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Understanding Formation and Impact of Tourism Affinity on Destination Perceptions Using Construal Level Theory and the Medusa Effect

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the formation and impact of tourist affinity on destination perceptions, employing construal level theory (CLT) and the Medusa effect (ME), a psychological concept in visual communication. Focusing on Japanese affinity towards Taiwan and the United States, the research explores how familiarity and perceived closeness shape affinity and influence tourists' intention to visit. Studies 1–2 reveal the intricate interplay between destination familiarity, perceived closeness, and affinity, as well as their perceptual influence on intention to visit. After careful selection and creation processes of the experimental stimuli by local people and experts, Studies 3–4 leverage the ME to show that tourists with higher affinity respond more favourably to single images than nested representations. This research contributes to tourism literature by linking CLT and ME, demonstrating how visual communication strategies can be tailored to different levels of tourist affinity to optimise their perceptual impact, providing actionable insights for Destination Marketing Organizations to target tourists effectively.

1 | Introduction

International marketing has progressively concentrated on consumers' emotional bonds with destinations to gain deeper insights into their behaviour (Kock et al. 2019). Meanwhile, research highlights the significance of positive emotions over negative ones (Papadopoulos et al. 2017). Tourist affinity, one such positive emotion, characterised by 'sympathy, admiration and attachment towards a specific foreign destination' (Josiassen et al. 2022, 2), guides tourists' destination and hotel choices (Josiassen et al. 2022; Tsaur et al. 2023) and—by signalling which markets remain loyal—helps DMOs formulate crisis communication and lay out resilience plans for such destinations (Farmaki et al. 2024). Despite growing academic interest in affinity, cross cultural research on the complex interplay of its

formation and perceptual impact on destination image remains scarce.

This study investigates two key aspects of tourist affinity. First, Studies 1–2 explore the intricate mechanisms through which affinity emerges, delving into the dynamic interplay of its antecedents and the sequential effects that shape favourable conations. Building on these findings, Studies 3–4 address the growing significance of visual communication strategies in tourism. Specifically, this study addresses how image presentation methods—informed by two highly relevant psychological theories—can be tailored to varying levels of affinity to optimise their perceptual impact. The first is construal level theory (CLT), which explains how psychological distance influences mental representation captured by either high- or low-level construal

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(Liberman and Trope 2014). The second, the Medusa effect (ME), explains the relationship between mental perception and pictorial abstraction, manipulated through either a single (concrete, low-level construal) image or a nested (abstract, high-level construal) image that reflects psychological distance (Will et al. 2021). Highlighting Japanese affinity towards Taiwan (Study 1, 3) and the United States (Study 2, 4), this research emphasises cross-cultural aspects of affinity and its influence on perceptual proximity, facilitating information processing by reducing cognitive effort.

Previous research has investigated factors associated with tourist affinity, but it has not provided a theoretical explanation of how tourist affinity develops (Serrano-Arcos et al. 2022). Therefore, the mechanisms underlying the influence of these factors on affinity remain unclear. While destination familiarity—the visual and psychological images retained by tourists (Anaya-Sánchez et al. 2024)—and perceived closeness—the psychological connection that surpasses mere familiarity (Guan et al. 2022)—are key antecedents of affinity (Serrano-Arcos et al. 2022), their interplay and sequential influence remain unexplored. This study examines how familiarity, perceived closeness, and affinity interact to shape tourists' decision-making. Expanding on Studies 1–2, Studies 3–4 indicate that affinity, while distinct from but inclusive of elements associated with social distance (Liberman and Trope 2014), plays a crucial role in shaping lower construal levels because a higher affinity leads to perceptual closeness (i.e., emotional bonds), which complements social distance without being reducible to it. Social distance reflects a cognitive appraisal of how remote or dissimilar a group or place feels to people (Liberman and Trope 2014). Tourist affinity, in contrast, is an affective orientation encompassing 'sympathy, admiration and attachment' to a destination (Josiassen et al. 2022, 2), serving as the affective counterpart to social distance—capturing valence, not distance per se. Because positive affect promotes approach motivation, heightened affinity is expected to further lower construal level beyond the effect of sheer proximity.

To capture tourists' perceptual preferences, this study applies CLT, focusing on how affinity-induced social distance impacts tourists' perception towards a destination. In CLT, reduced social distance leads to more concrete object perceptions (Liberman and Trope 2014). Thus, the present study employs the ME, a psychological concept in visual communication, which explains the relationship between perception and pictorial abstraction manipulated through a single (concrete) or nested (abstract) image reflecting a low or high construal level (Will et al. 2021). Exposure to diverse images on social media has intensified efforts to manipulate visual content to elicit favourable reactions (Siegel et al. 2023). By manipulating ME-based pictorial abstraction in accordance with affinity-induced social distance, positive tourist reactions towards the destination can be elicited. By integrating ME and CLT, this study provides novel insights into how affinity-induced social distance shapes tourists' perceptions and preferences.

The findings reveal that increased affinity is associated with a stronger favourable reaction to single (concrete) images over nested (abstract) ones in the ME framework. Thus, the relationship between the ME and tourists' responses, as influenced by construal levels, can be explained by affinity-induced social

distance towards the destination. Furthermore, this study contributes to cross-cultural research by investigating Japanese preferences for Eastern and Western destinations, an aspect that has been seldom explored in prior research.

This study examined Japanese affinity to Taiwan (Studies 1 and 3) and the United States (Studies 2 and 4), which are consistently ranked among the top 10 most popular destinations for Japanese travellers (JTB Tourism Research and Consulting 2023). The Japan Tourism Agency promotes foreign travel of Japanese (Japan Tourism Agency 2023). Additionally, both destinations maintain significant ties with Japan—political and economic partnerships for the United States and historical connections for Taiwan. The United States, Japan's second-largest trading partner (Japan External Trade Organization 2023), shares strong political ties through the G7 and the US–Japan alliance (US Department of State 2021). Taiwan, a former colony, shares strong historical ties. Building on Kang et al.'s (2024) comparative research on foreign tourists, this study investigates affinity for Eastern and Western destinations, offering cross-cultural insights for worldwide tourism marketing.

