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## Current Issues in Tourism

**Are they companions or intruders? The impact of advertising tourists' images on consumers' purchase intention to tour packages**

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## **Are they companions or intruders? The impact of advertising tourists' images on consumers' purchase intention to tour packages**

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### **Declarations of competing interest**

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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# Are they companions or intruders? The impact of advertising tourists' images on consumers' purchase intention to tour packages

Tourists' images, as one of the most common elements in travel product advertising, play an important role in product promotion. Despite their significance, few studies have examined how advertisements with tourists' images affect consumers' perceptions and purchase intentions to tour packages. In this study, we analyze the features of tour package advertisements with tourists' images, and construct a theoretical model based on cognitive consistency theory. Our study finds that advertisements with tourists' images promote consumers' purchase intention to group tour packages but weaken purchase intention to self-guided tour packages. This process is found to be mediated by embodied mental simulation. Moreover, this difference between group and self-guided tour packages is significant only for consumers with more relevant travel experience. The findings enrich travel product marketing research and offer practical insights for tourism marketing.

**Keywords:** tourists' images, tour packages, cognitive consistency theory, embodied mental simulation, relevant travel experience, purchase intention

## Introduction

In 2022, nearly 70% of consumers expressed a preference for booking travel products from online travel agencies (OTAs) rather than directly from suppliers (Condor Ferries, 2023). To promote travel products, photo advertisements (ads) have long been one of the most predominant forms of advertising for OTAs. Offering superior information conveyance and authenticity (Lundby, 2014), these photo ads

prompt potential consumers to simulate travel situations and experience (Tercia et al., 2020), and also influence their online purchasing (He et al., 2023).

Within OTA marketing contexts, tourists' images are very common in photo advertisements (Figure 1). Moreover, the impact of tourists' images in photo ads is likely to vary across different scenarios of travel product. These tourists' images as "other strangers", drawing from Urry's notion of the gaze, if were viewed as objects of the "cluster gaze", they are "companions" symbolizing group journeys and celebration (Urry & Larsen, 2011); alternatively, through the "romantic gaze", the images may convey the idea of "intruders" disrupting own private journeys (Urry & Larsen, 2011). This difference inspired us to think further about whether advertising tourists' images play the same role in the promotion of different types of tour packages, one of the most important products provided by OTAs.

As the world's second largest OTA market after the United States (Hotel Mize, 2020), two main types of tour packages are provided in the Chinese market: the traditional group tour package (GTP) and the self-guided tour package (STP). The former have long been popular in the Chinese market because they are competitively priced, save preparation time, and reduce uncertainty in unfamiliar environments (Jin et al., 2014; T. Wen et al., 2021). However, GTPs are also characterized by less freedom of social interaction and movement (T. Wen et al., 2021), tourists will always form a group with strangers and carry out the tour activities under the guidance of a professional guide (Chiang & Chen, 2014; Wang et al., 2013; Wong & Wang, 2009),

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5 and, more recently, the health risks of being within a group during the COVID-19  
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7 pandemic received attention (J. Wen et al., 2021). For these reasons, travelers nowadays  
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9 tend to have a greater desire for packages that allow them to autonomously find new  
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11 experiences on their own or with their friends at destinations (Jin et al., 2014). In  
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13 response to these market changes, OTAs have offered a new type of tour package, the  
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15 STP, which is more customized and appealing. Tourists on an STP are free to add or  
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17 remove package components from the menu provided by the merchants, which means  
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19 the tour route are all flexible (T. Wen et al., 2021). More importantly, STPs do not  
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21 require the tourist to be a member of a group with strangers, which is more suitable for  
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23 individuals and acquaintance tourist groups (Lin & Kuo, 2018; T. Wen et al., 2021).  
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25 STPs presently account for nearly 20% of China's travel product market and the  
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27 proportion is growing at a very high rate (CT News, 2023).  
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35 Given the significant differences between the GTP and STP, especially in social  
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37 interaction, tourists' images as an object of gaze, may elicit divergent responses in the  
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39 advertising of the two types of tour packages (Lin & Kuo, 2018; T. Wen et al., 2021).  
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41 To be precise, these images as "others" may have differentiated impacts on consumers  
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43 in different tour package ads, but this has not been studied hitherto. To bridge the gaps,  
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45 our research had two primary objectives. First, we explored how the contents and forms  
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47 of photo ads for tour packages were characterized when tourists' images are present  
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49 (vs. absent). Secondly, we explored interactions between advertising tourists' images  
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51 and different tour packages. Accordingly, we posed the following research questions:  
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