The impact of COVID-19 on consumer evaluation of authentic advertising messages

Jooyoung Park1 | Jungkeun Kim2 | Daniel C. Lee2 | Seongseop S. Kim3 | Benjamin G. Voyer4 | Changju Kim5 | Billy Sung6 | Hector Gonzalez-Jimenez7 | Fernando Fastoso8 | Yung K. Choi9 | Sukki Yoon10

1Peking University HSBC Business School, Shenzhen, Nanshan, China
2Department of Marketing, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand
3School of Hotel & Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Kowloon, Hong Kong
4Department of Entrepreneurship, ESCP Business School—London Campus, London, UK
5College of Business Administration, Ritsumeikan University, Ibaraki, Osaka, Japan
6School of Marketing, Curtin University, Bentley, Western Australia, Australia
7Department of Marketing, ESCP Business School—Madrid Campus, Madrid, Spain
8Business School, Pforzheim University, Pforzheim, Germany
9Department of Advertising & PR, Dongguk University, Seoul, Korea
10College of Business, Bryant University, Smithfield, Rhode Island, USA

Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between the COVID-19 threat and consumer evaluation of a product with authenticity appeals in advertisements. We propose that threatening situations like COVID-19 motivate consumers to lower their uncertainty and increase their preference for products with authentic advertising messages. Because individuals react differently to threatening environments according to their early-life experiences, commonly reflected in childhood socioeconomic status, we examined whether childhood socioeconomic status moderates the relationship between threat and consumer evaluation of authenticity in advertisements. First, secondary data from Google Trends provided empirical support for our predictions. In additional experimental studies, participants evaluated different target products in four studies that either manipulated (Studies 2 and 3) or measured (Studies 4 and 5) COVID-19 threat. Our results provide converging evidence that consumers positively evaluate products with authentic advertising messages under the COVID-19 threat. Consumers’ motivation to lower their uncertainty underlies the effect of COVID-19 threat on their evaluation of authentic messages (Study 3). This attempt to reduce uncertainty is more likely to occur for consumers with relatively higher childhood socioeconomic status (Studies 4 and 5). These findings suggest that using authenticity appeals during a pandemic could effectively reduce consumers’ perceived uncertainty and generate positive consumer evaluations.

Key words

advertising messages, authentic appeals, authenticity, consumer evaluation, COVID-19, perceived threat, socioeconomic status

1 INTRODUCTION

Disease cues, such as news about the number of deaths, escalate individuals’ perceived risk and motivate them to seek safety and reduce uncertainty (Shin & Kang, 2020). Because such motivations can entirely reform individuals’ preferences and choices (e.g., Galoni et al., 2020; Huang & Sengupta, 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic offers a unique opportunity to study the role of threat on consumer evaluations of advertising messages. Noticeably, there has been a growing interest in authenticity during the pandemic, as more brands are projecting authenticity (e.g., credibility, heritage, and tradition) in their advertising (Jenyns, 2020). It is suggested that authenticity will
be important for brands during and after the COVID-19 crisis because stories with genuineness and sincerity are likely to be a valued dimension of brand personality in the times ahead (Napoli et al., 2014). However, the knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 in this area is still minimal as researchers have just begun to investigate it (see Sobande, 2020), calling for more attention to authenticity and its relationship with advertising effectiveness in the pandemic era (Taylor, 2020).

Authenticity is a crucial element of advertising, and it has dominated many marketing practices (Becker et al., 2019; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Although there is no commonly accepted definition, authenticity consistently encapsulates “what is genuine, real, and/or true” in the literature (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010, p. 838). Studies show that authenticity is likely to lower perceived risk and uncertainty (Shin & Kang, 2020) and fulfill individuals’ psychological need for security (Gillath et al., 2010). Therefore, threatening situations like COVID-19 may motivate consumers to prefer products with authentic advertising messages.

Research indicates that people respond to threatening environments differently according to their early-life experiences, commonly reflected in childhood socioeconomic status (Griskevicius et al., 2011; Griskevicius et al., 2013; Mittal & Griskevicius, 2014). Behavioral tendencies developed in childhood are likely to persist in adulthood, especially under stressful conditions (Griskevicius et al., 2011). Therefore, when facing threatening events, like COVID-19, early-life experiences and behavioral patterns may emerge (e.g., Mittal & Griskevicius, 2014). Compared with those with lower childhood socioeconomic status, individuals with higher childhood socioeconomic status tend to have higher perceived control and desire to employ adaptive strategies in response to threat or stress (Boucher, 2020; Mittal & Griskevicius, 2014; Thompson et al., 2020). Considering the differential responses to threatening cues according to early-life experiences, we propose that childhood socioeconomic status will moderate the relationship between perceived COVID-19 threat and evaluations of products promoted with authenticity appeals.

Five studies test our predictions. Study 1 provides initial evidence from secondary data from Google Trends. Study 2 provides experimental evidence on the main effect of the COVID-19 threat on consumer evaluation of a product with authenticity (vs. non-authenticity) appeal. Study 3 further reveals that consumers’ motivation to lower their uncertainty underlies their positive evaluation of a product with authentic advertising messages. Using different population groups, Studies 4 and 5 show that individuals with relatively higher childhood socioeconomic status are more likely to favor products with authenticity appeals under the COVID-19 threat.

