social media, research increasingly highlights social-media influencers as influential actors in tourism. Social-media influencers act as opinion leaders who shape destination perceptions and influence travel-related decisions (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021; Jalilvand, 2017). Unlike traditional advertising, influencers are often perceived as more authentic and relatable, which helps build trust and stronger connections with their audiences (Abidin, 2016; Casaló et al., 2020).

Research suggests that influencers can affect decision-making across multiple stages, from generating initial awareness to shaping planning and booking considerations (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Wei et al., 2025). Influencer content shapes an ongoing evaluative process, with destinations reassessed over time rather

than at a single decision point (Hudson & Thal, 2013; Pourazad et al., 2025).

At the same time, important distinctions remain between engagement and influence. Metrics such as views, likes and comments are often treated as indicators of impact, but they do not necessarily reflect actual travel behavior. Likewise, expressed inspiration or intention may not lead to concrete action. These differences highlight the need to look beyond surface-level metrics to better understand how influence works in social-media interaction spaces.

Platform dynamics also shape visibility and exposure. Algorithmic recommendation systems may amplify already popular destinations, reinforcing attention toward highly visible locations and contributing to uneven tourism distribution (Banerjee et al., 2023; Müllner et al., 2025). This suggests that influencer impact must be understood within broader platform structures.

2.3. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON INFLUENCER IMPACT ON DESTINATION CHOICE

Empirical research indicates that social-media influencers shape audience attitudes and destination perceptions, with particularly strong engagement among Millennials and Generation Z, who are highly active on digital platforms (Hudders et al., 2020; Khamis et al., 2017). Influencers, often described as micro-celebrities, create personalized and relatable content that can affect how audiences interpret and evaluate destinations, including travel-related contexts (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021). Recent academic studies indicate that influencer-generated content across social-media platforms can affect destination visibility as well as travel-related interest and behavioral intentions (Mqwebu, 2024; Pourazad et al., 2025).

At the same time, much of this evidence relies on self-reported intention measures or aggregate engagement data, which do not necessarily demonstrate actual travel behavior. The relationship between exposure, expressed intention and actual visits remains complex and context-dependent. Several cases illustrate that influencer-driven exposure can also generate sudden surges in visitor numbers. Viral content has been linked to rapid increases in visits that may exceed local carrying capacities, as documented in empirical research in China (Wengel et al., 2022). Similar patterns have also been reported in media coverage of destinations in Italy (Giuffrida, 2025). These examples suggest that influencer exposure can increase destination visibility but may also contribute to overcrowding and capacity pressures. They highlight the need to examine how audience responses are formed, rather than assuming a direct link between online engagement and travel behavior.

2.4. YOUTUBE AS A DESTINATION MARKETING PLATFORM

YouTube has emerged as a powerful destination marketing platform where travel vlogs contribute to destination image formation and influence travel intentions (Arora & Lata, 2020; Mirzamurodova Kizi et al., 2025). Its long-form video format enables influencers to combine visual storytelling with practical guidance, making it effective for presenting travel itineraries and destination experiences (Hussain et al., 2024). Research suggests that YouTube travel content can enhance destination knowledge and positively influence visit intentions, particularly when perceived as credible and engaging (Chen et al., 2022; Huertas et al., 2017).

Beyond visual content, YouTube also supports sustained comment-based interaction. Viewers use comment sections to share opinions, ask questions, and reflect on past or intended travel. Compared to surveys or engagement metrics, these interactions show better how audiences express travel interest and planning.

Despite the platform's relevance, relatively limited research has examined large-scale YouTube comment discussion as a platform where travel-related thinking becomes visible. Most existing studies focus on influencer credibility, content strategies or self-reported intentions, leaving comment-based interaction under-explored. By viewing comments as signs of interest and planning, this study goes beyond engagement metrics while acknowledging data limitations.

2.5. THEORETICAL SYNTHESIS AND RESEARCH GAP

Previous research shows that social media and influencers shape destination awareness, image and reported travel intentions. However, engagement indicators such as views and likes are often treated as signs of influence, even though they do not necessarily reflect travel behavior. The gap between intention and action is well documented in tourism research.

In addition, platform structures such as recommendation algorithms can sometimes promote specific destinations, influencing their visibility beyond individual choices. These issues suggest that influence cannot be assessed solely through engagement metrics or assumed behavioral outcomes.

Despite substantial research on social media and tourism, little is known about how travel-related thought processes become visible within online interaction. Most prior studies rely on surveys, interviews or broad engagement indicators, which offer limited understanding of how audiences express their reactions after viewing influencer content.

