



Social, cultural and spatial imaginaries in rural tourism transitions[☆]

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ABSTRACT

In the social sciences, the topic of imaginaries refers to socially constructed, taken-for-granted meanings about events, places, and people. Imaginaries are created symbolically and rhetorically, through claims about self, others, and places; they help people make sense of individual and shared experiences. This study explores how residents of a rural community discursively construct imaginaries to address tourism-related transitions. Telephone interviews were conducted with three types of residents (leaders, permanent residents, and second homeowners) in Burke, Vermont (USA). Results show that interviewees conceptualized imaginaries in quite different ways. Community leaders discussed imaginaries within discourses of growth, permanent residents discussed imaginaries within discourses of history, and second homeowners discussed imaginaries within discourses of utopia. These results are contextualized within two institutional discourses of local community tourism planning. Three theoretical propositions about imaginaries and tourism-based rural community development are suggested. This research expands traditional empirical approaches to evaluating rural tourism development processes by suggesting that imaginaries are implicit but important aspects of decisions about social change.

1. Introduction

A dominant pattern of rural change observed in the United States and internationally since World War II has been the transition from depressed resource extraction and agricultural economies to service sector and amenity-based economies (Galston and Baehler, 1995; Krannich and Petzelka, 2003). Growth in the tourism sector over the past 70 years has brought success to many rural places (Wilson et al., 2001), but some communities that invested in a tourism economy have struggled (Chalip and Costa, 2012; Kuentzel, 2008). Limited success in implementing strategies that sustain both the quality of amenities and valued ways of life has been ascribed to a variety of factors. These include under-developed product branding and marketing, lack of demand, ineffective planning controls, and inadequate leadership or conflicts among residents (Smith and Krannich, 2000; Krannich et al., 2011; Cortes et al., 2014; Armstrong and Stedman, 2013; Park et al., 2019; Popescu et al., 2014; Kaltenborn et al., 2009; Flemsæter et al., 2020).

Implicit in these concerns is that tourism development presents

challenges for community sustainability, which has traditionally been measured by evaluating tangible benefits including economic gains, enhanced quality of life, and improved health of local ecosystems (Richards and Hall, 2003). But antecedent conditions of community life that foster an ethic of sustainability – intangible factors such as the strength of relationships across residents, the meanings of place to local people, and community identity – are also relevant, suggesting that challenges associated with rural community tourism development are not only tangible but also symbolic.

In these contexts, the concept of *imaginaries* can offer insight about how residents make sense of and explain processes of community change and the uncertainties related to proposed development transitions. *Imaginaries* are socially constructed, taken-for-granted meanings about reality that make everyday social and cultural practices seem obvious and sensible to people (Heikkilä, 2007; O'Reilly, 2014; Vogler, 2002). Not simply reflecting objective realities, the concept of imaginaries refers to flexible claims, crafted from the common symbols, language and meanings shared by people that reinforce their social habits and cultural

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practices. Imaginaries constitute “a network of significations, collectively shared, that each society makes use of to think about itself” (Arruda, 2015, p. 128).

Imaginaries are revealed in discourses about rural community transitions, tourism development, and amenity and lifestyle migration – all arenas of personal and collective imagination, fantasy, and longing (Müller, 2002; O'Reilly, 2014; Salazar, 2010; Salazar and Graburn, 2014). In tourism places, imaginaries frame the ongoing interchange between the tourist “gaze” of outsiders (Macnaghton and Urry, 1998) and the narratives of the destination upheld by residents, leaders, and service providers. Imaginaries are especially useful for studying community transitions because they help people to make sense of, discuss and negotiate divergent, variable meanings about a place. They also exert influence on practical aspects of community planning and development.

Tourism researchers have analyzed imaginaries to provide insight into the social, cultural and spatial organization of destinations (Chronis, 2012; Salazar and Graburn, 2014; Gutberlet, 2019), institutional approaches to place development and marketing (Gravari-Barbas et al., 2017), and the myth-making processes that foster place identities in developing rural communities (Stokowski, 2016). In this article, we extend prior research to explore how residents of a rural community imagine tourism-based growth, second home development, and community futures. We ask: *How do residents of a transitioning rural community use social, cultural, and spatial imaginaries to describe processes of community change and explain their meanings of place?* To answer these questions, we interviewed residents (local leaders, permanent residents, and second homeowners) of Burke, Vermont, USA, a small, rural community that has experienced a mix of success and struggle over the past 70 years.

Adopting a social constructionist perspective, we conceptualize imaginaries as the taken-for-granted assumptions about reality that help people to discursively construct, organize and interpret their experiences and give meaning to their everyday worlds (Adams et al., 2015; Arruda, 2015; Watkins, 2015; Valaskivi and Sumiala, 2014). The novelty of our approach is in evaluating rural community discourses from an imaginaries perspective, analyzing rhetorical qualities of imaginaries, and comparing discursive patterns across different groups of residents (and other local institutional discourses) in a transitioning community. This research contributes to understanding how social, cultural, and spatial imaginaries help to shape the ways community members think about and cope with the pressures of local change, while assessing the implications of imaginaries for rural communities experiencing uneven tourism development.

