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The power of visuals in destination advertising

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ABSTRACT

Tourism ads that feature human images have a significant impact on consumers' attitudes and decision-making processes. However, little is known about the relative effectiveness of tourism ads that portray models in candid versus posed stances. To address this gap, this study applies the narrative transportation theory and utilizes a mixed-method approach to examine the influence of modeling style (posed vs. candid) on destination advertising effectiveness. The findings from an eye-tracking experiment, a semi-structured interview, and three online experiments reveal that candid models outperform posed models in generating favorable consumer responses within the context of destination advertising. Furthermore, this study elucidates narrative transportation as the psychological mechanism underlying such effects. However, the superiority of candid models over posed models is observed specifically in nature-based destinations rather than urban destinations. This research provides important theoretical and managerial implications.

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Introduction

In today's visually-oriented society, tourism marketing places significant emphasis on utilizing photographs as a means of communication (Lian & Yu, 2019). Tourism photographs not only showcase recreational activities, landscapes, and other attractions of a destination but also incorporate "human elements" to enhance realism (Zhang et al., 2023). Compared with photographs solely focusing on scenery, images with human elements can enhance perceived social presence, thereby increasing the attractiveness of the photographs and viewers' intention to visit (Roy et al., 2021). The appropriate portrayal of human cues in ads is particularly crucial for products with hedonic qualities, such as tourism, as consumers pay significant attention to the "human elements" in entertainment products (Wang et al., 2014). Therefore, destination marketers must explore the optimal presentation of human images in marketing materials.

Recognizing the substantial role of human elements in tourism advertising, recent studies have further investigated the impact of human image attributes on viewers' perception of tourism ads, exploring factors such as the facially expressed emotions of the model (Schoner-Schatz et al., 2021) and model gender and age (Deng & Liu, 2021). However, limited attention has been given to modeling style (candid vs. posed) in tourism ads from the perspective of photography aesthetics. In photography and art literature, a photograph

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featuring a model can be categorized as either posed or candid, depending on the presented modeling style. Candid photos capture the natural or spontaneous moments of the model (Schroeder, 2013), which differentiates them from posed photos where the main character, such as a model, is often positioned to create a photographer-directed image (Berger & Barasch, 2017). This subtle difference in modeling style can lead individuals to perceive candid photos as more natural and authentic than posed ones (Berger & Barasch, 2017). Examples of candid or posed models can be found in destination marketing campaigns worldwide (see Appendix A).

While the effects of modeling style (candid versus posed) have been discussed in other contexts, existing research produces mixed findings. For example, consumers are more inclined to comment on candid photos shared on social networking sites like Facebook (Farace et al., 2017; Lim & Childs, 2020), whereas the effect is reversed in the job-hunting context. A preliminary study by Berger and Barasch (2017) indicates that individuals are more likely to hire someone who uses posed photos on LinkedIn. Thus, the uniqueness of the context can shape individuals' inferences from candid versus posed photos as well as the perceived value derived from each. Given that tourism products are experiential and intangible in nature, consumers heavily rely on external reference information, such as destination images, to make purchase decisions (Liu et al., 2023). Consequently, how destination marketers present models is crucial, as incorporating an appropriate "human touch" in marketing campaigns not only shapes the destination's personality but also reduces the risks associated with intangible product consumption (Feighey, 2003). Therefore, the distinctive characteristics of tourism marketing call for a nuanced understanding of modeling style (candid vs. posed) as a key visual element in destination marketing materials.

Moreover, existing studies examining candid versus posed modeling styles primarily utilize user-generated photos as standalone sources of information on social networking sites such as Facebook (Farace et al., 2017) or dating applications (Berger & Barasch, 2017) rather than elements embedded in marketing communications. As such, previous studies mainly examine the influence of modeling style on viewers' interest in making friends or dating with the person depicted in the photograph (Berger & Barasch, 2017) and intention to comment (Farace et al., 2017), leaving the influence of candid versus posed models on advertising effectiveness relatively unexplored. As photos featuring candid models are perceived as more natural and authentic, they are more likely to evoke a sense of being present in the moment (Schroeder, 2013). Notably, previous research demonstrates that when consumers can easily imagine themselves in a narrated scene, they tend to develop narrative-consistent responses (Irimiás et al., 2021). Therefore, we argue that tourism ads featuring candid (vs. posed) models enable consumers to more readily imagine themselves in the depicted scene, making them feel more transported into the fictional story presented by the ads, and consequently enhancing the effectiveness of destination advertising.

Furthermore, we introduce a practically and theoretically important contextual variable—destination type (nature-based vs. urban destination)—and examine its interaction with modeling style in shaping consumers' evaluation of tourism ads. Prior research demonstrates that when stimuli align with the characteristics of advertised products or activities, individuals tend to experience processing fluency and feel more transported into the scenes depicted in ads (De Droog et al., 2012), subsequently enhancing ad persuasion (Houghton, 2021). Tourism ads with candid (vs. posed) models are more congruent with nature-based destinations because of their shared emphasis on nature and authenticity. Thus, we propose that when promoting nature-based destinations, tourism ads featuring candid models (vs. posed models) elicit higher levels of narrative transportation, subsequently enhancing destination advertising effectiveness. However, when individuals are exposed to communications depicting relatively familiar contexts, they tend to utilize relevant prior information from memory to mentally simulate prospective events (Yim et al., 2020), and rely more on verbal rather than visual elements for information processing (Wyer et al., 2008). As tourism ads promoting urban destinations feature man-made structures that are relatively familiar to individuals, the subtle change in modeling style in visual elements may not significantly influence their information processing. Consequently, consumers exhibit similar responses regardless of the modeling style when exposed to tourism ads promoting urban destinations.

Against this backdrop, the current research aims to examine whether, why, and under what conditions tourism ads featuring a candid (vs. posed) model generate better advertising effects. The research questions addressed are as follows: 1) Do tourism ads with a candid (vs. posed) model result in greater destination advertising effectiveness? 2) If so, why? 3) Does this effect hold for different types of destinations, such as nature-based versus urban destinations? To achieve these objectives, a mixed-method approach is adopted, including an eye-tracking experiment, a semi-structured interview, and three online experiments.

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. Theoretically, this study adds to the literature on tourism advertising by identifying modeling style as a key visual feature that influences advertising effectiveness. It responds to the calls made by Picazo and Moreno-Gil (2019) and Park and Kim (2018) to expand visual research in tourism advertising and explore more detailed visual cues. Additionally, this study investigates the psychological mechanism that explains the impact of modeling style (candid vs. posed) on destination advertising effectiveness. These findings extend the narrative transportation theory by identifying another visual cue in the tourism ads - the model style - as a means to facilitate narrative transportation. Furthermore, this research contributes to both the visual and tourism literature by demonstrating destination type as a unique boundary condition for the effects of modeling style on tourism advertising persuasion. Methodologically, the novelty of this research lies in the use of a mixed-method approach, which includes a semi-structured interview, eye tracking, and online experiments. This approach provides a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of interest and enhances the robustness of the results.

