Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

'I Love Baku': Azerbaijani YouTubers and Citizen Diplomacy

Narmina Abdulaev

narmina@post.bgu.ac.il

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Case Report

Keywords: Youtube, Vlogs, Azerbaijan, Citizen Diplomacy, Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

Posted Date: September 18th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10829836/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

Social media and video-sharing platforms have expanded the range of actors involved in shaping states' international images, enabling independent social media influencers (SMIs) to play an important role in citizen diplomacy. This article examines how Azerbaijani YouTubers contribute to the country's image through Russian-language YouTube channels featuring everyday-life vlogs. The choice of Russian is both strategic and practical, allowing SMIs to reach the large Russian-speaking audience across the post-Soviet region, make Azerbaijan accessible through a familiar language, and foster intercultural dialogue. The main question is: How do Azerbaijani YouTubers use Russian language to promote Azerbaijan's image and practice citizen diplomacy among Russian-speaking audiences? Using a qualitative content analysis of eight Azerbaijani YouTube channels, the study finds that SMIs act as informal cultural ambassadors by presenting authentic narratives of daily life, culture, hospitality, and local traditions. These representations construct a positive and relatable image of Azerbaijan, complementing official public diplomacy efforts and demonstrating how digital SMIs can enhance soft power and cross-cultural understanding through citizen diplomacy.

Introduction

The proliferation of social media and video sharing platforms has transformed how countries are represented and perceived internationally. While national image-making was traditionally associated with governments, diplomatic institutions, and state-controlled media, digital communication has enabled individuals and other nonstate actors to participate directly in producing and circulating representations of national identity. Independent content social media influencers (SMIs), particularly YouTubers, can reach transnational audiences through personal narratives and everyday experiences (Lee and Alhabash 2025; Tabari and Ding 2024). Their digital practices may therefore function as a form of citizen diplomacy, contributing to how countries are understood by foreign audiences (Author 2025; Mukhammadieva 2026; Pelevina and Salojärvi 2025).

Azerbaijan provides a valuable case for examining this process, particularly given the competing narratives and stereotypes that can shape its international image. Azerbaijani YouTubers increasingly use video platforms to present everyday life, culture, society, and urban experiences to audiences beyond the country. Unlike official or explicitly promotional representations, everyday-life vlogs offer personal and seemingly authentic encounters with Azerbaijan. Through depictions of travel, food, traditions, interpersonal interactions, and urban life, SMIs can produce alternative national representations grounded in lived experience and mediated intimacy (Mekhdi 2023).

Language is an important dimension of this process (Author 2025; Baktybekova, Kagazbaeva and Ali 2026). The use of Russian by Azerbaijani YouTubers can extend their communicative reach to audiences across the post-Soviet region, where Russian remains widely understood and functions as a shared linguistic resource. Russian-language content enables SMIs to present Azerbaijan’s everyday realities through a familiar cultural and linguistic framework, potentially reducing cultural distance and

encouraging intercultural engagement. It also places Azerbaijan within a broader post-Soviet digital space where national identities and cultural practices are continually negotiated (Mekhdi 2023).

Literature review

Public and Citizen Diplomacy in the Digital Age

In digital age, the practice of public diplomacy, contributing to a shift from a predominantly state-centric and hierarchical model toward a more decentralized, interactive, and multi-actor form of international engagement. Traditionally, public diplomacy operates in a framework where governments and official institutions convey strategic narratives, values, and national interests to foreign publics (Cull 2019; Ismailzade 2024; Ketners, 2025). The emergence of social media has expanded the range of actors participating in diplomatic communication and created new opportunities for dialogue, participation, and interpersonal exchange. Digital public diplomacy can therefore be understood as the use of digital and networked communication technologies to engage foreign publics, facilitate dialogue, build relationships, and advance national interests (Bjola and Holmes 2015; Greco 2025; Manor 2019; Mukhammadieva 2026). Rather than simply transmitting information to international audiences, digital public diplomacy involves reciprocal communication, audience participation, and user-generated content (Manor 2025; Mukhammadieva 2026; Pelevina and Salojärvi 2025).

Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram etc. have become significant spaces for international communication because they enable individuals and organizations to communicate rapidly and directly across national and cultural boundaries (Ismailzade 2024; Lee and Alhabash 2025; Mukhammadieva 2026). This development has altered the structure of diplomatic communication by placing government institutions alongside journalists, civil society organizations, celebrity, SMIs, and ordinary social media users (Cora and Çora 2025; Ismailzade 2024). Consequently, diplomacy is increasingly characterized by networked communication in which official and unofficial actors coexist and interact within the same digital environment The growing participation of non-state actors has consequently blurred the boundaries between formal diplomatic communication and everyday forms of intercultural communication (Cora and Çora 2025; Manor 2019; Manor 2025; Mukhammadieva 2026; Pelevina and Salojärvi 2025).

This transformation is particularly relevant to the concept of citizen diplomacy, which extends diplomatic agency beyond governments and professional diplomats to include ordinary individuals. Citizen diplomacy is grounded in the premise that interpersonal encounters can contribute to international understanding by challenging stereotypes, encouraging cultural exchange, and fostering relationships between societies (McGowan 2026; Pelevina and Salojärvi 2025). Educational exchanges, cultural initiatives, civil society activities, community engagement, and other forms of interpersonal interaction have historically provided important mechanisms through which such relationships are established. In the digital environment, however, these interactions can occur at considerably greater scale and speed,

enabling individuals to communicate with geographically distant audiences without institutional mediation (Cora and Çora 2025; Mukhammadieva 2026).