The analysis presented here involves an extended interpretation of data from a 2012 study of second home tourism and community change in Burke. Initial analysis of the data emphasized observable processes of community tourism development – but we later became interested in intangible aspects of development and wondered whether the concept of imaginaries could offer new insights about tourism-based rural community change. Thus, this article is not a case study examining the actual processes of, or impacts from, tourism development in Burke. Rather, our purpose is to contribute to the theory of imaginaries within rural transitions, and to this end, we offer propositions for future research to build on theoretical contributions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Rural community development

Over the past half century, an extensive literature has emerged about the patterns and trajectories of change in rural regions of the United States and around the world. Much of this literature documents the social, economic and community transitions associated with local and regional shifts from resource extraction industries to amenity-based service economies (Johnson and Fuguitt, 2000; Johnson, 2012;

Krannich et al., 2011; Tress, 2002). Amenity places are those with especially attractive natural qualities (scenic views, pleasing landscapes, recreational opportunities) or cultural components (parks, museums, high-quality residential areas) – places seen as desirable for living, working or visiting (Schaeffer and Dissart, 2018; Matarrita-Cascante, 2017).

Counterintuitively, amenity-based recreation and tourism development in rural places may produce impacts that adversely affect local sustainability. Seasonal and second home construction can result in land fragmentation, erosion, negative effects on water quality and wildlife habitat, and infrastructure overload (Kaltenborn et al., 2008). Economic impacts may differentially affect community subgroups (Chalip and Costa, 2012), while rapid rates of growth might have negative consequences for local quality of life (Deller et al., 2001; Kuentzel and Ramaswamy, 2005; Gosnell and Abrams, 2011; Park et al., 2019). Long-term residents and newcomers may hold different attitudes about the goals and perceived impacts of development (Smith and Krannich, 2000; Clendenning et al., 2004; Armstrong and Stedman, 2013; Flora and Flora, 2013; Back, 2020). Even areas with abundant attractions may struggle without the human skills and knowledge needed to create and market tourism experiences (Popescu et al., 2014).

Related to research about sustainable rural development is a broad literature on symbolic values of landscapes and places – research that derives from a variety of disciplines and draws from an array of theoretical perspectives. For example, Greider and Garkovich (1994, p. 2) anticipated the idea of imaginaries, writing, “Our understandings of nature and of human relationships with the environment are really cultural expressions used to define who we were, who we are, and who we hope to be at this place and in this space.” Cultural meanings are visible in discourses of rurality and nature (Walsh, 2020) such that “discourses manifested through landscape may be long-lived, outlasting the original activities that produced them” (Morse et al., 2014, p. 233). Thus, rural tourism development may transform not only physical dimensions of a place, but also its ideologies (Gürsoy, 2019).

The discursive construction of natural and cultural landscapes creates imaginaries that people invoke in daily lives. For example, Bridger (1997) identified “heritage narratives” as a genre of selective representations of the past adopted by community members and applied in debates about the future of a community. He wrote (p. 78), “listening critically to heritage narratives entails a constant examination and reexamination of claims about what communities mean and about who has the power to define the meaning of particular places.” Heritage stories offer a rationale for group membership and belonging (Anderson, 1983), formalizing relational discourses across community groups (Stiman, 2019) and circumscribing community boundaries and individual or collective identities (Cohen, 1989).

2.2. Tourism imaginaries

Developing within anthropological and geographical studies of tourist destinations (Graburn and Gravari-Barbas, 2011; Salazar and Graburn, 2014), research about social, cultural, and spatial imaginaries recognizes that “places come to have shared, collective meanings, mediated through language, symbols, and other significations ... these meanings have the power to shape reality through the actions of individuals and groups” (O'Reilly, 2014, p. 3). Tourism marketers and the mass media communicate destination images, representations, and associated imaginaries (Howard, 2016; Waysdorf and Reijnders, 2017) that are reinforced in the practices of visitors, businesses, residents, and governments (Gravari-Barbas et al., 2017; Zhou, 2014; Moore, 2019).

Natural and cultural landscape symbolism are often implicit in imaginaries that influence tourists' experiences of travelling as well as their on-site encounters with others (Minca, 2007; Reijnders, 2011; Mostafanezhad and Norum, 2019). Proximity to natural and cultural heritage is an important part of rural destination images, where local communities often seek to portray a traditional working landscape

image in a modern economic context (Ramaswamy and Kuentzel, 1998). Landscape imaginaries thus inspire individual, group and regional identity and stimulate emotional attachments (Shucksmith, 2018). Permanent residents, in-migrants and tourists all engage in processes of imagining rural places; as McCarthy (2008, p. 131) explained, clarity about amenity migration requires “investigation of the widely circulating imaginaries, meanings, and performances coded as ‘rural’.”

In studying imaginaries, we draw from the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, who conceptualized society as an “imaginary institution” constructed upon networks of power, symbolism, signification and cultural meaning (Arruda, 2015). We also adopt Paul Ricoeur’s language-based perspective on imaginaries, which centers meaningfulness in linguistic uses of metaphor, symbol and narrative (Adams et al., 2015). These perspectives have previously been applied in analyzing how imaginaries are interpreted across society, diffusing through personal experiences, mass media, non-linguistic symbol systems (e.g., cultural rituals, architecture, photography), and processes of social and cultural representation and replication (Salazar and Graburn, 2014; Valaskivi and Sumiala, 2014). As Gaonkar (2002, p. 7) summarized, “Each society derives its unity and identity by representing itself in symbols, myths, legends, and other collectively shared significations. Language is the medium par excellence in which these social imaginary significations become manifest and do their constitutive work.”

2.3. Burke, VT: history and context

Composed of three villages (East Burke, Burke Hollow and West Burke), and situated on ancestral lands of Abenaki Native Americans, the Town of Burke – located in the northeastern part of the State of Vermont, in the New England region of the USA – was established as a farming community in 1782. Clearing the land for agriculture also initiated a thriving forest industry. In the mid-1800s, as the forests disappeared and the railroad arrived, farmers turned to raising sheep until the early 1900s, when dairy farms and a rejuvenated timber industry emerged. By the 1960s, farming and forestry were declining, and a tourism economy based on vacation homes, a ski area, and forest and mountain recreation began to emerge. In 2012, when the original study was conducted, Burke’s population was about 1750 (declining to about

1515 by 2019).

