

Current Issues in Tourism

Are they companions or intruders? The impact of advertising tourist images on consumers' purchase intentions for tour packages

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Statement of Novelty

The present research makes significant contributions. Firstly, despite the prevalence of tourist images in advertising, so far, no study has provided adequate answers on how they affect consumers' intentions for tour packages. Thus, based on the cognitive consistency theory, this study uncovers the potential interaction between advertising tourist images and the attributes of tour packages, significantly contributing to the knowledge gaps. Secondly, based on the link between individuals' cognition and embodied mental simulation, this work proposes a new boundary condition that tourist images to generate a positive effect through mental simulation, i.e., the presence of the images should not conflict with individual's cognition of the product attributes, providing an important supplement to the mental simulation theory. Additionally, based on the cumulative nature of experience, this study is the first to validate the influence of individuals' travel experience on their responses to tourism advertisements, offering a novel referable insight for future tourism marketing research. Finally, by analyzing the mechanisms and boundary conditions of the positive and negative effects of tourist images in product advertising, the current research offers valuable implications for precise and long-term marketing strategies within the tourism industry.

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5 **Are they companions or intruders? The impact of advertising tourist**
6 **images on consumers' purchase intentions for tour packages**
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1 Are they companions or intruders? The impact of advertising tourist 2 images on consumers' purchase intentions for tour packages

3 Abstract

4 This study investigates how advertising tourist images affects consumers' purchase intentions for
5 group tour packages and self-guided tour packages. In this research, an exploratory content analysis
6 was conducted first to examine the features of advertisements containing (vs. not containing) tourist
7 images. Then, grounded in cognitive consistency theory, three experimental studies were
8 implemented to explore the interaction effect between advertising tourist images and the types of
9 tour packages. The results indicate that advertising tourist images significantly promote (vs. weaken)
10 consumers' purchase intentions for group tour packages (vs. self-guided tour packages). Meanwhile,
11 the influence is mediated by embodied mental simulation, with tourist images promoting (vs.
12 hindering) individuals' mental simulation of the group tour (vs. self-guided tour) experiences and
13 thus increasing (vs. decreasing) intentions. Moreover, this effect is significant only for individuals
14 with extensive relevant travel experience. The present study provides novel insights for tourism
15 visual marketing research and offers important implications for precise and long-term marketing
16 strategies within the tourism industry.

17 **Keywords:** Tourist image; Tourism product; Cognitive consistency theory; Embodied mental
18 simulation; Travel experience; Visual marketing

19 Introduction

20 As the world's second largest tourism market (Ferries, 2024), two main types of tour packages
21 are provided in China, which accounts for 60% of total package consumption (Wang, 2023): the
22 traditional group tour package (GTP) and the emerging self-guided tour package (STP). The former
23 has long been popular due to its competitive pricing and the reduction of uncertainty in tourism
24 environments with tour guide's assistance (Jin et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2013). The latter has recently
25 gained popularity among young people, as it is customizable and allows consumers to add or remove
26 components from the menu provided by merchants (Wen et al., 2021). Most importantly, these two
27 tour packages cater to consumers with different social needs. GTP requires individuals to form
28 groups with unfamiliar members for travel, thereby possessing a strong social attribute (Jin et al.,
29 2014; Wang et al., 2013). In contrast, STP is characterized by its significant private nature, serving
30 consumers who prefer to travel alone to the destinations (Jin et al., 2014; Lin & Kuo, 2018; Wen et

1 al., 2021). These differences in tour package attributes shape consumers' differentiated cognitions
2 of the two packages, which influence individuals' responses to tour package advertisements (Lin &
3 Liao, 2010; Wang et al., 2009).

4 In tour package advertisements, tourist images are one of the most common visual elements
5 (see Figure 1). However, how advertising tourist images affect consumers' responses to tour
6 packages has not been thoroughly examined. Notably, previous findings regarding the influence of
7 advertising tourist images on individuals' responses are mixed. In hotel advertising, these images
8 have been regarded as effective materials for creating a social climate and enhancing booking
9 intentions (Joe et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2020). Conversely, in the advertisements of
10 identity-relevant experiences, tourist images may compete for psychological ownership of the venue,
11 thus weakening viewers' preference (Lu et al., 2023). The presented evidence suggests that our
12 understanding of the role of tourist images in advertising remains insufficient.

13 **[Insert Figure 1. Here]**

14 Considering consumers' cognitive differences between GTP and STP, especially in packages'
15 social versus private nature, the influence of tourist images in tour package advertising may be
16 complex. Drawing on the concept of the gaze, if tourist images are perceived as objects of the
17 "cluster gaze," they are "companions," symbolizing group journeys and celebrations. Conversely,
18 through the "romantic gaze," these images may be interpreted as "intruders" disrupting private
19 journeys (Urry & Larsen, 2011). **Accordingly, the current research aims to verify the potential
20 heterogeneous impact of advertising tourist images across different tour packages and explore the
21 underlying psychological mechanisms.**

22 Grounded in cognitive consistency theory (Akerlof & Dickens, 1982; Festinger, 1957), this
23 research comprises an exploratory content analysis and three experimental studies. Through these
24 studies, it is found that advertising tourist images enhance (vs. weaken) consumers' purchase
25 intentions for GTP (vs. STP). Meanwhile, the process is mediated by embodied mental simulation,
26 as researchers find that the cognitive consistency (vs. dissonance) induced by tourist images
27 increases (vs. decreases) the simulation of group tour experiences (vs. self-guided tour experiences)
28 and thus positively (vs. negatively) affects purchase intentions. In addition, researchers propose that
29 relevant travel experience serves as a moderator, suggesting that the effect is significant only when
30 consumers have accumulated sufficient travel experience.

1 The present research makes significant contributions. Firstly, despite the prevalence of tourist
2 images in advertising (Nikjoo & Bakhshi, 2019), so far, no study has provided adequate answers on
3 how they affect consumers' intentions for tour packages. Thus, based on the cognitive consistency
4 theory, this study uncovers the potential interaction between advertising tourist images and the
5 attributes of tour packages, significantly contributing to the knowledge gaps. Secondly, based on the
6 link between individuals' cognition and embodied mental simulation, this work proposes a new
7 boundary condition that tourist images to generate a positive effect through mental simulation (Li
8 & Wan, 2025; Wang et al., 2024), i.e., the presence of the images should not conflict with
9 individual's cognition of the product attributes, providing an important supplement to the mental
10 simulation theory. Additionally, based on the cumulative nature of experience (Dodd et al., 2005),
11 this study is the first to validate the influence of individuals' travel experience on their responses to
12 tourism advertisements, offering a novel referable insight for future tourism marketing research.
13 Finally, by analyzing the mechanisms and boundary conditions of the positive and negative effects
14 of tourist images in product advertising, the current research offers valuable implications for precise
15 and long-term marketing strategies within the tourism industry.

16 **Literature review and hypotheses**

17 *The differences in consumers' cognitions of tour packages*

18 Due to the significant differences in forms and contents when conducting tourism activities,
19 previous research has shown that people hold different cognitions for GTP and STP. To be specific,
20 consumers consider GTP as having strong social attributes, and the companion from unfamiliar
21 group members becoming an indispensable part when participating in group tours (Chiang & Chen,
22 2014; Lin & Liao, 2010; Wang et al., 2013; Wong & Wang, 2009). However, STP, on the other hand,
23 is associated with autonomy and privacy, tourists on self-guided tours usually travel alone or with
24 some acquaintances, typically individuals do not need to meet new group members (Lin & Kuo,
25 2018; Prayag et al., 2015; Wen et al., 2021). This difference in cognition influences consumers'
26 choice of tour packages. For instance, GTP gains its popularity among seniors (Wang et al., 2013)
27 and consumers with collectivist quality (Jin et al., 2014), who expect not to travel by themselves.
28 Whereas for people who have a greater desire to find new experiences on their own at destinations,
29 STP is a more suitable choice (Jin et al., 2014). Especially during the epidemic period, STP allows
30 individuals to avoid the risks of virus infection within a group, making it a safer option (Wen et al.,
31 2021).