Literature review

Human elements in tourism advertising

Destination ads typically comprise verbal elements (e.g., text) and visual elements (e.g., photographs) to effectively communicate the attributes and personalities of the destination (Singh & Hu, 2012). In the context of tourism products, which are primarily based on experience, the use of visual elements, particularly photographs, is crucial in transforming intangible experiences into tangible ones (Filieri et al., 2021). Tourism photographs are often reproduced in various formats, such as print or online posters, brochures, and postcards, making up the majority of destination ads (Garrod, 2009). Compared with text ads, these pictorial ads not only capture greater visual attention (Scott et al., 2016) but also better convey the values, emotions, and personalities associated with the destination (Tuerlan et al., 2021).

Recognizing the significance of tourism photographs, scholars have explored how specific visual content embedded in photographic ads influences tourists' perceptions and intentions. Previous research indicates that consumers respond more positively to tourism ads featuring human images (Roy et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2002). For example, Wang et al. (2002) found that tourism brochures featuring a tour leader's photo (i.e., endorser) generate greater advertising effects compared with brochures without such stimuli. Importantly, other studies find that consumers' ad perceptions can be influenced by the attributes of the depicted model in advertisements, such as their age and gender (Luoh & Lo, 2012), facial expressions (Schoner-Schatz et al., 2021), and the country-of-origin of celebrities (Liu et al., 2023). Despite these findings regarding human elements in tourism advertising, the modeling style (candid vs. posed) is another key yet neglected feature of models in photographs, calling for an empirical investigation of its impact on tourism advertising effectiveness.

Modeling style in photographs: Candid versus posed model

The literature on photography and art identifies two major photographic modes: posed and candid photos (Schroeder, 2013). In a posed photo, the model is directed by the photographer to pose or act in a specific manner while the photo is being taken (Hall et al., 2001). By contrast, a candid photo is thoughtfully composed and spontaneously captures the organic and unprompted moments of the model (Schroeder, 2010). The primary distinction between candid and posed photos lies in how the model is shot and presented (Hall et al., 2001). Therefore, we use the term "modeling style" to collectively refer to photographs that portray a model either in a candid or posed stance.

Both modeling styles in photographs have their own advantages. Photos with a posed modeling style can present the model's best side, allowing for more control over the impression they make on viewers (Berger & Barasch, 2017). In other words, a posed model can convey their desired effects and communicate a specific image. On the contrary, the candid modeling style is considered more natural, authentic, and unstructured compared with its counterpart, as it captures the randomness and spontaneity of the main characters in photographs (Farace et al., 2017). However, a candid photo does not necessarily mean the models were completely unaware of being photographed. Instead, the photo is often taken at unannounced intervals while the activity they engage in continues and is uninterrupted by the photographer (Hall et al., 2001). The "staged spontaneity" of candid photos provides viewers with aesthetic value and meaning, demonstrating how the products or destinations fit into consumers' lifestyles (Schroeder, 2013).

Previous literature primarily compares candid and posed photos in different contexts and produces mixed findings. For example, consumers are more likely to comment on candid photos shared on social networking sites like Facebook (Farace et al., 2017), whereas such an effect can be reversed when it comes to job hunting (Berger & Barasch, 2017). Therefore, the efficacy of a particular modeling style depends on the specific context, with the uniqueness of the context shaping the inferences individuals make from candid and posed photos, as well as the relative value derived from each style. However, to our knowledge, scant attention has been paid to the context of tourism advertising, which serves as a channel for non-personal communication of hedonic and experiential products that involve high engagement, uncertainty, intangibility, and perishability (Liu et al., 2023). Furthermore, previous studies mostly used photos as standalone sources of information with a focus on self-expression rather than incorporating them as elements of marketing communications. Will tourism ads with posed or candid models be more effective? And why? To answer these questions, we build on the narrative transportation theory and examine the impact of modeling style on destination advertising.

Narrative transportation theory

Narrative transportation refers to the extent to which individuals immerse themselves in a virtual narrative or story (Lim & Childs, 2020). It occurs when individuals feel a personal connection to the story and become fully engaged in it (Escalas, 2004). During this process, a narrative can create tension that shifts consumers' attention to the character or model depicted in the story (Lim & Childs, 2020). By drawing individuals into the conveyed story, narrative transportation allows for temporary escape (Irimiás et al., 2021). Narrative transportation differs from analytical processing in the elaboration likelihood model, as analytical elaboration relies on logical and rational thinking for persuasion (Escalas, 2004), whereas transportation leads to attitude change through reduced cognitive effort and a sense of realism in the experience (Green & Brock, 2000).

In the marketing context, attitude change pertains to consumer persuasion, exemplified by ad effectiveness (To & Patrick, 2021). Narrative transportation has been shown to facilitate elaboration on an ad's claim and evoke positive responses from consumers (Van Laer et al., 2014). Individuals transported into the story are more inclined to believe in the depicted world's

authenticity (Lee & Gretzel, 2012). Previous research shows that consuming destination TV series (known as film tourism) can lead to narrative transportation characterized by immersion and escapism (Irimiás et al., 2021). Notably, in addition to the advertising material, the characteristics of messages can influence narrative transportation (Huang et al., 2018). However, considerably less attention is given to examining how specific cues or elements embedded in destination ads can affect individuals' narrative transportation. Particularly, few studies apply narrative transportation theory to explain the process through which modeling style impacts persuasion effects, despite the widespread use of candid or posed models in tourism ads.

Hypothesis development

Relationship between modeling style and destination advertising effectiveness

Candid photography, that is, capturing in-between and naturally scripted moments, deviates from traditional promotional photography and conveys a sense of authenticity and naturalness (Baetens & Bleyen, 2011). Photos featuring candid models deliver key visual codes such as facial expressions, gestures, and backgrounds, creating a sense of dramatic complexity and personal intimacy (Yamamoto & Miura, 2012).

