

Application of communication-persuasion theory in tourism destination marketing in the
post-pandemic era

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Abstract

This study aims to adopt McGuire's communication-persuasion matrix as a theoretical lens for examining the effect of message appeal and message source on domestic tourists' attitudes towards the message and the destination leading to their visit intention. Experimental design was applied in two studies. Study 1 examined the influences of tourist focused message appeal (self-benefit vs other-benefit) and destination focused message appeal (gain-framed vs loss-framed) on attitudes towards the message and the destination. Study 2 examined the effects of tourist focused message appeal (self-benefit vs other-benefit) and government information source (central government vs local government) on attitudes toward the message and the destination. Tourist self-benefit message appeal positively develops participants' attitudes toward the message and the destination. Destination loss-framed message appeal has a stronger effect on participants' attitudes towards the destination than the gain-framed message. Central government message source positively influences participants' attitude towards the message. Finally, results show positive relationships among attitudes towards the message, the destination, and visit intention. Results also confirm attitude towards the destination mediates the relationship between attitude towards the message and visit intention. This study extends and broadens the knowledge of effective destination marketing communications in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: Communication-persuasion, Message appeal, Message source, Message framing, Visit intention, Tourism destination marketing

1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, the global tourism industry has suffered from various crises, including natural, political, economic, and health-related events (Cró & Martins, 2017; Tsai & Chen, 2011). Media communication about crises influences the public's attitude towards crises, as well as traveller's decision of visiting crisis-suffered destinations (Ghaderi et al., 2017). For example, high media exposure about the crisis may damage the public's confidence in post-crisis destinations (Ghaderi et al., 2017), reducing their visit intentions towards those destinations (Hammett, 2014). Therefore, post-crisis tourism destination marketers and researchers should not underestimate the potential influence of the media on visitors' decision-making. Nevertheless, the existing literature has been mainly focusing on the effects of positive or negative post-crisis tourism messages on public reactions (Avraham & Ketter, 2012; Lehto et al., 2008). The impact of different types of message appeal and message sources on post-crisis tourism destinations remains unknown.

Previous message appeal studies confirmed that consumers form more positive attitudes and behaviours towards the advertisement focusing on other-benefit than self-benefit (Cho et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2015). For example, Xu and Jeong (2019) found that other-benefit-based messages have higher persuasiveness in green restaurant advertisements. Cho et al. (2018) suggested that other-benefit appeals may lead to higher perceived sustainability and purchase intention of the product compared with self-benefit appeals. Overall, other-benefit seems to be more effective than self-interest in advertising products when purchase decision makings are based on a positive situation or a public setting. As far as research in post-tourism destination marketing is concerned, the effectiveness of other-benefit message appeal compared to self-benefit in the post-crisis situation is unknown in the existing literature.

Message framing studies are mostly about presenting the outcome either in a gain (positive side) or in a loss (negative side) format, i.e., gain-framed vs loss-framed (Martin,

1995). The existing literature demonstrated conflicting views of the impact of message framing. Generally, a gain-framed advertisement contributes to consumers' positive attitude towards the advertisement and the brand compared to a loss-framed advertisement (Segev et al., 2015; van't Riet et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2018). However, in contexts, such as charity, a loss-framed message significantly impacts consumers' attitudes, such as improving donation intention (Chang & Lee, 2009). Tourism studies on message framing remain scant with only one recent paper in the tourism industry context found related to COVID-19 (Gursoy et al., 2022). The perspective of destination gain-framed and loss-framed messages has not been widely studied yet.

Along with framing, message sources can have a significant effect on how tourists respond to information. For example, China possesses a top-down decision-making system in which the national level formulates the overall plan and the lower levels implement it (Qin et al., 2011). Tourism development reflects the interaction between the central and local governments. Chinese citizens formed a culture of trust in authority and a more powerful government with high status (Liu & Raine, 2016). Hence, in most situations, citizens or tourists might show higher trust and satisfaction with the Chinese central government than local governments (Wu et al., 2021). However, little is known about whether the trust of tourists in the central and local governments has changed under the context of the epidemic, and in what ways it has influenced tourists' attitudes.

McGuire's communication-persuasion matrix was utilised recently in the hotel marketing context to examine the effectiveness of sustainability communication on social media (Kapoor et al., 2021). The framework proved to be applicable in the hospitality industry, and further study is warranted to verify and confirm its' suitability in the tourism destination marketing area. It is important to study tourism destination marketing in the post-pandemic era; and domestic tourism must be prioritised to support the recovery of crisis-affected regions.

Therefore, the present study tests the effect of two input communication factors (i.e., message appeal, message source) on the output persuasion factors (i.e., tourists' attitudes towards the message, the destination, and visit intention) using McGuire's communication persuasion theory, which contributes to existing research in several ways. First, we reveal the importance of self-benefit message appeal in arousing tourists' positive attitudes towards the message and the destination in the post-pandemic era, which expands our understanding of the association between message appeal and tourists' attitudes in the post-COVID situation. Second, by providing evidence of the role of loss-framed message in forming tourists' attitudes towards the crisis-affected destination, we offer further insights into how crisis events can change tourists' attitudes towards loss and gain information. Third, our findings reinforce prior research findings that mainland Chinese citizens trust the central government more than local governments, regardless of the influence of the pandemic.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Background

Communication is crucial for destination marketing, especially for post-crisis destination promotion and branding (Park et al., 2019). The communication-persuasion matrix developed by McGuire (1989) provides a lens for tourism marketing researchers. The matrix specifies the process of using persuasive communications to influence the targeted audiences' beliefs, attitudes, judgments, decisions or behaviour (Aghazadeh et al., 2022; Flay et al., 1980). Based on the matrix, the effectiveness of communication depends on the input communication factors and the output persuasion factors. The input communication factors include attributes of the message source, message content, message recipient and message channel (McGuire, 1989). The message destination is the final outcome of persuasive communication, for instance in this current study a tourism advertisement used to persuade tourists to visit a particular destination.

