



Digital Travel Narratives and the Reconfiguration of Intercultural Competence in Higher Education

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Abstract

Travel narratives in times of contemporary digital culture are no longer confined to printed memoirs or documentary formats. They circulate constantly through social media platforms, blogs, vlogs, and algorithmically curated feeds, blending text, image, and video into immersive representations of place. For many students, these multimodal narratives, although fragmented, constitute their primary encounter with foreign cultures. The result is a subtle, but powerful transformation in the way cultural knowledge is produced, consumed, and internalized. What appears as a window onto global diversity may, in fact, operate as a mediated familiarity shaped by curated aesthetic filtering, selective framing, and platform logics that prioritise visibility over complexity. This paper considers the pedagogical implications of this shift. How should higher education respond to a context in which perceptions of cultural “others” are increasingly formed through curated, at times misleading, digital travel content? Drawing on Michael Byram’s model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (1997), particularly the capacities of interpreting and relating and the dimension of critical cultural awareness, and engaging with Darla Deardorff’s (2006) processual understanding of intercultural development, the paper argues that digital travel narratives demand a reconceptualization of intercultural pedagogy. Competence in this environment cannot be reduced to linguistic proficiency or exposure to diversity; it requires the ability to interrogate representation, to recognize subjectivity, and to situate oneself reflexively within systems of cultural meaning. Rather than treating digital narratives as supplementary teaching materials, the paper proposes approaching them as sites of critical analysis through which students can develop interpretive depth, reflexive awareness, and resistance to algorithmically reinforced stereotyping. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on the future of intercultural education in an era where culture is increasingly encountered through screens and curated “representations” rather than lived experience.

Keywords: *Travel narrative, digital, higher education, intercultural competence*

1. Introduction

The digital shift has fundamentally transformed the conditions through which cultural knowledge is produced, encountered, and interpreted. The digital ecosystem, including Instagram reels, TikTok travel content, YouTube vlogs, blogs, and algorithmically, allow users to access, circulate, and engage with representations of places, communities and cultures at a scale and frequency of their own choosing, before ever having to physically cross an actual border. What all these processes share in common, is the lack of direct experience, direct observation and direct engagement with the subjects portrayed. For people, particularly young people, these highly curated and processed representations constitute a primary source of knowledge and “mediated” experience of foreign cultures, shaping their perceptions, and assumptions long before any direct intercultural interaction takes place. Recent studies from Pew Research Center (2025) indicate that social video consumption for news and information globally increased from 52% in 2020 to 65% in 2025, while 44% of young adults aged 18–24 identify social media and video platforms as their primary source of news and information [1], [2]. In this type of ecosystem, introduction with a particular culture is achieved through screens, where swiping and scrolling have substituted the actual physical processes of acquiring contextual depth and critical understanding [3].

This transition is taking place against a backdrop of expansion of travelling as a phenomenon, at an estimated 1.52 billion international tourist arrivals worldwide in 2025. In addition to marking the highest level ever recorded, it also marks a record in terms of digital travel content created and consumed, as well as fundamental changes in the way the actual experience of travel itself happens, and is subsequently portrayed in some literary form. Consumption of travelling as an experience and its almost instantaneous documentation happens fast, in what seems more a quest to *conquer by sight and visual documentation* rather than understanding the visited subjects. Recent studies indicate that 83% of



travellers use social media for travel inspiration, while travel-related content on TikTok alone has accumulated hundreds of billions of views through hashtags such as #travel and #travelvlog [5], [6]. This has a direct impact on cultural exchange, cultural knowledge and perception of cultural differences, as travel narratives, despite their form, have played an important role in mediating perceptions of cultural difference. From travel memoirs and literary accounts resulting from lengthy exposures and direct observation and engagement with the documented subjects, to documentaries and televised travel programs, representations of distant places have long contributed to how societies imagine and interpret cultural “others” [7] and to the emergence of public pedagogy.

In contrast, digital travel narratives differ significantly from the traditional travel writing earlier forms. Unlike the inherited body of travel literature, which was characterised by physical presence, engagement, observation and some form of processing or reflection, i.e. the case of Edit Durham’s works or Margaret Hasluck, digital narratives circulate through fast-paced multimodal environments shaped by platform logics and algorithmic visibility [3], [8]. Documentations of cultural realities are presented in the form of processed images, short videos, and other curated products meant for instant consumption and sharing, carrying limited knowledge weight for the ones who consume it. As a result, representations of culture are frequently filtered through performative authenticity, selective framing, and visual simplification [9].