This article presents the conceptual foundation of the drivers of affinity and develops an affinity-based model of tourist behaviour. It further develops a conceptual model illustrating the relationship between mental perceptions and tourists' conations, moderated by affinity towards a destination. Following these empirical investigations, the article discusses theoretical and practical implications, concluding with limitations and suggestions for further investigations.

2 | Literature Review and Model Development

This study first investigates the sequential impact of familiarity, perceived closeness and affinity for a destination on behavioural intention, highlighting the intricate interplay among these constructs. It subsequently explores whether affinity, distinct from social distance but encompassing its elements, plays a crucial role in shaping lower construal levels; higher affinity leads to perceptual closeness, which complements social distance without being reducible. Consequently, from the ME perspective, this study posits a theoretical link between affinity-based perception and pictorial abstraction, manipulated through a single or nested image representing a low or high construal level.

2.1 | Familiarity as a Driver of Perceived Closeness and Affinity

Familiarity with a destination (hereafter, familiarity) encompasses the visual and psychological images that tourists retain in their memory about a location, shaped by their virtual reality experiences and visual contents (Anaya-Sánchez et al. 2024), cultural understanding (Shi et al. 2022) and unique travel experiences (Guan et al. 2022). While prior research has investigated familiarity in the context of cognitive image, it has been overlooked in shaping affective image, thus limiting insights into the influence on affinity (Josiassen et al. 2022). Research on place-related cognition and emotion have typically treated these

aspects independently, with limited investigation into their interplay (Ma et al. 2022).

Familiarity and perceived closeness are considered crucial drivers of affinity (Serrano-Arcos et al. 2022), whereas their interplay and sequential impact on conations have not been empirically examined. Perceived closeness reflects the psychological connection one feels with a foreign destination, surpassing mere familiarity (Guan et al. 2022). The social identity theory posits that shared group membership results in a sense of closeness; individuals identify with groups based on shared characteristics, such as lifestyle and attitudes, leading to perceived closeness (Małecka et al. 2022). Hence, familiarity with a foreign destination can increase perceived closeness by encouraging shared identity. Moreover, familiarity significantly impacts travellers' attitudes and behaviours by fostering a more concrete image of the destination (Czarnecki et al. 2023). Consequently, familiarity shapes the sense of perceived closeness towards a destination (Guan et al. 2022). This pattern holds true for both domestic and international destinations, as familiarity reduces psychological distance to such places (Kim et al. 2024).

Here, we examine the sequential relationship between the drivers of affinity and the concept of affinity itself. Intergroup contact theory suggests that meaningful and positive interactions with outgroup members can reduce prejudice and foster positive attitudes (Shah et al. 2023). Also, indirect contact through media and cultural content can similarly diminish outgroup prejudice (White et al. 2021). These theories collectively suggest that both direct and indirect contact, facilitated by enhanced familiarity and perceived closeness, play a critical role in cultivating affinity towards destinations. The relationship between familiarity and affinity follows a progression: increased familiarity enhances perceived closeness, which in turn fosters affinity (Serrano-Arcos et al. 2022). Perceived closeness directly influences the development of affinity, which is characterised by a sense of kinship or connection (Mathew et al. 2024).

Collectively, these studies establish a robust foundation for proposing that tourists with higher levels of familiarity with a destination are prone to experiencing increased perceived closeness and, ultimately, greater affinity towards that destination. Therefore:

H1. *Familiarity with a foreign destination increases perceived closeness to that destination.*

H2. *Perceived closeness to a foreign destination enhances the affinity for that destination.*

2.2 | Affinity as a Driver of Intention to Visit

This research evaluated the influence of affinity on the intention to visit a destination, building on prior research into tourism biases. Understanding the factors that shape individuals' intention to visit is essential for both Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) and researchers (Stylidis et al. 2022). While this relationship has previously been explored predominantly among Western tourists (Josiassen et al. 2022, 2023), this study extends

the investigation to Japanese tourists. The connection between affinity and intention to visit is analysed within the framework of feelings as information theory (Kock et al. 2019) and the broader concept of affinity (Josiassen et al. 2022). Feelings as information theory posits that individuals use their emotions as key information sources, influencing object evaluations (Yao et al. 2023). In the complex global market, this approach enables tourists to make straightforward ordinal evaluations (Kock et al. 2019). Based on this, we hypothesise that higher affinity towards a destination enhances the willingness to visit it, as affinity influences conations directly, bypassing extensive cognitive evaluations (Pai et al. 2023). Therefore:

H3. *Affinity enhances intention to visit a foreign destination.*

2.3 | Indirect Effects on Intention to Visit

Mediators offer critical insights into the dynamics of various interrelations (Prayag et al. 2013). This perspective is particularly relevant to this study, as perceived closeness and affinity serve as mediators in the relationship between familiarity and the intention to visit a destination. This intricate interplay aligns with the standard learning hierarchy (Roth and Diamantopoulos 2009), a theoretical framework commonly employed in country-of-origin research but seldom applied in empirical tourism studies (Terasaki et al. 2023).

The standard learning hierarchy posits that country cognition (e.g., perceptions of its people, economy, politics and landscape) shapes country affect, which in turn drives country conation, such as behavioural intentions towards that country (Roth and Diamantopoulos 2009). Viewing a country as a spatial entity (Papadopoulos et al. 2017) allows for the application of this hierarchy in the current study. Based on this theory, increased familiarity with a foreign destination enhances perceived closeness (destination cognition), which influences affinity (destination affect) and, ultimately, fosters intention to visit (destination conation) (Figure 1A). Since intention to visit involves a high-involvement decision (Stylidis et al. 2022), the standard learning hierarchy is particularly well-suited to the proposed research model. This model clarifies the statistical relationship between cognitive appraisals, tourism-related emotions towards foreign destinations and conations. Specifically, the causal pathway from familiarity to intention to visit is hypothesised to operate through perceived closeness and affinity. Therefore:

H4. *The relationship between familiarity with the affinity destination and intention to visit is mediated by affinity via perceived closeness.*

2.4 | Affinity and Social Construal

In destination marketing, existing research has primarily focused on the direct causal link among tourism biases and behavioural outcomes (Cassia and Magno 2022; Josiassen et al. 2023). However, no prior research has explored the moderating role of tourism biases in shaping tourists' perceptions of a destination. This perspective is essential, as it offers a strategic opportunity to attract previously untapped segments of tourists.