1 A few studies have revealed that such cognitive differences can lead to consumers' differential
2 responses to tour package advertising. For instance, researchers suggest that advertisements of GTP
3 containing socializing information are more attractive to consumers (Wang et al., 2009).
4 Additionally, the headline texts emphasizing the tour package's attribute (i.e., telling its group or
5 self-guided nature) is a significant element enhancing consumers' preference towards products (Lin
6 & Liao, 2010). However, although prior studies cite that tourist image serves a crucial part in visual
7 marketing (Deng & Liu, 2021; Nikjoo & Bakhshi, 2019), no research has examined whether they
8 would affect consumers' intention for both tour packages. Targeting this gap, the current research
9 aims to contribute to the literature by validating the potential impact of tourist image in tour package
10 advertising.

11 *The influence of tourist images on consumers*

12 Tourist image has long been one of the most salient visual elements in advertising, with studies
13 showing that nearly 40% of the pictures on social media containing tourist images (Nikjoo &
14 Bakhshi, 2019), but it is worth noting that empirical evidence about the influence of these images
15 on consumers' responses is complex. For example, many studies have validated that the presence of
16 tourists can generate positive responses among viewers in various contexts, including user-
17 generated photos (Bakhshi et al., 2014; Lu et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024), destination photos (Li &
18 Wan, 2025; Zhang et al., 2023), and hotel advertising (Joe et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021; Ye et al.,
19 2020). However, some researchers have concluded the tourist images can induce negative effects on
20 audiences in similar scenarios (Li et al., 2023; Lu et al., 2023).

21 For these mixed results, researchers have provided diverse explanations. Among them, one of
22 the representative findings is that tourist images can produce sociability and activate consumers'
23 positive intention (Joe et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2020). For instance, Joe et al. (2021)
24 found that the images of other customers in hotel advertising can activate individuals' expectation
25 of socializing with others and induce the need for belongingness, thus enhancing consumers booking
26 intention. In addition, researchers reported similar results in the contexts of hotel booking websites
27 (Park et al., 2021) and P2P accommodation booking platform (Ye et al., 2020). However, the positive
28 impacts of the tourist images mentioned above are concentrated in the hospitality scenarios, which
29 contain salient social attributes (Joe et al., 2021). In contrast, if the scenarios involve private
30 attributes, the impact of the tourist images may become completely negative. Evidence is shown in
31 Lu et al. (2023)'s study, where they found tourist images in the photos of identity-relevant
32 experiences will weaken viewers' preference for the venue (e.g., the vacation destinations, hiking

1 trails, and wedding venues). This is because the presence of tourists threatens viewers' feelings of
2 personal ownership, leading them to believe the venue belongs to others, thus decreasing their liking
3 or preference (Lu et al., 2023).

4 To sum up, it is obvious that whether the tourist images have a positive or negative effect needs
5 to be considered within the advertising context. Considering the significant differences in consumers'
6 cognition of GTP and STP attributes (i.e., sociability versus privacy), advertising tourist images may
7 elicit consumers' diverse reactions. However, currently, no researchers have yet focused on this issue.
8 To address the gaps, this research aims to use a mixed method to reveal the potential matching
9 mechanisms between tourism package attributes and advertising tourist images.

10 ***The impact of advertising tourist images on tour package purchase intention***

11 According to cognitive consistency theory, when faced with new information, consumers
12 prefer the part that is consistent with their existing cognitive systems (Festinger, 1957), and this can
13 activate the state of cognitive harmony, which is pleasurable to individuals and thus they show
14 favorable attitudes and higher evaluations of the objects (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955; Tseng &
15 Wang, 2023). Grounded in this theory, empirical evidence shows that advertising information that
16 is in line with consumers' cognition can promote individuals' positive intentions for destinations
17 and tourism products. For example, researchers found that in the celebrity endorsing context,
18 individuals have differential cognitions of destinations' and celebrities' personalities; thus,
19 celebrity–destination consistency in personality activates consumers' stronger intention to visit the
20 destination (Pradhan et al., 2023). Other studies have validated the consistency between backstory
21 and destination (Xu & Chen, 2024); between the video's background music and destination (Zhou
22 & Jiao, 2024); between logo typeface and destination (Li & Ma, 2023) can also produce such
23 positive effect. Similarly, in heritage souvenir selling contexts, when consumers realize the
24 advertising inheritors' images are highly consistent with souvenirs, they are more likely to germinate
25 purchase behaviors (Guo & Zhu, 2023).

26 However, the positive effects activated by consistency do not always exist. In contrast, if the
27 information conflicts with consumers' knowledge, experience, or cultural beliefs, cognitive
28 dissonance may arise (Akerlof & Dickens, 1982). This dissonance can trigger a mental discomfort
29 state, where individuals deploy psychological resources to rectify the incongruence, resulting in
30 aversion and lower evaluations of the objects (Guo et al., 2018; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). In the visual
31 marketing field, researchers have unearthed that cognitive dissonance significantly reduces

1 consumers' intention for the products. For instance, Zhang et al. (2024) suggest that photos from
2 merchants construct consumers' basic cognition of hotels, in this case, if the user-generated photos
3 on the online platforms are inconsistent with the former (e.g., the color and contents in photos),
4 individuals' booking intention will be weakened. Additionally, consumers are not likely to purchase
5 green resort products when noticing the reviews that conflict with green attributes (Tanford &
6 Montgomery, 2015).

7 Based on the evidence above, the current research posits that advertising tourist images elicits
8 divergent effects on consumers. Because tourist images symbolize sociability (Joe et al., 2021; Park
9 et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2020), which is consistent with individuals' cognition of GTPs (i.e., containing
10 strong social attributes), the images thus enhance consumers' purchase intentions for GTPs. In
11 contrast, this sociability conflicts with the private attributes of STPs and generates cognitive
12 dissonance in individuals, which in turn negatively affects consumers' purchase intention. Hence,
13 the research proposes the following serial hypotheses.

14 **H1a: Advertising tourist images positively affect consumers' purchase intention for GTPs.**

15 **H1b: Advertising tourist images negatively affect consumers' purchase intention for STPs.**

16 *The mediating effect of embodied mental simulation*

17 Embodied mental simulation suggests that consumers activate their memory and cognitive
18 systems in response to visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory information and utilize these cues to
19 simulate specific situations of future product experiences (Bagatini et al., 2023; Elder & Krishna,
20 2011; Xie et al., 2016). The literature in the field of visual marketing has uncovered the positive
21 effects that embodied mental simulation can generate. For instance, Elder and Krishna (2011)
22 suggest that if a product image (e.g., the yogurt with a spoon in it) orienting toward participants'
23 dominant hands, it will lead individuals to simulate interacting with the product and then increases
24 their purchase intentions. Similarly, Bagatini et al. (2023) suggest that pictures of fashion products
25 with human models can germinate greater purchase intentions as consumers will imagine wearing
26 them. Additionally, researchers underscore that embodied mental simulation is related to individuals'
27 cognition and previous experience, consumers are more likely to facilitate imagery if the
28 information is consistent with their cognitive systems (Elder & Krishna, 2011; Xie et al., 2016).

29 Meanwhile, researchers have validated the simulation of travel experiences when consumers

1 are viewing tourism advertisements (Li & Wan, 2025; Tercia et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2024). Among
2 them, some studies recognize the positive effect that tourist images have on embodied mental
3 simulation. Specifically, tourist images can prompt viewers to simulate scenarios of admiring the
4 landscape or interacting with the scene (Li & Wan, 2025), triggering consumers' visual mental
5 imagery related to tourism products (Wang et al., 2024), thereby enhancing perceived destination's
6 attractiveness and individuals' visit interest. In the meantime, Li and Wan (2025) also point out the
7 boundary condition of this positive effect-the images should have invisible faces. That is because
8 the unfamiliar faces will make individuals believe the travel experiences belong to others rather than
9 themselves (Li & Wan, 2025).

10 Integrating the existing literature, this study proposes that embodied mental simulation
11 mediates the mechanism in Hypothesis 1. Tourist images, seen as others, may help individuals to
12 simulate the experiences in group tours. These unfamiliar images could prompt consumers to
13 imagine they are interacting with new group members during travel, then enhance their purchase
14 intention for GTPs. Conversely, as seeking private experience in self-guided tours, individuals
15 expect to interact with the destination's scenery on their own, the simulation process may be
16 prohibited by tourist images when viewing advertisements of STPs, thus hindering purchase
17 intentions. Formally, this study posits the following hypothesis.

