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Beyond the scenic view: a multimodal discourse analysis of sustainable tourism imaginaries on TikTok in Anhui, China

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Emerging tourism destinations harness digital technologies to reconstruct their tourism imaginaries and thereby gain global visibility. Nevertheless, there remains a limited understanding of how these destinations utilize multimodal resources to communicate their sustainable tourism imaginaries. Therefore, this study investigates how the Anhui Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism communicates its sustainable tourism imaginaries on TikTok. Drawing on the works of Wang and Feng and Feng, a semiotic framework is proposed to model Anhui's imaginaries as evaluative attributes and analyze their construction through verbal and visual resources in short videos. The analysis of 203 TikTok videos reveals a positive representation of Anhui through six key imaginaries: natural beauty, vibrant cultural activities, contemporary chic, culinary experiences, traditional elegance, and rural idyll. These imaginaries reflect Anhui's commitment to sustainability across social, environmental, and economic dimensions. By examining the multimodal communication of Anhui's sustainable tourism imaginaries, this study provides insights for emerging destinations seeking to improve their visibility and appeal through sustainability-focused promotion.

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Introduction

The growing global competition among destinations has forced them to adopt market-oriented strategies for differentiation from their competitors to attract more tourists (Wang and Feng, 2023). Consequently, various regions, from long-established tourism markets to rapidly developing destinations in Asia like China, have recognized the importance of conducting destination branding campaigns. This branding involves a set of marketing activities designed to create and maintain a destination's unique identity through distinctive visual elements, memorable experiences, emotional connections with visitors, and reduced uncertainty in travel decisions (Blain et al. 2005). Collectively, these activities shape tourists' perceptions and cultivate destination imaginaries in people's minds, thereby attracting more tourists and ultimately driving tourism growth (Wang and Feng, 2023).

Destination imaginaries are often discussed in tourism studies as a set of preconceived images and expectations of potential tourists about a destination. These imaginaries shape tourists' expectations, behaviors, and emotional connections to a place (Salazar, 2012). In recent years, tourism imaginaries with sustainable values and connotations have gained prominence, driven by the growing awareness of environmental, cultural, and social responsibilities in tourism development, particularly among Generation Z travelers who prioritize sustainable practices (Görpe and Öksüz, 2022). They mold tourists' perceptions by aligning a destination's image with values of responsibility and sustainability. This alignment attracts tourists who increasingly seek to make environmentally sound and culturally respectful travel decisions. Despite their crucial influence in shaping such sustainable travel behaviors, imaginaries that embed sustainability have received limited academic attention. Most studies in tourism have traditionally concentrated on the physical attributes and images of destinations (Siyamiyan Gorji et al. 2023), with a predominant focus on marketing strategies (Ebrahimi et al. 2020), social impacts (Palacios-Florencio et al. 2021), and tourist satisfaction (Kusumah, 2024).

Studies have shown that destination tourism imaginary branding is a social discursive communication practice (Flowerdew, 2004; Lam, 2018). Thus, discourse analysis has gained increasing attention as an approach to examining how these imaginaries are communicated and constructed. Discourse analysis is a methodological approach that examines how language is used and meaning-making in social contexts and

investigates how language shapes and reflects social realities, beliefs, and power relations (Machin and Mayr, 2012). In the context of destination branding, this approach reveals how language is strategically employed to construct destination identities, which in turn shape and influence tourist perceptions (Hannam and Knox, 2005). Previous studies have effectively applied discourse analysis to examine how destination imaginaries are communicated across different media, including brochures (Ignatova, 2020), websites (Rowley and Hanna, 2020), and eco-documentaries (Wang et al. 2023). Initially, discourse-based analysis primarily focused on verbal resources. However, the growth of digital technologies has heightened the importance of multiple modes of communication (Xia, 2023). As a result, discourse analysis has expanded to incorporate other semiotic resources, such as images, sounds, and animations (Jewitt and Henriksen, 2016). This shift has given rise to multimodal discourse analysis, which examines the interaction of various semiotic modes in discursive communication, particularly in promotional contexts (O'Halloran and Tan, 2022). Recent studies show that multimodal resources shape urban identities (Lang, 2024; Wang and Feng, 2023) and effectively deliver sustainability messages (Fernández-Vallejo, 2023; Irimiás et al. 2024), yet research remains focused on well-known destinations, overlooking emerging ones with promising tourism potential.

Anhui is one of such emerging tourism destinations. This inland province of China is rich in natural and cultural resources but faces challenges in raising its international visibility and competitiveness. As illustrated in Fig. 1, from 2014 to 2023, the number of international tourists in Anhui reached approximately 0.48 million, significantly lower than the 16.73 million domestic tourists during the same period. Recognizing this disparity, the Anhui provincial government has prioritized global tourism promotion to boost its tourism influence in the global market. To achieve this, they have adopted platforms like TikTok, given its broad international reach and strong potential to promote Anhui abroad. Against this backdrop, this study adopts a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach to address the research gap in branding imaginaries for emerging destinations. Specifically, it examines how Anhui's tourism imaginaries are communicated through verbal and visual resources and how they integrate sustainability, a crucial factor in the global shift toward sustainable tourism.

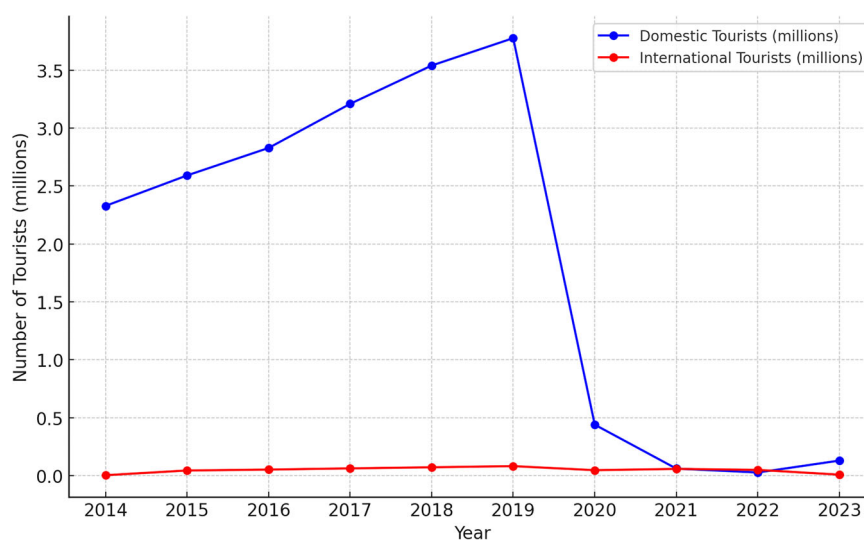


Fig. 1 Domestic and international tourist arrivals in Anhui province (2014–2023). This graph displays the stark contrast between domestic and international tourist arrivals in Anhui over the past decade.

By contributing to digital-age destination branding, this study aims to provide practical insights for emerging destinations like Anhui to enhance sustainable tourism promotion through effective multimodal communication strategies. More specifically, the objectives of this study are to:

- (1) Analyze and elucidate what tourism imaginaries Anhui projects and how these imaginaries are communicated through verbal and visual semiotic resources in its TikTok promotional short videos.
- (2) Analyze how Anhui's tourism imaginaries integrate and communicate the principles of environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

Literature review

This section reviews the literature relevant to this study, including destination branding and tourism imaginaries, social media for tourism branding, and multimodality and multimodal tourism discourse.

Destination branding and tourism imaginaries. Scholarly research on destination branding has evolved since its emergence in tourism studies. Early research primarily focused on marketing perspectives, viewing destinations as products requiring strategic promotion (Page and Connell, 2006). This understanding has gradually expanded across various disciplines, including tourism, communication, and urban studies (Swain et al. 2024). Despite the disciplinary differences, this body of literature identifies two fundamental dimensions of destination branding: identification and differentiation (Qu et al. 2011). Identification allows tourists to recognize a destination through its physical features (landmarks, coastlines) and intangible aspects (culture, customs, history), while differentiation emphasizes creating unique significance and emotional connections with tourists.