In the context of intangible tourism products, tourists rely on the mental images and feelings conveyed by the destination's offerings (Li et al., 2018). Candid model photography excels in evoking feelings, particularly the sense of being in the "here and now" (Schroeder, 2013). Storytelling's importance in destination promotion is well-established, as tourists use stories to construct knowledge about destinations (Moscardo, 2020). Tourism ads featuring candid models naturally tell the story of deep connections between the model and the destination. In contrast, tourism ads with posed models may disrupt the narrative by artificially composed poses or rehearsed actions, potentially disconnecting consumers from the story. The structural similarity of candid photography with the realistic tourist experience in the destination allows viewers to better understand the unplanned moments of the model within the temporal link to the destination (Adaval & Wyer Jr, 1998). Furthermore, candid photography captures models in authentic acts, displaying raw emotions and revealing the more genuine side of the destination. Natural interactions between tourists and destinations offer authentic glimpses into the culture, lifestyle, and atmosphere, injecting life into static tourism ads (Volgger & Pfister, 2019).

Considering the participatory and sincere nature of the candid style, we hypothesize that tourism ads featuring candid models elicit more favorable consumer responses in the destination advertising context. The hypothesis is as follows:

H1. : Tourism ads with a candid (vs. posed) model result in greater destination advertising effectiveness.

Mediating role of narrative transportation

In this study, we investigate narrative transportation as the underlying mechanism through which modeling style influences destination advertising effectiveness. Narrative refers to the mental interpretation of a story based on an individual's prior knowledge, whereas transportation involves the integrated fusion of attention, imagery, and emotions, pivoting toward narratives and providing an enhanced sense of genuine experience (Green & Brock, 2000). Narrative transportation occurs when individuals establish a personal connection with a story, becoming immersed in its narrative (Green & Brock, 2000).

In our study, we consider the modeling style (candid vs. posed) in tourism ads as a crucial narrative element that draws individuals into the visual world set by the main character. In destination advertising, the candid modeling style contributes to a narrative by documenting the progression of how the main character immerses himself or herself into destination events or interactions in a natural way (Huang et al., 2018). Specifically, tourism ads that portray models in candid stances often capture their raw emotions such as joy, surprise, love, or contemplation (Volgger & Pfister, 2019). Such genuine emotional cues in turn resonate with viewers, creating strong affective bonds and drawing them into the narrative being portrayed in destination ads (de Graaf et al., 2012). Additionally, these ads often portray the main character engaging in specific activities related to the destination, resonating with the target audience and enabling them to visualize themselves participating. Noticeably, the candid modeling style often includes subtle details that add depth to the narrative such as a spontaneous gesture or simply an averted gaze, enriching the story being told (To & Patrick, 2021). Compared with ads with posed models, those featuring candid models present more natural and casual narrativity, aligning more with individuals' real-life travel experiences (Baetens & Bleyen, 2011). Consequently, the visual story in destination ads with candid models enhances individuals' mental representations, transporting them into the fictional narrative conveyed by static ads (Escalas, 2004). Through mental representation, individuals generate vivid images of the story plot, leading them to feel as though they are personally experiencing the destination events (Mcferran et al., 2010). By contrast, destination advertisements featuring a posed model signal that the model is detached from destination activities, positioned to create a photographer-directed image (Berger & Barasch, 2017). The unnaturalness of the posed model disrupts the narrative by presenting artificially rehearsed actions, potentially disconnecting consumers from the story (Schroeder, 2010).

The activation of narrative transportation driven by advertising communications can further lead to positive consumer responses, such as more favorable product attitudes and improved brand assessment (Huang et al., 2018). For example, Lim and Childs (2020) found that being transported into a story creates meaning for viewers, enhancing their connection to the brand. Once individuals are transported into the scenario depicted in tourism ads, they tend to believe in the authenticity of the model and other elements of the story, such as the activities or the destination environments (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010). Through transportation, consumers mentally project themselves into the destination, imagining themselves as the characters engaging in the activities portrayed in the ads, thereby developing an affective

bond with the destination (Kim & Kim, 2021). This emotional connection to the place further enhances their intention to visit the destination (Hamid et al., 2020). Formally:

H2. : Narrative transportation mediates the impact of modeling style in tourism ads on destination advertising effectiveness.

Moderating role of destination type

Destinations can be categorized into different types, such as nature-based and urban destinations (Byun & Jang, 2015). Nature-based destinations emphasize the natural environment, including wildlife, outdoor activities, and diverse flora and fauna. These destinations often highlight the untouched or undeveloped nature of the region (Luo & Deng, 2008). In contrast, urban destinations are more developed, easily accessible by transportation, and offer a wide range of dining, accommodation, entertainment, transportation, and shopping options (Line et al., 2018). Urban destinations feature man-made structures and are perceived as relatively more familiar compared with nature-based destinations.

Importantly, prior studies show that when marketing communications align with the characteristics of the promoted products or activities, consumers tend to experience a greater sense of transportation into the narrated scene, leading to enhanced persuasion (Hofacker et al., 2016). The effectiveness of ads often relies on their ability to capture consumers' attention and engage them in the narrative flow of a story. When processing narratives, individuals construct mental models specific to the products or events and imagine themselves in the depicted scenes. However, this process requires cognitive effort and resources (Houghton, 2021). According to processing fluency theory, when stimuli align with the features of the advertised products or activities, individuals tend to experience fluent information processing (De Droog et al., 2012). Such processing fluency facilitates consumers' mental visualization of themselves in the story, positively influencing ad persuasion (Houghton, 2021). Conversely, when incongruence exists between the stimuli and the advertised products or activities, individuals may perceive the content as intrusive, disrupting the narrative transportation process (Hofacker et al., 2016).

In this research, we propose that tourism ads featuring a candid (vs. posed) model are particularly effective for nature-based destinations. Nature-based destinations are associated with a sense of naturalness, authenticity, and minimal disruption (Line et al., 2018), which are highly valued and expected by individuals when exposed to ads depicting such destinations (Lidwell et al., 2010). Therefore, tourism ads that convey messages related to nature and authenticity may align better with the natural setting of these destinations, enhancing consumers' processing fluency and their ability to immerse themselves in the events depicted in the ads. Compared with posed photos, candid photos capturing unposed moments are perceived as more natural and authentic (Berger & Barasch, 2017). However, we propose that the positive advertising effect of a candid model over a posed model is not significant when tourism ads promote urban destinations. Characterized by the busyness and familiarity of city life, urban destinations may not offer the same sense of "getting away" as nature-based destinations (Lidwell et al., 2010). When individuals are exposed to communications depicting familiar contexts, they can more easily imagine themselves in those contexts, even if the narrative elements are not as prominent (Schwarz et al., 2021). In fact, when people encounter relatively familiar contexts, they can mentally simulate prospective events by relying on relevant experiences stored in their memory (Yim et al., 2020). Moreover, exposure to familiar products can lead consumers to rely more on verbal rather than visual elements in ads for information processing (Wyer et al., 2008). Therefore, we anticipate that consumers exhibit similar responses regardless of the modeling style when tourism ads feature urban destinations. Formally:

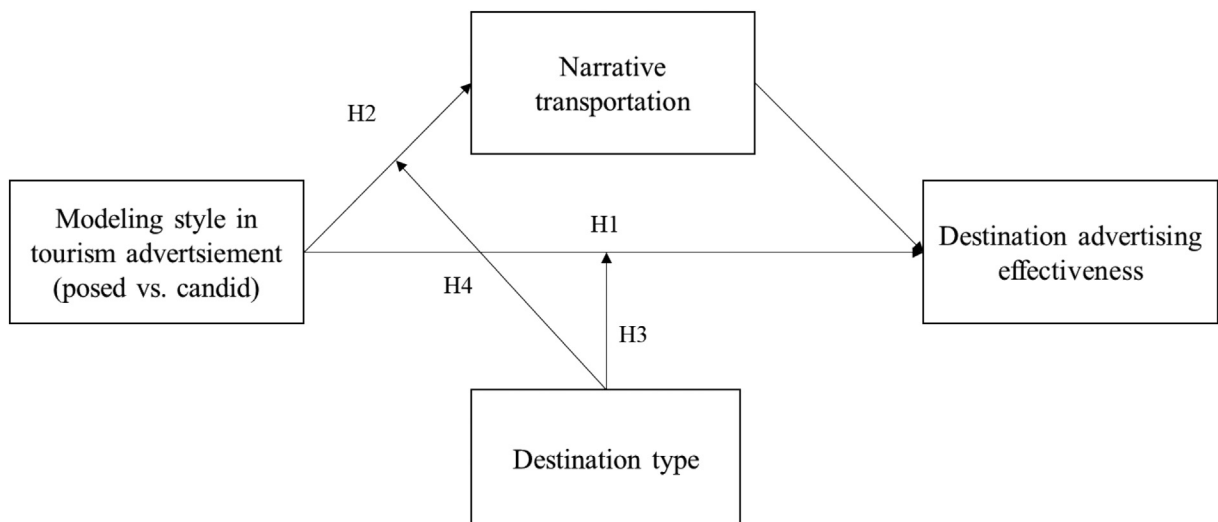


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

H3. : The effect of modeling style on destination advertising effectiveness is moderated by destination type such that this effect becomes significant in nature-based destinations but insignificant in urban destinations.

H4. : Narrative transportation mediates the effect of modeling style on destination advertising effectiveness in nature-based destinations.

The conceptual framework is presented in Fig. 1.

Overview of studies

This research employed a mixed-method approach consisting of four studies to test the hypotheses. Study 1 aimed to examine consumer responses to candid versus posed photos using stand-alone photos obtained from online travel websites as stimuli. To that end, we conducted an eye-tracking experiment along with semi-structured interviews to understand participants' attention patterns toward photos with a posed vs. candid modeling style. The combination of eye tracking and interviews can provide valuable insights into the underlying mechanisms driving attention patterns. Noticeably, eye-tracking data has been demonstrated to be valid metrics for tourism advertising effectiveness (Li et al., 2020).

Building upon the findings from Study 1, Study 2 sought to enhance the realism of the stimuli by reproducing the photos in advertising format. An online experiment was then conducted to investigate the relative effectiveness of tourism ads featuring a posed versus candid model. Additionally, Study 2 examined the mediating role of narrative transportation in the relationship between modeling style and destination ad effectiveness. In Study 3, a contextual factor—destination type—was identified to moderate the impact of modeling style in tourism ads on destination advertising effectiveness.

As Studies 2 and 3 incorporated real cities as destinations, the potential confounding effect of city stereotypes on the results necessitated further investigation. Additionally, prior research suggests that an image may convey a sense of movement, enhancing consumer engagement (Cian et al., 2014). Given that candid photos capture natural or spontaneous moments of the model, one might argue that the positive effects of the candid model stem from perceived movement: tourism ads with candid model may stimulate a greater perception of movement, thereby enhancing advertising effectiveness. Moreover, it is conceivable that participants' place of residence (e.g., undeveloped vs. developed areas) could influence the proposed effects, a consideration not addressed in previous studies of this research. Study 4 was designed to address these concerns and provide further support for the proposed effects. For brevity, Study 4 was presented in Appendix F.

Study 1

Stimuli development and study design

In Study 1, we conducted an eye-tracking experiment, followed by semi-structured interviews, to capture participants' visual attention and perceptions toward the photos. The eye-tracking experiment involved a 2 (modeling style: posed vs. candid) × 4 (photo group: group 1 vs. group 2 vs. group 3 vs. group 4) within-subjects experimental design. The four groups of photos were selected from three prominent online travel websites in China: Ctrip, Qunar, and Mafengwo (see details of stimuli development in Appendix C). In the within-subjects design, each participant is exposed to all groups of photos that were taken from nearly identical angles but with different modeling styles. In doing so, we could compare their attention patterns using eye-tracking techniques while minimizing the potential influence of individual differences such as age or personality on the outcomes (Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020).

To minimize research bias, the photos were presented in a random order, considering that human eye scans typically follow a left-to-right order. For example, for the first participant, photos with a posed model were displayed on the left side of the screen, while photos with a candid model were displayed on the right side (see Fig. 2 as an example). The stimuli placement may be reversed for subsequent participants. Furthermore, as each group of photos featured different models or backgrounds, the display order of each group of stimuli was also randomized to control for potential order effects. This design allowed us to compare participants' attention patterns and perceptions across different modeling styles while maintaining experimental rigor.

Sample and procedure

Study 1 was conducted in October 2022, involving 62 students from a Chinese university aged 18 to 30, with 82.3 % of them being females (see justification of using student sample in Appendix C). The eye-tracking experiment was conducted in a controlled laboratory environment with carefully regulated lighting, noise levels, temperature, and distractions to ensure optimal experimental conditions. The eye tracker used was the gaze point GP3, which was attached beneath the laptop screen. The laptop had a 32-in. monitor with a resolution of 1920 × 1080 pixels. Before the eye-tracking experiment, a calibration test was conducted to ensure accurate tracking of participants' eye movements. To maintain experimental rigor, each participant underwent the experiment individually. During the experiment, participants were exposed to four groups of photos, which were presented in random order. Following prior research (M. Li et al., 2020), each photo was displayed for 10 s, and participants' fixation counts and fixation duration were recorded as indicators of their visual attention toward the photos. To check the stimuli manipulation, participants were provided with the definitions of posed and candid photos and asked to indicate their agreement with the statement "Do you agree it is a candid photo?" for each photo (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Results showed that our manipulations were successful (see manipulation check results of Study 1 in Appendix C).