18 **H2: The impact of advertising tourist images on consumers' purchase intention for tour**
19 **packages is mediated by embodied mental simulation.**

20 *The moderating role of relevant travel experience*

21 Relevant travel experience is defined as the sum of an individual's experience of participating
22 in travel activities associated with a travel product (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Bettman & Park,
23 1980; Li et al., 2021). It can be measured both subjectively and objectively, where the former draws
24 on consumers' subjective evaluations of their own experience (Dodd et al., 2005; Tassiello &
25 Tillotson, 2020), and the latter is reflected in the frequency of actual consumption of the products
26 over a certain period (Baloglu, 2001; Li et al., 2021). Prior research has found that rich travel
27 experience negatively affects consumers' information searching intentions before a trip (Sharifpour
28 et al., 2014; Teichmann, 2011) and increases impulse purchase intentions during a trip (Li et al.,
29 2021). The mechanism behind this is that individuals' travel experience will cumulate as subjective
30 knowledge and conduct their cognitive system, which germinates consumers' self-confidence and
31 hence affect their intentions (Li et al., 2021; Tassiello & Tillotson, 2020). However, when

1 individuals lack travel experience, the influence above will disappear or even reverse as their
2 knowledge and cognition are insufficient (Li et al., 2021; Tassiello & Tillotson, 2020).

3 Based on the evidence, this research posits that relevant travel experience serves as a moderator
4 in the influence of tourist images on tour package purchase intention. Specifically, consumers who
5 lack relevant travel experience are initially still accumulating knowledge and may not realize the
6 different attributes of two types of tour packages (Bettman & Park, 1980; Tassiello & Tillotson,
7 2020). Consequently, the effect of tourist images is not enough to be activated. However, as
8 individuals will develop heuristic cognitive patterns as the amount of experience increases (Li et al.,
9 2021), thus cognitive consistency (vs. dissonance) is generated when seeing tourist images in
10 advertisements of GTP (vs. STP), hence affecting following intentions. Thus, this study proposes.

11 **H3: The impact of advertising tourist images is significant for consumers with extensive**
12 **relevant travel experience, while the impact is not significant for consumers who lack relevant**
13 **travel experience.**

14 **[Insert Figure 2. Here]**

15 **Methodology**

16 Before conducting experiments, two pilot studies were undertaken to design the stimulus
17 materials. Prior research has indicated that the features of tourist images in advertisements may
18 affect consumers' responses, such as facial expressions (Li & Wan, 2025; Schoner-Schatz et al.,
19 2021), gender and age (Deng & Liu, 2021). Therefore, to ensure the generalizability of the current
20 research's findings, it is crucial to figure out what features of tour package advertisements are
21 associated with the presence (vs. absence) of tourist images. Thus, Pilot Study 1 conducted an
22 exploratory content analysis to analyze the features of advertisements containing (vs. not containing)
23 tourist images. Then, based on the results above, Pilot Study 2 was implemented to determine the
24 materials and test the effectiveness of the stimuli.

25 Three experimental studies were then conducted to test the hypotheses. Study 1 tested the main
26 effect (H1a and H1b). Study 2 examined the mediating effect of embodied mental simulation (H2).
27 Study 3 was designed to validate the moderating effect of relevant travel experience (H3). Credamo
28 (<https://www.credamo.com/#/>), the Chinese leading and professional online survey platform, was
29 employed to recruit participants in all studies by researchers. Before implementing experiments,

1 researchers used G*Power to calculate the ideal sample size for each study (Faul et al., 2009), setting
2 account factors such as two-tailed, 80% power, 5% false-positive, and medium effect size (i.e., 0.5).
3 The overview of all studies can be found in Table 1.

4 [Insert Table 1. Here]

5 Pilot Study 1

6 To analyze the features of tour package advertisements, an exploratory content analysis was
7 done. This analysis leveraged manual coding to recognize the advertising visual elements in terms
8 of absolute counts and percentages based on the presence or absence of tourist images.

9 *Data collection*

10 The current research chose Ctrip (<https://www.ctrip.com/>) as the data source platform to collect
11 the advertisement samples. Ctrip is the third largest Online travel agency in the world in terms of
12 market capitalization, occupying 36.3% market share of China (Walker, 2024). By reviewing the
13 report published by China Tourism Academy (CTA, 2023), researchers selected Sanya, Lijiang, and
14 Suzhou as the case destinations, mainly based on the total number of tourists in 2022 and the range
15 of landscape types among these destinations.

16 Then, researchers captured advertisements of tour packages from the platform. To ensure the
17 diversity of samples, advertisements were collected on two of the peak tourist dates in China, i.e.,
18 the golden weeks of May Day (5/2023) and National Day (10/2023). Then, 450 advertisements were
19 collected (150 for each destination) on each date. After eliminating duplicates, a saturation point
20 had been reached in that there was little further variation in the style and content of the samples.
21 The final dataset comprised 804 advertisements, with Sanya, Lijiang, and Suzhou contributing 262
22 (33%), 273 (34%), and 269 (33%) samples, respectively.

23 *Data analysis*

24 The research utilized manual coding to analyze the content of all advertisements. First, 100
25 samples were randomly selected from the dataset, and two researchers independently coded them to
26 establish preliminary coding frames. Subsequently, the two researchers checked, negotiated, and
27 consistently interpreted the coding frames under the supervision of the third researcher to determine
28 the final coding frame used in this study. Then, the first two researchers fully coded the 804 samples

1 based on this frame. Finally, a third researcher performed the calculation and assessment of coding
2 consistency. The study employed Holsti's reliability (Holsti, 1969) and Cohen's kappa value (Cohen,
3 1960) as the indicators of consistency. The values were 0.967 and 0.908, respectively, indicating
4 high consistency, and thus, there were no issues with the dataset.

5 **Results**

6 *Features of destination Landscape*

7 Of the samples, 409 (51%) did not include tourist images and completely featuring destination
8 scenery. As detailed in Table 2, the predominant element across these advertisements for the three
9 cities was destination scenery, accounting for 72%. The scenery typically showed iconic
10 characteristics of the destinations, such as the sandy shores and ocean vistas in Sanya, the snow-
11 capped mountains and unique residential architecture in Lijiang, and the picturesque water town in
12 Suzhou, highlighting the distinct appeal of each destination. Moreover, for Sanya and Lijiang, where
13 the hotel and resort industries are relatively well developed, hospitality facilities frequently emerged
14 as the thematic focus of the advertisements, a trend less observed in Suzhou. Other elements,
15 including transportation and recreation facilities, plants, and animals, were less featured, appearing
16 in less than 5% of all.

17 **[Insert Table 2. Here]**

18 *Features of tourist images*

19 A total of 395 (49%) samples contained tourist images. Table 3 outlines the main features of
20 these advertisements in terms of absolute counts and percentages. Among them, 54% contained two
21 tourists, with a mean of 2.12 people (SD = 1.30) depicted. Most of the advertisements include both
22 male and female images (59%), this gender-balanced presentation strategy has been widely used in
23 advertising (Mohan et al., 2022). In addition, young and middle-aged people are predominantly
24 featured (74%). 16% depicted a multiple age range, typically to evoke family travel. It is worth
25 noting that most tourist images displayed visible faces with enjoyable facial expressions (64%), with
26 some bodily interaction (90%), and facing towards the viewer (52%). In comparison, a minority of
27 them were with invisible faces and showed their backs to the viewer (18%). Notably, considering
28 issues such as endorsement costs and business revenue (Wang et al., 2019), only 6% of the
29 advertisements used celebrity images.

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1 [Insert Table 3. Here]

2 Pilot Study 2

3 Based on the results of Pilot Study 1, researchers conducted Pilot Study 2 to determine the
4 stimulus materials for the following experimental studies. A survey was completed through
5 Credamo with a total of 105 respondents ($M_{\text{age}}=28.9$). In this survey, researchers selected nine
6 representative groups of tourist images and destination landscapes for the three case destinations
7 (i.e., Sanya, Lijiang, Suzhou). Then, respondents were invited to evaluate their attractiveness, and
8 then three groups of images were finalized, as shown in Table 4.