This study addresses this gap by analyzing YouTube comments as a place where viewers share destination interest, evaluation and initial planning interest in

response to influencer travel videos. The study also shows how LLM-based text analysis can be applied to large number of comments to identify patterns of travel consideration that are not captured through standard engagement metrics.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. VIDEO SELECTION

This work follows an exploratory, case-based design to examine how audience comments on YouTube travel-influencer videos reflect destination-related evaluations and travel intentions. Two itinerary-based travel videos about Japan were selected as analytical cases. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, the study focuses on analytical depth, using carefully chosen cases to explore how viewers engage with and interpret influencer-generated travel vlogs.

Videos were identified through a keyword search on YouTube using “14 days travel itinerary in Japan”. From the results, videos were selected based on three criteria: an itinerary-based structure covering multiple destinations, a high level of audience engagement measured through views and comments, and the availability of a substantial comment dataset. Itinerary-based videos were chosen because they present destinations in a sequential and experiential format, which is relevant for examining planning-related audience responses.

The first selected video was published on the Abroad in Japan channel, operated by a Japan-based international influencer. Titled *How to Spend 14 Days in JAPAN: Ultimate Travel Itinerary*, the video was uploaded in November 2023 and had received over four million views at the time of data collection. The itinerary begins and ends in Tokyo, with intermediate visits to Kamakura, Yokohama, Kanazawa, Shirakawa-go, Takayama, Kyoto (including a day trip to Nara), Osaka and Hakone (Abroad in Japan, 2023). The second video, titled *How to Spend 14 Days in Japan: A Japan Travel Itinerary*, was published on Allan Su’s channel in February 2021 and had accumulated over eleven million views. This itinerary follows a different spatial sequence, starting in Osaka and moving through Koyasan, Nara, Kyoto, Kanazawa, Takayama and Tokyo (Allan Su, 2021).

Using two popular videos from different influencers allows for a comparative examination of audience discourse across distinct presentation styles and audience groups. The analysis is not intended to generalize across all YouTube travel content but to offer insight into how audience engagement and interpretation may vary across popular itinerary-based travel videos.

3.2. DATA COLLECTION AND PRE-PROCESSING

Viewer comments were collected using YouTube Data API through Google Developer Console. Data extraction and processing were conducted in Python. All comments available at the time of collection were retrieved for each video.

Before analysis, the data were pre-processed to improve consistency. Duplicate comments, hyperlinks, emojis, non-textual symbols and very short entries without meaningful content were removed. Comments unrelated to travel or destination discussion were also excluded. Only English-language comments were retained.

The restriction to English comments was applied because the analytical models used in this study were trained primarily on English-language data. While this decision limits linguistic diversity and may exclude culturally specific expressions, it allows for more reliable interpretation of sentiment, emotion and thematic classifications. This limitation is acknowledged in the discussion.

After pre-processing, 1,461 comments from the Abroad in Japan (2023) video (out of 2,313) and 1,935 comments from the Allan Su (2021) video (out of 2,736) remained for analysis. No personal or identifying information about commenters was collected or analyzed.

3.3. ANALYTICAL APPROACH AND VALIDATION

The analysis combines sentiment analysis, emotion detection, aspect-based sentiment analysis and zero-shot topic classification to capture multiple dimensions of audience discussion. These methods were selected to examine broader sentiments, emotional expression, destination-specific judgements and broader thematic patterns within comments.

Model reliability was assessed through manual validation. A simple random sampling procedure was implemented in Python using random selecting 100 comments from each influencer’s dataset ($n = 200$). These comments were manually reviewed and compared with model-generated labels for sentiment, emotion and zero-shot topic classification. Performance was evaluated using accuracy and weighted F_1 score to account for class imbalance. Although the validation subset represents a small portion of the full dataset, it provided a contextual reliability check appropriate for the exploratory design.

As the study is exploratory, the aim was not to test predictive accuracy but to ensure consistent and reasonable interpretation of the results. It is also acknowledged that YouTube comments do not represent neutral or random samples of traveler opinion. Commenters are typically self-selected and may reflect higher levels of engagement and interest.

Platform dynamics, such as algorithmic visibility and social interaction among users, may further shape comments content. These characteristics are not treated as methodological flaws but as defining features of audience discussion within influencer-driven environments.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1. TOP 10 MOST LIKED COMMENTS ON BOTH VIDEOS

