

Exploring tourism marketing message authenticity and destination trust: The role of benefit appeal, framing strategy and tourist attribute

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ABSTRACT

Studies are scarce on examining the influences of tourism marketing messages on tourists' perceived message authenticity and destination trust, particularly in the post-crisis contexts. Drawing from the construal level theory and the prospect theory, and using a 2×2 experimental design approach, two separate experiments were conducted to investigate the direct effect of benefit appeal (i.e., self- and other-benefit) on participants' perceived message authenticity, and the moderating effect (i.e., destination message framing strategy and tourist attribute) on the relationship between benefit message appeal and perceived message authenticity. Applying the trust transfer theory, this study also confirmed the positive sequent relationship between message authenticity, destination trust and visit intentions to the destination. This study provides both theoretical contributions to destination marketing and managerial implications for marketing strategy development.

Keywords: destination marketing communication; benefit appeal; message framing strategy; tourist attribute; authenticity; trust

Introduction

Tourism destinations often launch an advertising campaign, as a marketing communications tool, to implement their post-crisis recovery strategy (Walters & Mair, 2012). Marketing message, as one of the elements of an effective destination advertising campaign, has a strong impact on tourists' perception and decisions (Singh et al., 2022; Xue et al., 2024). After COVID, almost all tourism destinations undertook various initiatives to encourage tourists to revisit (Xue et al., 2024). Due to uncertainty created by a crisis, it's critical for tourism destinations to produce an authentic advertising message (Park et al., 2022), and to rebuild tourists' trust towards their destinations (Lee et al., 2025). However, how do potential tourists assess the destination marketing message itself, such as message authenticity, as well as the destination portrayed in the message, such as destination trust, remains unclear in the existing literature.

Advertising messages could persuade audiences effectively from either self- or other-benefit perspectives (Gao et al., 2020; White & Peloza, 2009). There is ongoing debates about which type of benefit appeal is more effective to persuade the audiences (Grazzini et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2021). For instance, when materialistic participants viewed advertisements for ethical products with self-benefit appeals, they developed a favourable attitude towards the advertisement (Ryoo et al., 2020). However, other studies have found other-benefit appeals are more effective in context such as food waste reduction (Huang et al., 2021) and recycling behaviour in hotels (Grazzini et al., 2018). It remains unclear which type of post-crisis recovery marketing message appeal is more effective.

The effect of benefit appeal on consumers' perceptions is moderated by other factors, such as message framing strategy (Grazzini et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2021). Message framing strategy involves presenting the message from either a gain or loss perspective, based on prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Considering message framing strategy as a moderator, Huang et al. (2021) noted that when a message has a self-benefit appeal, a gain-framed message induces a significantly higher level of perceived attitude and revisit intentions than a loss-framed message. Conversely, Grazzini et al. (2018) found that when the message is self-benefit oriented, a loss-framed message is more likely to stimulate recycling behaviour than a gain-framed message. These conflicting results encourage more empirical studies to gain an in-depth understanding on the moderating effect. Audience attributes must be considered when marketers design effective advertising messages (Saeed et al., 2024). Individual characteristics, such as motivational orientation, may moderate the relationship between message content and individuals' attitudes and behaviour (Ku et al., 2012; White & Peloza, 2009). Applying the concept of message framing strategy from prospect theory to tourists, this study proposes two types of tourist attributes, loss- and gain-oriented, and tests whether gain- and loss-framed tourists act as moderators.

During a crisis, such as COVID-19, consumers have a favourite on products with authentic advertising messages (Park et al., 2022). This highlights the urgent need to understand what shapes consumer's perceptions of authenticity in advertising messages. Scholars have long recognised the importance of authenticity, such as brand and product authenticity, as it captures consumers' attention and drives business success (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Le et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022). However, message authenticity in advertising has been rarely studied, despite its significant role influencing audiences' purchase intentions

(Shoenberger et al., 2021). Overall, there is limited understanding of the antecedents and consequences of message authenticity in the existing literature (Lee et al., 2020; Um, 2022). This study aims to fill this knowledge gap by identifying the antecedents (e.g., benefit appeal in messages) and outcomes (e.g., portrayed destinations in the message).

In summary, this study addresses the following objectives: 1) to investigate the effect of benefit appeal on consumers' perceived message authenticity; 2) to examine the moderating effect of destination message framing strategy on the relationship between benefit appeal and message authenticity; 3) to test the moderating effect of tourist attributes on the relationship between benefit appeal and message authenticity; and 4) to empirically test the sequent relationships between message authenticity, destination trust, and visit intention to the destination.

Literature review

2.1 Theoretical foundations

2.1.1 Construal level theory and benefit appeal

Construal level theory was developed by Trope and Liberman (2010) to explain how the psychological distance of objects can influence individuals' mental construal and, subsequently their attitudes and behaviours towards the objects. Individuals construe/interpret the information on objects differently based on their perceived psychological distance to objects, including temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Evidence shows that people tend to use lower (more concrete) levels of construal to interpret psychologically close objects (e.g. self from the social perspective) as well as use higher (more abstract) levels of mental construal to illustrate psychologically distant objects (e.g. other people from the social perspective) (Lee & Oh, 2014).