9 To ensure the stimulus materials were effective in manipulating, the study recruited 75 (M_{age}
10 $=27.32$) participants to complete a pretest. After viewing each advertisement, participants were
11 asked to report whether the advertisement was designed for GTP or STP and whether it contained
12 tourist images or not. The measure items were referenced from Magnini and Kim (2016) and Wen
13 et al. (2021). The results showed that participants were able to distinguish whether the advertisement
14 is for a GTP ($M_{\text{GTP}}=5.84$, $SD=1.27$; $M_{\text{STP}}=2.55$, $SD=1.46$; $p<0.001$) or for a STP ($M_{\text{GTP}}=2.95$,
15 $SD=1.75$; $M_{\text{STP}}=5.76$, $SD=1.30$; $p<0.001$). Similarly, the presence of advertising tourist images
16 ($M_{\text{presence}}=5.96$, $SD=1.25$; $M_{\text{absence}}=2.15$, $SD=0.73$; $p<0.001$) and their absence ($M_{\text{presence}}=2.40$,
17 $SD=1.00$; $M_{\text{absence}}=5.53$, $SD=1.12$; $p<0.001$) could also be recognized. Therefore, the materials
18 were effective in manipulating.

19 [Insert Table 4. Here]

20 Study 1

21 *Design and participants*

22 Study 1 utilized Sanya as a case destination and designed a 2 (tour package: GTP vs. STP) \times 2
23 (tourist image: presence vs. absence) between-subjects experiment to test the main effect (H1a and
24 H1b). Participants were randomly recruited through Credamo. The study designed two control items
25 to exclude the interference of participants' past experience and interest, including "I have been to
26 Sanya" and "I have no interest in traveling to Sanya," and participants who responded affirmatively
27 to either were excluded. Finally, 160 participants (40.63% male, $M_{\text{age}}=30.81$) who passed the
28 control check were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental groups.

1 **Procedure**

2 Participants first read a piece of text conveying a scenario where they are shopping for a GTP
3 (vs. STP) to Sanya on an online platform based on the group they were assigned to. Then, they were
4 shown an advertisement with or without tourist images. Next, participants reported their purchase
5 intention through three items rated on a seven-point scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.905$, AVE=0.849,
6 CR=0.944), which were referenced from Yin et al. (2017). Finally, descriptive statistics and
7 demographic information of the participants were recorded.

8 **Results**

9 An independent samples T-test was conducted to examine participants' purchase intentions. As
10 expected, in the GTP groups, participants had stronger purchase intention when viewing
11 advertisements with tourist images ($M_{\text{absence}} = 4.983$, $SD = 1.377$; $M_{\text{presence}} = 5.633$, $SD = 1.311$, $t =$
12 2.162 , $p = 0.034$). Whereas in the STP groups, participants had stronger purchase intention when
13 advertising tourist images is absent ($M_{\text{absence}} = 5.775$, $SD = 0.741$; $M_{\text{presence}} = 4.883$, $SD = 1.529$,
14 $t = 3.318$, $p = 0.002$). Thus, study 1 supported H1a and H1b.

15 The study also used ANOVA analyses to exclude irrelevant factors that may interfere with the
16 mechanism. The results showed that participants' gender, age, educational level, occupation type,
17 and income level had no significant influence ($p > 0.05$).

18 **Study 2**

19 **Design and participants**

20 Study 2 used Lijiang as a case destination and designed a 2 (tour package: GTP vs. STP) \times 2
21 (tourist image: presence vs. absence) between-subjects experiment to test the mediating effect of
22 embodied mental simulation (H2). Then, 152 participants (42.76% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 31.12$) who passed
23 the control check were randomly recruited through Credamo and were randomly assigned to one of
24 the four experimental groups.

25 **Procedure**

26 Similar to study 1, participants were requested to imagine purchasing tour packages to Lijiang
27 online, and then they were shown an advertisement with or without tourist images. Before reporting

1 purchase intention, participants were asked to indicate the extent of mental simulation. The study
2 used three items referred to Elder and Krishna (2011) on a seven-point scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.852$,
3 AVE=0.774, CR=0.911). Finally, participants reported their purchase intention, and the descriptive
4 statistics and demographic information were recorded.

5 **Results**

6 As expected, the results of the independent sample T-test showed that participants in the GTP
7 groups had a stronger purchase intention when seeing advertising tourist images presence (M_{absence}
8 =4.702, SD =1.382; $M_{\text{presence}} =5.781$, SD =0.901, $t=-4.032$, $p<0.001$), but in the STP groups they
9 had a stronger purchase intention when viewing advertisements without tourist images (M_{absence}
10 =5.798, SD =0.603; $M_{\text{presence}} = 4.816$, SD =1.258, $t=4.340$, $p<0.001$), which again verified H1.

11 In addition, the embodied mental simulation showed the same trend as purchase intention. In
12 the GTP groups, participants had a stronger mental simulation when tourist images were present
13 ($M_{\text{absence}} =4.772$, SD =1.425; $M_{\text{presence}} =5.702$, SD =1.028, $t=-3.263$, $p=0.002$). However, in STP
14 groups, participants had a stronger mental simulation when seeing advertisements without tourist
15 images ($M_{\text{absence}} =5.763$, SD =0.639; $M_{\text{presence}} = 5.026$, SD =1.325, $t=3.088$, $p=0.003$).

16 To examine the mediating role played by embodied mental simulation, the study utilized
17 PROCESS Model 4 with 5000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2017). The results showed that the
18 mediating effect was significant in both the GTP groups (Effect=0.580, SE=0.219, 95% CI [0.460,
19 0.787]) and STP groups (Effect=-0.305, SE=0.140, 95% CI [-0.612, -0.065]). Additionally, the
20 direct effect of advertising tourist images on purchase intention was also significant ($\beta_{\text{GTP}} = 0.499$,
21 $SE_{\text{GTP}} = 0.215$, 95% CI_{GTP} [0.069, 0.928]; $\beta_{\text{STP}} = -0.677$, $SE_{\text{STP}} = 0.218$, 95% CI_{STP} [-1.112, -0.243]).
22 The results indicated that embodied mental simulation partially mediated the influence of
23 advertising tourist images on purchase intention, which supported H2.

24 **Study 3**

25 ***Design and participants***

26 Study 3 used Suzhou as a case destination and designed a 2 (tour package: GTP vs. STP) \times 2
27 (tourist image: presence vs. absence) between-subjects experiment to examine the moderating effect
28 of relevant travel experience (H3). A total of 156 participants (41.03% male, $M_{\text{age}} =29.22$) who

1 passed the control check were randomly recruited through Credamo and were randomly assigned to
2 one of the four experimental groups.

3 ***Procedure***

4 Similar to the previous studies, after viewing the text materials and advertisements, participants
5 first reported embodied mental simulation. Then, they were asked to complete two items to measure
6 relevant travel experience from both subjective and objective dimensions, which were adapted from
7 Dodd et al. (2005) and Li et al. (2021). Finally, purchase intention was measured, and descriptive
8 statistics and demographics of the participants were recorded.

9 ***Results***

10 The study first conducted two-way ANOVA to test the interacting effects of advertising tourist
11 images and relevant travel experiences on embodied mental simulation and purchase intention. In
12 the GTP groups, the interacting effects were significant on both embodied mental simulation ($F(1, 74) = 7.896, p = 0.006$) and purchase intention ($F(1, 74) = 7.507, p = 0.008$). Similarly, in the STP
13 groups, the effects were also significant on embodied mental simulation ($F(1, 74) = 7.161, p = 0.009$)
14 and purchase intention ($F(1, 74) = 5.304, p = 0.024$). These results suggested that a moderating test
15 was appropriate.

16
17 Then, the study utilized Johnson-Neyman analysis to test the moderating role played by
18 relevant travel experience, which allowed observing the significance at different experience levels
19 (Carden et al., 2017; Spiller et al., 2013), and the results were shown in Table 5. Then, floodlight
20 analysis was completed through RStudio 4.3.2, and the plots were shown in Figures 3 and 4.