Regarding approaches to destination branding, they have predominantly followed two trends. The first examines tourism attributes through various analytical models and evaluation methods (Siyamiyan Gorji et al. 2023). These studies have contributed to understanding the components and measurements of destination brands. The second trend focuses on consumer responses, investigating tourists' perceptions, brand awareness, and loyalty (Najar and Rather, 2023). This consumer-centric approach has effectively elucidated the identification aspects of destination branding, particularly regarding physical destination offerings. However, recent scholarly discussions revealed relative neglect of the brand construction process itself, particularly how destinations actively brand their desired identity (Lam, 2018; Wang and Feng, 2023). Thurlow (2024) also notes that place branding is a performative, reflexive semiotic process where destinations deliberately reconstruct their identities to secure recognition within global economic and cultural arenas.

The concept of destination imaginaries has since emerged, extending beyond physical attributes to include evaluative, emotional, and cultural dimensions of destination identity (Chronis, 2012). This shift suggests that destination branding involves more than simply cataloging physical attributes; it also explores how these attributes are imbued with meanings that construct the destination's identity for differentiation. For instance, studies focusing on China's urban tourism, such as those by Wang and Feng (2023) on Xi'an, and Lang (2024) on Hangzhou, demonstrate how destinations brand their digitalized urban imaginaries. These studies prove that tourism imaginary can offer a useful conceptual framework for further research on the interactions between tourism and branding. Methodologically, they offer a framework for analyzing how imaginaries are

branded through verbal and visual resources. However, these studies focus mainly on popular destinations, overlooking emerging destinations that need strategic branding to boost their tourism potential.

Social media for tourism branding. Social media platforms have become integral to tourism communication and branding. Tourism-related content ranks among the most popular topics on social media platforms, and its high visibility makes destination branding exceptionally responsive to social media conversations (Lund et al. 2018). This prominence has spurred research into effective social media strategies for tourism branding. Studies have revealed that social media functions primarily as platforms for narrative and communication rather than marketing channels (Lund et al. 2018; Peters et al. 2013). Based on these findings, scholars increasingly advocate for a sociological approach to social media in destination branding (Wellman and Germic, 2024).

The methodological approaches to social media tourism research have shifted fundamentally. Early studies employed discourse analysis, rooted in social constructionism, to examine website-mediated communication (Cheong, 2013). These investigations focused on how destinations promote attractions to international audiences. With the emergence of visual-oriented platforms like TikTok, research has shifted toward multimodal approaches in tourism branding. Recent studies by Wang and Feng (2023) and Lang (2024) demonstrate how the integration of verbal, visual, and audio elements in social media content creates compelling destination imaginaries. Their analyses of Chinese tourism destinations provide evidence for the effective use of social media in building and branding destination imaginaries. In summary, social media is now a key platform for tourism branding, and it demands a deeper understanding of how narrative structures and multimodal features construct distinctive destination imaginaries.

Multimodality and multimodal tourism discourse. The field of multimodal tourism discourse has expanded. This development is evident in the move from a focus on verbal-based media to the integration of multimodal resources driven by digital technologies (Francesconi, 2014). This evolution recognizes the integral role of images, sound, and video in complementing textual content for destination branding. Key contributions from Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) have established a foundational multimodality framework that considers communication more than just verbal representation. This framework supports a systematic approach to the interpretation of diverse forms of meaning-making (Jewitt and Henriksen, 2016, p. 69).

Recent studies have increasingly applied multimodal discourse analysis to examine how tourism destinations utilize various communicative modes to enhance their promotional strategies. For instance, Theodoropoulou and Alos (2020) investigated Qatar's use of multimodal discourse to brand itself as a premier sports tourism destination. Similarly, Jabeen et al. (2022) demonstrated how Saudi Arabia integrates multimodal elements to project a modern and multicultural tourism identity. Ahmed (2022) also explored how Egypt's promotional films employ multimodal resources to craft and communicate the country's tourism image. These studies demonstrate the effectiveness of using verbal and visual resources to brand their unique identities. However, they have often overlooked the evaluative potential of these multimodal resources, particularly in visual branding.

Studies on urban identities in Chinese cities, such as those by Lang (2024) and Wang and Feng (2023), have focused primarily on the depiction of events, people, and sceneries. The complex

interplay between visual resources and their evaluative implications for destination branding merits greater attention to improving branding strategies (Feng, 2023). Furthermore, although the growing awareness of sustainable tourism has increased the emphasis on embedding sustainability into destination branding, this aspect has not yet received substantial attention in existing research. One noteworthy contribution is the recent study by Irimiás et al. (2024), which applied multimodal discourse analysis to explore how European food festival websites communicate social sustainability through the interplay of verbal and visual resources. Thus, the above review indicates the need for more studies that integrate the evaluative potential of multimodal resources in tourism discourse, particularly in the context of sustainability and destination branding.

Analytical frameworks

Multimodal construction of destination tourism imaginaries.

This study proposed an integrated analytical framework to examine the multimodal construction of destination tourism imaginaries in short videos. The framework synthesizes approaches to both verbal and visual meaning-making processes based on established theoretical foundations (Feng, 2016; Wang and Feng, 2023; Feng, 2023). To deal with the complexity of multimodal meaning in videos, the theoretical foundation stems from Feng's (2012) pioneering research on emotional expression in movies, which divided semiotic choices into verbal and non-verbal resources. This framework was further developed by Feng (2016) into a multimodal representation model for analyzing the moral values promotion in entertainment shows by direct/indirect verbal articulations and visual embedding.

The theoretical framework has since been successively extended to different contexts, including urban imaginaries studies of Xi'an (Wang and Feng, 2023) and Hangzhou (Lang, 2024), individual identity construction (Wang and Feng, 2022), and national image building (Feng, 2023). Notably, in response to the rapid expansion of digitization and place branding, Wang and Feng (2023) devised the framework to investigate how Xi'an, a famous tourism city in China, constructs its digitalized urban imaginary on TikTok. Wang et al. (2023) further extended the application to examine China's eco-friendly national image construction in eco-documentaries through multimodal critical discourse analysis and appraisal theory. Their research demonstrated the multimodal framework's effectiveness in analyzing both urban and national imaginaries construction.

The framework's first component addresses verbal articulations through two main approaches. Based on the attitude system in Martin and White's appraisal theory (2005) and Feng (2016), the destination's imaginaries can be constructed through both explicit "inscription" and implicit "invocation" in discourse. Explicit verbal resources primarily utilize attitudinal adjectives (e.g., "fascinating" and "amazing") and metaphorical expressions. For instance, describing "the sea of clouds in Mount Huang is like a fairyland" explicitly constructs Anhui's natural aesthetic imaginary. Implicit construction occurs through two primary mechanisms: event recounting elicits imaginaries and saying imaginary-motivated things. For example, Anhui's contemporary imaginary might be constructed explicitly through labels like "a hub of contemporary chic" and implicitly through descriptions of international events like the International Culture and Tourism Festival or international tourists' evaluations of modern amenities in Anhui.

