

Fantasised and fantastical Nordic imaginaries

*Contextualising Nordic life vlogs by East
Asian YouTube vloggers*

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ABSTRACT

Nordic life vlogs are a popular genre among avid watchers of YouTube influencers across East Asia. The vlogs showcase “a slice of life” content, documenting the simple living, daily routines, beautiful landscapes, cultural festivals, and everyday norms of what it is like to live in the Nordic region. While there are many Nordic life vloggers, in this article, we focus on a subset: young immigrant women from Japan and South Korea living in the Nordics. By attending to the genre, content, and interactions between vloggers and viewers, we explore how female East Asian YouTube vloggers who have immigrated to Nordic countries construct fantasised and fantastical narratives around Nordic imaginaries. The discussion of multifaceted layers of Nordic imaginaries explains how Nordic life vlogs serve as a platform for young East Asian women to project their desire for a better life and cultivate subtle resilience at the juncture of postfeminism and postcolonialism.

KEYWORDS: YouTube, vlogger, Nordic, lifestyle, imaginaries

Introduction

Just by watching the slow-paced moments with the wonderful music and images, I feel immediately healed. The last scene of the walk during the white [snowy] night made me almost cry. (I don't know why). I think Japan is a good country, but sometimes I feel tired by the country's fast-paced lifestyle and busy environment. Thank you for making videos about Nordic countries. I will continue to come to this channel for healing ^^ [translated]. (Comment posted to a Japanese YouTube video on Nordic life; tanuko, 2020b)

Against the backdrop of loud, attention-grabbing, and usually hostile drama that circulates widely on YouTube, one genre stands out for being the opposite – quiet, nondescript, and calming: Nordic life vlogs, a popular genre especially among avid watchers of YouTube influencers across East Asia. The vlogs showcase “a slice of life” content, documenting the simple living, daily routines, beautiful landscapes, cultural festivals, and everyday norms of what it is like to live in the Nordic region. While there are many Nordic life vloggers, in this article, we focus on a subset who are immigrants hailing from Japan and South Korea (hereafter Korea), and who have come to call cities across Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden home. Collectively, these East Asian vloggers tend to celebrate the major social, cultural, and personal changes that this immigration has facilitated for their lives; this is especially noted among fellow East Asian viewers who overtly express their aspiration to be like these migrants, citing their appreciation for Nordic landscapes and admiration for the slow-paced life that these vloggers tend to highlight.

The titles of such videos do not shy away from the overt endorsement of these supposed Nordic imaginaries, with phrases including “Nordic life vlogs” (Lingonberii, 2022), “A day in the life of [Nordic country]” (Luca, 2021a; tanuko, 2020b), “Nordic diary” (Life with kamome, 2022; Mina Lim, 2022a), and “Nordic lifestyle” (@hokuoh_kurash, n.d.; tanuko, 2021) being among the most popularly used by East Asian vloggers from Japan and Korea. The cover images, video stills, and long pans of such videos tend to feature scenery of fjords and forests, minimalist interior decor, and very small crowds of locals in various postures of idyllic life: sitting under the sun at an outdoor cafe; sprawling on a picnic mat among luscious greenery; taking to winter sports in the mountains; or huddling together at a dinner table with warm dim lightning in a cozy home (e.g., Life with kamome, 2022; Lingonberii, 2023; tanuko, 2022). The actual content of such Nordic life vlogs shows the East Asian vloggers doing rather mundane routines: daily commutes to school or work; cooking at home; grocery shopping; casual walks in a park; weekend trips to countryside locales (e.g., Karu & Siiri, 2020; Mina Lim, 2022b). To further underscore the ambience of “being there”, the sound design of such videos typically emphasises ASMR-esque diegetic background sounds of birds chirping, snow crunching, and children playing, or they are accompanied by light and calming lounge music (e.g., DiscoverNara, 2019a; Lingonberii, 2022; tanuko, 2022).

The concept of the imaginary has its history in psychoanalysis, philosophy, and social theory, but has been adopted in other disciplines like cultural studies and developed deeply in anthropology in particular (Leite, 2014). In anthropological theory, the imaginary can be broadly defined as a “fantasy”, “a shared cognitive schema”, or a shared “cultural abstraction” of an idea (Strauss, 2006: 322). This idea can be a place, a culture, a nation, a people, or any other cultural subject. Since imaginaries are usually invoked by people who are unfamiliar with the cultural subject, in the context of this article, it is useful to consider how the concept has been deployed in tourism studies. The anthropological, sociological, geographical, and cultural studies approaches towards tourism tell us that imaginaries are “seductive” tools and serve as “fantasies [that] drive tourists” through the social construction of “peoples and places” (Salazar, 2012: 863). As such, imaginaries can be “distorted”, “repressed”, or “fantasised” (Leite, 2014: 260). Studies of the tourist imaginary have particularly focused on popular landmarks or landscapes and their stereotypes, as well as locations that are rural, far-flung, and at the “edge of the world” (see Herrero & Roseman, 2015). This coheres with our article’s focus on East Asian women who hold, construct, sustain, disseminate, encourage, and (perhaps only at times) challenge the imaginaries of the Nordic region, which is geographically distant and detached from their everyday milieu.

Specifically, our corpus of East Asian vloggers in the Nordic life vlog genre tends to be young Japanese or Korean women. Their immigration stories are myriad, as partners or spouses of locals who have newly relocated to the region (e.g., Karu & Siiri, 2020); as students (e.g., postgraduates, researchers) or career nomads (e.g., flight attendants, entrepreneurs) whose pursuits have taken them to institutes based in the Nordics (e.g., Mina Lim, 2023); or as young people on short-term visas who seek to experience living in the Nordic countries while on working holidays or professional development courses (e.g., Luca, 2021b). Yet, despite the diversity of their personal stories and journeys, the visual aesthetics of their Nordic life vlogs tend to adhere to the content scripts, thematic visuals, and design aesthetics we note above.