Local tourism development in Burke and the wider region results from public, private and non-profit partnerships. Collaborators include Kingdom Trails for mountain biking, hiking, and Nordic skiing; Vermont State Parks for hiking; the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers for snowmobiling; and Burke Mountain Resort for alpine skiing in the winter and mountain biking and hiking in the summer (Burke Area Chamber of Commerce, 2019). The Burke Mountain Resort ski area (Fig. 1) first opened in 1955, and the lodge was expanded in 1966 when the first chairlift was installed. Historically serving a small niche market, the ski resort struggled to be competitive with larger nearby Vermont resorts (Stowe, Sugarbush and Jay Peak). It suffered three bankruptcies between 1987 and 1995, and four ownership changes between 2000 and 2016 (New England Ski History, 2019); recent legal difficulties mean that the resort currently operates under receivership.

While the ski area struggled, mountain biking became the town’s economic driver (Moritz, 2016). Kingdom Trails now has well over 3000 annual members and counts over 75,000 visits per year to its trail system. Kingdom Trails represents a classic model of sustainable rural development: its partnerships offer access to a trail system that connects public and private lands managed by state government, town municipalities, the ski area, private landowners, and the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers. The success of Kingdom Trails illustrates local efforts at resilience through tourism development (Fig. 2).

The challenges faced by Burke over the past 50 years are reflected in its vacation/second home market, which began to expand in the late 1970s when Interstate 91 opened and provided easy access into Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom. In 1980, only 77 seasonal homes were listed in the town’s property records, and growth stalled during the 1980s with recessions, unfavorable weather, and ski area bankruptcies. With new ski area ownership and a strong economy, second home development increased dramatically in the 1990s and the 2000s (203 seasonal homes in 2000; 300 in 2010). In 2019, 34 companies provided condo and home rentals for visitors to the Burke area (Fig. 3).



Fig. 1. Burke mountain ski resort.



Fig. 2. Kingdom Trails Mountain Biking signage at Burke Country Store.



Fig. 3. Recent condominium second homes near Burke Mountain Ski Resort.

3. Methods

3.1. Data collection

Using a chain-referral method to identify interviewees, we conducted semi-structured telephone interviews during winter 2012 with 20 residents of Burke. These included local leaders ($n = 7$), permanent residents ($n = 6$), and second homeowners ($n = 7$), evenly split between women and men. All local leaders were also permanent residents. Most interviewees had significant experience with the community: on

average, second homeowners had lived in Burke seasonally for 19.6 years, while both groups of permanent residents had lived there, on average, for 31.3 years. Long experience with the community means that interviewees were often well-known by others, and easily conversant about their community and local happenings.

Interviews lasted 45 minutes to an hour and were audio-recorded and transcribed. Though all interviewees had an opportunity to review their transcript, only one did but made no changes. Interview questions emphasized land tenure in Burke, second home development, interactions between permanent residents and second homeowners,

perceived changes over time in Burke, and tourism development impacts.

3.2. Data analysis

The interviews generated 97 typed, single-spaced pages of transcripts. All authors independently read then discussed interview transcripts, using collaborative, iterative processes of data reduction, interpretation, and analysis to identify imaginaries and the rhetorical discursive patterns that supported them. Throughout, we focused on how people used imaginaries to describe their own experiences and tourism and community transitions.

Researchers have identified imaginaries through discursive analysis of literary devices (metaphors, fantasies, stereotypes, and others) and narrative forms (Gravari-Barbas et al., 2017; Chronis, 2012). Our re-interpretation of the interview texts, however, suggested that imaginaries are presented primarily as *claims* about self, others, heritage, landscape, and community. Arnold (1974, p. 51) defined claims as “any assertion to which a communicator appears to have committed himself (*sic*) by seriously offering it as ‘true’”—that is, claims have an overt rhetorical (persuasive) quality (Rodden, 2008), regardless of whether they are true or false. We see claims as the basic building blocks of imaginaries, and so, following Derrien and Stokowski (2020), we identified imaginaries as claims uttered by interviewees and supported by taken-for-granted assertions.

All 20 interviewees incorporated imaginaries in their accounts, and 198 instances of imaginaries were identified across the transcribed texts. Texts that included imaginaries drew primarily from interview questions about community transitions over time; descriptions of the community, others living there, and local heritage and landscape; second home development; and level of optimism about the future. We examined imaginaries texts for the content, form and style of presentation, evaluating these initially *within* each interviewee group (community leaders; permanent residents; second homeowners), then *across* groups. The comparative findings are discussed thematically, highlighting aspects of social, spatial and cultural imaginaries that contribute to discourses of tourism-based change. Finally, following Lehtonen's (2000) reminder that discourses are contextual, we evaluated the research results relative to two institutional discourses in Burke: the town government planning documents and the ski area's web-based marketing materials.

Throughout the study, we worked to achieve qualitative research standards of credibility, transferability, and confirmability of results (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The authors have studied a variety of rural places, allowing us to triangulate theories, sources, and methods (credibility). We used techniques of reflexivity and peer-debriefing in developing detailed descriptions of discursive processes (transferability). We worked collaboratively towards confirmability, keeping notes for an audit trail, and challenging our beliefs and findings. The interpretive analysis was ultimately developed through a lengthy process of collaborative writing and review.