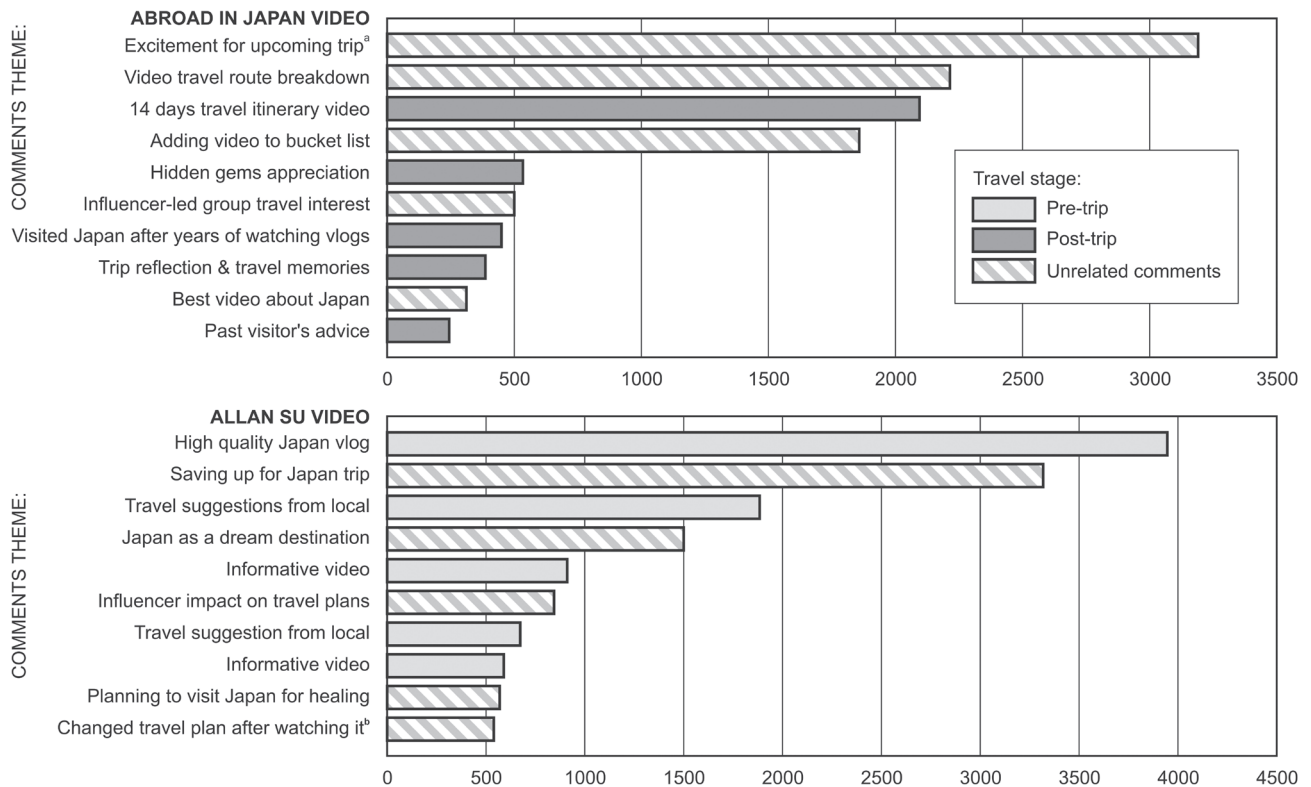
Figure 2 summarizes the dominant themes and travel stages associated with the ten most-liked comments for each video, together with the number of likes received by each comment. The vertical axis represents comment themes, while the horizontal axis indicates the number of likes, which reflects audience endorsement rather than behavioral intensity. Each comment is also categorized by travel stage (pre-trip, post-trip or unrelated), enabling a comparative interpretation of audience engagement across the two videos.

In the Abroad in Japan video, the most liked comments are concentrated within the pre-trip and post-trip stages. Themes such as excitement for an upcoming trip, itinerary appreciation and planning-related

engagement suggest that viewers are interacting with the content in relation to some upcoming trip. For example, the comment “I’m actually going on a 14-day trip starting Friday next week so I was delighted to see this title” illustrates a direct connection between video exposure and imminent travel planning (Abroad in Japan, 2023).

By comparison, the Allan Su video shows a more varied distribution of comment themes and travel stages. Although several highly endorsed comments refer to destination aspirations and planning considerations, a larger share of top-liked comments are categorized as unrelated to specific travel stages. Nevertheless, some comments explicitly indicate reconsideration of travel plans, such as “I was originally going to do Tokyo → Kyoto → Osaka next March, but this vlog really changed my mind” (Allan Su, 2021).

Overall, the comparison suggests that the Abroad in Japan video attracts a more travel-focused audience, as reflected in the higher concentration of travel intention-oriented comments among the most-liked entries. In contrast, the Allan Su video appears to generate broader forms of engagement, with fewer highly endorsed comments directly linked to pre-trip or post-trip stages. These findings reflect differences in audience discussion and engagement patterns rather than evidence of actual travel behavior.