This study applies McGuire's communication-persuasion matrix theory as the communication persuasion process aligned with the intention of the current study to explore domestic tourists' attitudes towards the message, the destination, and visit intention.

We manipulate two input communication factors, namely, the message appeal (tourist focused: self-benefit vs other-benefit; destination focused: gain-framed vs loss-framed) and the message source (central government vs local government) on the government announcement (channel) to examine their influences on three output persuasion factors, namely, the traveller's attitudes towards the message and the destination and the final outcome of visit intention. The following sections discuss the hypothesis and conceptual model development. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed research model.

Please insert Figure 1 here

2.2 Message appeal

Message appeal, as an essential component in marketing communications, helps to explain who benefits from that action portrayed in marketing communications, such as the consumer, the society or the company (Hardeman et al., 2017). Previous studies have investigated the effectiveness of various message appeals of tourism destination marketing communication. Wang et al. (2018) examined the effectiveness of destination advertising through message appeal (rational and emotional appeal) and endorsement types (chief executive officer [CEO] of a destination management organisation [DMO], promotion research expert and tourists) and revealed that destination advertising effectiveness varies by message appeal and endorsement type. Given that marketing communications are considered essential in tourism recovery, it will be beneficial to examine the effect of different message appeals and message sources on tourists' behaviours during the crisis recovery period.

In tourism, the effects of self-benefit messages on tourist behaviour have not been extensively examined. Hardeman *et al.* (2017) found self-benefit message appeal to be more persuasive in prompting pro-sustainability behaviour since these messages align with individuals' goals and standards. However, other scholars (e.g., Kim & Jun, 2016; Teng et al., 2015) in their marketing communication study revealed the positive attitudes and behaviours of consumers towards the businesses or advertising messages that are associated with benefiting others, such as the community.

In this study, we identify the tourist focused message (self-benefit vs other-benefit) appeal that might influence tourist attitudes towards the message and the destination. We operationalised self-benefited communications that emphasise the personal benefit to tourists, which are common pricing strategies to attract tourists' visit after a crisis, such as airlines, hotel discounts or free attraction admissions. Afterall, self-benefit is one of the fundamental human motives (Haidt, 2007). As opposed to self-benefited appeals, other-benefit appeals aim to benefit a larger group or society, such as helping the economic recovery of crisis-affected destination in the post COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, we hypothesise that:

H1: *Tourist focused message appeal (self-benefit vs other-benefit) has a direct effect on tourists' attitude towards the message, such that self-benefit message appeal results in a more positive attitude towards the message than other-benefit message.*

H2: *Tourist focused message appeal (self-benefit vs other-benefit) has a direct effect on tourists' attitude towards the destination, such that self-benefit message appeal results in a more positive attitude towards the destination than other-benefit message.*

According to prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), messages can be framed from a gain or a loss perspective (Chang & Lee, 2009; Martin, 1995). A gain-framing strategy emphasizes the positive outcomes of complying with a recommended behaviour, so an individual's prospect is positive; whereas a loss-framing strategy highlights the negative consequences of noncompliance, so an individual's prospect is negative (Pan et al., 2021). Existing tourism studies focused on viewers' gain- or loss-prospect based on the gain- or loss-framed message, such as gain refers to the viewer/tourist should have if visiting the advertised destination or loss refers to the viewer/tourist should have if not visiting the advertised destination (Pan et al., 2020). Previous studies believed that gain-framed message is more effective in terms of influencing consumers' attitude and purchase intentions than loss-framed message (Chi et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2018). However, in charitable donation advertisement negative framing is more effective than positive framing (Chang & Lee, 2009). Gursoy et al. (2022) found that participants in the loss-framed message condition perceived lower vaccine risk than those in the gain-framed message condition, indicating that loss-framed messages are linked to more positive attitude than gain-framed messages. The present study focuses on travel to health crisis-affected destination wherein tourists might have safety and health risk concerns. Therefore, we developed the following hypotheses:

H3: *Destination focused message appeal (gain-framed vs loss-framed) has a direct effect on tourists' attitude towards the message, such that loss-framed message appeal results in a more positive attitude towards the message than gain-framed message.*

H4: *Destination focused message appeal (gain-framed vs loss-framed) has a direct effect on tourists' attitude towards the destination, such that loss-framed message appeal results in a more positive attitude towards the destination than gain-framed message.*

2.3 Message source

In addition to developing policies and regulations for the tourism industry (Baum & Szivas, 2008; Nunkoo, 2015), governments might play an important role to promote post-crisis tourism communications to potential tourists (Wan, 2008). Chinese citizens trust the central government more than local governments (Liu & Raine, 2016) given that a centralized governance system has more power in regulations and decision making (Hong et al., 2019). However, Su, Su, and Zhao (2021) found that the effective implementation of anti-COVID policies, official media propaganda, and public expectations of local governments resulted in higher citizen trust than usual. In other words, the extent to which citizens' level of trust in local and central governments may fluctuate depending on the performance of local and central governments during the pandemic. Prior studies have revealed that authoritarian values of different levels of government may play a significant role in China's tourism development (Zhao & Timothy, 2015; Zuo et al., 2017). According to this logic, tourists may also have different reactions to the information released by the central and local government. However, to date, little attention has been paid to the effects of public information sources from the central and local governments on tourists' respond to information, especially during the pandemic.

