Exploring agritourism perceptions through social media: A thematic analysis based on the uses and gratifications theory

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Abstract. This exploratory study uses Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory and thematic analysis (TA) to assess perceptions of the potential of agritourism in Azerbaijan, focusing on the YouTube channel "Country Life Vlog." The channel, which originates from a small farm in northern Azerbaijan, has enjoyed global success and attracts numerous user comments, providing unfiltered qualitative data. To examine the main themes, 300 random comments were collected from six random videos. The qualitative analysis revealed four themes related to the potential of agritourism. Users commented positively on elements such as food, domestic animals and nature and showed moderate interest in traveling to Azerbaijan. The study used co-occurrence (overlap maps) and word cloud analyzes of the qualitative data set to visualize the most frequently mentioned terms and their relationships. These results are insightful for state tourism agencies, private farms and companies looking to market agritourism in Azerbaijan.

1 Introduction

YouTube comments offer unfiltered insights from diverse audiences and shed light on public perceptions and interests in areas such as tourism and agriculture [1, 2]. When analyzed with an appropriate framework, they provide a deep understanding of trends and sentiments [3]. In this paper, the Azerbaijani YouTube channel "Country Life Vlog" is used as a case study to explore agriculture and agritourism as potential drivers of sustainable economic development.

The Republic of Azerbaijan, a small post-Soviet country in the South Caucasus, has a rich history and a diverse natural environment. Strategically located, Azerbaijan experienced a post-Soviet transition, a war with Armenia in the early 1990s and an oil boom between 2005 and 2014 [4]. While oil and gas dominate the country's economy, agriculture has always been crucial. It contributes significantly to employment and receives extensive government subsidies [5]. Agriculture's share of GDP has fallen from 24.9% in the 1990s to 5.5% in 2022, but 35.6% of the labor force was still employed in agriculture in 2022 [6, 7].

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Despite the importance of agriculture, Azerbaijan lags behind other post-Soviet economies in exports, crop productivity and profitability [8]. Challenges include soil salinization, pollution and inefficient water use [9]. Although land resources and biodiversity are limited, some research highlights Azerbaijan's high potential for agritourism, which should be developed as part of the national diversification program [10, 11]. Recent studies focus on the trends and challenges of agritourism to support the national diversification strategies and improve the socio-economic well-being of rural communities [12].

Recent government measures aim to improve agriculture in Azerbaijan by addressing low productivity, inadequate technology, lack of funding, weak institutions and fragmented farmland [13]. Akparov et al. [14] emphasize that agrodiversity increases domestic demand and developments in gene banks, databases and legislation strengthen agricultural potential. Agritourism, supported by new tourism trends and social media, seems to be a promising direction for the country's near future.

To add to the literature on agricultural development in Azerbaijan, the assessment of agritourism potential is essential, but there are few studies in this area. Surveys and interviews appear to be suitable methods, but there are also cost- and time-efficient methods, as the research design of this study shows. There is no clear consensus on the definitions of agritourism, agrotourism, agritourism and related terms [15]. However, based on Phillip et al.'s [15] survey, agritourism is defined as rural enterprises that integrate a working farm and commercial tourism and where visitors participate in agricultural or complementary activities. This paper argues that analyzing YouTube comments using U&G theory can assess perceptions of agritourism in Azerbaijan in a cost- and time-efficient manner, albeit with certain limitations.

The research question of this study is: What is the perceived agritourism potential of Azerbaijan as reflected in the YouTube comments on "Country Life Vlog" channel? The main objective is to qualitatively assess this potential by analyzing the comments of the channel focusing on village life using TA and U&G theory. This approach uncovers the perceptions and interests of the public in relation to agritourism. Furthermore, the combination of TA and U&G provides a solid theoretical framework to explore why users engage with agricultural content, thus supporting the research question.

The scope of the current study is limited to YouTube comments from viewers of a particular channel—"Country Life Vlog." User-generated data on platforms such as YouTube provide the necessary validity for academic studies to analyze real insights from viewers and public opinion. In the age of increasing digitalization, such an approach improves our understanding of socio-economic phenomena through a diverse and engaged audience.

