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## Rural tourism product promotion: a comparison of message framing techniques

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### ABSTRACT

Drawing on construal level theory, this study aims to examine the effects of construal level (high vs. low) and benefit type (self-benefit vs. other-benefit) on tourists' purchase intention regarding main (package tour) and supporting (homestay) rural tourism products. Utilizing a mixed between-/within-group methodology with a 2 × 2 scenario-based experimental design, the analysis of 352 survey responses revealed that a message describing self-benefit with low construal outperformed other messages in two temporal scenarios (long vs. short distance). These results enrich our understanding of rural tourism promotion, laying theoretical foundations for future studies and providing practical implications for the tourism industry.

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Rural tourism; tourism product promotion; main tourism product; supporting tourism product; message framing; construal level theory

### Introduction

Rural tourism is now on the rise after the pandemic, as people begin to look for less populated locations for touristic activities (Silva, 2021; United Nations World Tourism Organization [United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2020; Vaishar & Šťastná, 2020). The Trip.com Group, one of the world-leading online travel agencies, witnessed threefold year-on-year growth in China's rural tourism sector by March 2021 (Westcott & Wang, 2021). In addition, online social conversations in the Asia Pacific region on creative tourism, in which rural tourism activities are largely included, grew by 47% from 2020. These destinations are managed by small-scale enterprises in local communities (Irshad, 2010), not yet prepared to deal with turbulent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (UNWTO, 2020), and heavily reliant on their cultural and natural assets to appeal to tourists (Dimitrovski et al., 2012; Irshad, 2010; Wilson et al., 2001).

Following the pandemic, rural tourism has shown its ability to help rejuvenate the global industry through promoting natural and less crowded destinations (X. Chi & Han, 2021). Despite the increasing scholarship on rural tourism in the literature from the late nineteenth century (J. Gao & Wu, 2017), existing investigations have largely limited to the destination and the government perspective, mainly focusing on management (e.g. Garrod, Wornell, & Youell, 2006; Fotiadis, Vassiliadis, & Piper, 2014) and governance issues (Rocca & Zielinski, 2022). While some recent studies have investigated the tourist

perspective to understand the mechanism through which rural tourism experience benefits tourists (Kastenholz et al., 2018; An & Alarcón, 2021), there is a lack of research that explores how rural tourism should be promoted to generate tourist's demand (Garau, 2015; Marzo-Navarro et al., 2017). This research gap was also observed by Rosalina et al. (2021) who conducted a systematic review on 125 rural tourism literature to identify the lack of tourist's demand as the top external challenge in rural tourism development and concluded that marketing strategy in rural tourism has received relatively less scholarly attentions.

Rural tourism product promotion has always been a challenging task, because over-promotion may lead commercialization to destroy valuable rural values and assets in a tourism destination (Q. Yang et al., 2022), but promotion is necessary to communicate the benefits of rural tourism (Fotiadis et al., 2016). One of the hottest topics in tourism promotion is message framing since Lee and Oh (2014) suggested it as one of the most persuasive communication strategies for consumer behaviors. However, in addition to the scarce scholarly attentions on effective message framing techniques over rural tourism promotion (Rosalina et al., 2021), message framing literature suffers from two main research gaps that render investigations of rural tourism product promotion necessary.

First, most message framing studies focused on sustainable behaviors (e.g. B. Yang & Mattila, 2020; Chan et al., 2022; Chen & DeSalvo, 2022) and risk-reduction

behaviors (e.g. Gursoy et al., 2022; Liu & Mair, 2023), but overlooked its marketing or advertising relevance (M. Zhang et al., 2018). Second, since message framing strategies were initially introduced by Kahneman and Tversky (1979) who drew on the prospect theory to interpret individual's behaviors as a trade-off between gain and loss, the theoretical development of message framing has heavily relied on comparing gain and loss framing technique. However, unlike sustainable behaviors or risk-reduction behaviors, rural tourism product purchasing decision does not clearly involve trade-offs between benefits and risks. In other words, rural tourism product promotion may serve as a new study context to explore other relevant message variables (Ye & Mattila, 2021; O. H. Chi et al., 2021), such as the perceived relationships and divergence between readers and the message contents as proposed by construal level theory (CLT).

Given the aforementioned research gaps, this study drew on construal level theory (CLT) to address three research objectives: (1) to investigate how tourists' purchase intention toward main rural tourism products is driven by different promotional messages, (2) to investigate how tourists' purchase intention toward supporting rural tourism products is driven by different promotional messages, and (3) to examine the temporal differences of promotional messages' effectiveness. Specifically, this study adopted a mixed between-/within-group methodology with a 2 (high construal vs. low construal)  $\times$  2 (self-benefit vs. other-benefit) scenario-based experimental design to understand tourists' purchase intention toward main and supporting tourism products in two temporal scenarios.