Self- and other-focused are often interchangeable with the term point of reference (Huang et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020), which are typical examples to describe social distance (Lee & Oh, 2014). The perspective of self- and other-benefit is also a main focus of marketing communication messages (White & Peloza, 2009). Self-benefit appeal highlights the viewer/customer as the primary beneficiary, while other-benefit appeal emphasizes other people, such as the community or society, as the main beneficiary of the viewer/customer's actions (Kim et al., 2022). According to the construal level theory, when the benefit appeal is self-oriented, viewers/customers can relate self-benefit messages to themselves and their personal experiences to easily process the information in a more detailed thinking style (Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 2004). However, when the benefits appeal moves from self to other, viewers/customers perceive a greater social distance and use higher levels of mental construal to process the marketing communication information (Lee & Oh, 2014).

2.1.2 Prospect theory and gain- and loss-framing

Prospect theory was developed to predict individuals' decision-making when risk or uncertainty is involved (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Individuals assess the information

which is framed in either a gain or loss way (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981) to form their decision-making process. Therefore, message-framing strategies, such as loss- and gain-framed, are a key element of prospect theory (Rahman et al., 2018). A gain-framing strategy emphasizes the positive outcomes of complying with a recommended behaviour, so individuals' prospects are positive; whereas a loss-framing strategy highlights the negative consequences of noncompliance, so individuals' prospects are negative (Pan et al., 2021).

Majority of the tourism studies applying the prospect theory centred on message framing (Chi et al., 2021; Grazzini et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2018). Among these studies, most of them focused on viewers' gain- or loss-prospect based on the gain- or loss-framed message, such as the possible gain that the viewer/tourist will have if visiting the advertised destination or the possible loss the viewer/tourist will have if not visiting the advertised destination (Pan et al., 2020). Recently, a few studies have started to research the benefit of others, such as the general community or environment (Grazzini et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2021). For instance, the gain or loss the general community (or we) will have if a customer takes pro-environmental actions, such as food waste reduction in restaurants (Huang et al., 2021) or recycling behaviour in hotels (Grazzini et al., 2018). Focusing on the crisis marketing, Cheung and Song (2024) found that destination loss-framed message appeals have a stronger effect on participants' attitudes toward the destination than destination gain-framed messages. This can be explained by the prospect theory that individuals perceive losses as more significant than gains (Tversky & Kahneman, 1992). However, the gain-framing or loss-framing has primarily been applied to message framing in the tourism context (Chi et al., 2021; Grazzini et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2018). Based on the message framing strategy from prospect theory as well as individuals' regulatory focus (e.g., prevention or promotion) (Zhang et al., 2018), tourists can be described as gain- and loss-framed.

2.1.3 Trust transfer theory, authenticity, and trust

Authenticity is vital for any business, as consumers are eager to search for a sense of authenticity and business owners proactively authenticate their products or businesses (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Song et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2022). In advertising, the significant role of message authenticity has also been acknowledged (Shoenberger et al., 2021). However, less is known about message authenticity, such as antecedents and consequences, in both advertising and tourism literature (Lee et al., 2020; Um, 2022). Studies have presented various results on the relationship between authenticity and trust. For example, certain scholars support that brand authenticity is one of the antecedents of brand trust (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019; Moulard et al., 2016; Portal et al., 2019). Others argue that brand trust or product trust contributes to the overall brand authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2021). Hence, the relationship between authenticity and trust requires further investigation.

Trust-transfer theory can be used to explain authenticity and trust in the advertising context. This theory states that peoples' trust in one trustable object might influence their trust towards another object (Liu et al., 2018; Stewart, 2003). For example, Filieri (2015) stated that consumers' perceived source credibility of online reviews positively influences their overall trust toward the online review website. Similarly, Kim and Song (2020) confirmed in the restaurant setting that consumers' trust towards the marketing claims affects their trust towards the restaurant. Based on the same logic and trust-transfer theory, it is concluded that

the authenticity of a marketing message can positively contribute to brand trust. Furthermore, numerous studies have confirmed the positive relationship between brand trust and behavioural intention (Lee & Back, 2008; Punyatoya, 2014).

2.1.4 Post-crisis recovery strategies

Scholars have examined post-crisis recovery strategies implemented by tourism destinations. For example, previous scholars have commonly analysed secondary data such as news reports, websites and recovery campaigns on tourism destinations (e.g., marketing campaigns for global destinations in response to COVID 19) to provide a comprehensive overview of post-crisis tourism destination recovery strategies (Avraham, 2021; Avraham & Beirman, 2023). The interviews with tourism stakeholders also better understand various post-crisis recovery strategies (Walters & Clulow, 2010). Majority of these investigations use a qualitative method (Avraham, 2021; Avraham & Beirman, 2023; Walters & Clulow, 2010). However, the effectiveness of different post-crisis recovery strategies in terms of reviving the tourism industry and attracting tourists back is rarely known (Walters & Mair, 2012). Additionally, Eisend and Tarrahi (2016) noted that the effectiveness of advertising, including post-crisis recovery messages, is typically assessed using quantitative methods. One exception is Walters and Mair (2012) who conducted an experiment and found that celebrity endorsement is the most effective recovery message for natural disasters. Consequently, more quantitative studies are urgently needed to test the effectiveness of the post-crisis recovery strategies and to examine tourists' attitudes and behaviour towards these strategies.

2.2 Hypothesis development

2.2.1 Effect of benefit appeal on individuals' perceived message authenticity

Previous scholars have investigated the effect of appeals on the advertisement itself and (or) the object portrayed in the advertisement (Kim et al., 2022; Rhee & Jung, 2019). There is ongoing debate about which type of appeal is more effective in advertising. For example, some argue that advertisements focusing on self-benefit are more effective in promoting greater consumer awareness and persuasion than those emphasizing other-benefit, as gaining positive benefits is one of the fundamental human motives (Hardeman et al., 2017; Rizzi et al., 2020).