21 **[Insert Table 5. Here]**

22 In the GTP groups, for participants whose relevant travel experience was higher than 2.55 (M-
23 0.28SD, $M = 2.846, SD = 1.048$; 51.28% of total), advertising tourist images had a significant positive
24 effect on embodied mental simulation, and for whose experience was higher than 2.73 (M-0.11SD;
25 51.28% of total), tourist images positively affected purchase intention. For the rest of the participants
26 who had less experience, the impact was not significant (See Figure 3).

27 **[Insert Figure 3. Here]**

1 In the STP groups, for participants whose experience was higher than 3.86 (M=0.16SD,
2 M=4.058, SD=1.235; 64.10% of total), tourist images had a significantly negative effect on
3 embodied mental simulation, and for whose experience was higher than 3.56 (M=0.40SD; 64.10%
4 of total), tourist images negatively affect purchase intention. For the rest of the participants who had
5 less experience, the influence was not significant (See Figure 4). Thus, the results supported H3.

6 **[Insert Figure 4. Here]**

7 **Conclusion and discussion**

8 ***Conclusion***

9 The current research was to investigate the potential impact of tourist image in tour package
10 advertising. Specifically, based on individuals' cognitive differences between GTP and STP, this
11 research aimed to validate the diverse responses that tourist images could elicit on consumers'
12 purchase intentions for GTPs and STPs. Further, researchers introduced and examined the mediating
13 role played by embodied mental simulation while testing relevant travel experience as a moderator
14 of the entire mechanism. The main findings could be concluded as follows.

15 First, this research validated that the interaction between individuals' cognitions of tour
16 packages and advertising tourist images did affect consumers' purchase intention. It was found that
17 tourist images positively influenced consumers' purchase intention for GTPs because tourist images
18 symbolized sociability (Joe et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2020) and matched with GTPs'
19 group attributes, cognitive consistency was consequently engendered and promoted consumers'
20 intention (Festinger, 1957; Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955). In contrast, this sociability conflicted
21 with STPs' private attributes and activated cognitive dissonance in consumers (Akerlof & Dickens,
22 1982), which in turn weakened purchase intention for STPs.

23 Second, the mediating effect of embodied mental simulation was determined. Echoing the prior
24 findings that tourist images can promote individuals' mental simulation of travel experience and
25 germinate positive intentions (Li & Wan, 2025; Wang et al., 2024), this research found a similar
26 mechanism in GTP advertising contexts, since these images as others helped individuals to simulate
27 the experiences in group tours, i.e., interacting with unfamiliar members during the trip. However,
28 as consumers seek private experiences in self-guided tours, tourist images become intrusive visual
29 elements that prevent individuals from imagining interacting with the destination's scenery on their

1 own. Therefore, the simulation process was interrupted, and hence, purchase intention was
2 weakened.

3 **Third, this research revealed the moderating role that relevant travel experience played.**
4 Specifically, inexperienced consumers were still initially accumulating knowledge and lacked
5 cognition of the different attributes of two tour package types (Bettman & Park, 1980; Tassiello &
6 Tillotson, 2020). Therefore, the impact of advertising tourist images was not significant among
7 individuals with less relevant travel experience. Conversely, when individuals' experience met a
8 certain threshold, cognitive consistency or dissonance would be activated by advertising tourist
9 images, which affected consumers' mental simulation and purchase intention.

10 ***Theoretical contribution***

11 This research has important contributions to the existing literature in several ways. Firstly,
12 although previous studies have explored the impact of tourist images in advertising, most of them
13 mainly focused on how tourist images influence consumers' preference and visit intentions to the
14 destinations (Li & Wan, 2025; Lu et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). Additionally,
15 while researchers have documented the significant differences in tour packages' attributes (Jin et al.,
16 2014; Lin & Kuo, 2018; Wang et al., 2013; Wen et al., 2021), currently no study has explored
17 whether advertising tourist images would germinate diverse influences on consumers' decision
18 when purchasing tour packages. **By linking consumers' cognitive differences of tour packages to
19 the sociability engendered by tourist images, this study uncovers the phenomenon of consumers'
20 cognitive consistency and dissonance that exists in tourism product advertising contexts. Hence, the
21 current study enriches consumer decision-making research and provides a new perspective to the
22 field of tourism marketing.**

23 Secondly, this study develops the theory of embodied mental simulation by revealing a new
24 boundary condition of its positive effects in tourism advertising contexts. Prior research has
25 indicated the positive effect that tourist images can generate as they promote consumers' mental
26 simulation of travel experiences (Li & Wan, 2025; Wang et al., 2024). **However, the present research
27 posits a condition that is necessary for tourist images to work positively through mental simulation,
28 i.e., these images must be in line with consumers' cognitions of the destination or products. Thus,
29 this study provides a more comprehensive perspective for understanding mental simulation.**

30 **In addition, this work is the first to introduce travel experience into tourism advertising contexts**

1 and validates its effects on consumers. Although previous studies have shown individuals' travel
2 experience shaped their behaviors before and during trips (Li et al., 2021; Teichmann, 2011), no
3 researcher has focused on the potential impact of travel experience on consumers' responses towards
4 advertisements. The current study, based on the cumulative nature of experience, confirms the
5 differentiated responses to advertisements in high and low experience consumers, consequently
6 expanding the application of travel experience in the field of tourism marketing.

7 Finally, grounded in cognitive consistency theory (Akerlof & Dickens, 1982; Festinger, 1957),
8 this research reveals the psychological mechanism that links the advertising tourist images to
9 consumers' purchase intentions for tour packages, thereby providing a theoretical foundation for
10 tourism marketers. Most importantly, based on the mechanism of cognition formation and its impact
11 on individuals' psychology and behavior, this work effectively integrates the concepts of embodied
12 mental simulation and travel experience, providing a referable theoretical framework for future
13 visual marketing research.

14 ***Practical implication***

15 As important marketing tools, advertisements for tour packages should be differentiated by
16 visual design. To be specific, in GTP advertising, tourist images should be utilized more, featuring
17 enjoyable facial expressions, young male and female companions, and interactive body postures.
18 However, in STP advertising, merchants should avoid using tourist images as they will interfere
19 with consumers' mental simulations. Instead, advertisements that purely depict destination scenery
20 should be utilized more for STP.

21 More importantly, tourism merchants should adopt differentiated advertising strategies for
22 consumers with different levels of travel experience. Precisely, for consumers who regularly
23 purchase GTP products, especially those with rich group tour experience, merchants should push
24 more advertisements with tourist images to those consumers. Advertisements without tourist images
25 should be pushed more for those who often purchase STP products, especially those who have rich
26 self-guided tour experience.

27 Additionally, the present research provided important support for long-term marketing as the
28 consistency between consumers' cognition and advertising information is a key factor that affects
29 purchase decisions, which cannot be separated from the influence of individuals' travel experience.
30 Thus, for newly created travel products, a long-term normalized marketing strategy should be

1 adopted to promote consumers' cognition of these new products in subtle ways (e.g., push reports
2 on product-related events to the consumers), which could be a useful way to improve the
3 effectiveness of advertisements.

4 ***Limitations and future research***

5 This research has some limitations. First, considering the main features of advertisements on
6 the present online travel agency, all the stimulus materials used consisted of two companion tourists,
7 including male and female, whereas images of single or group tourists (i.e., three or more people)
8 were not considered, thus the materials design should be enriched in future research. Second, while
9 there are many other types of advertising, such as videos and interactive advertisements, this study
10 only considered photo advertisements, the advertising form should be included as a potential factor
11 that may affect consumers' intentions in future studies. In addition, previous studies have shown
12 that individuals' cognitions may be influenced by culture (Cowan & Spielmann, 2020). Since all of
13 the participants were recruited in China, who advocated collectivism (Hofstede, 1983), they might
14 have a natural preference for companionable images. Thus, participants from a wider range of
15 regions should be recruited in the future to increase the generalizability of the conclusions.

