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ABSTRACT

This study focused on the impact of attractive travel selfies on potential travelers, especially when they have a positive self presentation intention. The study is based on social comparison theory and found that positive self presentation intentions motivate people to engage in upward body comparisons. If the upward body comparison led to self-image concerns among potential travelers, their perceptions of both benign and malicious envy were enhanced. When self-image concerns were absent, only benign envy perceptions were increased. Our research confirms that the physical attractiveness of tourists' selfies on social media has an impact on destination marketing effectiveness.

Introduction

In recent years, the tourism industry has been labeled the "selfie era" (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2018). Accroding to Dinhopl and Gretzel's definition of travel selfie (2016): tourists emphasize their own images in photos that are intended to be shared with online audiences. Previous studies unanimously indicate that taking and posting travel selfies is primarily driven by the motivations of self-presentation, which involve the self-objectification of body image and strategic editing of physical attractiveness (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016; Lo & McKercher, 2015; Lyu, 2016).There has been a shift in visitors' focus, with their interest in gazing at and presenting their own bodies surpassing their emphasis on the destination itself. Scholars have confirmed an "attraction shading effect" from tourists' selfies, where the tourist's image occupies a significant portion of the photograph compared to the featured attraction (Christou et al., 2020). Furthermore, appealing selfies are believed to influence destination selection of potential travelers, as they portray how a tourist might appear in the future. Encouraging tourists to capture and share selfies could serve as an effective marketing strategy to attract potential visitors (DG, 2020).

Since presenting image attractiveness online bring many potential benefits, including perceived higher intellectual and social skills by others (Hamermesh, 2011), tourists tern to post self-related photos and intentionally manipulate these pictures to present an ideal self-image (J. Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013; Lyu, 2016). Extensive evidence suggests that people are committed to achieving popular online images, even resorting to undergoing cosmetic surgery (Hunt, 2019) and selecting destinations for selfies, using makeup and clothing to enhance the attractiveness of their photos (Chua & Chang, 2016). Other tourists present countless idealized selfies featuring thin, lean/tone, and photoshopped images (Mills et al., 2018). This deliberate display contributes to the internalization of highly attractive yet unrealistically ideal images by the audience. Despite the widespread attention drawn by travel selfies and self-presentation, research on tourists' body images in selfies remains limited. Existing work has partly discussed these selfies as a form of tourist gaze facilitated by social media (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016). Narcissism and envy promote the sharing of these selfies (DG, 2020), with positive self-presentation being a key motive for posting them online (Lo & McKercher, 2015; Lyu, 2016).

However, the prevalence of attractive tourist selfies can have a "double-edged sword effect," which means that the mixed consequences need to be taken into consideration. Exposure to unrealistic and unnatural attractive selfies frequently, such as the "thin ideal" and "athletic ideal," can contribute to the perpetuation of idealized beauty standards and body image norms. Consequently, high attractive images are considered as prevalent, desirable, and accessible for regular people (J. W. Kim & Chock,

2015; Meier & Gray, 2014; Robinson et al., 2017) and individuals may feel ashamed or inadequate if they do not meet these standards (J. W. Kim & Chock, 2015; Meier & Gray, 2014; Tiggemann et al., 2013). The popularity of selfies has received criticism in the realm of body image, as it has been linked to increased physical comparison, dissatisfaction, anxiety, and other negative psychological effects (CA, 2020; Tiggemann et al., 2020). However, the potential negative impact of selfie presentation on travelers remains unclear. When undesirable body image perceptions are triggered, these adverse effects may extend to destination choices and consumption.

Taking into account the significant role of social comparison theory in body image and travel intention research (Hajli et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2022), this study introduces the concept of upward body comparison. On one hand, attractive tourist selfies can serve as a source of inspiration, sparking interest and influencing destination choices (i.e. "If they can do it, maybe I can, too") (Tiggemann et al., 2013). On the other hand, if upward social comparisons activate negative self-image perceptions, people may feel disappointed about the prospect of travel and self-presentation, and then blame the cause of low self-esteem, which is other tourists who are more attractive. We focus on a trio of issues to fill knowledge gaps around tourists' body image. First, we investigate whether, when tourists aspire to present a positive online image through travel, they consider the self image attractiveness as an important aspect of presentation. Second, we explore the impacts of upward body comparison and negative body image perception on destination marketing. Third, we adopt the concept of benign envy and malicious to measure the double-edged sword effects caused by upward body comparison and shifting body image perceptions.

Theoretical background

Travelers' selfie presentation on social media

These deliberately selected travel selfies constitute a form of self-presentation in the tourism literature (Lyu, 2016). According to Goffman (1959), strategic self-presentation (i.e. impression management) is a purposeful self-modification process. Lyu (2016) pointed out that such self-presentation arises from tourists' objectification of their own bodies. When people internalize an external ideal image, they see their own appearance as an object that others will monitor. These selfies capture tourists' self-gaze. That is, travelers see themselves through others' eyes (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016). Individuals in turn edit their true image to approximate their ideal image.

Strategic self-presentation is associated with outcomes such as improved personal well-being, social competence, self-esteem and self-efficacy, and self-identity development (e.g. Gentile et al., 2012; H. Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017; S. A. Lee & Oh, 2017). Some people travel to obtain these psychological benefits, thus preferring destinations that enhance their self-image. Social media self-presentation reflects a shift from text-based narration to visual description. Modern media is image-oriented, with body and personal image often being core components. An attractive body image is a prime factor in travelers' positive self-presentation. Yet little is known about tourists' psychological characteristics tied to body image. Travelers driven by self-presentation are nonetheless a valuable segment: they typically choose destinations suitable for self-presentation, and their post-trip photos guide others' destination selection. This cycle leads places to become less pertinent than tourists' self-gaze (Christou et al., 2020; Lyu, 2016; Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2018; Picard & DiGiovine, 2014).