Original Comments: ^aI'm actually going on a 14 day trip starting Friday next week so I was delighted to see this title
^bI was originally going to do Tokio → Kyoto → Osaka next March, but this vlog really changed my mind

Figure 2. Travel decision stages reflected in the 10 most-liked viewer comments
 Source: authors

4.2. SENTIMENT AND ASPECT-BASED SENTIMENT ANALYSIS

Sentiment analysis, also known as opinion mining, is a natural language processing (NLP) technique used to identify the emotional tone or sentiment (positive, negative or neutral) expressed in written text (Liu, 2017). Aspect-based sentiment analysis (ABSA) extends this approach by examining how users express sentiment toward specific aspects or features discussed in the text (Mehra, 2023; Sabeeh & Dewang, 2019). In this study, sentiment analysis was conducted using RoBERTa (Robustly Optimized BERT Approach) model implemented via the Hugging Face Transformers library. The model achieved accuracy and weighted F_1 scores above 0.80 in both videos, confirming the reliability of the classification.

Analysis of viewer comments on the two 14-day Japan itinerary videos indicates that most comments

in both cases were classified as positive. The sentiment distributions across the two videos were broadly similar, with positive sentiment accounting for the largest share of comments, followed by neutral and negative categories (Figure 3). This pattern reflects a generally favorable audience response to the content. The predominance of positive sentiment should be interpreted with caution. YouTube audiences are self-selecting, and viewers who watch itinerary-based travel videos may already have an interest in the destination. In this context, positive sentiment may reflect alignment between audience expectations and the content rather than direct behavioral impact.

These patterns capture viewers' favorable reactions and perceptions, which are often linked to destination image and interest formation in tourism research (Hussain et al., 2024). While such responses indicate positive engagement and approval, they do not demonstrate confirmed travel behavior but instead show how viewers express positive impressions within the travel decision-making process.

4.2.1. ASPECT-BASED SENTIMENT ANALYSIS

Aspect-based sentiment analysis was then applied to identify the main aspects discussed within each sentiment category. Comments were first grouped according to RoBERTa-derived sentiment labels (positive, neutral and negative) and subsequently processed in Python using Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK).

Word clouds are used as a descriptive visualization of frequently mentioned adjective-noun pairs and are interpreted as an exploratory illustration of selected video

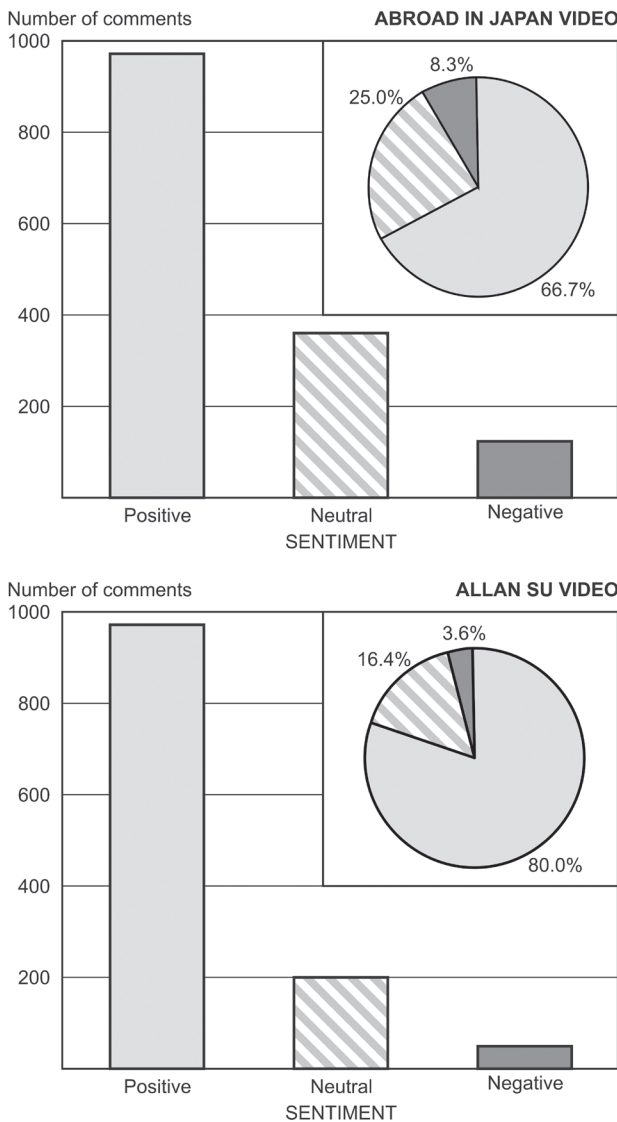


Figure 3. Dataset distribution graph for sentiment analysis
Source: authors



Figure 4. Word cloud of frequently mentioned pairs in viewer comments
Source: authors

comment with word size indicating relative frequency. As shown in Figure 4 (cf. p. 161), viewers of the Abroad in Japan video more frequently refer to pairs related to upcoming trips, itinerary use and specific destinations, reflecting a stronger orientation toward planning-related and destination-focused discourse. In contrast, word cloud of the Allan Su video more often emphasize aspects related to video quality, presentation and overall enjoyment, suggesting a more general evaluative focus on content and production style.