The importance of citizen diplomacy within digital environments is closely connected to the perceived authenticity of personal communication. Social media content based on everyday experiences, personal narratives, and informal forms of self-presentation may be interpreted as more authentic and relatable than highly controlled government communication (Mukhammadieva 2026; Tabari and Ding 2024). This perceived authenticity can enhance audience engagement and may influence how foreign publics understand another society, its cultural practices, social norms, and everyday life. SMIs can therefore perform forms of informal representational work by presenting their own experiences to international audiences (Lee and Alhabash 2025). In doing so, they may function as unofficial cultural ambassadors whose representations can complement, complicate, or challenge official national narratives (Cho-Li, Jin and Kiousis 2025; Manor 2019; Manor 2025; Pelevina and Salojärvi 2025; Tabari and Ding 2024).

The expansion of citizen participation in diplomatic communication also corresponds with the broader transformation of public diplomacy from message transmission toward relationship-building. Contemporary digital public diplomacy increasingly emphasizes interaction, listening, participation, and sustained engagement rather than the unilateral dissemination of strategically formulated messages (Baktybekova, Kagazbaeva and Ali 2026). Such an approach reflects the argument that effective public diplomacy depends not only on communicating with foreign publics but also on understanding their perspectives and creating opportunities for meaningful interaction (Ketners 2025). Digital platforms facilitate this process by allowing audiences to respond, comment, share, reinterpret, and circulate content, thereby becoming active participants in the production and dissemination of diplomatic meanings (Mukhammadieva 2026; Pelevina and Salojärvi 2025).

Citizen diplomacy can encompass a wide range of activities involving individuals and non-state organizations. Cultural and educational exchange programs, for example, can generate long-term interpersonal relationships and social capital that extend beyond the immediate context of an exchange. Similarly, artists, educators, community leaders, and civil society organizations can contribute to intercultural understanding by creating spaces for cultural dialogue and engagement, particularly among marginalized or displaced populations (Chen and Tang 2026; Mukhammadieva 2026).

The relationship between digital public diplomacy and citizen diplomacy can also be situated with soft power. Nye (2004) defines soft power as the capacity to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or material inducement. Cultural values, political legitimacy, institutions, and international relationships can therefore become sources of attraction that shape how countries are perceived by foreign publics. In the digital environment, however, the production of such attraction is no longer controlled exclusively by governments. Citizens, migrants, travellers and other SMIs may consequently participate in the production of narratives that affect how nations and cultures are perceived internationally (Lee and Alhabash 2025; Mukhammadieva 2026). Their content may reinforce positive national images by highlighting cultural heritage, hospitality, social values, or everyday experiences, but it

may also expose social tensions, inequalities, political controversies, or alternative interpretations of national identity (Lee and Alhabash 2025). Rather, it represents a complex process through which individuals negotiate cultural meanings and national identities within transnational digital networks. The diplomatic significance of such communication derives precisely from its capacity to introduce perspectives that may exist outside formal institutional discourse (Ccory 2025; Lee and Alhabash 2025; Manor 2019; Mukhammadieva 2026).

Youtube as a platform for nation image construction

Digital platforms like YouTube occupy a distinctive position in the construction and circulation of national images because of its emphasis on long-form audiovisual storytelling. Unlike text-based social media, YouTube enables creators to combine visual imagery, spoken language, music, and personal narratives, producing immersive representations that can facilitate cultural understanding (Pelevina and Salojärvi 2025). Vlogs, in particular, have become an influential genre through which creators document everyday experiences, often using personal and seemingly spontaneous interactions that contribute to perceptions of authenticity. This perceived authenticity can strengthen viewers' trust and enhance the persuasive potential of creators' narratives (Baktybekova, Kagazbaeva and Ali 2026; Pfender, Wanzer and Bleakdey, 2024). Consequently, YouTube SMIs increasingly participate in processes of nation image construction that were previously dominated by governments, diplomatic institutions, and traditional media (Baktybekova, Kagazbaeva and Ali 2026; Mukhammadieva, 2026).

This development is closely connected to the changing dynamics of nation branding, which refers to the strategic management of a country's international reputation through cultural, economic, political, and social communication (Anholt 2007; Mukhammadieva 2026). While governments continue to invest in official nation-branding initiatives, national images are increasingly shaped by decentralized digital creators whose representations operate outside formal institutional communication. SMIs contribute to this process by producing personalized narratives that emphasize lived experience and authenticity rather than official promotional messages (Tabari and Ding 2024). Their content frequently focuses on ordinary dimensions of everyday life including family traditions, local cuisine, transportation, education, shopping, and social interactions that are rarely central to government campaigns. By foregrounding these mundane experiences, SMIs can humanize countries, reduce psychological distance between foreign audiences and local populations, and provide alternative perspectives on national identity and culture (Mukhammadieva 2026; Pelevina and Salojärvi 2025; Tabari and Ding 2024).

In this context, YouTubers can be as digital diplomats who influence perceptions of countries, cultures, and international issues through a bottom-up form of soft power grounded in personalization, emotional storytelling, perceived authenticity, and parasocial relationships. SMIs can also challenge dominant international narratives and contribute to alternative forms of digital story (Cora and Çora 2025; Mukhammadieva, 2026).