The act of capturing travel selfies directs the audience's attention towards body image, transforming both the body and destination into subjects of observation. The significance of body image is further magnified in the realm of online self-presentation. Within the context of social media's virtual interpersonal interactions, body image replaces the physical presence of a "unique body" and aids users in establishing their personal identity. The existence of the body plays a crucial role in the formation of individual identity. Our bodies serve as a medium for expressing personal or societal unconscious processes, encompassing emotions, cultural and social attitudes, aspirations, values, and beliefs (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2015). Nonetheless, offline self-presentation relies on physical performance, which Mauss (1973) terms as body technique. This repetitive, learned, and unchallenged nature of performance, known as "performativity," is claimed to shape one's identity through repeated bodily experiences (Larsen, 2005). While face-to-face self-presentation is dynamic and embodied, online self-presentation is static and revolves around verbal descriptions or photographic depictions of one's appearance (Toma & Hancock, 2010). Travel selfies enable tourists to showcase their bodies, particularly their faces, enabling the audience to form a relatively comprehensive perception of their identity.

Social comparison theory

We adopt social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) as the theoretical framework for our study. The theory posits that individuals are driven to seek information about others in order to evaluate their own position

within a social group (Myers & Crowther, 2009). Social comparison theory encompasses two types of comparisons: upward social comparison and downward social comparison. The former occurs when individuals compare themselves to others perceived as superior, while the latter involves comparing oneself to those considered less successful or inferior. Engaging in these comparisons serves as a basis for self-evaluation and the development of self-concept (Stapel & Koomen, 2001), reducing uncertainty and providing individuals with a sense of meaning (Suls & Wheeler, 2000). Thus, social comparison is a significant psychological process that influences individuals' daily judgments, experiences, and behaviors (Corcoran et al., 2011). It assists individuals in evaluating their own performance (Boissicat et al., 2022), comprehending complex information (Mussweiler & Epstude, 2009), and, importantly, maintaining their self-esteem (Triệu et al., 2021).

Research on body image suggests that social comparison plays a central role in how an attractive body image impacts the audience (Myers & Crowther, 2009). Social comparison theory is widely used in this field. When individuals engage in upward social comparison related to body image, they tend to internalize an idealized image. By comparing themselves to individuals with more attractive bodies, they gain an understanding of what is considered desirable and how they can potentially improve their own appearance. However, many people, particularly women, often feel unable to match the slim and attractive standards set by models (Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010). This perception can lead to body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, and even contribute to the development of eating disorders (Grabe et al., 2008). We propose that body image concerns arising from upward body comparison, which triggers negative emotions related to dissatisfaction, can result in various consequences. Furthermore, the processes of assimilation and contrast reveal how body image concerns influence the outcomes of social comparison.

Assimilation and contrast effects

Contradictory findings have been reported in social comparison research. One potential explanation for these discrepancies is whether the comparison yields a contrast effect (e.g. "that person is not like me") or an assimilation effect (e.g. "that person could be similar to me") (Collins, 1996; Smith, 2000). Specifically, when individuals engage in upward comparisons that result in a contrast effect, it is likely to lead to demoralization by emphasizing the differences between oneself and the upward comparison target. Conversely, upward comparisons that yield an assimilation effect are more likely to be inspiring, as they underscore

the similarities between the individual and the upward comparison target (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997).

In the realm of tourism research, there is also a mixed body of evidence. Hajli et al. (2018) explored the social comparison preferences and envy of potential tourists, reporting positive results that suggest upward social comparison and envy can act as motivators for desire to visit a destination. Liu et al. (2019) also found benign envy occurring after upward comparison. While Feng et al. (2021) observed malicious envy triggered by other travelers' luxury hotel consumption. Additionally, H. Kim and Chung's (2022) investigation on dual envy in relation to travel experiences revealed that the outcome of envy depended on the availability of such experiences. Despite these advances, there are still several theoretical gaps in the understanding of the relationship between social comparison and envy within the domain of tourism research. Further exploration and investigation are needed to bridge these gaps and provide a more comprehensive understanding of this relationship.

We speculate that the different relationship between comparison and envy is determined by whether the contrast effect is caused by the upward social comparison. Because contrast effect, travelers' focus on negative self-conceptions promoted defensive processing of social comparison information. This leads to a different reaction to envy from upward assimilation effect travelers. Self-evaluation is often used as a measure of contrast and assimilation effects (e.g. Vogel et al., 2020). However, the current study did not measure the self-evaluation of potential travelers after experiencing comparison. Self-evaluation acts as a measure of contrast and assimilation effects (e.g. Vogel et al., 2020). The contrast effect applies in cases of reduced self-evaluation. We measure this effect based on body image concerns, a negative perception of the difference between oneself and a superior person. A meta-analysis involving 156 studies found social comparison to be associated with relatively high physical dissatisfaction (Myers & Crowther, 2009). Upward body comparison is presumably likely to lead to the contrast effect, especially if potential visitors sense a gap between themselves and an attractive image and cannot dismiss the discrepancy (i.e. they become dissatisfied with their own body image). Other people may not experience marked body image dissatisfaction after such comparison. We speculate that people without body image concerns will see positive results from comparison.

Two types of envy

Two subtypes of envy, which have received close attention in travel research as of late, exert positive

(motivated by benign envy) and negative (motivated by malicious envy) impacts on travel intention. We introduce the notion of envy to determine how body comparison and body image concerns influence tourism consumption. Several body image studies have shown that physical dissatisfaction causes mental distress among men and women and is significantly correlated with low self-esteem and depression (Paxton et al., 2006; Sahlan et al., 2021). The perceived inferiority resulting from upward social comparison results in envy, a social emotion (Van de Ven, 2016) which has been universally recognized as a form of pain: people who see that others are better off may think "That could have been me" (Van de Ven & Zeelenberg, 2015). Envy is pervasive among social media users (Wallace et al., 2017). Although envy of others' luxurious consumption has garnered interest in the tourism field, envy based on body image comparison is less understood.

Envy triggers a tendency to respond to a self-assessment threat (Van de Ven et al., 2009). Two reactions prevail: raising one's own status or removing another person from their superior position. Parrott and Smith (1993) argued that envy can produce a desire for what another has (i.e. benign envy) or an expectation that that person will lose their advantage (i.e. malicious envy). Benign envy reflects one's drive to improve oneself and to work hard to obtain what others have (Van de Ven et al., 2009). Wishing for an envied person to lose what they have embodies malicious envy (Wu & Srite, 2021). This form of envy is typified by negative views of the envied person (Van de Ven et al., 2009) and can inspire undercutting or aggression toward others (Lange & Crusius, 2015; Van de Ven & Zeelenberg, 2015).