This study adds to the literature in several ways. First, our research shows a link between perceptions of external threats and attitudes toward products promoted with authenticity appeals. There has been little research on how external or situational factors affect consumers’ attitudes toward products advertised with authenticity appeals. Building upon prior work on consumers’ psychological need for security (Gillath et al., 2010), we demonstrate that a heightened threat leads consumers to evaluate products with authenticity appeals more positively. Second, this study deepens our understanding of the impact of childhood socioeconomic status on consumer behavior. The result offers the novel implication that individuals with high childhood socioeconomic status are more likely to restore perceived security and control through their product choices under external threats than those with low childhood socioeconomic status. Thus, this study identifies an essential individual factor determining the impact of threat perception on the evaluation of products promoted with authenticity appeals.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 | Authenticity in consumer behavior and advertising

Consumers increasingly seek authenticity, which has become one of the fundamental elements of contemporary marketing (Brown et al., 2003). Research has documented that authenticity reflects a product’s quality and trust level (van den Bosch et al., 2005), enhances message receptivity (Labrecque et al., 2011), and increases perceived quality (Moulard et al., 2014) and purchase intentions (Napoli et al., 2014). Accumulated evidence also suggests that authenticity generates positive consumer responses (e.g., del Barrio-García & Prados-Peña, 2019; Lee et al., 2019; Li et al., 2019). For example, Lee et al. (2019) found that authentic Korean cosmetics enhanced consumer perceptions of quality and led to higher purchase intention. This finding echoes del Barrio-García and Prados-Peña’s (2019) study of cultural attractions and Wang and Mattila’s (2015) research on service environments: A higher degree of perceived authenticity positively influences patronage intentions. Buendgens-Kosten (2014) further suggested that consumers have an innate desire to acquire authentic products based on the products’ inherent “realness” and “trueness to origin.” Thus, consumers not only value authentic products and brands but actively search for them when evaluating their alternatives (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Lee et al., 2019).

Acknowledging advertising as an effective way to communicate the authenticity of a brand or product, another stream of research examined how to convey authenticity in advertisements (e.g., Botterill, 2007; Chalmers & Price, 2009; Stern, 1994; Zhang et al., 2014). Stern (1994) suggests that positioning products as associated with genuine craftsmanship, rooted in tradition, and having a concrete relationship to a location can emanate authenticity. Botterill (2007) further stipulates that for authenticity to be successfully communicated, underlying messages of “truth” and “substance” must be conveyed. As authentic products generate consumers’ positive responses, authenticity appeals have also been shown to enhance consumers’ brand loyalty and elevate sales (Chalmers & Price, 2009). O’Neill et al. (2014) showed that consumers are inclined to remain loyal to brands they deem authentic and are willing to pay premiums.

Then, when would consumers seek authentic products or be more persuaded by authentic advertising appeals? The extant
literature recognizes that both internal and external factors can affect consumer preferences toward authenticity. For instance, when faced with uncertainty (e.g., an inundation of alternatives, personal relationships, and choosing restaurants) or threats (e.g., health concerns), consumers tend to prefer authentic options (e.g., Adams, 2006; Gillath et al., 2010). Adams (2006) first illustrated this idea in his study, which presented the correlation between personal well-being and preference for authenticity. It was explained that when individuals feel insecure or uncertain, they search for an authentic existence. Gillath et al. (2010) further revealed that individuals’ psychological need for security promotes authenticity. More recent studies (e.g., He et al., 2017; Liang et al., 2018) observed a greater preference for authenticity when consumers confront uncertainty or risk. For example, consumers tend to prefer familiar products when facing problematic situations because familiarity is associated with safety and security (He et al., 2017). Similarly, Liang et al. (2018) showed that authenticity decreases consumers’ perceived risk.

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly threatened consumers’ ontological security and created adverse psychological, affective (e.g., fear and anxiety), and behavioral (e.g., increased indulgent consumption) responses (Campbell et al., 2020). Encountering such a threat, consumers employ adaptive strategies aimed at reducing risk and uncertainty (e.g., Galoni et al., 2020; Giroux et al., 2021; Huang & Sengupta, 2020; J. Kim & Lee, 2020; J. Kim, Park, et al., 2021; Pena-Marin et al., 2020). For example, Huang and Sengupta (2020) found that contagious disease cues increased consumer preference for atypical (vs. typical) product options because they are associated with a small number of people and thus mitigating the threat of infection. Galoni et al. (2020) also showed that the pandemic’s emotional threat promotes consumer preference for familiar (vs. unfamiliar) products that help regain a sense of control. Similarly, Pena-Marin et al. (2020) found that after COVID-19, financial investors showed a greater preference for high-priced (vs. low-priced) stocks that they perceived to be more stable. Together, prior work indicates that consumers are likely to lower uncertainty and risk under a pandemic threat. Because authenticity is associated with lower uncertainty (e.g., Adams, 2006; Gillath et al., 2010), we predict that consumers will evaluate products with messages of authenticity (vs. nonauthenticity) more favorably when facing a significant threat from pandemics like COVID-19. Formally, we hypothesize that:

**H1:** High (vs. low) threat of COVID-19 will increase consumer attitude toward a brand/product with authentic advertising messages.

**H2:** The motivation to reduce uncertainty will mediate the impact of the COVID-19 threat on the evaluation of authentic advertising messages.

### 2.2 Moderating role of childhood socioeconomic status

A growing body of research has shown that childhood environments can determine individuals’ decision-making and behaviors (Belsky et al., 1991), especially when environmental stressors or mortality cues, like COVID-19, are present (Griskevicius et al., 2011). If authenticity helps to decrease perceived uncertainty, which can enhance perceived control (Liang et al., 2018) under the high threat of COVID-19, we further propose that childhood socioeconomic status will moderate consumer evaluations of a product with authenticity appeal.