Figure 5 presents the ten most common aspects identified across both videos. While both comment sets share general aspects such as Japan and video, notable differences emerge in the prominence of other terms. Comments on the Abroad in Japan video more frequently highlight aspects such as trip, itinerary,

ryokan and Hakone, indicating deeper engagement with travel details and planning considerations. By comparison, comments on the Allan Su video emphasize aspects such as thanks, country and people, reflecting broader appreciation of the content and creator rather than specific planning elements. These differences point to variations in how audiences engage with itinerary-based content across influencer channels, without implying direct behavioral outcomes.

4.3. EMOTION DETECTION

Emotion detection was conducted on viewer comments using a DistilRoBERTa-based transformer model (j-hartmann/emotion-english-distilroberta-base), which classifies English text into seven emotion categories. In

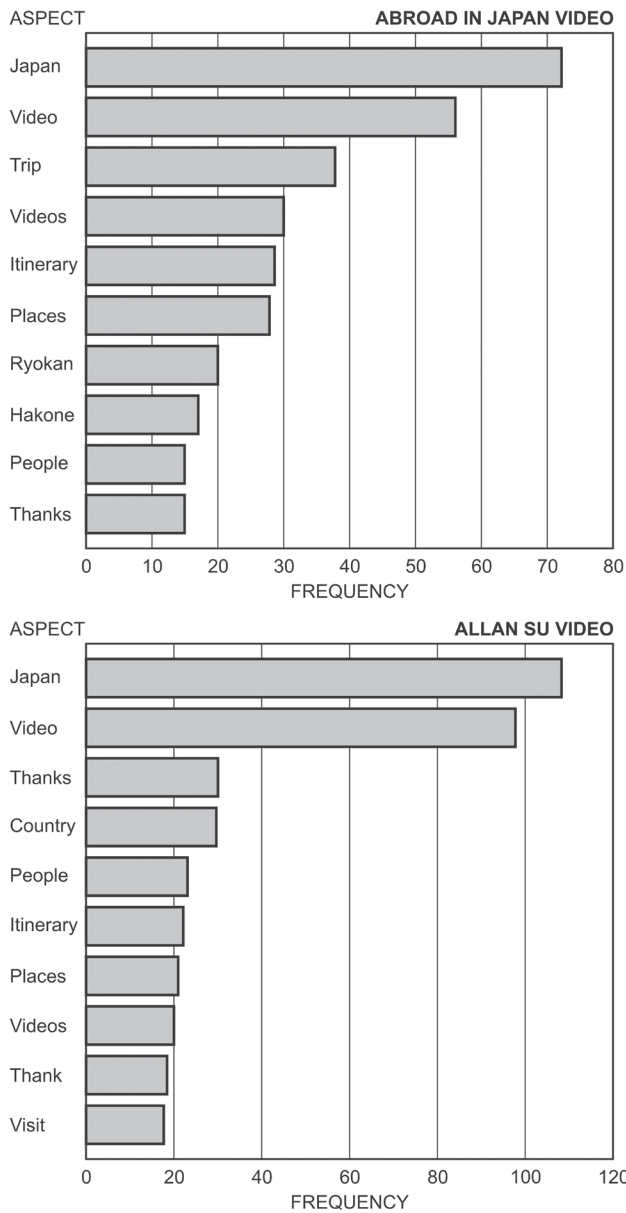


Figure 5. Top 10 extracted aspects from YouTube comments
Source: authors

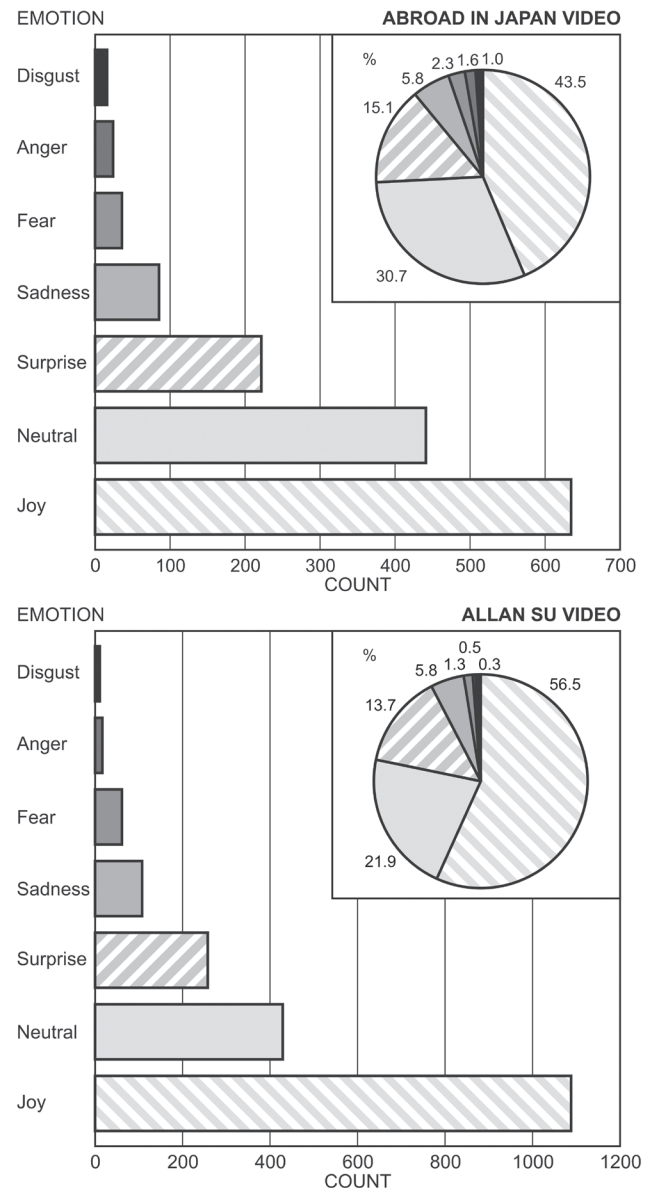


Figure 6. Detected emotions in Abroad in Japan vs. Allan Su travel vlogs
Source: authors

this study, the model achieved accuracy and weighted F_1 scores above 0.80, indicating stable performance for analysis. Figure 6 presents the distribution of emotions identified across comments for both videos. The results show that viewer responses were largely characterized by joy, surprise and neutral reflection, indicating predominantly positive affective reactions. These emotional patterns suggest favorable reception of the content rather than evidence of confirmed travel behavior. In tourism research, positive emotional responses are often associated with interest formation and favorable destination perception.

Prior research indicates that emotionally positive content on social media is linked to higher interaction and engagement levels (Deng et al., 2025). Studies further show that users frequently express enjoyment and enthusiasm when discussing travel experiences online, shaping how destinations are perceived and circulated within digital communities (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024). In this study, emotion detection is therefore