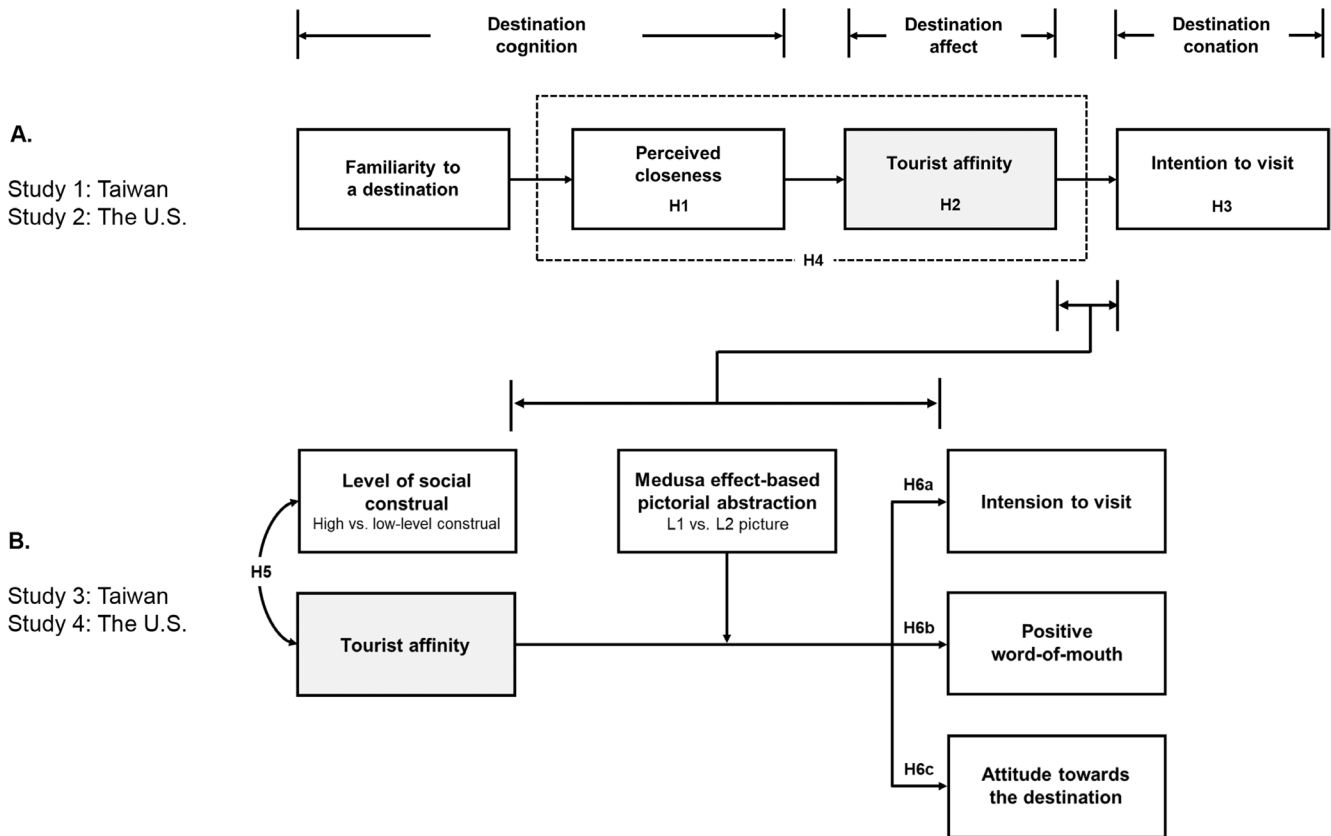


FIGURE 1 | Research model for (A) (H1–H4) and (B) (H5–H6a–c).

Given the significant role that destination pictures play in shaping impressions compared to texts (Siegel et al. 2023), capturing how tourists' perceptions of such pictures evolve based on affinity could provide valuable guidance for developing visual communication strategies.

To investigate the moderating role of affinity, this study applies CLT, which explains how mental representations are shaped by psychological distance from an object (Duan et al. 2021). Psychological distance refers to an individual's subjective perception of an object's proximity or remoteness from key reference points, such as the self, current physical location and present time (Wang et al. 2022). Accordingly, tourists' perceived closeness to a destination can be conceptualised as the perceived social distance between the destination and the self. Recently, CLT has been applied to tourism research across various contexts, including cognitive versus affective destination images (Wang et al. 2022), online reviews (Chang and Ko 2024) and ski tourism (Chen et al. 2020). Meanwhile, the relationship between tourist biases (i.e., affinity) and CLT has not been investigated, and the construal-level changes resulting from affinity-induced perceptual closeness remain unclear.

Psychological proximity to an object leads to concrete, low-level construal, while psychological remoteness results in abstract, high-level construal (Liberman and Trope 2014). Hence, the construal level can vary depending on the psychological distance from the object. In this study, heightened affinity is expected to further lower construal level, as it serves as an affective complement to social distance. Thus, tourists

with high (vs. low) affinity will perceive closer to the destination, reducing their construal level as social distance decreases. Thus:

H5. *The higher the affinity to a foreign destination, the lower the construal level to travel to that destination.*

2.5 | Construal-Level and ME

The present study employs ME (Will et al. 2021), which explains the relationship between perception and pictorial abstraction manipulated by a single: concrete (vs. nested: abstract) image to capture changes in construal level. Assuming that affinity-induced perceptual closeness reduces tourists' construal level, the ME could be applied to manipulate the image of travel destinations. This framework offers numerous applications based on how destination images are processed through the construal level. Most tourism visual design studies concentrate on colour, layout or typography (Su and Li 2024), and travellers now encounter a constant stream of destination images on social media (Siegel et al. 2023). Yet, to our knowledge, no work has linked CLT with the ME's notion of pictorial abstraction (Will et al. 2021); we fill that gap. Indeed, numerous pictures capturing the essence of the ME are shared on Instagram, whether intentionally or not (Supporting Information Appendix A). Given that images are more effective than words in capturing viewers' attention (Su and Li 2024), strategically employing ME-based visual communication could leave a stronger impression of destinations on potential tourists.