Russian-Language Azerbaijani YouTubers

Language plays a central role in digital public diplomacy because it determines the accessibility, reach, and cultural resonance of communication among international audiences (Rahimli 2026). Russian remains an important language across the post-Soviet information space, enabling communication across national borders and connecting diverse audiences through a shared linguistic environment. Recent research identifies YouTube as an increasingly significant platform for digital diplomacy, where audiovisual content can contribute to state image construction and international communication (Baktybekova, Kagazbaeva and Ali 2026). In Azerbaijan, the continued social relevance of Russian is also reflected in the country's multilingual educational and communication environment (Abizada and Seyidov 2024; Rahimli 2026).

The scale of Azerbaijan's SMIs ecosystem further illustrates the relevance of this phenomenon. In May 2025, Modash identified 2,197 Azerbaijani YouTube influencers, including with audiences of up to approximately 500,000 followers (Modash 2025). Although this database does not indicate how many produces content specifically in Russian, it demonstrates the substantial scale of Azerbaijan's YouTube environment. For Russian-speaking Azerbaijani YouTubers, Russian can therefore operate as both a practical audience-expansion strategy and a diplomatic resource through which culture, traditions, hospitality, tourism, and everyday life are communicated to transnational audiences. Such SMIs can reduce linguistic barriers and facilitate intercultural dialogue while contributing to the construction of Azerbaijan's national image (Mekhdi, 2023).

Despite the growing significance of Russian-language digital communication, limited scholarship has examined how Azerbaijani YouTubers construct national representations for Russian-speaking audiences. The main question is: How do Azerbaijani YouTubers use Russian-language to promote Azerbaijan's image and practice citizen diplomacy among Russian-speaking audiences?

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using thematic analysis. A qualitative approach is appropriate for examining patterns, meanings, and recurring themes in media content, while thematic analysis provides a systematic yet flexible method for identifying and interpreting how experiences are represented and narrated, particularly in contexts of crisis and uncertainty (Braun and Clarke 2022).

The dataset consists of vlogs (hereafter referred to as videos) produced by Azerbaijani YouTubers from July 2025 to July 2026 (see Table 1). Relevant videos were identified through targeted keyword searches conducted in both Russian and English. Search terms included "Baku," "Azerbaijan," and "vlog," along with their Russian-language equivalents and related combinations. The selection focused on publicly available videos relevant to the research questions and produced by Azerbaijani YouTubers during the specified period.

Table 1
List of Youtubers

Name of channel	Link
ASMR RALPH ISKANDER	https://youtube.com/@asmr_ralph_iskander?si=xNIEGH5HLaj4D928
Ayka Emilly	Ayka Emilly - YouTube
Kamillas Life	https://www.youtube.com/@Kamillaslife
SabiwaVlog	https://www.youtube.com/@SabiwaVlog
Ya v Baku	https://www.youtube.com/@yavbaku
Вот так и живём	https://www.youtube.com/@RugiyavlogBaku
Солнечный Край	https://www.youtube.com/@alinlv83
Уютный Баку	https://www.youtube.com/@life-baku

All selected videos were originally recorded in Russian and translated into English by the author for analysis. Particular attention was paid to preserving the original meaning, tone, expressions, and contextual nuances of the speakers' statements. This translation process enabled systematic thematic analysis while minimizing the loss of culturally and linguistically specific meanings.

Regarding research ethics, the study analysed only publicly accessible YouTube videos that were openly available to all users without requiring membership, subscription, or restricted access. The videos were therefore treated as publicly available media content. No private, restricted, or personally shared material was accessed (Ho et al., 2026). The analysis focused on the content and narratives presented in the videos rather than on the personal lives of the SMIs. Where appropriate, identifying information was limited to publicly available information directly relevant to the study.

Findings

The thematic analysis identified major categories that consistently appeared across the videos produced by Azerbaijani Russian-speaking YouTubers. Collectively, these representations portray Azerbaijan through ordinary life rather than through official or institutional narratives, reflecting characteristics associated with citizen diplomacy.

Constructing Azerbaijan in Everyday Narratives

The primary category centres on the visual, spatial, and experiential representation of everyday urban environments. Rather than prioritizing monumental landmarks or conventional tourist sites, the SMIs predominantly feature routine settings such as supermarkets, residential districts, cafés, public transit, shopping centres, parks, and local markets. Consequently, these ordinary environments become the principal medium through which global audiences encounter Azerbaijan. One SMI for instance, notes:

“Usually, the shopping mall is packed at this time, but it’s summer now, most people are away on vacation, so the mall is relatively empty.” (Солпечный край, 4.8.26).

Consumer-related content appears throughout the dataset. Videos frequently include supermarket visits, price comparisons, product reviews, shopping recommendations, and discussions of household expenses. These practices constitute an important mechanism through which SMIs communicate practical knowledge about everyday life in Azerbaijan to audiences located outside the country.

The importance of such information is explicitly articulated by one SMI:

“I remember people writing: "Thanks for the reviews and for mentioning the prices, it’s always interesting to compare." That’s why I show this here”. (Life Baku, 4.8.26)

The vlog therefore functions not only as entertainment but also as an informal source of comparative consumer knowledge. Price information becomes particularly significant because it enables viewers in other countries to situate Azerbaijan within their own economic experiences.

This comparative function is also evident in the following observation:

“Oh, lovely. It has everything, just like at the market. We actually just passed an Iranian shop up ahead. Oh, wait, it says "Tabris" right there”. (Life Baku, 4.6.26)

Here, the representation of local commercial spaces simultaneously conveys information about the availability of products and the multicultural character of the consumer environment. The vlog's focus on stores and products consequently transforms mundane consumption into a form of cultural knowledge.