2 Data and methodology

The research design and theoretical framework are shown in Figure 1. The process began with a careful observation of YouTube comments in which users expressed their opinions and willingness to engage with the farmers or individuals featured in the videos. Based on these expectations (e.g., interest in visiting, learning and imitating recipes, showing feelings and emotions), a qualitative data set was created by randomly collecting comments. This data was then analyzed using U&G theory and TA, which provided insights into the potential of agritourism through thematic mapping, word clouds and overlap maps. This approach can be applied to other case studies where YouTube comments are analyzed for qualitative insights.

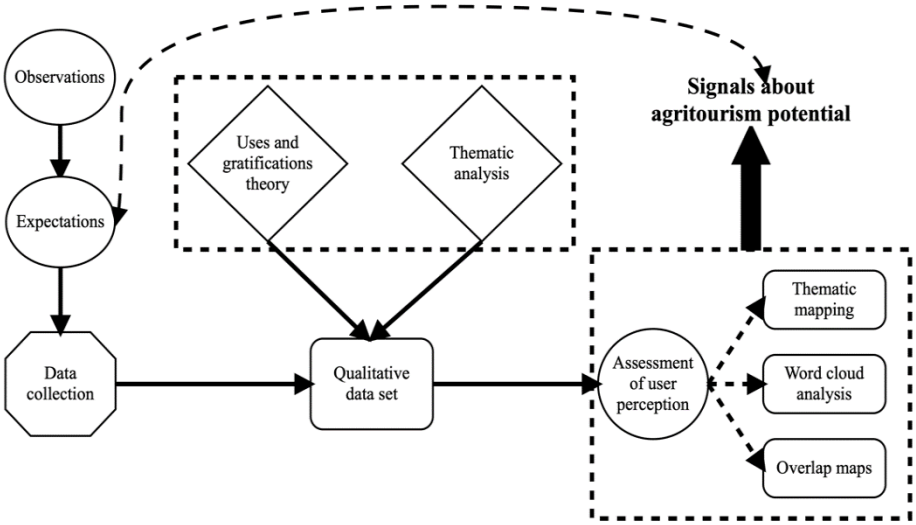

Fig. 1. Research design and theoretical framework of the current study.

The data source for this study is the comments section of the "Country Life Vlog," which at the time of writing has 6.5 million subscribers and nearly two billion views of 454 videos. This channel documents rural life through high-quality videos showcasing nature, traditional cuisine and country activities, and attracts numerous user comments that serve as a rich source of qualitative data. Analyzing these comments using U&G theory helps assess the potential of agritourism by understanding viewers' interest in rural tourism. This analysis provides valuable insights into consumer preferences and potential opportunities for agritourism development in Azerbaijan.

50 random comments were collected from 6 random videos of the channel. All non-English comments were translated into English using the YouTube platform's automatic translation feature before being included in the computerized QDA. The qualitative dataset was created in Quirkos (version 2.5.3) to apply both U&G theory and TA. The list of videos and their length, release dates and total views are shown in Table 1. The original language of the comments and the title of the videos were added as source properties. Then, the comments were coded qualitatively to apply the TA, which is mainly based on the U&G theory. Table 1 also provides some technical details about the sample of selected videos and comments.

U&G theory examines why people engage with certain media content and what they get out of it [16]. This perspective suggests that media use is driven by personal needs, motives and expectations that lead to different satisfactions and outcomes [17, 18]. The idea that media selection is purposeful and not random goes back to early studies by Rosengren [19]. However, U&G theory offers a more dynamic and systematic approach, especially in the digital age where entertainment and relaxation are considered the main motives for media consumption [20].

The U&G theory reveals that media consumption encompasses more than just content. It examines the reasons for media choices and how individual differences influence them [21]. This perspective provides a framework to understand the social and psychological needs that drive media use, taking into account audience characteristics, activities and motivations over time. Applying U&G theory to YouTube comments can reveal viewers' motivations, interests and perceptions regarding agritourism in Azerbaijan, especially among foreigners. For instance, users might express an intention to travel to Azerbaijan or show a positive perception of the country's agritourism potential, which TA can systematically reveal.

Table 1. List of the videos and their technical details that provided comments for the current analysis.