Regarding the 'COVID-19 tourism' recovery, the China central government acts as an influential and powerful leader responsible for providing updated information about the virus (e.g., reporting new daily confirmed COVID-19 cases in the country), making general travel guidelines for domestic travel and implementing regulations for relevant industries, such as health, transport and hotel industries. The primary responsibility of local government is to create a stable pandemic environment within a province and to support the recovery of tourism activities when under an epidemic. The local government co-operates with the central

government to update the newest COVID-19 information and oversees the activities of local tourism companies (OECD, 2020). Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H5: *The central government message source results in a more positive attitude towards the message than the local government.*

H6: *The central government message source results in a more positive attitude towards the destination than the local government.*

2.4 Tourists' attitude and behavioural intention towards tourism message

Tourist attitude, referring to psychological and behavioural tendencies, is an effective predictor of tourist behaviour (Huang & van der Veen, 2019). A few studies have investigated the impact of tourists' attitude towards advertisement on their visit intention. For example, van der Veen and Song (2014) found celebrity-endorsed advertisements significantly impacts people's attitudes towards Hong Kong and visit intentions. Kim and Jun (2016) unveiled that event advertisements help people establish a positive image of the hosting city, which further influences their visit intentions. Pourashraf et al. (2018) uncovered that Word-of-Mouth (WOM) advertisement can significantly affect tourists' beliefs about religious destinations and their visit intention towards a destination.

Thus, we assume that when marketing messages highlight certain travel benefits or to include destination-related information, there are direct effects such as tourists' attitude towards the message may influence their attitude towards the destination; tourists' attitude towards the message and the destination may influence their visit intention accordingly; and tourists' attitude towards the destination may mediate the relationship between their attitude towards the message and visit intention. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H7: *The attitude of the message/announcement will positively influence tourists' attitude towards the destination.*

H8: *The attitude of the message/announcement will positively influence tourists' attitude towards visit intention.*

H9: *Tourists' attitude towards the destination will positively influence tourists' visit intention.*

H10: *Tourists' attitude towards the destination mediates the relationship between tourists' attitude towards the message and visit intention.*

3. Method

In this study, an experimental design approach was adopted to test the effect of input communication factors on output persuasion factors from the theory of McGuire's communication-persuasion matrix. More specifically, this study aimed to examine the effect of message appeal and message source on tourists' attitudes towards the message and the destination. Following the suggestions from previous experimental design studies (Lv & McCabe, 2020; Ma et al., 2022; Song & Kim, 2022), two experiments were conducted to verify the results, thereby increasing the external validity and generalisability of the results.

3.1 Study 1

3.1.1 Design

In Study 1, a 2 (tourist focused message appeal: self-benefit vs other-benefit) x 2 (destination focused message appeal: gain-framed vs loss-framed) between-subject factorial design was used. More specifically, tourists' self-benefit appeal presented the benefits to potential tourists, such as discounted flight tickets or accommodations and free attraction

admission tickets, whereas other-benefit appeal emphasised ‘helping the tourism recovery in the destination’. In terms of destination focused message appeal, gain-framed message presented tourism bringing hope to the destination, such as ‘lives of the tourism employees will be greatly improved’; whereas loss-framed message presented information that the destination will have no future without tourism activities. All stimuli are shown in Appendix 1.

3.1.2 Questionnaire development and data collection

All dependent variables were adapted from previous studies to fit this study using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = ‘strongly disagree’ and 7 = ‘strongly agree’). The measurement items and reliability information are summarised in Table 1. Attitude towards the message and attitude towards the destination were measured using four items and three items, respectively, both from (van der Veen & Song, 2014). Visit intention was measured using four items from (Bae & Chang, 2021).

Please insert Table 1 here

A filter question helps to identify frequent Chinese domestic travellers prior to COVID-19 as participants. Travel-related questions and socio-demographic information questions were also provided in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was first developed in English on the basis of the existing literature and then was translated to Chinese by two native Chinese researchers who work and live in English-speaking countries and are proficient in both English and Chinese languages. Ethical approval was granted by the university that the first author works.

An online marketing research firm, Wenjuanxing (www.wjx.cn), with a reliable and valid database of consumers in Mainland China helped to collect the data in May 2021. Using a random sampling approach, questionnaire links were sent to Chinese adult residents through

their database. After screening for targeted frequent travellers, they were asked to click on the link and were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions. To ensure that participants paid attention to the questionnaire, we asked participants to complete manipulation check questions towards the scenarios. Details are shown in Section 4.1.1. In addition, the marketing research firm also included two irrelevant math questions to check whether participants focused on the questions. Only participants who answered the correct math questions were considered valid responses in this study.

A total of 217 questionnaires were obtained, with cell sizes of 52–57. As shown in Table 2, more than half (55.8%) of participants were 21–30 years old, and 68.7% of the participants were females. 82.9% of the participants had a Bachelor’s degree. The top occupation was office worker (45.2%). 28.6% of the participants had a personal monthly income of RMB7000–9999, which is the most common income category. Before COVID-19, 73.3% of the participants travelled 6–10 times per year. Around 92.6% of the participants in Study 1 reported zero COVID-19 cases in the city that they were living the day before.

Please insert Table 2 here

3.1.4 Data Analysis

A two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) in SPSS was employed with two independent variables (i.e., tourist focused message appeal and destination focused message appeal) and two dependent variables (i.e., attitude towards the message and the destination) to answer H1–H4. Covariates were demographic and travel-related variables as these variables affect tourists’ attitude towards the message and the destination (Song et al., 2018; van der Veen & Song, 2014). In addition, PROCESS Model 4 via SPSS was conducted to test the relationships between attitude towards the message, attitude towards the destination and visit intention (H7,

H8, H9 and H10). More specifically, we used attitude towards the message as the independent variable, visit intention as the dependent variable, attitude towards the destination as the mediator, and demographic and travel-related information as covariates.

