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Influence of music on tourism imaginaries of distant destinations

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Abstract

Purpose: Visual and textual narratives have long been recognized as stimuli for shaping tourism imaginaries, but the role of music is still to be explored. This study explores how tourism imaginaries of distant destinations are shaped through music.

Methods: An experimental design using video-elicitation and 23 semi-structured interviews were appropriate for examining sensory stimuli and imaginaries. Potential tourists to Ecuador consumed the same promotional video with three different music. Ecuador was selected for being a lesser-known country seen as an untamed destination by Western travellers. A deductive-inductive thematic analysis revealed both manifest and latent dimensions of tourism imaginaries.

Results: Different music paired with identical visuals generates contrasting tourism imaginaries of place, practices, and participants. Ecuador was perceived as a dangerous, peaceful, or vibrant place. Music also shaped imaginaries of tourism practices, leading participants to associate Ecuador with either active or relaxing experiences. As a novelty, the study shows that music can stimulate social awareness of locals' and tourists' roles and relations, by eliciting imaginaries of either social detachment or connection with host communities.

Implications: Tourism marketers are advised to consider music in videos to shape tourism imaginaries and to carefully select music when promoting lesser-known and distant destinations.

Keywords: *destination marketing; promotional videos; tourism advertising; perceived distance; narrative*

JEL Classification: O34, M31, M37

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1. Introduction

Imaginaries are mental schemes that draw on perceptions, narratives, and fantasies rather than on factual knowledge (Strauss, 2006). According to the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, desire drives to imagination, and imagination to the desire for making real what we imagine (as cited in Kaplan, 1972). Tourism imaginaries enable individuals to envision places, tourism practices, and their own roles as tourism participants. Gravari-Barbas and Graburn (2012) define these imaginaries as a three Ps model, building on Places, Practices and Participants. Given that tourism destinations cannot be experienced beforehand, mass media such as books, films, documentaries, and TV series play a crucial role in tourism imaginaries formation (Reijnders et al., 2015). Narratives comprising stories, characters, settings, and atmosphere also have the potential to shape imaginaries around a specific place and with it, establish certain expectations associated to it, which eventually influence travel intention (Frost & Laing, 2014; Mitev, Irimiás, & Michalkó, 2024). Prior research shows that tourism imaginaries and travel intention are interconnected as tourists travel to a certain place seeking the projection and realization of their imaginaries (Bruner, 1991; Chronis, 2012; Gómez-Morales, Castro & Nieto-Ferrando, 2024; Skinner & Theodossopoulos, 2011).

Distant destinations may struggle with contradicting tourism imaginaries due to over generalizations and stereotypes (Dolnicar & Grün, 2017, Harrison-Hill, 2001). People tend to associate distant and unfamiliar destinations with negative stereotypes related to economic, environmental, political, health, and safety risks (Chaudhary & Ul Islam, 2023; Shang, Romagosa & Pallares-Barbera, 2025). Though, distant destinations can also be attractive as their imaginaries are

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associated with exotic experiences (Larsen & Guiver, 2013). While distance remains a central determinant of destination choice, tourism imaginaries can contribute to motivating travel to distant places by subtly reducing perceived remoteness and moderating their exotic character (Shang, Pallares-Barbera & Romagosa, 2026; Staszak, 2008).

Considering the pliant nature of imaginaries (Chronis, 2012; Salazar, 2012), Destination Marketing Organisations, DMOs, often rely on destination promotional videos to shape tourism imaginaries through visual, textual, and auditory elements, enabling prospective visitors to imagine, fantasize, and daydream of the destination (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Although destination marketing research has extensively studied the influence of visual and textual representations (Caton & Santos, 2009; Echtner & Prasad, 2003; Waitt, 1999), the role of music in the formation of tourism imaginaries has been scarcely explored (Gravari-Barbas, Graburn, & Staszak, 2023; Lv et al., 2023; Nanjangud & Reijnders, 2022; Reijnders et al., 2015; Yin, Bi & Chen, 2020). To the best knowledge of authors, no prior studies have addressed the interplay music-tourism imaginaries in the frame of distant and lesser-known destinations. Therefore, the main research objective is to explore how tourism imaginaries of distant destinations are shaped by music.