Hypothesis development

Relationship between self-presentation and upward body comparison

This study posits that self-presentation intention on social media platforms may result in greater participation in upward social comparison among tourists. First of all, self-presentation enables tourists to compare themselves with others more frequently. As Goffman (1959) suggests, self-presentation heavily relies on understanding the specific context, environment, and anticipated audience. In order to reduce uncertainty regarding the presentation environment, individuals seek information from others, thereby engaging in social comparisons (Festinger, 1954). Humans have an inherent need to establish certainty in their world and their position within it (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Ambiguity and uncertainty

are typically perceived as unpleasant states, which individuals attempt to manage by seeking out information (Strube & Yost, 1993). Social media users primarily rely on information from social media platforms to make judgments about their audience (Walther et al., 2008). Research propose that evaluations, both internal and external, can influence how individuals portray their public identity and subsequently adopt more effective self-presentation strategies (Stern, 2008).

Second, potential travelers may be more active and consciously choose to compare with more attractive objects. Because the process of social comparison is also a process of acquiring information and knowledge about superior objects, this implies the possibility of self-improvement. In previous studies, upward social comparison on social media was described as an unavoidable and spontaneous process (for example J. W. Kim & Chock, 2015). Social comparisons are not only imposed on individuals by external circumstances, but individuals also willingly expose themselves to such experiences when they have self-improvement goals (JV, 1989). Self-presentation requires external information to guide the desired presentation outcome. The "social surveillance" proposed by Marwick (2012) also support this. When users observe content created by others, they develop a perception of what is considered normal, acceptable, or unacceptable within the community. As a result, they may adjust or modify their own posts accordingly. Therefore, the intention of self-presentation drives people to participate in social comparison more frequently, and at the same time makes people seek comparison with better target. The following hypothesis is proposed accordingly:

H1: Self-presentation positively influence on upward body comparison

Relationship between upward body comparison and body image concerns

Myers and Crowther (2009) conducted a meta-analysis consisting of 156 studies (with 189 effect sizes) and found a positive association between social comparison and heightened levels of physical dissatisfaction. This suggests that engaging in upward body comparison may result in a contrast effect, where individuals perceive a discrepancy between themselves and an attractive image, subsequently leading to dissatisfaction with their own body image. After upward body image comparison, if the comparers are not be able to dismiss the discrepancies exist, comparison may turn to contrast

effect. Presnell et al. (2004) define body dissatisfaction as the presence of negative subjective comments relating to one's physical appearance or specific body features. Garner (2002) expands the concept to include dysfunctional attitudes, negative beliefs, and negative emotional responses towards one's weight and body shape. Research conducted by Spitzer et al. (1999) revealed that over 80% of women in college settings reported dissatisfaction with their bodies, while among adolescent girls, 76.8% indicated a desire to lose weight (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). Moreover, individuals who already experience anxiety or uncertainty regarding their body image tend to be more inclined to seek out standards for (upward) social comparison, thereby exacerbating feelings of body dissatisfaction (SC, 2009). Negative psychological consequences associated with body dissatisfaction include the development of eating disorders, overexercising and undergoing risky cosmetic procedures (Corning et al., 2006; Stice, 2002).

H2: Upward body comparison positively influences body image concerns.

The mediating effect of body image concern

Our proposition suggests that the contrast effect would result in a greater extent of potential travelers generating envy-related responses, whether in benign or malicious forms. The emphasis on negative self-perceptions can have detrimental effects on self-esteem, thereby triggering an increased motivation to defend and enhance self-esteem. Consequently, individuals are inclined to act in response to this perceived threat (Van de Ven et al., 2009). In order to counteract the potential negative impact of social comparisons on their self-image, individuals may utilize defensive strategies aimed at safeguarding their self-worth (e.g. Klein et al., 2001; Stapel & Schwinghammer, 2004). Previous research in the field of social comparison has explored various defensive strategies, such as indirect tactics aimed at impeding the subsequent performance of the comparison target (e.g. sabotaging their performance in a subsequent test) or efforts directed at improving one's own performance (e.g. working harder on a subsequent test; see Tesser, 1988). Additionally, studies have shown that by devaluing the attractiveness of comparison target, participants effectively mitigate the perceived threat to their self-esteem. These defensive strategies align with the two types of envy, namely, the desire to improve oneself (benign envy) and the inclination to diminish competitors (malicious envy). Based on this,

we anticipate that Self-image concern has a significant mediating effect between upward body comparison and envy. And self-image concern positively influences both benign envy and malicious envy.

H3: Body image concerns positively influence benign envy.

H4: Body image concerns positively influence malicious envy.

H5: Self-image concerns mediated the relationship between upward body comparison and benign envy

H6: Self-image concerns mediated the relationship between upward body comparison and malicious envy

Direct relationship between upward body comparison and envy

When upward body comparisons do not diminish the potential traveler's self-perception of body image, the achievement of others can trigger a shift towards benign envy. In such instances, upward social comparison acts as a motivator, thus explaining why previous research on travel envy has predominantly highlighted the positive impact of upward comparison on benign envy and its influence on destination marketing effects. Wheeler's (1966) research findings propose that individuals do not perceive upward comparison as a threat to their self-esteem; instead, they may perceive it as an opportunity for self-enhancement. In fact, being among the "more successful" can be more enjoyable than being among the "less successful," thus suggesting that upward comparison potentially yields greater self-enhancement benefits compared to downward comparison. While an increasing body of literature indicates that exposure to ultra-thin models often leads to heightened body dissatisfaction among a significant portion of women, there exist studies that have reported either no effect or even a positive effect of exposure to idealized female models on women's self-evaluations (Joshi et al., 2004; Mills et al., 2002). It is plausible that women who place importance on their appearance or actively strive to improve their appearance perceive models as sources of inspiration for self-improvement.

The assimilation effect arises when travelers are inspired by the belief that they can attain similar status or achievements as the comparison target (Suls et al., 2002). Lockwood and Kunda (1997) demonstrated that exposure to upward targets enhances individuals' self-

perceptions of competence and motivation, particularly when they believe in the potential for change in their own status. This study posits that when the assimilation effect takes place, travelers perceive themselves as belonging to a more desirable group and consequently, their self-evaluation remains intact. Furthermore, they consider the destination as a means to enhance their presentation effects and personal image effectively. Therefore, upward body comparison is viewed as facilitating benign envy while curbing malicious envy, as the object of comparison is regarded as their future self.