## Literature review

### Rural tourism

Since Lane (1994) proposed rural tourism as a sustainable development tool in the tourism industry, initial studies on rural tourism have been conducted from a macro perspective to understand how rural tourism development helps (re)generate socio-economic development (Quaranta et al., 2016) and revitalize declining rural productivity in a destination (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012; Kortoci & Kortoci, 2017). Since rural tourism usually takes the form of small-scale privately owned businesses established to create natural and cultural attractions for tourists (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008; Wilson et al., 2001), Dimitrovski et al. (2012) believed that the relatively weak leakage effect in rural tourism has allowed locals to benefit more effectively from economic growth, the promotion of local resources, and

improved local infrastructure, reducing local population migration. This argument was also supported by M. M. Su et al. (2019), who conducted a livelihood sustainability analysis to highlight how tourism practitioners, local residents, and the community can benefit from rural tourism development.

The dominance of macro perspectives in the rural tourism literature ended when Hall et al. (2003) proposed rural tourism as a form of niche tourism and called for more investigations into tourists' motivations and experiences in rural tourism (Novelli, 2005). For example, based on various studies on rural travel motivations (Frochot, 2005), Park and Yoon (2009) conducted a market segmentation study to identify four different types of rural tourist: family togetherness seeker, passive tourist, want-it-all seeker, and learning excitement seeker. Dong et al. (2013) identified five rural travel motivations, growth and escape, nature and rural exploration, relaxation, social bonding, and family fun, and three further types of rural tourist: experiential travelers, rural travelers, and indifferent travelers. Rid et al. (2014) reported inconsistent findings on travel motivations (i.e. heritage and nature, authentic rural experience, learning, and sun and beach) and market segments (i.e. multi-experience and beach seekers, multi-experience seekers, heritage and nature seekers, and sun and beach seekers).

Along with tourists' increasing desire for authentic experiences (Kastenholz et al., 2012), another line of research from a micro perspective focuses on the dimensionality and outcomes of a rural travel experience. Drawing on the stimuli-organism-response model, many scholars have adopted the four "reals" of experience (i.e. entertainment, education, escapism, and aesthetic) proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1998) to investigate the mechanisms through which rural travel experience influences tourists' behavioral or psychological responses, such as travel satisfaction (Kastenholz et al., 2018) and behavioral intention (Loureiro, 2014). Ye et al. (2021) conceptualized rural travel experience as a combination of ordinary and extraordinary experiences to examine its effects on memorability and word-of-mouth intention. Y. Zhang et al. (2021) introduced the concept of health consciousness to better explain rural tourism participations.

While the intensive scholarly focus on travel motivations and experiences has provided valuable insights into tourists' attitudes and behaviors toward rural tourism, it conceptualized tourists' interest in rural tourism as a somewhat trait-like characteristic and overlooked possible promotional efforts to trigger tourists' behavioral intentions. This argument was supported by Rabadán-Martín et al. (2019), who discovered that most

rural tourism service providers did not provide clear information on their products to foster direct sales. Król (2019) proposed an “abandoned websites” phenomenon in rural tourism promotion to argue that many rural tourism service providers do not focus on the marketing and sales functions of online promotions. Since the situation dissatisfied Wilson et al. (2001), who highlighted information communication for tourism promotion as one of the most important success factors for rural tourism development, Rosalina et al. (2021) called for more investigation into the effective ways of promoting rural tourism products that are formed by diversified travel motivations and experience.

### *Message framing in tourism*

Message framing implies a complex psychological process (Maheswaran & Meyers Levy, 1990) through which individuals interpret and react to messages differently depending on how the information is presented (M. Zhang et al., 2018). The tourism and hospitality literature has been no stranger to message framing. Since Kahneman and Tversky (1979) drew on the prospect theory to highlight a trade-off between gain and loss in the framing theory, message framing has generated extensive scholarly attentions on how messages should be developed to promote desired behaviors in two risk-related research areas.

Along with the increasing environmental concerns, the first research area focuses on encouraging tourists' pro-environmental behaviors, such as towel or linen reuse (e.g. Grazzini et al., 2018; Chan et al., 2021), sustainable dining behaviors (e.g. Ye & Mattila, 2021; X. Zhang et al., 2020), carbon offsetting behaviors (e.g. B. Zhang et al., 2019; O. H. Chi et al., 2021), because activities in tourism and hospitality usually contain a dilemma between leisure gratification and environmental risks (Azam, Alam, & Hafeez, 2018). Another research area focuses on investigating how a message should be framed to encourage tourists' risk reduction behaviors, such as food allergy prevention (e.g. Wen & Lee, 2020), crisis prevention (e.g. Liu Lastres, 2022; Xie et al., 2022), and vaccination intentions (e.g. Gursay et al., 2022). While these two research areas have echoed Lee and Oh's (2014) argument that message framing is one of the most persuasive communication strategies for informing consumer behaviors, they mainly focus on risk communications but overlooked the advertising or marketing role of message framing.