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19 **Declarations of competing interest**

20 The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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For Peer Review

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Some photo advertisements captured from Ctrip (Pilot Study 1)



Appendix B. Experimental scenarios

Group tour package (GTP)

Recently, due to the physical and mental stress, you decide to give yourself a vacation and take a trip. You have enough time and money. To save energy, you come to an online travel agency (OTA) platform to buy group tour packages. Among all the destinations, you finally pick out Sanya/ Lijiang/ Suzhou. Below is the product description of the Sanya/ Lijiang/ Suzhou group tour packages you find on the OTA platform, please read it carefully:

Chinese version

<p>团队服务</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 含司机接送和导游讲解服务 全程安排专业中英文双语导游和司机负责带团 10人成团 2人起订，不足10人与陌生人拼团 	<p>交通</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 飞机往返 行中用车 精品轿车或旅游车（含景区交通） 	<p>游玩</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10个景点（固定） 无购物活动
<p>住宿</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 五星酒店 含4晚精品五星级酒店 	<p>餐食</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 精美特色餐食 餐厅与食物固定 	

1 **English version**

 团队服务 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Including driver pick-up and tour guide service Professional bilingual tour guides and drivers will be arranged throughout the entire tour• Tour group of ten people Reservation threshold is at least two people Less than ten people need to form a group with strangers	 交通 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Round trip flight• Transportation for tour Premium sedan or coach (including transportation to scenic spots)	 游玩 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 10 attractions (fixed)• No shopping activity
 住宿 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• five-star hotel Includes 4 nights in a boutique five-star hotel	 餐食 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exquisite special meals Restaurants and food are fixed	

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4 **Self-guided tour package (STP)**

5 Recently, due to the physical and mental stress, you decide to give yourself a vacation and take a
6 trip. You have enough time and money, To save energy, you come to an online travel agency (OTA)
7 platform to buy self-guided tour packages. Among all the destinations, you finally pick out Sanya/
8 Lijiang/ Suzhou. Below is the product description of the Sanya/ Lijiang/ Suzhou self-guided tour
9 packages you find on the OTA platform, please read it carefully:

11 **Chinese version**

 团队服务 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 含司机接送和导游讲解服务 安排司机负责景区接送与双语导游讲解（自选）• 无旅游团 人数无限制，即订即走，产品服务自由组合	 交通 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 飞机往返• 行中用车 精品轿车或旅游车（含景区交通）	 游玩 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 10个景点（自选）• 无购物活动
 住宿 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 五星酒店 含4晚精品五星级酒店	 餐食 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 精美特色餐食 餐厅和食物自选	

13 **English version**

 团队服务 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Including driver pick-up and tour guide service Drivers between scenic spots and bilingual tour guides (all optional)• No tour group No limit to the number of people, order now and go Optional combination of products and services	 交通 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Round trip flight• Transportation for tour Premium sedan or coach (including transportation to scenic spots)	 游玩 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 10 attractions (optional)• No shopping activity
 住宿 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• five-star hotel Includes 4 nights in a boutique five-star hotel	 餐食 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exquisite special meals Choose your own restaurants and food	

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1 **Appendix C. Experimental stimuli**

2 **Study 1 - GTP**

3 **[Tourist images presence]**

4



跟团游

5♥ 海南三亚5日4晚跟团游
初游经典 万人好评 国际品牌旗舰线! 【喜...
官方自营 “这五天过得太快乐啦!” “很享受的体验”
5.0分 已售 999 人 ¥2999 起

5 **[Tourist images absence]**

6



跟团游

5♥ 海南三亚5日4晚跟团游
初游经典 万人好评 国际品牌旗舰线! 【喜...
官方自营 “这五天过得太快乐啦!” “很享受的体验”
5.0分 已售 999 人 ¥2999 起

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8 **Study 1 - STP**

9 **[Tourist images presence]**

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自由行

5♥ 海南三亚5日4晚自由行
初游经典 万人好评 国际品牌旗舰线! 【喜...
官方自营 “这五天过得太快乐啦!” “很享受的体验”
5.0分 已售 999 人 ¥2999 起

11 **[Tourist images absence]**

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自由行

5♥ 海南三亚5日4晚自由行
初游经典 万人好评 国际品牌旗舰线! 【喜...
官方自营 “这五天过得太快乐啦!” “很享受的体验”
5.0分 已售 999 人 ¥2999 起

13 Note: “三亚” means “Sanya”; “跟团游” means “Group tour package”; “自由行” means “Self-
14 guided tour package”; “官方自营” means “Officially provided by OTA”; “这五天过得太快乐啦!”
15 means “These five days have been so happy!”; “很享受的体验” means “Very enjoyable
16 experience”; “5.0分” means “5.0 points”; “已售” means “Already sold”.

1 **Study 2 - GTP**

2 **[Tourist images presence]**

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跟团游



5♥ 丽江5日4晚跟团游
『自营隐奢·高端定制』金茂凯悦+2晚雪...
官方自营 “这五天过得太快乐啦!” “很享受的体验”
5.0分 已售 999 人 ¥2999 起

4 **[Tourist images absence]**

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跟团游



5♥ 丽江5日4晚跟团游
『自营隐奢·高端定制』金茂凯悦+2晚雪...
官方自营 “这五天过得太快乐啦!” “很享受的体验”
5.0分 已售 999 人 ¥2999 起

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7 **Study 2 - STP**

8 **[Tourist images presence]**

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自由行



5♥ 丽江5日4晚自由行
『自营隐奢·高端定制』金茂凯悦+2晚雪...
官方自营 “这五天过得太快乐啦!” “很享受的体验”
5.0分 已售 999 人 ¥2999 起

10 **[Tourist images absence]**

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自由行



5♥ 丽江5日4晚自由行
『自营隐奢·高端定制』金茂凯悦+2晚雪...
官方自营 “这五天过得太快乐啦!” “很享受的体验”
5.0分 已售 999 人 ¥2999 起

12 Note: “丽江” means “Lijiang”; “跟团游” means “Group tour package”; “自由行” means “Self-guided tour package”; “官方自营” means “Officially provided by OTA”; “这五天过得太快乐啦!” means “These five days have been so happy!”; “很享受的体验” means “Very enjoyable experience”; “5.0分” means “5.0 points”; “已售” means “Already sold”.

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1 **Study 3 - GTP**

2 **[Tourist images presence]**

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The screenshot shows a travel package titled "苏州5日4晚跟团游" (Suzhou 5-day 4-night group tour). The main image features a man in a black traditional Chinese garment and a woman in a red qipao standing on a boat. The text on the right includes a 5.0 rating, "已售 999 人" (999 people sold), and a price of "¥ 2999 起".

4 **[Tourist images absence]**

5



The screenshot shows the same travel package listing as above, but the main image is replaced by a background image of a boat on a canal. The text on the right remains identical: 5.0 rating, "已售 999 人", and "¥ 2999 起".

6
7 **Study 3 - STP**

8 **[Tourist images presence]**

9



The screenshot shows a travel package titled "苏州5日4晚自由行" (Suzhou 5-day 4-night self-guided tour). The main image features the same man and woman from the previous screenshots. The text on the right includes a 6.0 rating, "已售 999 人", and a price of "¥ 2999 起".

10 **[Tourist images absence]**

11



The screenshot shows the same self-guided tour listing as above, but the main image is replaced by a background image of a boat on a canal. The text on the right remains identical: 6.0 rating, "已售 999 人", and "¥ 2999 起".

12 Note: “苏州” means “Suzhou”; “跟团游” means “Group tour package”; “自由行” means “Self-
13 guided tour package”; “官方自营” means “Officially provided by OTA”; “这五天过得太快乐啦!”
14 means “These five days have been so happy!”; “很享受的体验” means “Very enjoyable
15 experience”; “5.0 分” means “5.0 points”; “已售” means “Already sold”.