H7: Upward body comparison positively influence benign envy

H8: Upward body comparison negatively influence malicious envy

Relationship between envy and attitude

We use destination attitude to measure the promotional impacts of travel selfies on a destination. Attitude, commonly defined as a evaluative judgment towards a specific object, can range from favorable to unfavorable or neutral (Lutz, 1991; Thurstone, 1928). It represents a psychological inclination expressed through the evaluation of a particular entity with varying degrees of favor or disfavor (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; H. Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015). While previous studies commonly employed visit intention as a measure of potential travelers' consumption preferences (T. H. Lee, 2009; Mechinda et al., 2009), it should be noted that users' behavioral intention on a social networking site may not necessarily reflect the likelihood of actual behavior (Hajli et al., 2018; Yadav et al., 2013). Furthermore, several studies have corroborated attitude as a critical determinant in tourist choice behavior (Mohsin, 2005; Pike, 2006). And, other attractive travelers are more likely to influence a potential traveler's destination attitude through a series of cognitive processes. Communicators with attractiveness tend to be well-liked and can exert a positive impact on the products they endorse (Messner et al., 2008). Consistent with this, studies on source credibility suggest that the physical attractiveness of celebrity endorsers has a positive effect on people's attitudes towards advertisements and brands (Roy et al., 2013). Based on these findings, we argue that an appealing tourist image is a pivotal factor in shaping a more positive destination attitude among potential tourists.

We theorize that benign and malignant envy have opposite effects on destination attitude. On the positive side, envy can be motivating (Van de Ven et al., 2009). This propensity can explain why "keeping up with the Joneses," an intense desire to have what others of one's age have, is an impetus for economic growth (Van de Ven et al., 2009). People who experience benign envy from attractive travel selfies may choose to visit the pictured destination to take appealing photos themselves. Their attitude towards the destination could then improve. Negative facets of envy evoke thoughts and actions that belittle others. The drive to avoid uncomfortable social comparison that harms one's self-esteem can lead people to alienate relatively successful comparison targets (Tesser, 1980). The role of envy in increasing avoidance also exists in an information systems context, such that users abandon some websites in favor of new ones (Lim & Yang, 2015). We posit that malicious envy adversely affects destination attitude when people aim to disparage a target and associated materials (e.g. the pictured destination). The following hypothesis is thus put forth:

H9: Benign envy positively influence on destination attitude

H10: Malicious envy negatively influence on destination attitude

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical model guiding this study.

Method

Data collection

Data were gathered through a survey. The questionnaire was posted on WeChat, China's most popular social media platform, to ensure respondents had social media accounts and used social media to some extent. Respondents were first introduced to our research context and were asked to recall relevant experiences. The prompt was as follows: "Social media (such as WeChat, Weibo, Tik Tok, Xiaohongshu, etc.) is where many people record and share highlights and important experiences in their lives. After a satisfying trip, many people like to share their feelings and attractive photos online and get compliments from their friends. In the past, when using social media, have you seen fascinating travel experiences and destinations? Have you ever liked or commented on any social media content and how it affected your impressions of these places? Please try to recall these browsing experiences and any social media travel stories you have seen."

The questionnaire was distributed in several travel-related WeChat groups. The group members live in different cities in China with different incomes and ages. The only thing they
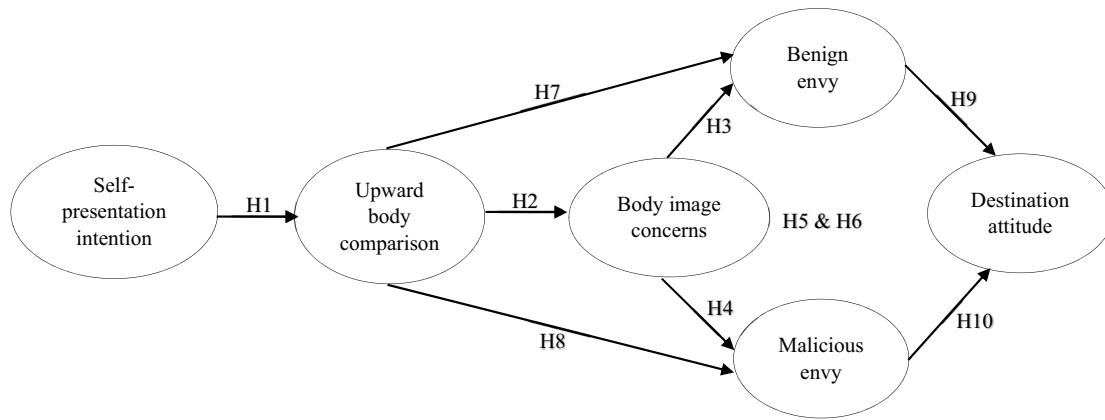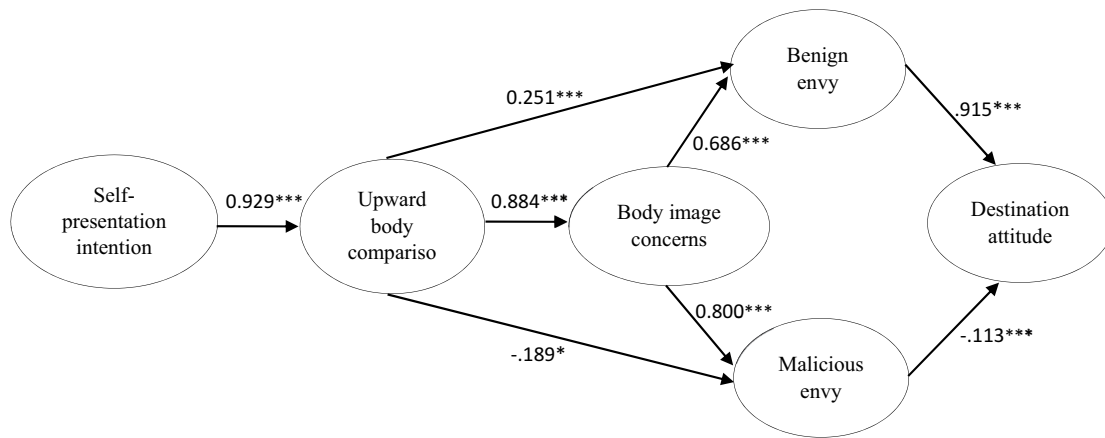
Figure 1. Theoretical model.