used to capture emotional audience responses to influencer content, rather than serving as indicator of actual travel decisions.

4.4. ZERO-SHOT CLASSIFICATION

Zero-shot classification enables text to be categorized into previously unseen labels without task-specific training by leveraging natural language inference (NLI). In this work, the facebook/bart-large-mnli model, implemented via the Hugging Face Transformers framework, was applied to YouTube comments using a predefined set of 44 candidate labels reflecting different forms of audience engagement and discussion. Examples include “the viewer plans to follow the advice or itinerary in the video” and “the viewer is planning or dreaming of a future trip to Japan”. Labels such as “the viewer is giving general feedback and not about trips” were also included to identify comments unrelated to travel planning (Table 1).

Table 1. Candidate labels used during zero-shot classification model along with manually assigned topics

No.	The viewer...	Mapping with topic
1	... finds the video helpful for planning	Informative and helpful video
2	... learned something useful from the video	
3	... is praising the editing, visuals, or narration	
4	... is thanking the creator for making the video	
5	... is giving positive feedback about the video	
6	... is asking a travel-related question	Japan trip-related questions
7	... is requesting itinerary advice	
8	... is asking about places to visit or stay in Japan	
9	... is unsure about travel timing or logistics	Planning Japan trip with this itinerary
10	... is planning a trip using the video	
11	... wants to follow the video itinerary	
12	... is inspired to use this plan for a future trip	
13	... is organizing a trip with similar destinations	
14	... finds the video is perfect for their upcoming trip to Japan	
15	... thinks that the video timing is perfect as the viewer is preparing to visit Japan	
16	... intends to follow the itinerary for their upcoming Japan visit	
17	... is feeling excited to visit Japan soon and follow the video itinerary	
18	... is planning a trip to Japan with specific travel dates	
19	... feels inspired to visit Japan	Inspired to travel Japan
20	... wants to go to Japan after watching	
21	... expresses fascination or emotional love for Japan	
22	... is dreaming of traveling to Japan someday	

Table 1 (cont.)