Complementing the verbal component, the second dimension of the framework focuses on visual embedding strategies, which builds upon Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar (2020). Although previous studies suggested that destination imaginaries

are visually constructed through three primary elements: sceneries, characters, and effects (Lang, 2024; Wang and Feng, 2023), this study adopts Feng's nuanced (2023) framework with four subsystems ("entail", "provoke", "flag", and "afford") for its systematic analysis of implicit-explicit meaning-making in tourism videos. The framework also enables better captures of the complex interplay between visual resources and their evaluative implications in short-video destination branding. Specifically, Feng (2023) analyzes a Chinese national image promotional film and maps out the visual semiotic resources that generate evaluative connotations. The model of evaluative connotations comprises four subsystems: "entail", "provoke", "flag", and "afford", which range from explicit to implicit. Feng (2023, p. 58) considers "visual evaluative meanings as connotations, and they cannot be *inscribed* like those in language; rather, they can only be *invoked* (or *evoked*) through relevant tokens." In the system, "entail" is the closest to the inscription, which means the evaluative meaning is highly conventionalized and can be realized by facial expressions, emblematic gestures, and visual symbols. "Provoke" refers to using metaphors and other rhetorical devices that direct readers to an attitude. There are two options under "provoke": "cinematic metaphor" and "comparison".

Regarding the cinematic metaphor, different choices within a shot can be used metaphorically. The comparison is concerned with the relation between adjacent shots. "Flag" is mainly realized by graduation resources in the language (Martin and White, 2005), suggesting that "visual resources such as increased quantity or repetition of visual elements can flag attitude" (Feng, 2023, p60). For example, the attitude can be increased by presenting a large quantity of visual attributes (i.e., quantity). Also, using different shots (e.g., close or far) indicates different degrees of intimacy (i.e., proximity). "Distribution" highlights something through the duration of time or the repetition of shots. The last option in the system is "afford", which refers to evaluations implied in the context of visual representation (i.e., the representational meaning (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020)). This option is mainly about the representation of characters, events, and scenery. "Character" is analyzed in terms of different actional, analytical, and classificational processes that are predominantly socio-culturally meaningful activities (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). The evaluative meanings in visuals can also be achieved in "event" and "scenery" that always reveal socially shared standards (Feng, 2023, p. 60).

Based on these theoretical foundations, this study proposes an integrated semiotic framework specifically designed for analyzing Anhui's tourism imaginaries in short videos. As illustrated in Fig. 2, the framework systematically maps both articulated imaginaries (expressed verbally) and embedded imaginaries (depicted visually). It also helps code the videos to analyze prominent features and distribution of Anhui's tourism imaginaries.

Three pillars of sustainability. The sustainability concept originated from the 1970s environmental movements and gained formal recognition through the IUCN's 1980 World Conservation Strategy. The 1987 Brundtland Report "Our Common Future" established sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p. 43). This definition laid the groundwork for the three-pillar model of sustainability, which was later formalized at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. The model integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions to achieve comprehensive sustainability (Barbier and Burgess, 2021). These three pillars of sustainability closely align with the United

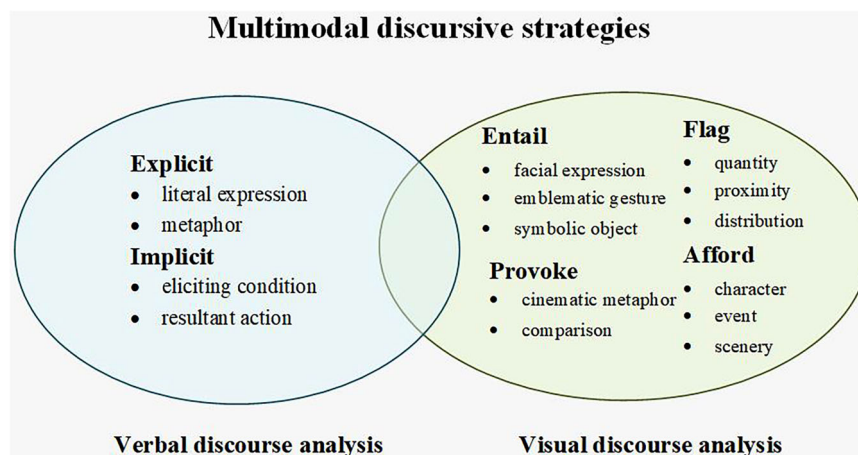


Fig. 2 Framework of multimodal evaluative discursive strategies. This framework is used to analyze the multimodal discursive strategies deployed to communicate Anhui's tourism imaginaries.

Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which provide a comprehensive framework for global sustainable development. Together, they offer clear guidance for integrating sustainability into tourism practices and promotion.

Environmental sustainability focuses on the conservation of natural resources, the reduction of environmental impacts, and the promotion of environmentally conscious living. It emphasizes the necessity of balancing promoting tourism and maintaining ecosystem resilience to preserve natural resources for future generations. This pillar aligns closely with SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 14 (life below water), and SDG 15 (life on land), which advocate for sustainable land use, biodiversity conservation, and climate resilience. For instance, eco-tourism initiatives that protect fragile ecosystems while providing educational experiences for tourists are increasingly recognized as best practices (Costa et al. 2022).

Social sustainability is devoted to preserving local cultural and historical heritage, as the authenticity of local places and practices forms the foundation of a destination's distinctiveness. This dimension also involves enabling community well-being and conducting tourism practices that empower rather than exploit local populations (Irimiás et al. 2024). The social pillar supports preserving cultural heritage and empowering communities, aligning with SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities). It emphasizes the importance of protecting social fabric and improving the quality of life for all, which ensures that development is inclusive and benefits are equitably shared.

Economic sustainability in tourism emphasizes the fair distribution of wealth, income-generating opportunities for local communities, and the promotion of local businesses. It also involves minimizing negative externalities, such as over-commercialization or resource depletion. This pillar aligns with SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure), which focus on inclusive economic growth, job creation, and sustainable industrialization. For example, tourism can stimulate local economies by creating employment opportunities, supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, and developing infrastructure that supports sustainable practices.

Recent studies confirm the importance of these principles in achieving tourism success. Costa et al. (2022) measure success through the balance of environmental protection, economic growth, and social advancement. Similarly, Ozturkoglu et al. (2021) demonstrate the crucial role of sustainable practices in hospitality management and destination marketing. Arifin et al. (2025) further point out that integrating sustainability into

tourism communication aligns with the increasing demand from tourists for responsible practices. These three pillars, therefore, offer a practical framework for analyzing destination promotional activities and assessing the sustainability of tourism initiatives.

Methodology

Data collection. The data for this study were collected from the official TikTok account of the Anhui Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism. The account was selected due to its authenticity, consistent updates, and influential reach. With over 117,600 followers and 1.3 million likes, the account has become an important platform for promoting Anhui's tourism to a global audience. All videos posted between the account's launch on January 31, 2021, and April 5, 2024, when the study began, were analyzed. In total, 203 videos were examined, with a combined duration of 1 h, 46 min, and 13 s. All verbal elements, including video captions, copywriting, and voice-overs, were extracted for analysis. Meanwhile, key visual scenes were captured using Adobe Premiere Pro 2021 to enable a detailed examination of the visual semiotic resources. To streamline the analysis process, an Excel spreadsheet was created to organize metadata, such as video links, duration, likes, and comments.

Data analysis. The examination of Anhui's tourism imaginaries employs the "Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis" method (Machin and Mayr, 2012). This method reveals that these imaginaries not only represent evaluative attributes expressed through verbal and visual resources but also reflect and are influenced by socio-cultural contexts where sustainability trends are a predominant feature. Thus, the analysis operates on two interrelated levels: micro-discourse analysis examines the construction of imaginaries, and macro-contextual analysis interprets the sustainable values and connotations embedded within Anhui's imaginaries. Accordingly, the data analysis incorporates both the conceptualization and construction of imaginaries and their contextual interpretation, as illustrated in Fig. 3.