The ME suggests that people perceive a single picture as more concrete (real) than a nested picture, which appears more abstract. To clarify this distinction, Will et al. (2021) defined key terminology: the real world as Level 0 (L0), a single picture as Level 1 (L1), and a nested picture as Level 2 (L2). As the level increases, the object appears more abstract, and this heightened degree of abstraction in pictures facilitates construal-based pictorial abstraction. In this study, both L1 and L2 pictures of the target destination are utilised. This approach will help enhance tourists' favourable responses by leveraging affinity-induced perceptual closeness to a destination.

Previous studies on the matching effect have demonstrated that processing fluency increases when the processing style aligns with the type of stimulus (Feng et al. 2022). In CLT research, when the types of stimuli and construal levels match, the object is evaluated more favourably (Wang et al. 2022). In the present study, the concept of ME is applied to manipulate pictures, aiming to capture participants' construal-levels influenced by affinity-induced perceptual closeness to the destination. More specifically, as tourists with high (vs. low) affinity will perceive the destination more concretely, L1 (vs. L2) pictures will lead to more favourable evaluations and conations towards the destination (Figure 1B). These outcomes will be measured by intention to visit, positive word-of-mouth (WOM), and attitude towards the destination. Thus:

H6. *The higher the affinity, the more favourable the responses to (a) intention to visit, (b) positive WOM, and (c) attitude towards the destination when the destination image is described as L1 (vs. L2) picture.*

The research model is summarised in Figure 1, comprising Figure 1A (H1–H4) and Figure 1B (H5–H6a–c).

3 | Study 1

3.1 | Purpose

Study 1 examined the formation model of Japanese affinity towards Taiwan as a travel destination and to assess its downstream effect on intention to visit through testing H1–H4 (Figure 1A). Japanese respondents were selected based on their demonstrated affinity for Taiwan, as mentioned in Section 1.

3.2 | Methods

In July 2022, a professional research agency administered an online survey to 400 Japanese consumers that included two instructional manipulation checks (IMCs) to detect response bias (Josiassen et al. 2022). Respondents were required to select specific options (e.g., selecting '6' for this question) for IMCs. After excluding inattentive responses using two IMC questions, 315 responses were used for analysis. The sample comprised almost equal proportions of individuals across ages, gender and balanced household income (Supporting Information Appendix B outlines sample characteristics). We confirmed individual differences between participants who passed and failed the IMC questions (Oppenheimer et al. 2009). Based on these findings

(Supporting Information C details the analysis), we controlled for age, gender and household income in subsequent analyses (also in Studies 2–4).

To address common method biases (CMBs), we implemented procedural remedies from Podsakoff et al. (2024), as the study simultaneously measured independent and dependent variables. First, participants' anonymity and confidentiality were assured. Second, the measurement items were randomly rearranged within a scale, and the questions were ordered to reduce priming effects. Third, analytical scales from previous studies were used to avoid complexity and ambiguity and were translated into Japanese by two marketing experts (Douglas and Craig 2007).

Responses were obtained on a seven-point Likert scale and averaged to create a measurement index. Supporting Information Appendix D provides construct details and measurement items, including Cronbach's α , composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). Additionally, Supporting Information Appendix E outlines descriptive statistics. Familiarity was measured using Diamantopoulos et al. (2011). Perceived closeness was adopted from Terasaki et al. (2022) ($r=0.635$, $p<0.001$). Affinity and intention to visit scales were adopted from Josiassen et al. (2022).

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to evaluate both convergent and discriminant validity, and the result showed a good fit ($\chi^2/df=3.156$, GFI=0.905, CFI=0.962, TLI=0.951, RMSEA=0.083, SRMR=0.049). All standardised factor loadings exceeded 0.5, and the AVEs were >0.5 , demonstrating convergent validity (Hair et al. 2018). Cronbach's α and CR of all constructs were above 0.7 (Hair et al. 2018), respectively. Hence, all constructs satisfied the criteria for internal reliability. The Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) criterion was tested, which was below 0.9, indicating sufficient discriminant validity (Henseler et al. 2015). We checked the variance inflation factor (VIF) for multicollinearity; the highest was 3.169, within the acceptable level (Cenfetelli and Bassellier 2009). Finally, to assess the potential impact of CMB ex post, Harman's single factor test (HSF) was conducted. The result showed that a single factor accounted for 59.25%, suggesting the potential presence of CMB. Although it was not ideal, surpassing the 50% threshold does not necessarily indicate bias (Howard et al. 2024). As further noted by Spector (2006)—automatically assuming that a positive CMB result is a problem without further empirical evidence is misguided. Our model shows strong convergent and discriminant validity, acceptable model fit, and all VIF values are well below the conservative threshold of 3.3 (Cenfetelli and Bassellier 2009). These results suggest that the constructs are distinct, and that multicollinearity is likely not a concern, reducing the likelihood that CMB significantly distorts the findings.

3.3 | Results

To examine the intricate interplay among antecedents influencing intention to visit, a serial mediation analysis (Hayes 2018) was conducted with familiarity as the independent variable, intention to visit as the dependent variable, perceived closeness and affinity as the mediators, and age, gender (male=0, female=1) and household income as control variables. PROCESS

macro v3.3 (model 6; Hayes 2018) was used to evaluate the proposed hypotheses with a bootstrap estimation through 10,000 resamples.

First, familiarity with Taiwan increased perceived closeness to the destination ($B=0.463$, $SE=0.047$, $p<0.001$), supporting H1. Second, perceived closeness to Taiwan fostered affinity ($B=0.673$, $SE=0.043$, $p<0.001$), supporting H2. Third, affinity for Taiwan enhanced intention to visit ($B=0.418$, $SE=0.067$, $p<0.001$), supporting H3. Finally, the positive indirect effect of familiarity on intention to visit via perceived closeness and affinity was significant, supporting H4 ($B=0.130$, $SE=0.029$, 95% CI [0.079, 0.191]).

3.4 | Findings and Analysis

As stated above, all hypotheses (H1–H4) were supported. In summary, familiarity increases perceived closeness, thus positively affecting affinity. In turn, affinity generates intention to visit. Supporting Information Appendix F presents the details.