The study draws on the Place–Practices–Participants model of tourism imaginaries formation (Gravari-Barbas, Graburn & Staszak, 2023; Wu et al., 2025). By advancing current knowledge on music and tourism imaginaries this study contributes to ongoing discussions on the relationships among music, place, and tourism; and explores social awareness enhanced by music. Finally, it contributes to the literature on perceived distance and destination marketing (Shang, Romagosa & Pallares-Barbera, 2025) by emphasizing the role of tourism imaginaries, a comparatively underexplored construct in this context, in potentially reducing the perceived distance between destinations and potential travellers and encouraging interest in distant destinations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Perceived distance to destinations

Distance in tourism research is typically split into absolute and perceived forms, yet this distinction remains conceptually thin and empirically unstable. Absolute distance is measurable such as miles, kilometres or travel time (Pike & Kotsi, 2016). Perceived distance refers to accessibility, familiarity, and cultural proximity (Guan et al., 2022; Kastenholz, 2010; Larsen & Guiver, 2013). While widely cited, the claim that perceived distance overrides physical distance often rests on static, survey-based evidence (Harrison-Hill, 2001; Shang, Pallares-Barbera, & Romagosa, 2026). This literature assumes stable perceptions, despite tourism being shaped by shifting representations, media exposure, and symbolic consumption. A persistent problem is conceptual overlap. Perceived distance is frequently used to explain the same phenomena as destination imaginaries (simplification, stereotyping, and symbolic reconstruction) without clearly separating the two. Studies show that distant places trigger coarse cognitive representations and generalisations (Dolnicar & Grün, 2017) but stop short of asking whether this is a function of distance itself or of the imaginaries through which distance is mediated. The distinction matters because without it, distance becomes a proxy for broader processes of meaning-making.

Literature also treats distance as a predictable force, yet its effects are inconsistent. Distance is framed as a barrier: it reduces knowledge, increases perceived risk, and weakens behavioural intention (Dolnicar & Grün, 2017; Guan et al., 2022). At the aggregate level, gravity-model evidence confirms that bilateral distance depresses international tourist flows (Malaj & Malaj, 2023). Such macro-level regularities, however, say little about how distance is experienced or interpreted by individual travellers. In parallel, it is framed as an attraction: it signals difference, escape, and the promise of the exotic (Larsen & Guiver, 2013). These positions coexist but are rarely reconciled. Few studies specify when distance generates anxiety and when it produces desire. Instead, risk and attraction are presented as coexisting outcomes, with limited attention to the cultural and representational conditions that activate one over the other. Segmentation studies complicate the picture but do not resolve it. Novelty seekers are drawn to distant destinations until familiarity erodes their appeal, while risk-averse travellers prefer proximity (Basala & Klenosky, 2001; MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997). Other work links long-haul travel to higher income and education levels (Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017). These findings suggest that distance is relational rather than fixed, yet they rely on broad categories and cross-sectional data. They say little about how perceptions of distance are formed, transformed, or contested.

Methodologically, the field is narrow. Quantitative dominance has produced general patterns but limited explanation. Perceived distance is treated as an input variable, measured rather than interpreted. This leads to two blind spots. First, distance is stabilised as an attribute of destinations rather than understood as socially constructed. Second, the symbolic content that shapes distance -images, narratives, sounds- remains underexamined. This limitation is relevant for research on music and tourism. If distance is mediated through imaginaries, then cultural forms are not peripheral; they are constitutive. Yet existing studies rarely engage with how specific auditory stimuli such as music produce, compress, or reconfigure distance. Instead, they assume that perceptions precede representation, rather than emerging through it.

This study addresses these gaps by treating perceived distance as an outcome of meaning-making processes rather than a pre-existing condition. A qualitative approach is required to capture this. It allows analysis of how distance is articulated, negotiated, and embedded in cultural imaginaries. It also enables a strict analytical separation between distance and imaginaries, which the current literature repeatedly blurs.

2.2 Tourism imaginaries formation

Tourism imaginaries are not passive representations. They are socially and geopolitically produced narratives that organise how destinations are known before they are experienced (Andrews, 2017; Chronis, 2012; Salazar, 2012). Rather than reflecting reality, they stabilise selective meanings, values, and expectations. This is especially consequential where direct experience is limited and knowledge is largely mediated. Destination marketing plays a central role in this process by offering vicarious encounters with places (Gutberlet, 2022). Existing research documents recurring visual and textual patterns, landscapes, local populations, and tourist activities (Caton & Santos, 2009; Echtner & Prasad, 2003; Waitt, 1999), yet often remains descriptive. It catalogues images but rarely interrogates how they structure interpretation or constrain meaning. This pattern persists in digital settings, where analyses of destination social media imagery continue to identify the content categories through which destination identity is narrated without addressing how those categories shape interpretation (Michael, Chunawala & Fusté-Forné, 2025). To move beyond description, tourism imaginaries can be specified across three dimensions: place, practices, and participants (Gravari-Barbas & Graburn, 2012). This framework is widely cited but weakly operationalised. It is often used as a classificatory device rather than an analytical tool.