Scarce resources in early life limit individuals’ ability to change the environment (Influrna et al., 2011; Kraus et al., 2012). With low ability to affect the environment, individuals from underprivileged households may have repeatedly failed to control stressful events and abandoned efforts to control them. Therefore, individuals with relatively low childhood socioeconomic status, characterized by unpredictability and scarce resources, tend to have a low sense of and desire for control (Mittal & Griskevicius, 2014). Instead of exercising control over the environment, individuals with low childhood socioeconomic status are likely to adapt to the environment. For example, Thompson et al. (2020) showed that compared with those with high childhood socioeconomic status, individuals with relatively low childhood socioeconomic status tend to actively devalue their initial choice when it becomes unavailable, indicating adaptive strategies to product unavailability.

In contrast, individuals from resource-affluent childhoods follow proactive decision-making strategies, such as choosing a product that fulfills their needs, in response to situational changes (Carey & Markus, 2016; Thompson et al., 2020). Because plentiful resources help individuals overcome uncertain or threatening situations, individuals from resource-affluent childhoods tend to have a higher sense of control (Mittal & Griskevicius, 2014). Also, the material advantages of those in higher social classes promote an orientation to the self and a tendency to behave by following internal states (e.g., needs or traits). Therefore, individuals with high socioeconomic status are likely to exercise control over the environment through proactive decision-making strategies to satisfy their needs in a given circumstance (Thompson et al., 2020).

Growing evidence suggests that individuals with low childhood socioeconomic status tend to adapt to, rather than change, external situations like COVID-19, whereas those with high childhood socioeconomic status are likely to try to change the external situation by following proactive strategies. Under heightened COVID-19 threats, consumers with higher childhood socioeconomic status will show greater preferences for authentic products that lower their perceived uncertainty than those with lower childhood socioeconomic status. In contrast, people with lower childhood socioeconomic status will try to adjust themselves, for example, by distorting the perceived threat instead of actively attempting to overcome the situation (Griskevicius et al., 2011). For this reason, a threatening situation like COVID-19 will not significantly change preferences for those with low childhood socioeconomic status. We thus hypothesize that:

**H3:** Consumers with higher (vs. lower) childhood socioeconomic status will evaluate a product with authenticity advertising messages more favorably in response to a high (vs. low) threat of COVID-19.
Figure 1 illustrates the overall framework. First, we performed a secondary data analysis using Google Trends to support our predictions. For the experimental studies 2–5, following prior work, we focused on two different conceptualizations of authenticity. We adopted an objectivist conceptualization of authenticity in Study 4 (e.g., emphasizing the historical origin, based on Lee et al., 2019) and a constructivist conceptualization of authenticity in Studies 2, 3, and 5 (e.g., emphasizing the family-owned company, based on Lude & Prügl, 2018, or foods based on traditional recipes).

We present five experimental studies conducted in the United States of America (Studies 2 to 4) and the United Kingdom (Study 5). The studies were completed between August and September 2020 (Studies 4 and 5) and between March and April 2021 (Studies 2 and 3) when the COVID-19 threat was still prevalent globally.

3 | STUDY 1: SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS—GOOGLE TRENDS SEARCH DATA

3.1 | Method

As the initial evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on the preference for authenticity appeals, we analyzed a set of secondary data from Google Trends (https://trends.google.com/), which shows how public interest in web searches changes over time. The data inform the magnitude of search interest relative to the highest point (i.e., a value of 100) for the given region and time. To test our predictions, we collected data on the keywords related to authenticity (i.e., authentic/authenticity/authentic product [Authentic], original/originality/original product [Original], credible/credibility/credible product [Credible], true/true product [True], real/real product [Real]). For comparison, we used the average search interest of selected samples in two time periods before and after COVID-19. Because the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, we regarded the period from March 15, 2020 to May 15, 2021 (61 weeks) as a high-threat period (i.e., after COVID-19). For the matching samples, we set the period from January 6, 2019 to March 7, 2020 (61 weeks) as a low-threat period (i.e., before COVID-19). The week of March 8, 2020, on which the declaration date fell, was excluded from the analysis. To be consistent with the cultural contexts chosen for our experiments, we focused on the search interest in the United States and the United Kingdom.

3.2 | Results and discussion

Consistent with our prediction, the results indicated a significant increase in Google searches for the keywords after the outbreak of the pandemic, that is, for "average for five keywords", $M_{before-COVID} = 47.80$, $SD = 5.08$ vs. $M_{after-COVID} = 54.77$, $SD = 4.97$, $F(1, 120) = 58.69, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.328$; an average increase of 14.6% after COVID-19, as shown in Figure 2. The results for each keyword were similar (i.e., all $ps < .001$ for comparisons of search amounts for the five keywords before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, for "Authentic" case, $M_{before-COVID} = 55.59$, $SD = 5.68$ vs. $M_{after-COVID} = 59.79$, $SD = 7.67$, $F(1, 120) = 11.82$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.187$; for "Original" case, $M_{before-COVID} = 44.46$, $SD = 6.94$ vs. $M_{after-COVID} = 49.79$, $SD = 6.80$, $F(1, 120) = 18.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.132$. Thus, secondary data provided initial evidence supporting COVID-19’s impact on consumers’ preferences for authenticity.
Study 2 provides experimental evidence for the main hypothesis that a high (vs. low) threat of COVID-19 increases the evaluation of a brand that uses authenticity messages in its advertising.

4.1 | Method

Participants were 201 US adults (56.7% women, average age = 42.63, SD = 14.23) recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) for a nominal payment. We randomly assigned participants to one of 2 (COVID-19 threat manipulation: High threat vs. no threat) × 2 (authentic message: Authentic vs. nonauthentic) conditions with a between-subjects design.