4 | Study 2

4.1 | Purpose

Study 2 tested the formation model of Japanese affinity towards the United States as a travel destination, ensuring external validity and assessing its effect on intention to visit (H1–H4, Figure 1A). Japanese respondents were selected based on their demonstrated affinity for the United States, as noted in Section 1.

4.2 | Methods

An online survey was conducted in December 2022 enrolling 400 Japanese consumers registered with a professional research agency, excluding those in Study 1. As in Study 1, ex ante procedural remedies were implemented to mitigate CMBs (e.g., maintaining participants' anonymity and confidentiality). After excluding inattentive responses using IMC questions, 326 responses were used for analysis (Supporting Information Appendix B outlines sample characteristics). The sample was nearly evenly distributed across age, gender and household income, and these factors were controlled in analyses.

Supporting Information Appendix D provides construct details and measurement items. Additionally, Supporting Information Appendix E outlines descriptive statistics. Familiarity was measured using Diamantopoulos et al. (2011). Perceived closeness came from Terasaki et al. (2022). Affinity and intention-to-visit scales were adopted from Josiassen et al. (2022). Responses were averaged from a seven-point Likert scale.

A CFA was conducted, which showed a good fit ($\chi^2/df=3.970$, $GFI=0.892$, $CFI=0.938$, $TLI=0.921$, $RMSEA=0.095$, $SRMR=0.045$). All standardised factor loadings exceed 0.5, and the AVEs were >0.5 , demonstrating convergent validity (Hair et al. 2018). All constructs satisfied the criteria of internal reliability, with Cronbach's $\alpha>0.72$ and $CR>0.7$ (Hair et al. 2018).

HSF results showed that a single factor dominates 53.66%. Although the value slightly exceeds the 50% threshold, the highest VIF was 2.492, which was well below the conservative threshold of 3.3 (Cenfetelli and Bassellier 2009). With satisfactory CFA, convergent and discriminant validity as well as VIF, we concluded that our model remains valid.

4.3 | Results

Following Hayes (2018), a serial mediation analysis examined how familiarity influences intention-to-visit, with perceived closeness and affinity as mediators. PROCESS macro v3.3 (model 6; Hayes 2018) evaluated the hypotheses using 10,000 bootstrap resamples. H1 ($B=0.475$, $SE=0.048$, $p<0.001$), H2 ($B=0.474$, $SE=0.042$, $p<0.001$), H3 ($B=0.457$, $SE=0.062$, $p<0.001$) and H4 ($B=0.103$, $SE=0.024$, 95% CI [0.057, 0.151]) were supported.

4.4 | Findings and Analysis

All hypotheses (H1–H4) were supported in the formation model of Japanese affinity towards the United States, ensuring external validity. Multi-group analysis confirmed that the results were consistent with those of Study 1 (Supporting Information Appendix G). In summary, familiarity increases perceived closeness, thereby positively influencing affinity. Subsequently, affinity generates intention-to-visit. Supporting Information Appendices F and G present the detailed findings from this study and the multi-group comparison respectively.

5 | Study 3

5.1 | Purpose

Study 3 addresses visual communication strategies in tourism, considering Japanese affinity towards Taiwan as a travel destination (H5 and H6a–c, Figure 1B). Specifically, it explores how CLT- and ME-based image presentations adapt to varying levels of affinity to optimise perceptual impact.

5.2 | Methods

An online experiment was conducted in May 2023 by a Japanese research agency, excluding participants from Studies 1–2. Only participants using PCs were included to ensure image visibility ($N=327$). After removing inattentive responses using IMC questions, 265 responses were used for analysis (Supporting Information Appendix B outlines sample characteristics).

The stimuli featured a picture of *dà jī pái* (popular local fried chicken) designed to represent different construal levels: a single picture (L1, concrete, low-level construal) and a nested picture (L2, abstract, high-level construal) (Figure 2). For details on the selection and creation process of the experimental stimuli, see Supporting Information Appendix H-1. We examined whether each picture corresponded to an assumed construal level. The concreteness level was assessed using the transportation scale (Escalas 2004) ($\alpha=0.933$, $CR=0.933$, $AVE=0.737$).

A significant difference between L1 (Mean=4.022, SD=1.384) and L2 (Mean=3.603, SD=1.213; $t_{(263)}=2.625$, $p=0.009$, $d=0.323$) pictures was observed, validating the concreteness manipulation. Participants were randomly assigned to a photo of dà jī pái with the following description: ‘You are planning a trip to Taiwan. While researching tourist information, a photo of dà jī pái, a popular local food, caught your eye’.

Participants were then instructed to answer questions on dependent variables, the degree of concreteness, affinity, and construal level. Supporting Information Appendix I presents construct details and measurement items. Responses were averaged from a 7-point Likert scale. Affinity was evaluated using Kock et al. (2019) ($\alpha=0.959$, CR=0.959, AVE=0.797); intention-to-visit ($\alpha=0.822$, CR=0.846, AVE=0.656) and positive WOM ($r=0.879$, $p<0.001$) were assessed using Josiassen et al. (2022); attitude towards the destination was assessed using Kim et al. (2008) ($\alpha=0.936$, CR=0.937, AVE=0.789); and construal-level was measured using two items ($r=0.858$, $p<0.001$). To prevent multicollinearity, all variables were mean-centred, with the highest VIF of 1.093, which was well below the conservative threshold of 3.3 (Cenfetelli and Basselier 2009).



FIGURE 2 | Stimuli for Study 3. Left: L1 picture. Right: L2 picture.