(1) Place refers to how destinations are spatially and atmospherically framed (Echtner & Prasad, 2003). Representations select and condense features into recognisable tropes, which simplify complexity and stabilise expectations.
(2) Practices refer to the activities associated with the destination. These representations define what tourists are expected to do and how experiences should unfold (Andrews, 2017).
(3) Participants refer to how actors are constructed, including both tourists and local populations. This includes roles, identities, and implied relationships (Caton & Santos, 2009). These representations create imaginaries on the modus vivendi of locals and the expected host-guest relations (Tung, 2021).

In practice, these dimensions frequently collapse into one another. Representations of place already embed assumptions about practices and participant roles. This overlap reduces analytical precision and obscures how different elements contribute to meaning-making. A clearer separation is required to trace their distinct effects. A consistent finding across the literature is the construction of distant destinations as other (Salazar, 2012). These representations rely on recurrent tropes -exotic, paradisiacal, primitive, or pristine- which compress difference into simplified narratives (Echtner & Prasad, 2003). This otherness refers to non-west places such as Latin America, the Caribbean, Pacific Islands, Asia, Africa and Middle East, which are often depicted as exotic, paradisiacal, primitive, or pristine (Echtner & Prasad, 2003). Such framings are not neutral, as they encode asymmetries. Locals are often positioned as servers or entertainers, while tourists are framed as adventurers or spectators (Caton & Santos, 2009; Waitt, 1999). While widely acknowledged, this dynamic is seldom examined across different modes of representation.

Tourism imaginaries also have behavioural implications. They shape expectations prior to travel and frame interpretation during it (Andrews, 2017; Staszak, 2008). They can normalise specific practices, including forms of consumption or conduct that would be constrained in everyday settings. Although studies show that tourists may relax social and ethical norms in liminal contexts (Bristow & Jenkins, 2020; Tolkach et al., 2017; Urry, 1990), this tendency is rarely linked to the specific imaginaries that legitimise such behaviour.

Research has focused on visual and textual materials, treating imaginaries as image-based constructs. This leaves other forms of mediation underexplored. As a result, the sensory and affective dimensions through which destinations are imagined remain weakly theorised. This limitation is significant. If imaginaries structure how destinations are perceived, then the media through which they circulate shape that process, and the range of those media continues to widen as tourism operators adopt immersive formats for virtual destination exploration (Sousa, Alén, Losada & Melo, 2024). Music, in particular, can condense affect, signal cultural difference, and guide interpretation without explicit representation. As so, music in destination promotional materials can be a novel way of narrative transportation (Mitev, Irimiás, & Michalkó, 2024) and a helpful element to shape or reshape imaginaries.

2.3 Music and tourism imaginaries

Music, sound, and place are co-constitutive. Places are not only seen but heard, and sound contributes to how they are recognised and remembered (Bennett, 2002). These associations are constructed through multiple channels: characteristic instruments and soundscapes, lyrical references, and the geographic anchoring of genres and artists (Long, 2014). Once stabilised, such associations can function as symbolic shortcuts. Music then operates as a "signifier of place,"

condensing cultural identity, heritage, and atmosphere into an immediately recognisable form (Lashua et al., 2014). This process, again, is not neutral. When strongly linked to a destination, music can become a tourism asset and even a promotional icon (Henke, 2005). It produces condensed narratives that shape how destinations are imagined before they are experienced.

Empirical work shows that music can trigger vivid mental imagery and influence visit intention (Lv et al., 2023; Yin et al., 2020). Comparable mechanisms are documented in consumer markets beyond tourism, where exposure to music shapes consumer attitudes and, through them, behavioural intention (Adewumi, Echebiri & Hauge, 2025). The evaluative work performed by music is therefore not confined to the destination context. Recent studies suggest that music communicates spatial and social meanings in ways comparable to visual representation, while also generating affective attachment (Wu et al., 2025). However, this equivalence is often assumed rather than critically examined. Music does not replicate visual meaning; it reframes it through emotions, acoustic features and associations (Shevy, 2008; Zhu & Meyers-Levy, 2005). Music operates through anticipation and emotional patterning, making imagined experiences more vivid and action-oriented (Huron, 2006). Its effectiveness lies in its ambiguity: it conveys both musical and extra-musical meanings without fixing interpretation. Advertising research has long exploited this capacity. Musical genres carry social and cultural associations that shape perception through learned links rather than explicit information (Cook, 1998; Murray & Murray, 1996). These associations can reinforce stereotypes or stabilise simplified identities (Craton & Lantos, 2011; Zander, 2006).