Despite the extensive investigations on message framing in the advertising literature (e.g. C. T. Chang & Lee, 2009; C. T. Chang, 2007; Roy & Sharma, 2015; Tsai,

2007), investigations on product promotion have largely lagged behind in the tourism and hospitality literature, because scholars have relied heavily on the prospect theory to examine the framing effects in the risk-related contexts. Specifically, while M. Zhang et al. (2018) highlighted the effectiveness of message-framing techniques on forming a perceived destination image and thus fostering tourists' intention to participate in a particular form of niche tourism (Yoon et al., 2019), there is limited research on how message-framing techniques can be used to promote rural tourism products.

### *Application of construal level theory*

CLT was proposed by Markus and Kitayama (1991) to describe how individuals perceive relationships and divergence between themselves and others (Singelis, 1994). This theory was initially adopted to study cultural differences, suggesting that individuals in Western cultures consider themselves independent and those in the Eastern cultures consider themselves connected to others and to society as a whole (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). However, one's perceived relationships with others are unlike a trait-like perception but also activated by external stimuli (Aaker & Lee, 2001; Aaker & Williams, 1998). Specifically, various scholars have suggested that CLT is an insightful theory to understand the persuasiveness of framing messages (Adler & Sarstedt, 2021; Lee & Pounders, 2019; Xu, 2017, 2019), because individuals process information differently based on their perceived psychological distance from others (Kareklas et al., 2012).

### *Abstractness in CLT*

CLT proposes that an object or event can be understood at different levels of abstractness (Liberman & Trope, 2003). Abstractness is not interchangeable with vagueness; it is a process of reconstructing one message into another that has a higher-level meaning, for instance, “visiting a country” becomes “going on a get-away” (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The more psychologically distant an object is from the message receiver, the more likely it will be perceived as abstract, and vice versa (Trope et al., 2007). When processing information of greater psychological distance, such as relating to events happening in a distant future or involving higher-level goals, individuals tend to use more abstract and higher-level construal (Liberman & Trope, 1998). Change in distance affects one's prediction, evaluation, and actions (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Hence, the abstract construal level has widely been recognized as a way to inspire

a more positive attitude toward eco-friendly products relative to the concrete construal level (Reczek et al., 2018).

The tangibility of an product is a key contributor to the abstract level in CLT (Miller & Foust, 2003), with tangibility indicating concreteness (i.e. low construal) and intangibility indicating abstractness (i.e. high construal). While the tourism industry has widely been recognized as an experience industry that is intangible in nature (Smith, 1994), there are tangible products, such as accommodations, attractions, foods and beverages, supporting the whole tourism experience (S. Chang, 2018). In the tourism product design, main products are the core experiences and activities derived from the destination's unique characteristics, serving as the main pull factors "lead[ing] an individual to select one destination over another" (Klenosky, 2002, p. 396). Since these main products are usually the satisfiers of one's push factors, such as relaxation, education, and entertainment, Smith (1994) concluded that they are essentially selling the intangible tourism experiences. On the other hand, supporting products are tangible elements that complement overall tourism experiences (Ben Dalia et al., 2013; Smith, 1994). Since Wilson et al. (2001) argued that a well-developed rural tourism destination requires effective communications of main and supporting products, it is important to understand how they should be framed in an advertising message.

When evaluating products that are intangible, high-level construal is more influential in decision-making, and tangible products are more influenced by low-level construal (Ding & Keh, 2017). In the tourism context, rural tourism's main products should be communicated with high-level construal in abstract language, as it is ultimately selling intangible "experience," while supporting products should be communicated with low-level construal in concrete language. However, research has shown contradicting results when messages with different construal levels are paired with self- and other-benefit for communicating prosocial and pro-environmental products (D. Yang et al., 2015; Jäger & Weber, 2020).

### *Self-benefit vs. other-benefit in CLT*

The perspectives of self and others, also known as self and other referencing points, lead to different evaluations of the same information (Andersen et al., 1998; Taylor, 2020; Trope et al., 2007). Self-benefit and other-benefit are often considered interchangeable with egoistic values and altruistic values, respectively, which are desirable goals with various levels of importance that people use as guidelines for

their actions and behaviors in their daily lives (Y. Kim, 2011). The pairing of self- and other-benefit with various elements in CLT is common in the tourism literature, especially on topics related to prosocial and pro-environmental issues (Brügger et al., 2016). X. Zhang et al. (2020) explored the combination of self-/other-benefit with gain/loss framing on food waste practices at events. Y. L. Gao et al. (2020) tested the same combination with an additional cute/aggressive visual cue variable on hospitality cause-related marketing campaigns. While there are various possibilities for coupling self-/other-benefit with different elements, the general consensus is that benefit types are more persuasive when they are congruent in distance: self-benefit paired with short psychological distance and other-benefit paired with long psychological distance.