First, we manipulated the COVID-19 threat by adopting a procedure from prior research (Huang & Sengupta, 2020). Specifically, we provided a news article to the participants and asked them to review it before answering a set of questions. Depending on the experimental conditions, they reviewed one of two newspaper articles, as shown in Figure 3. Participants in the high threat condition read an article titled “Can Covid damage the brain?” In contrast, those in the control condition read an article

FIGURE 2 Results of Google Trends search data
titled “A nerve-racking final round adds drama to golf’s fan-free return.”

After reading the article, we exposed participants to a scenario about visiting an Italian restaurant. We asked participants to imagine that their friend had suggested the restaurant. The detailed description was different across two experimental conditions, as shown in Figure 4. Specifically, we exposed participants in the authentic condition to a “Giovanni’s Pizza and Pasta” restaurant that emphasized the authenticity of the food (i.e., “food based on the owner's traditional Italian recipes passed on in their family”). On the contrary, we presented participants in the control condition to “Mike’s Pizza and Pasta” with a different message (i.e., “food based on the owner’s interpretation of Italian recipe”).

After reviewing the advertising message, participants indicated their attitude toward the brand using three items on 7-point scales (i.e., 1 = very bad/very negative/very unfavorable, 7 = very good/very positive/very favorable, α = 925). Finally, we checked the manipulation of authenticity for the restaurant on a 7-point scale (i.e., 1 = not at all authentic, 7 = very authentic, based on Lee et al., 2019).

4.2 | Results and discussion

We conducted a two-way analysis of variance. First, the manipulation check for authenticity was successful in that only the main effect of the authentic message was significant, $M_{\text{authentic}} = 6.22$, SD = 0.88 vs. $M_{\text{nonauthentic}} = 4.94$, SD = 1.66; $F(1, 197) = 45.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.187$.

Second, for the attitude toward the restaurant, the two main effects were not significant ($ps > .095$), but the interaction effect was significant, $F(1, 197) = 6.86$, $p = .010$, $\eta^2 = 0.034$, as shown in Figure 5. Planned contrasts indicated that the evaluation of the restaurant in the authentic advertising condition was higher when the
Study 2 – Non-authentic condition
Imagine that you are going out for dinner with a friend. The friend suggested an Italian restaurant, Mike’s Pizza and Pasta, in which the food is based on the owner’s interpretation of Italian recipes.

Study 2 – Authentic condition
Imagine that you are going out for dinner with a friend. The friend suggested an Italian restaurant, Giovanni’s Pizza and Pasta, in which the food is based on the owner’s traditional Italian recipes passed on in their family.

5 | STUDY 3: TESTING THE MEDIATING ROLE OF REDUCING UNCERTAINTY

COVID-19 threat was high (M\text{high threat} = 6.07, SD = 0.96) than when the threat was low, M\text{low threat} = 5.42, SD = 1.19, F(1, 197) = 8.71, p = .004, \eta^2 = 0.042). On the contrary, the evaluations of the restaurant for nonauthentic advertising conditions were relatively low and similar, regardless of the COVID-19 threat (M\text{high threat} = 5.40, SD = 1.09 vs. M\text{low threat} = 5.57, SD = 1.12, F(1, 197) = 0.57, p = .451, \eta^2 = 0.003). In sum, the results supported H1: A high threat of COVID-19 increased consumer evaluation of a brand using authenticity appeals in its advertising.

5.1 | Method
Participants were 120 US adults (45.8% women, average age = 39.29, SD = 12.53) recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) for a nominal payment. We randomly assigned participants to one of two (COVID-19 threat manipulation: high threat vs. no threat) conditions with a between-subjects design.

First, we manipulated the COVID-19 threat as we did in Study 2 with a slight modification. We asked participants in the high threat condition to read the same article from Study 2, titled “Can Covid damage the brain?” We exposed those in the control condition to an article titled “Nets adding another All-Star in LaMarcus after buyout with Spurs.” After that, we asked participants to rate their perceived uncertainty at that moment on a 7-point scale (i.e., 1 = not at all uncertain, 7 = very certain).

After the reading task, we presented participants with a scenario about visiting an Italian restaurant. Participants imagined
that their friend suggested two restaurants. The detailed descriptions of the two restaurants were from Study 2. Restaurant A (i.e., Mike’s Pizza) was a less authentic restaurant than B (i.e., Giovanni’s Pizzeria), an authentic option, as shown in Figure 4. We asked all participants to show their relative preference for the two options on a 7-point scale (i.e., 1 = strongly prefer Mike’s Pizza, 7 = strongly prefer Giovanni’s Pizzeria). We then asked participants to rate their response regarding the uncertainty reduction by choosing the authentic option on two items, that is, choosing Giovanni’s Pizzeria over Mike’s Pizza could reduce uncertainty/choosing Giovanni’s Pizzeria over Mike’s Pizza could reduce unpredictability. Participants rated their responses on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much, r = .81, p < .001). Finally, participants indicated their perception regarding the authenticity of the two restaurants (i.e., which restaurant do you perceive to be more authentic?) on a 7-point scale (i.e., 1 = definitely Mike’s Pizza, 7 = definitely Giovanni’s Pizzeria).

2To control the effect of the specific image and brand name of each restaurant, we conducted a pretest (N = 109, 52.2% women, average age = 40.66, SD = 13.48) using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk). After being exposed to the restaurant name and picture, participants were asked to evaluate the stimuli using three items on 7-point scales (i.e., 1 = unfavorable/dislike/bad, 7 = favorable/like/good, α = .971). The results indicated that the two restaurants were similarly favorable, M_Mike’s_Pizza = 5.63, SD = 1.17 vs. M_Giovanni’s_Pizzeria = 5.42, SD = 1.44, F(1, 107) = 2.70, p = .045, η² = 0.006.