No.	The viewer...	Mapping with topic
23	... is reminiscing about a past trip	Bringing back travel memories
24	... is sharing travel memories	
25	... has visited Japan and relates to the video	
26	... recalls visiting places shown in the video	
27	... is suggesting places to visit in Japan	Viewers suggestions about Japan travel
28	... is giving travel advice or tips	
29	... is recommending alternative spots	
30	... is sharing experiences for future travelers	
31	... already visited places from the video	Followed the itinerary
32	... has followed the same travel plan	
33	... retraced the video itinerary during their trip	
34	... followed the suggestions in the video during travel	
35	... regrets not seeing the video before	Regret not seeing this earlier
36	... missed something on their past trip	
37	... feels the trip could have been better with this info	
38	... is recommending this video to others	Electronic word-of-mouth
39	... is spreading positive word of mouth	
40	... says they will share the video with friends	
41	... encourages others to watch or follow the channel	
42	... is making a casual or humorous comment	Others
43	... is giving general feedback but not discussing travel	
44	... is comparing Japan with other countries	

Source: authors.

To improve interpretability and reduce label fragmentation, fine-grained labels were subsequently grouped into broader thematic categories. Labels were merged when they reflected conceptually similar forms of engagement, such as “planning Japan trip with this itinerary”, “Japan trip-related questions”, “following the itinerary”, “informative and helpful video” feedback, “post-visit reflection”, or “electronic word-of-mouth”. A manual reassessment of a subset of classified comments was conducted to examine the coherence of label assignments and to support the strength of the grouping process. This approach allowed the analysis to move beyond individual labels and to focus on broader patterns of audience discussion.

For the *Abroad in Japan (2023)* video, comments were grouped into nine topic categories, including “informative and helpful video”, “Japan trip-related questions”, “planning Japan trip with this itinerary”, “inspired to travel Japan”, and “followed the itinerary”. The distribution of these topics suggests that a large share of audience engagement is inclined toward

information seeking, itinerary evaluation, and expressed interest in future travel. In the case of the Allan Su (2021) video, comments were grouped into eight categories, such as “informative and helpful video”, “inspired to travel Japan”, and “trip-planning-related questions”, indicating a similarly positive but a slightly less trip planning-focused pattern of engagement (Figure 7). These differences appear to reflect variation in channel positioning and audience composition. A Japan-specialized channel may attract viewers already engaged in destination consideration, leading to more detailed planning-oriented discourse. A broader YouTube channel may generate inspiration-driven engagement without the same depth of itinerary-specific discussion. Importantly, these topic patterns represent expressed interest and planning rather than confirmed travel behavior. They provide insight into how viewers express travel decision-stage thinking in response to itinerary-based influencer content, rather than demonstrating direct behavioral outcomes.