While it has been suggested that messages focusing on other-benefit are more effective in increasing positive attitude and purchase intention toward sustainable products (Jäger & Weber, 2020; Prakash et al., 2019), how types of benefit pair with abstractness remains unknown. Aligning with some other studies (e.g. W. Lin et al., 2022), D. Yang et al. (2015) suggested that concrete messages paired with self-benefit were more effective than concrete messages paired with other-benefit, and abstract messages paired with other-benefit generated the highest purchase intention. In contrast, Jäger and Weber (2020) found that concrete messages paired with other-benefit generated the strongest desire to purchase sustainable products, through abstract messages paired with other-benefit were still more effective than both abstract messages paired with self-benefit and concrete messages paired with other-benefit. Based on the principle that the alignment between construal level and benefit type should be considered to determine is the most persuasive message, the pairing of main tourism products with high-level (abstract) construal is expected to be the best combination for increasing purchase intention, while the pairing of supporting tourism products paired with low-level (concrete) construal is the least effective. Hence, we hypothesized that:

**H1a:** An other-benefit message generates stronger purchase intention for main tourism products than a self-benefit message.

**H1b:** A high-construal message generates stronger purchase intention for main tourism products than a low-construal message.



**H2a:** A self-benefit message generates stronger purchase intention for supporting tourism products than an other-benefit message.

**H2b:** A low-construal message generates stronger purchase intention for supporting tourism products than a high-construal message.

### Temporal distance in CLT

According to CLT, goals for the near or distant future are presented at different construal levels, ultimately resulting in different attitudes and behaviors toward the goals (Liberman et al., 2002; Ma & Li, 2022). While several recent tourism and hospitality literature have considered this temporal distance in tourism activities (e.g. B. Su, 2011; Chung & Chen, 2018), its application in message framing remains limited (J. Kim & Kim, 2016). Unlike pro-environmental behaviors or risk-reduction behaviors whose goals usually have specific temporal distance (i.e. pro-environmental goals are usually long-term and risk-reduction goals are usually achieved once the behavior is performed), the temporal distance between rural tourism product purchasing and consumption varies across different situations.

When tourists have a near-future goal of consuming the tourism products, they tend to focus on straightforward information to make a decision immediately to achieve their goal. Such a concrete mindset guides tourists to pay attention to tangible aspects, such as accommodations, attractions, foods and beverages, at a low construal level that allow them to make a decision in a short time (Burkley et al., 2013; Carrera et al., 2017). In contrast, when tourists set a goal for a distant future, they tend to adopt a more abstract mindset to consider

a purchase from a “why” perspective (i.e. why do I want to go on this trip?) and thus look at the “ideological” features of the products (e.g. the ambiance of the product) (Liberman et al., 2002). This argument was supported by Trope and Liberman (2003) who discovered that tourists who are planning a trip for a distant future applied a broader categorization to group tourism activities into fewer categories.

Grounded on CLT, low-construal messages indicating self-benefits are expected to serve as a more effective strategy for rural tourism product promotion when the temporal distance is short, while high-construal messages indicating other-benefits may be effective when the temporal distance is long (Trope & Liberman, 2010). On top of J. Kim and Kim (2016) who verified this impact of temporal distance on individual’s preferences over construal level, this study considered the moderating effect of self/other-benefits to propose a research model (Figure 1), hypothesizing that:

**H3a:** When the temporal distance is short, a self-benefit message generates stronger purchase intention than an other-benefit message.

**H3b:** When the temporal distance is short, a low-construal message generates stronger purchase intention than a high-construal message.

**H3c:** When the temporal distance is long, an other-benefit message generates stronger purchase intention than a self-benefit message.

**H3d:** When the temporal distance is long, a high-construal message generates stronger purchase intention than a low-construal message.

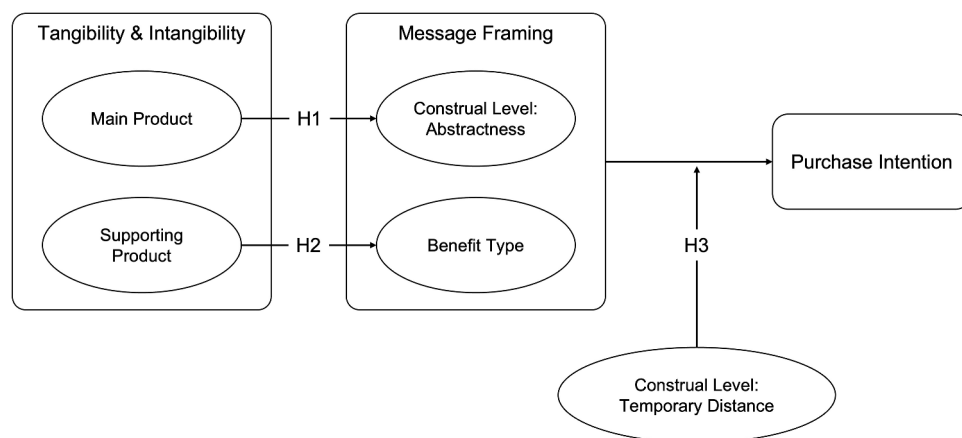


Figure 1. Proposed research model.