5.2 | Results and discussion

First, as expected, participants evaluated Giovanni’s Pizzeria as higher in perceived authenticity (M = 5.83, SD = 1.55 vs. 4 (neutral point); t(119) = 12.91, p < .001). In addition, participants’ perceived uncertainty was higher in the high threat condition (M_{high threat} = 4.49, SD = 2.05) than in the no-threat condition (M_{low threat} = 3.67, SD = 1.82, F(1, 118) = 4.14, p = .044, η² = 0.034). These results indicate that the manipulations of threat and authenticity were successful.

Second, we found that the experimental factors significantly influenced the relative preference for the two restaurants, F(1, 118) = 4.51, p = .036, η² = 0.037. Specifically, the preference for the authentic (vs. nonauthentic) restaurant was higher when the COVID-19 threat was high rather than low (M_{high threat} = 5.86, SD = 1.53 vs. M_{low threat} = 5.24, SD = 1.66). Furthermore, we found a similar pattern for uncertainty reduction in that uncertainty reduction with the authentic option was higher in the high (vs. low) threat conditions (M_{high threat} = 5.18, SD = 1.79 vs. M_{low threat} = 4.49, SD = 1.68, F(1, 118) = 4.67, p = .033, η² = 0.038), as shown in Figure 5.

We further conducted a mediation analysis following Hayes’ PROCESS method (2017: model #4; IV: The perceived threat of COVID-19, mediator: Uncertainty reduction, DV: The relative preference brand). The results supported our prediction (H2): The indirect effect of the uncertainty reduction was significant (indirect index = −0.11, se = .06, 95% confidence interval [CI]: −0.250, −0.007), whereas the direct effect became insignificant (direct index = −0.20, se = 0.14, 95% CI: −0.483, 0.075), suggesting a fully mediating role for uncertainty reduction. Thus, the results suggest that consumers’ motivation to reduce uncertainty underlies their preference for a product with an authenticity advertising message under the COVID-19 threat.

6 | STUDY 4: TESTING THE MODERATING ROLE OF CHILDHOOD SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS (H3)

Study 4 extended previous studies by investigating the moderating role of childhood socioeconomic status on consumer attitude toward a brand with an authenticity advertising appeal under threat. In this study, we measured the perceived threat of COVID-19 to control for individual differences.

6.1 | Method

Participants were 145 US adults (45.5% women, average age = 38.29, SD = 11.20) recruited from Amazon’s MTurk for a nominal payment.

First, we asked participants to rate their perceived threat of COVID-19 using two items (e.g., “In your opinion, how life-threatening is COVID-19?”) along a 7-point scale (e.g., 1 = not at all
serious, 7 = very serious, \( \alpha = .851 \), J. Kim, Giroux, et al., 2020). Then, we exposed participants to advertising for a cosmetic product (i.e., Korean Red Ginseng Moisturizer) that emphasizes the authenticity of the product (“Specially formulated with authentic Korean Red Ginseng based on a traditional herbal skin care formula”), as shown in Figure 6. Next, we asked participants to indicate their attitude toward the brand (\( \alpha = .888 \)) and checked the manipulation of authenticity as we did in Study 2. Finally, we asked participants to answer questions related to their childhood socioeconomic status (e.g., I felt relatively wealthy compared to the other kids in my school, \( \alpha = .863 \)) and current socioeconomic status (e.g., I have enough money to buy things I want, \( \alpha = .868 \)). Participants rated their responses on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree, Griskevicius et al., 2011). The correlation between childhood and current socioeconomic status was positive (\( r = .41 \), \( p < .001 \)).

6.2 | Results and discussion

The manipulation check for authenticity was successful in that the index was higher than the neutral point (\( M = 5.68 \), \( SD = 1.03 \) vs. “4,” \( t (144) = 19.63, p < .001 \)). We first conducted a moderation analysis for the attitude toward the brand, following Hayes’ PROCESS method (2017; model #1; IV: The perceived threat of COVID-19, moderator: Childhood socioeconomic status, DV: Attitude toward the brand). The results supported our prediction in H3: the moderating effect was significant (\( \beta = .11 \), \( se = 0.03 \), \( t = 3.08, p = .002 \), 95% CI: 0.038, 0.173). Specifically, for those whose childhood socioeconomic status was relatively low (\(-1 \) SD in the scale), the impact of the COVID-19 threat on DV (i.e., attitude toward the brand) was not significant (\( \beta = .05 \), \( se = 0.07 \), \( t = 0.69, p = 0.494 \), 95% CI: −0.091, 0.188). On the contrary, for those whose childhood socioeconomic status was relatively high (+1 SD in the scale), the impact of the COVID-19 threat on DV was significant (\( \beta = .36 \), \( se = 0.08 \), \( t = 4.40, p < .001 \), 95% CI: 0.200, 0.527). Specifically, for those with high childhood socioeconomic status, the evaluation of the brand was higher when the perceived threat was relatively high (vs. low) (\( M_{high \ threat} = 6.25 \) vs. \( M_{low \ threat} = 5.22 \)), as shown in Figure 7. Although there was a significant correlation with childhood socioeconomic status, current socioeconomic status did not show a significant moderating role (\( \beta = −.01 \), \( se = 0.04 \), \( t = −0.06, p = .952 \), 95% CI: −0.084, 0.079), suggesting that a simple wealth effect did not drive the above effect.

7 | STUDY 5: TESTING THE MODERATING ROLE OF CHILDHOOD SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS (H3) USING ANOTHER POPULATION: THE UNITED KINGDOM

In Studies 2 to 4, we recruited our participants from the United States. In Study 5, we replicated the moderating study in another country (the United Kingdom) to enhance the external validity of our results.