3.2 Study 2

3.2.1 Scenarios

In Study 2, a 2 (tourist focused message appeal: self-benefit vs other-benefit) x 2 (government information source: central government vs local government) between-subject factorial design was adopted. The rationale of examining tourist message appeal in both experiments is that the key outcome of tourism marketing message is to persuade potential tourists to visit the tourism destination via attracting their attention to marketing message. Thus, tourist-focused message appeal is often the key application in most of the marketing messages. In addition, we also manipulated two levels of governmental information source, namely, the central government (e.g., the Chinese central government) and the local government (e.g., the local government of a tourist destination in China). All stimuli are shown in Appendix 2.

3.2.2 Questionnaire development and data collection

We adopted the same procedure of Study 1 to develop questionnaire for Study 2, both studies used the same dependent variables. The measurement items and reliability information are summarised in Table 1. Ethical approval was obtained from the university that the first author works. We used Wenjuanxing (www.wjx.cn) again to collect valid data in September 2021 for Study 2 following the same procedure as presented in Study 1. Details of manipulation check questions are shown in Section 4.2.1. A total of 219 valid responses were collected, with cell sizes ranged between 52–57. As shown in Table 2, more than half of participants were in the age group of 31–40 (53%), and more than half of the participants were females (53.9%).

77.6% of them had a Bachelor's degree. Nearly half of them (49.8%) were office worker. More than a third of them (35.2%) had a personal monthly income of RMB7000–9999. Before COVID-19, 67.6% of them travelled 6–10 times per year. 91.3% of the participants reported recent zero COVID-19 cases in the city that they were living the day before.

3.2.4 Data Analysis

Similar to Study 1, we also employed a two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) in SPSS with two independent variables (i.e., tourist focused message appeal and government information source) and two dependent variables (i.e., attitude towards the message and the destination) to answer H1, H3, H5 and H6. We considered demographic and travel-related variables covariates. PROCESS Model 4 via SPSS was conducted again to test the relationships between attitude towards the message, attitude towards the destination and visit intention (H7, H8, H9 and H10). More specifically, we used attitude towards the message as the independent variable, visit intention as the dependent variable, attitude towards the destination as the mediator, and demographic and travel-related information as covariates.

4. Findings

4.1 Study 1

4.1.1 Manipulation check

Manipulation control checks (7-point Likert Scale; 1= 'strongly disagree'; 7= 'strongly agree') were successful. For example, participants in the tourist self-benefit conditions rated 'the message mainly benefits tourists' significantly higher than those in the tourist other-benefit conditions ($M_{\text{Self-benefit}} = 5.95 > M_{\text{Other-benefit}} = 2.88$, $t [215] = 13.417$, $p < .001$). Participants in the destination loss-framed conditions agreed significantly higher on the question 'without tourism activities, the destination will have no future' than those in the destination gain-framed

conditions ($M_{\text{Loss-framed}} = 5.66 > M_{\text{Gain-framed}} = 3.50$, $t(215) = -9.679$, $p < .001$). In Study 1, the realism score for the scenarios was 5.04 (SD = 1.448) based on a 7-point scale, indicating the high realism in daily life.

4.1.2 Influence of tourist focused message appeal on participants' attitude towards the message and the destination

As shown in Table 3, the main effects of tourist message appeal on participants' attitude towards the message ($F [1, 206] = 8.801$, $p < 0.01$) and the destination ($F [1, 206] = 4.671$, $p < 0.05$) were significant. More specifically, participants in the self-benefit appeal group had a more positive attitude towards the message than those participants in the other-benefit group ($M_{\text{self-benefit}} = 5.65 > M_{\text{other benefit}} = 5.26$). Thus, H1 was supported. Similarly, participants in the self-benefit appeal group had a more positive attitude towards the destination than those participants in the other-benefit group ($M_{\text{self-benefit}} = 5.45 > M_{\text{other benefit}} = 5.14$). Therefore, H2 was accepted. In terms of the effect of covariates, occupation ($F [1, 206] = 5.061$, $p < 0.05$) and travel frequency ($F [1, 206] = 7.696$, $p < 0.01$) affected participants' attitude towards the message.

Please insert Table 3 here

4.1.3 Influence of destination focused message appeal on participants' attitude towards the message and the destination

As shown in Table 3, the main effect of destination focused message appeal on participants' attitude towards the message ($F [1, 206] = 0.473$, $p = 0.489$) was insignificant. For example, participants in the gain-framed group ($M_{\text{gain framed}} = 5.41$) had a similar level of attitude towards the message than those participants in the loss-framed group ($M_{\text{loss framed}} = 5.50$). Therefore, H3 was rejected. The main effect of destination focused message appeal on participants' attitude towards the destination ($F [1, 206] = 4.652$, $p < 0.05$) was significant. More specifically,

participants in the loss-framed group ($M_{\text{loss framed}} = 5.45$) had a more positive attitude towards the destination than those participants in the gain-framed group ($M_{\text{gain framed}} = 5.15$). Thus, H4 was supported. Additionally, tourist message appeal and destination message appeal did not exert any interaction effect on attitude towards the message ($F [1, 206] = 2.927, ns$) and attitude towards the destination ($F [1, 206] = .781, ns$). In terms of the effect of covariates, only income influenced participants' attitude towards the destination ($F [1, 206] = 7.473, p < 0.01$).