Collectively, such vloggers are important conduits for the formation of public knowledge and imaginaries of Nordic life and culture for their flagship viewership based in East Asia. Nordic vlog content on social media is quickly gaining in popularity, and it is thus a useful genre for vloggers to attract an audience and cultivate their online brand; it is quite literally the commodification of Nordic life – or at least perceptions of it via the lens of a foreigner – that generates an income for these vloggers. However, Nordic life vlogs are also important sites from which aspiring migrants, prospective tourists, or curious foreigners glean insights into the possibilities of a “better life” or social mobility. The expression of aspiration and interest, usually conveyed through envy and desire in the comments section, reflects the postfeminism and postcolonial desire invoked in the viewers, which is important to interrogate for its perpetuation of East–West binaries. It is these very imaginaries that we seek to interrogate.

In this article, we explore how female East Asian YouTube vloggers who have immigrated to Nordic countries construct fantasised and fantastical narratives around Nordic imaginaries. Guided by theories of postcolonialism and postfeminism, we contextualise the Nordic fantasies from an East Asian standpoint through these women's desires for an "escape", the allowance for their postfeminist sensibilities, and the growing trend of "Nordic vibes". These recent contexts are framed through the sociopolitical histories of East Asian longing and projection. As these women are plagued by rising rates of suicidality, lack of self-care, and distrust in a broken system (Denyer & Kashiwagi, 2020; Park, 2021; Saori, 2021), the imaginaries of a Nordic life offer myriad opportunities: career mobility, improvements to personal well-being, and enhancements to gender standing. Through an empirical corpus of YouTube videos and personal interviews, guided by a larger project rooted in digital ethnography and grounded theory analyses, we offer that the narrative devices of Nordic life vlogs utilise props and experiences, concepts and vibes, and aesthetics and atmosphere to set the scene. We then consider how these East Asian women construct and use Nordic life vlogs and the imaginaries they convey as spaces for healing to recover societal wounds with Nordic spectacles, for gathering to make diasporic connections, and for aspiring to cultivate postfeminist betterment. We conclude the article with a discussion of Nordic life vlogs as an evolving dynamic, yet a contested field where subtle resilience slowly but surely develops at the juncture of postfeminism and postcolonialism.

Contextualising Nordic fantasies from an East Asian standpoint

In this section, we introduce the standpoint of the Japanese and Korean female vloggers in our study and their impetus for producing Nordic life vlogs that at once foster fantasised and fantastical Nordic imaginaries. In the former, these women use the narrative device of life vlogs to demonstrate their fantasised Nordic imaginaries through personal projections about the new possibilities of living in the Nordics; this often occurs by way of comparison against their home cultures, even if these are "false" dichotomies hinged upon an unrealistic daydreaming or postcolonial desire. In the latter, these women are confronted with lived experiences and commentary that challenge their initial fantasies, exposing their fantastical Nordic imaginaries as illusionary, as they encounter the realities of systemic and structural issues.

The blend of the fantasised and the fantastical imaginaries intersects with the Nordic gender equality paradox. Although the Nordic countries have long been celebrated for their high levels of gender equality, gender segregation has been frequently observed in society (Sørensen, 2019). Despite significant educational and employment advancements for women, both public and private sectors remain divided along gender lines, with men predominantly in lucrative industries and women disproportionately in caregiving roles (Husu, 2019; Sørensen, 2019; see also Askanius, 2022). Notably, as we explore throughout this article, this gen-

der segregation is neither acknowledged nor criticised, but rather normalised in Nordic vlog content created by East Asian YouTubers in a romanticised manner. The aesthetic presentation of homemaking and domesticity in the vlog content, often accompanied by Nordic landscapes, starkly contrasts with hierarchical structures of gender and social competitions prevalent in East Asia, the vloggers' place of origin. This contrast underscores a perceived gender equilibrium, though segregated, in Nordic society, fuelled by a postcolonial desire.

To frame the standpoint from East Asia, we illustrate the sociopolitical realities from which these women vloggers attempt to escape; the larger backdrop of their postfeminist sensibilities; and recent trends towards pursuing Nordic vibes in aspirational consumption.

An "escape"

The dependency of young East Asians towards their everyday realities is best encapsulated through popular Internet slang terms. The Japanese “中世ジャップランド” [*chūsei jappurando*, trans. “medieval Japanese land”] (Matsutani, 2016) and Korean 헬조선 [*hell Joseon*, meaning “hell-like Joseon”¹] (Kim, 2018) are popularly used among young adults to refer to their homelands of Japan and Korea in a self-deprecating manner – the historical connotations of being medieval or from the Joseon times are pointed sarcasms about the “backwardness” of their society, being plagued with issues such as a poor awareness of social equality, labour rights, gender equity, and strict social hierarchies between the older generation and the young generation (Kim, 2018; Koo, 2015). In response, many young adults actively seek ways to “escape” these conditions, usually through immigration into the self-perceived “developed” West, projecting their postcolonial desire to the imagination of the West (Chun, 2021; Shin, 2021). The Korean neologism *taljo* or *taljoseon* [탈조(선), trans. “Escape from hell Joseon”] was created in this context to refer to the phenomenon of young adults leaving Korean society for a better future, or to a social desire to do so (Shin, 2021).

The desire for *taljo* is frequently lamented by frustrated young women who are critical of their sexist and patriarchal society, which in recent years has included rising cybersex trafficking crimes and cases of femicide (Baik, 2020; Koo & Kim, 2021). While there is no specific term akin to *taljo* in Japan, the sociopolitical context evidences a similar increase in young women's immigration to different countries, usually North America and Western Europe, for similar reasons (Kato, 2010; Sasaki, 2023). In tandem with the longstanding colonial binary of the West and the Other (Said, 1978), several “Western” white-dominant countries with strong economies and democratic regimes are idealised as “desirable places to live”, imagined as havens of civic virtue, equality, freedom, and comprehensive welfare systems, as opposed to “medieval-like” hierarchical Asian society (Shin, 2021). Amongst many, Nordic countries are the most mentioned countries in this celebration, frequently depicted in pop culture in a celebratory light for their comprehensive welfare systems and slow-living lifestyle, often epitomised by the Danish concept of *Hygge* (e.g., Nah, 2021; Nishio, 2022). It is under this plight

that the fantasised (albeit fantastical) Nordic imaginaries appear as a utopian place for young East Asian women to seek a better life, pursue self-achievement, and find small happiness with the wholesomeness in their selfness, in line with the popular discourse of post-feminist pursuits.

