

YouTube Travel Documentaries and Western Tourist Perceptions of Israel and Palestine: Implications for Peace Tourism

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Abstract

This study investigates how independent YouTube travel documentaries shape Western tourist perceptions of Israel and Palestine in the aftermath of the October 7, 2023 attacks. Drawing on audience and media effects theory, the research examines how alternative social media narratives interact with pre-existing perceptions shaped by Western mainstream news coverage. Using an interpretive qualitative design, a focus group of 13 Western tourists (nine repeat visitors and four first-time visitors) viewed two documentaries—Journey Through Palestine and Journey Through Israel—followed by moderated discussion. Thematic analysis reveals that participants initially relied heavily on mainstream media frames characterized by politicized and polarized representations. However, exposure to the documentaries prompted negotiated readings that emphasized cultural commonalities, everyday coexistence, and shared social practices. While participants reported increased empathy and more differentiated perceptions of both communities, findings should be interpreted cautiously given the small sample size and the predominance of repeat visitors. Rather than demonstrating direct peacebuilding effects, the study suggests that independent travel media can contribute to discursive openings that complicate dominant conflict narratives. The research advances tourism scholarship by integrating audience reception theory with peace tourism debates and by empirically examining how social media travel texts are interpreted in conflict-affected destinations.

Keywords: Social media; Peacebuilding; Israel; Palestine; Western Tourists; Stereotypes; YouTube; Mass Media

Introduction

Media—both traditional and digital—play a central role in shaping perceptions of foreign destinations, particularly those affected by conflict (Tham et al., 2019; Panievsky et al., 2024). In tourism research, destination image formation has long been linked to mediated representations, with studies demonstrating how news and entertainment media influence perceptions of safety, cultural difference, and political stability (Llodra-Riera et al., 2015; Keelson et al., 2024). In conflict-affected regions, these mediated images often become primary sources of knowledge for prospective tourists who lack direct experience.

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Western mainstream media portrayals of the Middle East have frequently emphasized themes of instability, extremism, and threat, particularly following events such as 9/11, the 7/7 attacks, and the October 7, 2023 attacks in Israel (Jackson, 2024; Elmasry, 2024). Such representations may contribute to generalized and homogenized understandings of the region, potentially discouraging tourism and reinforcing symbolic boundaries between “Western” and “Middle Eastern” identities (Cocking, 2020). However, the contemporary media environment is no longer dominated exclusively by traditional news institutions. Digital platforms—especially YouTube—have enabled independent travel creators to circulate alternative narratives that foreground everyday life, cultural heritage, and interpersonal encounters.

Despite growing scholarship on media representation of Israel and Palestine (Elmasry, 2024; Kareem & Najm, 2024), limited research has examined how Western tourists interpret social media travel documentaries depicting these destinations. Tourism research on Israel and Palestine has focused primarily on destination image, religious tourism, and development (Isaac & Abu Eid, 2018; Stein, 2008), while media research has largely centered on news framing. The interpretive impact of independent travel documentaries on audience perceptions remains underexplored.

This study addresses that gap by examining how Western tourists interpret two YouTube travel documentaries about Israel and Palestine in the aftermath of October 7, 2023. Rather than assuming direct media effects, the research adopts an audience-centered approach, drawing on cultural and reception theories to analyze how viewers negotiate, accept, or contest mediated representations. In doing so, the study contributes to debates on peace tourism by exploring whether alternative travel narratives can complicate dominant conflict frames and open discursive space for more nuanced understandings of contested destinations.

Overview of Hoffer's YouTube Documentaries

“Journey Through Palestine” (Hoffer, 2024a) and “Journey Through Israel” (Hoffer, 2024b) are two travel documentaries available on YouTube, created by Stef Hoffer, a German filmmaker. “Journey Through Palestine” was released in March 2022, followed by “Journey Through Israel” in May 2022. In these documentaries, Hoffer explores Israel and the West Bank, the largest and most accessible region of Palestine, but he does not visit or feature Gaza. The travel documentary on Palestine clearly illustrates that the concept of Palestine holds different meanings for different individuals, often overshadowed by its associations with political unrest and conflict. However, the travel documentary on Palestine clearly shows Palestine as a region of remarkable cultural richness and beauty, showcasing historic landmarks, stunning natural landscapes, significant religious sites, and a diverse culinary tradition, all complemented by the hospitality of the Palestinian people. In “Journey Through Palestine,” Hoffer traverses the Holy Land, a region of significant importance to the three main monotheistic religions, focusing specifically on the West Bank. His exploration includes the vibrant streets of Ramallah and the narrow alleyways of Nablus, alongside religious sites in Hebron and Bethlehem, as well as the ancient ruins of Jericho. Throughout his journey, Hoffer engages with local residents and samples traditional cuisine, presenting a narrative that highlights positive experiences and attractions. Nevertheless, he also acknowledges the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine, which has significantly affected the lives of many in the region. During Hoffer's trips, he encourages his audience, especially those from the Western world who may have minimal or no interaction with either Palestinian or Israeli individuals, to explore alternative sources of information outside of mainstream Western media. This journey marks Hoffer's first extensive trip since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a fact he expresses gratitude for as he resumes his travels.