In tourism, this suggests that music does not merely support existing imaginaries, it actively structures them. Despite this, tourism studies have treated music as secondary to visual content. Research on film and media shows that soundtracks shape geographical imagination alongside images (Reijnders et al., 2015; Nanjangud & Reijnders, 2022), yet the specific contribution of music remains under-specified. Music guides interpretation, frames atmosphere, and directs attention, but its role is often subsumed under broader audiovisual analysis. This limits understanding of how imaginaries are formed across sensory modalities.

Emerging studies in destination marketing begin to address this gap. Coronel and Irimiás (2023) showed that music genres in destination promotional videos alluded to the destination's character: when using rhythmic or dynamic music in the video the destination was perceived as a lively, whereas when using classical music, the destination was seen as cultural or relaxing. Likewise, Zhang et al. (2025) compared the effects of two styles of background music in short destination promotional videos: sedate (slow-paced) vs. energetic (fast-paced). They found that when the semantic associations of the music align with the video, the music enhances tourists' immersion and ultimately influences their travel inspiration. For instance, while sedate music fostered a warm and peaceful atmosphere, enhancing emotional connection, energetic music boosted dynamism, thus encouraging exploration.

These findings show that music shapes not only affective response but also the narrative framing of place. Yet this line of research remains fragmented. It identifies effects but rarely connects them to broader processes of meaning-making. It also treats musical choices as variables rather than as culturally embedded forms with shifting meanings (Lashua et al., 2014). As a result, the role of music in constructing tourism imaginaries, and in shaping perceived distance, remains under-theorised. This gap is consequential. If imaginaries are multi-dimensional and mediated, then music is not an additive element but a constitutive one. Different musical forms can generate distinct imaginaries of the same destination by altering how place, practices, and participants are interpreted. Analysing these variations is therefore central to understanding how destinations are symbolically produced and experienced.

3. Research Methodology

To explore how music in destination promotional videos influences the formation of tourism imaginaries of distant destinations this study adopts a qualitative research approach. First, a promotional video created by the Ministry of Tourism of Ecuador available on YouTube in high resolution (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ctUQXxDX-U&t=21s, duration 1′52″) was selected for the study because had no voiceover or text, and the visual effects were easily adaptable to different background music. The selected promotional video features the four regions of the country: Coast, Andes, Amazonas and Galapagos, with a special focus on the natural resources of each region.

The country was selected due to several reasons. Firstly, Ecuador is a Latin American country which exemplifies a non-west country and has traditionally been promoted as an exotic country. Prior studies on the visual and verbal content of promotional brochures of Ecuador targeting the U.S. travellers revealed that the country was represented as an untamed destination that offers a pristine nature and tourist encounters with natives (Echtner & Prasad, 2003). Secondly, Ecuador is an emergent tourist destination that receives slightly less than 1.5 million international tourists yearly. Its relatively low prominence compared to other Latin American destinations makes it a suitable case for minimizing the influence of participants' prior familiarity and pre-existing perceptions about the destination. Finally, the destination has actively sought to attract tourists through marketing campaigns, particularly promotional videos. Notably, in

2014 a promotional video featured a version of The Beatles' pop song "All You Need Is Love," for which the country paid $1.3 million in royalties, whereas in 2023 the country's promotional video featured an epic track 'Nature 2022' by Piotr Matuszewski, available in digital libraries. This shift in promotional music provides a useful framework for examining how different musical choices may shape tourism imaginaries of a destination like Ecuador.

Three versions of this video were created by keeping the original visuals and replacing the original music by three types of music: i) epic, ii) traditional (Andean folk), and iii) pop. These three music types represent contrasting musical stimuli and are employed in the study as elicitation devices to access how participants construct tourism imaginaries through symbolic interpretation. Table 1 shows a systematic comparison of the musical stimuli used in the video.

Hungarian participants were selected due to the substantial geographical distance between Ecuador and Hungary (10,731 km), representing a distant European outbound tourist market. Additionally, they were suitable for the study given the practical and logistical constraints of the experimental design, which required in-person interaction between the researcher and participants, as the researcher was based in Hungary. Participants were recruited using via purposive sampling method. To be eligible, individuals had to meet three criteria: 1) have not previously visited the study destination, 2) be potential travellers to distant destinations, and 3) be proficient in English. During the recruiting process, the authors made sure not to have volunteers who had previously visited Ecuador to prevent the influence of previous experiences or knowledge in the participants' responses (Gong & Tung, 2017). Similarly, to ensure the suitability of participants, a self-administered screening questionnaire based on the 20-item International Tourism Role (ITR) scale proposed by Mo, Havitz and Howard (1994), with slight modifications recommended by Jiang, Havitz and O'Brien (2000), was conducted to the volunteers to segment participants into three groups: familiarity seekers, average travellers, and novelty seekers. The final sample comprised 23 Hungarian professional adults (female=14, Mage= 35.6), who were novelty seekers and potential visitors to distant destinations. This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants voluntarily took part in the study and provided written informed consent for the utilization of the collected data for research purposes.