4. Results

Below, the rhetorical content, forms, and styles of imaginaries are discussed within each of the three interview groups (community leaders; permanent residents; second homeowners). Then, social, spatial, and cultural imaginaries common to all three groups are identified. Findings are then contextualized in terms of two local institutional discourses. Throughout, quotes from interviews are identified by interviewee number (#).

4.1. Research results: within-group imaginaries

Community leaders, permanent residents and second homeowners view Burke and its community and tourism transitions in different ways. Below, we discuss the claims that support each group's construction of

imaginaries about community transitions and local sustainability.

4.1.1. Community leaders: imaginaries within discourses of growth

Community leaders (local government officials; a realtor; a director of a recreation non-profit organization; $n = 7$) were all permanent residents of Burke; three had lived there for over 40 years, three for about 15 years, and one for eight years. These interviewees emphasized what they would not like to see in Burke's future: they were against “*bad unchecked growth*” and “*in-your-face types of architecture*” (that is, radical, annoying construction that doesn't “fit in” with other local styles). One government leader (#4) commented, “*We don't want to build trash around here.*” These leaders invoked symbols of undesirable tourism places and businesses to contrast with local conditions. Stowe, Vermont (a wealthy town with a large, adjacent ski area) was often mentioned, with claims that Stowe attracted “*presumptuous*” people “*looking for glitz.*” One leader (#3) commented, “*Well it won't [become Stowe] ... because everyone here hates Stowe.*” Starbucks coffee shop was also used as a negative symbol, and some felt it a point of honor to not have one in Burke. At the same time, Burke's community leaders often mentioned their “*bad economy*” and the need for tourism growth to provide jobs for local people and improve the tax base. Though clear about what they did not want the community to become, they did not specify future visions for Burke.

Community leaders also spoke of perceived differences between long-time residents and second homeowners. They described other permanent residents as having “*rural values,*” while they used the derogatory term “*flatlanders*” (that is, those not living in Burke's mountainous environs) for second homeowners, whom they saw as being sophisticated but “*less presumptuous than [second homeowners at] places ... like Stowe*” (#5). These claims constitute imaginaries that categorized and positioned both groups of residents. One leader (#3) described permanent residents as being “*less involved [in local politics] until the point where they may be restricted in something they want to do,*” while another (#2) explained of second homeowners that, “*People that move here to become new residents, they're bringing new life, new ideas ... some we like, some we don't.*” These assertions suggest a divided community in which community leaders tended to dismiss other residents' concerns about over-development. As one leader (#7) noted about their small ski area, “*(it's) only a B + ski mountain at best, and it will never be better than that. And the town is pretty dinky, and I don't think it can ever turn into Stowe. So, I don't see things getting crazy.*”

Leaders consistently spoke of the “*bad economy*” and Burke's need for “*managed growth.*” They continually asserted that Burke was nothing like other tourism places and would never become so. They presented themselves as informed, confident and skilled. By phrasing imaginaries so matter-of-factly, community leaders positioned themselves as capable leaders who could shape local discourses and manage local tourism growth. Their logic is summarized in this comment (#4): “*You can't just build a fence around a town and say no more development. People have to live places; people have to be able to use their property appropriately. But I think the challenge is to make sure you balance all that.*”

4.1.2. Permanent residents: imaginaries within discourses of history

Of the permanent residents ($n = 6$) interviewed for this study, half had lived in Burke for over 40 years, while the others had lived there less than 7 years; they were or had been employed in a variety of professional and technical jobs. The symbols they used in constructing imaginaries represented the community and its landscape primarily through association with local history. They referenced local agriculture, “*rural values,*” and “*the landscape.*” Unlike community leaders and second homeowners, permanent residents spoke about the three villages of the Town of Burke as individual entities, presenting more nuanced understanding of the local area. They expressed fears about second homeowners and tourists bringing different or new ideas to Burke; for example, “*Well, they bring their ideas from wherever it might be, whatever state or area they come from, they bring different ideas ...*” (#11).

Many permanent residents used comparisons and stories to describe changes in Burke over time. One (#13) explained: “Well, Burke when I grew up was primarily farming. In fact, there wasn’t anything that would be classed as recreational, the way it is now.” The same interviewee (#13) commented on physical changes in the landscape resulting from construction of second homes: “You used to be able to drive for two or three miles and that would be the only thing, the road. And now you drive along and ... there’s a road going up in this direction, and there’s a house at the end of it, and a road going off of it another direction every little ways with a house at the end of it ... it’s changing the landscape.”

Imaginations expressed by these permanent residents coalesced around their desire to keep Burke as it is. One interviewee (#14) discussed a time when grandiose plans were proposed for developing tourism at the ski mountain: “Everyone was like, do they have a clue where the Northeast Kingdom is? ‘Are they joking?’ kind of stuff. We’re not going to do that here we’re not going to pay five dollars for a cup of coffee and twelve dollars for a hamburger. It isn’t going to happen.” Many were nostalgic about the Burke of the past: “It’s just ... rural and it’s part of Vermont ... what Vermont was 150 years ago, it’s still basically the same ... It’s a great place to live. Bring up your children ... Because it’s friendly and safe” (#20).

For interviewees who were permanent residents, then, the history of the community and its practices of agriculture and forestry were used to symbolize the community’s enduring heritage. Their imaginations applied claims that Burke was safe, family friendly, and rural. They were tolerant of second homeowners, but felt that newcomers introduced community changes impacting both the physical setting (new houses) and social life (new ideas). Nevertheless, they acknowledged that second homeowners are highly valued because they contribute economically to the community and state by paying taxes and making purchases. Overall, permanent residents interviewed for this study seemed realistic about growth: “the world is changing, you know ... it’s a nice little rural community ... we should try to keep it as ‘Vermont’ as we can” (#20).