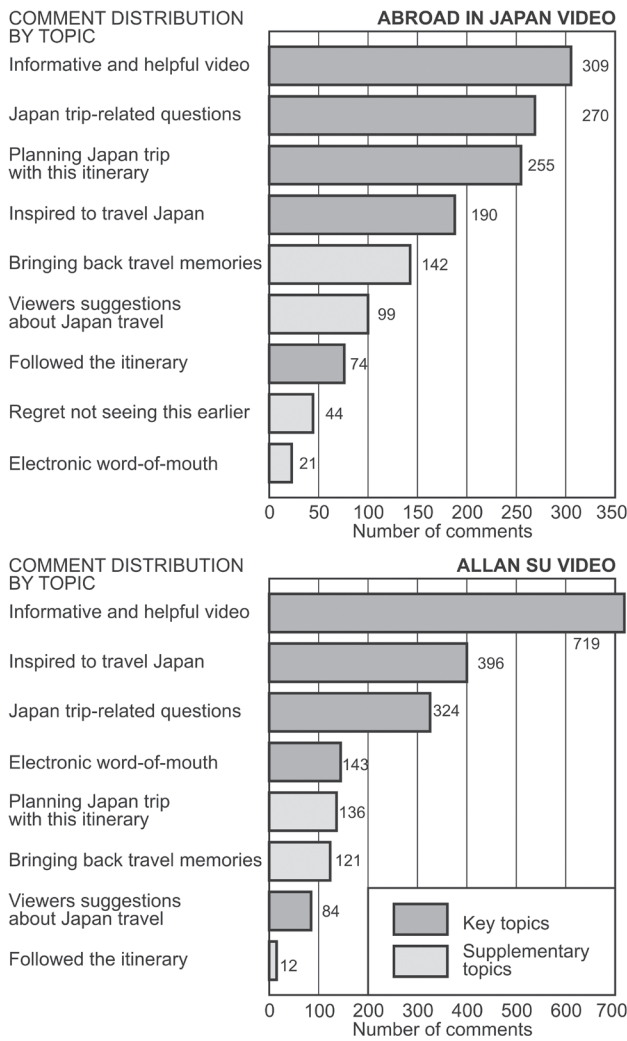


Figure 7. Final topics from the zero-shot classification
Source: authors

4.4.1. ABROAD IN JAPAN AND ALLAN SU VIDEOS KEY TOPIC COMPARISON

Figure 8 shows clear differences in engagement patterns between the two videos. Comments on Abroad in Japan more frequently include planning-related discussion, such as itinerary use, destination-specific questions and trip preparation. This suggests that many viewers were already at an active consideration stage within the travel decision-making process. In contrast, comments on Allan Su more often emphasize inspiration, informational value and general appreciation. While interest in Japan is present, fewer comments refer to concrete planning steps. Engagement in this case appears more aligned with early-stage inspiration.

These differences may reflect influencer specialization and audience segmentation. Destination-focused channels such as Abroad in Japan are more likely to attract viewers already interested in Japan, which may explain the higher share of planning-oriented comments. In contrast, broader travel channels like Allan Su may attract audiences at earlier stages of

inspiration and destination exploration. Platform recommendation systems may further reinforce this alignment.

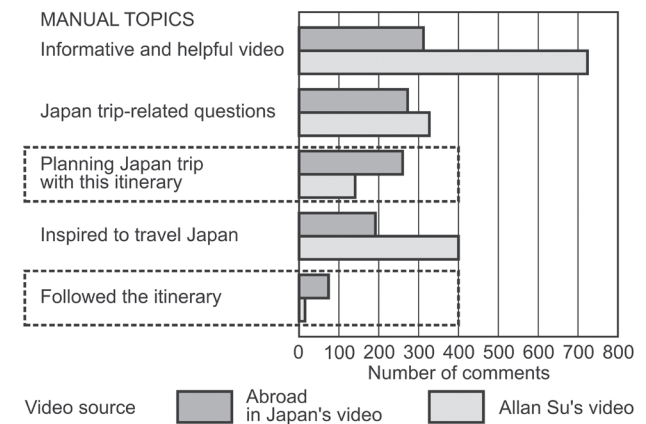


Figure 8. Abroad in Japan and Allan Su videos key topic comparison
Source: authors

5. DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

YouTube’s long-form travel videos combine visual storytelling with practical itinerary guidance, contributing to destination image formation and shaping destination-related interest (Huertas et al., 2017; Jara-Amézaga, 2023). Based on customer journey perspective, the findings suggest that influencer content is reflected mainly in early and intermediate stages of travel consideration. Viewer comments reveal reflections on destinations, routes, timing and possible future travel plans. These expressions indicate interest and planning consideration rather than confirmed travel behavior. The findings also indicate that engagement cannot be used as a single measure of influence. Metrics such as views, likes or general sentiment offer only limited understanding of how audiences process travel content. In contrast, comments provide clearer evidence of cognitive engagement, including itinerary comparisons and destination-specific questions. Within the customer journey framework, these patterns align with evaluation and planning stages rather than final decisions.

Conceptually, the study shows that comment-based analysis can make stages of the travel decision-making process discursively visible. In this sense, influence is best understood as a gradual process reflected in how viewers express interest, comparison and planning-related thinking, rather than as a direct behavioral outcome.

From a practical perspective, itinerary-focused influencer content may promote more detailed destination consideration. However, its implications for destination management should be interpreted

carefully. Comment data cannot show changes in visitor patterns, instead, it may serve as an early signal of emerging interest and help inform communication and content strategy.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to research on social media and tourism by examining how viewer comments on YouTube reflect destination evaluation and travel consideration in response to influencer-led travel content. By analyzing large-scale comment data using sentiment analysis, aspect-based sentiment analysis, emotion detection, and zero-shot classification, the study shows how audience responses can be used to understand travel intentions and opinions to itinerary-based travel videos. The integration of YouTube comment analysis with an LLM-supported analytical approach offers a structured way to examine audience engagement beyond views and likes.

The findings indicate that itinerary-focused influencer content is associated with destination interest and trip planning-related discussion, particularly among viewers engaging with destination-specific YouTube channels. These responses should not be interpreted as evidence of actual travel behavior; instead, they reflect how viewers share their interest, opinions and planning intentions within the travel decision-making process.

From a policy perspective, the study suggests that influencer collaborations may contribute to destination visibility and emerging interest patterns. However, implications for destination management should be approached with caution. Key limitations include the focus on two videos, English-only comments, and the use of automated language models. Future research could expand this approach using larger, multilingual and cross-platform datasets.

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