Video-elicitation interview is a data collection technique that employs visual and aural stimuli to encourage participants' discussion on specific issues (Li & Ho, 2019). Elicitation techniques strongly support interviews as mechanisms for generating reflections and explanations in response to certain stimuli (Watson & Kirby, 2025). In consequence, the use of video-elicitation interviews is deemed to be appropriate to examine participants' imaginaries of the destination and how these were influenced by different musical stimuli in destination promotional videos. In this vein, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually after video-elicitation between January and February of 2023. Interviews were carried out in soundproof rooms with a desk, comfortable chair, and an available monitor. All participants were provided with headphones, which served as the source of the aural stimulus. The headphones were connected to the researcher's personal computer via Bluetooth, allowing the researcher to control the sound volume and ensure consistency across all videos and participants. Every participant was exposed to the three videos in a randomised order, followed by a set of open-ended questions aiming to explore their reactions and insights on the video and the broadcasted destination (e.g., What is your opinion about this video? What is your opinion about the destination? Did your opinion about the destination change?). Participants' responses were audio-recorded for subsequent transcription following their provision of written informed consent. From interview 21 onwards, participants largely corroborated earlier information, with no new information emerging, indicating that saturation had been reached. Data collection was continued until 23 interviews to confirm the stability of the findings and ensure that no further information would emerge.

Transcriptions of the audio recordings were produced using Alrite software and compiled into a Word document. The authors performed a double-check to review the transcriptions' accuracy. Following Joffe's (2011) guidelines, thematic analysis was conducted using a deductive–inductive approach. Guided by the theoretical framework, the three dimensions of tourism imaginaries were established as initial deductive codes. The dataset was then examined iteratively, with relevant excerpts highlighted and assigned to these initial codes and organised according to the specific musical stimulus to ensure clear attribution of responses across experimental conditions and facilitate subsequent comparison.

An inductive phase of analysis followed, during which excerpts within each dimension and stimulus were further examined to identify variations in meaning and patterns in the construction of tourism imaginaries under different musical conditions. This process enabled the refinement and elaboration of codes and themes, incorporating both manifest and latent content in dialogue with the theoretical framework. A final systematic interpretive analysis was conducted to compare tourism imaginaries across musical stimuli.

Coding was conducted independently by the researchers and subsequently compared to identify discrepancies. These were resolved through discussion and consensus, leading to refined code definitions and greater consistency in interpretation across the dataset, thereby enhancing the dependability of the analysis.

Table 1. Musical stimuli used in the three video versions

Type of music	Track	Description
Epic	**Title:** "Epic Expedition" **Author:** John Samuel Hanson (BMI), Yoav Goren (BMI), Jeffrey Fayman (ASCAP).	Epic music is conceptualised as a modern branch of cinematic orchestral music, characterised by instrumental composition with high intensity (Demfire Creation, 2023). The selected stimulus, which is an orchestral soundtrack without lyrics, falls within this category. Prior research suggests that fast-paced, high-intensity orchestral music tends to elicit higher levels of arousal, perceived energy, and tension (Ilie & Thompson, 2006). Precisely, due to these acoustic characteristics, epic music is associated with fantasy, heroism, and adventure, making it frequently used in film trailers, video games, and promotional media (Demfire Creation, 2023). In tourism marketing, instrumental music has been identified as one of the most commonly used forms of background music in advertising contexts (Pan & Hanusch, 2011).
Traditional (Andean folk)	**Title:** "Humano" **Author:** Gabriel Meye	Traditional music is conceptualised as music associated with a specific geographical area or ethnic group (Long, 2014). This type of music functions as a mechanism of place's identity, while potentially evoking stereotypical associations (Linardaki & Aslanides, 2020). This particular track recreates the traditional folk Andean music, through the use of instruments such as: mandolin, acoustic guitar, acoustic drums, strings, percussion, and woodwinds, therefore is deemed appropriate for exemplifying this type of music. Prior studies demonstrated that indigenous music is accepted by individuals who like a wide variety of music genres (Henke, 2005), therefore, folk music can be very effective for destination marketing because it targets a larger audience.
Pop	**Title:** "Alive" **Author:** Electro-pop duo "Empire of the Sun".	Pop music is a genre within popular music, which is broadly conceptualized as commercially produced, mainstream music characterised by high familiarity, repetitive structure, and global circulation (Allan, 2005). The frequent use of popular songs in advertising (usually chart hits) has been attributed to its capacity to attract attention, enhance memory and foster positive emotions (Allan, 2005; Allan & Tryce, 2016; Chou & Lien, 2010). The selected song was released in 2013 and achieved international commercial success, receiving platinum and gold certifications in multiple markets and gaining further exposure through its use in films, television programmes, and video games.