4.1.3. Second homeowners: imaginations within discourses of utopia

The second homeowners (n = 7) interviewed lived part-time in Burke; two had been part-time residents for over 30 years, two for about 15 years, and three for about six years. Three had grown up or previously lived in Burke, then moved away, while the others had moved there part-time upon retirement. All expressed very positive sentiments about Burke: it was a “wonderful town,” “a small, rural community,” and a “well-kept secret.” Among these interviewees, McDonalds was mentioned as a symbol of undesirable development that would diminish local qualities of being charmingly “quaint and Vermont-like” (#17). The imaginations expressed by second homeowners differed in form and content from those of community leaders and permanent residents. Though expressing their “love” for the area, these interviewees were sometimes critical about what they saw as “a lot of small-town politics” (#16). In general, second homeowners expressed wider geographical interests than did other interviewees, extending their appreciation for rurality, nature, the “beautiful state of Vermont,” and the entire New England region.

Second homeowners had decided to establish a seasonal residence in Vermont because they liked the amenities of Burke and the region. Even if second home development had changed the ambience somewhat, these interviewees felt the outcome was sustainable: “I didn’t rape the land to build a fancy new house or anything. I mean, I keep mine up. I think it lends to the landscape rather than detracting from it. I think that people that can own a second home generally can afford the upkeep, so their homes look good and are well-maintained” (#6). They expressed benevolent concern for their adopted place, and saw themselves as contributing to the local economy and being good neighbors to permanent residents they perceived as less-affluent.

Some second homeowners complained about the high property taxes imposed on their homes, but they generally accepted that cost: “It’s a beautiful state, it’s a clean state, and that’s just the price you pay for living

there” (#8). Many were hesitant about local change, but were open to some development: “You know, I don’t want it to change too much, but I think it would be nice to see a little bit more, you know, retail or restaurants, or shops, something like that” (#18). Others supported some local growth to provide jobs for permanent residents: “I still, overall, think that [second home developments] would be good if they’re done right. Whether I like building things or not, I think people need a way of having an income. And there’s not a lot for them to do there” (#12). That last phrase (“there’s not a lot for them to do there”) recapitulates imaginations about assumed differences between permanent and seasonal residents and the nature of rural places.

4.2. Research results: imaginations across interviewee groups

The analysis above shows that rhetorical claims supporting imaginations were consistent within interviewee groups. Discourse patterns across groups also show thematic and stylistic forms that bolstered and clarified social, spatial and cultural imaginations.

4.2.1. Social imaginations: internal and external others

Using stereotypes as a rhetorical device, all three interviewee groups invoked social imaginations that expressed fear about others living both within and outside Burke. Though the specific others varied, each interviewee group expressed negative claims about others who might create problems for Burke’s assumed quality of life, itself a creation of imaginations.

Community leaders spoke about wealthy outsiders who allegedly sought major tourism changes in Burke: “You know, when they [a real estate development company] wanted to fly in here and make it feel like Florida, everybody had a real issue with that” (#7). Here, the meaning of “everybody” is unclear: is it the entire Burke community, community leaders, or the resort owners who could expect new competition? Linguistic slippage in imaginations allows varying interpretations of claims, while also presenting the speaker as expert.

Community leaders also stereotyped Burke’s permanent residents as “these people,” and second homeowners as “outsiders.” One local official (#10) said of second homeowners, “Burke is a very welcoming town, and we try to make **outsiders** feel welcome” (bold added). In these examples, imaginations are exclusionary, a code reflecting assumed power and authority. This is also visible in use of both in- and out-group language (we/they) in this complex imaginations text about second homeowners, narrated by a community leader (#1):

... every time they come up here, they’re shopping at local stores, they’re buying our gasoline, they’re eating at our local restaurants, they’re renting out their homes ... or their second homes or camps, bringing in new people who come up to experience our area ... they’re purchasing in our stores and our shops and eating in our restaurants, using our recreational facilities it creates economy.

This text can of course be read as a factual account of the community impacts of tourism. Yet, in its repetition (they/our) and summary point (“it creates economy”), the text also constructs social imaginations of inclusion and exclusion.

Permanent residents also stereotyped others. They described community leaders as a generalized “they” who were assumed to be looking out for the community’s interests: “I just hope they can keep it organized and ... not lose its character too much. ... they haven’t hurt anything yet, and I don’t believe they ever will in my lifetime” (#11). Another resident said, “My biggest concerns about the area would be that it might get overbuilt and commercialized a little ... I don’t know that that’s what’s going to happen. But you never know. What they say and what they do could be two different things” (#15). Second homeowners also spoke about a nameless “they” in terms of development: “I think they’re trying to improve the village area, which I think would be nice” (#17). These quotes reflect uncertainties relative to community goals and trust within local relationships; they

also reveal the tenuousness of imaginaries.

Thematically, then, all interviewees used similar symbolic forms and linguistic tools (stereotyping) in social imaginaries that spoke about the future of the community. These claims revealed potential fault lines within the community, and between local people and “outsiders.”

4.2.2. Spatial imaginaries: landscape symbolism

Spatial imaginaries were supported by interviewees’ metaphorical uses of the local landscape, and in discursive references to an iconic local symbol (“the mountain”). One topic was especially notable as a metaphor for community changes: landscape fragmentation. All three interviewee groups similarly framed rural imaginaries in terms of changes to scenery and aspects of the physical landscape.