1 Appendix D. Measurement Items

Variables	Measurement items	Source
Advertisement type (Manipulation check)	1. To what extent do you think these are group tour package / self-guided tour package advertisements? (1= <i>not at all</i> , 7= <i>very much</i>)	Magnini & Kim, 2016; T. Wen et al., 2021
	2. To what extent do you think these advertisements contain / do not contain tourist images? (1= <i>not at all</i> , 7= <i>very much</i>)	
Embodied mental simulation	1. When viewing the advertisement, to what extent did images of attending a group tour / self-guided tour in Lijiang / Suzhou come to your mind? (1= <i>few or no</i> , 7= <i>lots of</i>)	Elder & Krishna, 2011
	2. When viewing the advertisement, how much of the experience of attending a group tour / self-guided tour in Lijiang / Suzhou could you imagine? (1= <i>few or no</i> , 7= <i>a lot of</i>)	
	3. To what extent while viewing the advertisement could you imagine attending a group tour / self-guided tour in Lijiang / Suzhou? (1= <i>not at all</i> , 7= <i>to a great extent</i>)	
Relevant travel experience	1. I have a lot of experience with group tours / self-guided tours. (1= <i>strongly disagree</i> , 7= <i>strongly agree</i>)	Dodd et al., 2005; Li et al., 2021
	2. My frequency of group tours / self-guided tours in recent years is on average ____ times per year.	
Purchase intention	1. For this tour package, I would like to buy it. (1= <i>strongly disagree</i> , 7= <i>strongly agree</i>)	Yin et al., 2017
	2. For this tour package, I probably will buy it in the future. (1= <i>strongly disagree</i> , 7= <i>strongly agree</i>)	
	3. For this tour package, I would like to recommend it to my friends. (1= <i>strongly disagree</i> , 7= <i>strongly agree</i>)	

3 Appendix E. Means, Standard Deviations, Skewness, and Kurtosis for Key 4 Variables

Study	Measure Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skewness</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>
Study 1	Purchase intention				
	For this tour package, I would like to buy it.	5.42	1.29	-1.39	1.58
	For this tour package, I probably will buy it in the future.	5.34	1.44	-1.16	1.17

		For this tour package, I would like to recommend it to my friends.	5.19	1.62	-1.26	1.14
Study		<i>Embodied mental simulation</i>				
	2	When viewing the advertisement, to what extent did images of attending a group tour / self-guided tour in Lijiang come to your mind?	5.37	1.45	-1.24	1.18
		When viewing the advertisement, how much of the experience of attending a group tour / self-guided tour in Lijiang could you imagine?	5.32	1.41	-1.07	0.95
		To what extent while viewing the advertisement could you imagine attending a group tour / self-guided tour in Lijiang?	5.26	1.44	-0.97	0.16
		<i>Purchase intention</i>				
		For this tour package, I would like to buy it.	5.42	1.32	-1.12	1.16
		For this tour package, I probably will buy it in the future.	5.29	1.33	-1.14	1.12
		For this tour package, I would like to recommend it to my friends.	5.11	1.33	-0.95	0.88
Study		<i>Embodied mental simulation</i>				
	3	When viewing the advertisement, to what extent did images of attending a group tour / self-guided tour in Suzhou come to your mind?	5.49	1.50	-1.18	0.78
		When viewing the advertisement, how much of the experience of attending a group tour / self-guided tour in Suzhou could you imagine?	5.41	1.49	-0.95	0.16
		To what extent while viewing the advertisement could you imagine attending a group tour / self-guided tour in Suzhou?	5.27	1.54	-0.92	0.15
		<i>Purchase intention</i>				
		For this tour package, I would like to buy it.	5.30	1.22	-0.91	-0.04
		For this tour package, I probably will buy it in the future.	5.29	1.60	-0.74	-0.58
		For this tour package, I would like to recommend it to my friends.	5.01	1.72	-0.71	-0.48
		<i>Relevant travel experience</i>				

I have a lot of experience with group tours / self-guided tours.	4.88	1.37	-0.24	-0.67
My frequency of group tours / self-guided tours in recent years is on average ____ times per year.	2.03	1.64	0.73	0.18

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12 **Appendix F. Participants profiles**

	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4
	N = 160	N = 152	N = 156
Gender			
Male	65 (40.6%)	64 (42.1%)	64 (41.0%)
Female	95 (59.4%)	88 (57.9%)	92 (59.0%)
Age			
0-20	4 (2.5%)	5 (3.3%)	6 (3.8%)
21-30	92 (57.5%)	78 (51.3%)	98 (62.8%)
31-40	44 (27.5%)	51 (33.6%)	35 (22.4%)
41-50	13 (8.1%)	12 (7.9%)	13 (8.3%)
51-60	7 (4.4%)	6 (3.9%)	2 (1.3%)
>60	-	-	2 (1.3%)
Educational level			
Elementary school or below	-	3 (2.0%)	1 (0.6%)
Junior high school	2 (1.3%)	1 (0.7%)	-
High school	3 (1.9%)	3 (2.0%)	1 (0.6%)
Technical school	11 (6.9%)	8 (5.3%)	15 (9.6%)
Undergraduate	120 (75.0%)	106 (69.7%)	105 (67.3%)
Graduate	24 (15.0%)	28 (18.4%)	33 (21.2%)
PhD	-	3 (2.0%)	1 (0.6%)
Job occupation			
Student	46 (28.7%)	36 (23.7%)	36 (23.1%)
Nationalized enterprise	25 (15.6%)	29 (19.1%)	20 (12.8%)
Public institution	10 (6.3%)	5 (3.3%)	10 (6.4%)
Government official	7 (4.4%)	4 (2.6%)	8 (5.1%)

Private enterprise	66 (41.3%)	71 (46.7%)	69 (44.2%)
Foreign enterprise	6 (3.8%)	5 (3.3%)	10 (6.4%)
Freelance	-	2 (1.3%)	3 (1.9%)
Monthly income (RMB)			
0-¥2,000	10 (6.3%)	21 (13.8%)	21 (13.5%)
¥2,001-¥4,000	22 (13.8%)	12 (7.9%)	21 (13.5%)
¥4,001-¥6,000	43 (26.9%)	37 (24.3%)	39 (25.0%)
¥6,001-¥8,000	40 (25.0%)	35 (23.0%)	36 (23.1%)
More than ¥8,000	45 (28.1%)	47 (30.9%)	39 (25.0%)

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TABLES

Table 1. Research overview

Study	Purpose	Sample	Analysis	Finding
Pilot	Analyze the features of tour package advertisements	804 photo advertisements	Exploratory content analysis	N/A
Pilot	Determine the stimulus materials and test their effectiveness in manipulating	180 participants ($M_{age}=28.24$)	Independent samples T-test	N/A
Study 1	Examine the main effect between advertising tourist images and tour packages	160 participants (40.63% male, $M_{age}=30.81$)	Independent samples T-test, one-way ANOVA	Supported H1a and H1b
Study 2	Examine the mediating effect of embodied mental simulation	152 participants (42.76% male, $M_{age}=31.12$)	Independent samples T-test, PROCESS Model 4	Supported H1a, H1b, and H2
Study 3	Examine the moderating effect of relevant travel experience	156 participants (41.03% male, $M_{age}=29.22$).	Two-way ANOVA, floodlight analysis	Supported H3

Table 2. Features of advertisements without tourist images

	Sanya	Lijiang	Suzhou	Totals
Overall counts	108	130	171	409
Main element				
Destination scenery	63 (58%)	92 (71%)	140 (82%)	295 (72%)
Hospitality facilities	22 (21%)	24 (19%)	5 (3%)	51 (12%)
Transportation facilities	6 (5%)	3 (2%)	2 (1%)	11 (3%)
Recreation facilities	9 (8%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	10 (2%)
Plants	1 (1%)	3 (2%)	7 (4%)	11 (3%)
Animals	5 (5%)	3 (2%)	7 (4%)	15 (4%)
Others	2 (2%)	5 (4%)	9 (5%)	16 (4%)

Note: "Others" included texts, cartoons, and paintings.