Postfeminist sensibilities

Postfeminist sensibility refers to an amalgam of popularised but seemingly unrelated and even contradictory qualities regarding feminine identity that circulate in mainstream media culture (Gill, 2007). Feminist scholar Rosalind Gill (2007: 147) has outlined elements of postfeminist sensibility, which circulate through consumer culture:

the notion that femininity is a bodily property, the shift from objectification to subjectification, an emphasis upon self-surveillance with monitoring and self-discipline, a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment, the dominance of a makeover paradigm, and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference.

As part of these elements, an imperative to monitor, train, and manage one's psyche – including emotions – prevails in women's popular culture through books, movies, and magazines, implicitly imposed upon young women under the guise of self-care and self-help credos (Orgad & Gill, 2021). This imperative is regulatory, redirecting women's focus on the individual rather than the social, generating positive feelings and cultivating postfeminist subjectivity aligned with the ideal psyche for the neoliberal doctrine (Binkley, 2014; Gill, 2008; Illouz, 2007). Women are called on to feel good about and confident in themselves, repudiating a whole range of feelings and experiences, which is framed "as crucial for individual self-achievement and career success and for facilitating the greater 'revolutionary' goals of social equality and diversity" (Orgad & Gill, 2021: 61). The consumer industry uses the self-transformation, self-care, and self-help narratives in marketing to specifically target female consumers, giving an illusion that their products can help women focus on their mindfulness and achieve the self-project.

Against this backdrop, Nordic imaginaries emerge as a new placeholder for popular culture and consumer industries in East Asia to marketise young women by using the language of self-betterment. In fact, this trend has been in the making for almost two decades. Since the mid 2000s, there has been a growing interest in Nordic cultures in East Asia. Many associate this "Nordic boom" [北欧ブーム] with the critically acclaimed Japanese independent film titled *Kamome Diner* (Ogigami, 2006), which portrays short everyday episodes of a Japanese woman Sachie, who lives alone in Helsinki, Finland and runs a Japanese restaurant called Kamome Diner (e.g., Yahoo Japan, 2018). Although the restaurant has no customers, Sachie enjoys her life with a positive mindset, which is amplified through cinematographically curated mise-en-scènes, such as a clutter-free kitchen design with light-toned pastel colours in the restaurant and an exquisite view of the Old Town pier in Helsinki. In the film, Finland and

the broader Nordic region are portrayed as an “almost utopia” where people find their own ways to make a living, seek small moments of happiness, and appreciate simple daily moments – all of which constitute a sharp contrast to the fast-paced, competitive, and overwork culture of East Asia (Yoo, 2016).

Nordic vibes

After the cult popularity of *Kamome Diner* across East Asia, Nordic vibes have become in vogue as a cultural trend and genre and have even become popularly translated as 북유럽감성 [*Bug-Europe gamseong*] in Korean and 北歐風 [*Hokuofu*] in Japanese. Various media productions and formats have borrowed from the narrative theme and mise-en-scène of *Kamome Diner*, including movies like *Little Forrest* (set in Korea with original screenwriting in Japanese), lifestyle magazines like *Kinfolk* (founded in Oregon, US, but inspired by Nordic aesthetics), and online businesses like the YouTube-based Japanese online shopping mall 北歐暮らしの道具店 [*Hokuoh kurashi no douguten*, trans. A shop for Nordic life] that introduces “Nordic-inspired” slow-paced housekeeping practices and sells minimalist-designed culinary products as “Nordic-influenced” goods.

More tellingly, as reminiscent of the postfeminist sensibilities intimated earlier, many of the popular artifacts branded with Nordic vibes are dominantly gendered. The idea of femininity is repetitively emphasised in these artifacts, with visuals of young women possessing socially desirable corporeal capital and domesticity that is traditionally associated with women. For instance, in the advertising of culinary and household items, the YouTube channel Hokuoh specifically targets the female audience by showing images of women pleasantly working on household chores (@hokuoh_kurash, n.d.). Similarly, in an article from the Korean women’s magazine *Singles* that introduces a list of luxurious hotels in Seoul, the “Nordic influenced” design of one of the hotels is described as “a present for me who needs healing [translated]” (*Singles*, 2016).

In this popularisation of Nordic vibes, underlying is the amalgamation between East Asian women’s postcolonial desire and Nordic-branded consumer culture. While countries in regions like North America, Western Europe, and Australia are seen as the pinnacle of the advanced Western world in East Asia (Shin, 2021), Nordic countries are particularly celebrated as a place of happiness (Fuse, 2021). This perception is evident in the media, where Nordic countries are consistently articulated as “the happiest countries”, contrasting with East Asian nations often criticised for their competitive and suppressive societies (e.g., Iwatake, 2023; Jin, 2014).

The juxtaposition between the Nordic and the East Asian perpetuates the Western colonial vestiges that link East Asia with premodern legacies such as corrupt politics, poor working conditions, and income disparities (see Ryang, 2006; Yoo, 1997). Against this backdrop, the widely renowned Nordic model – an economic model adopted in many Nordic countries combining social welfare and capitalism – is highly endorsed as a solution to the pressing East Asian issues (Nishio, 2022; Saito, 2023).