The implications apply to higher education in relation to intercultural education scholarship also. Existing approaches to intercultural competence have largely emerged from frameworks that prioritised direct interaction, mobility, dialogue, and immersion as the primary conditions through which intercultural understanding develops [10], [11]. Today, students approach intercultural encounters with already *influenced* views by what they have *consumed* digitally, giving rise to a conflict between what they perceive and what the context actually is. As Byram argues, intercultural competence requires not only knowledge of other cultures, but also “the ability to decentre and take up the perspective of another” [10].

From the intercultural education scholarship perspective, the challenge for higher education is therefore, no longer simply how to expose students to the inter-cultural discourse, but how to ensure critical interpretation of mediated representations through which cultural knowledge is generated and *consumed*. This is particularly important given that digital travel *content* is characterised by a sense of *proximity and familiarity* with the context, which does not necessarily correspond to deep understanding. Exposure to visual diversity alone does not automatically foster reflexivity, critical awareness, or the capacity to engage with cultural complexity. In some cases, repeated digital representations may even reinforce stereotypes, flatten differences, or encourage superficial forms of cultural consumption masked as intercultural openness [12].

This paper focuses on the pedagogical implications of this shift: how should higher education respond to a context in which perceptions of cultural “others” are increasingly formed through curated, at times misleading, digital travel content? Drawing on Michael Byram’s model of Intercultural Communicative Competence [10], particularly the capacities of interpreting and relating and the dimension of critical cultural awareness, and engaging with Darla Deardorff’s [11] processual understanding of intercultural development, the paper argues that digital travel narratives demand a reconceptualization of intercultural pedagogy. Competence in this environment cannot be reduced to linguistic proficiency or exposure to diversity; it requires the ability to interrogate representation, to recognize subjectivity, and to situate oneself reflexively within systems of cultural meaning.

Rather than treating digital narratives as supplementary teaching materials, the paper proposes approaching them as sites of critical analysis through which students can develop interpretive depth, reflexive awareness, and resistance to digitally reinforced stereotyping. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on the future of intercultural education in an era where culture is increasingly encountered through screens and curated “representations” rather than lived experience.

2. Digital Travel Narratives and the Transformation of Cultural Mediation

Despite these transformations in modes of cultural encounter, the importance of intercultural competence cannot be disputed. To the contrary, the increased inter-cultural interactions has further accentuated the importance of better understanding cultures. Literature on intercultural competence has traditionally emphasised dialogue, immersion, direct engagement, and reflective interaction as central conditions for intercultural learning [10], [11]. Such frameworks generally assume that sustained exposure to cultural difference and the *observer’s capacity* to critically observe and interpret unfamiliar contexts play a fundamental role in the development process of intercultural understanding. At the same



time, the role of travel narratives has been explored in relation to the shaping of public understandings of foreign cultures and its subsequent contribution to various forms of public pedagogy [7]. These approaches to intercultural competence, although differing in emphasis and disciplinary perspective, converge on a number of aspects.

According to Deardorff, intercultural competence refers to “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” [11]. Whereas Byram, furthers the definition on intercultural competence, focusing on the ability to interpret and relate cultural meanings, critically evaluate perspectives, and develop what he describes as “the ability to de-centre and take up the perspective of another” [10]. In exploring the concept through his *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* framework, Bennet looks at intercultural competence as a developmental shift in the way individuals perceive and respond to cultural difference, moving from ethno-centric perspectives toward greater intercultural sensitivity and ethno-relativism [12]. What stands out is his emphasis on the importance of understanding foreign cultures relative to their own context rather than through the standards of one’s own culture. Notes of ethnocentric perspectives are present in numerous travel narratives, such as in Lord Byron and John Cam Hobhouse depictions of Albania.

Kramsch identifies interpretation of symbolic meaning as crucial to intercultural understanding. She further argues that intercultural understanding requires the ability to interpret symbolic meaning and recognise the cultural positioning embedded within communicative practices [13], contrary to the digital travel narratives, where cultural, social and historical elements are presented as visual consumable cultural experiences, while their deeper symbolic meaning from a social or cultural perspective, remain unexplored. Similarly to Kramsch’s approach to exploring meaning beyond what is obvious, Edward Hall also focuses on the understanding of

culture as a system of implicit meanings and hidden dimensions that extend beyond immediately observable behaviour [14]. For Hall, intercultural understanding is conditioned by one’s ability to recognise the often invisible structures that shape communication, social interaction, and perception, which would require in-depth observation, analysis and interpretation of the observed context.