Price comparisons are particularly prominent in the corpus:

“Fruit used to be much cheaper here in the summer. The most expensive fruit in Baku now is cherries, but the large ones. They cost around 7–8 manats [...] and apricots. Apricots are also about the same price.” (ASMR RALPH ISKANDER 29.7.26).

The discussion of prices is not limited to factual reporting. In some cases, SMIs explicitly reflect on the value and relevance of providing such information to their audiences:

“By the way, let me give you some price guidelines. So, coffee is 8 manats, and this one with sour cream, well, that's also 8 manats. So, 16 manats, in short. Yes, is a bit expensive in that regard. Unfortunately, at that price, I don't think such a mug should be served. Coffee in a mug like that, well, you're a disgrace, and in the city centre, right in the centre, right in the heart of it, at the market. You know, I'm showing you, for example, prices, yes, for coffee, for a pastry, there, for a cake, and at that moment I'm thinking: "What if there's even a point in showing all this?" Because we live in a time when any information can be found on the internet in literally a couple of seconds, absolutely any information. Prices in cafes, in restaurants, in any country, in any city, yes, even the cost of groceries in stores can be looked up, compared, studied, if you want. And sometimes I think, "Do I even need to tell you what we bought and for how much? How

much we paid for food, for coffee, for some little things?" Although, on the other hand, I understand that someone is genuinely interested in this, because from time to time people really do write to me asking to show prices just so they can compare, look, get their bearings. And I understand that too. Well, to be honest, it seems to me that now, in the age of technology, this endless information, robotics, and this constant digital race in short supply, something completely different is becoming. These are simple heartfelt conversations, these quiet get-togethers. It doesn't matter whether it's over a cup of coffee or a cup of tea." (Вот так и живём, 3.7.26).

This account is analytically significant because the SMI explicitly recognizes a tension between the informational and relational functions of the vlog. Although prices can be readily accessed through digital platforms, the SMI suggests that their value lies partly in the interpersonal context in which such information is communicated. Thus, consumer information is embedded within a broader mode of mediated sociality.

Shopping practices are consistently explained within their local context, allowing viewers to understand everyday economic life. Recommendations are generally based on personal experience rather than commercial promotion. By presenting practical information about prices, products, and daily consumption, SMIs offer viewers an accessible perspective on living conditions in Azerbaijan while responding to questions frequently raised by Russian-speaking audiences abroad. In this sense, consumption becomes a vehicle through which Azerbaijan is made knowable to geographically dispersed Russian-speaking viewers.

Similarly, visual captures of the urban landscape are frequently accompanied by spontaneous aesthetic reflections: "Friends, how beautiful, what colours in the sky. For some reason, the sky seems brighter than it actually is. It's much darker now. Look at those clouds. Amazing, how beautiful!" (Kamillaslife, 5.8.26).

These excerpts demonstrate how Azerbaijan is discursively constructed through the experiential and visual dimensions of daily urban life. Instead of relying on nationally symbolic iconography, the vlogs present the country through mundane spaces encountered during routine activities, generating a form of mediated familiarity that invites viewers to experience Azerbaijan through the SMI's situated perspectives.

This emphasis on ordinary spatiality distinguishes these vlogs from traditional promotional travel media. By bypassing curated tourist itineraries and foregrounding sites of routine mobility, consumption, and casual social interaction, the vlog format produces an informal, vernacular representation of Azerbaijan that contrasts markedly with state-sponsored tourism campaigns. At the same time, the SMIs' representations are characterized by informal modes of production that reinforce the perceived authenticity of these everyday narratives. Handheld cameras, spontaneous conversations, ambient sounds, unplanned events, and real-time reactions are consistently retained in the final recordings. Rather than eliminating the imperfections that naturally arise during everyday filming, SMIs incorporate

them into the narrative structure, contributing to the perception that their content is spontaneous, personal, and closely connected to lived experience.

Authenticity is also produced by incorporating current events into everyday narratives, thereby connecting personal experiences with developments in the broader urban environment. For example, one SMI observes: “The city is preparing for the Formula One. The Formula One will be held in Baku from September 24 to 26.” (Солничный край, 4.6.26). The reference to an internationally recognizable event is embedded within the SMI’s ordinary observations of the city rather than presented as a formal tourism announcement. In this way, major events become part of the lived urban landscape documented through the vlog.

Importantly, authenticity is further constructed through the inclusion of minor disruptions, unexpected situations, and mundane mistakes. One SMI recounts an everyday navigation error: “Girls, I want to tell you about an awkward situation that happened to us on the subway today. We had to go just one stop, get off the train, cross to the other side, and transfer to another side. Seems easy, right? But when we were driving, at some point we realized that we had boarded the wrong train and arrived at the same station again. And so, finding ourselves back at the same station, we boarded a different car. We spent, let's say, about 10 minutes, and then we went where we needed to go.” (Sabiwa vlog, 18.6.26). Rather than undermining the credibility of the narrative, such mistakes contribute to its authenticity because they reproduce the unpredictability and imperfection associated with ordinary life.