The utopian image of the Nordic model resonates globally, not just in East Asia, which is easily sighted in North America and Europe (Livingston, 2021). Indeed, the Nordic model has now been reconfigured as a marketing tool in today's consumer culture. The Nordic vibes and imagery are now easily spotted across the globe, appearing in various forms of consumer goods and services, from cafes and restaurants to aesthetics like Scandinavian design and even vehicles (Livingston, 2021; Mordhorst, 2021). Moreover, the notion of "pure" whiteness in the imagination of Nordic culture (Andreassen, 2017), despite the colonial histories and Indigenous populations in the region, adds complexity to the postcolonial aspirations of East Asian women, symbolising Nordic uniqueness. In conjunction with the Nordic model, Nordic exceptionalism is central to the contemporary Nordic branding and imagery, portraying Nordic countries as fundamentally distinct from other "Western" countries, embodying characteristics of "global 'good citizens'" such as altruism, anti-racism, a peace-loving mindset, and civic values (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016: 2). This likely holds significant appeal, particularly for postcolonial subjects who, while unconsciously imitating the culture of the coloniser, strive to retrieve a sense of self by critiquing the coloniser (see Fanon, 1967). When Nordic countries stand out positively among the Western countries (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016), they appear as utopian destinations for East Asian women to seek upward mobility away from the perceived backwardness of their homelands, by relocating to the imagined "West", while retaining their subjective voice and avoiding being reduced to racialised objects by white colonisers (see Shin, 2021).

Historicising the East Asian projection of Nordic imaginaries

Situated within the longer history of postcolonialism and postfeminism, this section outlines three elements of the Nordic imaginaries that emerge from a historical reading of East Asian projections. Specifically, the Nordic life vlogs produced by the East Asian YouTube vloggers whom we study centre around opportunities for career mobility, improvements to personal well-being, and enhancements to gender standing.

Resisting suicidality: Opportunities for career mobility

In both Japan and Korea, the neoliberal doctrine of economic competition and individualism that governs society has led to an increase in socioeconomic inequality and class polarisation. As the unemployment rate continues to rise, especially among young adults, precarity is exacerbated. This is evidenced in the longstanding social phenomena like NEETs (young people Not in Education, Employment, and Training; Genda, 2007) and freeters (young people who "have given up job hunting and thus are no longer considered part of the labour market"; Kosugi, 2004: 53) due to the economic recession (Inui, 2005).

This socioeconomic decline has resulted in extremely high suicide rates among young adults in both countries, with suicidality being a leading cause of mortality. According to a recent 2020 statistic, Korea ranks first and Japan fourth for the highest suicide rate among the OECD countries: 26 suicides for every 100,000 people in Korea, and 15.4 suicides in Japan (OECD, 2023). Suicide rates have surged due to anxiety from social isolation, financial hardships, unemployment, overwork culture, and sexism in society (Denyer & Kashiwagi, 2020; Park, 2021; Saori, 2021). Social media content titled “A day in the life of corporate slave [in Japan/Korea]” records high views and comments, portraying female employees spending more than 15 hours at work, being scolded by their bosses, often skipping meals, and being unable to take sick leave despite health conditions (@the.talk.therapy, 2023).

Seeking self-care: Improvements to personal well-being

As we explicate later in the article, the discourse of healing has flourished in East Asian popular culture since the mid-2000s, through the terms 癒し [*iyashi*] in Japanese and 힐링 [an English loanword meaning “healing”] in Korean. Healing culture originates in the neoliberal context of East Asia as a kind of governmentality. In the neoliberal system, where individuals navigate precarious living conditions and ongoing economic competitions, a sociocultural imperative has been popularised that emphasises one’s emotional capability of managing and tending to their affective reactions to social and economic encounters (Han, 2021; Illouz, 2007; Park, 2016).

In the US, the therapeutic culture and market has blossomed to champion the ethos of self-help and self-care through institutional help, talk shows, counselling services, and rehabilitation programmes (Illouz, 2007, 2008). By emphasising recuperation, recharging, and recovery in everyday life, the discourse advocates an aim to achieve a holistic balance of the body, mind, and soul, fostering the wholesomeness of the self (Illouz, 2008). The therapeutic culture has similarly manifested in East Asian popular culture in the name of “healing” (Park & Whang, 2018; Song, 2023), but as a more private self-project that individuals undertake by themselves, due to a negative stigma attached to mental illness and psychiatric counselling at large (Zhang et al., 2019). The focus on mindfulness and inner peace is prominent in the healing discourse, assuming that life struggles originating from external forces, such as a competitive society and economic crisis, create wounds on the self (Park & Whang, 2018; Song, 2023). Thus, self-care and self-therapy are seen as empowering tools for recovery and resilience, and ultimately for a better tomorrow. The healing discourse acts as a kind of magic spell, redirecting individuals’ focus toward the personal and private to endure and survive within challenging and competitive socioeconomic conditions.

Entering a new system: Enhancements to gender standing

Finally, one of the most popular public discourses about Nordic imaginaries among East Asian audiences presumes that Nordic countries are a monolithic entity whose sociopolitical values and institutions are world-close. For instance, it is popularly believed that the “Nordic model”, equipped with powerful welfare systems, is globally endorsed as *the* utopian model to promise the social equity and well-being of citizens (Andersson & Hilson, 2009). This fantasy of a Nordic utopia is frequently discoursed in the East Asian mediascape, with an emphasis on the “high quality of life in Nordic countries”, the “welfare system”, and the “advanced education system”, to name a few (Saito, 2023). In particular, taken together with the image of a “gender equal society” where “there is no gender division” (Nah, 2021), the intersectionality of this fantasised discourse dovetails with young East Asian women’s appeals for career mobility and personal well-being. As such, it is under these harrowing climates that young women have been leaving (or fantasising as such) their East Asian homes to seek a better life in the Nordic countries (Jin, 2014; Sasaki, 2023).

In the midst of these contrasting narratives around the imaginaries of the Nordic, the popularity of Nordic vlog content produced by East Asian women presents an interesting phenomenon. How do they build Nordic imaginaries in their vlog content in “a day in the life” content? How are these imaginaries consumed by their audience, presumably in their home countries? What does this tell us about those who casually transit into and out of these virtual in-between spaces of vlog content?