However, many scholars argue that other-benefit appeals are more effective than self-benefit appeals in terms of advertisement persuasion (Goldstein et al., 2008; White & Peloza, 2009). When individuals encounter other-benefit appeals, they often develop more positive perceptions (White & Peloza, 2009) and behaviour (Chen & Chang, 2012; Goldstein et al., 2008) toward the objects featured in the message. In addition, because individuals wish to create a positive impression on others, they are highly motivated to engage in other-benefit behaviour, and generally hold positive attitudes toward the self-benefit advertisements (Green & Peloza, 2014; White & Peloza, 2009).

The relationship between benefit appeal and authenticity is still not clear. Kim et al. (2022) found that other-benefit appeal of restaurant advertisement positively increases the

authenticity of the object (i.e., restaurant) portrayed in the advertisement. Kim et al. (2022) explained that participants consider other-benefit important in restaurant advertisements because restaurants often play a significant role in the local community, serving as places for locals to interact and engage with each other. However, studies also argued that when self-benefit claim is presented, consumers can refer themselves to easily proceed with the message, pay much attention to the message, and have in-depth and fluent information processing (Line et al., 2016; Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 2004). In addition, when consumers find the information useful, they can absorb the information easily (Wu et al., 2022). The fluency-truth association also suggests that easy-to-process information (e.g., high processing fluency) leads to higher evaluation of truth (Rennekamp, 2012). Truthful is a typical feature of message authenticity, therefore, we propose the hypothesis below.

H1: Individuals' perceived message authenticity differs between various benefit appeals. More specifically, self-benefit appeal generates a higher level of message authenticity than other-benefit appeal.

2.2.2 Moderator of message framing strategy (i.e., gain- and loss-framed destination message) on the relationship between benefit appeal and individuals' message authenticity

Although some scholars have investigated the interaction effect of message framing strategy and the construal level of message on people's attitude and behaviour towards the message (Grazzini et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2021; White et al., 2011; Yoon & La Ferle, 2018), these studies reported conflicting results. For example, Grazzini et al. (2018) examined guests' recycling behaviours in hotels and demonstrated that the loss-framed message incorporating more concrete information (at low construal level) more effectively stimulates individuals' information processing than the loss-framed message using more abstract information (at high construal level). Similarly, White et al. (2011) also confirmed that loss frames in a concrete mindset (at low construal level) are more effective in encouraging consumer recycling intentions and behaviours than loss frames in an abstract mindset (at high construal level), whereas gain frames in an abstract mindset are more effective than gain frames in a concrete mindset. White et al. (2011) explained that loss frames emphasize negative consequences and threats of not taking actions, and suggest that these threats need to be addressed, so specific concrete information in a low level could effectively persuade individuals to take actions. On the other hand, as gain frames result in a broader-level reaction, so they activate more abstract and higher-level thinking in a high construal level.

However, other scholars revealed different results on the interaction effect. For example, Huang et al. (2021) studied food waste prevention and found that when the message is self-benefit appealed, a gain-framed message would induce a significantly higher level of perceived attitude and behavioural intentions on food waste prevention than a loss-framed message (Huang et al., 2021). Since high authenticity is often linked to a positive judgement of the objects (Kim et al., 2020; Le et al., 2019), there might be a positive association between the matching effect (e.g. self-benefit appeal and gain-framed message) and authenticity. Additionally, Yoon and La Ferle (2018) researched saving behaviour message and confirmed in their study 2 that high collectivistic individuals rated the self-benefit appealed and gain-

framed advertisement more effective than self-benefit appealed and loss-framed advertisement. As Becker et al. (2019) stated that message authenticity is highly related to advertising effectiveness, it is hypothesized that collectivistic individuals such as Chinese may consider the advertisement emphasizing self-benefit and gain-oriented more authentic than other types of advertisements. There might be a possible interpretation for the interaction effect between message appeal and framing strategy on authenticity. When self-benefit claim is presented, consumers can refer themselves to easily proceed with the message, pay much attention to the message, and have in-depth and fluent information processing (Line et al., 2016), thus they might distinguish the gain-framed message from loss-framed message. It makes sense that a destination's marketing goal after a crisis is to recover the destination itself as soon as possible, and bring the destination back to normal (e.g., from a gain perspective) (Mair et al., 2016). This type of gain-framing is more common and realistic. However, when other-benefit claim is presented, individuals are less sensitive to the framing strategies in the given message (Andersen et al., 1998), resulting in no difference in evaluating both gain- and loss-framed message. Based on the above discussion, we propose:

H2: Destination message framing strategy moderates the relationship between benefit appeal and individuals' perceived message authenticity.

H2a: In the self-benefit appeal, destination gain framing contributes to a higher level of message authenticity than destination loss framing.

H2b: In the other-benefit appeal, the level of message authenticity is similar between destination gain and loss framing messages.

2.2.3 Moderator of tourist attribute (e.g., gain- and loss-framed tourists) on the relationship between benefit appeal and individuals' message authenticity

Individual characteristics influence their views on message content, which ultimately affects the effectiveness of marketing and advertising messages. For instance, when individuals feel that the advertised message is consistent with their goals, they are likely to form a positive evaluation towards the message, and they are likely to develop a negative assessment when the advertised message is incongruent with their personal goals (Lazarus, 1991). In addition, Zhang et al. (2018) examined the moderator of individuals' regulatory orientations, either promotion or prevention, on the effect of message framing and tourists' positive image perception. Individual's promotion orientation refers to higher level gains such as hopes, accomplishments, and growth, whereas prevention orientation focuses on minimizing negative aspects. More specifically, Zhang et al. (2018) argued that promotion-oriented individuals had a positive image perception on messages emphasizing benefiting tourists. Andersen et al. (1998) acknowledged that individuals are less sensitive to the other-benefit message. Given the matching effect between promotion-oriented individuals and message benefiting tourists, we propose that gain-framed tourists develop a favourable attitude towards the self-benefit appealed messages to tourists themselves. Since high authenticity is often related to a positive judgement of the objects (Kim et al., 2020; Le et al., 2019), we developed the hypotheses below:

H3: Tourist attribute moderates the relationship between benefit appeal and message authenticity.