Similarly, the term Israel in the travel documentary conjures diverse interpretations among individuals, as it is recognized as one of the most dynamic and multifaceted countries globally. Hoffer also highlights that while often associated with political instability and conflict, Israel boasts stunning natural landscapes, vibrant urban centers, ancient historical sites, and an exceptional culinary scene, all enriched by the hospitality of the Israeli people. In “Journey Through Israel,” Hoffer travels through the Holy Land, a region that has served as a crossroads of religions and cultures for centuries, established as a nation in 1948. His exploration ranges from the beautiful beaches and bustling streets of modern Tel Aviv to the religious landmarks and atmospheric alleyways of Jerusalem’s Old City. Hoffer also traverses the saltwater of the Dead Sea and the surreal desert landscapes of the Negev. Engaging with local residents and tasting the region’s cuisine, he approaches the narrative from a traveler’s perspective, focusing on uplifting stories and experiences. At one point in the travel documentary, Hoffer highlights how Arab citizens of Israel live harmoniously alongside their Israeli counterparts. He highlights their significant contributions to Israeli society, showcasing a shared existence that often goes unnoticed amid the broader narratives of conflict. This portrayal emphasizes the complex, multifaceted relationships that enrich the fabric of the nation. Still, he also addresses the Israel-Palestine conflict, acknowledging its impact on the lives of many. At the end of the travel documentary, Hoffer advises that for those interested in the region’s political and historical intricacies, a thorough examination of different informational sources is vital.

Theoretical Framework: Media Representation, Audience Reception, and Peace Tourism

Media Representation and the Construction of Conflict Imaginaries

Media play a constitutive role in shaping social imaginaries of distant places, particularly where direct experience is limited (Keelson et al., 2024). In tourism contexts, destination image formation has long been understood as a mediated process in which news coverage, film, and digital content contribute to cognitive and affective evaluations of place (Rauf & Pasha, 2024). When destinations are associated with political instability or violence, media representations may become the primary source of knowledge for potential visitors (McChesney, 2001).

In the case of Israel and Palestine, Western media coverage has frequently centered on episodes of violence, security operations, and geopolitical confrontation (Elmasry, 2024). Such reporting often relies on episodic framing, emphasizing crisis events over quotidian life. Over time, repeated exposure to these frames may cultivate durable cognitive schemas linking the region to insecurity or threat (Gerbner et al., 2002). Within tourism studies, this dynamic is associated with risk perception and destination avoidance behavior (Fürsich, 2009).

However, media representation does not simply transmit information; it structures symbolic boundaries (Maneri, 2023). Drawing from cultural sociology, conflict reporting may reinforce categorical distinctions between “us” and “them,” constructing simplified binaries that obscure internal diversity. These symbolic constructions can influence not only safety perceptions but also moral positioning and empathy (Zhang & Zhang, 2026). Thus, mediated representations shape not just whether destinations are perceived as safe, but how their inhabitants are imagined (Isaac & Abu Eid, 2018).

From Media Effects to Media Ecologies

In the contemporary digital era, media plays a pivotal role in molding human behavior, societal norms, and perceptions through multiple channels (Keelson et al., 2024). Media has an important impact on cognition and behavior; for example, continuous exposure to violent media can desensitize viewers to actual violence (Ang, 1996). Media Effects Theory, primarily a branch of communication studies, offers insights into how media exposure influences individual and collective attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Media Effects Theory identifies several types of impacts that media content can have on viewers, including cognitive, emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral impacts. Cognitive impacts shape audiences' knowledge acquisition, understanding, and reality perception. Emotional impacts can arouse a wide range of feelings, affecting viewers' moods. For example, movies that prompt positive emotions can evoke feelings of happiness and enjoyment, while news coverage of tragic events can provoke sentiments of empathy and sadness. Also, media attitudinal impacts focus on how media shapes viewers' beliefs and attitudes regarding ideological stances, social issues, public opinion, and consumer choices. Lastly, media behavioral impacts examine how media content affects viewers' behavior, with empirical research indicating that constant exposure to positive media content can lead to altruism, while negative content may contribute to aggression (Potter, 2012).

Traditional media effects models—including agenda-setting and cultivation theory—suggest that sustained exposure to dominant frames can shape public perception by influencing the perceived importance of issues and normalizing particular interpretations of reality. (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Gerbner et al., 2002). Social Learning Theory suggests that viewers learn through imitation of media representations, with media providing a source of social models (Bandura, 2002). Yet contemporary media environments are increasingly fragmented and participatory. Social media platforms such as YouTube function within what scholars call hybrid media systems, where traditional journalism exists alongside user-generated content and narratives that are amplified through algorithmic processes (Hongcharu, 2024; Soto-Vásquez, 2022).