Similarly, the vlog format incorporates local history, popular culture, and cultural references into spontaneous encounters with the urban environment. One SMI remarks: “These are our eggplant taxis. We're putting together a little overview, friends [...] There's a place up ahead where a scene from the movie "The Diamond Arm" was filmed. If we get there, I'll show you. These narrow streets, friends, souvenirs. Souvenir shops everywhere.” (ASMR RALPH ISKANDER 1.8.26). Here, the representation of Baku combines contemporary urban mobility with references to Soviet popular culture, local streets, and souvenir commerce. Another SMI draws attention to a contemporary cultural event: “One of the largest street art exhibitions in recent years is currently taking place near the Heydar Aliyev Center in Baku. This exhibition is titled "Wildlife Superheroes." It's from the world-renowned artists Geely and Mars. The exhibition opened in February of this year, and it's the largest project of the artists' careers. Around 100 works have been brought to Baku.” (Ya v Baku, 30.5.26). The inclusion of such observations expands the representation of Azerbaijan beyond conventional tourist imagery by connecting the city to both historical cultural memories and contemporary cultural production.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that authenticity in Azerbaijani vlogs is not simply a consequence of low-production-value filming. The vlog consequently functions not as a formally structured promotional media product, but as an extension of ordinary life and personal experience through which Azerbaijan is rendered familiar, accessible, and experientially authentic.

2. Explaining Azerbaijani Culture Through Everyday Experiences

The videos frequently provide explanations of Azerbaijani customs, traditions, food, and everyday social practices for audiences living outside the country. Cultural information is generally introduced through participation in ordinary activities rather than through formal or explicitly educational presentations. This approach situates cultural explanation within personal and experiential narratives, making cultural practices more accessible by illustrating them through concrete, everyday examples.

Food represents one important domain through which cultural knowledge is communicated. For example:

“We ordered Jorat qutab with greens and meat. Then I'll get some danaliva, too. It's called Jorat qutab, named after the village of Jorat. They're smaller than regular Baku qutab. And they're baked in the oven, not on a saj.” (Солничный край, 26.7.26)

Food is also presented in connection with memory, family history, and personal identity:

“I like a similar combination, when chicken is fried with lots of onions, and then covered with eggs. It immediately reminds me of my childhood. Or rather, the time when my mother was alive. She often made this, well, meat gravy. Well, you can't really call it a gravy. Basically, a meat accompaniment, say, to Baku pilaf. By the way, this is also one of the Baku cooking options. She would take chicken drumsticks, fry them with onions, and then with lots of onions, and then add eggs. And it seems pretty simple, but it turned out, well, incredibly delicious. I still remember that taste. Perhaps that's why I love dishes that combine onions, chicken, and eggs so much. By the way, it's somewhat reminiscent of chikhortma, a famous dish of Azerbaijani cuisine. Chicken, onions, and eggs also play the main roles there. Simple ingredients, but the result is simply wonderful.” (Вот так и живём, 31.5.26).

The corpus also includes explanations of wedding-related practices. One SMI discusses the organization of marriage ceremonies and the relationship between traditional and contemporary forms:

“For example, I think this model would be perfect for the Civil Registry Office, because we'll have the Civil Registry Office separately from the wedding, and most people do just that. Basically, we'll have two weddings. One is classic, you know, traditional, and the other is more modern with my relatives. We're planning on doing it that way. We'll also have an engagement party. It's called Nishan. It happens about a week before the wedding. We also definitely need to do the Civil Registry Office. Sometimes it's done that way. You could simply incorporate the Civil Registry Office into the wedding, invite a registry office representative to the restaurant, and that's it. But I want to do it a little differently.” (Ayka Emilly, 24.7.26)

The economic dimension of wedding customs is similarly explained to viewers:

“People ask about weddings say, if you’re going to a wedding, how much do you give? If it’s just acquaintances, we usually give 50 manats. But if we’re going to a relative’s wedding, it’s over 100 manats, sometimes even 150”. (Life Baku, 2.6.26)

The negotiation between traditional expectations and contemporary preferences is also evident in discussions of household practices:

“Typically for restaurants or if you're buying very large sets. In our case, we'll be buying two sets. Frankly, I'm against such a purchase because it's expensive and not particularly functional, for me personally. Firstly, because we live alone. Secondly, our apartment isn't very large, and we plan to entertain guests in the future at a restaurant, celebrate birthdays, events, and the like. We gather at various establishments, but definitely not at home. So, honestly, I don't understand why I need a 74-piece set; it's for 12 people. On this channel, with a Russian-speaking audience, absolutely everyone will understand. I'm 100% sure of that. But on another channel, I got a ton of hate, saying I don't respect traditions and that it's downright rude of me”. (Ayka Emilly, 10.8.26)

These examples demonstrate that cultural representation in the videos extends beyond presenting Azerbaijani traditions as static cultural markers. Instead, customs are explained through personal participation, family memories, food practices, and decisions related to contemporary social life. Culture is therefore presented as lived and negotiated rather than fixed. By connecting cultural practices to personal experiences and everyday choices, the SMIs portray Azerbaijani culture as embedded in ordinary social life while simultaneously making it accessible to Russian-speaking audiences outside the country.

3. Audience and SMIs Relationships and Participatory Vlogging

A further theme emerging from the analysis concerns the relational and participatory nature of the relationship between Sand their audiences. Across the corpus, Azerbaijani Russian-speaking YouTubers consistently position viewers not merely as recipients of content but as active participants in the ongoing development of their channels. This relationship is articulated through direct address, responses to comments, references to audience requests and expectations, and explicit acknowledgment of viewers’ emotional responses. The audience consequently becomes embedded in both the production process and the narrative structure of the vlogs.