H3a: In the self-benefit appeal, gain-framed tourists perceive a higher level of message authenticity than loss-framed tourists.

H3b: In the other-benefit appeal, the level of message authenticity is similar between gain- and loss-framed tourists.

2.2.4 Relationship between message authenticity, destination trust, and visit intention to the destination

Prior studies proved the positive direct relationships between authenticity, trust, and behavioural intentions. For example, focusing on airline brands, Portal et al. (2019) identified that a higher level of brand authenticity positively contributes to a higher level of brand trust. Studies have also confirmed the relationships between brand trust and behavioural intention (Lee & Back, 2008; Punyatoya, 2014). Furthermore, authenticity is also highly linked to consumers' purchase intention (Kim & Song, 2020; Stepchenkova & Belyaeva, 2020).

Advertising studies have also well documented the positive relationship between attitude towards the advertisement, attitude towards the brand displayed in the advertisement, and brand choice (Biehal et al., 1992; Erkan & Evans, 2016; Schmuck et al., 2018). This sequential relationship can be explained by the trust-transfer theory. For instance, this theory explains that consumers' evaluation of the marketing claims, such as the credibility of the message, directly affects their perceived competence towards the brand (a dimension of brand trust), which ultimately develops their purchase intentions (Kim & Song, 2020). Kim and Song (2020) confirmed the mediator role of brand trust in the relationship between the credibility of the marketing claim and purchase intention. Similarly, in the tourism destination marketing setting, Cheung and Song (2024) also confirmed that tourists' attitude towards the destination in the advertising positively contributes to their visit intention to the destination. Based on the above discussion, we propose the below sequent relationship:

H4: Message authenticity is positively related to destination trust.

H5: Destination trust is positively linked to tourists' visit intention to the destination.

H6: Destination trust mediates the relationship between message authenticity and tourists' visit intention to the destination.

Figure 1 shows these hypothetical relationships of constructs in both experiment 1 and experiment 2.

(Please insert Figure 1 about here)

Method

Research design and questionnaire development

Using a scenario-based experimental design approach, we conducted two experiments to address the research objectives. We manipulated the independent variable of benefits appeal (i.e., self-benefit to tourists vs. other-benefit to the destination) and the moderator of destination message framing strategy (i.e., gain-framed destination message vs. loss-framed destination message) in scenarios of Experiment 1. Furthermore, we manipulated the independent variable of benefit appeal (i.e., self-benefit to tourists vs. other-benefit to the destination) and the moderator of tourist attribute (i.e., gain-framed tourist vs. loss-framed tourist) in scenarios of Experiment 2. Scenarios descriptions are shown in Appendix.

The questionnaire includes three parts. The first section is the demonstration of a randomly allocated scenario for each participant. The second section asks participants to evaluate the scenario that they have read. These evaluations include items for all three constructs, such as message authenticity, destination trust, and visit intention to that destination. All constructs, adopting or adapting from previously reliable and valid scales, are measured based on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). For instance, the 4 items for measuring message authenticity were adapted from previous studies (Kim & Song, 2020; Shoenberger et al., 2021; Um, 2022). Destination trust was assessed using 2 items from Boger et al. (2020). Visit intention to the destination was measured by 3 items from Bae and Chang (2021). The final section gathers participants' demographic, travel background, as well as current COVID situations in the living area of the participants.

Data collection and sample profile

Ethical approval was granted by the university where the first author is employed. A leading online marketing research firm, Wenjuanxing, in mainland China recruited its panel members to participate in the experiments. The firm has a total of 6.2 million qualified panel members for research (Wenjuanxing, 2025). Several screening questions were used to select qualified participants, including 'Are you a Chinese citizen living in mainland China?' 'Are you older than 18 years old?', and 'Did you have any domestic travel experiences before COVID?' Regarding the minimum sample size, we entered the following information into the G*Power software: proposed ANCOVA analysis, a medium effect size of 0.25, an α error probability of 0.05, a power of 0.95, four experimental groups, and three measurements. The results indicated that each experimental condition requires the minimum sample size of 24 subjects, thus each experiment needs to have at least 96 subjects (G*Power, 2025).

The firm invited qualified panel members in their database to fill in the e-survey. To ensure valid responses, we checked the duration of time each participant took to complete the experiment, and those who finished the study within three minutes were eliminated (Kim & Song, 2024). Additionally, we ensured that there were no missing data for each response. Altogether 446 valid data were collected in September 2021 and February 2022, including 233 in Experiment 1 and 213 in Experiment 2. Demographic profiles in this study are similar

to the participants' profile of previous studies (Chen et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2023) such as young, well-educated and female dominant. As shown in Table 1, leading categories for each demographic profile are: age (21-30: 52.4% [experiment 1]; 51.2% [experiment 2]), gender (female: 67.4% [experiment 1]; 65.3% [experiment 2]), education (undergraduate degree: 82.8% [experiment 1]; 71.4% [experiment 2]), occupation (white-collar worker: 49.8% [experiment 1]; 43.2% [experiment 2]), income (RMB7000-9999: 30.9% [experiment 1]; RMB above 10000: 31.5% [experiment 2]), travel frequency annually before COVID (6-10 times: 69.5% [experiment 1]; 75.1% [experiment 2]), and current COVID cases in the province (none: 82.4% [experiment 1]; 82.2% [experiment 2]).