4.1.4 Relationships between participants' attitude towards the message, destination and visit intention

PROCESS (Model 4) by Hayes (2013) was used to explore the relationships between participants' attitude towards the message, the destination and their visit intention. Age, gender, education, occupation, income, travel frequency and COVID-19 condition in the city were used as covariates. As shown in Table 4, the results showed that attitude towards the message positively impacted attitude towards the destination ($\beta = 0.844, 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.619 \text{ to } 0.827, p < 0.001$), confirming H7. Attitude towards the message positively affected visit intention ($\beta = 0.331, 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.022 \text{ to } 0.332, p < 0.05$), supporting H8. Additionally, participants' attitude towards the destination significantly affects their visit intention ($\beta = 0.483, 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.451 \text{ to } 0.746, p < 0.001$), supporting H9.

For all covariates in Study 1, only income positively affected participants' visit intentions ($\beta = 0.116, 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.015 \text{ to } 0.231, p < 0.05$). In the PROCESS models, indirect effects are significant when the 95% confidence interval (CI) does not include zero. In addition, the results show that attitude towards the destination mediates the relationship between attitude towards the message and visit intention ($\beta = 0.408, 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.198 \text{ to } 0.589$) in support of H10.

Please insert Table 4 here

4.2 Study 2

4.2.1 Manipulation check

We also confirmed the successful manipulation controls in Study 2. For instance, the manipulation question of ‘the message mainly benefits tourists’ was rated significantly higher for subjects in the self-benefit appeal groups than other-benefit appeal groups ($M_{\text{self-benefit}} = 6.45 > M_{\text{other-benefit}} = 1.28$, $t(217) = 30.918$, $p < .001$). Participants in the central government information source groups rated ‘the message is published by the central Chinese government’ as being significantly higher than the participants in the local government groups ($M_{\text{central government}} = 6.59 > M_{\text{local government}} = 1.28$, $t(217) = -18.544$, $p < .001$). In Study 2, the realism score for the scenarios was 5.07 (SD = 1.603) based on a 7-point scale, showing our scenarios are realistic.

4.2.2 Influence of tourist focused message appeal on participants’ attitude towards the message and the destination

As shown in Table 5, tourist message appeal significantly influenced participants’ attitude towards the message ($F[1, 208] = 6.311$, $p < .05$) and the destination ($F[1, 208] = 5.779$, $p < .05$). For instance, participants in the self-benefit group perceived a more positive attitude towards the message than those participants in the other-benefit group ($M_{\text{self-benefit}} = 5.83 > M_{\text{other-benefit}} = 5.54$), supporting H1 again. Similarly, subjects in the self-benefit group perceived a more positive attitude towards the destination than participants in the other-benefit group ($M_{\text{self-benefit}} = 5.32 > M_{\text{other-benefit}} = 4.96$), confirming H2 again.

Please insert Table 5 here

4.2.3 Influence of government information source on participants' attitudes towards the message and the destination

Table 5 exhibits that the main effect of the level of government information source on participants' attitude towards the message was significant ($F [1, 208] = 4.726, p < 0.05$) as participants in the central government group had a more positive attitude towards the message than those participants in the local government group ($M_{\text{central government}} = 5.81 > M_{\text{local government}} = 5.56$). Therefore, H5 was supported. However, the main effect of the level of government ($F [1, 208] = 0.176, p = 0.675, M_{\text{central government}} = 5.11, M_{\text{local government}} = 5.17$) on attitude towards the destination was insignificant, thus rejecting H6. Furthermore, tourist message appeal and government information source did not cause any interaction effect on attitude towards the message ($F [1, 208] = .299, ns$) and attitude towards the destination ($F [1, 208] = 1.799, ns$). For all the covariates, only participants' income ($F [1, 208] = 3.987, p < .05$) and travel frequency before COVID-19 ($F [1, 208] = 7.438, p < 0.01$) significantly affected participants' attitudes towards the destination.

4.2.4 Relationships between participants' attitude towards the message, destination and visit intention

Similar to Study 1, we conducted PROCESS Model 4 to explore the relationships between participants' attitude towards the message, the destination and their visit intention. Demographics, and travel-related information were used as covariates. The results in Table 6 showed that attitude towards the message positively impacted attitude towards the destination ($\beta = 0.622, 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.507 \text{ to } 0.807, p < 0.001$), supporting H7. Attitude towards the message positively affected visit intention ($\beta = 0.405, 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.168 \text{ to } 0.505, p < 0.001$), supporting H8. Additionally, participants' attitude towards the destination significantly affects their visit intention ($\beta = 0.646, 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.509 \text{ to } 0.772, p < 0.001$), accepting H9.

In terms of covariates, travel frequency affected attitude towards the destination ($\beta = 0.216$, 95% CI = 0.009 to 0.423, $p < 0.05$). Attitude towards the destination mediates the relationship between attitude towards the message and visit intention in support of H10 again ($\beta = 0.402$, 95% CI = 0.255 to 0.567).

Please insert Table 6 here

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1 Discussion

In this section, we discussed the findings of this study by referring to previous studies. Firstly, we found that tourist focused message appeal (self-benefit vs other-benefit) can positively influence tourists' attitude towards the message and the destination. More specifically, in the experimental studies 1 and 2, tourist self-benefit message appeal groups showed more positive attitudes towards the message and the destination than the other-benefit group. Similar to a previous study on sustainable destination selection (Hardeman et al., 2017), tourist self-benefit message appeal is also more persuasive than other-oriented message appeal in the context of tourism destination marketing in the post-pandemic era. An account for the result can be that self-benefit message stimulated the utilitarian benefits (price-quality perception) of participants when motivated by promotional stimuli, such as discounts (Jee, 2021). Thus, consumers may view this type of discounts as an incentive to support the crisis-affected destination. Consequently, self-benefit appeal can create a positive attitude towards the marketing communication message as well the crisis-affected destination.