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4. Results

Grounded on the three dimensions of tourism imaginaries identified in this study (place, practices, and participants), the thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that music stimulus is capable to shape tourism imaginaries.

4.1 Tourism imaginaries through epic music

In the experiment, when the video was played with epic music, respondents described Ecuador as an exotic and potentially dangerous destination. Across accounts, this pattern was associated with perceptions of remoteness and unfamiliarity. The extracts from the interviews support this interpretation.

"I felt it a bit more dangerous." (Female, 24y)

"It is a wild country" (Female, 55y)

"It was not like the calm South American country, but it is like a lot of wildness and animals and ocean." (Male, 36y)

"The Amazonas probably is a bit more unknown and is a bit harsher." (Male, 42y)

"During this video I started to worry about the environment, only because of the music I guess." (Male, 31y)

Regarding tourism practices, and in correspondence with the previous imaginary, respondents envisioned Ecuador as a destination for adventure-oriented tourism activities. Respondents imagined themselves getting very active at the destination with travel itineraries mainly based on extreme sports.

"The music is so dramatic that you feel that you won't be bored there, you can explore and get the biggest adventures there." (Female, 44y)

"I didn't know that it has so many adventurous places." (Female, 29y)

"If you go to Ecuador, you can do a lot of things." (Male, 28y)

"Surfing, drafting, walking in the mountains, so more adventurous." (Female, 46y)

In terms of participants, under this musical stimulus, accounts reflected imaginaries of Ecuador as a destination more suitable for younger travellers seeking adventure. Some participants also referred to a preference for guided travel and limited social engagement with locals, alongside references to individualised travel experiences.

"It is for people who really like go out in the nature and try more dangerous stuff […]
it's more like getting there in the wild." (Female, 24y)

"I was thinking that maybe it is more for my son who is 27-year-old and not for older people." (Female, 55y)

"It's like for younger people maybe who are seeking for big adventures." (Female, 44y)

"I would probably err on the side of caution and go hiking with a guide." (Male, 21y)

"It was giving a more individualistic vibe for me [...] to have time with yourself." (Female, 21y)

4.2 Tourism imaginaries through traditional music

With traditional music, respondents described Ecuador as a peaceful destination with cultural richness and a relaxed atmosphere. In addition, accounts expressed a sense of increased familiarity and perceived closeness to the destination, suggesting a reduction in perceived "roughness" associated with more remote environments.

"It was like a Mediterranean peaceful country." (Male, 36y)

"That's a relaxing place." (Male, 45y)

"I think it's a nice place. It has a deep cultural heritage" (Male, 39y)

"It increased familiarity." (Male, 21y)

"It's nice and friendly." (Female, 44y)

"Even the Amazonas feels a bit closer, so that kind of roughness disappears with the music." (Male, 42y)

Regarding practices, respondents envisioned low-intensity tourism activities, these included slow-paced experiences and interest in cultural attractions which are consistent with a relaxed travel setting.

"You can just imagine yourself there lying on the beach and hearing this music." (Female, 29y)

"I have to go there and do much less things and just enjoy slowly everything." (Female, 24y)

"I perceived myself in a much more relaxed travelling scenario." (Male, 21y)

"You can just stay relaxed and look at the environment" (Female, 44y)

"If a person is more interested in local culture or things like that." (Female, 46)

"The buildings, the cultural heritage and churches." (Male, 39)

In terms of participants, the video fostered an imaginary of hospitable and socially open locals, which lead to the willingness for closer engagement with local communities.

"I think it is a positive and a welcoming country. So, they're waiting for tourists to come and visit their places" (Male, 42y)

"I wouldn't say that the people living there are always happy or smiling, but they are definitely more positive than, for example, Hungarians." (Female, 29y)

"I have to be a little bit integrated among the people and I really want to see Ecuador not just like a tourist country, but also to know it. It's really interesting how the music can change it." (Female, 24y)

"I had the feeling that I want to go to Ecuador and get to know the people who are living there and sit with them in a little restaurant and talking with them." (Female, 27y)

"I would have go to Ecuador for the people." (Male, 28y)

4.3 Tourism imaginaries through pop music

With the pop music, respondents perceived Ecuador as a vibrant and lively holiday destination and the interviews revealed imaginaries about a positive and energetic atmosphere.