## Method

### Instrument design

Drawing on a mixed between-/within-group methodology, this study adopted a 2 (high vs. low construal) x 2 (self- vs. other-benefit) test for both main and supporting products, and in two scenarios distinguished by point in time in the trip-planning process. Kerala, India was selected as the rural tourism destination of focus, for three main reasons. First, despite the unclear definition of rural tourism, Kerala was confirmed as a rural tourism destination by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO] & Huzhou City, 2017). Second, Kerala offers diverse main and supporting tourism products. Package tours were considered as a form of main tourism product because they have been recognized as one of the most essential elements determining a rural tourism destination's success (Wilson et al., 2001). Kerala's half-day and one-day Village Life Experience packages offer activities like fishing and tree planting, visits to heritage and cultural sites, and traditional craft-making that condenses authentic Keralan culture for the ultimate rural tourism experience. On the other hand, the homestay program was considered as a form of supporting tourism product in this study, because it is a popular option for product diversification. Third, Kerala is a relatively less well-known destination, minimizing possible confounding effects of familiarity.

Each message consisted of two interventions: high construal vs. low construal, and self-benefit vs. other-benefit, and respondents were asked to rate their purchase regarding both main and supporting tourism product. High-construal/self-benefit messages depicted self-benefit in abstract behavior (e.g. a refreshing and relaxing experience) while low-construal/self-benefit messages expanded upon the former (e.g. handcraft workshops in different villages). High-construal/other-benefit messages presented the products' benefits to the destination in a general picture (e.g. helping the

destination to protect its culture), whereas low-construal/other-benefit messages were specific as to what the benefits were or how they could be achieved (e.g. "50% of the paid fee will be used to support local cultural groups"). Self-benefit in the questionnaires were extracted from the product pages, and other-benefit were extracted from reports and studies (Giampiccoli et al., 2020; Kulshreshtha & Kulshreshtha, 2019; UNWTO, 2017, 2020; Wilson et al., 2001). These four framed messages were designed to be used in two temporal scenarios (Table 1). Scenario One represented a long time distance (i.e. six weeks) to departure, whereas Scenario Two indicated a short time distance (i.e. one day). According to Google data, the booking period for transportation peaks at six weeks before the departure date. Fox (2019) also showed that around one-third of late bookings are made the same day or up to two days before departure.

On top of the four framed messages, an online survey was developed via Qualtrics for data collection. The survey consisted of four main sections. The first began with a short definition of a rural tourism destination accompanied by a set of photos to help the respondents grasp the concept more easily. The second section asked the respondents to imagine themselves in Scenario One, planning for a rural trip happening in six weeks. A brief description of the main product, with a photo for clarification, was presented to the respondents before reading the messages. After reading one of the four framed messages, they were asked to rate the likeliness that they would purchase the product on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all likely; 5 = extremely likely). The same process was repeated for the supporting product. The third section, Scenario Two, investigated the respondents' purchase intention regarding the products under a manipulated condition. The respondents were asked to imagine they were planning a rural trip departing the next day, presented with rephrased versions of the statements from section two, and

**Table 1.** The framed messages.

Interventions	Main tourism product (package tour)	Supporting tourism product (homestay)
High-construal and self-benefit (high/self)	"The package tour will take you on an amazing journey to indulge in the destination's cultural beauty."	"The homestay offers you a memorable stay and an ambiance of authentic lifestyle in the serene village."
Low-construal and self-benefit (low/self)	"The package tour takes you to a handcrafting workshop, tree-planting activities, and cultural performances, and prepares you a meal of local cuisine."	"The homestay welcomes you with a comfortable queen-size mattress, a fresh traditional breakfast, and relaxation in nature."
High-construal and other-benefit (high/other)	"The benefits generated from this package will contribute to the destination's long-term resilience."	"The benefits generated from the homestay will help advance the well-being of the local community."
Low-construal and other-benefit (low/other)	"For every package tour, 50% of the earnings will be given to the community for education and protecting culture."	"This homestay is eco-friendly and the income from bookings goes directly to the homeowner and the destination."

asked to rate the likeliness that they would purchase the products on the same scale. The testing messages were rephrased to avoid the respondent fatigue effect that Bradley and Daly (1994) identified as emerging when respondents are asked to perform the same types of tasks repeatedly. The last section of the survey collected the respondents' demographic information.