Within such media ecologies, independent travel creators may function as alternative narrators or voices of the destination. Unlike conventional news outlets, travel vloggers often foreground everyday interactions, culinary practices, and interpersonal encounters. These narrative strategies may shift the representational emphasis from macro-political conflict to micro-social coexistence (Islam et al., 2025). Importantly, however, these alternative representations do not exist outside power structures; they are embedded within platform logics, monetization systems, and audience expectations that shape content production (Rauf & Pasha, 2024).

By situating YouTube travel documentaries within a broader media ecology rather than positioning them as inherently counter-hegemonic, this study avoids romanticizing digital platforms. Instead, it examines how such content interacts with pre-existing mainstream narratives in shaping interpretive processes.

Audience Reception and Negotiated Meaning-Making

While the media effects tradition illuminates how frames circulate and acquire issue prominence, audience reception theory shifts attention to how meaning is actively constructed at the point of consumption (Ott & Mack, 2010; Zaborowski et al., 2016). Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model posits that audiences do not passively absorb media messages but interpret them through socially situated frameworks shaped by prior experience, cultural positioning, and ideological orientation. As such, viewers may adopt dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings of a text.

Tourism scholarship has increasingly drawn on reception theory to explore how mediated travel narra-

tives are interpreted across cultural contexts (Tivers & Rakić, 2012; Yoo & Buzinde, 2012). These studies show that audiences filter representations through lived experience, mobility histories, and identity-based interpretive schemas. Meaning-making, therefore, is neither uniform nor immediate; it is mediated by accumulated experiential knowledge.

For repeat visitors, this interpretive process becomes qualitatively distinct. Unlike first-time viewers who rely primarily on mediated representations, repeat visitors possess embodied memories and affective attachments that function as interpretive anchors. These experiential resources may generate what can be termed *experiential authority* — a perceived capacity to evaluate, authenticate, or contest media portrayals based on personal familiarity with place (De-Santis & Torres-Toukourmidis, 2026). In this sense, reception is not simply cognitive but memory-based and relational, shaped by layered encounters over time.

In conflict-affected destinations, this dynamic is especially significant. Exposure to travel documentaries may not simply displace security-framed news narratives (Yoo & Buzinde, 2012); rather, repeat visitors may engage in negotiated readings that differentiate between geopolitical conflict and ordinary social life. Instead of wholesale attitudinal transformation, what emerges is cognitive differentiation — a re-configuration of interpretive boundaries between “conflict space” and “lived space.” Media texts are thus assessed against embodied memory rather than absorbed as primary definitional frameworks (Tivers & Rakić, 2012). By adopting a reception-oriented lens, this study focuses on cumulative sense-making processes. It shifts analytical emphasis away from linear media influence toward iterative interpretive work, where meanings are revised, or contested across multiple encounters with both media texts and place itself.

Tourism, Contact, and the Limits of Peace Claims

Peace tourism literature suggests that tourism encounters can facilitate intercultural understanding by fostering contact, empathy, and recognition of shared humanity (Farmaki & Stergiou, 2021). Drawing loosely from contact theory (Allport, 1954), some scholars (Li & Wang, 2020; Malik, 2023) argue that structured encounters under appropriate conditions may reduce prejudice. However, empirical verification of tourism’s peace-building capacity remains contested. Critics caution against assuming that mobility automatically translates into mutual understanding, noting that tourism can also reproduce asymmetries and superficial engagement (Causevic & Lynch, 2011).

Recent empirical work reinforces this caution. Qualitative research on grassroots tourism initiatives in Colombia’s postconflict regions demonstrates that tourism spaces may simultaneously contest, reproduce, and conceal power structures rather than straightforwardly advance reconciliation (Guasca Ricaurte, 2024). Similarly, political-economic analyses of tourism governance in Medellín show how tourism development can coexist with criminal regulation and informal control, complicating celebratory narratives of tourism-led peace dividends (Naef, 2023). At the macro level, econometric evidence examining the aftermath of Colombia’s ceasefire finds limited structural transformation in historically conflict-affected municipalities, underscoring that reductions in violence do not automatically yield broad-based economic recovery (Fajardo-Steinhäuser, 2023). Together, these findings suggest that tourism’s contribution to peace is uneven, mediated by local power configurations, and constrained by institutional capacity. Within this debate, mediated tourism content represents a further layer of abstraction. Unlike direct interpersonal contact, documentary viewing constitutes a symbolic encounter (Cocking, 2020). Its potential contribution lies not in producing reconciliation but in expanding imaginative horizons—what Appadurai (1996) describes as the “capacity to aspire.” By showing everyday coexistence, alternative travel narratives can challenge broad, one-dimensional portrayals of conflict without resolving deeper structural issues (Yoo & Buzinde, 2012).