7.1 | Method

Participants were 188 UK adults (51.6% women, average age = 45.19, \( SD = 15.39 \)) recruited from an online panel provider (UK Qualtrics) for
a nominal payment. Different from earlier studies, we used body wash as a new target product.

First, we asked participants to rate their perceived threat of COVID-19 with the scale used in Study 4 (α = .850). Then, we showed participants an advertisement for a body wash, as shown in Figure 6. We manipulated the key message of the advertisement to reflect authenticity by emphasizing the brand as a “family company,” following the procedure by Lude and Prügl (2018). After that, we asked participants to rate their attitude toward this brand (α = .919) and complete a manipulation check for authenticity with the same scale used in Study 4. Finally, we measured childhood socioeconomic status (α = .861) and current socioeconomic status (α = .875) as we did in Study 4. The correlation between childhood and current socioeconomic status was positive (r = .40, p < .001).

### 7.2 Results and discussion

The manipulation check for authenticity was successful; the index was higher than the neutral point (M = 5.22, SD = 1.19 vs. “4,” t(187) = 14.05, p < .001). For the main analysis, we conducted a moderation analysis following Hayes’ PROCESS method (2017; model #1; IV: The perceived threat of COVID-19, moderator: Childhood socioeconomic status, DV: Attitude toward the brand). The results supported our prediction in H3. The interaction effect of the threat and childhood socioeconomic status was significant (β = .08, se = 0.04, t = 1.98, p = .049, 95% CI: 0.001, 0.151). Specifically, for those whose childhood socioeconomic status was relatively low (−1 SD in the scale), the impact of COVID-19 threat on DV (i.e., attitude toward the brand) was not significant (β = −.10, se = 0.08, t = −1.24, p = .217, 95% CI: −0.268, 0.061). On the contrary, for those whose childhood socioeconomic status was relatively high (+1 SD in the scale), the impact of the COVID-19 threat on DV was marginally significant (β = .15, se = 0.09, t = 1.70, p = .092, 90% CI: 0.004, 0.293). The evaluation of the brand was higher when the perceived threat was relatively high (vs. low) (Mhigh threat = 5.37 vs. Mlow threat = 4.93), as shown in Figure 8. However, the moderating effect of the current socioeconomic status was not significant (β = .02, se = 0.03, t = 0.55, p = .579, 95% CI: −0.047, 0.083), indicating that the above effect was not driven by a simple wealth effect. To summarize, we successfully replicated Study 4 using participants from another country.

### 8 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

#### 8.1 Summary of findings

The current global COVID-19 pandemic context provides a unique opportunity to study the role of threat in advertising and consumer decision-making in a realistic environment—unlike traditional research relying on scenarios. In Study 1, the secondary data analysis using a Google Trends search confirmed our predictions. Across four experimental studies, we investigated the impact of individuals’ perceived threat of COVID-19 on their preference for products promoted with authenticity appeals. Our results showed that increased threat leads to consumers’ positive evaluation of products advertised with authenticity appeals. We found no such effect for products promoted with more generic, neutral appeals. We also demonstrated that consumers’ motivation to reduce uncertainty mediates the relationship between perceived threat and attitude toward products promoted with authenticity appeals. In addition, we showed that consumers with high childhood socioeconomic status evaluated authentic products more favorably in response to heightened threat than those with low childhood socioeconomic status. Conversely, respondents’ current socioeconomic status did not affect the tested relationships, suggesting that the effects of the threat on preference for authentic appeals are rooted in consumers’ life-history experiences.

#### 8.2 Theoretical contributions

Our research contribution is threefold. First, our paper extends the literature on authenticity by linking external threats like COVID-19 and consumers’ attitudes toward products promoted with authenticity appeals. Research has shown that authenticity positively influences consumers’ perceptions and values (e.g., Lee et al., 2019; Li et al., 2019; Liang et al., 2018) and leads to positive advertising outcomes (e.g., Chalmers & Price, 2009; Zhang et al., 2014). For example, Hamby et al. (2019) showed that sharing a story about the founders’ original purpose of the business could increase the perceived authenticity of the brand. Our results extend these findings to the context of threat perceptions during a global pandemic. Building on prior work (Gillath et al., 2010; He et al., 2017; Liang et al., 2018), we posited and showed that consumers favorably evaluate products with authenticity appeals when facing a heightened threat. The mediating role of reduced uncertainty suggests that consumers may seek an authentic
product or brand to compensate for the lack of safety/security under the COVID-19 threat. Our research demonstrates that the communication strategies for enhancing authenticity, such as sharing the founder’s stories (Hamby et al., 2019), can be more effective in a pandemic era.

Second, our research adds to the increasing body of research on childhood socioeconomic status (Griskevicius et al., 2011; Mittal & Griskevicius, 2014). Research demonstrates that environmental challenges faced during childhood, including those of a socioeconomic nature, shape individual behavioral patterns in response to uncertain environments (Griskevicius et al., 2011; Hill et al., 2016). We extended prior work by focusing on the uncertainty and threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to examine the effect of childhood socioeconomic status on consumers’ responses to threats and preference for authenticity appeals. We showed that the impact of threat perceptions on evaluations of products promoted with authenticity appeals was stronger among consumers with high childhood socioeconomic status compared to those with low childhood socioeconomic status. Those with high childhood socioeconomic status may seek to restore internal control and security by focusing on restoring themselves rather than relying on environmental support systems (Boucher, 2020). Our finding provides additional empirical supports for the notion that during stressful events (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic), consumers’ early-life experiences determine their choices and behaviors (e.g., J. Kim, Giroux, et al., 2021; Mittal & Griskevicius, 2014; Park et al., 2020).