### Data collection

Before the actual data collection, the four messages were piloted with 100 respondents (25 respondents for each) to examine the manipulation. Specifically, pilot respondents were required to complete an online survey hosted on Qualtrics to indicate on 5-point bipolar scales whether the message reported self-benefit- or other-benefit-related information (1 = self-benefit focus; 5 = other-benefit focus), and whether the information was low-construal or high-construal (1 = low-construal; 5 = high-construal). The results suggested that the mean score for the main product's high/self message was perceived as more abstract than the low/self message (MMain\_High/self = 4.06, SD = 0.85; MMain\_Low/self = 4.44, SD = 0.81), the high/other message was perceived as more abstract than the low/other message (MMain\_High/other = 3.06, SD = 1.53; MMain\_Low/other = 3.13, SD = 1.31), the high/self message was perceived to be more self-benefit-oriented than the high/other message (MMain\_High/self = 2.24, SD = 1.45; MMain\_High/other = 4.44, SD = 1.47), and the low/self message was perceived to be more self-benefit-oriented than the low/other message (MMain\_Low/self = 2.70, SD = 1.32; MMain\_Low/other = 4.28, SD = 1.69). The supporting product's high/self message was perceived as more abstract than the low/self message (MSupporting\_High/self = 4.13, SD = 1.20; MSupporting\_Low/self = 4.69, SD = 0.48), the high/other message was perceived as more abstract than the low/other message (MSupporting\_High/other = 3.00, SD = 1.32; MSupporting\_Low/other = 3.38, SD = 1.41), the high/self message was perceived to be more self-benefit-oriented than the high/other

message (MMain\_High/self = 2.59, SD = 1.15; MMain\_High/other = 4.30, SD = 1.59), and the low/self message was perceived to be more self-benefit-oriented than the low/other message (MMain\_Low/self = 1.87, SD = 1.29; MMain\_Low/other = 4.05, SD = 0.84).

The online survey was designed with the Qualtrics platform and distributed using a convenience sampling technique. Actual data collection took place over a 24-hour period with the aim of amassing 400 complete responses. Following the suggestions of P. M. Lin et al. (2020), two criteria were adopted to eliminate invalid responses: (1) surveys completed in less than 0.5 minutes and (2) respondents tripped up by an attention-check question ("If you are reading this statement, please select 'strongly disagree'"). These criteria left 352 valid responses for further analyses. Since group samples ranged from 82 to 96, above the threshold of 30, the central limit theorem supported data normality in experimental research settings and gave a green light for parametric tests (Yoganathan et al., 2021).

### Data analysis

A three-stage data analysis approach was adopted to analyze the valid responses using IBM SPSS 25.0. First, descriptive analysis was performed to report the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Second, a two-way ANOVA analysis was conducted to examine the interaction effects of the two types of intervention (i.e. high construal vs. low construal and self-benefit vs. other-benefit), addressing hypotheses 1 and 2. Third, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was performed to compare the temporal difference in the responses to the framed message between Scenarios One and Two, thereby addressing Hypothesis 3.

## Results

### Sample profile

Of the 352 responses collected, 65.63% were from women ( $n = 231$ ) and 33.81% from men ( $n = 119$ ), two respondents preferred not to disclose their gender. The largest age segment was 50–59 years old, representing

**Table 2.** Message comparison for main tourism products.

Variables	Purchase intention					
	Main tourism products			Supporting tourism products		
	Mean Square	F	p	Mean Square	F	p
<b>Main effects</b>						
Self-benefit vs. other benefit	4.394	4.730	0.030	1.760	1.699	0.193
High construal vs. low construal	0.573	0.617	0.433	3.079	2.973	0.086
<b>Interaction effects</b>	1.658	1.785	0.182	0.665	0.642	0.423



**Table 3.** Message comparison for supporting tourism products.

Variables	Purchase intention					
	Scenario One (six weeks)			Scenario Two (one day)		
	Mean Square	F	p	Mean Square	F	p
<b>Main effects</b>						
Self-benefit vs. other benefit	5.699	5.901	0.016	4.931	4.935	0.027
High construal vs. low construal	2.229	2.308	0.130	6.618	6.622	0.010
<b>Interaction effects</b>	2.251	2.311	0.128	10.257	10.264	0.001

30.11% of all participants ( $n = 106$ ), followed by 18–24 at 26.42% ( $n = 93$ ) and 40–49 at 21.31% ( $n = 75$ ). The average age was 41.96 years old. Most respondents were Taiwanese (83.52%,  $n = 294$ ), followed by mainland Chinese (4.26%,  $n = 15$ ) and Hong Kong (3.98%,  $n = 14$ ).

### Hypothesis testing

A first two-way ANOVA analysis was performed to examine the interaction effects of construal level and benefit types on purchase intention toward the main tourism products (Table 2). The results showed that there were no statistically significant interactions between the effects of construal level and benefit types on purchase intention. Inspecting individual variables, the main effects of benefit type showed significance on purchase intention in Scenario One. Other-benefit messages were more effective than self-benefit messages ( $MM_{Main1\_High/self} = 3.29$ ;  $MM_{Main1\_Low/self} = 3.07$ ;  $MM_{Main1\_High/other} = 3.38$ ;  $MM_{Main1\_Low/other} = 3.44$ ) when tourists had more time to prepare their trip. However, the construal level did not have a significant influence on purchase intentions in either Scenario One or Two. Hence, Hypothesis 1 was partly supported with only H1a supported, whereas Hypothesis 2 was rejected.