Secondly, we found that destination focused message appeal only affects tourists' attitude towards the destination but does not influence tourists' attitude towards the message. In particular, loss-framed messages are linked to more positive attitude towards the destination

than gain-framed messages. Different from previous studies (Chi et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2018) stating that gain-framed message is more effective in terms of influencing consumers attitude and purchase intentions than loss-framed message, our study found that loss-framed messages are linked to more positive attitude towards the destination than gain-framed messages. This could be explained by the negativity of the crisis-affected destination, which shares some similarity with charity activities in the charitable donation advertisement (Chang & Lee, 2009). Participants may show empathy towards the crisis-affected destination; thus, are more likely to develop positive attitude towards the destination in the marketing message. However, we found that destination message appeal does not influence tourists' attitude towards the message, such as whether the message is persuasive or convincing. It might be due to the fact that hopes of the tourism and other industry businesses to recover remains uncertain in mainland China, therefore participants were less likely to form a positive attitude towards the message on crisis recovery.

Thirdly, we found that central government has a more positive influence on tourists' attitude towards the message than the local government. A possible reason is that Chinese citizens trust the central government more than local governments (Liu & Raine, 2016); thus, participants are more likely to form more positive attitude towards the message sent by the central government than by the local government. However, the level of government doesn't influence tourists' attitude towards the destination. A possible reason is that in addition to the guidelines made by the central government, local governments in China are also allowed to implement additional tools to deal with COVID in local destinations (GMS, 2020), therefore, participants do not always view the greater influence on local destinations from the central government.

Finally, the attitudes towards the message and the attitudes towards the destination had a positive effect on visit intention. Our results are consistent with the stream of literature

supporting individuals' attitudes of the announcement positively influence tourists' attitude towards the destination, then subsequently impact their visiting intention (Kim & Jun, 2016; Pourashraf et al., 2018; van der Veen & Song, 2014). In other words, the more positive attitude that the participants have towards the message, the more likely that they will form positive attitude towards the destination. In addition, attitude towards the message and the destination influences tourists' visit intention to the destination. Furthermore, we confirmed the mediating role of attitude towards the destination on the relationship between attitude towards the message and visit intention. This demonstrates that in addition to focusing on the direct impact of message itself on visit intention, a good understanding of the destination portrayed in message is vital for driving tourists' visit intention to the destination.

5.2 Theoretical contribution

This study contributes to the existing literature in tourism marketing. Firstly, adopting the McGuire's communication persuasion model, our research offers empirical evidence to address the conflicting views of whether communication of self-benefit or other-benefit message appeal can effectively influence tourists' attitudes. In the post-COVID situation, the communication factor of self-benefit message appeal is more effective than other benefit in terms of arousing tourists' positive attitudes towards the message and the destination. This study is the pioneer of verifying the effectiveness of self-benefit appeal in post-COVID tourism marketing communications. In addition, the new findings of the mediating role of attitude towards the destination, is a significant persuasion factor in the tourism marketing context that helps to link the relationship between attitude towards the message and visit intention.

Secondly, our study extends the knowledge on loss-framed and gain-framed research and prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). The existing literature on prospect theory is mainly about individuals (Chang & Lee, 2009; Martin, 1995; Pan et al., 2021), such as

visitors. In this study. We take an anthropomorphic perspective to research tourist destinations instead. For example, we consider a tourist destination as an individual who may gain something or loss something. Therefore, we believe our study makes a theoretical contribution to the existing literature. In addition, majority of the tourism studies argued that gain-framed message is more effective in terms of influencing consumers' attitude and purchase intentions than loss-framed message (Chi et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2018). However, our study found that the loss-framed message is more effective in terms of forming consumers' attitude towards the crisis-affected destination than the gain-framed message. This new finding sheds new thoughts on the relationship between prospect theory and tourism destination. In addition, only one recent published paper on loss-framed and gain-framed in the COVID-19 situation in tourism can be identified (Gursoy et al., 2022). Therefore, our study fills the knowledge gap of applying prospect theory in the context of tourism in post-COVID-19 era. Thirdly, our study offers a good understanding of the important role of the central government in terms of forming tourists' positive attitude towards the message. Although we know that mainland Chinese citizens trust the central government more than local governments (Liu & Raine, 2016), this topic has never been studied in the tourism area, and the role of the government in the post-COVID period tourism remains undetermined.

5.3 Practical implications

The study offers several practical implications. Firstly, both studies confirmed that tourists' self-benefit message positively generates tourists' attitudes towards the message and the destination, thus industry practitioners can rely on this finding to develop tourism message, such as advertisement. More specifically, information emphasising on what tourists can benefit from the message, such as economic benefits from the discounted low price, can be effective and persuasive. Secondly, destination loss-framed message significantly enhances tourists'