The micro-level discourse analysis comprises the projected imaginaries (part 1) and their realization through multimodal resources (part 2). The first part involves coding and classifying the projected imaginaries using inductive content analysis, which allows categories to emerge from the data. Through iterative discussions and reflexive processes between the authors and an invited specialist in social semiotics, six core categories of tourism imaginaries and their attributes were identified (see Table 1). Since these imaginaries are constructed through verbal and visual

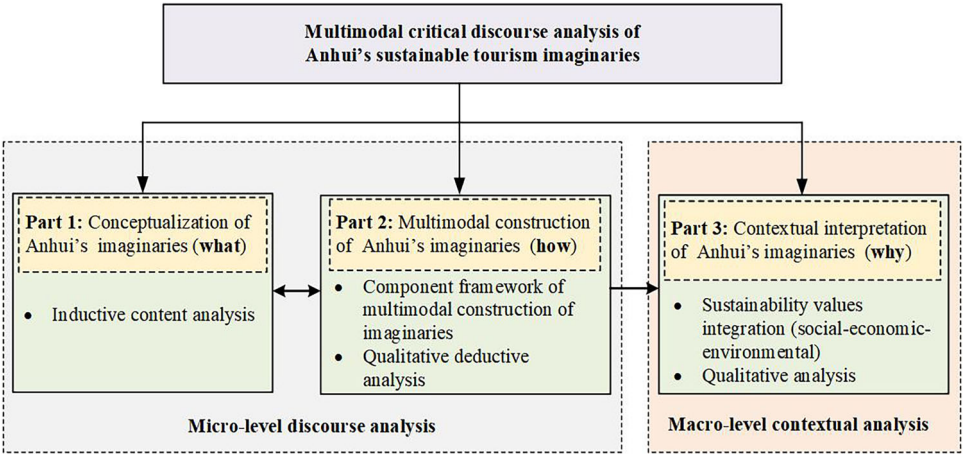


Fig. 3 The methodological framework for analyzing the representation of Anhui’s imaginaries. This framework is used to analyze Anhui’s sustainable tourism imaginaries.

Table 1 Distribution of Anhui’s tourism imaginaries.			
Imaginaries	Video count	Per (%)	Key attributes
A mosaic of vibrant activities	101	49.75%	Seasonal festival activities: Wangmantian Fish Lantern Festival, Dragon Boat Festival in Wuhu; Water-based recreation: Wuhu Fanta Wild Water Park adventures; Adventure experiences: winter skiing, mountain hiking in Mount Huang; Cultural participation: traditional craft workshops, tea ceremony experiences; Scenic routes: self-driving along Hongling Highway ...
A region of natural aesthetics	83	40.89%	Seasonal flower landscapes: Chengkan Village’s rapeseed flowers, Maihuayu Village’s plum blossoms; Mountain scenery: Mount Huang’s sea of clouds and pine trees, Tianzhu Mountain’s autumn forests; Water landscapes: Taiping Lake, Xin’an River beauty ...
A hub of contemporary chic	30	14.78%	Urban entertainment: Hefei night markets, AH Space Cultural Center, Hefei Aquarium; Modern infrastructure: Wuhu Yangtze River Bridge; Hefei High-tech Zone; Contemporary lifestyle: fashion shows, urban coffee culture, modern shopping districts ...
A realm of time-honored elegance	29	14.29%	Ancient architecture: Huizhou ancient residences, Xidi and Hongcun Villages, ancient bridges and pavilions; Traditional crafts: four treasures of study, Huizhou woodcarving, traditional papermaking; Cultural heritage: Lu Opera performances, Shadow puppet shows, traditional festivals ...
A destination of culinary delight	23	11.33%	Local specialties: Huainan Beef Soup, Huimo pastry, Hairy tofu; Traditional teas: Keemun Black Tea, Mount Huang Maofeng Tea, Taiping Houkui Tea; Festival foods: glutinous rice meatballs, traditional salted goods, Tongcheng water bowl feast ...
A portrait of rural idyll	11	5.42%	Agricultural landscapes: traditional farming practices, tea plantations, harvest scenes; Rural experiences: countryside bed and breakfast, farm-to-table dining, rural craft workshops; Village life: traditional village paths, local festivals, agricultural activities ...

discourse, the identification process naturally integrates with the second part of the discourse-based analysis.

The second part adopts a deductive approach using the proposed multimodal analytical framework as a coding scheme (see Fig. 2). This framework examines the construction of multimodal meanings and maps the distribution of Anhui’s imaginaries across its videos. In this process, each video is performed as a unit of analysis. An imaginary was counted once per video if it was realized through either verbal or visual resources or co-constructed by both. In cases where a single verbal or visual resource conveyed multiple imaginaries, all relevant imaginaries were counted. A specialist was invited to ensure coding accuracy. Both intra-coder and inter-coder reliability measures were implemented. Face-to-face discussions were held between the authors and the specialist to compare coding results and reach a consensus on the identification and construction of imaginaries. The ReCal2 reliability calculator confirmed an inter-coder reliability rate exceeding 96%.

For the third part, a macro-level contextual analysis was conducted qualitatively. Given the role of sustainability in destination development and the increasing public awareness of sustainable practices, this analysis interprets and evaluates Anhui’s imaginaries by incorporating the three pillars of sustainability and their connotations. The goal is to explore and clarify how an emerging destination like Anhui articulates its sustainability initiatives and engages with global audience.

Results

Overall distribution of Anhui’s tourism imaginaries. Through an analysis of 203 short videos, six tourism imaginaries of Anhui were summarized. These imaginaries were categorized based on their unique attributes, and their prevalence was determined by coding their manifestations using various multimodal discursive strategies. The findings, as detailed in Table 1, illustrate both the distribution of these imaginaries and their key attributes.

The most prominent imaginary, “a mosaic of vibrant activities”, represents nearly half of the 203 videos and showcases Anhui as a hub for lively and energetic experiences. Following closely is “a region of natural aesthetics”, which accounts for 40.89% of the videos and depicts Anhui’s stunning landscapes for those seeking natural beauty and tranquility. Furthermore, “a hub

of contemporary chic” (14.78%) reveals Anhui’s modern character through urban entertainment and infrastructure, yet this modernity is balanced by “a realm of time-honored elegance” (14.29%), which showcases the active practice of cultural heritage. In addition, “a destination of culinary delight” (11.33%) presents Anhui as a place where tourists experience local culture through its distinctive cuisine. The final imaginary, “a portrait of rural idyll” (5.42%), captures authentic rural Chinese life and traditions and offers tourists true-to-life experiences of rural traditions and lifestyles. The distribution indicates that Anhui primarily attracts tourists through active engagement and natural beauty, further woven with modern amenities, cultural heritage, local cuisine, and rural authenticity. The following section will examine the multimodal construction and communication of these imaginaries based on the framework in Fig. 3.

Multimodal construction of Anhui’s tourism imaginaries

A mosaic of vibrant activities. The most prevalent imaginary, a mosaic of vibrant activities, portrays Anhui as a destination for active engagement and experiential tourism. In 101 videos, this imaginary showcases how tourists can participate rather than merely observe the destination’s offerings. The offerings range from traditional cultural events like the Lu opera to modern recreational experiences such as winter sports and self-driving tours. Through these diverse activities, tourists gain immersive experiences that bridge Anhui’s traditional heritage and contemporary lifestyle. To illustrate, this imaginary is implicitly conveyed through “the eliciting condition”, a strategy that involves depicting events that evoke a specific evaluation. This is evident as both traditional festivals and modern recreational facilities are described in verbal discourse. In addition, the “resultant action” strategy is used, where actions motivated by this imaginary are depicted. For example, Text 1 implicitly describes the appeal of a parade by drawing numerous tourists who are eager to immerse themselves in the traditional culture of Huizhou. Besides, expressions such as “various performance activities” and “various exciting activities” explicitly manifest Anhui’s diverse leisure options. Such diverse offerings show Anhui to be a destination brimming with energy and cultural depth.

Text 1 states: The parade attracts numerous tourists who come and appreciate it, experiencing the traditional culture of Huizhou.