Another two-way ANOVA analysis was performed to examine the interaction effects of construal level and benefit types on purchase intention toward the supporting tourism products (Table 3). Despite all insignificant results in Scenario One, the effect of benefit type, the effect of construal level, and their interaction effect were found to be significant in Scenario Two. Specifically, low-construal messages were more effective in

communicating other-benefit, while high-construal messages were more effective in communicating self-benefit ( $MS_{Supporting2\_High/self} = 3.12$ ;  $MS_{Supporting2\_Low/self} = 3.73$ ;  $MS_{Supporting2\_High/other} = 3.22$ ;  $MS_{Supporting2\_Low/other} = 3.15$ ). Hence, Hypothesis 3a, 3c, and 3d were supported.

When significant Shapiro-Wilk tests rejected data normality, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was performed in place of paired  $t$ -test (Table 4). The result showed a significant interaction effect between construal level and benefit type for the supporting tourism products ( $R^2 = 0.05$ ,  $F(1, 349) = 10.26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). There was also a significant effect of temporal distance on three of the eight pairs. The first pair was the supporting product in the high/self message ( $Z = -2.24$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), the new median after shortened temporal distance was 3 compared to 4 before the manipulation. The main product had significant results in the low/self message ( $Z = -3.08$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) with 4 as the new medium compared to 3, and in the high/other set ( $Z = -2.73$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) where the new and original median are both 3. Within each set, the majority of respondents did not change their likeliness rating.

## Discussions and conclusion

### Discussions

From the results of testing hypotheses 1 and 2, it can be concluded that purchase intentions regarding rural tourism products under longer temporal distances are not influenced by construal level constructed by the abstractness of the messages, even when the products

**Table 4.** Temporal comparison of message effectiveness.

Message type	Purchase intention	Mean	Z	p
High/self	S2_Main – S1_Main	0.01	0.440	0.965 <sup>ns</sup>
	S2 Supporting – S1 Supporting	0.19	2.243	0.025*
Low/self	S2_Main – S1_Main	0.33	3.084	0.002**
	S2 Supporting – S1 Supporting	0.11	1.005	0.315 <sup>ns</sup>
High/other	S2_Main – S1_Main	0.30	2.731	0.006**
	S2 Supporting – S1 Supporting	0.01	0.223	0.824 <sup>ns</sup>
Low/other	S2_Main – S1_Main	0.09	0.876	0.381 <sup>ns</sup>
	S2 Supporting – S1 Supporting	0.05	0.634	0.526 <sup>ns</sup>

Notes. \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.005$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; <sup>ns</sup> $p > 0.05$

have prosocial and pro-environmental features. This contradicts the findings of D. Yang et al. (2015). However, construal level was found to be effective in influencing purchase intention when the temporal distance was short, in other words when psychological distance appears shorter. One possible explanation is that there is an interplay of uncertainty avoidance on rural tourism products and destinations. Rural tourism being a comparatively niche sector with which the public is less familiar, the uncertainty in purchasing rural tourism products leads to those with high uncertainty avoidance, and the Taiwanese are so characterized (de Bellis et al., 2015), taking many more than just one or a few product descriptions into consideration to make a purchase decision when time is deemed sufficient (Jordan et al., 2013). Therefore, the respondents took other information, such as past experience and their own interpretation based on the context of the message, as a point of reference for purchase intention instead of solely the abstract/concrete message itself.

Although the intangibility and tangibility of the two tourism products did not spark significant difference in the respondents' responses to construal-level stimulations, which is contrary to the findings of Ding and Keh (2017), they had significant interactions with benefit type. Potential consumers find intangible main products presented with other-benefit messages most attractive while self-benefit messages are most persuasive for tangible supporting products. This finding is a relatively new but is to an extent consistent with the study of Y. L. Gao et al. (2020) that found self-benefit to be more persuasive when there was a fit between elements in the message design and the message components. On the subject of temporal distance, it is found that the purchase intention of other-benefit messages and high-construal messages for both main and supporting products remained almost unchanged, if it did not drop lower, when temporal distance was shortened. This implies that a low/self message is the only effective message frame to increase purchase intention when psychological distance is reduced by a limited time.

### *Theoretical contributions*

This study contributes to the existing literature by further our understanding of rural tourism promotion and message framing in three main ways. First, along with the recent trend of rural tourism during the pandemic, this study has appeared one of the few attempts to investigate rural tourism product promotion from a message framing perspective. This perspective is important not only because rural tourism has widely been recognized as a form of sustainable tourism that

helps enhance the whole tourism system, but also because Rosalina et al. (2021) reported the lack of tourist's demand as one of the top challenges in rural tourism development. While many efforts have been done to improve rural tourism offerings and enrich rural tourism experiences, this study shifted the discussion from the during-trip stage to the pre-trip stage to focus on product promotion.