The significance of audience engagement is evident in SMIs accounts of their motivations for maintaining and developing their channels. For example, explicitly connects blogging with access to professional opportunities and distinguishes between content produced for Russian-speaking audiences and content produced in Azerbaijani:

“Honestly, I dreamed of becoming a blogger to receive PR newsletters. And finally, my dream came true after seven years of blogging. Because before, I was filming for a Russian audience, and I lived, for example, in Baku, and I was filming content for Russian-speaking people, so I didn't receive any PR newsletters... So, I started taking advantage of the perks of blogging after I created an Azerbaijani-language channel. I'm so great that I did that. By the way, if anyone's interested, I'll leave a link to my Azerbaijani channel below.” (Ayka Emilly, 3.8.26)

This account illustrates how language choice and audience configuration can shape SMI perceived opportunities within the platform environment. At the same time, the practice of vlogging is frequently represented as emergent and relatively unstructured rather than as the outcome of a predetermined professional strategy. One SMI describes the origins of the practice as follows:

“I don't even know how I came up with the idea to make vlogs. It was just sudden. At some point, the idea popped into my head, and I immediately started filming without much thought or preparation. I just did it. I don't know how it will all go from here.” (Sabiwa vlog, 7.5.26).

Audience participation also becomes visible through the moderation of comments and the management of negative feedback. Rather than presenting the comment section as an unproblematic space of interaction, SMIs describe actively regulating audience contributions:

“I was writing comments, and they didn't go through, meaning they didn't pass my check. I blocked them, deleted them, because the comments were quite rude. But then again, this happens to all bloggers. There's no way around it. I understand that”. (Life Baku, 2.6.26)

Such practices indicate that audience engagement involves not only encouragement and positive feedback but also forms of boundary management through which SMIs determine which forms of participation become incorporated into the channel.

The SMI further construct their channels as shared projects involving both themselves and their viewers. This positioning is particularly explicit when introducing new content or changes to the channel:

“Hi everyone. Welcome to my channel. I’m glad you stopped by. We’re starting a new blog series together. I hope you enjoy watching. You’ve probably noticed that there are some changes to my channel again, I’ve decided to go back to the original name.” (Вот так и живём, 3.7.26).

The use of collective formulations such as “we’re starting” constructs the vlog as an ongoing relational project rather than as a completed media product delivered to a passive audience. The audience is thus discursively incorporated into the continuation and transformation of the channel.

The importance of this relationship becomes particularly apparent when SMI experience interruptions in their publishing routines. In one extended account, a SMI explains a delay in uploading new material and directly links the continuation of the channel to viewers’ responses:

“Yes, my vlogs have started coming out about a week late again. Why did this happen? Because I simply lost touch with reality a bit. My life has gotten so busy, so many things have piled up, and I've become so immersed in all this activity that I've become desperately short of time. It's not that I haven't filmed anything at all; I've filmed a few things from time to time, but then I simply haven't had time to edit. And there have been days when I haven't recorded anything at all, because I just haven't had the time. And, you know, I was really pleased to read the comments under the previous vlog, where many wrote: “Where did you disappear to? You were missed. Sveta [snorts] Rumyantseva even wrote that she was going

through withdrawal. Someone wrote that they just come to my channel to relax. Honestly, it's incredibly nice to read things like this. I feel so warm at the thought that you were waiting for me. Of course, it's not like I completely disappeared, although, to be honest, from the outside it probably looked that way. But this disappearance of mine was completely unplanned. I didn't plan to take some kind of vacation from YouTube or disappear for a long time. It's just how things worked out. Now I'm slowly trying to, uh, put it all together, edit videos from the files I already have, not lose anything and carefully combine it all in a vlog. Because even if I filmed very little during the day in short pieces, it's still part of my life. And that's exactly what I'm sharing with you. And I really like this because I always feel supported by you in any mood, in any format, and at any moment. And this is truly very valuable to me." (Вот так и живём, 3.7.26).

This account demonstrates that audience engagement extends beyond measurable interaction such as comments or subscriptions and acquires an explicitly emotional dimension. The SMI interprets viewers' expressions of concern and absence as evidence of attachment to the channel and describes this attachment as a source of motivation and support. Importantly, the SMI also frames the vlog as an extension of everyday life, emphasizing that even fragmented and minimally recorded experiences can become meaningful content when incorporated into the shared vlog narrative.

The audience-SMI relationship also extends beyond the digital platform into physical spaces. In one instance, a SMI describes being recognized by a viewer while shopping in a retail store:

"I was in Rosman and I was already at the checkout when I was paying. And a woman comes up to me, a rather pretty woman. That's it. And she asks me this question. She asks: "Are you a blogger?" Yes. I say: "Yes, basically, generally speaking, when viewers who watch me, well, with pleasure, contact me, they immediately say, for example […] I watch your channel or I'm, let's say, I'm subscribed there." […] I'll tell you about what kind of conversation I actually had with this woman in the next vlog. This is where our new vlog will begin". (Вот так и живём, 3.7.26).

The encounter demonstrates how mediated familiarity can be translated into recognition in everyday physical settings. Moreover, the SMI incorporates the encounter into the subsequent vlog, thereby transforming an offline audience interaction into further online content. The boundary between the SMI's mediated and everyday environments is consequently porous: experiences generated through audience interaction in physical spaces are reintroduced into the digital narrative and become part of the continuing relationship with the wider audience.

The reciprocal character of this relationship is also reinforced in SMIs' closing statements, which explicitly acknowledge viewers' continued attention and support:

"I want to say a huge thank you for watching my videos to the end and supporting me in absolutely any capacity. And we will see you in the new vlog. Bye-bye everyone." (Вот так и живём, 3.7.26).