Community leaders lamented the lack of proper zoning and the fragmentation of the land; one (#5) commented, “I hate to see a driveway every two hundred feet up a road because that’s the way the property’s been divided. I’d prefer see a drive and a cul-de-sac with houses scattered around it ... but that’s hard to write into the bylaws.” A permanent resident (#15) also expressed concerns about landscape change: “that it was overly built and it was going to change everything drastically.” A second homeowner (#9) considered the impacts on others: “The scenery, [development] kind of messes up a little bit ... I think it’s more the change than the impact, for the locals.” Comments about landscape effects served as metaphors for overall change in Burke. New people, ideas, and tourism development proposals introduced uncertainty to taken-for-granted ways of local life. Spatial imaginaries have visual referents: people can see change happening across local landscapes. But interpretations of those transitions vary. For community leaders, planning for tourism development is lacking; for permanent residents, overbuilding and extensive change are considered unsustainable; for second homeowners, the scenery and local people are negatively affected.

One iconic community symbol reinforces these points. Interviewees from all three groups spoke about Burke Mountain as simply “the mountain,” personifying that landmark as another local actor. Community leaders referenced the mountain in terms of the resort’s potential to stimulate local business through entertainment. As one leader (#10) said, “The mountain does do shows, comedy shows, and um things like that occasionally, but that’s about it. They don’t have a regular nightclub.” Second homeowners spoke of “the mountain” literally, referring to its ski area as a small local attraction. One (#8) commented,

I don’t know what they’re doing with the mountain. I know right now it’s ... still a family thing. So ... it didn’t raise our property values ... when we purchased [our second home], the story was the mountain was going to be built up, and that the property value was going to go sky high, and it didn’t. But that’s still a good thing.

Permanent residents referenced “the mountain” as a symbol of Burke’s history and a participant in the tourism economy of the area: “if the ski mountain continues to do what it’s supposed to do, or what it plans to, it will build more structures because they will build more condominiums along the ski trails That might provide more jobs in the community, if they can do that” (#14).

Thus, across interviewees, “the mountain” was a tangible symbol over-burdened with meaning. Various described as a resource to be used, a small local attraction, and a reminder of Burke’s history, the symbol was deployed in spatial imaginaries that looked with a sense of uncertainty (but hopeful promise) toward the future.

4.2.3. Cultural imaginaries: self and community

Cultural imaginaries combined claims about processes of local transition as opportunities or threats to the community. These were shaped by ideas about community sustainability, tourism development, and “progress.” For example, in speaking about a developer’s plans to build “quite a few” new housing units close to Burke Mountain, one permanent resident (#19) said, “That’s the only concern I have, that it will

increase traffic, but that’s progress.” Problems associated with increased traffic are often mentioned in case studies about rural tourism growth, but they are equally often rationalized with clichés referencing a need for “progress.”

Questions about the nature of community were apparent across the three groups of interviewees. One permanent resident (#11) felt that they lacked power to influence the future of Burke, commenting, “I hope they don’t destroy the community that I grew up in.” A community leader (#7) expressed concern about his ability to withstand the pressures of change (from seasonal homeowners), saying, “they come from Boston, and they want to be able to buy everything they’re able to buy in Boston in Burke. You know what I mean?” A second homeowner (#12) positioned herself as an outsider, observing, “I guess I’m not enough in the community to know the community atmosphere. But I’m sure that it exists because it’s a small, rural, New England community.” Thus, community was a powerful symbol for all interviewees – but the imaginaries they invoked suggest a lack of shared understanding.

This is also apparent in a particular form of discursive maneuvering visible in these interview texts. One community leader (#1) described Burke as a “tight knit” community, stating, “homeowners are part of the community; the second homeowners ... they know they are a vital part of the economy.” Replacing community with economy, and assigning one group of local people to that category, raises questions about the strength of community relationships.

Finally, members of all three groups introduced imaginaries in speaking about social change as a threat to local natural and cultural places. Community leaders felt that change would negatively affect tourism and recreational uses of the land. One leader (#3) said, “rather than having large open agricultural fields or very large tracts of wooded areas ... new homeowners will put up “No Trespassing” signs. So that impacts hikers, and hunters” All local leaders discussed the need for “proper planning,” “well-thought-out planning,” “the right community participation,” and “educating people” to address threatened amenities. Permanent residents spoke positively and nostalgically about the town (small shops, old farmhouses, dirt roads, the “nice” community) and its landscapes (farmland, lakes, scenery). Second homeowners referred to Burke as a “tourist area” centered on “the mountain,” its recreational amenities, “beautiful scenery,” and “very small town.” Many of these individuals liked the slow-paced lifestyle of the area and imagined it staying that way.

Thus, cultural imaginaries incorporated intersecting concerns and values about place, people and community change. Notable, though, is how often all interviewees spoke about the need for *other people* to protect and sustain their actual and imagined community.

4.3. Contextualizing research results

The analysis above shows that interviewees asserted intersecting social, cultural, and spatial imaginaries related to life in Burke and its future. Prominent themes of both *within* group and *across* group analyses included the influence of history, rurality, and landscape on current and future community possibilities; relationships between self and others; desirable/undesirable qualities of growth; and the utility of tourism development. Constructed imaginatively by individuals and social groups, rhetorical claims supporting imaginaries revealed both overt tensions of community life and implicit sentiments about sustainability.

These discontinuities are also evident in institutional discourses of two local entities that historically exert power: the Town of Burke (in its governmental capacity), and the Burke Mountain Ski Area (in economic investment and development). The [Burke Mountain Ski Area \(2013\)](#) posted on their website a lengthy tourism marketing text describing town/ski area relationships, a few sentences of which read:

“A quintessential Vermont village – not the now common “Vermont-inspired” village – complete with white steeples and a country store. The kind of place where logging trucks still share the road with SUVs filled

with ski families up for the week. The kind you don't find too often anymore. Especially around a mountain with over 2000' of vertical. This isn't a small mountain for locals, it's a big mountain where everyone feels like [a local]."