5.3 | Results

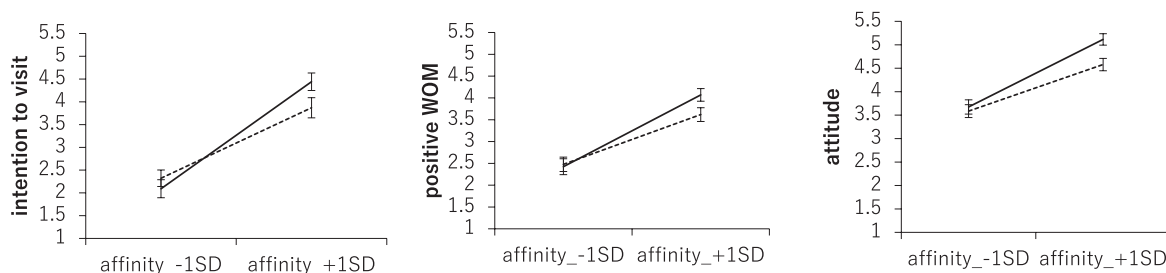
The results confirmed a negative correlation between affinity and construal level ($r=0.670$, $p<0.001$), supporting H5. We regressed intention-to-visit on picture (L1=0 vs. L2=1), affinity, picture×affinity, and the covariates (age, gender and household income) ($F_{(6,258)}=21.091$, $p<0.001$; $R^2=0.329$). The main effects of picture ($B=-0.253$, SE=0.137, $p=0.065$) and affinity ($B=0.707$, SE=0.089, $p<0.001$) were significant. As the interaction (picture×affinity) was significant ($B=-0.263$, SE=0.116, $p=0.024$), a simple slope analysis was performed at the mean affinity value ± 1 SD (Figure 3). Simple slope analysis examines interaction patterns more closely when they are significant in regression analysis (Aiken and West 1991). The results revealed that, with low affinity, the simple main effect of the picture was non-significant ($B=0.061$, SE=0.196, $p=0.758$). In contrast, for high affinity, the effect was significant ($B=-0.567$, SE=0.192, $p=0.003$); L1 picture was rated more favourably than the L2 picture (H6a supported).

When the dependent variable was positive WOM ($F_{(6,258)}=13.274$, $p<0.001$; $R^2=0.236$), the main effect of picture was non-significant ($B=-0.199$, SE=0.135, $p=0.220$), and that of affinity was significant ($B=0.690$, SE=0.105, $p<0.001$). Picture×affinity had a p -value slightly greater than 0.1 ($B=-0.212$, SE=0.137, $p=0.123$), whereas the direction of the interaction aligned with H6b. Similarly, when the dependent variable was attitude towards the destination ($F_{(6,258)}=15.714$, $p<0.001$; $R^2=0.268$), the main effect of picture ($B=-0.312$, SE=0.135, $p=0.022$) and affinity ($B=0.603$, SE=0.088, $p<0.001$) were significant. Picture×affinity had a p -value slightly greater than 0.1 ($B=-0.188$, SE=0.114, $p=0.101$), but the direction of the interaction aligned with H6c.

5.4 | Findings and Analysis

Study 3 supported H5 and H6a, whereas H6b and H6c had p -values slightly above 0.1. Although we did not assume these outcomes, Figure 3 reveals the proposed direction in which a higher affinity generally leads to more favourable responses for L1 (vs. L2) pictures.

Study 3



Results

H6a: supported

H6b: not supported*

H6c: not supported*

FIGURE 3 | Moderating effect of affinity against tourists' responses. Solid line: L1 picture; dashed line: L2 picture. Error bars: Standard error. * p -value slightly greater than 0.1, whereas the direction of the interaction aligned with H6b–c.

6 | Study 4

6.1 | Purpose

Study 4 addresses visual communication strategies in tourism, considering Japanese affinity towards the United States (H5 and H6a–c, Figure 1B), and ensures external validity of Study 3 by changing the destination. It specifically explores how CLT- and ME-based images adapt to varying affinity levels to optimise perceptual impact.

6.2 | Methods

An online experiment targeting PC respondents ($N=151$) was conducted by a Japanese research agency in September 2023. After removing inattentive responses using IMC questions, 137 responses were used for analysis (Supporting Information Appendix B outlines sample characteristics). Participants from Studies 1–3 were excluded.

A picture of New York City was selected as the object, with the design being made by a professional design firm, consisting of a picture (L1: concrete) and the nested picture (L2: abstract) (Figure 4). For details on the selection and creation process of the experimental stimuli, see Supporting Information Appendix H-2. We examined whether each picture corresponded to an assumed construal level ($\alpha=0.931$, $CR=0.931$, $AVE=0.730$). A significant difference between L1 (Mean = 3.490, $SD=1.265$) and L2 (Mean = 2.778, $SD=1.253$; $t_{(135)}=3.243$, $p=0.001$, $d=0.562$) pictures was observed, validating the concreteness manipulation. Participants were randomly assigned to a photograph with the following description: ‘You are planning a trip to the United States. While researching tourist information, a photo of New York City caught your eye’.

Participants were then instructed to answer questions on dependent variables, the degree of concreteness, affinity and construal level. Supporting Information Appendix I presents construct details and measurement items. Responses were averaged from a seven-point Likert scale. Affinity was evaluated using Kock et al. (2019) ($\alpha=0.956$, $CR=0.957$, $AVE=0.786$); intention-to-visit ($\alpha=0.875$, $CR=0.878$, $AVE=0.706$) and

positive WOM ($r=0.757$, $p<0.001$) were assessed using Josiassen et al. (2022); destination attitude was assessed using Kim et al. (2008) ($\alpha=0.936$, $CR=0.903$, $AVE=0.780$); and construal-level was measured using two items ($r=0.812$, $p<0.001$). To prevent multicollinearity, all variables were mean-centred, with the highest VIF at 1.042, which was well below the conservative threshold of 3.3 (Cenfetelli and Bassellier 2009).

6.3 | Results

Considering that all the constructs used in the analysis had sufficient internal consistency and convergent validity, the correlation between affinity and construal level was examined and found to be $r=0.763$ ($p<0.001$), supporting H5.

Next, we regressed intention-to-visit on picture (L1 = 0 vs. L2 = 1), affinity, picture \times affinity and the covariates (age, gender and household income) ($F_{(6,130)}=18.827$, $p<0.001$; $R^2=0.465$). The main effect of picture was non-significant ($B=-0.171$, $SE=0.200$, $p=0.394$), whereas that of affinity was significant ($B=0.909$, $SE=0.107$, $p<0.001$). As picture \times affinity was significant ($B=-0.311$, $SE=0.153$, $p=0.044$), a simple slope analysis was performed. With low affinity, the simple main effect of the picture was non-significant ($B=0.231$, $SE=0.076$, $p=0.404$), whereas for high affinity, it was significant ($B=-0.572$, $SE=0.188$, $p=0.047$) (Figure 5). Hence, H6a was supported.