Second, while the tourism and hospitality literature has been no stranger to message framing, the investigations relied heavily on the prospect theory to examine individual's pro-environmental behaviors and risk-reduction behaviors that contain a clear "loss" component. The overreliance on the prospect theory does not only overlook other message aspects than gain/loss framing, but also restrict theoretical development. In addition to examining two common message aspects (i.e. abstractness level and type of benefits), this study drew on CLT to focus on an underexplored aspect (i.e. temporal distance) in the message framing literature (J. Kim & Kim, 2016). Specifically, temporal distance was found as one of the most important aspects determining tourists' rural tourism product purchasing intention, because long temporal distance significantly reduced the attractiveness of other-benefit messages and elevated self-benefit messages' power to encourage purchase in three out of the four sample groups.

Lastly, on top of the CLT, this study considered the tangibility of tourism products and incorporated it into message design. Since many scholars have encouraged investigations on how different information factors are interconnected to influence one's attitudes and behaviors (e.g. Taylor, 2020; Wen & Lee, 2020; Xu, 2019), the consideration of tangibility emphasizes that the impacts of message framing vary across different tourism product types. Specifically, main tourism products were found to generate more behavioral intentions when they are described with other benefits, whereas supporting tourism products were more effective to be communicated with self benefits.

### *Practical contributions*

In putting the findings of this study to practical use for developing rural tourism products, service and product providers in rural destinations should strategically design their messages based on product types, characteristics, and expected timing to optimize reception by the target audience. When promoting experiences like cultural performances, workshops, or visits to indigenous villages that posit resiliency benefits, the message should state these prosocial and pro-environmental

details in an easily understandable language to increase potential visitors' purchase intention. Rural destinations should ensure that the related information, naming the benefits and positive impacts their products offer, is available to stakeholders to support them in providing the most accurate and powerful product messages. On the other hand, the promoters of physical supporting products such as homestays, village eateries, and campsites should focus on illustrating the features that will enhance visitors' rural tourism experience. For instance, the Village Kitchen in Palau, the Philippines, should emphasize the availability of traditional and authentic cuisine for travelers rather than how it could create job opportunities for villagers.

With the more-than-twofold increase in travel-related searches for "today" or "tonight" (Loo, 2017), it is important to leverage the power of temporal distance. Channels that can easily retrieve timing-related information about potential rural visitors should have customized and segmented messages. Online booking platforms where visitors can indicate their expected visiting time or time to use the service/participate in the experience can identify whether the temporal distance is short enough to display low/self messages instead of other framings to improve the possibility of selling rural tourism products. In addition, in-destination promotions, in places such as local airports or transportation hubs, could also shift to low/self messages in order to attract visitors who make more spontaneous travel plans to visit a rural destination and purchase these rural tourism products. If the channel is time-insensitive, messages for main products should avoid high/other messages whose impact on purchase intention drops significantly when time distance is short; the same applies to high/self messages for supporting products.

To capture a specific segment of rural visitors, rural destinations should consider starting with those seeking cultural products and activities, as they were the group whose message framing preferences were the most significant. Successfully persuading these types of visitors to purchase rural tourism products would require promotion of cultural products with low/other messages. To promote supporting products with natural features, such as homestays or campsites, that emphasize authentic village life in a natural setting, homeowners should adopt low/self messages to be specific about the encounters with nature that guests will experience (e.g. an orchard with many exotic fruit trees). Supporting products that generate a similar sense of well-being as physical activities, such as traditional massages offered in rural Thai villages and Palau in the Philippines, should illustrate the spiritual benefits instead of the specific services included.

### Limitations and future research directions

This research has a few limitations. First, 94% of the respondents were Asian, which might not fully represent the actual population that rural tourism destinations are targeting. Second, as the respondents were mainly from countries where English is not the native language, it is unclear whether proficiency in the language introduced variance to the test results. Nevertheless, while the survey adopted packaged tours as the main product, main products in a rural tourism destination can vary greatly in terms of features, which might lead to different results. Hence, it is recommended that future studies target a population with more equally distributed demographics and select a variety of main products with diverse features for deeper insights. The same applies to supporting products.

With regard to directions for future research, the effects of combined self- and other-benefit messages on purchase intention could be explored, along with the effect of benefit type on purchase intention of target populations that are interested in rural tourism at various levels. Future studies could also focus on constructing high and low construal through other factors, such as social distance, to further investigate the relationship between construal level and purchase intention relating to rural tourism products. Last but not least, for the benefit of rural tourism destinations' targeted marketing, researchers could also extend this study by looking into the differences between international and domestic rural destination visitors.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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