This text contrasts (without naming) Burke and its charming small-town qualities ("real" Vermont souvenirs; "picture-perfect inns and B&Bs") with a future of craft brewpubs and artist studios located in refurbished barns that retains all those small-town values. Yet, these romanticized imaginaries of place and people equate "the mountain" with the town, replacing existing residents with idealized images of people and amenities common to up-scale ski resorts. This marketing text later disappeared from the web.

Other local institutional discourses are produced by Burke's town government, which regularly publishes planning documents expressing visions and actions guiding the community's future. The 2018 town plan, for example, asserts that, "*The town has been transformed from a quiet farming town to a resort destination, and increasingly, a center for innovation and commerce*" (p.4) – a claim which ignores the fact that upscale impacts have not spread across Burke's three villages. Another relevant document is [Burke's Community Character Inventory \(2008\)](#) which promotes "rural character" as a dominant imaginary associated with the community priorities of maintaining scenic views and open agricultural land. According to that document (2008, p. 15), "*Burke residents have a strong shared understanding of what constitutes the community's rural character ... (which is) threatened by rapid development.*"

Relative to our study of Burke's residents, we disagree. First, we observe that imaginaries differ across residents, government, and private entities in the community. Second, slippage in the meanings of community sustainability likely occur over time as rhetorical challenges arise across individual and institutional discourses. Third, even government's institutional discourses do not always accord with those of a community's residents (which are themselves not always aligned, as we have shown). Among the institutional imaginaries of Burke, however, those focused on "rural character" have persisted. We believe this is because the notion of "rural character" is sufficiently abstract to serve most local individuals, groups and institutions, while remaining the centerpiece of Burke's sustainability narrative.

5. Discussion

This article focused on the interlinked discourses of social, cultural, and spatial imaginaries arising in a rural community that is slowly transitioning to a tourism-based economy. Imaginaries were identified for three types of residents (leaders, permanent residents and second homeowners) and across three aspects of rural community life: relationships among people (social), local ways of life (culture), and place relationships (spatial). One conclusion from this research is that there is no single imaginary reflective of community tourism development. Even within a small, rural place like Burke, imaginaries reflect varying perspectives about tourism development and the practical actions that may lead to long-term community quality of life.

The data show that residents applied similar symbols related to rural life, landscape, and Vermont itself to construct different imaginaries. Community leaders invoked imaginaries centered around growth control and "*proper planning*." They presented themselves as knowledgeable, confident in their understanding of the community, and favorable to growth. Permanent residents constructed imaginaries based on their experience of living in Burke; their sense of self was linked to affection for place, others, and local history. They desired slow growth and felt that leaders would take care of Burke and guide development in alignment with residents' values. Second homeowners expressed imaginaries drawn around the amenity values of Burke. They sought to sustain what they saw as the picturesque, charming, rural, "Vermont-like" features of the area.

Each group of residents thus expressed a separate vision of Burke's

"rural character," its capacities, and of what might be pursued as a sustainable form of local tourism development. In their varied emphases on the type and speed of development, the desirability of growth or change, and the perceived effects on community life, different groups of residents provide their own insights about visions of the community and tourism development ([Graburn and Gravari-Barbas, 2011](#); [Scott and Pashkevich, 2019](#)). Our data show that these differences seem to vary by level of community power, supporting prior research showing that community leaders are more favorable to growth than other residents ([Stokowski, 1996](#)). This suggests that future research about tourism imaginaries should consider the influence of residential status:

Proposition #1: Imaginaries will differ in content, form, and style across types of residents within a rural community, affecting support for development proposals.

Creatively linking rhetorical claims to systems of social and cultural knowledge, imaginaries organize meanings about the past, present and future for people and communities ([Castoriadis, 1975](#)). They offer a sense of stability and permanence during periods of local change. But imaginaries are neither permanent nor neutral; they become re-imagined as circumstances evolve ([Moore, 2019](#)). Thus, imaginaries must be seen in context with other institutional powers (local and external) that exert independent "ideological dominance" ([Baptista, 2014](#)). This raises questions about the Burke imaginaries relative to patterns of tourism development over time: to what extent are these common to rural places experiencing tourism development? Given Burke's early stages of tourism growth, researchers should consider imaginaries along a continuum of local growth:

Proposition #2: Imaginaries expressed in early stages of community change may differ in content, form, and style from those expressed in later stages of tourism development.

The discursive study of imaginaries extends traditional approaches to the study of tourism-based community transitions in rural places. Imaginaries that align shared place-based sentiments with future goals may help to elevate individual and institutional commitments to retain community uniqueness. In the heightened circumstances of community change, though, imaginaries can also reveal cleavages in community members' perspectives about people and place. Because imaginaries rhetorically "carry" and reproduce existing social meanings while also facilitating creation of new meanings in interpersonal and mediated interactions, the uses of symbols related to local natural and cultural heritage become very important.

Landscape imaginaries are particularly important in rural places, for as [Graburn and Gravari-Barbas \(2011, p. 160\)](#) explain, "Landscape is the prototypical imaginary: it is culturally specific, shared by the social community, yet is it dynamic and reflective of sociocultural change." Landscapes and other heritage features are called upon in symbolic social, cultural, and spatial relationships enacted by residents. In Burke, permanent residents' emphasis on the imaginaries of idyllic rurality (in the form of pastoral agricultural landscapes and historic rural villages) stood in counterpoint to second homeowners' focus on imaginaries related to an idealized picture of Burke as an old-fashioned, charming, beautiful place, and to community leaders' insistence on new imaginaries of place characterized by carefully planned development of sports, recreation, and wellness amenities.