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1 Table 3. Features of advertisements with tourist images

<i>Overall counts</i>	Sanya	Lijiang	Suzhou	Totals
	154	143	98	395
<i>Number of tourists</i>				
= 1	25 (16%)	43 (30%)	44 (45%)	112 (28%)
= 2	98 (64%)	77 (54%)	36 (37%)	211 (54%)
= 3	15 (10%)	7 (5%)	7 (7%)	29 (7%)
> 3	16 (10%)	16 (11%)	11 (11%)	43 (11%)
<i>Gender</i>				
Male only	5 (3%)	8 (6%)	15 (15%)	28 (7%)
Female only	30 (20%)	60 (42%)	45 (46%)	135 (34%)
Multiple genders	119 (77%)	75 (52%)	38 (39%)	232 (59%)
<i>Age</i>				
Child age	7 (5%)	2 (1%)	13 (13%)	22 (6%)
Young & middle-age	98 (63%)	134 (94%)	61 (62%)	293 (74%)
Older age	14 (9%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	16 (4%)
Multiple ages	35 (23%)	6 (4%)	23 (24%)	64 (16%)
<i>Body orientation</i>				
Facing forward	90 (58%)	65 (45%)	51 (52%)	206 (52%)
Facing back	27 (18%)	27 (19%)	18 (18%)	72 (18%)
Facing sideways	37 (24%)	51 (36%)	29 (30%)	117 (30%)
<i>Facial expression</i>				
Enjoyable	113 (73%)	85 (60%)	54 (55%)	252 (64%)
Neutral	8 (5%)	22 (15%)	22 (23%)	52 (13%)
Sad	0 (0%)	4 (3%)	0 (0%)	4 (1%)
No face shown	33 (22%)	32 (22%)	22 (22%)	87 (22%)
<i>Body posture</i>				
Interactive	149 (97%)	129 (90%)	77 (79%)	355 (90%)
Non-interactive	5 (3%)	14 (10%)	21 (21%)	40 (10%)
<i>Reputation</i>				
Non-celebrities	145 (94%)	132 (92%)	94 (96%)	371 (94%)
Celebrities	9 (6%)	11 (8%)	4 (4%)	24 (6%)
<i>Background elements</i>				
Destination scenery	83 (54%)	88 (61%)	51 (52%)	222 (56%)
Hospitality facilities	9 (6%)	12 (8%)	6 (6%)	27 (7%)
Transportation facilities	8 (5%)	11 (8%)	2 (2%)	21 (5%)
Recreation facilities	41 (27%)	11 (8%)	24 (25%)	76 (19%)
Plants	1 (0%)	7 (5%)	7 (7%)	15 (4%)
Animals	8 (5%)	11 (8%)	0 (0%)	19 (5%)
Others	4 (3%)	3 (2%)	8 (8%)	15 (4%)

2 Note: "Others" included texts, cartoons, and paintings.

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Table 4. Evaluation of the attractiveness of the stimulus materials

Group	Tourist images			Destination landscape images		
Study 2						
$M_{attractiveness}$	5.80	5.06	4.86	4.86	5.80	5.34
$SD_{attractiveness}$	1.35	1.14	1.61	1.61	0.96	1.26
Used in study	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No
Study 3						
$M_{attractiveness}$	4.03	5.94	4.54	6.00	5.00	5.74
$SD_{attractiveness}$	1.25	0.91	1.17	0.87	1.48	1.36
Used in study	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Study 4						
$M_{attractiveness}$	4.23	5.29	5.71	5.74	5.83	5.54
$SD_{attractiveness}$	1.44	1.15	1.13	0.92	1.15	1.34
Used in study	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No

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Table 5. Moderating effect in Study 4

Group		Group tour package						Self-guided tour package							
Outcome	Moderator	Effect	SE	t	Sig.	95%CI		Outcome	Moderator	Effect	SE	t	Sig.	95%CI	
						LICI	UICI							LICI	UICI
EMS	TIs * RTE	0.868	0.309	2.810	0.006	0.253	1.484	EMS	TIs * RTE	-0.528	0.197	-2.676	0.009	-0.920	-0.135
	M _{RTE} -1SD	0.014	0.459	0.031	0.975	-0.899	0.928	M _{RTE} -1SD	0.060	0.343	0.176	0.861	-0.623	0.743	
	M _{RTE}	0.925	0.321	2.879	0.005	0.285	1.565	M _{RTE}	-0.592	0.240	-2.465	0.016	-1.070	-0.113	
	M _{RTE} +1SD	1.835	0.454	4.044	< 0.001	0.931	2.740	M _{RTE} +1SD	-1.243	0.341	-3.645	< 0.001	-1.923	-0.564	
PI	TIs * RTE	1.015	0.370	2.740	0.008	0.277	1.753	PI	TIs * RTE	-0.519	0.225	-2.303	0.024	-0.968	-0.070
	M _{RTE} -1SD	-0.176	0.549	-0.321	0.749	-1.271	0.919	M _{RTE} -1SD	-0.209	0.392	-0.534	0.595	-0.989	0.571	
	M _{RTE}	0.887	0.385	2.307	0.024	0.121	1.655	M _{RTE}	-0.850	0.274	-3.101	0.003	-1.396	-0.304	
	M _{RTE} +1SD	1.952	0.544	3.588	< 0.001	0.868	3.035	M _{RTE} +1SD	-1.491	0.390	-3.826	< 0.001	-2.267	-0.714	

Note: EMS= embodied mental simulation; TIs= tourist images; RTE= relevant travel experience; PI= purchase intention; GTP=group tour package; STP= self-guided tour package.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Examples of tour package advertisements

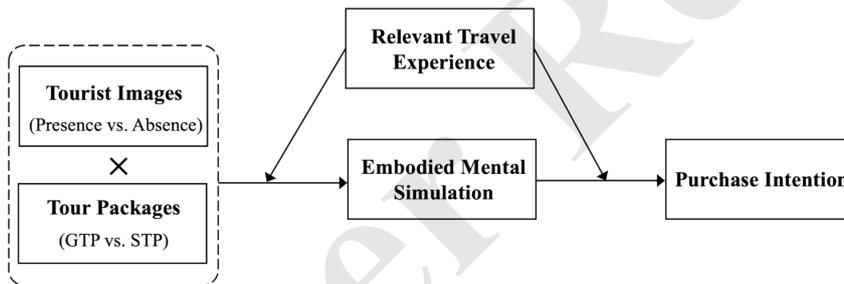


Figure 2. Theoretical framework

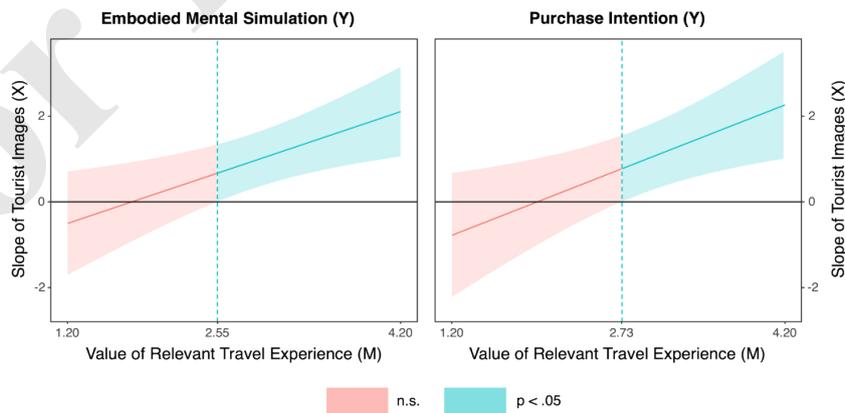


Figure 3. Results of floodlight analysis (GTP)

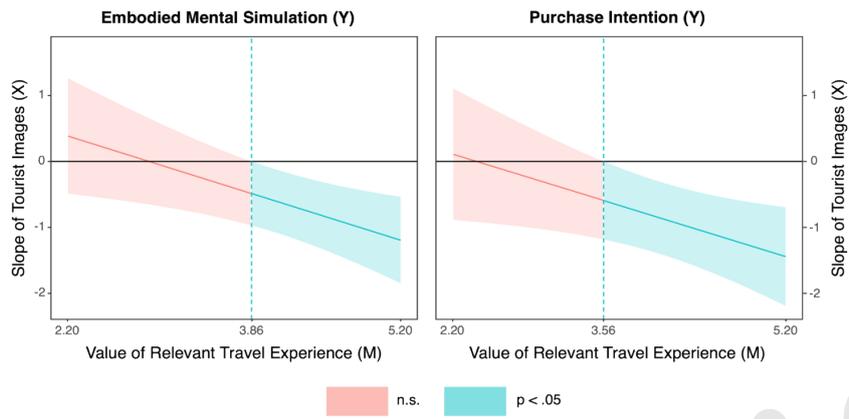


Figure 4. Results of floodlight analysis (STP)