Beyond verbal descriptions, the revitalization of local folk activities and traditional Chinese cultural symbols was visually *afforded*, which exemplifies China’s soft power strategy for cultural rejuvenation (Wang and Feng, 2023) and showcases Anhui’s commitment to harmonizing cultural heritage with modern tourism practices. Both locals and tourists are represented in videos as active social actors. Participants’ facial expressions of happiness also *entail* Anhui’s vibrant atmosphere, as illustrated in Fig. 4. A woman and young girl share a joyful moment during the Chinese New Year festivities. Their natural smiles and expressions elicit an emotional connection with viewers through close-up shots and extended scenes. Their casual dress and relaxed gestures suggest a spontaneous moment rather than staged filming. The textual caption “It is very lively” shows Anhui as a culturally rich and active region. The scenes that follow depict a local artist performing, and they act similarly in *affording* Anhui diverse activities. The identities of these artists are displayed through their distinct physical features, including their performance attire, unique makeup, hairstyles, and accessories (van Leeuwen, 2008). Numerous scenes skillfully recontextualize their activities, showcasing them as cultural practices designed to captivate tourists. Such a presentation *flags* the region’s diverse offerings through the extensive “quantification” and “distribution” of these artists and their performances

across videos. These activities entertain and educate tourists and foster cultural interaction between locals and tourists, thereby increasing local participation and advancing social sustainability (Boulhila et al. 2022).

Anhui as a region of natural aesthetics. Anhui’s natural beauty is showcased through its scenic landscapes and seasonal charm, characterized by rolling hills, serene lakes, and vibrant floral displays. This imaginary position positions Anhui as a destination that offers tranquil and visually stunning experiences that appeal to those who admire the artistry of nature. Such imaginary is explicitly articulated in 83 videos, where a plethora of positive adjectives are utilized, such as “beautiful scenery”, “wonderful”, “fascinating”, and “amazing place”. Beyond mere *literal descriptions*, Anhui’s beauty is imbued with wonder through *metaphorical language*. For instance, the term “fairyland” (see Text 2) casts Anhui into an enchanting realm, where reality merges with fairy-tale charm to conjure a dreamlike landscape.

Text 2. The sea of clouds in Mount Huang is like a *fairyland*. Visit the fairyland and feel the magnificent beauty of the mountains and rivers.

Concurrently, Anhui’s natural beauty manifests itself in its natural wonders. Figure 5 captures an expansive sea of clouds with observers at a mountaintop sunrise, which showcases Anhui’s majestic landscapes. In these scenes, nature assumes a central role rather than remaining a mere backdrop in the unfolding narrative of beauty and wonder. This perspective conveys both tranquility and grandeur and establishes Anhui as a destination where nature crafts sublime artistry each day. This image reflects the region’s striking aesthetics and beckons viewers to witness its awe-inspiring moments firsthand.

The accompanying text, “Whispering a timeless tale of nature’s sublime artistry”, echoes this imagined landscape. The word “whispering” creates quiet reverence to match the sunrise’s majesty, and phrases like “timeless tale” and “sublime artistry” portray the scene as an enduring masterpiece. This representation uses the traditional Chinese ‘idea-image’ concept (yijing in Chinese pinyin) to express Anhui’s aesthetics (Farquhar, 2009). This centuries-old approach to natural landscapes extends beyond direct depictions to create deep experiential understanding. A viewer’s comment confirms this effect: “What a great view to see”.

A hub of contemporary chic. Anhui is represented as a hub of contemporary chic, characterized by its modern urban lifestyle, advanced technology, and vibrant cultural spaces. Semiotic markers such as high-tech zones, exhibitions at the Anhui Art Museum, urban night markets, chic malls, and contemporary tea culture indicate the region’s innovation, urban transformation, and global cultural integration. These elements reflect Anhui’s rapid economic growth and readiness for international investment (Wang and Feng, 2023). This evolving modern identity is *explicitly* constructed by verbal terms like “modern” and “contemporary”. These terms convey a strong endorsement of Anhui as a center of contemporary chic. Besides, hashtags like “#modern Anhui” further emphasize its modernity. Furthermore, Anhui’s modern features are implicitly conveyed through the strategy of *eliciting conditions*, which is demonstrated by hosting events like the Anhui International Culture and Tourism Festival and cities gaining global recognition for their unique modern charm. Meanwhile, Anhui strengthens its international presence by promoting its ancient villages, which are now recognized as World Heritage sites.

Apart from verbal expressions, Anhui’s contemporary features are *afforded* by urban landmarks such as skyscrapers and advanced transportation systems, including viaducts and the Anhui International Convention and Exhibition Center. The



Fig. 4 Joyful faces at Lunar New Year celebrations in Fuyang, Anhui. This scene depicts the celebration of the Lunar Year of the Dragon in Fuyang County.

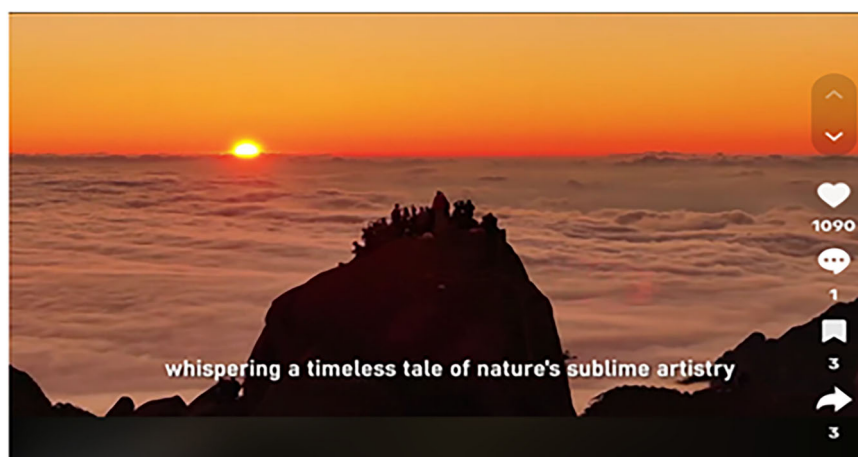


Fig. 5 Autumnal sunset at Mount Huang. This scene beautifully depicts the sunset view of Mount Huang, one of China's Five Great Mountains.

depiction of the high-tech industrial zone in its capital city, Hefei, further demonstrates its modernity. A viewer's comment, "WOW my God 🤯🤯" reflects surprise at this unexpected modern face of Anhui, which challenges the traditional perceptions of this emerging destination. These elements signify Anhui as a modern destination engaging in globalization, urban development, and cultural integration (Forceville, 2020). Moreover, scenes are predominantly captured in extreme long shots and from panoramic or aerial views. Such filming techniques illustrate Anhui's modern features and *flag* its modernity. Modernity is also *provoked* through cinematic metaphors of movement, indicated by rapid motions within shots and swift transitions between them. Such fast-cutting techniques suggest a landscape of quick changes and dynamic evolution.

In addition, the presentation of international tourists participating in cultural activities *provokes* a perception of the region's modern identity. As illustrated in Fig. 6, two young international tourists learning traditional Tai Chi from a Chinese master suggest the global appeal of Anhui's culture. This interaction symbolizes Anhui's international presence and modernity, *entailing* its contemporaneity. Activities such as foreigners adorned in traditional Chinese Hanfu and participating in poetry readings and calligraphy workshops further exemplify Anhui's

fusion of tradition with modernity (Wang and Feng, 2023). Anhui's cosmopolitan features are also *entailed* by upscale retail experiences at venues like Intime City and Yintai Centre. The emblems of prominent international brands are visually linked with Anhui's modernity, metaphorically *affording* a sense of luxury and trendsetting sophistication. These visual representations project Anhui as a destination that honors its past while embracing a forward-looking, globally connected future. This modern, global image aligns with the Chinese government and local authorities' vision, particularly during Anhui's "14th Five-Year Plan" period as an international leisure tourism destination.