Methodology

This study is grounded in a longitudinal digital ethnography conducted since 2020, focusing on East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean) YouTube vloggers who live in the Nordic countries and post Nordic life vlogs. Digital ethnography serves as a valuable tool for exploring the localities, technocultural objects, events, and people’s lived experiences, relationships, and social worlds that are complicately interwoven and manifest in the digital space (Pink et al., 2018). By engaging with the connections and dynamics that people forge via various technocultural elements, digital ethnography allows a researcher to situate research within the messiness, ambiguity, and open-endedness of our digitally mediated lived experiences in relation to the constantly evolving characteristics of the digital space (Pink et al., 2018). Taking up this approach, we posit that the Nordic life vlog genre is not a static object but a dynamic field in-the-making, evolving through interactions between people (e.g., content creators, subscribers), socioeconomic contexts (e.g., East Asian sociopolitical contexts and neoliberal histories), and technocultural phenomena (e.g., YouTube vlogger or influencer culture).

To be bounded in the field and map out the sociocultural interactions that are mediated via and manifest in the Nordic life vlog genre, we employed a set of methodological tools, including a visual and textual analysis of channels in this

genre and the comments therein and personal interviews with the channel owners, alongside our original digital ethnography of the wider landscape of Nordic imaginary discourse influencers (especially short-term travellers) on social media. Firstly, we shaped our dataset by watching YouTube content searched through keywords 北欧暮らし [*hokuo-kurashi*, trans. living in Nordic countries] and 북유럽브이로그 [*bug-Europe-vlog*, trans. Nordic life vlog].

Our larger corpus comprises over 30 channels by Japanese and Korean vloggers who produce Nordic life vlogs on a regular basis predominantly in Japanese and Korean, with occasional referents of some English and some Nordic languages. The channels in the corpus exhibited a range of subscriber bases (spanning from a few hundred to hundreds of thousands), geographical locations (being based in cities across Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden), and occupations and migrant status (e.g., students, temporary workers on working-holiday visas, partners of local Nordic citizens). The subset of the corpus investigated for this article considers the channels by vloggers who self-identify as women in their 20s and 30s. Guided by Pink and colleagues' (2018) digital ethnography, we focused on dynamics between various digital materials presented in Nordic vlog content and attempted to map out the evolving landscape of the Nordic vlog genre. To do so, we first conducted visual and textual analysis on the narrative themes, aesthetic design, and messaging content conveyed through the vlogs and the conversations that unfolded in the comments sections.

We also conducted personal interviews with East Asian Nordic vloggers to understand what roles they serve as key actors in this phenomenon and what interactions they are having with their audience. Our larger corpus of data also comprised personal interviews with four Korean vloggers who were previously or are presently based in the Nordic countries, though as an exemplar, this article highlights insights from just one interviewee. Interviewees were asked open-ended questions, such as “what made you film and post Nordic vlogs”, “what are the difficulties and benefits in producing Nordic vlog content”, “how do you engage with your audience”.


In our analysis, we situated our corpus of data within the broader contexts of the sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and sociocultural specificities that East Asian young women are entangled with, such as the aforementioned precarious life in East Asia. We utilised grounded theory as our coding guide and focused on finding patterns across the data corpus and thematising them to conceptualise Nordic imaginaries (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In presenting our data, we take a nuanced approach to protect our research informants from any potential risk from this research, such as online harassment. While we use interview quotes verbatim and note our interviewees' names as they indicated in consent forms that they wished to be presented, we sometimes “fabricated” our data, including interview quotes and select social media posts, to ensure our informants' online safety and privacy by making some of our data “unsearchable” (Markham, 2012). We note also that the corpus of YouTube vlog data, YouTube vlog comments, and personal interviews were originally presented in a mixture of Japanese and Korean languages, with some uses of the English language. Where translations have been

made, this has been noted. Above and beyond our moral ethics as researchers, procedural ethics for this project has been approved by our institution.

Setting the scene to convey Nordic imaginaries

In our data corpus, we found that East Asian Nordic vloggers build and convey Nordic imaginaries by setting the Nordic scenes in their videos. They employ a variety of devices, such as local-specific props to capture and reenact their experience, conceptual Nordic images to amplify particular vibes associated with the Nordics, and a set of aesthetic designs and elements to construct Nordic-like atmosphere.

Props and experiences

Firstly, the Nordic vibes are visually constructed through props specifically related to the Nordic region and culture, such as Viking-related souvenirs, local cuisines, fjord landscapes, and famous landmarks like Nyhavn in Denmark. The most popular channels in this genre, tanuko, for example, visit various places in Nordic countries, showcasing locations like a Royal Copenhagen flagship store (tanuko, 2022) and local markets in Sweden during the Christmas season (tanuko, 2020a). Local food items are also frequently featured, with vloggers going grocery shopping or cooking local cuisines (Karu & Siiri, 2020). These props are aesthetically placed alongside snapshots of quirky spots in the city centre and exotic locales in the countryside, as encapsulated in titles like “Walking around Göteborg, a city of history and charm” (Lingonberii, 2023) “Scandinavian life  Swedish castle and autumn forest walk / Fika time” (tanuko, 2020b).

Concepts and vibes

Beyond these local-specific elements, conceptual Nordic images are also highlighted as part of the Nordic vibes. These concepts are not necessarily tied to tangible objects in Nordic locales but are more concerned with what people imagine to be Nordic in relation to the popular discourse of the Nordic. This includes minimalist aesthetics, often called “Scandinavian design” (Mordhorst, 2021), captured in images of monochromatic kitchens and simple interior decorations that are found in any other countries. Also, slow-living lifestyles are metaphorically conveyed through vlog episodes, featuring soothing bath times, calm cooking videos, and idyllic gardening scenes with relaxed cats or dogs in gardens (Lingonberii, 2022; SAKTA, 2021; tanuko, 2021). This focus on mindfulness and slow living aligns with East Asian pop culture’s imagination of what Nordic life entails, a concept and brand that has gained prominence with Scandinavian-related brands like IKEA and Kinfolk (Andersson & Hilson, 2009; Scheiding, 2022).