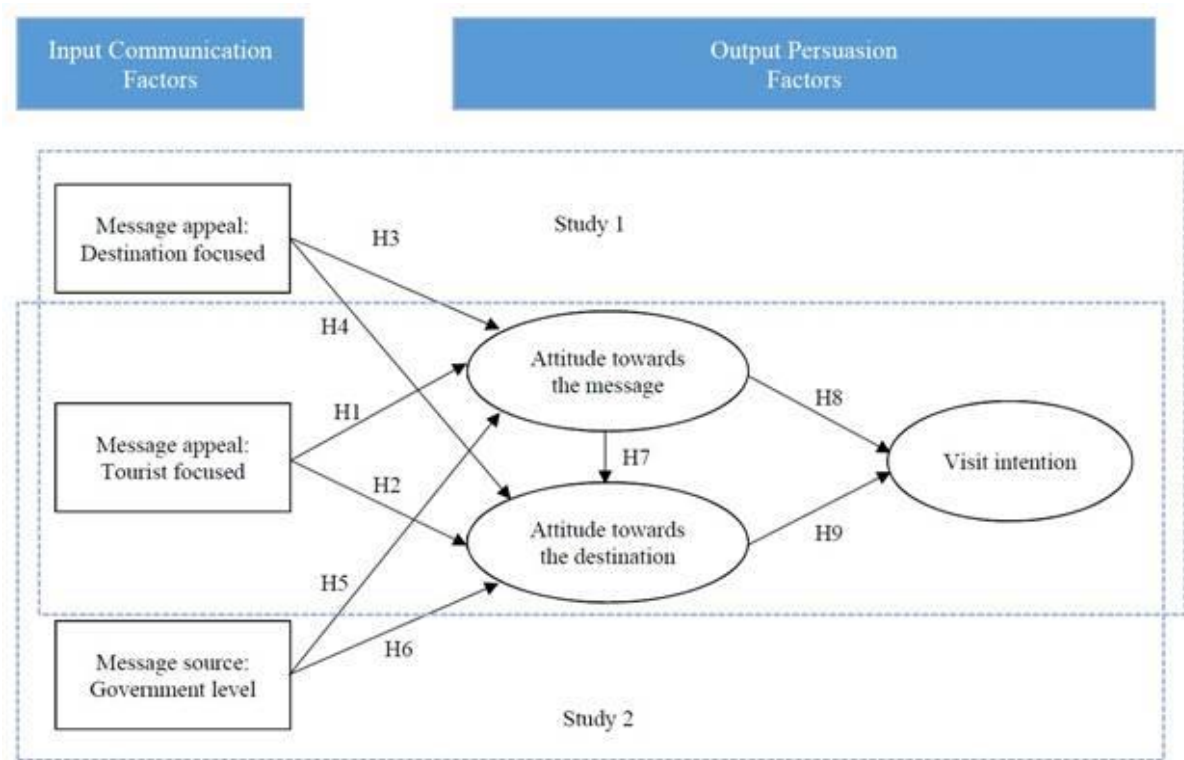
positive attitude towards the destination. Therefore, framing the loss perspective of the destination, such as the negative outcome of losing tourists, can be effective in terms of developing tourists' positive attitude towards the destination. Thirdly, central government information leads to tourists' more positive attitude towards the message than regional government information. Therefore, the central government should play a significant role in developing crisis recovery messages to shape tourists' attitude in the aftermath of the pandemic. The local government can also play a supporting role to promote the destination. Finally, persuasive crisis recovery messages must be developed as they can directly contribute to tourists' visit intention towards the destination.

5.4 Limitations and future research

This study holds several limitations. Firstly, this study only investigated the characteristics of the marketing message (e.g., message appeal and message source) on consumer attitude; however, the characteristics of the participants, such as their cultural variation (individualist vs collectivist) might also affect Chinese consumers' evaluation of marketing message (Wyer & Hong, 2010). Therefore, scholars in the future may investigate the moderating effect of consumer cultural variation on the relationship between marketing message and consumer evaluation. Secondly, this study focuses on Chinese nationals and hence limited the generalisability of the results. In this study, Chinese participants form more positive attitude towards the message delivered by central government than the local government. The relationship between the Chinese government and the citizens is very particular and unique. As consumer behaviours between Chinese and Westerners might be different, it would be valuable to replicate this study in another cultural context to compare or verify the results of this study. Thirdly, this study only tested the hypotheses on the basis of hypothetical experiments. As field study and experiment may generate different results (Song & Kim, 2022), future studies can

collect field study data from Chinese travellers in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, scholars in the future may conduct content analysis with the media information developed by various levels of government, and identify framing strategies used by these media. Findings in the future research can be used to verify the results of the present study.

Figure 1. The proposed conceptual model.



Note: Tourist focused message appeal (*self-benefit vs other-benefit*), Destination focused message appeal (*gain-framed vs loss-framed*), Government information source (*central government vs local government*)

Appendix 1:

Imagine that the COVID-19 pandemic is over, and you are planning to take a holiday:

Whilst browsing the internet, you find that the Tourism Bureau of XYZ city is hosting a press conference. The message emphasises that tourists will spend less money if they visit XYZ now as there are discounted flight tickets or accommodation, free attraction tickets and so on. [*The message emphasises that tourists' visitation can help tourism and hospitality businesses recover*].

The message also emphasises that the tourism destination of XYZ will be full of hope again if tourists visited the destination, eventually improving the lives of tourism employees. [*The message emphasises that the tourism destination of XYZ will have no future. If tourists did not visit the destination, there will be no jobs for tourism employees, placing them in an unideal condition*].

Appendix 2:

Imagine that the COVID-19 pandemic is over, and you are planning to take a holiday:

You are reading the People's daily and find a message written by the central Chinese government [*You are reading a local newspaper and find a message written on behalf of the city destination XYZ local government*]. The message emphasises that tourists will spend less money if they visit XYZ now as there are discounted flight tickets or accommodation, free attraction tickets and so on. [*The message emphasises that tourists' visitation can help tourism and hospitality businesses recover*].

Table 1. Measurements and Reliability.