Taken together, these examples indicate that audience interaction constitutes an integral component of vlog production rather than a secondary response to already-produced content. Viewers' comments, questions, requests, emotional reactions, and expectations are incorporated into SMIs' accounts of their own practices and, in some cases, directly influence subsequent content. At the same time, SMIs actively cultivate a sense of continuity, familiarity, and mutual recognition by addressing viewers directly, acknowledging their absence or support, and incorporating audience encounters into subsequent vlogs. The findings therefore point to a relational model of vlogging in which content production and audience engagement are mutually constitutive.

Conclusion

The analysis identified interconnected themes characterizing the communication practices of Azerbaijani YouTubers. First, vloggers construct a sense of place through ordinary urban environments, including streets, supermarkets, cafés, parks, public transport, and local markets. Such representations transform destinations from conventional tourist sites into familiar living environments, fostering virtual co-presence with everyday life. This finding is consistent with Mukhammadieva's (2026) analysis of YouTube food-travel vlogs, which demonstrates how SMIs can shape destination images through intimate, multimodal representations of everyday cultural practices.

Second, consumer-oriented content operates as cultural mediation. Product reviews, price comparisons, shopping practices, and evaluations of local services provide practical information while translating cultural norms and everyday consumption patterns. Consequently, vloggers acquire authority as local experts whose knowledge is grounded in lived experience, while consumption functions as a form of cultural capital. This supports the broader argument that digital creators increasingly participate in cultural and national image construction outside formal diplomatic institutions (Cho-Li, Jin and Kiousis, 2025; Silva Casas, 2025).

Third, authenticity constitutes a central mechanism of audience trust. Informal filming, spontaneous interactions, visible imperfections, real time prices, and encounters with residents create an impression of transparency and credibility, consistent with the concept of calibrated amateurism. The importance of this mediated authenticity is also evident in contemporary research on YouTube influencers, which demonstrates how seemingly ordinary and personal content can communicate persuasive cultural and social meanings (Pfender, Wanzer and Bleakley 2024).

Finally, vloggers practice everyday citizen diplomacy by shaping international perceptions through representations of ordinary life rather than official narratives. This finding corresponds with Chen and Tang's (2026) conceptualization of online citizen diplomacy, which emphasizes the growing capacity of non-state actors to foster international understanding and relationships. It also extends research showing that YouTubers can function as informal diplomatic actors and contribute to national image construction (Baktybekova, Kagazbaeva and Ali 2026; Cho-Li, Jin and Kiousis 2025; Cora and Çora 2025). In this sense, Azerbaijani vloggers participate in a decentralized form of digital diplomacy in

which national representation emerges through everyday communication rather than institutional messaging. Their use of Russian is particularly significant because Russian continues to function as an important shared linguistic medium across the post-Soviet space; research on language and educational practices in Azerbaijan further illustrates the continuing relevance of Russian within Azerbaijani society (Abizada, Azar and Seyidova, 2024).

Collectively, these findings support the concept of *Everyday Citizen Diplomacy*, whereby routine activities become mechanisms of cultural mediation, informal nation representation, and trust-building among transnational digital publics. Rather than simply reproducing official forms of public diplomacy, Azerbaijani YouTubers contribute to what Manor (2019) describes as the digitalization of public diplomacy: a shift toward interactive, networked, and increasingly decentralized forms of international communication. Their practices therefore demonstrate how ordinary digital storytelling can generate soft power through familiarity, authenticity, cultural accessibility, and interpersonal connection, extending Nye's (2004) concept of soft power into the everyday social-media environment.

The findings of this study suggest that the communication practices of Azerbaijani Russian-speaking YouTubers can be understood through a hierarchical process that extends beyond the documentation of everyday life. Building on the empirical findings and previous scholarship on cultural mediation, authenticity, and citizen diplomacy, this study proposes the *Three Circles Model of Everyday Cultural Mediation.* The model conceptualizes how ordinary personal content gradually acquires broader cultural and diplomatic significance through three interconnected levels: everyday life, cultural mediation, and citizen diplomacy.

The first circle represents the foundation of the model. At this level, YouTubers document routine aspects of their daily lives in Azerbaijan, including walks through shopping trips, restaurant visits, home cooking, family activities, package unboxings, travel, and everyday urban experiences.

Rather than producing content centred on official narratives or tourist attractions, SMIs present ordinary moments that characterize everyday life. These seemingly mundane activities constitute the primary material from which audiences construct their understanding of contemporary Azerbaijan. The findings demonstrate that daily routines, rather than exceptional events, form the core of the vloggers' communication. The second circle illustrates the transformation of everyday experiences into cultural knowledge. The findings indicate that YouTubers do not merely document local life; they actively interpret and explain it for Russian-speaking audiences living outside Azerbaijan. Throughout the videos, SMIs provide explanations of local customs, national holidays, traditional cuisine, shopping practices, prices, product quality, and social norms. These explanations are embedded within everyday activities and presented through personal experience, allowing viewers to contextualize unfamiliar cultural practices.

The third circle represents the broader implications of this communicative process. As viewers repeatedly encounter representations of everyday life, practical information, and cultural explanations across multiple videos, they gradually construct broader perceptions of Azerbaijan.

Everyday experiences provide the empirical foundation of the communication process. These experiences become meaningful through cultural mediation, as SMIs interpret and contextualize local practices for audiences unfamiliar with Azerbaijan. Over time, the accumulation of these mediated experiences contributes to the formation of broader perceptions of the country, thereby generating processes associated with citizen diplomacy. The *Three Circles Model of Everyday Cultural Mediation* therefore offers a conceptual framework for understanding how everyday digital storytelling evolves into a form of informal international communication, linking personal narratives to cultural understanding and, ultimately, to the construction of national image through citizen diplomacy.