(Please insert Table 1 about here)

Data analysis

In this study, H1, H2, and H3 were tested using two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) in SPSS, using covariates of age, gender, education, income, occupation, travel frequency before COVID, and current COVID situation in the living area. Additionally, the relationships between message authenticity, destination trust, and visit intention were tested using AMOS and PROCESS.

Results of Study 1 and Study 2

Study 1 - Manipulation check

All manipulation checks for independent variables were successful. For example, subjects in the self-benefit appeal rated the question of 'the press conference's content is mainly about benefiting tourists' significantly higher than those in the other-benefit appeal ($t [231] = 14.817$, $p < .001$; M self-benefit = 6.02 > M other-benefit = 2.67). Furthermore, participants in the loss-framed destination message rated the question of 'the press conference mentioned that without tourists' visit, the destination will be miserable and desperate' significantly higher than those in the gain-framed destination message ($t [231] = -12.395$, $p < .001$; M loss-framed destination message = 5.76 > M gain-framed destination message = 3.24). We also asked participants to assess whether the scenario was realistic in daily life based on a 7-point scale, the realism score was 5.07 ($SD = 1.45$).

The main effect of benefit appeal on participants' perceived message authenticity and the moderating effect of destination message framing strategy (H1, H2, H2a, and H2b)

As shown in Table 2, there was not any main effect of the benefit appeal on participants' perceived message authenticity (M self-benefit = 5.39, M other-benefit = 5.42, $F [1, 222] = .076$, $p = .783$). Thus, H1 was rejected. There was an interaction effect between benefit appeal and destination message framing strategy on message authenticity ($F [1, 222] = 5.189$,

$p < .05$). Therefore, H2 was confirmed. As demonstrated in Figure 2, in the self-benefit appeal situation, gain-framed destination message was linked to a higher level of message authenticity than loss-framed destination message (M gain-framed destination message = 5.57; M loss-framed destination message = 4.94; $F [1, 222] = 3.993, p < .05$), accepting H2a. However, in the other-benefit appeal situation, participants evaluated both loss-framed and gain-framed destination messages similar in terms of message authenticity (M gain-framed destination message = 5.31; M loss-framed destination message = 5.53; $F [1, 222] = 1.411, p = .236$), supporting H2b.

(Please insert Table 2 about here)

(Please insert Figure 2 about here)

4.3 Study 2 - Manipulation check

Similar to experiment 1 we also confirmed the successful manipulation check for independent variables. For example, participants in the self-benefit appeal rated the question of ‘the press conference’s content is mainly about benefiting tourists’ significantly higher than those in the other-benefit appeal ($t [211] = 14.358, p < .001$; M self-benefit = 5.92 > M other-benefit = 2.63). Furthermore, participants in the loss-framed tourist condition assessed the question of ‘you are a tourist who focuses mainly on how to avoid negative impact while travelling’ significantly higher than those in the gain-framed tourist condition ($t [211] = -6.719, p < .001$; M loss-framed tourist condition = 5.77 > M gain-framed tourist condition = 4.11). The realism score for the scenarios in experiment 2 was 5.05 (SD = 1.60) based on a 7-point scale, showing our scenarios are realistic in daily life.

4.4 The main effect of benefits appeal on participants’ perceived message authenticity and the moderating effect of tourist attribute (H1, H3, H3a, and H3b)

According to Table 3, there was also no main effect of benefit appeal on participants’ perceived message authenticity (M self-benefit = 5.39; M other-benefit = 5.35, $F [1, 202] = .082, p = .775$), rejecting H1 again. We observed the significant interaction effect between message benefit appeal and tourist attribute on message authenticity ($F [1, 202] = 4.465, p < .05$). Thus, H2 was supported. As illustrated in Figure 3, in the self-benefit condition, gain-framed tourists perceived a higher level of message authenticity than those loss-framed tourists ($F [1, 202] = 6.80, p < .05$; M gain-framed tourist = 5.63 > M loss-framed tourist = 5.14), accepting H3a. However, in the other-benefit condition, there was no significant difference of message authenticity between gain- or loss-framed tourists ($F [1, 202] = .117, p = .732$; M gain-framed tourist = 5.32; M loss-framed tourist = 5.38), confirming H3b.

(Please insert Table 3 about here)

(Please insert Figure 3 about here)

4.5 Results of Study 1 and Study 2: Relationship between message authenticity, destination trust, and visit intentions to the destination

4.5.1 Measurement model

The measurement model for each experiment was conducted before implementing structural equation model. The measurement model fit the data well (goodness-of-fit index of experiment 1: $\chi^2=42.713$, $df=24$, $\chi^2/df=1.78$, CFI=.984, TLI=.976, IFI=.984, RMSEA=.058; goodness-of-fit index of experiment 2: $\chi^2=48.804$, $df=24$, $\chi^2/df=2.033$, CFI=.975, TLI=.962, IFI=.975, RMSEA=.070). Table 4 shows all three constructs demonstrated good reliability (e.g., both Cronbach's alpha values and the composite reliability scores were above 0.70) and great validity (e.g., convergent validity and discriminant validity). For instance, all factor loadings were greater than 0.60 and the average variance extracted (AVE) scores for all constructs were above 0.50, confirming high convergent validity. Additionally, as shown in Table 5, all square roots of AVE scores were higher than their paired correlation coefficients, indicating high discriminant validity.