	Stage 1		Stage 2	
Constructs and Measurement Items	Factor loading	<i>α</i>	Factor loading	<i>α</i>
<i>Attitude towards the message</i>		.756		.828
• This message is convincing	.805		.821	
• This message is effective	.807		.842	
• This message is informative	.651		.792	
• This message is believable	.775		.800	
<i>Attitude towards the destination</i>		.758		.810
• The destination in the message is favourable	.823		.900	
• I like the destination in the message	.828		.857	
• The destination in the message is positive	.811		.812	
<i>Visit intention</i>		.891		.862
• I intend to travel to this destination in the near future.	.852		.829	
• I am planning to travel to this destination in the near future.	.881		.838	
• I will make an effort to travel to this destination.	.856		.854	
• I will certainly invest time and money to travel to this destination in the near future.	.885		.847	

Table 2. Participants' profile

Variable	Study 1 (N = 217)		Study 2 (N = 219)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Age				
18-20	15	6.9	9	4.1
21-30	121	55.8	69	31.5
31-40	67	30.9	116	53.0
41-50	12	5.5	21	9.6
51-60	1	0.5	4	1.8
≥ 61	1	0.5	0	0
Gender				
Male	68	31.3	101	46.1
Female	149	68.7	118	53.9
Education				
Below college	3	1.4	7	3.2
College	13	6.0	28	12.8
Undergraduate	180	82.9	170	77.6
Postgraduate	21	9.7	14	6.4
Occupation				
Governmental officer	13	6.0	14	6.4
Entrepreneur	27	12.4	13	5.9
Professional	28	12.9	41	18.7
Private business owners	5	2.3	10	4.6
Office worker	98	45.2	109	49.8
Salesperson	12	5.5	9	4.1
Self-employed	9	4.1	6	2.7
Students	20	9.2	15	6.8
Housewife	0	0	1	0.5
Retired	1	0.5	0	0
Others	4	1.8	1	0.5
Personal monthly income (CNY)				
Less than 3000	25	11.5	21	9.6
3000-4999	21	9.7	15	6.8
5000-6999	56	25.8	39	17.8
7000-9999	62	28.6	77	35.2
≥ 10000	53	24.4	67	30.6
Travel frequency per year before COVID-19				
1-5 times	8	3.7	8	3.7
6-10 times	159	73.3	148	67.6
11-20 times	43	19.8	56	25.6
More than 21 times	7	3.2	7	3.2
Confirmed positive COVID-19 cases yesterday in the city that I live				
No	201	92.6	200	91.3
1-5	16	7.4	16	7.3

6-10	0	0	3	1.4
11-20	0	0	0	0
More than 21	0	0	0	0

Table 3. Summary of ANCOVA results in Study 1

Independent variable	Attitude towards the message			Attitude towards the destination		
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Tourist message appeal	8.801	.003	.041	4.671	.032	.022
Destination message appeal	.473	.492	.002	4.652	.032	.022
Tourist message appeal x destination message appeal	2.927	.089	.014	.781	.378	.004
Covariates						
Age	2.949	.087	.014	.509	.476	.002
Gender	3.699	.056	.018	.465	.496	.002
Education	.382	.537	.002	.038	.846	.000
Occupation	5.061	.026	.024	.667	.415	.003
Income	3.749	.054	.018	7.473	.007	.035
Travel frequency	7.696	.006	.036	2.091	.150	.010
COVID-19 condition in the city	.981	.323	.005	.307	.580	.001

Table 4: Results on the relationships between participants' attitude towards the message, destination and visit intention in Study 1

Predictor	Attitude towards the destination	Visit intention
Attitude towards the message	.8439 **	.3307 **
Attitude towards the destination	-	.4833 **
Covariates		
Age	.0030	-.0118
Gender	-.0887	-.0103
Education	.0452	-.1548
Occupation	.0300	.0105
Income	.0549	.1156 *
Travel frequency	-.0287	.0222
COVID condition	-.2745	.0609
R ²	.7014 **	.5478**
Indirect effect on visit intention	Effect	LL95% CI; UL95% CI
Attitude towards the message → attitude towards the destination → visit intention	.4079	.1976; .5893

Notes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

Table 5. Summary of ANCOVA results in Study 2

Independent variable	Attitude towards the message			Attitude towards the destination		
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Tourist message appeal	6.311	.013	.029	5.779	.017	.027
Government information source	4.726	.031	.022	.176	.675	.001
Tourist message appeal x government information source	.299	.585	.001	1.799	.181	.009
Covariates						
Age	.230	.632	.001	1.103	.295	.005
Gender	.103	.749	.000	2.327	.129	.011
Education	.011	.916	.000	.234	.629	.001
Occupation	.006	.937	.000	3.086	.080	.015
Income	.098	.755	.000	3.987	.047	.019
Travel frequency	.084	.772	.000	7.438	.007	.035
COVID-19 condition in the city	.041	.840	.000	.073	.788	.000

Table 6: Results on the relationships between participants' attitude towards the message, destination and visit intention in Study 2

<i>Predictor</i>	Attitude towards the destination	Visit intention
Attitude towards the message	.6218 **	.4050 **
Attitude towards the destination	-	.6462 **
<i>Control variable</i>		
Age	.1081	-.0531
Gender	-.2202	-.1456
Education	.0393	-.1361
Occupation	-.0847	-.0463
Income	-.0709	.0978
Travel frequency	.2158 *	.0593
COVID condition	.1414	-.1115
R ²	.2850**	.5322**
Indirect effect on visit intention	Effect	LL95% CI; UL95% CI
Attitude towards the message → attitude towards the destination → visit intention	.4018	.2547; .5673

Notes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

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