N	Video title	Length	Published date (DD/MM/Year)	Views
1	Fresh Sheep's Milk Cheese Making in Nature	25 min 09 sec	19.01.2024	4.1 mil.
2	From Field to Oven: Picking, Drying, and Baking Strawberries	28 min 48 sec	09.06.2024	2.6 mil.
3	Nature's Sweetness: Preparing Dandelion Syrup in the Mountains | ASMR video	23 min 54 sec	26.05.2024	1.8 mil.
4	TREBUXA - The Royal Dish Made From Cheap Ingredients (Outdoor Cooking)	20 min 22 sec	04.10.2023	5.8 mil.
5	Rustic Charm: Traditional Village Style Potato Bread Recipe	23 min 26 sec	07.04. 2024	2.8 mil
6	Cooking Gutabs from Giant Honey Pumpkin | Outdoor Cooking	18 min 00 sec	14.01.2024	13. mil

Note. All technical data were collected on August 22, 2024 and may change over time.

Braun and Clarke's [22] TA was selected for its systematic approach to categorizing and interpreting data, which helps to identify recurring themes and patterns. By combining U&G theory with TA, this study provides insights into the aspects of rural life that appeal most to potential tourists and what they expect from agritourism experiences in Azerbaijan. This method ensures credible and reliable findings. Braun and Clarke's [22] six-step TA process mainly includes steps such as familiarizing with the data, creating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting.

In this study, only public data from the YouTube platform were analyzed, without considering the gender or geographical location of users, as such data is inaccessible without owning the channel. The author declares that there were no conflicts of interest, commercial interests or ethical violations in the data extraction and reporting of the results. The thematic focus of each video—primarily about cooking activities in a farm setting—significantly influenced users' comments.

3 Results

3.1 Overview of the qualitative codes, thematic mapping and statistics

Depending on the interweaving of the codes and the logical flow, each code was connected to others to construct the main theme. As a result, four themes were identified: 1) Elements in the videos as inspiration for agritourism (received a total of 506 codes); 2) Sharing the feelings: Being an interactive user (received a total of 393 codes); 3) Users' statements (received a total of 393 codes); and 4) Geographical dimensions and users' interactions (received a total of 131 codes). The relevant codes and their frequencies are described in Table 2.

In the first theme, the most frequent code was food (108 codes), in the second theme it was gratitude (153 codes), in the third theme there were no codes because it was the theme itself, and finally, in the fourth theme, the most frequent code was the indication of the user's country (80 codes).

Table 2. Overview of the qualitative codes in terms of their frequency and thematic mapping.

Theme 1: Elements in the videos as inspiration for agritourism		**Theme 2: Sharing the feelings: Being an interactive user**	
Name of the codes	**Frequency**	**Name of the codes**	**Frequency**
Food	108	Gratitude	153
Family members	96	Blessing	107
Domestic animals	82	Admiration/Love	75
Nature	71	Enjoyment/Like	47
The channel itself	60	Nostalgic	8
Household/farm	51		
Religious elements	38		
Theme 3: Users' statements		**Theme 4: Geographical dimensions and users' interactions**	
		Indication of the user's country	80
		User interaction	27
		Indication of travel	12
		Indication of Azerbaijan	12

The distribution of languages and source videos of the comments shows that the qualitative data set contains a diverse range of different user opinions and feedback in terms of geographical regions (i.e., countries) or cultures (see Table 3). The main languages of the comments were English, Russian and Arabic. However, there are also comments from Spain, Portugal, Germany and Türkiye. Table 3 also shows the distribution of source videos to ensure the diversity of comments in relation to the channel's videos.

Table 3. Distribution of languages and source videos of the analyzed comments.

Theme No.	**Top six languages of the comments**	**Top two source videos of the themes**
1	English–33%; Russian–33% Arabic–10%; Spanish–5% Turkish–4%; Portuguese –3%	1) Rustic Charm: Traditional Village Style Potato Bread Recipe; 2) Cooking Gutabs from Giant Honey Pumpkin | Outdoor Cooking
2	Russian–35%; English–31% Arabic–12%;Turkish–4% Spanish–4%; German–2%	1) Fresh Sheep's Milk Cheese Making in Nature; 2) From Field to Oven: Picking, Drying, and Baking Strawberries
3	English–38% Russian–33% Turkish–5%; Arabic–5% Portuguese–4%; Spanish–4%	1) Nature's Sweetness: Preparing Dandelion Syrup in the Mountains; 2) TREBUXA - The Royal Dish Made From Cheap Ingredients (Outdoor Cooking)
4	English–40% Russian–27% Turkish–6%; Arabic–6% Portuguese–6%; Spanish–5%	1) From Field to Oven: Picking, Drying, and Baking Strawberries; 2) TREBUXA - The Royal Dish Made From Cheap Ingredients (Outdoor Cooking)