(Please insert Table 4 about here)

(Please insert Table 5 about here)

4.5.2 Structural equation model

We tested H4 and H5 using SEM, which demonstrated a good model fit (goodness-of-fit index of experiment 1: $\chi^2=42.713$, $df=24$, $\chi^2/df=1.78$, CFI=.984, TLI=.976, IFI=.984, RMSEA=.058; goodness-of-fit index of experiment 2: $\chi^2=48.804$, $df=24$, $\chi^2/df=2.033$, CFI=.975, TLI=.962, IFI=.975, RMSEA=.070). The results show that H4 and H5 were supported in both experiments 1 and 2. Specifically, message authenticity positively influenced destination trust (Experiment 1: $\beta = .708$; $p < .001$; Experiment 2: $\beta = .692$; $p < .001$), and destination trust significantly affected visit intention to the destination (Experiment 1: $\beta = .359$; $p < .01$; Experiment 2: $\beta = .382$; $p < .01$). We used PROCESS to test the mediator of destination trust. In experiment 1, destination trust was a successful mediator to mediate the relationship between message authenticity and visit intention ($\beta = .515$; 95% CI .347 to .671), supporting H6. In experiment 2, destination trust also mediated the

relationship between message authenticity and visit intention ($\beta = .426$; 95% CI .257 to .580), confirming H6.

Discussion

Our study investigated the effect of benefit appeal on participants' perceived message authenticity and the moderating effect of framing strategy (e.g., destination message and tourist condition) on the relationship between benefit appeal and participants' perceived message authenticity. More specifically, the result indicated that benefit appeal itself did not exert influences on message authenticity, which rejects the traditional viewpoint of either self-benefit appeal (Rizzi et al., 2020) or other-benefit appeal (Goldstein et al., 2008; White & Peloza, 2009) influencing consumers' attitude and behaviour. A possible explanation is that scholars recently have argued that benefit appeal does not directly contribute to consumers' attitudes and behaviour, but the relationship between benefit appeal and consumers' attitudes and behaviour is moderated by other variables, such as the message framing strategy of focusing on loss or gain (Grazzini et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2021).

Our study revealed the moderating effect of message framing strategy on the relationship between benefit appeal and message authenticity. For the self-benefit condition, a gain-framed message induces a higher level of message authenticity than a loss-framed message, but for the other-benefit condition, there is no difference between a gain- and loss-framed message. Although prior research has not confirmed the relationship in the context of message authenticity and post-crisis recovery communication, a few tourism and hospitality studies have verified the interaction effect of benefit appeal and message framing strategy on consumers' perception and revisit intentions (Grazzini et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2021). This can be explained by previous studies in that when the construal level is low (e.g., self-benefit appeal), consumers can refer to themselves to proceed with the message, use fluent information processing system, pay much attention to the message, and thus are sensitive to the content or changes of the message (Huang et al., 2021). However, when the construal level is high, individuals often rely on more generalized mental schemas to proceed with information and become less sensitive to the difference in framing strategies in the given message (Andersen et al., 1998). The fluency-truth association also suggests that easy-to-process information (e.g., high processing fluency) leads to higher evaluation of truth (Rennekamp, 2012). Since a destination's marketing goal after a crisis is to bring the destination back to normal from a gain perspective (Mair et al., 2016), therefore, the gain-framed message is more common and realistic than loss-framed message. The above discussion explains the moderating effect of framing strategy. Additionally, high collectivistic individuals rated the self-benefit appealed and gain-framed advertisement more effective than self-benefit appealed and loss-framed advertisement (Yoon & La Ferle, 2018). Therefore, Chinese participants in our study, as high collectivistic individuals, considered self-benefit appealed and gain-framed message more authentic.

Furthermore, our study revealed that tourists attribute also moderates the effect of benefit appeal on message authenticity. For the self-benefit appeal, gain-focused tourists are more likely to view the post-crisis marketing information as more authentic than loss-focused

tourists, but for the other-benefit appeal, there is no difference between gain-focused and loss-focused tourists. Although no literature has confirmed this moderator role of tourists attribute, prior studies have indicated that consumers' characteristics can be a moderator to influence the effectiveness of marketing messages (Ku et al., 2012; White & Peloza, 2009; Zhang et al., 2018). Zhang et al. (2018) argued that promotion-oriented individuals had a positive image perception on messages emphasizing benefiting tourists, showing that there is a matching effect between promotion-oriented tourists and message benefiting tourists. Linking the construal level theory and the prospect theory, we can confirm that compared to loss-focused tourists, gain-focused tourists are more sensitive and more likely to agree the authentic marketing information on a low construal level (e.g., focusing on self-benefit); however, both gain- and loss-focused tourists view the marketing information similarly on high construal level (e.g., focusing on other-benefit). A possible reason is that tourists' common motivation to visit a destination is about self-benefit (e.g., focusing on tourists themselves rather than relationships with others) and gain-focused (e.g., relaxation and positive emotions) (Jang et al., 2009; Mitas et al., 2012; Pearce & Lee, 2005). Thus, gain-focused participants are more likely to agree with the information on self-benefit.

Our study confirmed the positive relationships between message authenticity, destination trust, and visit intention to the destination. Although there is no direct evidence confirming the positive relationships, other relevant studies have indirectly supported the positive relationships. According to Kim and Song (2020), consumers' evaluation of the marketing claims directly affects their trust towards the brand. Furthermore, Cheung and Song (2024) also confirmed that tourists' attitude towards the destination in the advertising positively contributes to their visit intention to the destination. Applying trust transfer theory, we provide sufficient evidence to support the positive relationships between message authenticity, destination trust, and visit intention to the destination.