Emerging research also shows that social media plays an increasingly central role in constructing destination imaginaries, particularly in volatile or politically sensitive contexts. A recent study shows how tourism stakeholders cocreate destination images through social media photography, highlighting the negotiated and multi-actor character of digital place-making (Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2024). Complementing this, narrative analyses of the Russia–Ukraine war in tourism media illustrate how conflict framing reshapes destination image and public interpretation during periods of active geopolitical crisis (Tan, & Cheng, 2025). Empirical studies on electronic wordofmouth (eWOM) further demonstrate that digitally circulated narratives significantly influence travel intentions and destination trust, particularly under conditions of perceived risk (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024). These findings substantiate the claim that mediated representations—especially via social platforms—shape not only symbolic understandings but anticipated mobility practices.

Evidence from conflict-marked destinations such as the Korean DMZ further illustrates how cognition, prior knowledge, and affect interact in shaping engagement. A 2024 study of overseas visitors applying the extended Theory of Planned Behavior found that cognitive and affective destination images significantly influenced attitudes and revisit intention, with prior knowledge moderating these effects (Kang, 2024). The present study therefore approaches peace tourism not as an outcome to be measured, but as a “discursive formation” (Foucault, 1972, p. 38). The analytical focus remains on perceptual shifts—specifically, whether exposure to YouTube travel documentaries prompts viewers to differentiate between political conflict and lived social realities. Such differentiation, while modest, may represent an important prerequisite for more nuanced engagement with contested destinations.

Conceptual Integration

Bringing these strands together, the current study conceptualizes Western tourists’ perceptions as shaped within a dynamic interplay of (1) dominant news frames, (2) alternative digital narratives, and (3) individual interpretive agency. Rather than treating media influence as linear, the framework assumes a layered process in which viewers draw upon multiple representational resources when constructing meaning. The central research question emerging from this integration is therefore not whether YouTube documentaries change attitudes in a measurable sense, but how Western tourists interpret and negotiate alternative representations of Israel and Palestine within an already saturated media environment. By situating audience reception within a broader media ecology and linking it to debates in peace tourism, the framework provides the analytical architecture for examining perception formation in conflict-affected destinations.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative design to explore how Western tourists interpret two independent YouTube travel documentaries depicting Israel and Palestine. The research question centers on processes of meaning-making rather than measuring causal media effects. Accordingly, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for examining how participants articulate, negotiate, and contextualize their perceptions in discussion. The study is situated within a constructivist epistemological framework, which assumes that perceptions of destinations are socially constructed through mediated representations, prior experiences, and interpersonal interaction.

A focus group method was selected because it enables the observation of collective sense-making pro-

cesses and the co-construction of interpretations (Morgan, 2020). Given that reception theory emphasizes negotiated readings (Tham et al., 2019), a group setting allows participants to articulate, challenge, and refine their interpretations in interaction with others. This method is therefore particularly suited to examining how audiences interpret media texts in socially situated contexts. Focus group interviews typically involve media viewing followed by guided discussion. They are classified into two following types: “full groups” (8-10 participants) and “mini groups” (4-6 participants), often lasting 100-130 minutes (Walden, 2008). This study utilized the full group format, inviting 13 participants (targeting eight) to ensure adequate attendance. The primary author moderated the sessions, managing data collection and study objectives.

Sampling and Participants

Participants (N = 13) were recruited through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) via a tour operator serving Western European and North American tourists visiting Israel and selected areas of the West Bank (Table 1). Eligibility criteria included: (1) being over 18 years of age, (2) fluency in English to ensure active participation in discussion, and (3) current participation in organized tour activities within the region. The purposive sampling strategy was designed to access individuals who were actively encountering the destination and therefore likely to reflect on mediated and lived perceptions simultaneously.

Although the initial intention was to recruit primarily first-time visitors, nine of the thirteen participants were repeat visitors. This demographic composition introduces a potential interpretive bias, as prior embodied experiences may moderate or complicate media influence. Rather than treating this as a methodological flaw, the study acknowledges that repeat visitation constitutes an important contextual variable shaping perception formation. Nevertheless, this imbalance limits the ability to generalize findings to first-time visitors or non-travelers and is addressed further in the limitations section.

The sample size slightly exceeds conventional focus group norms (typically 8–10 participants) (Walden, 2008), yet the discussion remained manageable and interactive. Toward the later stages of the session, thematic repetition indicated that conceptual saturation had been reached, as no substantively new interpretive patterns emerged.