Figure 2. Structural model.

have in common is their interest in travel-related topics. Most of the group members have travel experiences and plan to travel in the future. Respondents participated voluntarily and were informed they could withdraw from the survey at any time. The questionnaire has been collected from May 1 to June 2 2022. Ultimately, 807 valid questionnaires were acquired, details are provided in Table 1. The sample included 414 men (51.3%) and 393 women (48.7%). Of them, 686 were between the ages of 20 and 50 (85%). Most held a bachelor's degree or higher (85.5%). The majority (81.29%) reported earning a monthly income between 5,000 and 20,000 yuan. Social media channels in this study include WeChat, Weibo, Tik Tok and Xiaohongshu. They are the dominant social media in the Chinese market. Other social media were not considered due to their smaller user base and more fragmented functionality.

Measurement

We assembled a self-presentation intention scale to assess potential tourists' willingness to post positive travel experiences on social media if they took a trip. Items were adapted from scales by Krasnova et al. (2010) and Walther et al. (2001), both of which had adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's α = 0.86 and 0.80, respectively). Modifications ensured that the items suited our study context and adhered to Chinese communication conventions.

Items on upward body comparison concerned the extent to which potential travelers engaged in physical upward social comparison after viewing trip photos on social media. The scale consisted of four items regarding body comparison based on four aspects of the viewer's experience. Items were adapted from the Body Comparison Scale (BCS; see Spitzer et al., 1999). The original BCS includes general ratings of bodily features at 20 sites (e.g. waist, hips, and cheeks). Dijkstra and Barelds (2011) extracted four items (Cronbach's α = 0.87). We referred to the same dimensions in our study, namely facial attractiveness, figure idealization, weight idealization, and general attractiveness.

Table 1. Respondents' demographics.

Category		n	Frequency
Gender	Male	414	51.3%
	Female	393	48.7%
Age	18–20	58	7.2%
	21–25	145	18%
	26–30	167	20.7%
	31–35	179	22.2%
	36–40	118	14.6%
	41–45	35	4.3%
	46–50	42	5.2%
	51–55	39	4.8%
	56 or above	24	3%
Education	Below high school	32	4%
	High school	85	10.53%
	College/university	500	61.96%
	Graduate school	190	23.5%
Monthly income (RMB)	Less than 2,000	27	3.3%
	2,000–5,000	124	15.4%
	5,000–8,000	200	24.8%
	8,000–11,000	160	19.8%
	11,000–14,000	121	15.0%
	14,000–17,000	91	11.3%
	17,000–20,000	64	7.9%
	More than 20,000	20	2.5%

Self-image concerns covered potential travelers' negative body-related self-perceptions upon exposure to an ideal image. The scale contained two dimensions. The first was psychological and assessed negative physical or appearance-related perceptions resulting from upward social comparison (e.g. "I feel somewhat dissatisfied with my appearance"). Items for this dimension were adapted from the Negative Physical Self Scale (Chen et al., 2006), which contains 48 items across five dimensions (General Appearance, Facial Appearance, Shortness, Fatness, Thinness). We considered the General Appearance dimension (Cronbach's α = 0.80). Lyu (2016) used the same three items to measure appearance dissatisfaction (Cronbach's α = 0.78). We also included a behavioral intention dimension to measure respondents' psychological perceptions. Several common appearance-enhancing strategies were addressed – improving make-up skills, undergoing plastic surgery, losing weight, and improving dressing skills – that respectively corresponded to the four BCS dimensions (Dijkstra & Barelds, 2011). Examples included "I think I should improve my make-up skills" (i.e. facial attractiveness) and "I think I should take some actions to lose weight" (i.e. weight loss).

We adapted the Benign and Malicious Envy Scale from Van de Ven et al. (2009) 4-item measure (e.g. "I felt inspired by the person whom I envied" [benign envy] and "I felt cold toward the person whom I envied" [malicious envy]). Many measurement tools involving envy address the two dimensions of activated thoughts or action tendencies (Lange & Crusius, 2015; Liu et al., 2019; Van de Ven et al., 2009). We also adapted the 4-item envy scale that Liu et al. (2019) altered from Van

de Ven et al. (2009) to match the Chinese context (Cronbach's α = 0.79). Our resultant 4-item benign envy scale contained items such as "I like the good-looking people in these photos" and "I was inspired and motivated by the travel experiences of highly attractive people;" our 4-item malicious envy scale featured items such as "Viewing these pictures makes one feel depressed" and "I feel unfair." Destination attitude captures a potential traveler's attitude toward a destination after being exposed to trip photos containing idealized destination images. Our scale contained five items (satisfying, pleasant, enjoyable, worthwhile, and fascinating) adopted from Hsu et al. (2010).

Results

Statistical analysis

To evaluate our proposed theoretical model, we employed two-stage structural equation modeling (SEM) as Anderson and Gerbing (1988) recommended. Data were analyzed in AMOS 28 software. Researchers using SEM must verify the appropriateness of the measurement model first before estimating the structural model (Byrne, 2010). SEM entails two stages. The first, which is used to evaluate the measurement model, involves confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). CFA can concurrently test the relationships between observed variables (indicators) and non-observed variables (latent constructs). The second stage, hypothesis testing, is performed to validate the associations between latent constructs.

A series of validity and reliability tests need to be carried out before conducting SEM (Kline, 2005). Cronbach's alpha reflects a scale's internal reliability. All Cronbach's alpha values in this study exceeded the suggested cut-off of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994); details are provided in Table 2. Our questionnaire possessed sound internal reliability. As shown in Table 3, all skewness values were less than 3 and kurtosis values were less than 8 (Kline, 2005). The univariate normality of our data distribution was therefore not a concern; the data were suitable for further analyses via SEM (Kline, 2005).

Measurement model estimation

We conducted CFA to assess construct validity and reliability as well as latent factors' unidimensional characteristics. Five model fit indices were calculated to evaluate the model's goodness of fit. All fit indices met the requirements for a satisfactory fit (Kline, 2005; CMIN/df = 2.319 < 3, NFI = 0.965 > 0.9, TLI = 0.978 > 0.9, CFI =

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and reliability of variables.