Theoretical contribution

This study makes theoretical contributions to the existing literature. First, our study makes a significant contribution to the field of post-crisis recovery strategies. While most previous research on this topic has been qualitative, providing a comprehensive overview of various strategies (Avraham, 2021; Avraham & Beirman, 2023; Walters & Clulow, 2010), our study employs a quantitative approach to offer empirical evidence on the effectiveness of post-crisis recovery messages.

Second, our study provides further evidence on the moderating effect of message framing strategy on the relationship between benefit appeal and consumers' perception in the post-crisis marketing message setting. Prior studies have presented conflicting viewpoints on how this moderation works (Grazzini et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2021; Yoon & La Ferle, 2018). Our study, by focusing on post-crisis marketing communication within the Chinese context, demonstrates that, under low construal level conditions (i.e., self-benefit appeal), a gain-framed destination message significantly enhances the perception of message authenticity compared to a loss-framed destination message. This can be explained by both construal level theory and fluency information processing literature. Thus, our research extends the understanding of how various theories can be effectively combined in post-crisis marketing communication.

Third, our study attempts to apply the framing strategy (e.g., gain- or loss-framed messages) to the tourist context and tests the moderator of tourist attribute (e.g., gain- and loss-framed tourists). The existing tourism studies on the framing strategy (e.g., loss- and gain-frame) mainly investigate the message itself (Grazzini et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2021), and largely ignore the consumers' characteristics (Ku et al., 2012; White & Pelozo, 2009; Zhang et al., 2018). Our study confirmed that gain-focused tourists rated the post-crisis marketing information more authentic than those loss-focused tourists when the information is about low construal level (e.g., self-benefit appeal).

Fourth, although numerous advertising studies are emphasizing the significant role of attitude towards the message/advertisements (Biehal et al., 1992; Erkan & Evans, 2016; Schmuck et al., 2018). However, message authenticity (e.g., the message is authentic, realistic, believable, and truthful) is more specific than message attitude. Considering the significant role of authenticity in driving the business forward and attracting more customers (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Yang et al., 2022), it's key to research authenticity. However, the existing literature has not paid much attention to the antecedents and consequences of message authenticity. Therefore, our research contributes to a good understanding of message authenticity in general and tourism settings.

Fifthly, our study investigates the effect of marketing communication design on participants' perceived message authenticity in tourism and non-tourism literature. Previous studies have examined the effect of message type (e.g., threats vs no threats) (Shoenberger et al., 2021), and politicians' blunders in social media communication (Lee et al., 2020) on message/communication authenticity. However, whether benefit appeal influences consumers' perceived message authenticity and how the framing strategy moderates the relationship between benefit appeal and message authenticity is unknown. Finally, our study provides evidence on the sequent relationship of message authenticity, destination trust and visit intentions to the destination applying trust-transfer theory. We also successfully verified that destination trust is a mediator to influence the relationship between message authenticity and visit intentions to the destination.

5.2 Managerial implications

We offered recommendations to the tourism destination marketing organisations in China for post-crisis marketing communication. Tourists' perceived authenticity of marketing messages, directly and indirectly, influences their visit intention to the destination. Destination marketing organisations need to pay more attention to the design of marketing materials from the perspectives of benefit parties and framing strategy. Detailed suggestions are shown below. First, tourism destination marketing organisations should not purely use benefit appeal (e.g., self- or other-benefit) in marketing materials to create authentic marketing messages. In fact, they should consider combining benefits appeal and framing strategy. For example, while portraying a self-benefit appeal message, the message should also focus on the gain perspective of the destination, rather than the loss perspective of the destination, which is more likely to generate tourists' higher level of message authenticity. A self-benefit appeal message could be portrayed based on direct benefits to potential tourists derived from collaboration with other tourism stakeholders. These direct benefits could include free entry at tourist attractions, and discounted transport and accommodation rate. At the same time, a gain-framed

destination message, such as there will be hope in the tourism industry if tourists revisit the destination, could be included in the marketing materials.

Second, tourism marketing organisations should also pay attention to tourist attributes as well. Tourism marketing managers must identify the target tourists with gain-focused travel motivation. For instance, before presenting the key marketing message, tourists should be encouraged to reflect on the positive side of travelling, which is linked to gain-focused travel motivation. The combination of the self-benefit appeal message and tourists' gain-framing condition could effectively create tourists' perception of higher message authenticity than other combinations.

5.3 Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, we adopted an experimental design approach to invite participants to assess the hypothetical post-COVID scenarios. As the COVID pandemic is over, it is recommended to conduct field studies to investigate the real effect. Second, we requested the online marketing research firm to recruit participants based on a few general selection criteria without including specific criteria on participants' demographics. Therefore, the sample profile in this study may not reflect the overall demographic background of the population. Third, the participants of this study were young, well-educated and female dominant. Future studies should research an equal gender sample, middle aged and old participants as well as those without a university degree to generalise the findings. Fourth, we conducted this study in mainland China, cultural differences might exist in terms of how consumers respond to various marketing materials for different types of crises. Therefore, empirical data from other countries, other crisis events, and other marketing materials should be collected to verify the results of this study. Finally, this study investigated the moderator of destination message framing strategy in experiment 1, and the moderator of tourist attribute in experiment 2. A future research direction could be whether incorporating two moderators in a single experiment could generate any interaction effect among the independent variable and the two moderators.