""I can image a place where you can buy equipment for a journey. Maybe the weather is fine, so it is a bit vivid." (Male, 39y)

"It has a holiday vibe." (Female, 30y)

"I think when you go into the beach, the sun, because it's creating the vibe." (Female, 40y)

Regarding the practices, respondents described imaginaries centred on leisure, entertainment, and enjoyment. These included references to parties and recreational activities as the next snippets show, and the music have also stimulated participants reflections on bodily-experiences and feeling themselves "more alive".

"If you go there, you can go for parties" (Female, 27y)

"It's more about the fun part of the trip, more about the popular part of it" (Female, 32y)

"If you are there and you can try all of these things, then you could feel yourself more alive because you have the opportunity to go and do the diving, go to the mountains and so on" (Female, 44y).

In regard to the participants, pop music also fostered imaginaries of Ecuador as a destination for younger travellers and social travel contexts. Unlike the epic music condition, participants more often associated travel with peers, rather than solitary, and with high social interactions not necessarily with locals.

"With that music it is rather for younger people." (Female, 44y)

"It's not for me as an audience. Maybe it's directed for a younger generation." (Male, 45y)

"It makes some inclusion, I think. So, the music is that let's be together and let's have fun." (Male, 39y)

"If you are more like a beach person, then you can go there" (Female, 40y)

"I had the feeling with that video and the music that if I want to be there with my friends having fun." (Male, 28y)

"I got the idea that people there are really friendly with tourists." (Female, 29y)

"I felt because of the music that I have to be a tourist there." (Female, 24y)

Although some nuanced and occasionally divergent responses emerged during the interviews, they remained limited and did not affect the overall pattern of findings. To summarise, Table 2 builds on the codes emerging from interviews and organise them according to the Place-Practices-Participants model.

Table 2. Tourism imaginaries shaped under different musical stimuli

Musical stimulus	Tourism imaginaries		
	Place	**Practices**	**Participants**
Epic	Exotic, remote, and potentially dangerous	Adventure-oriented activities (e.g., extreme sports, exploration in natural settings)	Solo travel; need for local guide; limited engagement with host community
Traditional (Andean folk)	Peaceful, culturally rich, with increased familiarity	Relaxation-oriented, culturally focused activities	Hospitable and socially open locals; high engagement with host community
Pop	Vibrant, lively holiday	Leisure-oriented activities (e.g., entertainment, recreational sports)	Group-based travel; peer interaction; limited engagement with host community

5. Discussion and conclusions

The current study aimed to explore the role of music in destination promotional videos in shaping tourism imaginaries of distant destinations. Findings suggest that music actively reorganises how the same visual content is interpreted, producing divergent and sometimes contrasting tourism imaginaries in terms of place, practices, and participants.

As shown by the results, the characteristics of the musical stimuli were reflected in the tourism imaginaries elicited under each condition. Under epic music, participants envisioned Ecuador as an exotic, remote, and potentially dangerous destination. These imaginaries were broadly consistent with the intensity and tension associated with the orchestral soundtrack. Similarly, imaginaries of active travel itineraries and adventure-oriented tourism practices appeared to resonate with the energetic and high-arousal character of the music. Rather than being derived solely from the visual content, these imaginaries suggest that participants interpreted the destination through meanings conveyed by the soundtrack.

Traditional music generated a markedly different tourism imaginaries. Ecuador was envisioned as a peaceful destination, characterised by familiarity, and a less harsh environment, which was consistent with the slow-paced track. Interestingly, the destination was envisioned as culturally rich, despite the limited visual representation of cultural sites and local communities in the video. This suggests that participants drew on meanings associated with folk musical forms when constructing tourism imaginaries of the destination. Consistent with the music features, tourism practices were envisioned as relaxation-focused, culturally oriented, and low in intensity.

The pop music condition produced yet another interpretive framework. Participants imagined Ecuador as a vibrant and lively holiday destination associated with leisure and enjoyment. These imaginaries were broadly aligned with the positive emotional tone and energetic character of the soundtrack. Interestingly, participants envisioned parties and entertainment despite the absence of nightlife imagery in the video. The lyrics and overall composition of the song may therefore have contributed meanings that extended beyond the visual stimulus, influencing the tourism practices imagined at the destination.