Table 1. *Participant Demographics (N = 13)*

Participant	Nationality	Age Range	Gender	Occupation	Visit Status
P1	USA	45-54	Male	High School Teacher	Repeat
P2	England	35-44	Female	Marketing Manager	Repeat
P3	France	55-64	Male	Business Consultant	Repeat
P4	Canada	25-34	Female	Graduate Student	First time
P5	Germany	45-54	Male	Engineer	Repeat
P6	USA	35-44	Female	NGO Program Officer	Repeat
P7	Netherlands	65-74	Female	Retired Teacher	Repeat
P8	Greece	25-34	Male	Hotel Receptionist	First time
P9	USA	55-64	Female	Healthcare Administrator	Repeat
P10	Italy	35-44	Male	IT Specialist	Repeat
P11	Canada	45-54	Male	Architect	Repeat
P12	England	25-34	Female	Social Worker	First time
P13	USA	35-44	Male	Small Business Owner	First time

Materials

Two independently produced YouTube travel documentaries were selected: *Journey Through Palestine* and *Journey Through Israel*. Both documentaries foreground everyday life, cultural heritage, and interpersonal encounters rather than political commentary. The documentaries were produced prior to the October 7, 2023 attacks; however, participant interpretations occurred in the post-October 7 context. This temporal distinction is analytically significant, as viewers engaged with the content against the backdrop of intensified media coverage and geopolitical tension. The selection criteria prioritized comparable production quality, narrative structure, and duration to ensure analytical consistency. Neither YouTube travel documentaries explicitly positioned itself as a peacebuilding intervention, allowing the study to examine emergent interpretations rather than responses to overt normative messaging.

Procedure

The research process consisted of three stages. First, participants attended an orientation session in which the study's purpose was explained, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality assurances were provided. Second, participants viewed the documentaries in a controlled group setting to ensure consistent exposure conditions. Third, a moderated focus group discussion was conducted the following day to allow time for reflection while preserving recall accuracy.

The semi-structured discussion guide included questions addressing: (1) prior media exposure to Israel and Palestine, (2) pre-existing destination perceptions, (3) interpretive responses to the documentaries, (4) perceived similarities and differences between Israelis and Palestinians, and (5) reflections on whether the documentaries altered or complicated earlier perceptions. The moderator encouraged critical reflection while minimizing directive prompts in order to reduce interviewer bias (Morgan, 2020).

Data Analysis

The focus group discussion was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis following Patton (2015). The analysis proceeded in three stages: open coding to identify initial categories, axial coding to explore relationships among themes, and selective coding to refine overarching interpretive patterns. The coding process prioritized participants' interpretive language while also situating responses within the theoretical framework of audience reception and different negotiated readings (Tabel 2).

Manual coding was employed due to the manageable dataset size and the researcher's contextual familiarity with the region. While qualitative software can enhance organization, it does not replace interpretive judgment. To enhance credibility, an external qualitative researcher reviewed the coding framework and thematic interpretations. Minor refinements were made following this peer review process. To further enhance trustworthiness, eight participants engaged in follow-up virtual reflections (via Zoom) to validate whether the identified themes resonated with their experiences. This member reflection process helped ensure that interpretations accurately represented participant perspectives while acknowledging that meaning-making remains dynamic and context-dependent (Patton, 2015).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to protocols of ethics policy and practice for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence (Patton, 2015). Given the politically sensitive nature of the topic, care was taken to foster a respectful discussion environment and to avoid pressuring participants to adopt particular viewpoints. All identifying information was anonymized in transcripts and reporting.

Table 2: *Main Themes, Subthemes, and Illustrative Participant Quotations*

Main Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative Participant Quotation
Western Mainstream Media and the Politics of Belonging	Palestine framed through Hamas, terrorism, and instability	"They associate Palestinians living in Gaza with Hamas militants." (England)
	Israel portrayed as advanced, democratic, and aligned with Western values	"They portray Israel as an advanced, democratic country that cares about human rights." (England)
	Generalized assumptions about Palestinian society	"I associate certain traits with all Palestinians... I feel Palestinian society is male-dominated." (England)
	Geopolitical binaries: Western allies vs. anti-West actors	"Our American media divides Middle Eastern nations into two groups." (USA)
	Differentiating Israeli people from the Israeli government	"It's important to differentiate between the Israeli government and the Israeli people." (France)
	Limited coverage of Israeli protests	"Media doesn't show much about protests happening inside Israel." (Netherlands)
Social Media Travel Documentaries: Destabilizing the Binary	Recognition of similarities in family life	"The videos showed families sharing dinners." (Canada)
	Recognition of shared cultural practices	"Palestinians and Israelis are more alike than I had thought." (Canada)
	Similarities in fashion and public life	"I see Western-style clothing, but also conservative styles—similar on both sides." (USA)
	Visibility of urban modernity	"I didn't expect Palestinian cities to look so modern." (Italy)
Negotiated Readings and Cultural Commonality	Shared religious spaces	"I never expected to see mosques alongside synagogues and churches." (Greece)
	Reframing conflict as political rather than religious	"It's not just about religion... it's about dirty politics." (USA)
	Positive representation of Palestinian women	"Seeing Palestinian women driving and working changed my perception." (France)
	Movement toward shared humanity	"At the end, I saw people living normal lives like anyone else." (Canada)

Study Findings

Media, Othering, and the Reframing of Israel and Palestine: From Geopolitical Binaries to Shared Humanity