Aesthetics and atmosphere

The entertainment value of these vlog videos is added by the aesthetically pleasing displays of visualised Nordic imaginaries. This invites the audience to feel the ambience as pseudo-experience by watching the vlog content. The extent of pseudo-experience is maximised, as the subjects are largely absent in the content. In most of our data corpus, the vloggers' identifiable factors, including their faces and voices, are intentionally cut out from the camera angle and muted by the calm background music. According to the popularised principle of camera movements in film theories, the absence of subjects in camera movements invites the audience to become the beholder of the eyes who are seeing the images of the video and occupy the subject position (Branigan, 2013). Seen in this light, the audience of the Nordic vlog content can virtually enjoy the *real* moments and lives in Nordic countries. This format has gained popularity, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, when watching influencer content in different countries was considered “a kind of travel” that people could experience during lockdowns and border closures (Abidin et al., 2020). Indeed, many channels in our data gained popularity during the Covid-19 pandemic, and comments express gratitude to the vloggers for providing “travel-like experiences” (Luca, 2021a; Mina Lim, 2020a).

In setting the scene to convey Nordic imaginaries, it is important to note that these endeavours are characterised by middle-class affluence, emphasised through Nordic-specific materials like Scandinavian interior designs and local cooking devices, as well as the privilege of pursuing a relaxed, slow-paced life. Although the vlog content on “small happiness” (tanuko, 2023) may seem to counter a luxurious lifestyle and the culture of excessive consumption driven by capitalist culture, it implicitly builds on “pecuniary taste” – a class distinction based on cultural taste signified through objects surrounding a person, exclusive to a particular class stratum in line with their wealth (Abidin, 2014). While luxury brand items may not be prominent in these videos, architecture bearing Scandinavian design is commonly considered a middle-class aesthetic (see Scheiding, 2022). The local goods and items shown in the vlogs also accentuate the middle-class positionality of the vloggers, regardless of their actual class status, due to the economic affluence associated with Nordic countries in relation to the “Nordic model” (Andersson & Hilson, 2009). Thus, while the idyllic sceneries and non-materialist images of the Nordic vlog content may lead the audience to momentarily forget about fast-paced conspicuous consumer culture in East Asia, the Nordic imaginaries here continue to reinscribe a classed lifestyle, based on culinary extravagance, aesthetic tastes in house designs, and affluence to enjoy a nomadic life and mobility, creating a fantasised vision of Nordic countries.

Nordic imaginaries as spaces of healing, gathering, and aspiring

When the vloggers build and deliver Nordic imaginaries, their fellow East Asian viewers show their appreciation of the aesthetically-pleasing Nordic scenes set up in the content, using functions like comments. YouTube's communicative affordance helps the vloggers and the viewers to interact with intimacy in the virtual space shaped by the vlogs. These interactions further facilitate three major functions of Nordic imaginaries in relation to particular contexts of the cultural discourse of healing, their diasporic status as East Asian expats, and postfeminist sensibilities for self-enhancement.

Healing: Recovering with Nordic spectacles

In contrast to the fast-paced competitive work-life in East Asia, the fantasised Nordic imaginaries serve as a locus where the audience, presumably living in home countries, develop and project their utopian fantasies onto Nordic countries and cultures. The slow-living lifestyles and beautiful nature portrayed in an aesthetically pleasing manner resonate widely, especially within the context of healing culture in East Asia. Exemplary comments below posted on these Nordic vlogs illustrate the continuous fuelling of Nordic fantasies through serene images with a calm and pastoral ambience:

I was healed by the beautiful scenery and the beautiful lake in the video. It's like a scene from the Ghibli film *Howl's Moving Castle*. I envy you and your life surrounded by Finland's great nature [translated]. (Comment posted on a video by Life with kamome, 2022)

For someone like me who doesn't know anything about outside of Japan, this video feels like a dream-like space with beautiful nature and I won't be even surprised if fairies appear. This is really healing for me. Thank you [translated]. (Comment posted on a video by tanuko, 2020b)

In a similar way that the Western therapeutic discourse often presumes Asia as a land of spirituality and therapy based on long-standing Orientalism (Islam, 2012), the healing discourse of East Asia, as found in our data corpus, subscribes to Occidentalism, with a postcolonial psyche of desiring what is believed to be Western values. The healing discourse here touches on a colonial premise that Nordic cultural values prioritise well-being, with Western culture's enhanced awareness and advanced welfare system for wellness, happiness, and prosperity (Nah, 2021; Nishio, 2022; for East Asian (post)colonial history, see also Ryang, 2006; Yoo, 1997). In the articulation of the healing discourse with Nordic fantasies, the East–West binary is constantly reinforced, as reflected in the following comments expressing a longing for the relaxed and cherished life portrayed in the Nordic life vlog content:

In your videos, people are so relaxed and really cherish every moment of their life, which I guess is the basic thing for happiness in our life. I'm longing for this kind of life. I'm pressed for time by busy work here in Korea. But I feel healed by watching your daily life in Finland. (Comment posted on a video by Little Ji, 2020)

The account above evidences how the audience of the Nordic life vlogs appropriates Nordic imaginaries as a place of recuperation, where individuals believe they can be healed from societal wounds experienced in the neoliberal East Asian system (see Han, 2021; Park, 2016). A moment when they are captivated and mesmerised by the Nordic spectacles of the content allows the audience to detach themselves from the physical space (East Asia) and the real-life conditions surrounding them (overworking culture, competitive economic precarity, social roles and responsibilities). Thus, although the moment when the audience consumes and engages in the Nordic life vlog content may be temporary in their busy daily lives, it offers a virtual space for them to casually come in and out of for healing and a wholesome sense of selfhood and individuality.