Construct	Items	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's α
Self-presentation intention				0.921
	V1: If I have the opportunity to travel, I will share more about my pleasant experiences from the trip on social media than the less pleasant ones.	3.62	1.546	
	V2: When I go on a trip in the future, I will present the experience in a more idealistic way.	3.59	1.557	
	V3: I'll put the best parts of the experience on social media.	3.69	1.560	
	V4: When I describe my trip, I present a more positive self-image on social media.	3.57	1.543	
Upward body comparison				0.946
	V5: I usually find people in trip photos with better figures than I have.	3.70	1.485	
	V6: I usually find that people in trip photos have a more ideal weight than I do.	3.61	1.544	
	V7: I usually find people in trip photos to be better looking and more attractive than I am.	3.68	1.529	
	V8: I usually find people in trip photos look better overall than I do.	3.66	1.553	
	V9: I often find that people in trip photos know a lot more than I do about how to look attractive.	3.72	1.549	
Body image concerns				0.947
	V10: I felt a certain level of dissatisfaction with my appearance.	3.69	1.558	
	V11: I was uncomfortable with certain aspects of my appearance.	3.66	1.574	
	V12: I think most of my friends are more attractive than I am.	3.65	1.517	
	V13: I think I should improve my make-up skills.	3.67	1.588	
	V14: I found myself able to accept a certain amount of plastic surgery.	3.65	1.526	
	V15: I think I should take some actions to lose weight.	3.64	1.530	
	V16: I think I should improve my dressing skills.	3.61	1.547	
Benign envy				0.915
	V17: I like the good-looking people in these photos.	3.56	1.503	
	V18: I am inspired and motivated by the travel experiences displayed by highly attractive people.	3.61	1.494	
	V19: I would like to try to take a trip like those people did.	3.63	1.527	
	V20: I'm willing to give them a thumbs-up or leave positive comments.	3.63	1.510	
Malicious envy				0.913
	V21: It is depressing to look at these pictures.	3.62	1.644	
	V22: I feel unfair.	3.56	1.679	
	V23: I think these trips were far less perfect than they seemed, and they should have been worse.	3.63	1.635	
	V24: I'd rather talk about the disappointing parts of the picture than the seemingly perfect ones.	3.50	1.637	
Destination attitude				0.944
	V25: Satisfying	3.69	1.641	
	V26: Pleasant	3.65	1.600	
	V27: Enjoyable	3.67	1.615	
	V28: Worthwhile	3.69	1.633	
	V29: Fascinating	3.68	1.640	

0.980 > 0.9, RMSEA = 0.040 < 0.08). We additionally computed the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) as suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) and JF (2010). As listed in Table 2, the CR values for all constructs were greater than 0.70, and the AVE values were higher than 0.50 (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Fornell & Larcker, 1981; JF, 2010). The square roots of AVE values surpassed the correlation coefficients for the associated latent variables (Table 4), revealing the scale's sufficient convergent validity and discriminant validity.

Structural model estimation

All hypotheses were supported (see Figure 2). Direct effects were shown in Table 5, and indirect effects were shown in Table 6. Specifically, self-presentation positively affected upward body comparison (H1: β = 0.929, $t = 32.009$), and upward body comparison positively influenced body image concerns (H2: β = 0.884, $t =$ 29.698). Body image concerns had a significant positive impact on benign envy (H3: β = 0.686, $t = 13.336$) and malicious envy (H4: β = 0.800, $t = 10.005$). Body image concerns significantly mediated the relationship between upward body comparison and benign envy (H5: B = 0.607; 95% CI = [0.527, 0.699]; $p < 0.000$). Similarly, body image concerns significantly mediated the relationship between upward body comparison and malicious envy (H6: B = 0.707; 95% CI = [0.575, 0.868]; $p < 0.000$). Upward body comparison positively influenced benign envy (H7: β = 0.0251, $t = 5.284$) but negatively affected malicious envy (H8: β = −0.189, $t = −2.463$). Benign envy positively influenced destination attitude (H9: β = 0.915, $t = 23.876$), whereas malicious envy negatively affected such attitude (H10: β = −0.113, $t = −3.859$). Since the control variables are

Table 3. Measurement model estimation.

	Standard factor loading	S.E.	t value	Average variance extracted	Composite reliability	Skewness	Kurtosis
Self-presentation intention				0.7443	0.9209		
V1	.861					.260	−.497
V2	.863	.031	32.792***			.301	−.471
V3	.866	.031	32.990***			.396	−.502
V4	.861	.031	27.336***			.297	−.554
Upward body comparison				0.7773	0.9458		
V5	.916					.118	−.683
V6	.877	.025	39.300***			.311	−.542
V7	.881	.025	39.735***			.297	−.441
V8	.852	.027	36.576***			.329	−.528
V9	.881	.025	39.692***			.342	−.510
Body image concerns				0.7182	09469		
V10	.855					.419	−.540
V11	.842	.032	31.270***			.415	−.402
V12	.851	.030	31.910***			.481	−.401
V13	.847	.032	31.651***			.390	−.502
V14	.866	.030	32.943***			.467	−.343
V15	.840	.031	31.173***			.393	−.399
V16	.831	.032	30.580***			.424	−.380
Benign envy				0.7304	0.9155		
V17	.869					.424	−.368
V18	.846	.031	31.627***			.391	−.370
V19	.871	.031	33.367***			.397	−.404
V20	.832	.031	30.716***			.395	−.369
Malicious envy				0.7242	0.9131		
V21	.849					.256	−.757
V22	.856	.042	30.286***			.324	−.695
V23	.848	.044	29.849***			.278	−.678
V24	.851	.044	30.037***			.309	−.688
Destination attitude				0.7721	0.9442		
V25	.888					.108	−.722
V26	.877	.026	36.465***			.176	−.653
V27	.866	.027	35.435***			.185	−.622
V28	.894	.026	38.025***			.141	−.765
V29	.868	.027	35.600***			.172	−.720

Table 4. Correlation estimates and average variance extracted.