Intercultural understanding is presented as a complex process requiring sustained observation, contextual interpretation, and reflection on multiple layers of meaning, including symbolic and implicit cultural dimensions [10], [11], [13], [14]. Across the various definitions, meaningful intercultural learning is conditioned by the ability to adopt an ethno-relativist approach and recognise layers of cultural meaning rooted in broader social, historical, and cultural contexts [12]. These competencies cannot be reduced to mere exposure, as they require interpretive depth, sustained interaction, reflexivity, and the capacity to engage with ambiguity and complexity in encounters with cultural difference [15], [16]. Contemporary digital travel environments increasingly challenge these preconditions, as they are characterised by fast-paced consumption, selective and fragmented representation, algorithmic mediation, and instant visibility.

These perspectives on intercultural competence highlight also how the contemporary digital environment conditions how these competences are formed and exercised. As travel narratives shift from elaborate and interpretative, to brief, primarily visual accounts based on short exposure to the foreign context, broader questions of observation, authority, authenticity, representation, and meaning-making arise. The following table summarises some of the major structural transformations characterising contemporary digital travel narratives and considers their implications for the development of intercultural competence.

Table 1. Structural Transformations in Digital Travel Narratives and Their Implications for Intercultural Competence

Dimension	Classical Travel Narratives	Contemporary Digital Travel Narratives	Implications for Intercultural Competence
Temporality	Extended embedding, slower observation, delayed narration and publication	Instant documentation, real-time sharing, accelerated circulation of experiences shaped by processes of “time-space compression” [17]	Reduced time for reflection, contextual interpretation, and gradual intercultural understanding



Narrative Structure	Linear, reflective, descriptive, and contextually grounded narratives	Fragmented, modular, multimodal, and non-linear forms of storytelling characteristic of digital narratives [18], [19]	Weakening of sustained interpretive engagement and coherent contextual understanding
Representation	Textually mediated interpretation emphasising explanation and contextualisation	Visually dominated and highly aestheticised representations shaped by simulation and spectacle [20], [21]	Increased visual familiarity without corresponding interpretive depth or symbolic understanding
Cultural Engagement	Direct observation, dialogue, immersion, and prolonged interaction with local communities	Accelerated symbolic consumption through short-form and algorithmically curated exposure	Reduced opportunities for reflexivity, ambiguity tolerance, and ethno-relativist interpretation [10], [12]
Symbolic Meaning	Attention to cultural context, symbolism, social relations, and historical interpretation	Simplification of cultural practices into consumable visual experiences detached from deeper symbolic meanings	Limited engagement with implicit meanings and deeper cultural logics [13], [14]
Authority and Knowledge Production	Authorial authority grounded in prolonged experience, linguistic engagement, and contextual observation	Authority increasingly dispersed across audiences, engagement metrics, platform visibility, and algorithmic circulation [3], [22]	Instability of interpretation and weakening of contextual reliability and epistemic depth
Authenticity	Search for contextual and experiential authenticity through immersion and interpretation	Curated, staged, and performative authenticity shaped by platform aesthetics and audience expectations [23]	Blurring of distinctions between lived experience and constructed representation
Audience Relationship	Readers positioned primarily as receivers of interpretation	Interactive audiences participating in circulation, validation, and meaning construction within participatory digital cultures [24]	Cultural meanings become fluid, unstable, and increasingly engagement-driven
Platform Logic	Narratives shaped primarily by authorial intention and editorial structure	Visibility determined by algorithms, virality, engagement metrics, and platform optimisation [3], [25]	Cultural exposure filtered through algorithmically reinforced visibility structures
Purpose and Orientation	Interpretation, contextualisation, documentation, and knowledge generation	Visibility, performance, audience engagement, and symbolic consumption increasingly prioritised within digital culture [21], [26]	Shift from intercultural interpretation toward performative interculturality
Pedagogical Implications	Supports slower observation, contextual learning, and interpretive intercultural engagement	Encourages rapid recognition, symbolic familiarity, and surface-level exposure	Necessitates critical digital literacy, reflexive interpretation, and critical engagement with representation [11], [27]



From the comparison, it becomes evident that the transformation is not simply about form, but about fundamental reshaping of the conditions through which intercultural understanding occurs. Classical travel narratives were generally characterised by extended, sustained observation and direct interaction with the local context, as opposed to digital travel narratives primarily relying on immediacy, visibility and curation. These transformations become particularly visible when comparing historical and contemporary representations of specific cultural contexts, such as Albania in British travel narratives across time.

3. Comparative Perspectives on Albania in Historical and Digital Travel Narratives

Albania represents a particularly relevant case through which to examine the transformation of travel narratives and their implications for intercultural understanding. Historically approached as a remote, unfamiliar and culturally different, Albania attracted numerous travel writers including including Lord Byron, John Cam Hobhouse, Edith Durham, and Margaret Hasluck, whose works contributed significantly to the production and circulation of knowledge about Albanian society within broader European audiences [7]. They generally relied on prolonged observation, embedding in the local context, direct and sustained interaction with local communities, and analytical reflection in constructing their narratives. Contemporary digital representations of Albania, by contrast, increasingly emerge through accelerated and visually mediated environments structured by platform visibility, aesthetic circulation, and audience engagement.