As eye-tracking experiments alone cannot provide insights into the cognitive processing underlying participants' attention patterns, semi-structured interviews were conducted using a retrospective think-aloud approach. Specifically, participants were guided to reflect



Fig. 2. Examples of stimuli in Study 1.

on their eye-tracking processes and were asked to select and explain their preference for either posed or candid photos during the interviews.

Results

Fixation counts

A two-way repeated measures ANOVA analysis was conducted. As expected, the results of the multivariate test output (see Table 1 in Appendix C) revealed a main within-subjects effect for modeling style on fixation counts. As expected, the results of the multivariate test (see Table 1) revealed a main within-subjects effect for modeling style on fixation counts. Specifically, photos with a candid model ($M = 16.08$) elicited higher fixation counts than those with a posed model ($M = 14.93$; $F(61) = 5.318$, $p < 0.05$). Results also showed a main within-subjects effect for photo groups on fixation counts. As each group of photos featured different individuals and backgrounds, it is possible that fixation counts would vary across groups. The interaction between modeling style and photo groups on fixation counts was not significant.

Fixation duration

Similarly, the results from a two-way repeated measures ANOVA analysis on fixation duration revealed a main within-subjects effect of modeling style (see Table 1 in Appendix C). Specifically, photos with a candid model ($M = 4.72$) elicited higher fixation duration than those with a posed model ($M = 4.25$; $F(61) = 7.96$, $p < 0.05$). There was no main within-subjects effect for photo groups on fixation counts. The interaction between modeling style and photo group was also not significant.

Table 1

Results of multivariate test for fixation counts and fixation duration.

Factors	Fixation counts			Fixation duration		
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial eta squared	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial eta squared
Modeling style	5.318	<0.05	0.080	7.964	<0.05	0.115
Photo group	21.603	<0.001	0.262	2.166	0.094	0.034
Modeling style × Photo group	0.288	0.834	0.005	0.110	0.954	0.002

The multivariate test output under a two-way repeated measures ANOVA offers information about the overall significance of the main within-subjects effect of the two independent variables (e.g., modeling style and photo group) and their interaction effect on multiple dependent variables (e.g., fixation counts and fixation duration).

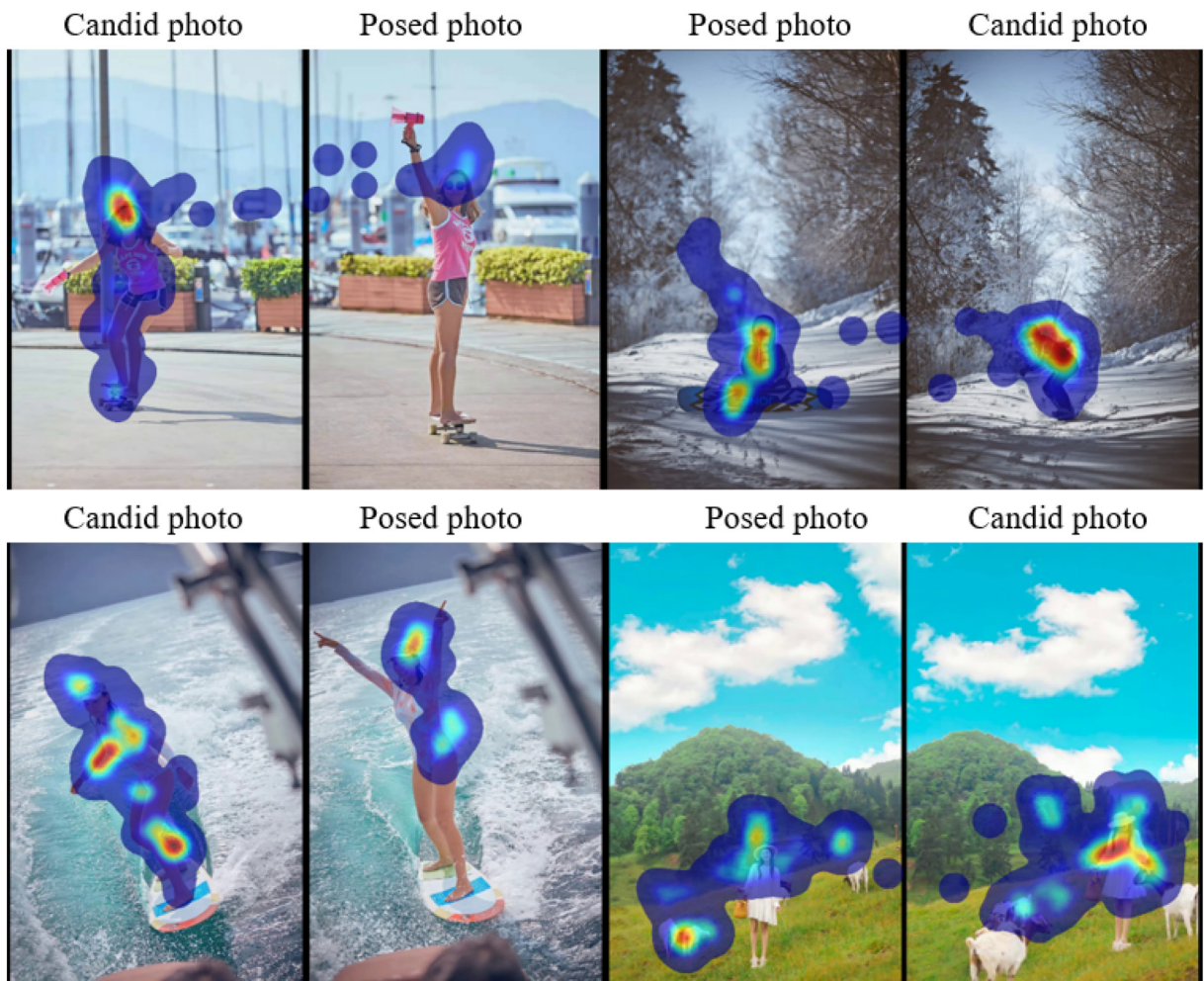


Fig. 3. Heat maps of visual attention patterns toward four groups of photos.