The findings demonstrate that Western mainstream media functioned not simple as a source of infor-

mation but as a powerful discursive structure shaping how participants understood Israel and Palestine. In the absence of direct contact with Palestinians, participants relied heavily on crisis-oriented news narratives that framed Palestine primarily through security, Islamic terrorism, and instability, while portraying Israel as democratic, modern, civilized, progressive society and aligned with Western values. This asymmetry contributed to processes of othering, in which Palestinians were often homogenized and associated with Hamas, whereas Israelis were more frequently individualized and humanized, particularly when some research participants had personal interactions with Israeli citizens. Media narratives thus contributed to geopolitical binaries that divided the region into “Western allies” and “anti-Western actors,” reinforcing “moral hierarchies of belonging” (Özbilgin et al., 2026, p. 5).

However, exposure to social media travel documentaries disrupted these binary frames by foregrounding everyday life, shared cultural practices, and overlapping religious spaces. Participants began to recognize similarities in family life, food traditions, fashion, and urban modernity across Israeli and Palestinian communities. Religious sites such as the Tomb of the Patriarchs/Ibrahimi Mosque further challenged assumptions of absolute separation, prompting some participants to reinterpret the conflict as political rather than inherently religious. Overall, the findings indicate a shift away from essentialist portrayals toward a reframing grounded in shared humanity, cultural commonality, and structural analysis. The following sections unpack these dynamics in greater depth, tracing how participants first reproduced dominant media framings and then began to negotiate, challenge, and rework them through exposure to alternative visual narratives. Together, these themes illustrate the shift from media-driven marginalization toward more relational and humanized understandings.

Western Mainstream Media and the Politics of Belonging

Focus group discussions revealed that Western mainstream media played a central role in shaping participants' perceptions of Israel and Palestine, particularly during and after the October 7, 2023 attacks. Participants relied primarily on CNN, BBC, Fox News, DW, Euronews, and AFP, especially in the absence of direct contact or firsthand experience. Rather than simply informing participants, Western media functioned as a discursive structure that produced hierarchies of belonging, normalizing certain identities while marginalizing others. Palestine was frequently understood through a security-oriented lens, closely associated with Hamas, terrorism, instability, backwardness, and underdevelopment. As one participant stated:

“They associate Palestinians living in Gaza with Hamas militants. But I feel like the coverage of Israel tells us a different story. They portray Israel as an advanced, democratic country that cares about human rights, and they even show how Palestinians and Arabs enjoy the Israeli way of life. They highlight how Arabs living in Israel have freedom and democracy compared to their counterparts in Syria, Egypt, Jordan and Palestine, and they show in the news street names in both Arabic and Hebrew. Somehow, Israelis and Palestinians seem very opposite” (England).

Another participant reflected how media narratives shaped generalized assumptions:

“I associate certain traits with all Palestinians, despite not having personal interactions with any of them... I feel that Palestinian society is male-dominated... but oppressed by the controlling Hamas group.” (England)

Importantly, none of the participants had direct contact with Palestinians or in-depth knowledge of Palestinian society. In the absence of lived experience, media narratives became the primary source through which Palestine was imagined. This supports scholarship suggesting that when personal contact is limited, media representations disproportionately shape collective perceptions (Soto-Vásquez, 2022; Yoo & Buzinde, 2012).

A clear analytical pattern emerged from the interviews in how participants categorized Middle Eastern countries. Many described a division between “Western allies” (e.g., UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Jordan, Qatar) versus “Anti-Western/anti-Israel actors” (e.g., Palestine, Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Yemen). As one participant explained:

“I noticed our American media especially Fox News divides Middle Eastern nations into two groups. One group is allied with the West and Israel, while the other group... is portrayed as anti-Semitic and anti-West.” (USA)

This binary framing mirrors dominant Western geopolitical discourse and reflects how media narratives construct moral and political boundaries between “civilized/progressive” and “extremist/backward” societies (Elmasry, 2024; Kareem & Najm, 2024). At the same time, perceptions of Israel were noticeably more nuanced. Unlike their views of Palestinians, many participants had interacted with Israeli citizens in their home countries. These interpersonal encounters disrupted total reliance on media narratives. One participant reflected:

“I’ve worked and interacted with several Israeli citizens... They are really nice people... I think it’s important to differentiate between the actions of the Israeli government now in Gaza and the Israeli people.” (France)

This distinction is analytically significant. While Palestinians were often described in broad and generalized ways, Israelis were portrayed as distinct individuals and humanized through personal familiarity. This imbalance reflects Hall’s (1980) concept of essentialist stereotyping, in which out-groups are treated as uniform, while familiar groups are recognized as complex and diverse. Participants also rejected the idea that most Israelis supported the war, criticizing Western media for overlooking protests within Israel. This indicates that participants were not passive recipients of media narratives (Zaborowski & Dhaenens, 2016). Rather, exposure to Israelis fostered selective resistance to homogenizing portrayals. Overall, the findings show that proximity and interpersonal familiarity shaped perception more powerfully than abstract media exposure alone. Where participants lacked direct contact with Palestinians, they relied more heavily on simplified and politically framed portrayals.