Finally, this study extends our understanding regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the consumer behaviors. As summarized in Table 1, the current literature focuses on the effect of the contagious disease on various consumption behaviors such as preference for typical products (Huang & Sengupta, 2020), variety-seeking (J. Kim, 2020), and the effectiveness of different types of communication messages such as positive (vs. negative) framing (e.g., Jiang and Dodoo, 2021), and high (vs. low) construal messages (e.g., H. E. Kim et al., 2021). Compared to the existing literature, this study focuses on the importance of the COVID-19 threat on specific communication messages regarding authenticity.

TABLE 1 Summary of COVID-19 research on consumption and communication

| Articles | Main focuses | Key findings |
|----------|--------------|--------------|
| Mecit et al. (2021) | Perception of future danger, Precautionary behavior | A gendered linguistic cue (masculine vs. feminine) describing COVID-19 influences consumers’ precautionary behavior and perception of future danger. |
| J. Kim, Giroux, et al. (2020) | Risk perception, Stockpiling intention | Joint presentation of statistical information on an alternative threat (e.g., car accident) increases COVID-19 risk perception and stockpiling intention. |
| Jiang and Dodoo (2021) | Persuasion to engage in prevention behavior | In low-risk public contexts, a mask-wearing request is more persuasive if the message is loss-framed (vs. gain-framed) and appeals to the interests of socially distant (vs. proximal) entities. In a high-risk public context, gain-framed messages are always more persuasive. |
| Huang and Sengupta (2020) | Preference for atypical options | Disease cues increase preference for atypical (vs. typical) options via a people avoidance motive. |
| Verlegh et al. (2021) | Brand attitude, Self-brand connection | Expressing support for consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic results in more favorable brand attitudes and a stronger self-brand connection, particularly for consumers who are more worried about COVID-19. |
| J. Kim (2020) | Variety seeking | Perceived threat of COVID-19 increases consumer variety-seeking. |
| Galoni et al. (2020) | Preference for familiar products | Disease cues jointly elicit disgust and fear which then increase preference for familiar products. |
| Pena-Marín et al. (2020) | Stock preference | Thoughts about COVID-19 elicit fear and uncertainty, which increase consumer preference for high (vs. low)-priced stocks. |
| Ulqinaku et al. (2020) | Unhealthy compensatory consumption | Reminders about heroes during mortality threats (activated by COVID-19) lead to less unhealthy compensatory consumption through perceived personal power. |
| H. E. Kim et al. (2021) | Behavioral intention toward experience goods | Consumers with high (vs. low) levels of perceived uncertainty about COVID-19 respond to ads more favorably when the message is distally (vs. proximally) framed. |
| Ozue et al. (2021) | Service failure and recovery strategies | Three different types of customers (i.e., blanders, empathizers, and churners) are found in the context of the online service recovery strategy during COVID-19. |
| Septianto and Chiew (2021) | Preference for typical option | People with a fixed (vs. growth) mindset showed higher preferences for typical options under a high threat of COVID-19. |
| Current study | Attitudes towards authentic brands | When perceived threat of COVID-19 is strong (vs. weak), authentic brands or appeals are evaluated more favorably because they help reduce uncertainty. |


8.3 | Practical implications

Our research findings have several managerial implications. First, the results showed that authentic advertising messages might increase positive attitudes toward brands and products, especially in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when consumers sense a substantial threat. Thus, this study provides empirical evidence of the efficacy of the authenticity appeals of products.

Our findings highlighted the effectiveness of using authenticity appeals to promote various products during and after the pandemic era. For example, marketers can use authenticity appeals to enhance the quality and highlight the origin of cosmetic products. As discussed above, the COVID-19 and postpandemic era enhance this effect. Advertisers can express authenticity visually and verbally. As another example, an expert can show and explain how to grow and process the food in an advertisement of a functional food. These communication strategies will be effective in promoting brand value and intention to purchase via authenticity enhancement. Such an approach will be effective post COVID-19 because the pandemic is large enough to change potential consumers’ routine purchase paradigms, such as stressing health or hygiene in choosing a product.

The effect of the COVID-19 threat on consumers’ preferences for authenticity was more salient in those with high childhood socioeconomic status than those with low childhood socioeconomic status. This finding provides a managerial implication regarding market segmentation. Prior research often measured childhood socioeconomic status using a retrospective self-report of parents’ educational attainment and (un)employment (Reiss et al., 2019). For example, when consumers subscribe for a membership, marketers can easily obtain subscribers’ demographic information. Using such information, if the primary appeal of products is authenticity, marketers could better target those from relatively high childhood socioeconomic status, especially during pandemic conditions. Also, our findings provide grounds for marketers to adopt differential marketing tactics, according to the level of childhood socioeconomic status, during the health crisis. For example, magazines targeting high-end female customers are ideal outlets to advertise functional health foods or esthetic-seeking products. Thus, our results recommend choosing a female researcher who can explain the scientific efficacy of the products as a promotional endorser to enhance the communication effectiveness.

8.4 | Limitations and future research directions

Despite the theoretical and practical implications, this study has several limitations. First, in line with prior research on brand authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015), this study used an experimental design with hypothetical products controlling for potential confounding factors, such as prior beliefs about target brands or products. However, to increase the external validity of the findings, future research might replicate our results using existing brands. Relatively, we tested our hypotheses on specific product categories. Given that authenticity appeals have been used to promote various products, using additional product categories would enhance the external validity of our findings. In addition, we used attitude toward the brand and perceived effectiveness as core dependent variables. Future research should extend the validity of those findings to other core consumer behavior variables, such as intention to buy, persuasiveness, and attractiveness. Those variables can facilitate distinctive psychological interpretations. Lastly, to limit the scope of the research, we relied on prior research (e.g., Griskevicius et al., 2011) to predict the moderating role of childhood socioeconomic status in the relationship between external threats and preferences for products with authenticity appeals. Future research might examine how early-life experiences shape the perceived ability and motivation to control threatening experiences in adulthood to further demonstrates the underlying mechanisms of the moderating effect of childhood socioeconomic status.