Heat maps

Heat maps were generated to illustrate participants' visual attention patterns toward the photos. The heat maps showed aggregated fixation data from all 62 participants, with colors ranging from red to green indicating higher and lower fixation times, respectively. As shown in heat maps (see Fig. 3), participants primarily focused on the human element in the photos. Importantly, photos with a candid model exhibited larger and more intense red zones across all four groups, indicating higher attention compared with photos with a posed model.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand participants' preferences and perceptions of the two types of photos, aiming to gain preliminary insights into the potential mediating role of narrative transportation. A deductive coding process was used to analyze the interview transcripts. The results revealed that 76 % of participants expressed a preference for photos with a candid model. When asked to explain their preference, participants commonly described candid photos as more natural, authentic, and interactive compared with posed photos. For example, one participant said, "These photos (i.e., candid photos) are more natural and they look more real" (Participant 11). Another participant remarked, "These photos (i.e., candid photos) are more natural, vivid, and have better interaction with the environment" (Participant 14). Importantly, the findings indicated that candid photos were generally perceived as more expressive, creating a stronger sense of immersion compared with posed photos. Participants highlighted this perception, with statements such as "the candid photos look more natural, the posed photos seem to lack communication" (Participant 16) and "I feel the candid photo is more vivid, and she (i.e., the photo character) is conveying her emotions" (Participant 51). Moreover, participants said that "the candid photo gives me a feeling of wanting to participate" (Participant 13), "it makes me curious to know what the person in the photo is doing" (Participant 5), and "candid photo is more natural and makes me feel a sense of immersion, and I am more interested in visiting this place" (Participant 6). Although participants did not

explicitly mention their “narrative transportation” experiences, these responses align with this concept, suggesting that candid photos have the potential to evoke greater narrative transportation, providing initial evidence for the mediating role of narrative transportation.

The combined findings from the eye-tracking experiment and semi-structured interviews in Study 1 suggested that photos with a candid model generated more visual attention and had the potential to evoke greater narrative transportation compared with photos with a posed model. These findings offered preliminary support for H1 and provided initial evidence for the mediating role of narrative transportation.

Study 2

Design and stimuli development

Study 2 conducted a single-factor (modeling style: posed vs. candid) between-subjects experimental design to test H1 and H2. Unlike Study 1 using stand-alone photos as stimuli, Study 2's stimuli were designed to mimic real tourism ads. We first selected one group of photos from Study 1 that included a posed and candid model, respectively. Previous research indicates that models' facial expressions and eye gaze direction (direct gaze vs. averted gaze) within ads may influence advertising effectiveness (Schoner-Schatz et al., 2021; To & Patrick, 2021). Specifically, direct eye gaze may divert viewers' attention and disrupt the narrative transportation process. In our study, it is conceivable that a candid model may look away from the viewer (i.e., averted gaze), whereas a posed model may gaze directly at viewers (i.e., direct gaze). To avoid these potential confounding effects, we intentionally selected a set of photos featuring a skier wearing a mask. These two photos were adjusted through Photoshop technique into destination ads that have identical backgrounds except for the modeling style. A pretest was conducted to ensure the effectiveness of stimuli (see pretest results in Appendix D).

Sample and procedure

A total of 122 participants were recruited from Credamo, an online crowdsourcing platform that has been widely used in tourism and hospitality research (Su et al., 2022). The demographic composition of the sample consisted of 54.8 % female participants, with 97.2 % falling in the 21–40 age range, and 92.2 % holding a four-year college degree or above.

Participants were instructed to imagine themselves in a scenario where they were searching for a travel destination and came across a tourism advertisement featuring Haerbin, a Chinese city known for its ice sculpture festival. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of two tourism ads (see stimuli of Study 2 in Appendix B). Both ads depicted a model skiing at a ski resort. Both ads depicted a model skiing at a ski resort while wearing a mask. In the posed condition, the skier in the ad adopted a specific pose. In contrast, the skier in the candid condition was captured naturally, without posing for the photographer.

Measurement

Destination advertising effectiveness was assessed using a 10-item scale adapted from Weng et al. (2021). Example items included “This advertisement is very attractive” and “I would like to learn more about this place” (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$). Narrative transportation was measured using an 8-item scale adapted from Green and Brock (2000). Sample items included “While viewing the ad, I could vividly imagine the events depicted” and “My attention rarely wandered while viewing the ad” (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.79$). As participants' familiarity with the destination may influence their decision-making process (Horng et al., 2012), it was included as a control variable in data analyses. Familiarity with the destination was measured with three items adapted from Kent and Allen (1994). Sample items included “How familiar are you with Haerbin” (1 = not at all, 5 = extremely; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$). The manipulation checks for modeling style and stimuli realism were consistent with the pretest of Study 2, and the results revealed that our manipulations were successful (see results in Appendix D).

Results

Destination advertising effectiveness

To test H1, a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted on destination advertising effectiveness, with familiarity with the destination included as a control variable. The results revealed a significant main effect of modeling style ($F(1,112) = 9.46, p < 0.05$), as depicted in Fig. 4. As expected, tourism ads with a candid model ($M = 4.46$) yielded higher levels of destination advertising effectiveness compared with ads with a posed model ($M = 4.25$).

Mediation analysis

To examine the mediating role of narrative transportation (testing H2), a mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2017), with modeling style in tourism ads as the independent variable, narrative transportation as the mediator, and destination advertising effectiveness as the dependent variable. Familiarity with the destination was included as a control

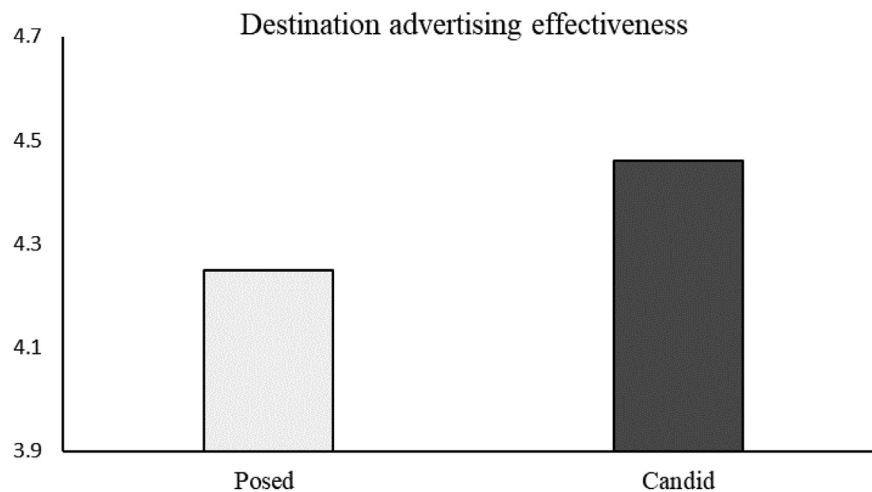


Fig. 4. Impact of modeling style on destination advertising effectiveness.

variable. The bootstrapping results revealed that narrative transportation mediated the impact of modeling style on destination advertising effectiveness (indirect effect = -0.0940 , 95 % CI = $[-0.2086, -0.0192]$).