Considering positive WOM as the dependent variable ($F_{(6,130)}=15.591$, $p<0.001$; $R^2=0.418$), the main effect of picture was non-significant ($B=-0.062$, $SE=0.187$, $p=0.740$), whereas that of affinity was significant ($B=0.831$, $SE=0.101$, $p<0.001$). Here, picture \times affinity was significant ($B=-0.375$, $SE=0.143$, $p=0.010$). A simple slope analysis indicated that with low affinity, the simple main effect of the picture had a p -value slightly greater than 0.1 ($B=0.423$, $SE=0.259$, $p=0.104$), whereas with high affinity, it was significant ($B=-0.548$, $SE=0.268$, $p=0.043$) (Figure 5). These findings supported H6b.

Subsequently, when attitude towards the destination was considered as the dependent variable ($F_{(6,130)}=9.462$, $p<0.001$; $R^2=0.304$), the main effects of picture ($B=-0.580$, $SE=0.195$, $p=0.004$) and affinity ($B=0.619$, $SE=0.105$, $p<0.001$) were significant. Here, picture \times affinity was significant ($B=-0.416$, $SE=0.149$, $p=0.006$). A simple slope analysis revealed that with low affinity, the simple main effect of the picture was non-significant ($B=-0.042$, $SE=0.269$, $p=0.876$), whereas for high affinity, it was significant ($B=-1.118$, $SE=0.279$, $p<0.001$) (Figure 5). Therefore, H6c was supported.

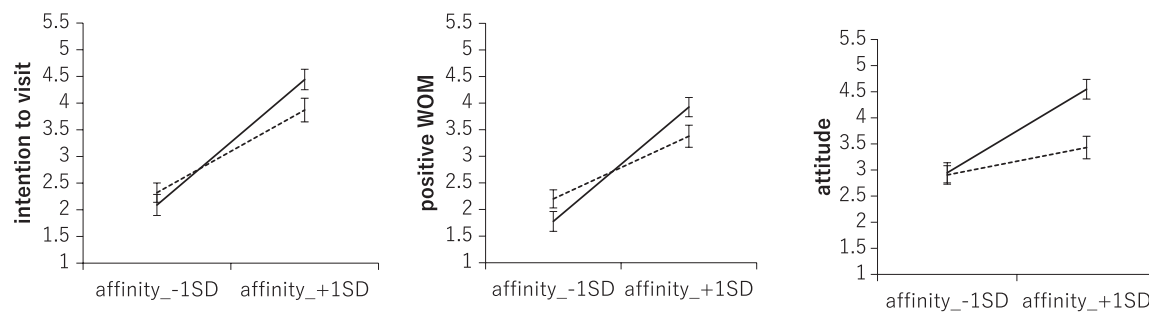
6.4 | Findings and Analysis

All hypotheses (H5 and H6a–c) were supported in Study 4. Hence, Study 4 ensured the external validity of Study 3 by changing the destination. It confirmed that a higher affinity lowered the construal level, and it leads to more favourable responses for L1 (vs. L2) pictures.



FIGURE 4 | Stimuli for Study 4. Left: L1 picture. Right: L2 picture.

Study 4



Results

H6a: supported

H6b: supported

H6c: supported

FIGURE 5 | Moderating effect of affinity against tourists' responses. Solid line: L1 picture; dashed line: L2 picture. Error bars: Standard error.

7 | Discussion and Conclusions

Our results offer valuable insights related to the role of affinity in shaping tourists' favourable responses to foreign destinations, offering a fresh perspective on the intersection of affinity and CLT. Additionally, it introduces empirical evidence through the novel application of ME to illustrate changes in construal levels driven by affinity-induced perceptual closeness. The following sections discuss the theoretical implications, practical applications, study limitations and directions for further investigations.

7.1 | Theoretical Implications

Our work uniquely highlights the sequential influence of destination familiarity, perceived closeness and affinity on tourists' perceptions, providing novel insights into how these interrelated constructs shape destination evaluation. Specifically, it elucidates the intricate interplay among these factors, exploring their collective impact on tourists' emotional and behavioural responses. Drawing on social identity theory (Małecka et al. 2022) and intergroup contact theory (Shah et al. 2023), the study demonstrates that familiarity enhances perceived closeness by fostering shared identity. This perceived closeness, in turn, reduces prejudice and fosters a sense of kinship that strengthens affinity. While familiarity and perceived closeness have been recognised as fundamental components in building affinity, their interdependence and combined influence on positive attitudes have not been empirically confirmed (Serrano-Arcos et al. 2022). Additionally, inspired by feelings as information theory (Kock et al. 2019), the research identifies a positive relationship between affinity and conations, extending these findings beyond product marketing to explore Japanese affinity towards Eastern and Western destinations. This extension enriches the understanding of affinity's role in cross-cultural destination perceptions.

H4 supports the application of the standard learning hierarchy, emphasising the hierarchical structure where destination-related appraisals and emotions influence tourists' conations. This perspective, seldom explored in previous literature (Ma et al. 2022), aligns well with contemporary destination marketing strategies. Importantly, the findings demonstrate consistency across both Eastern and Western contexts, showcasing

the robustness of this interplay in culturally diverse settings. This is the first investigation of tourism biases in such varied cultural contexts, particularly focusing on Asian participants. By validating these relationships across Eastern and Western destinations, the study emphasises the cross-cultural relevance of affinity-driven tourism strategies, providing valuable insights for global destination marketing.

Studies 3–4 establish a critical link between tourist affinity and construal levels (Liberman and Trope 2014), showing that affinity-induced perceptual closeness (i.e., emotional bonds) lowers construal level. This indicates that affinity can serve as an alternative to social distance in tourism bias research. This discovery has enabled the visual presentation of tourism communication strategies tailored to the construal-levels altered by affinity. Unlike prior studies that predominantly explored direct causal links between tourism biases and outcomes (Cassia and Magno 2022), this research offers a more nuanced perspective on how tourism biases induce perceptual changes.