3.2 Thematic analysis

On the first theme, users highlighted specific elements of the videos that made a strong impression and sparked interest in agritourism among some viewers. As the focus of the channel is on cooking, food received the most qualitative attention. In addition, users expressed their feelings about family members involved in farming and agritourism, as well as their appreciation for domestic animals (pets), nature and the channel itself. Religious elements—Islam-related—also received attention. Overall, this theme depicts a harmonious household where the serene surroundings—lush gardens, lovely animals and family cohesion—evokes admiration and gratitude, especially for the grandparents and their idyllic

rural lifestyle. In this theme, we could see certain indications that some viewers would like to visit Azerbaijan to see the described elements with their own eyes and experience them personally.

The second theme, "Sharing the Feelings: Being an Interactive User," focused on the emotions that the videos evoke. Many viewers expressed their blessings and gratitude to the farm's family members, often in a religious context. They also praised the channel for its artistic camera work that captures beautiful landscapes. The domestic animals featured in the videos were particularly admired, followed by appreciation for the natural surroundings, the food and the general content of the channel.

The third theme comprised fragmentary and direct statements from viewers expressing their admiration for the unparalleled excellence, culinary mastery, idyllic lifestyle and inspirational influence of the farm. Viewers praised the cooking skills on display and often expressed a desire to learn and replicate the recipes. The tranquil rural setting, characterized by natural beauty and harmonious living, evoked feelings of peace and contentment. The depiction of a simple, fulfilling life inspired viewers to follow a similar path and often encouraged personal growth and reflection. While many of these comments stand alone, they are closely linked to the sentiments expressed in the first and second themes.

The fourth theme, "Geographical dimensions and user interactions," focused on the geographical aspects of YouTube comments. Viewers often mentioned their home country or expressed a desire to visit Azerbaijan, motivated by the videos they saw. Some emphasized Azerbaijan's potential for agritourism by repeatedly praising or admiring the country. In addition, several comments indicated that viewers intended to apply the recipes or practices they learned in the videos in their own lives. This theme underscores the global reach of the content and its influence on viewers' travel aspirations and culinary practices.

In the fourth theme, many comments express gratitude and appreciation for the content, the creator and the community, with a focus on cultural exchange. Viewers from different countries often share their culinary traditions and experiences, creating a sense of global connection and exchange. Mentioning their home countries allows viewers to engage more deeply with the content and connect with others who share similar culinary interests. This theme highlights how viewers discuss and celebrate traditional dishes, home-cooked meals and the joy of cooking, often followed by a desire to visit Azerbaijan. The next part of the TA will explore the co-occurrence or overlap of the constructed themes to gain further insight into these interactions.

In summary, two of the four themes reflect the general intention of viewers to travel to such farms and enjoy the activities depicted. However, it was difficult to distinguish between serious intentions and simple statements. It is possible that the comments were misinterpreted due to machine translation. TA is not comparable to surveys or similar methods, and U&G does not help to quantify specific intentions. Nevertheless, millions of viewers showed the highest level of interactivity and communication after watching the channel's videos. Most viewers found the channel unique and very relaxing in a time of information overload, which is rapidly increasing in the age of digitalization of information.

3.3 Overlap or co-occurrence analysis

Theme 2 exhibited the highest co-occurrence with the qualitative codes: Food (46), family members (44), pets (42), nature (42), the channel itself (36) and statements from users (relating to theme 3; 31). There was also considerable overlap in theme 3, particularly with food (36), family members (22), nature (18), the channel itself (16), household/farm (14), pets (12) and admiration/love (12). It is noteworthy that theme 3 did not appear together with travel-related or nostalgic ideas. Finally, theme 4 was mainly associated with food (12), gratitude (20), user statements (8), nature (7) and pets (6).

a. Concentric co-occurrence circles of the theme 1.

b. Concentric co-occurrence circles of the theme 2.

c. Concentric co-occurrence circles of the theme 3.

d. Concentric co-occurrence circles of the theme 4.

Fig. 2. Concentric co-occurrence circles of the constructed themes.