Study 3

Design and stimuli development

To test H3 and H4, Study 3 conducted a 2 (modeling style: posed vs. candid) \times 2 (destination type: urban vs. nature-based) between-subjects experimental design.

Professional designers created the stimuli to ensure their quality. The manipulation of destination type in the tourism ads adapted from Line et al.'s (2018) approach. Specifically, in the urban destination condition, the tourism ad showcased Shanghai, one of China's modern cities, characterized by iconic landmarks such as TV towers, urban streets, and architectural marvels. In contrast, the nature-based condition featured Lijiang, a Chinese tourism city known for its natural resources, including forests, lakes, and mountains, and its relatively underdeveloped local facilities. For the manipulation of modeling style in tourism ads, the posed model condition featured an individual posing in a specific manner, while the candid model condition captured unposed and spontaneous moments. Considering the potential influence of the model's eye gaze on advertising effectiveness (To & Patrick, 2021), we presented the model in both candid and posed styles with averted gaze direction (i.e., not looking at the viewer directly) (see stimuli of Study 3 in Appendix B).

Sample and procedure

229 participants were recruited from Credamo. Among the participants, 51.5 % were female, 91.2 % were aged between 21 and 40, and 91.3 % held a four-year college degree or above. Participants were instructed to imagine a scenario similar to that in Study 2.

Measurement

The measurement for destination advertising effectiveness (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.71$), adapted from Weng et al. (2021), narrative transportation (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$), adapted from Green and Brock (2000), and familiarity with the destination were consistent with Study 2. The manipulation of destination type was assessed using an attribute likelihood scaling technique (Line & Hanks, 2016). The man-made attributes included a variety of restaurants, convenient shopping, and convenient transportation, while the natural attributes included rich natural attractions, access to wildlife, and a relaxing atmosphere (Line & Hanks, 2016). The manipulation checks for modeling style and stimuli realism were the same as in Study 2, and the results revealed that our manipulations were successful (see results in Appendix E).

Results

Destination advertising effectiveness

To test H3, we conducted a two-way ANCOVA on destination advertising effectiveness, with familiarity with the destination as the control variable. The results revealed a significant main effect of modeling style ($F(224) = 10.38$, $p < 0.05$), supporting H1. Additionally, the main effect of destination type was significant ($F(224) = 10.76$, $p < 0.05$). Importantly, there was a significant

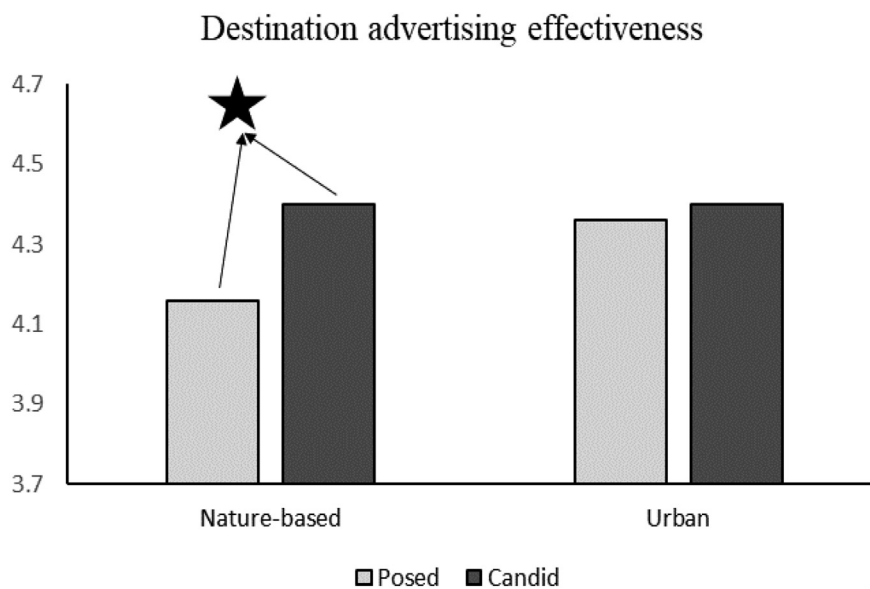


Fig. 5. Impact of modeling style and destination type on destination advertising effectiveness.

two-way interaction between modeling style and destination type ($F(224) = 21.27, p < 0.05$), as shown in Fig. 5. Simple main effects analysis indicated that when promoting a nature-based destination, tourism ads with a candid model ($M = 4.40$) generated higher destination advertising effectiveness than those with a posed model ($M = 4.16, F(224) = 31.88, p < 0.05$). However, when tourism ads promote an urban destination, there was no significant difference in destination advertising effectiveness between the posed condition ($M = 4.36$) and the candid condition ($M = 4.40, F(224) = 0.89, p = 0.35$).

Mediation analyses

To test H4, a moderated mediation analysis was conducted (Process Model 8, Hayes, 2017). The bootstrapping results indicated a significant moderated mediation process through narrative transportation (index = 0.0932, 95 % CI = [0.0169, 0.1769]). Specifically, narrative transportation mediated the impact of modeling style on destination advertising effectiveness in the nature-based destination (indirect effect = -0.0964 , 95 % CI = [$-0.1599, -0.0397$]), but not in the urban destination (indirect effect = -0.0032 , 95 % CI = [$-0.0540, 0.0485$]).

Discussion and conclusion

Conclusion

The portrayal of models in tourism ads, specifically the modeling style, plays a significant role in advertising effectiveness. Through four studies, this article explores the persuasive potential of modeling style as a crucial visual feature in tourism ads. Our findings demonstrate that tourism ads featuring candid models elicit stronger visual attention, as measured by eye-tracking technology, indicating greater advertising effectiveness (Study 1). Additionally, we provide empirical evidence of the main effects using self-report measures and identify narrative transportation as the underlying process mechanism (Study 2). Furthermore, we uncover the moderating role of destination type, revealing that candid models outperform posed models in nature-based destinations but not in urban destinations (Studies 3 and 4).