In terms of participants, tourism imaginaries about the role of tourists and locals, and the relations between them, were also sensitive to musical framing. However, these should not be interpreted as stable social attitudes but as momentary configurations of imagined social distance. Epic music tended to position the tourist as isolated and externally guided, traditional music fostered imaginaries of closer host–guest relations, while pop music foregrounded peer-group sociability with limited host engagement. These patterns suggest that destination promotional videos may not simply shape imaginaries of places and practices but appears to contribute to social awareness by shaping imaginaries of social relations between locals and tourists before any actual encounter occurs.

These findings suggest that destination meaning in audiovisual communication is not stable but is continually reconfigured through musical framing that extends beyond the visual domain. Rather than operating as mere content supplementation, music appears to structure the type and intensity of what is considered imaginable within the destination, working through processes of imaginative constraint and expansion that shape which tourism experiences and social relations become thinkable in the first place. In this sense, music provides symbolic and affective cues through which participants construct meaning about the destination, rather than simply accompanying the visual narrative. This points to an integrative form of audiovisual interpretation, in which music and visuals are not processed separately but co-construct destination meaning.

From a theoretical perspective, the study draws on the Place–Practices–Participants model of tourism imaginaries formation (Gravari-Barbas, Graburn & Staszak, 2023) to advance understanding of how music shapes tourism imaginaries across these three interrelated dimensions. Moreover, the study contributes to the literature on music in marketing by reinforcing and extending the notion of music as a carrier of semantic associations (Shevy, 2008; Zhu & Meyers-Levy, 2005) highlighting how music operates as an interpretive and symbolic resource that informs how destinations are imagined, how tourism practices are envisaged, and how social relations within destinations are cognitively framed. In particular, the results suggest that music can influence how relational configurations between tourists and host communities are imagined, thereby linking auditory stimuli to forms of emerging social awareness within tourism imaginaries.

Importantly, the emergence of familiarity and perceived proximity in the traditional condition raises a conceptual question. In this case, familiarity did not derive from prior experience, knowledge, or exposure to the destination, but appeared to emerge through affective and symbolic associations elicited by the music. Rather than reflecting proximity in any objective sense, it was imaginatively constructed within the viewing experience. This suggests that perceptions of distant destinations are shaped not only by visual representation, but also by the meanings embedded in how destinations are heard. In this sense, the study contributes to the literature on perceived distance and destination marketing (Shang, Romagosa & Pallares-Barbera, 2025) by highlighting tourism imaginaries as a mediating construct through which distant destinations are symbolically and affectively interpreted, shaping how relational proximity and familiarity are imagined in the absence of direct experience (Mitev, Irimiás, & Michalkó, 2024).

From a managerial perspective, these findings are particularly relevant for distant destinations. The results indicate that music operates not merely as a complementary promotional tool but as an important element capable of conveying complex representations of tourist destinations (Coronel & Irimiás, 2023). For destinations seeking to position themselves as safe, welcoming, and accessible, music can play a role in shaping how such attributes are imaginatively constructed within promotional contexts. The findings also suggest that tourism imaginaries may influence perceived target segments, insofar as prospective travellers may or may not identify with the types of tourists implied by different musical framings. In this regard, DMOs may consider music as a strategic resource for aligning promotional content with desired audience positioning. Overall, the study highlights the importance of deliberate musical selection in destination promotional videos. It suggests that musical choices should be aligned with the types of tourism imaginaries a destination seeks to evoke, such as adventure, relaxation, culture, or leisure, depending on the intended positioning strategy. Finally, recognising the role of music in destination communication supports a more integrated approach to audiovisual marketing, in which auditory elements are treated as a substantive component of tourism promotion materials rather than an auxiliary design feature.

5.1 Limitations and future directions of the study

Notwithstanding its important findings, this study is not without limitations. Although the videos were presented in a randomised order, the sequence of videos may still have influenced participants' responses. Furthermore, the fact that the same participants viewed all three videos could have led to fatigue or reduced attention, potentially affecting the quality and consistency of their responses. Future research could address these concerns by adopting a between-subjects design in which participants are exposed to only one stimulus, thereby minimizing fatigue and carryover effects. In this regard, although the study is based on a substantial set of 23 interviews, this study relies exclusively on Hungarian novelty-seekers individuals, which limits transferability and cultural generalizability. Future research could expand the sample size while incorporating a cross-cultural sample to capture a broader range of perspectives and enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Another limitation is that one of the soundtracks used in the experiment included lyrics, which may have influenced the formation of tourism imaginaries, although this effect was not explicitly reported by participants. Future research could extend these findings by examining other aural elements in destination promotional videos, such as environmental sounds (soundscapes), lyrics, and voice-over narration, and their respective roles in shaping immersion and tourism imaginaries.

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