Observation vs Visibility

Historical travel narratives on Albania frequently emerged from extended engagement with the local context. Durham's accounts, for example, relied on prolonged interaction with communities, detailed observation of customs and social structures, and attempts to interpret symbolic dimensions of everyday life. Hasluck similarly engaged with language, folklore, and customary law as means of understanding Albanian society beyond surface appearance. Contemporary digital travel narratives, however, increasingly privilege visibility over observation. Much contemporary travel content presents Albania through rapidly consumable visual markers including beaches, mountains, hospitality rituals, affordability, and "hidden gem" aesthetics circulated through blogs, destination platforms, reels, and short-form travel narratives [28], [29], [30], [31].

Interpretation vs Symbolic Consumption

While classical travel writers frequently attempted to contextualise the cultural and historical dimensions of Albanian society, contemporary digital narratives often reduce cultural practices to symbolic consumable experiences. Hospitality, food traditions, mountain life, affordability, Riviera tourism, and local customs are frequently presented as aesthetic and emotionally engaging visual fragments detached from broader historical or social interpretation [28], [29], [30], [32], [33]. Contemporary representations of Albania increasingly rely on recurring visual and symbolic motifs such as "Europe's last hidden gem", "the Maldives of Europe", inexpensive coastal tourism, and "untouched" landscapes circulated through blogs, travel platforms, and international media coverage. Consequently, digital familiarity with Albania may develop through repetition of symbolic imagery rather than through deeper engagement with cultural complexity.

Duration vs Acceleration

The temporal conditions under which representations are produced have also changed substantially. Historical travel writing often emerged through journeys lasting months or years, allowing writers time for observation, reflection, contextual immersion, and interpretive processing. Durham, Hasluck, Byron, and Hobhouse spent extended periods travelling through and observing Albanian territories, producing narratives grounded in prolonged engagement with local communities and everyday life. Contemporary travel narratives, by contrast, are increasingly produced in real time within accelerated digital environments that reward immediacy, novelty, and rapid circulation [17]. Much contemporary travel content on Albania is structured around short-term and highly consumable experiences, including "weekend escapes", Riviera tourism, affordability, visual landscapes, and rapidly circulating destination recommendations shared through blogs and digital travel platforms [28], [29], [30], [31]. Under such conditions, travel becomes simultaneously an experience and a performative act of documentation, limiting opportunities for the slower interpretive processes associated with intercultural understanding. The comparison between historical and contemporary travel narratives on Albania therefore illustrates



broader transformations in the conditions through which cultural knowledge is produced and consumed. While classical travel writing was often grounded in prolonged observation, interpretive narration, and contextual engagement, contemporary digital representations increasingly privilege visibility, immediacy, aestheticisation, and symbolic accessibility. This transformation does not necessarily eliminate intercultural exposure, but it fundamentally alters the depth, temporality, and interpretive conditions through which intercultural understanding is formed. Rather than encouraging sustained engagement with cultural complexity, many contemporary travel narratives operate through accelerated visual familiarity and emotionally accessible representations designed for circulation within digital attention economies.

Conclusion

This paper examined how the concept of intercultural competence in relation to higher education has transformed as a result of the digital shift. Intercultural competence frameworks from numerous researchers were analysed, including Byram, Deardorff, Bennett, Kramsch, and Hall, helping identify a number of elements associated with traditional intercultural learning, such as sustained direct observation, interpretation of symbolic and implicit meanings, and engagement with the local context. Through the analysis of contemporary digital narratives, it became evident that conditions under intercultural learning happens, including noticeably shorter periods of time to observe, engage and interpret, a tendency to share visual, at times processed representations of the intercultural experience. The paper used a comparative analysis approach to identify how the transformations of the conditions impact not only travel narratives, but most importantly intercultural understanding and the knowledge production process. The differences between traditional travel writing and digital narratives are evident with the traditional approach particularly favouring elements of depth of understanding and interpretation, the search for symbolic or implicit meanings and attempts to contextualise the unfamiliar. The paper argued that exposure to a foreign context alone does not produce intercultural understanding or meaning, giving rise to narratives that remain detached from their historical context, social complexity, and interpretive depth.

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Ultimately, the paper concludes that the challenge facing intercultural education today is not the disappearance of intercultural encounter, but its transformation. In a context where cultures are increasingly encountered through screens, curated representations, and algorithmically structured visibility, intercultural competence may depend less on the quantity of cultural exposure available to students than on their capacity to critically interpret the representations through which cultural difference is made visible.

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