A realm of time-honored elegance. Anhui's time-honored elegance stems from the enduring legacies of its historical sites and traditional arts. This cultural identity positions Anhui as a custodian of ancient Chinese traditions and aesthetics. The exquisite Hui-style architecture and well-preserved historical villages like Xidi and Hongcun exemplify the harmonious relationship between the region's natural beauty and historical heritage. Moreover, Anhui's traditional crafts and ceremonial practices are depicted not merely as cultural symbols but as vibrant traditions that continue to resonate in the modern context. For instance, Xuan papermaking and Hui-style wood carving practices suggest Anhui's dedication to preserving centuries-old artisan

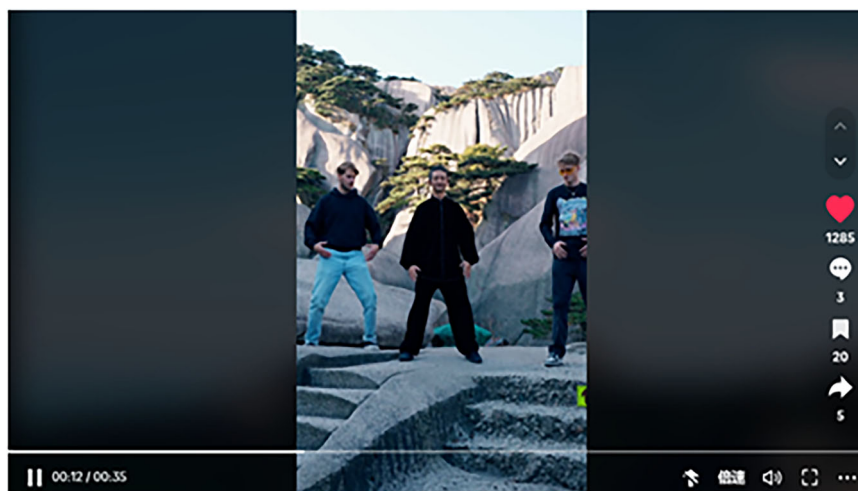


Fig. 6 Foreign Youths Practising Tai Chi in Anhui. This scene shows overseas youth practising Tai Chi.

skills. This elegance is *explicitly* conveyed through the frequent use of words such as “exquisite” and “elegant”. As demonstrated in Text 3, the term “elegant” emphasizes the aesthetic intrinsic to Anhui’s architectural tradition. In addition, architectural metaphors liken structures to classical Chinese art, *invoking* an imaginary that integrates cultural depth with a philosophical balance between humanity and the environment. This portrayal broadens the discourse on Anhui’s time-honored elegance. Furthermore, the “*eliciting condition*” strategy is also employed. As described in Text 4, the appeal to Anhui creates a scene that invites viewers to experience Huizhou’s beauty and historical depth personally. This direct appeal evokes an emotional response that builds a connection between the viewer and the city’s enduring cultural legacy.

Text 3: Ancient residential buildings are *elegant*, with houses of blue tiles and white walls blending harmoniously with the natural landscape. Like *an ink-splashed Chinese painting*, they display the ancient Chinese ideal of harmony between humans and nature.

Text 4: Come to the ancient city of Huizhou, surrounded by mountains and waters, and feel *the antique charm lasting for millennia*.

Anhui’s elegance is visually *afforded* by its historical legacy. The region’s charm lies in its Huizhou-style residences, intricate ancestral wood carvings, and peaceful village scenes, all of which embed its cultural richness. These elements are tied together by a subdued, earthy color palette that evokes a sense of antiquity. More than mere aesthetics, this visual harmony conveys the tranquility and timeless grace woven into Anhui’s identity. The Hui-style residential buildings in Fig. 7 exemplify this heritage. Their distinctive white walls and black tiles stand as visual markers of Anhui’s long history. These structures represent more than architectural achievements; they embody an era that valued craftsmanship and aesthetic detail. The orderly arrangement of rooftops and their perfect integration with the surrounding landscape illustrates the traditional Chinese principle of harmonious coexistence with nature. This philosophy remains fundamental to the region’s enduring appeal and continues to shape its architectural character. Furthermore, the enduring tranquility captured in these scenes, untouched by modern intrusions, reveals a way of life preserved across centuries. As the caption, “Huizhou ancient residential buildings are elegant”, suggests, these images capture the essence of enduring grace. Overall, the visuals invite viewers to traverse time and experience Anhui’s profound cultural legacy, engaging them in an emotional journey that resonates with traditional Anhui culture. This deep

connection is echoed in viewers’ feedback, including remarks like “Chinese culture never fails to amaze me tbh”, which demonstrates the continuing fascination with Anhui’s heritage.

A destination of culinary delight. Anhui’s culinary delights are featured in 23 videos that showcase its gastronomic attractions, from bustling marketplaces to serene tea houses. These videos display unique ingredients, intricate cooking techniques, and the historical and cultural significance of Anhui cuisine. A series of attitudinal expressive terms like “unforgettable”, “delicious”, “a hearty and satisfying meal”, “satisfying and flavorful”, and “alluring” describe the offerings. The use of sensory-rich language intensifies this imaginary, as demonstrated in Text 5. The verbal descriptions convey the provenance and authenticity of local ingredients, evoking the distinctive flavors and aromas that characterize Anhui cuisine. This approach allows viewers to appreciate the culinary heritage and time-honored techniques embodied in each traditional dish. It transforms Anhui into more than a travel destination—it becomes a living museum of culinary tradition where visitors can taste history and culture with every bite.

Text 5: Using the most *authentic ingredients*, the clean and sweet mountain spring water, after delicate processing, the dish will be delivered into your mouth. The taste of hometown reverberates in the taste buds.

In addition, the visual presentation of Anhui’s traditional and unique dishes, which are rich in color and texture, *afforded* the region’s culinary delight. Bustling markets filled with fresh ingredients, videos capturing joyous dining experiences, and detailed close-ups of dishes connect viewers directly, showcasing Anhui’s culinary appeal (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). Moreover, the actional process of chefs skillfully preparing regional specialties, such as Huimo pastry and Zhutang fine-dried noodles, demonstrates the delicacy of the food and the craftsmanship integral to Anhui’s culinary heritage. These dishes are also conceptually depicted to display their culinary delights, as illustrated in Fig. 8. Such depictions have garnered positive responses, with one viewer commenting, “It looks delicious. I would like to try it to know the taste 🤤🤤🤤”, which reflects the frequent and enthusiastic feedback these imaginaries evoke. Altogether, these techniques *provoke* Anhui as a gastronomic haven where dining transcends mere sustenance to become an immersive cultural experience. In addition, scenes of families who share dishes embody the cultural values of kinship and respect

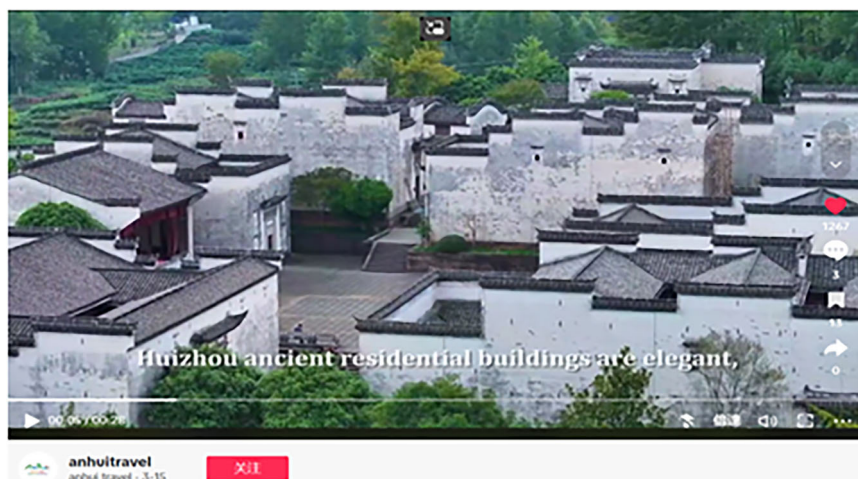


Fig. 7 The timeless elegance of Huizhou's ancient architecture. This scene depicts Huizhou-style architecture in Anhui.