By merging ME (Will et al. 2021) with CLT, our analysis not only elucidates how affinity affects tourists' perceptions but offers new insights into tailoring marketing visuals to match these changes, enhancing destination appeal. Since destination pictures shape impressions more than texts (Siegel et al. 2023), understanding how tourists' perceptions of these pictures align with affinity can guide effective visual communication. Studies 3–4 demonstrate that lower construal levels, driven by higher affinity, result in more favourable responses to L1 (vs. L2) imagery. If other tourism biases, such as tourist animosity (Stepchenkova et al. 2018), can induce social distance from travel destinations like affinity, our findings could be broadly applied to address these biases in visual communication within tourism. Additionally, the results further revealed a matching effect between construal levels and pictorial abstraction, grounded in ME. Specifically, lower construal levels led to more favourable responses when images were presented as L1 (vs. L2) pictures, a relationship attributed to increased information processing fluency (Feng et al. 2022). These results underscore the significance of aligning visual stimuli with tourists' construal levels to enhance their evaluations. This study represents a pioneering effort to explore the theoretical linkage between construal levels and the ME, offering insights that extend into broader research domains.

In Studies 3–4, multiple dependent variables were incorporated to assess H6a–c. The findings demonstrated that when affinity was high, responses to L1 pictures generally surpassed the median of 4 points, averaging around 4.5 points. In contrast, responses to L2 pictures averaged closer to 3.5 points. These findings indicate that the ME manipulation of picture abstraction functioned effectively, with significant differences in responses to L1 and L2 pictures under high-affinity conditions. This result underscores the impact of the stimulus and the meaningfulness of the ME effect in this context, providing useful information related to the emerging body of research, as the replication of this effect is still limited (Han et al. 2021).

7.2 | Practical Implications

Our findings have practical implications for DMOs and the broader tourism industry. First, tourism marketers can enhance affinity and the intention-to-visit foreign destinations by sharing rich and diverse information through media platforms, fostering familiarity and emotional connections that motivate potential tourists to explore these locations. For instance, [VisitTheUSA.com](https://www.visittheusa.com) effectively employs videos to show the unique people, places and experiences across the United States, emphasising its rich diversity in food, music, art, sports, and natural scenery ([VisitTheUSA.com](https://www.visittheusa.com) n.d.). Our study highlights a cognitive-to-emotional trajectory, showing that familiarity fosters perceived closeness, which, in turn, develops affinity for destinations. This approach not only encourages initial visits but also promotes repeat tourism, as affinity has been shown to correlate positively with revisit intentions (Terasaki et al. 2023).

Second, Studies 1–2 suggest that tourism marketers can enhance affinity by emphasising shared identity or cultural similarity, as perceived proximity to a destination fosters a sense of affinity. For instance, highlighting elements such as ‘food’ similarity or availability (Ng et al. 2007), or drawing on evocative campaigns like diaspora tourism, ‘the search for family history, sense of identity and belonging and either real or symbolic meanings of home’ (Zhu 2023, 97), can make a destination feel closer and more relatable to target tourists. However, striking the right balance between cultural differences and similarities is essential (Guan et al. 2022), as it allows marketers to attract a broad range of tourists while offering the unique experiences they desire when travelling abroad.

Third, tourism marketers can tailor pictorial presentations based on the target tourists’ affinity. Given that modern tourism marketing often relies on graphical imagery to engage potential customers (Siegel et al. 2023), marketers should consider the level of pictorial abstraction in their posts. The current research utilised ME to manipulate stimuli according to construal levels, offering a simple yet effective communication approach. Given the role of familiarity in fostering affinity, countries or regions that have not previously disseminated information through media can attract potential tourists through visual communication using L2 rather than L1 pictures. Conversely, for countries or regions that have previously engaged in media-based information dissemination, L1 pictures are likely to be more effective for existing tourists, while L2 pictures can serve as a compelling means to engage new tourists. Thus, by strategically employing either L1

or L2 imagery tailored to specific target audiences, DMOs can optimise their effectiveness in attracting tourists.

7.3 | Limitations and Future Research

This research had several limitations. First, the sample only included Japanese tourists, limiting the generalisability of our results to other cultural groups. Future research should assess the robustness of these findings by determining whether similar results can be observed among non-Japanese tourists.

Second, the focus on only two types of foreign destinations may not fully encompass the diversity of tourism contexts. Further investigations should consider a varied range of cultures and destinations. For example, despite political tensions, Japanese affinity for South Korea remains strong, fuelled by its popular culture (Taketani and Terasaki 2022). Since South Korea is a top destination for Japanese tourists (JTB Tourism Research and Consulting 2023), further exploration of its role as a target destination could enhance the validity of our findings.

Third, exploring relevant elements of familiarity—cultural understanding (Shi et al. 2022), virtual or real travel experiences (Anaya-Sánchez et al. 2024; Guan et al. 2022)—could help tourism promoters enhance affinity and related behaviours. Although our research validated the overall decision-making model, it did not investigate the specific sources of familiarity, which holds practical significance. Another limitation is that intentions do not always align with actual behaviour (Viglia et al. 2024). Hence, future studies could, for example, test the present model using social media ‘likes’ as the dependent variable.

Fourth, this study suggests that ME is more effective for tourists with high affinity. Prior investigations have demonstrated that high-level construal reduces judgement bias (Septianto and Pratiwi 2016). For tourists with lower affinity, emphasising intrinsic over peripheral stimuli, such as image manipulation, may have a greater impact. To attract low-affinity tourists, destinations should focus on accessibility and affordability. Future research should explore these strategies to optimise ME-based tourism communication. Given the limited research in this area, this study highlights a promising avenue for future investigation.

Finally, although diagnostic tests suggested potential CMB, it does not necessarily invalidate the findings (Spector 2006). Still, we acknowledge this limitation and encourage future research to replicate the findings using designs less prone to method bias, such as time separation or multi-source data.

Author Contributions

Shinichiro Terasaki: conceptualisation, methodology, software, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, visualisation, supervision, project administration, funding acquisition. **Keigo Taketani:** conceptualisation, methodology, software, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, visualisation, funding acquisition. **Alexander**

Josiassen: conceptualisation, methodology, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, funding acquisition.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are available in the [Supporting Information](#) of this article.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Appendix S1:** Supporting Information.