In Study 3, we provided mediation evidence by using the relative preference for the high (vs. low) authenticity option. The comparison between two different options itself could influence the unexpected bias. Future research needs to test the underlying mechanism for the single option condition. Finally, Studies 4 and 5 measured both the perceived threat of COVID-19 and childhood socioeconomic status in our studies. The correlational nature of the studies, however, limits casual inferences to be made between the constructs. We recommend the future studies to provide more robust causal evidence through experimental manipulation.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID
Jungkeun Kim http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2104-833X
Billy Sung http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0028-6574
Hector Gonzalez-Jimenez http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3805-8262

REFERENCES
Adams, W. W. (2006). Love, open awareness, and authenticity: A conversation with William Blake and DW Winnicott. Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 46(1), 9–35.

del Barrio-García, S., & Prados-Peña, M. B. (2019). Do brand authenticity and brand credibility facilitate brand equity? The case of heritage destination brand extension. Journal of Destination Marketing & Management, 13(2), 10–23.

Becker, M., Wiegand, N., & Reinartz, W. J. (2019). Does it pay to be real? Understanding authenticity in TV advertising. Journal of Marketing, 83(1), 24–50.

Belsky, J., Steinberg, L., & Draper, P. (1991). Childhood experience, interpersonal development, and reproductive strategy: An evolutionary theory of socialization. Child Development, 62(4), 647–670.

Beverland, M. B., & Farrelly, F. (2010). The quest for authenticity in consumption: Consumers’ purposive choice of authentic cues to shape experienced outcomes. Journal of Consumer Research, 36(5), 838–856.
Napoli, J., Dickinson, S. J., Beverland, M. B., & Farrell, F. (2014). Measuring consumer-based brand authenticity. *Journal of Business Research, 67*(6), 1090–1098.

O’Neill, C., Houtman, D., & Aupers, S. (2014). Advertising real beer: Authenticity claims beyond truth and falsity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 17*(5), 585–601.

Ozuem, W., Ranfagni, S., Willis, M., Rovai, S., & Howell, K. (2021). Exploring customers’ responses to online service failure and recovery strategies during Covid-19 pandemic: An actor-network theory perspective. *Psychology & Marketing, 38*, 1440–1459. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21527

Park, J., Kim, J., & Kim, S. (2020). Evolutionary aspects of scarcity information with regard to travel options: The role of childhood socioeconomic status. *Journal of Travel Research*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287520971040

Pena-Marín, J., Adaval, R., & Shen, L. (2020). Fear in the stock market: How COVID-19 affects preference for high- and low-priced stocks. *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*. Advanced Online Publication. https://doi.org/10.1086/711930

Reiss, F., Meyrose, A. K., Otto, C., Lampert, T., Klasen, F., & Ravens-Sieberer, U. (2019). Socioeconomic status, stressful life situations and mental health problems in children and adolescents: Results of the German BELLA cohort-study. *PLOS One, 14*(3), e0213700.

Septianto, F., & Chiew, T. M. (2021). Perceived threat of COVID-19 influences product preferences: The moderating role of consumers’ mindset. *Australasian Marketing Journal, 29*(1), 78–86.

Shin, H., & Kang, J. (2020). Reducing perceived health risk to attract hotel customers in the COVID-19 pandemic era: Focused on technology innovation for social distancing and cleanliness. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 91*, e102664. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102664

Sobande, F. (2020). ‘We’re all in this together’: Commodified notions of connection, care and community in brand responses to COVID-19. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 23*(6), 1033–1337.

Stern, B. (1994). Authenticity and the textual persona: postmodern paradoxes in advertising narrative. *International Journal of Research in Marketing, 11*(4), 387–400.

Taylor, C. R. (2020). Advertising and COVID-19. *International Journal of Advertising, 39*(5), 587–589.

Thompson, D. V., Hamilton, R. W., & Banerji, I. (2020). The effect of childhood socioeconomic status on patience. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 157*, 85–102.

Ulqinaku, A., Sarjal-Abi, G., & Kinsella, E. L. (2020). Benefits of heroes to coping with mortality threats by providing perceptions of personal power and reducing unhealthy compensatory consumption. *Psychology & Marketing, 37*(10), 1433–1445.

Verleg, P. W., Bernritter, S. F., Gruber, V., Schartman, N., & Sotgiu, F. (2021). "Don't worry, we are here for you": Brands as external source of control during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Journal of Advertising, 50*(3), 262–270.

Wang, C. Y., & Mattila, A. S. (2015). The impact of servicescape cues on consumer pre-purchase authenticity assessment and patronage intentions to ethnic restaurants. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research, 39*(3), 346–372.

Zhang, H., Sun, J., Liu, F., & Knight, J. G. (2014). Be rational or be emotional: Advertising appeals, service types and consumer responses. *European Journal of Marketing, 48*(11/12), 2105–2126.

**How to cite this article:** Park, J., Kim, J., Lee, D. C., Kim, S. S., Voyer, B., Kim, C., Sung, B., Gonzalez-Jimenez, H., Fastoso, F., Choi, Y. K., & Yoon, S. (2022). The impact of COVID-19 on consumer evaluation of authentic advertising messages. *Psychol Mark, 39*, 76–89. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21574