Social Media Travel Documentaries: Destabilizing the Binary

In contrast to crisis-centered news coverage, the two YouTube travel documentaries introduced everyday life, cultural practices, and shared spaces. While the documentaries initially highlighted culinary and cultural differences—distinct foods, dress, and social customs—participants consistently identified shared practices across both communities. Culinary scenes in both contexts were framed around family gatherings and social dining. One participant noted:

“The videos showed Palestinian and Jewish families sharing dinners... I’ve come to see that Palestinians and Israelis are more alike than I had thought.” (Canada)

Rather than reinforcing separation, these portrayals foregrounded parallel traditions of family life and hospitality. Participants also observed similarities in fashion and public life. As one participant reflected:

“In Tel Aviv and Haifa... I see many people in Western-style clothing, yet I also see more conservative Israelis... similar to Palestinian women.” (USA)

This visual hybridity disrupted previously internalized binaries of “modern Israel” versus “traditional Palestine.” Rather than presenting two culturally sealed worlds, the documentaries depicted layered identities and overlapping aesthetic norms. For several participants, this prompted a reconsideration of previously held assumptions, shifting their perceptions from rigid distinctions to a more comparative understanding. Importantly, this shift did not remove their awareness of political conflict. Instead, par-

ticipants appeared to distinguish between geopolitical tensions and everyday social life. The documentaries therefore functioned less as counter-propaganda and more as reframing tools, broadening the interpretive framework through which viewers understood the region. In this respect, social media travel content does not deny conflict but rather limits its dominance within the viewer's cognitive framework.

Negotiated Readings and Cultural Commonality

The theme of similarity became especially pronounced in discussions of religion and Palestinian women. Participants were particularly struck by the representation of the Tomb of the Patriarchs / Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron, a site sacred to both Muslims and Jews. One participant described surprise at seeing shared religious space:

"I never expected to see so many mosques alongside synagogues and churches in Israel—it really opened my eyes to the coexistence and peace here." (Greece)

Rather than viewing religion as naturally linked to conflict, many participants reframed the situation as primarily political and geopolitical in nature. One participant stated:

"It's not just about religion... it's about dirty politics. Religion gets twisted and hijacked by our corrupt politicians." (USA)

This shift is analytically significant: whereas earlier discussions reproduced essentialist stereotypes, the documentaries facilitated movement toward structural and political interpretations of the conflict. Participants also responded positively to portrayals of Palestinian women driving, working in markets, and participating in tourism activities such as visits to the Dead Sea and the Jericho Cable Car. These images contrasted sharply with prior media-driven depictions of Palestine as exclusively conflict-ridden (Jackson, 2024). Several participants compared Palestinian and Israeli urban lifestyles, concluding that both societies exhibit comparable forms of modernity and daily routine. This comparative reasoning destabilized earlier hierarchies of development and civility that had been shaped by Western media.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Research Implications

This study explored how Western tourists interpreted two YouTube travel documentaries on Israel and Palestine within the geopolitical context following the October 7, 2023 attacks. Rather than demonstrating a linear media effect, the findings reveal a negotiated interpretive process shaped by participants' prior exposure to Western mainstream news, their personal experiences, and the alternative narrative frames offered by independent travel media. In doing so, the discussion connects the empirical findings to Media Effects Theory while also engaging audience and cultural studies perspectives that emphasize interpretive agency.

Participants' pre-viewing perceptions closely reflected dominant Western news frames. Their descriptions of Palestine frequently relied on condensed symbolic cues—violence, extremism, instability, and anti-Western hostility—mirroring violent imaginaries prevalent in Western mainstream media. These responses align with cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 2002), which posits that long-term exposure to recurring media frames can normalize particular constructions of social reality. Participants' descriptions reflect what cultivation theory conceptualizes as long-term exposure to recurrent frames that normalize imaginaries of threat and violence. Rather than articulating nuanced geopolitical distinctions, they relied on widely accepted assumptions embedded in mainstream news discourse. These

assumptions appeared especially pronounced among those without extended prior immersion in the region. However, repeat visitors often moderated these perceptions by drawing on their own lived experiences, suggesting that direct contact can complicate purely media-shaped perceptions. This finding refines Media Effects Theory by demonstrating that media influence does not operate as a simple, linear outcome of exposure. Traditional media effects models, such as agenda-setting and cultivation theory, often imply that repeated exposure to particular frames shapes audience perceptions in relatively predictable ways. While these models acknowledge prior attitudes, they tend to emphasize exposure as the primary driver of perceptual change. The present findings show that audiences interpret media content in relation to their prior lived experiences and embodied knowledge. Rather than passively absorbing representations, participants compared documentary portrayals with their own memories and encounters. Media influence therefore emerges as an interactional process, mediated by experiential familiarity, rather than as an isolated effect of exposure alone.