	Self-presentation intention	Upward social comparison	Self-image concern	Benign envy	Malicious envy	Destination attitude
Self-presentation intention	0.8627					
Upward social comparison	.857**	0.8816				
Self-image concern	.787**	.828**	0.8475			
Benign envy	.719**	.724**	.791**	0.8546		
Malicious envy	.480**	.471**	.572**	.628**	0.8510	
Destination attitude	.833**	.829**	.807**	.711**	.443**	0.8787

Note: Diagonal values are square roots of AVE values; off-diagonal values are estimates of intercorrelations between latent constructs.

Table 5. Hypothesis testing results.

Hypothesis		B	S.E.	C.R.	Result
H1	Self-presentation intention positively influences upward body comparison.	0.929***	0.030	32.009	Supported
H2	Upward body comparison positively influences body image concerns.	0.884***	0.029	29.698	Supported
H3	Body image concerns positively influences benign envy.	0.686***	0. 049	13.336	Supported
H4	Body image concern positively influences malicious envy.	0.800***	0.084	10.005	Supported
H7	Upward body comparison positively influences benign envy.	0.251***	0.044	5.284	Supported
H8	Upward body comparison negatively influences malicious envy.	−0.189*	0.079	−2.463	Supported
H9	Benign envy positively influences destination attitude.	0.915***	0.044	23.876	Supported
H10	Malicious envy negatively influences destination attitude.	−0.113***	0.031	−3.859	Supported

Note: *$p < 0.05$; B = standardized estimates.

crucial for separating the effects of independent variables and producing more precise results, we tested the hypothesis again after controlling the effects of gender, age, education level and monthly income. The results were still significant (see Figure 3). Thus, the theoretical model is considered to have relatively universal applicability.

Table 6. Hypothesis testing results of indirect effect.

Hypothesis	B	S.E.	Bias-corrected 95% CI			Percentile 95% CI			Result
			lower	upper	p	lower	upper	p	
H5	0.607	0.051	527	.699	.000	.523	.694	.000	Supported
H6	0.707	0.088	.575	.868	.000	.566	.858	.000	Supported

Note: B = standardized estimates.

Control variables: gender, age, education level and monthly income
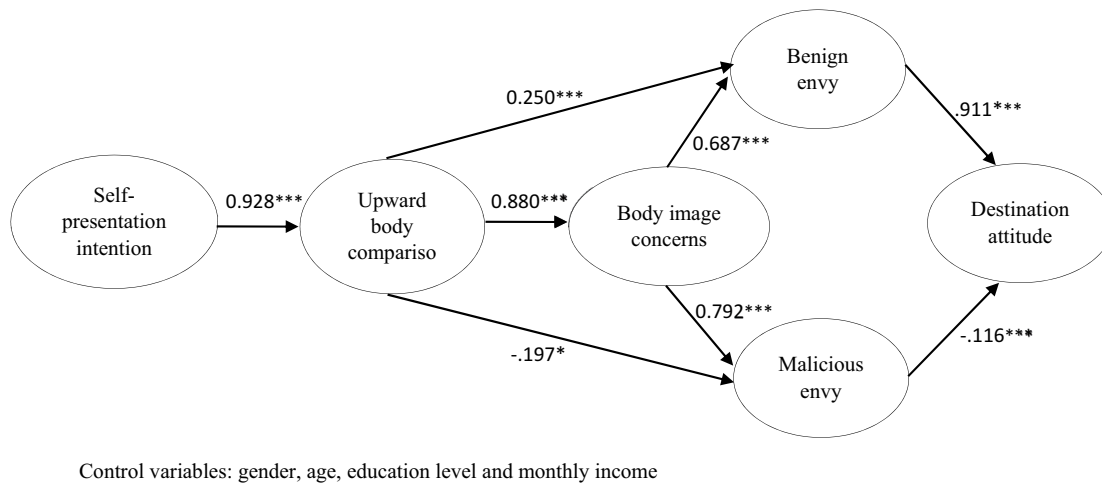
Figure 3. Structural model (Eliminates the effect of the control variables).

Discussion and conclusion

Overall, the current study found that positive self-presentation intentions motivate people to compare themselves with more attractive tourist images (H1). This proves that presenting an attractive body image is an important part of positive self-presentation. And potential travelers through the upward comparison to determine whether destinations satisfy their desire for online self-image enhancement. However, upward body comparison caused an increased perception of body image concerns (H2), which further led to the double-edged effect. Body image concerns mediated the relationship between upward body comparison and the two types of envy (H5 & H6). And body image concerns significantly enhances the perception of benign envy (H3) and malicious envy (H4). This suggests that, when upward body comparisons lead to self-image concerns in potential travelers, the perception of envy is enhanced, whether benign or malicious. On the one hand, potential travelers attempt to bridge the gap with more superior objects by improving themselves, on the other hand, potential travelers may mitigate the threat to their self-image perception by devaluing more superior objects. Benign envy has a positive effect on destination attitudes (H9), proving that potential travelers believe a destination contributes to their online image. Malicious envy has

a negative effect on the destination (H10), proving that the negative attitude of potential travelers towards the superior object also covers the destination. The effect of envy on destination preference is consistent with previous research. We have provided evidence that travel consumption should be considered in terms of online tourist-to-tourist interaction. Other travelers significantly influence potential travelers' destination selection. Advances in information and communication technologies have transformed tourism globally (Cohen et al., 2022) and now encompass the intersection and reflection of people, places, and social networks (J. Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013; Urry, 2002).

Theoretical implications

First, our results offer empirical support for current tourists' self-presentation that focuses on body image. We confirmed a travel motivation tied to presenting an attractive body image. We assessed the pre-trip phase and noted that, during the information-gathering stage, potential tourists tend to choose destinations that promote self-image presentation. Researchers have observed a shift in tourism, namely in the growing prevalence of self-objectification. Dinhopl and Gretzel (2016) proposed the concept of "self-directed tourist gaze", in which tourists gaze at themselves by taking

selfies and make themselves a tourist attraction (p.127). A core component of tourists' gaze is objectification. Self-directed gazes place tourists in a visual framework for self-presentation rather than self-understanding (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016). Similarly, Lyu (2016) reported that appearance surveillance positively affected strategic travel selfie editing. Fox and Rooney (2015) demonstrated that highly self-objectified individuals were more willing to edit photographic images to generate positive impressions. Our findings complemented these results.