Theoretical implications

First, we contribute to the existing literature on destination advertising effectiveness by highlighting the impact of modeling style (candid vs. posed) in photos on the efficacy of tourism advertising. Previous studies explore the influence of various human elements in tourism ads, including the presence/absence of endorsers (Wang et al., 2002) gender and age of models (Luoh & Lo, 2012), and the proportion of human elements in promotional materials (Zhang et al., 2023). Extending this line of work, our study delves deeper into the characteristics of the ad models (candid or posed) and provides robust evidence that candid models outperform posed models in the domain of tourism advertising. This finding aligns with previous studies showing the superiority of candid photos over posed ones in the realm of interpersonal relationship management (Berger & Barasch, 2017; Lim & Childs, 2020). Our study extends this literature by demonstrating that candid models outperform posed models in the domain of tourism advertising—a non-personal communication channel characterized by hedonism, high consumer engagement, and uncertainty (Liu et al., 2023). Notably, our study adopts hybrid measures of semi-structured interviews, physiological measures (eye-

tracking data), and online experiments to assess tourism advertising effectiveness. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the impact of modeling style and distinguishes our study from most visual research in tourism advertising, which predominantly relies on self-reported questionnaires that may be susceptible to cognitive bias.

Second, this research provides empirical support for the narrative transportation theory in elucidating the mechanism through which modeling style in tourism ads impacts advertising effects. The advertising literature has recognized message-related factors, such as identifiable characters (Van Laer et al., 2014), type of self-referencing (Escalas, 2007), and eye gaze (To & Patrick, 2021), as determinants of individual transportation. This study extends this literature by revealing another visual element inherent in static tourism ads—the modeling style (candid vs. posed)—as a determinant that stimulates viewers' narrative transportation. The candid model enhances the naturalism of the ad by presenting consumers with a more authentic and genuine portrayal of the tourist image, where the story character interacts naturally with the promoted destination (Green et al., 2008). By capturing unprompted moments of the main character, the tourism ads offer consumers a visual scene resembling a real-life destination experience, thereby heightening their sense of immersion and narrative transportation (Green et al., 2008). This study affirms the significant role of narrative transportation in the experiential consumption context, supporting the previous findings of Back et al. (2020) and echoing the works of To and Patrick (2021) by demonstrating that narrative transportation can be activated not only through the presence of a human image as a whole but also through specific characteristics of the model in the advertisement.

Third, we contribute to visual and tourism literature by not only demonstrating the impact of modeling style on ad persuasion (Wolf, 2003) but also identifying an important boundary condition—destination type. We show that tourism ads with candid models lead to better advertising effects in nature-based destinations, while this effect is attenuated in urban destinations. Previous visual studies also identify boundary conditions for candid vs. posed photos. For example, in a consumer selfie context, candid photos may not be superior to posed photos due to the perception of greater silliness (Farace et al., 2017). This is because the self-aggrandizing nature of selfie photos contradicts the spontaneous nature of candid photos, leading to a lower aesthetic quality. This study extends this line of research by identifying destination type as an additional boundary condition. Moreover, previous research on visual research has found that humans have an affinity for images depicting natural environments (Lidwell et al., 2010; Yu, 1995). Therefore, we contribute to this literature by revealing that individuals not only prefer natural images but also human elements embedded in such images that help them immerse themselves in the narrative of natural environments.

Practical implications

The result of the current study provides valuable insights for tourism marketers when creating and selecting appropriate destination marketing materials including tourism brochures, guidebooks, postcards, and websites. For example, photographers are advised to capture sequence photos of the model during the initial stage of destination advertising production, focusing on capturing in-between ephemeral moments. These moments could include a tourist surfing on the sea or a couple chatting and laughing naturally in a national park. To capture the raw and natural emotions of the model, photographers should use a “zoom lens” to shoot the model without being intrusive or getting too close. Incorporating such photos in destination ads can facilitate tourists' connection with the content conveyed by the advertisement, ultimately influencing their decision to visit the destination. Furthermore, photos provided by tourists on online review platforms and those shared by social influencers on social media have emerged as powerful marketing tools. Practitioners could encourage travelers and social influencers to showcase photos with candid models on these platforms. For example, travelers can be guided to upload candid photos on online review platforms, accompanied by explicit examples and incentives such as reward points.

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of making consumers feel transported to the destination by incorporating narrative elements in the ads, significantly enhancing the persuasion effects of destination ads. Therefore, creating effective marketing materials that further facilitate transportation into the narrative of destination ads is crucial for destination marketers. In particular, using narrative visual cues (e.g., candid modeling style) is key, along with aligning such cues with specific markets. Previous research suggests that the higher the similarity between consumers and the main character in the ad, the easier it is for them to become immersed in the story (Vaughn et al., 2009). Thus, destination marketers should not only present natural or spontaneous moments of the model (i.e., candid model) but also consider the fit between the character and the potential audience (e.g., age, ethnicity, and gender) to better engage viewers in the story depicted in the ads. This can be achieved through micro-niche marketing, a popular strategy utilizing consumer data (e.g., demographics) to identify the interests of specific groups and send targeted advertisements aligning with their interests (Danaher, 2023). Specifically, destination marketers can create several versions of destination ads using candid models with different characteristics and target specific customer groups based on the fit between the main character and the audience.

To maximize the effectiveness of modeling style in tourism advertising, it is important to consider the match between the specific modeling style and the attributes of the destination. For nature-based destinations, practitioners are advised to design their ads using models that appear more carefree or rushed. This is particularly important for tourism ads that incorporate natural elements such as oceans, mountains, deserts, and rainforests. On the other hand, the modeling style, whether posed or candid, may play a less important role in determining the advertising effectiveness of urban destinations. Instead, consumers may be more concerned about functional cues presented in ads promoting urban destinations. Previous research has shown that consumers pay more attention to accommodation and destination functional attributes, such as events, food quality, safety, and accommodation range, when assessing an urban destination (Barros & Assaf, 2012). Therefore, urban destination marketers should incorporate such cues to attract consumers' attention and effectively promote their destinations.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study is not without limitations. First, the stimuli in Study 1 comprised stand-alone photos sourced from online travel websites and thus lacked destination information. To bolster the robustness of our findings, future research could collaborate with tourism companies to design authentic destination ads and conduct eye-tracking experiments. Second, the current research focuses on the content feature of a photo incorporated in tourism ads. However, tourism ads also sometimes use cartoon-like characters, and future research can study whether the advertising medium (graphic arts vs hand-drawn illustration) moderates the effectiveness of modeling style. For instance, while the cartoon-like character delivers stronger cuteness, the difference between cartoon and human being may make consumers hard to immerse themselves into a visual narrative, thereby leading to similar advertising effects. Finally, this study focuses on modeling style embedded in static online tourism ads such as those posted in online travel agencies. Static ads load faster than video ads and are more likely to hold viewers' attention. However, there is a variety of viewing modes for print ads that differ by their interactivity levels, such as watching with visual reality devices. Future research can explore how viewing modes influence the proposed effects.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Shanshi Li: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Huiling Huang:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualization. **Xinyu Liu:** Visualization, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Zhenyu Chen:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2024.103790>.

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