While each group of residents imagined Burke's heritage differently, they aligned their tourism development interests and concerns around the unifying symbol of "the mountain." This is not surprising because Burke Mountain features strongly in the history and ethos of the community – and as [Cohen \(1989, p. 21\)](#) explained, "Symbols are effective because they are imprecise ... They are, therefore, ideal media through which people can speak a 'common' language." In Burke, though, that "common language" produced quite different imaginaries across resident groups. These contradictions suggest a need for future research

based not just on the meanings of natural and cultural heritage symbols for tourism places, but on their discursive *meaningfulness* as components of imaginaries:

Proposition #3: Natural and cultural symbols of community heritage are deployed for differential purposes by actors in tourism development processes.

The Burke study considers amenity development from the standpoint of imaginaries, but other research echoes this article's claims. For example, Müller (2002) pointed out that for places that rely on second home development, the rural environment known as the "countryside" is also an invention – an interlinked set of social, cultural, and spatial imaginaries that affect individual decisions (where to build a second home, for example) and ultimately quality of life. While local leaders may envision second homes in terms of economic values, local planning needs and governance issues (Hall, 2015), second homeowners rely on rhetorical discourses of imagination and myth in their experiences of place, sometimes creating through imaginaries what Müller (2002) referred to as a "parallel society." In these language practices, imaginaries draw strongly on local symbols and figurative devices (such as comparison).

The language practices and discourses of imaginaries are thus important intangible resources for communities experiencing tourism transitions. Though imaginaries "are irreducible to meaning alone" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 19), they are consequential. Imaginaries are situated within the social practices, patterns, and performances of how people live, their relationships with other people and objects, and the ways they structure social life and interact with the surrounding world (Andrews, 2017; Sovacool and Hess, 2017). Implicit in the taken-for-granted claims about people and place, imaginaries are central to processes of community change.

6. Conclusions

Imaginaries are revealed in the symbol systems of language and discourses by which people make sense of their experiences and share their impressions and meanings about reality (Derrien and Stokowski, 2020). They are shared conceptions of reality that give people a sense of reality and stability in everyday life – and as such, they have potential to help shape public life, social relationships and cultural meanings (Heikkilä, 2007). Applied to solve community problems, they may positively expand thinking about future choices – or they may constrain innovation, mislead, or drive wedges between people. The ways that issues and problems are represented and communicated symbolically has implications for local planning processes and outcomes (Bridger, 1997; Panikkar and Tollefson, 2018; Argüelles et al., 2017).

In considering the role of second homeownership and amenity migration, utopian ideals of community and rurality often center on visual and sensory appreciation of landscapes (Shucksmith, 2018). This contrasts with the orientation of people who have lived for a long time in a community, who develop functional and sentimental ties to places and ties to other people. Both kinds of imaginaries were present in our data, with second homeowners expressing imaginaries about Burke as a utopia and permanent residents expressing imaginaries within discourses about Burke's history. These divergent perspectives, in concert with the imaginaries expressed by local leaders, suggest a need to study community tourism transitions that account for diversity in viewpoint along with differences in socioeconomic characteristics.

To date, the amenity migration literature has emphasized study of privileged (primarily white) groups: those with time for leisure, the ability to travel, and the discretionary income to make amenity purchases. The study of tourism imaginaries would have more impact if conducted in more diverse settings. We also recognize that our sample is relatively small, and inattentive to more diverse types of seasonal and permanent residents (Park et al., 2019); a larger, more varied sample of

permanent residents and second homeowners is needed to test the ideas here.

A topic deserving further study in tourism and outdoor recreation is that of the intersections of community, landscape and planning as socio-cultural processes energized by imaginaries. Residents, community officials, businesses, realtors, tourism authorities, neighborhood associations, environmental organizations, and others who speak on behalf of a place all contribute to the imaginaries of place. The study of Burke residents indicates a need for future research about the interactions of imaginaries across sense of self, sense of place, and sense of community in transitioning communities.

Ultimately, notions of community tourism development are themselves imaginaries that vary across groups of people who use rhetorical claims to make sense of who they are, and what life should be like, in the places they live. Evaluating rural community transitions from an imaginaries perspective, and considering how imaginaries vary across types of community residents, presents new approaches to studying both local tourism development and the sustainability of rural communities. Our interpretive rhetorical analysis also directs attention to both the fluidity and fixedness of discursive patterns of imaginaries. We encourage further research about the social, cultural, and spatial aspects of tourism imaginaries, and the ways these affect personal lived realities and influence local planning processes.

Finally, the research presented here suggests a relationship between imaginaries and community planning practices. In this context, though, we offer a caution: planning is not only about tangible objects or sites – it is also about people (Healey, 2010). Tourism and community development involve processes "whereby spokespersons negotiate meaning across both material and symbolic landscapes of memory, place and identity" (Greider and Garkovich, 1994, p. 264). Planning for rural tourism development would benefit from attending to all the rhetorical discursive processes by which imaginaries are constructed, along with the community input and values that decide which imaginaries prevail for different groups of people at given times.

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Author contributions

Patricia Stokowski: Conceptualization; Formal analysis; Supervision; Visualization; Writing - original draft; Writing - review & editing. **Walter Kuentzel:** Conceptualization; Funding acquisition; Project administration; Supervision; Methodology; Writing - review & editing. **Monika Derrien:** Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Data curation; Writing - review & editing. **Yumiko Jakobcic:** Formal analysis; Validation; Methodology; Writing - original draft; Writing - review & editing.

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