Fig. 8 Culinary delight of Anhui: Lingyang Yipin Pot. This scene presents the Lingyang Yipin Pot, a traditional dish from Anhui.

that are deeply rooted in the region's dining customs. These scenes also demonstrate the important role that food plays in Anhui's daily life and social practices. This harmonious blend of culinary representation and cultural values positions Anhui's gastronomy as a bridge that connects culinary delights to the essence of cultural tradition (Puppín, 2018).

A portrait of a rural idyll. Anhui's portrayal of a rural idyll captures its authentic rural lifestyle through traditional farming and village life. This imaginary appeals to those seeking to retreat from urban environments and explore the simplicity and authenticity of rural culture (Li et al. 2023). An example of how this imaginary is implicitly conveyed can be seen in the depiction of Maihuayu Village, where "the vast sea of plum blossoms offers a serene retreat from the bustling outside world". This rural setting constitutes an *eliciting condition* and creates a fundamental contrast between rural Anhui's tranquility and urban chaos. It heightens the appeal of a peaceful rural escape and conveys Anhui's idyllic and pastoral atmosphere. As for the visual depiction, the rural idyll is primarily *provoked* by weaving together Anhui's pastoral landscapes and the unhurried rhythms of rural life. These visuals *provoke* a symbiotic relationship between locals and their environment, where the unspoiled beauty of the countryside and villagers' lifestyles evoke tranquility. For example, as shown in Fig. 9, the scene of people picking tea leaves against lush, terraced fields dressed in traditional attire evokes

timelessness and a deep connection to the land. The medium shot allows viewers to observe the serene pace of rural life closely. The caption "Tea Picking Tour in Shexian County" complements the visual, which shows an immersive experience of Anhui's tea culture. These scenes present Anhui as a destination where one can connect with the simplicity and beauty of rural traditions. These observations align with a recent study demonstrating that rural tourism development, promoted through China's Rural Revitalization Strategy, boosts tourist satisfaction and revisit intention by promoting local characteristics and deep cultural connections (Li et al. 2023; Kou and Xue, 2024).

Contextualizing sustainability in Anhui's tourism imaginaries.

Anhui's projected imaginaries reflect real-world contexts and demonstrate how the region communicates its sustainability initiatives to global audiences. Following the analysis of the identification and construction of these imaginaries, this section examines how these imaginaries integrate environmental, social, and economic sustainability principles in the region's tourism promotion.

Environmental sustainability is increasingly recognized as a priority in global tourism (Toscani et al. 2024). Anhui exemplifies this commitment through initiatives aimed at conserving its diverse natural resources and reducing the ecological footprint of tourism. Such efforts include promoting biodiversity and eco-

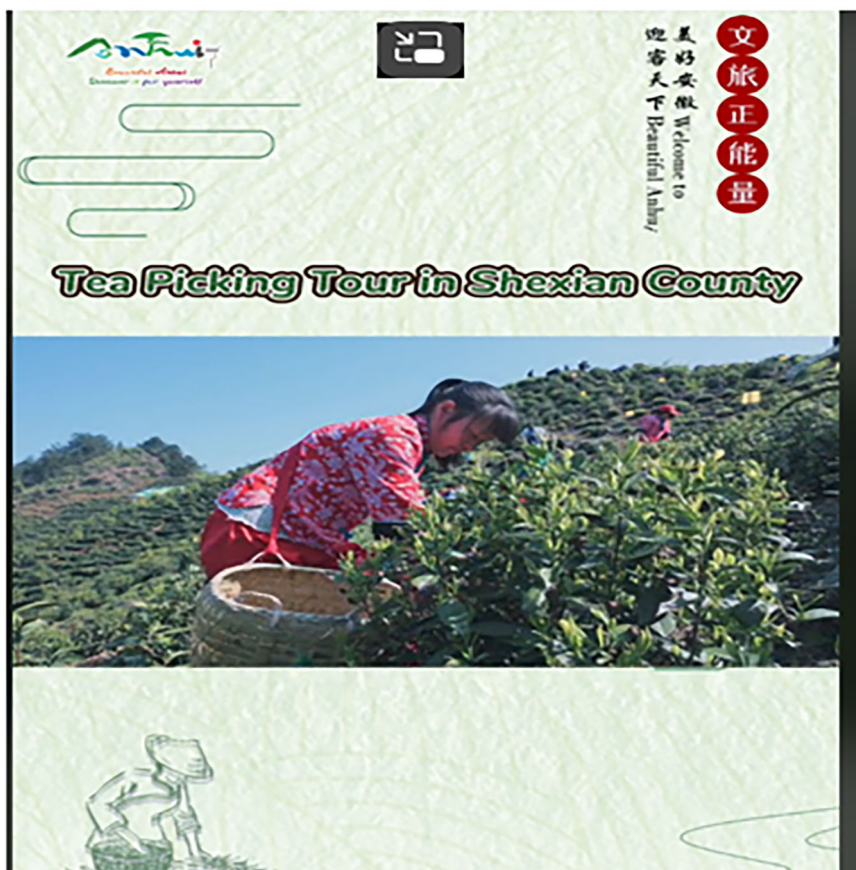


Fig. 9 Tea harvesting in Shexian County, Anhui. This scene presents tea picking in Shexian County.

friendly practices vital for preserving Anhui's natural sites for future generations. This is shown in its renowned natural beauty, such as the dramatic rock formations and cloud seas of Mount Huang. The promotional strategy utilizes both visual and verbal resources to communicate these features. Visual depictions afford the pristine condition of these landscapes, complemented by explicit verbal expressions such as “unspoiled” and “spectacular”, which project Anhui as a clean and unspoiled destination. Moreover, this region broadens beyond its natural wonders and presents rural charm through pastoral lifestyles and agricultural traditions. Through this portrayal, the value of living in harmony with nature and preserving traditional ways of life is emphasized. These branding efforts enable visitors to experience the tranquility of rural life and cultivate a sense of responsibility toward local ecological conservation. This approach is consistent with Zhao et al. (2024), who show that a genuine connection with a destination's natural and cultural beauty can evoke self-transcendent emotions among tourists and encourage sustainable behaviors.

Social sustainability in tourism emphasizes protecting cultural diversity and community well-being (Nugraheni et al. 2020). It ensures that tourism activities do not disrupt local social structures or cultural identities. In this context, Anhui's branding efforts preserve local values and customs to differentiate the region's appeal. In particular, its vibrant activities and time-honored elegance convey this commitment by showcasing its cultural and historical heritage. More specifically, Anhui presents its cultural heritage through narrative representations of diverse folk customs and performance activities. For instance, visual scenes often depict tourists and locals engaging together in activities such as watching performances or participating in local folk arts. These interactions help strengthen community bonds

and cultural identity. Moreover, Anhui's ancient architecture and historical sites are presented through a conceptual process that conveys a ‘stable and timeless essence’, which strengthens the sense of historical depth (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). In addition, verbal expressions such as “historically rich” and “timeless” evoke a deep connection to the past. These efforts, in turn, echo the findings of Giannakopoulou and Kaliampakos (2016) in their study on Sirako, a mountain settlement in Greece, demonstrating that tourists' appreciation for architectural heritage at destinations enhances their willingness to protect local heritage. By extension, Anhui cultivates meaningful cultural exchanges between visitors and residents through educational initiatives focused on historical sites and traditional customs, thereby strengthening community vitality. Furthermore, it creates opportunities for locals to participate in cultural activities and strengthens the region's economic foundations.