Considering tourism's far-reaching consumption potential, travel selfies may enable people to draw others' attention and gain admiration. Previous research has addressed the flaunting of cultural capital and consumption power through travel (Liu et al., 2019). We determined that body image attractiveness is another aspect of tourists' online identity management: presenting a positive self-image (e.g. an appealing body image) is a primary motivation among potential travelers. People hold good attitudes toward destinations that may be conducive to positive self-presentation. More appealing images of other tourists on social media cause viewers to become more interested in the pictured destinations. Christou et al. (2020) relatedly pointed out that tourists' trip photos have shifted from capturing local people and scenic spots to framing themselves as the only (or main) subject.

We further documented a gaze interaction among tourists. Visitors' self-presentation intentions promote upward social comparison, reflecting an interest in observing others' images – other people's ideal self-presentation implores individuals to try to keep up. The image of others thus serves as a mirror, allowing a person to gaze at themselves in the reflection of an ideal image. Scholars have argued that the tourist gaze shapes relationships of power between people who gaze and the object of their gaze, no matter what or who the target is (Urry, 2002). This circumstance has been criticized for creating "an asymmetrical power relationship" (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 204). The gaze relationship can be reversed as well: observing others' body image informs the ideal body image in one's mind. Bandyopadhyay and Ganguly (2018) defined the field of gaze as a complex network where the people in it cannot claim to be politically innocent or naive. The tourist gaze in contemporary digital culture has hence been redefined via social media.

Second, upward body comparison on social media was found to activate body image concerns and two types of envy. For benign envy, attractive tourists in selfies were seen as role models for self-improvement irrespective of whether viewers' body image concerns increased. Therefore, regardless of if the contrast effect or the assimilation effect applied, the comparator sought to fill this gap through self-improvement. This outcome aligns with research on the normative direction of people's social comparison; that is, people compare themselves with slightly more competent others (JV, 1989). Doing so facilitates self-evaluation while inspiring self-improvement. Self-evaluation and self-improvement have especially been shown to drive social comparison (Collins, 1996). Even if such comparison diminishes self-satisfaction, viewers still see others as objects to learn from. Brickman and Bulman (1977) point to the "pleasures and pains of social comparison", suggesting the beneficial but hedonically costly effects of comparison with superior objects: painful, but also more valuable than downward comparison (p.179).

Self-concern mainly modulated the inhibition or activation of malicious envy in our study. As such concern rose, the superior comparison target was subjected to malicious envy – related attacks and put-downs to compensate for the comparator's lower self-evaluation. Malicious envy was suppressed in the absence of self-concern. These results are congruent with assimilation effects. Upward social comparison can be self-enhancing when the comparator sees themselves as belonging to a group of superior people and is thus obliged to defend that group. Our findings are useful for explaining social media interactions involving self-presentation consumption. Upward social comparison can also be deliberate: a person may judge whether an objective is really comparable or relevant before scrutinizing it (Collins, 1996). People who seek self-improvement may search upward to learn from superior others (JV, 1989). A superior comparison target can indeed boost the comparator's consumption intention despite elevated self-concern. Our model further helps to explain pervasive self-presentation anxiety and hostility toward more attractive presenters on social media.

Finally, this study enriches the literature on destination attitude. In tourism behavior research regarding social media, destination visit intention is often used to measure the effectiveness of destination marketing. The antecedents of destination attitudes deserve a closer look. Attitudes towards destinations and travel consumption crucially inform tourists' choices (Mohsin, 2005; Pike, 2006). We identified other visitors' physical attractiveness as a factor shaping positive destination attitude.

Given the ubiquity of self-presentation behavior among contemporary travelers, destination selection partially relies on whether a destination serves as a stage to highlight one's attractiveness through

complimentary selfies. Other tourists' appealing selfies serve as advertisements for a place's self-presentation potential. Our work takes an early step to remedy the relative lack of investigation into tourists' body image attractiveness. Some studies on destination endorsers have reported positive advertising effects of physical attractiveness. Van der Veen and Song (2014) noticed that communicators' attractiveness positively influenced the audience's destination attitudes and indirectly improved the audience's visit intentions. Messner et al. (2008) determined that, when a physically attractive communicator seeks to change a receiver's behavior, the receiver is more likely to follow the communicator's advice. Glover (2009) described the potential effects of celebrity images on destination awareness and purchase decisions when promoting destinations.

Managerial implications

We discovered that attractive images in trip photos stimulate the audience's desire for tourism consumption. Building landscapes conducive to photography can encourage tourists to take selfies. Organizing travel photography activities on social media can also compel viewers to find unique shooting locations in destinations. Turkey's Ministry of Culture and Tourism has launched a selfie contest calling on people to take selfies in museums and share them on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Competition prizes include a free museum card, a free ticket to one of the concerts of the State Opera and Ballet.

At the same time, highly attractive travel selfies are the source of negative physical perceptions. When people believe that superior others' achievements are attainable, upward social comparison is inspiring rather than disheartening (H. Kim & Chung, 2022). For example, in recent years, some tourist attractions in China have begun to provide professional photography services for tourists. With the help of some professional photography studios, which include makeup artists, photographers, photo editors, etc., the regular tourist can also take very attractive travel selfies. Managers' positive guidance can help translate negative self-perceptions into benign envy and produce more optimistic destination attitudes. The transformation of tourism photography has heightened the pertinence of self-expression and identity formation (Dijck, 2008). Marketing managers are urged to cultivate a deeper understanding of a destination's social value and associated identity information to more easily target tourist segments that the destination can attract.

Limitations

We examined contemporary tourists' upward social comparison, envy, and self-presentation motivations and assembled a holistic model to aid tourism industry practitioners and researchers. Several limitations of our effort illuminate avenues for future work. First, while some studies have underlined body image dissatisfaction as the main outcome of upward social comparison (Myers & Crowther, 2009; SC, 2009), others have discussed self-perceived self-enhancement. We did not test conditions under these two mindsets. Tourists' personalities and environmental settings may influence potential visitors' self-perceptions. Subsequent research can explore relevant factors. Second, to unearth many potential tourists' subjective experiences, we gathered data through self-report surveys. Respondents' recall can be biased. Other issues, such as dishonesty and avoidance of negative questions, can also cause questionnaire results to not fully reflect reality. Scholars can employ experimental or qualitative methods in follow-up studies to obtain more authentic responses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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