This study is limited by its focus on Azerbaijani YouTubers and publicly available content, which may not represent the broader population of Youtubers or capture their intentions and private motivations. Although the findings identify practices of cultural mediation and everyday citizen diplomacy, the study cannot determine how audiences actually interpret these representations or whether they influence international perceptions. Future research should therefore incorporate audience reception, Youtubers interviews, and comparative analysis across languages, platforms, and post-Soviet contexts.

Declarations

Author Contribution

A. wrote the main manuscript text

References

1. Abizada, Azar, and Sevinj Seyidova. 2024. The effect of the Russian language immersion on academic achievement of students whose mother tongue is Azerbaijani. *Innovation* 37(2): 481–498. https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2021.1891026
2. Author 2025
3. Baktybekova, Bekzat Baktybekovna, Elmira Kagazbaeva, and Botagoz Ali. 2026. YouTube as a tool for digital diplomacy and strategic security: A comparative analysis of Russia and Kazakhstan. *Journal of Strategic Security* 19(2): 47–66. https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.19.2.2556.
4. Bjola, Corneliu, and Marcus Holmes. 2015. *Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.
5. Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2022. *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
6. Chen, Zhenglun, and Ping Tang. 2026. Online citizen diplomacy: The emerging power to foster international relations. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 21(1): 28–56. https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-bja10242
7. Cho-Li, Q., Y. Jin, and S. Kiousis. 2025. Borrowing a mouth to speak? Foreign content creators in China's national image building. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 21(4): 412–426.

https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-025-00398-1.

8. Cora, Matthew Ethan, and Hakan Çora. 2025. Digital diplomats of the new era: The role of YouTube influencers in shaping global perceptions and foreign policy narratives. *Turan: Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi* 17(68): 108–114.
9. Casas, Ccory Yamina Silva. 2025. Digital ambassadors of Peru: Cultural diplomacy in the age of content creators. *Política Internacional*, 137 (June): 253-268. https://doi.org/10.61249/pi.vi137.225.
10. Cull, Nicholas John. 2019. *Public Diplomacy : Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age*. Polity Press.
11. Greco, Stefano. 2025. A comparative analysis of United States and European Union digital Diplomacy in India. *Global Policy* 16(5): 907–920. https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.70088
12. Ho, Angela, Anneliese Hulme, Tania Prvan, and Goran Štrkalj. 2026. Evidence for an ethics–practice gap in digital anatomy education: Provenance and consent disclosure in English-language YouTube videos." *Annals of Anatomy* 266: 152856. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aanat.2026.152856
13. Ismailzade, Fariz. 2024. Digital diplomacy in Azerbaijan: Lessons learned and future opportunities." In *Digital Diplomacy in the OSCE Region*, edited by Oğuz Güner, Erman Akıllı, and Burak Güneş. Springer International Publishing AG. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-50966-7_2
14. Ketners, Karlis. 2025. Digital practices of diplomatic communication and their implications for global politics. *Foreign Affairs*, 24: 64–72. https://doi.org/10.59214/2663-2675.35(1).2025.64
15. Lee, Heijin, and Saleem Alhabash. 2025. The role of social media influencers in nation branding and relationship building with foreign audiences. *Public Relations Review* 51(2): 102570. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2025.102570
16. Manor, Ilan. 2019. *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04405-3.
17. Manor, Ilan. 2025. "23. Digital Diplomacy." In *Elgar Encyclopedia of City and Place Branding*, 93.
18. Mekhdi, Leila. (30 May 2023). Jamila Musayeva: Azerbaijan"s Famous YouTuber and Etiquette Consultant. *The Caspian Post*. https://caspianpost.com/stories/jamila-musayeva-azerbaijans-famous-youtuber-and-etiquette-consultant
19. Modash. 2025. "Top 20 YouTube Influencers in Azerbaijan: Find Azerbaijani YouTubers." May 24, 2025. Accessed August 24, 2026. https://www.modash.io/find-influencers/youtube/azerbaijan.
20. Mukhammadieva, Iroda. 2026. Digital gastrodiplomacy: A multimodal semiotic analysis of how YouTube food travel vlogs construct destination image in Uzbekistan. *Tourism and Hospitality* 7(5): 129. https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp7050129
21. Nye, Joseph S. 2004. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs.
22. Pelevina, Nuppu, and Virpi Salojärvi. 2025. YouTube as a narrative battlefield: Brazilian social media influencers and the Russian War in Ukraine." *The Communication Review* 28(4): 363–386. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2025.2545676

23. Pfender, Emily J., Claire Wanzer, and Amy Bleakley. 2024. A content analysis of social media influencers' 'What I Eat in a Day' vlogs on YouTube. *Health Communication* 39(11): 2244–2255. https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2023.2260966.
24. Rahimli, Ruslan. 2026. Digital transnationalism: Social media and the social behaviors of Azerbaijanis in Europe. *Baltic Journal of Legal and Social Sciences*, 2: 272–281. https://doi.org/10.30525/2592-8813-2026-2-31
25. Tabari, Saloomeh, and Qing Shan Ding. 2024. *Celebrity, Social Media Influencers and Brand Performance : Exploring New Dynamics and Future Trends in Marketing*. 1st ed. 2024. Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-63516-8.