Economic sustainability in tourism involves supporting the local economy with the goal of also ensuring long-term prosperity (Qiu et al. 2019). In this regard, Anhui exemplifies the economic benefits of sustainable practices through various dimensions. For instance, urban development in cities like Hefei and Wuhu, characterized by modern skyscrapers and commercial districts, stimulates employment and attracts investment, which in turn drives local economic growth (Wang and Feng, 2023). These developments are reflected in verbal expressions such as “innovation,” “vitality,” and “modernization”, which not only convey a promising future but also suggest Anhui's readiness for business partnerships and investment. Meanwhile, the province draws on its rich historical sites and cultural festivals to attract heritage tourism and boosts local economies through increased visitor spending on services and products. Similarly, culinary tourism boosts Anhui's local economy by promoting local cuisine

globally, which benefits restaurants, food vendors, and rural agricultural producers (Wondirad et al. 2021). This approach also improves supply chains between rural producers and urban markets, which in turn expands economic opportunities across the region. Furthermore, rural revitalization initiatives, including agritourism and cultural tourism, contribute to household incomes and job creation through homestays, craft workshops, and agricultural experiences (Liu et al. 2023). Another important aspect is eco-tourism, which capitalizes on well-preserved natural landscapes such as Mount Huang and Qiandao Lake. These attractions draw eco-conscious tourists whose sustainable expenditures provide additional support for the local economy (Shang et al. 2024). Overall, these interconnected elements demonstrate Anhui's communication of economic sustainability in tourism.

Discussion and conclusion

The analysis reveals how Anhui communicates its six tourism imaginaries through TikTok videos: natural beauty, vibrant cultural activities, unique culinary offerings, modern chic, traditional elegance, and rural idyll. These imaginaries are constructed through verbal and visual resources and function as powerful tools that promote sustainability. They embed sustainable values into Anhui's identity and reshape public perceptions (Fernández-Vallejo, 2023). This section first discusses Anhui's imaginaries compared to other destinations, analyzing their sustainability implications and the features of videos. Subsequently, practical suggestions for emerging destinations will be presented.

The analysis shows that Anhui's tourism branding prominently features vibrant cultural activities (49.75%) and natural aesthetics (40.89%). This strategy aligns with broader tourism trends, where destinations use cultural heritage and natural landscapes to attract visitors. However, Anhui's branding differs from other Chinese destinations like Xi'an and Hangzhou, which merge modern urban elements with historical and cultural aspects (Wang and Feng, 2023; Lang, 2024). Unlike these cities, Anhui focuses more on rural landscapes, culinary traditions, and historical elegance, placing less emphasis on modern urban elements. This focus deepens Anhui's cultural appeal but might limit its attractiveness to audiences looking for contemporary travel experiences. A similar trend is observed when comparing Anhui to global destinations. For instance, Qatar's tourism branding positions it as a future-oriented, elite sports destination by capitalizing on mega-events like the FIFA World Cup to forge its international identity (Theodoropoulou and Alos, 2020). Similarly, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 tourism campaign deliberately constructs a modern identity through high-tech imagery and multicultural representations, actively challenging traditional perceptions of the Kingdom (Jabeen et al. 2022). These destinations shape their imaginaries to appeal to global markets, drawing on either large-scale events or consciously crafted representations of modernity. In contrast, Anhui's tourism efforts focus on local attributes such as festivals and regional cuisine, which mainly resonate with domestic audiences and show limited efforts to position the region on an international stage. This is further evidenced by the relatively low volume of comments under Anhui's promotional short videos, an observation that suggests limited tourist engagement and interaction and may indicate a narrower appeal or insufficient outreach to broader audiences.

In addition, destinations demonstrate diverse approaches to sustainability communication in their tourism branding. For instance, New Zealand's "100% Pure" campaign directly demonstrates environmental purity (Hayes and Lovelock, 2017), whereas Anhui's branding indirectly conveys sustainability through the representation of natural landscapes and rural idylls. This implicit approach may fall short of motivating sustainable

tourist behaviors. Research on Italian cultural tourism destinations shows that explicit communication of sustainable practices on official platforms can better influence tourist behavior (Marchi et al. 2021). Similarly, studies on European food festival websites indicate that clear social sustainability messaging improves community well-being (Irimías et al. 2024). These findings suggest that Anhui could gain a competitive edge by showcasing its environmental and social sustainability efforts more prominently. Such promoted practices would not only attract sustainability-conscious tourists but also boost local economic sustainability.

To effectively deliver these sustainability messages, Anhui employs modern filming techniques to create dynamic and immersive promotional content. Through fast cuts, varied camera angles, close-up shots, and carefully orchestrated *mise-en-scène* elements—such as the arrangement of characters, actions, and expressions—the videos effectively capture the region's unique appeal. Furthermore, the communication style in these videos, particularly on mobile social media platforms, predominantly utilizes a bottom-up approach (Senyao and Ha, 2022). This starkly contrasts with traditional tourism branding media like websites and brochures, which typically rely on top-down information dissemination. In Anhui's short videos, natural voices reflecting the daily lives of locals and tourists, colloquial language, and close-up camera angles offering intimate, eye-level views foster a sense of personal connection and equality with viewers (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). These strategies not only engage viewers but also make Anhui more accessible and relatable to a global audience.

Based on a detailed analysis of multimodal communication and sustainability interpretation in Anhui's imaginaries, practical implications from its sustainable branding practices can be used to guide other emerging tourism destinations. Specifically, emerging destinations should explicitly integrate sustainability into their branding by demonstrating clear commitments to sustainable practices. Moreover, globalizing cultural heritage is also crucial, making it more accessible and appealing to international audiences through digital storytelling and international cultural events. In addition, leveraging technological advancements in mobile social media platforms is essential, utilizing features such as editability, portability, connectivity, and multimodality to maximize interactivity and engagement (Wang and Feng, 2023). In terms of multimodal features, promotional videos should make greater use of multimodal resources to clarify cultural contexts. For example, when Anhui uses "idea-image" constructs and Confucian symbols that international viewers may find unfamiliar, these elements should be accompanied by both visual and verbal explanations to improve accessibility. Meanwhile, although China's promotional content typically avoids negative portrayals and follows a "positive propaganda" strategy (Wang et al. 2023), incorporating more nuanced and sophisticated content would help attract international engagement and satisfy audience curiosity. Finally, a bottom-up communication strategy is recommended, in which the daily lives of ordinary people are showcased through techniques such as colloquial language and close-up shots. These techniques effectively convey sustainable messages and create a stronger sense of connection with viewers.

To conclude, this study provides new insights into how Anhui, an emerging destination, projects its multifaceted tourism imaginaries and simultaneously incorporates sustainability commitments through TikTok. Using multimodal critical discourse analysis, it illustrates how Anhui communicates its imaginaries through verbal and visual resources and integrates sustainability into its tourism branding. Methodologically, this study presents a systematic multimodal construction framework for examining how these resources shape a destination's imaginaries, offering more insights into sustainability communication in tourism promotion. Future research could extend this framework to different contexts, such as ethnic minority destinations, to assess its

broader applicability. Practically, the findings guide emerging tourism destinations seeking to strengthen their global branding through sustainable tourism initiatives.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. First, it focuses solely on TikTok videos. To address this, a follow-up study will examine Anhui's tourism imaginaries across multiple social media platforms and adopt more data-driven methods to strengthen the validity of the proposed models and increase the broader applicability of the conclusions. Second, while this study examines imaginaries from the destination's perspective, the actual impact of these sustainability strategies on the public remains unclear. Future studies could incorporate interviews or surveys with tourists and content creators to explore social-cognitive and ethnographic perspectives, providing deeper insights into audience reception and practical effects (Bhatia, 2017). Third, as tourism marketing strategies and social media representations continually evolve, short-term studies may not capture long-term trends. Longitudinal research would be valuable for tracking these changes and identifying emerging patterns in destination branding.

Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Author contributions

Shuangyan Du: Conceptualization, research design, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript writing. Cecilia Yin Mei Cheong: Literature review, methodology development, manuscript revision, editing, and overall supervision.

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The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval

The article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent

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