Gathering: Making diasporic connections

The healing function further facilitates community building between the audience members and the vloggers. In producing and consuming the content, both the audience members and the vloggers continue to check in with each other casually with some extent of intimacy. Many vloggers employ intimacy in their content, as if they are speaking to their audiences privately, “hello friends, how are you doing?” [translated] (Mina Lim, 2022b). In the comment sections, audiences and subscribers of these vlog channels also post their casual hello messages, mentioning recent changes that the vloggers made a note of in the content, for example, “It’s always good to see you. Your child has grown up so fast!” [translated] (Life with kamome, 2023). While this kind of imaginary intimate relationship between content creators and subscribers is commonly found in the current climate of influencer culture (Abidin, 2015), the extent of intimacy is built in a more pleasant manner in the Nordic life vlogs. The calm and slow-living content that was filmed inside and outside someone’s house and neighbourhood becomes a virtual communal village where people can freely come and go and feel a sense of comfort. This further builds a circuit of more private intimacy throughout the channels, amplified through parasociality presented by the vloggers and the vloggers’ private domain depicted in content (home, private parties). For example, the following “thank you for inviting me” comments were posted to a video by Japanese vlogger Karu & Siiri (2022) showing a traditional Finnish dinner in the countryside of Finland with their close friends:

A fun to be invited to your dinner 🍷 I've been healed by your videos [translated]. (Comment posted on a video by Kary & Siiri, 2022)

Thank you for the invitation 😊 The pure white world of Finland is so beautiful ✨ ✨ [...] Thank you for the delicious dinner and dessert. [...] It was fun to watch a lot of videos this year and connect with the two of you, Tino, and the people of Finland 🎵 Happy new year! [translated]. (Comment posted on a video by Kary & Siiri, 2022)

Although individual subscribers and audience members do not necessarily feel connected to each other, the idyllic atmosphere resonating within the content helps them occupy the virtual space in their own ways, as a place for “healing”, “virtual traveling”, and even “online diaspora”, especially for expats or those in similar situations. Indeed, frequently sighted are comments such as “Hi! Studying abroad in Sweden! So good to meet someone in the neighbouring country” [translated] (DiscoverNara, 2019a). The online diaspora manifested strongly in videos where the vloggers share personal struggles living as expats, garnering supportive comments from the audience who have similar experiences – although these types of videos were a few in our data corpus. For example, when Mina Lim posted a video of her getting a surgery in Finland, many people posted worrying comments with sympathy:

Oh no, sorry to hear you’ve been sick. Staying healthy is the most important thing for expats. I get you, as an expat in Germany. I do think we need to be strong and resilient in order to live in these [European countries] as East Asian women [translated]. (Comment posted on a video by Mina Lim, 2022a)

Similar experience here. Fellow peers here, don’t get sick. We need to take care of ourselves as foreigners who are living abroad. If we get sick while being thousands of miles away from our home Korea, we are the only ones who suffer, as nobody else can take care of us [translated]. (Comment posted on a video by Mina Lim, 2022a)

Sometimes, the intimate connection is built more strongly via other social media functions and technologies, such as group chat messengers that are popular in their home countries (e.g., LINE, KakaoTalk) and live-streaming. Live-streaming affords instant and more intimate connections with the audiences and vloggers, as both can immediately communicate with each other and find a sense of co-presence using the YouTube live-chat function. This not only helps the audience find a sense of intimacy, but also allows the vloggers to feel connected to their home cultures and people through interactive engagements, which ultimately constitutes an online diasporic village (Ponzanesi, 2020; Ponzanesi & Leurs, 2014).

Mina Lim, for instance, emphasised how communicating with her audience helped her combat nostalgia and loneliness during lockdowns in Finland due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In an interview, she stated:

I get some views from outside Korea; students who are studying abroad and expats watch my channel because they think I share hardships about living abroad [...]. Here in Finland, there’s no Korean communities. And I don’t even live in the capital city, so there’s nothing related to Korea here. But since I started a YouTube channel, I feel it has given me a new Korean community.

I get lots of support and it has impacted me positively. Although I can't go to Korea now because of Covid-19, I have lots of Koreans to talk to. A definite plus point for me [translated].

The shared experiences as migrants living in other countries and the conversations in their native languages build a diasporic community, akin to Cabalquinto and Soriano's (2020) concept of "online sisterhood" – that is, "the networked, affective, feminine and postcolonial dimension of online engagement" among migrant women who share similar identities located in similar social situations (Cabalquinto & Soriano, 2020: 894). Online sisterhood, built on the shared appreciation for Nordic vlog content, manifests via communicative exchanges that are not just relatable but also aspirational among the communal village members, particularly in a strong manner in tandem with the particular context of postfeminist-related *taljo* in East Asia.

Aspiring: Cultivating postfeminist betterment

The Nordic vlog content also functions as a locus for aspiration, particularly among many young women seeking to pursue a better life with a professional career and work–life balance. Many Nordic vloggers in our data indicate their occupations in their channel descriptions or content, ranging from postgraduate students to marketers, IT engineers, and flight attendants. In sharing their everyday life in Nordic countries, some try to depict "the realities" of living as an East Asian expat and provide a balanced viewpoint about the pros and cons of Nordic life, evidenced in some titles like Mina Lim's (2020b) "Studying Abroad in Finland: Culture Shock as a Korean", Discover-Nara's (2019b) "The reason I decide not to move to Finland permanently", and Luca's (2021b) "Reality: to those who want to move to Sweden on working holiday visa" [【現実】スウェーデンワーホリに憧れている人へ]. In these videos, they address topics such as cold weather, *kaamos* (Finnish for Polar night)-related depression, anti-Asian racism, and the lack of metropolitan city structures.

Despite addressing these challenges, the beautiful, calm, and peaceful images of Nordic life portrayed in the genre likely overshadow the struggles shared by some of the vloggers. Consequently, the nomadic lifestyles of these vloggers are perceived as "successful" rather than "struggling". This perception, aligning with the discourse of Nordic fantasies, presents them as "successful women" who were able to attend to a sense of self and afford intercontinental moves for self-betterment – be this career development, life improvement, and so on – and thus ultimately attaining self-achievement.