3.4 Word cloud analysis

Part of the QDA was the visualization of the qualitative data set with the help of word clouds. Figure 3 shows the words most frequently used by the viewers, which is also an indication of the robustness of the current analysis. Words such as “beautiful,” “love,” “wonderful,” “good,” “beauty” and “peace” convey strong positive feelings and appreciation. The views likely felt a sense of joy, admiration, or satisfaction related to the content or experience. Also, the frequent use of words such as “family” and “love” indicates a strong emphasis on observations related to connections and relationships in the videos. Participants may have been able to relate the content to their own lives or felt connected to others who have had similar experiences.

Words like “videos,” “everything” can indicate that the focus is on the content itself and the overall experience. Participants may have found the videos engaging, informative or entertaining. The presence of the word “God” suggests that spiritual or religious beliefs may have played a role in participants’ experiences or interpretations. Finally, the word “work” indicates a connection to daily life and work. Participants may have perceived the content as relevant to their daily routine or seen it as a way to escape or relax. The frequent occurrence

of these words suggests that the content collected was positively received and had a significant impact on participants' emotions, relationships and understanding of the world. The presence of these words also underlines the validity and robustness of the TA and co-occurrence analysis.

Fig. 3. Word cloud visualization of the qualitative data set.

4 Conclusions

This paper demonstrates the feasibility of combining U&G theory with TA to investigate perceptions of agritourism potential. By analyzing large qualitative data sets from digital platforms, in particular the globally recognized YouTube channel "Country Life Vlog," the study offers valuable insights. The development of four themes around an Azerbaijani farm illustrates why this content has received almost two billion views. The results also show how important the interactive and dynamic engagement of viewers can be for the development of agritourism.

The elements in the videos such as food, farm members, pets, nature, etc. received the most qualitative codes and form the first theme where users provided specific feedback on each component of the videos. They expressed different feelings and explained their intentions and ideas inspired by rural life. Most notably, some of them stated that they were planning a trip to Azerbaijan after seeing the unique experience of agritourism. Most users not only watched the videos, but also indicated their own countries, compared them to their own culture and made notes on the recipes. They indicated that they were always watching new videos, which is evidence of interactive and dynamic media consumption. All of these themes are interconnected (as shown by the overlap maps) and the use of words such as "beautiful," "love" and "wonderful" indicates an absolutely positive visual experience for users. Their main intention was to enjoy exceptional landscapes that provide content for agritourism.

There are several policy implications that can be drawn from these results. First, Azerbaijani tourism authorities could capitalize on the positive perception of agritourism by increasing their promotional efforts, especially emphasizing unique aspects such as traditional cuisine and rural lifestyle, as seen in the "Country Life Vlog." This could attract more international visitors interested in authentic rural experiences. Second, given the expressed interest in traveling to Azerbaijan, the infrastructure in rural areas needs to be improved to accommodate agritourism. Investment in transportation, lodging and local amenities could provide a better tourism experience. Third, the strong positive reactions to

food and rural life suggest that these cultural elements could be important marketing points. Policies that support the preservation and promotion of traditional Azerbaijani practices could increase the country's attractiveness as an agritourism destination. Fourth, local communities could be more actively involved in agritourism by offering them training programs to help them work effectively with tourists to ensure sustainable and inclusive development. Furthermore, "Country Life Vlog" exemplifies profitable business model where farms can produce digital content and generate profits to ensure their well-being even without physical or real tourism. Finally, utilizing popular social media channels such as "Country Life Vlog" in tourism campaigns could increase visibility and target niche markets interested in agritourism. Collaboration with content creators could help develop compelling stories that resonate with a global audience.

This study has several limitations. First, YouTube comments can be moderated or removed by the channel owner, which could affect the validity of the data. However, in the case of "Country Life Vlog" this is unlikely. Second, the dataset is limited to comments posted on a single YouTube channel between June 20, 2024 and July 15, 2024. While this limitation restricts the ability to observe changes in user comments over time, the reason for this was the manual qualitative coding on Quirkos, which cannot be permanently fulfilled beyond certain thresholds. Third, the small sample size of six videos and 300 comments may limit the generalizability of the study, but this limitation is addressed by the previous point. Finally, qualitative coding is prone to human error, including mislabelling. Future research should aim to analyze larger data sets using advanced qualitative data analysis techniques, such as grounded theory or sentiment analysis, with automated methods such as automatic coding. Comparative studies on experiences with agritourism in other countries are also welcome.

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