After viewing the documentaries, participants did not simply replace mainstream narratives with new ones. Instead, they engaged in what Hall (1980, p. 138) conceptualizes as “negotiated decoding.” These reactions indicate a “negotiated decoding” process in which prior awareness of conflict was not abandoned but recontextualized. The visual portrayal of everyday coexistence—families dining, markets bustling, religious sites situated side by side—functioned as a symbolic disruption of the binary frames that had previously structured participants’ understanding. The documentaries did not erase knowledge of violence; rather, they introduced competing images that expanded new interpretive possibilities. The destabilization observed here was partial and conversational in nature, rather than fully transformative or comprehensive. In this sense, independent travel documentaries may function as supplementary narrative resources within a broader media environment dominated by “crisis-driven news coverage” (Xu, 2025, p. 29).

A particularly significant interpretive move involved participants’ emphasis on shared cultural practices. Through comparative cultural mapping, participants situated perceived differences within broader frameworks of human commonality. They simultaneously articulated difference and similarity, reflecting active audience positioning rather than passive consumption (Fiske, 2010; Zaborowski & Dhaenens, 2016). This supports reception theory’s claim that viewers negotiate meaning through their own cultural repertoires. However, the emphasis on similarity also reveals an important tension. While highlighting shared humanity may reduce symbolic distance, lifestyle-focused travel narratives can risk overlooking deeper power imbalances within the conflict. By centering gastronomy, fashion, and everyday life, the documentaries implicitly downplayed underlying political inequalities. Thus, while participants began to perceive both communities as more human and relatable, this shift occurred within the representational limits of tourism-oriented storytelling.

Participants also showed a shift from binary thinking to more differentiated understandings. Rather than viewing Israelis and Palestinians as uniform groups, they increasingly distinguished between governments and citizens, religion and its political use, and extremist groups and everyday people. This softening of rigid categories does not provide direct evidence of peacebuilding. However, it indicates a discursive shift that may serve as an initial step toward more complex intercultural understanding. Importantly, repeat visitors were more likely to express nuanced distinctions, reinforcing the finding that media representations interact with prior lived experience in shaping interpretation.

The findings therefore suggest that independent travel documentaries may operate as alternative interpretive resources within a conflict-saturated media environment. Participants’ responses indicate not a wholesale rejection of mainstream narratives, but a rebalancing process in which everyday representations complicated the dominant geopolitical imaginaries. Importantly, this study does not claim that exposure to travel documentaries produces measurable peacebuilding outcomes. The qualitative data point to an interpretive shift or perceptual adjustment rather than attitudinal transformation or behavior

ioral change. Whether such perceptual shifts endure over time or translate into concrete peace-oriented practices remains beyond the scope of the current study.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to media and tourism scholarship by empirically illustrating how cultivation effects may be moderated through alternative media exposure and prior travel experience. It demonstrates the applicability of Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model within a tourism-media context, showing negotiated rather than dominant readings. Moreover, it situates social media travel documentaries within a media ecology framework, where alternative narratives coexist with and partially disrupt mainstream conflict frames.

From a practical perspective, tourism stakeholders should exercise caution in positioning social media as a direct peacebuilding mechanism. While the findings suggest that alternative narratives can reduce symbolic distance and encourage reflexive questioning of stereotypes, they do not demonstrate sustained reconciliation outcomes. Collaborative storytelling initiatives that highlight coexistence may contribute to more nuanced destination images, yet such initiatives must avoid depoliticizing structural inequalities or overstating tourism's capacity to resolve entrenched geopolitical conflict in the region.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the small qualitative sample limits generalizability. Second, the predominance of repeat visitors may have shaped interpretive responses, as prior embodied experiences can moderate media influence. Third, recruitment through a tour company may have introduced selection bias toward individuals already open to intercultural engagement. Fourth, the documentaries were produced in 2022, prior to the October 7, 2023 attacks, meaning that participants interpreted them within a dramatically altered geopolitical environment. Future research could adopt comparative designs including first-time visitors, non-travelers, or experimental approaches to assess differential decoding patterns. Also, longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in examining whether perceptual adjustments persist beyond immediate discussion contexts or influence subsequent travel-related decision-making.

In conclusion, this study does not demonstrate that social media travel documentaries generate peacebuilding in any direct or measurable sense. Rather, it shows that such narratives can complicate dominant media imaginaries by introducing representations of everyday coexistence and shared cultural practices. These interventions appear discursive rather than transformative: they expand interpretive possibilities and encourage reflexivity without displacing awareness of conflict. Within the limits of qualitative inquiry, the contribution of independent travel media lies in its capacity to bring a human dimension back to communities that are frequently framed through conflict oriented news discourse, thereby opening modest but meaningful space for more differentiated intercultural understanding.

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