Mina Lim's content exemplifies this case. Having worked as a middle-school teacher in Korea, she moved to Finland for her master's degree and now works as a marketer for an IT company. Her journey of leaving one of the most stable jobs in Korea and pursuing a new life experience in a foreign country as a single young woman appears as a life model among many audience members experiencing stress due to the competitive working environment and overwork culture in Korea. Together with the Nordic fantasy that one's well-being is

prioritised by the social system, Lim's accomplishments over the past three years – including obtaining a master's degree, securing a stable job, and purchasing her own house – are viewed as a “lifestyle dream”. Many comments intimately refer to her as *unnie* [언니] – a Korean term of endearment used by women to refer to an older woman as a “big sister” – as a compliment for her courage and maturity. For instance:

I'm in my mid-20s, but I already feel tired of living in Korea. I began to watch your YouTube videos and they are so interesting. And it suddenly occurred to me, would it be possible for me to live in Finland? So I watched your video “If you're this kind of person, welcome to Finland”, and [the lifestyle depicted] suited me perfectly. So, I vaguely have a big dream of developing my English skill till my 30s, moving to Finland and working or running a business there. It's vague, but I really want to achieve the dream. So far, I've only worked part-time for a living, but I'm wondering what skills and jobs are required to work in Finland, especially as a foreigner. It's a bit scary to make a living by working part-time in a foreign country. So, is there any advice you can give, please *unnie*? [translated] (Comment posted on a video by Mina Lim, 2023)

For those facing societal pressures in the neoliberal doctrine of East Asia, the culture and working conditions in Nordic countries portrayed in Mina's content – where employees can take their leave anytime, work from home, and go home after 8 hours of work without their boss's permission – appear utopian. Despite the everyday difficulties of being an East Asian female expat, as outlined by Lim, the portrayal of the possibilities offered by the “Nordic life” in her content fuels a postfeminist fantasy of self-care and self-achievement, which greatly resonates with the audience's desire for *taljo* and a reality fulfilled with work–life balance.

Negotiating the fantasised and fantastical Nordic imaginaries

As I run a YouTube channel about Finland, I had chances to be interviewed by a Korean broadcaster and by a Finnish broadcaster. I wanted to talk about two different cultures to improve our understanding about each other. But the Korean broadcaster wanted to show something that stands out, so only took bits of the whole conversation and highlighted shallow aspects. Then Korean audiences reacted, “yes, those Finnish people are not civilised, lazy”. The same thing happened here in Finland. [...] So I contemplate a lot about how to add enough context in my videos to avoid this kind of thing. [...] But my subscribers are mostly women in their 20s, and they like something fun and consume content quickly by skimming, so... I find it difficult to [balance between providing contexts and pursuing fun] [translated]. (Mina Lim, personal interview)

In most of our data corpus, the visualised Nordic life aims *less* to provide new or practical facts about the countries or cultural conventions and is *more* descriptive of the atmosphere of the moments portrayed in the vlog content. As stated in Lim's account above, some vloggers are aware of the constraints and potential pitfalls in prosuming Nordic imaginaries that are too fantasy-like. A few channels in our data attempt to provide informative and balanced information about Nordic life. Japanese YouTuber Luca discusses Sweden's social systems that marginalise temporary migrant workers on working-holiday visas like herself (Luca, 2021b). Similarly, Nord-Labo, a channel run by two Japanese women in Sweden, shares a list of pros and cons of living in Sweden based on their experience as East Asian expats, including "too slow" culture and "difficulties to make local friends", due to the somewhat reserved personality of local people (Nord-Labo, 2022).

This emerging new format in the Nordic life vlog genre, slightly different from the dominant ones, is actually in tandem with the growing interest in the actuality of Nordic life among East Asian people. While this growing fashion continues to make Nordic imaginaries proliferate in East Asian pop culture, a slightly opposite counter-discourse also emerges not just on YouTube, but across social media. The Korean Twitter (now X) account named 오세요 핀란드 [*Oseyo Finland*, trans. Come to Finland] (with 12.1 thousand followers as of writing) provides a poignant example of this counter-narrative, where the initial excitement about studying abroad in Finland shifts to darker themes of depression, loneliness, and hopelessness as time passes: "come to Finland, frozen will be your body and your soul", "as I continue to live, there is no home for me in Finland and Korea, no friends. I cannot think of reasons to live" [translated] (@moimoifd, 2018). The abrupt cessation of updates and the final tweet illustrating depression – "At last, I vanish into the deep dark" [translated] – has shocked people about the reality of Nordic life among social media users in Korea.

Although we could not find a case that is drastically contrary to the dominant Nordic imaginaries or that is similar to the Come to Finland Twitter account, we found that many Nordic life vloggers tried to blend their lived experiences with the popular Nordic fantasies for viewership, such as by intentionally obscuring their everyday struggles as young Asian migrant women in the dominant white culture. It is because they are aware of how their content is appreciated by their fellow East Asian women in order to escape the life adversities they are facing in competitive East Asian society, albeit temporarily and virtually. Our analysis showed that Nordic life vlog content is not purely for entertainment; it reproduces fantasies, perpetuates the East–West binary, covertly classifies those with socioeconomic means to mimic the exhibited Nordic lifestyle, and thereby propagates a classed meritocracy among East Asian women. Nevertheless, we argue that Nordic imaginaries also provide a place for struggling beings to cultivate a subtle feminist resilience through their casual prosumption of edited vignettes in "a day in the life" content grounded in the fantasised and fantastical.

The resilience implicitly conveyed through Nordic imaginaries – to defy adversity and recover from societal wounds – differs from the resilience, confidence,

and empowerment championed in postfeminism of the US and UK. For East Asian women, resilience may be the only way to endure the competitive and precarious life conditions. In this context, a utopian-like portrayed place, whether fantasy or reality, serves as a temporary shelter for them to rest and recuperate to endure life's challenges. Practices involved in building and consuming Nordic imaginaries, including showcasing the selected part of Nordic realities and finding inspiration and healing from content, are networked and communal efforts to boost resilience in a subtle manner. Although not prominently noticeable, the calm and serene ambience and carefully curated information of the Nordics inspire East Asian women to seek and dream of alternatives to life's challenges and the struggles they are facing. The co-presence and interactions of vloggers and audiences in Nordic life vlog content foster an evolving dynamic but contested field where subtle resilience slowly but surely develops at the juncture of postfeminism and postcolonialism.

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ENDNOTES

1 Joseon, also spelled as Choseon, is a kingdom that ruled the Korean peninsula before modernisation, Republic of Korea. It is often used as a derogatory term referring to South Korea or both North and South Korea.