Appendix:

Experimental scenarios:

Experiment 1:

Please imagine that the COVID-19 pandemic was finally over, and you are planning for a holiday somewhere. While browsing the internet, you find news from a press conference organized by the tourism bureau of the city XYZ in China. The news says that tourists could save money if they visit the city XYZ now since XYZ offers discounted flight tickets or accommodation, free tourism attraction tickets, and so on [The news says that tourists' visit to XYZ can help the tourism industry to recover quickly in post COVID-19 pandemic].

For the city XYZ, if tourists visit the city XYZ, the tourism industry will be full of hope, and tourism employees will be happy [For the city XYZ, if no tourists visit the city XYZ, the tourism industry will be in despair, and staff members in the tourism industry will be miserable]

Experiment 2:

Please reflect on your personal views:

I mainly view the gain that travel brings to me. For example, I will be happy, relaxed, fun, and calm if I travel. [I mainly view the loss that travel can avoid. For example, I will be unhappy, stressed, bored, and anxious if I don't travel].

Please imagine that the COVID-19 pandemic was finally over, and you are planning for a holiday somewhere. While browsing the internet, you find news from a press conference organized by the tourism bureau of the city XYZ in China. The news says that tourists could save money if they visit the city XYZ now since XYZ offers discounted flight tickets or accommodation, free attraction tickets, and so on [The news says that tourists' visit to XYZ can help the tourism industry recover quickly in the post COVID-19 pandemic].

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Figure 1. Research Framework

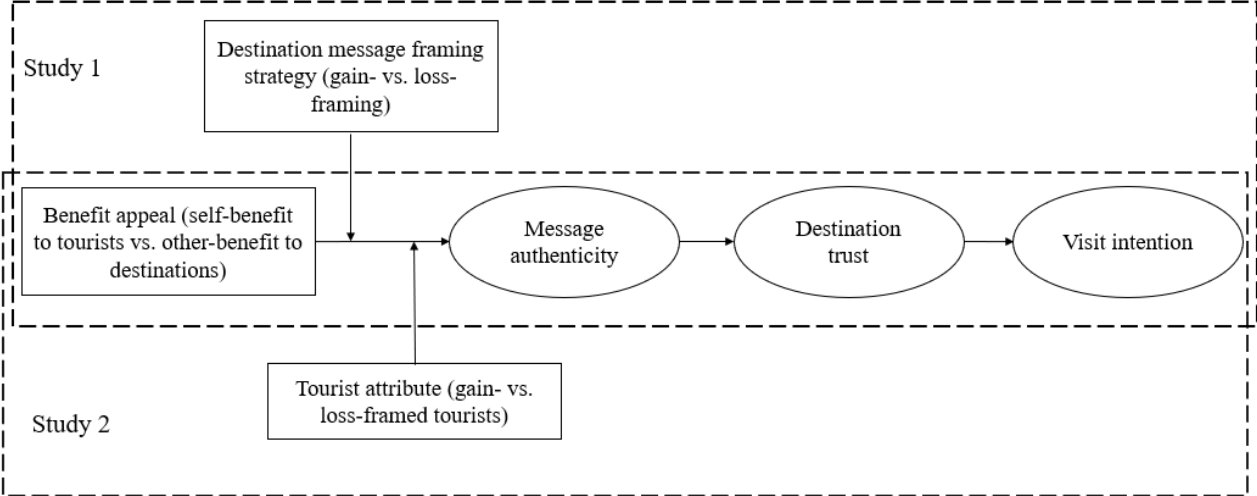


Figure 2. Interaction effect of Benefit Appeal and Destination Message Framing Strategy

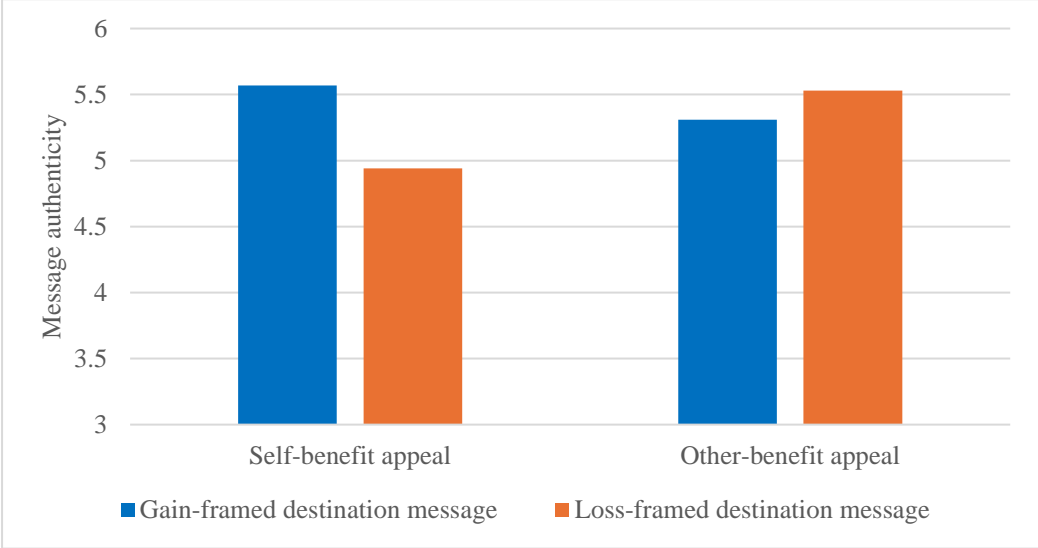


Figure 3. Interaction effect of Benefit Appeal and Tourist Attribute

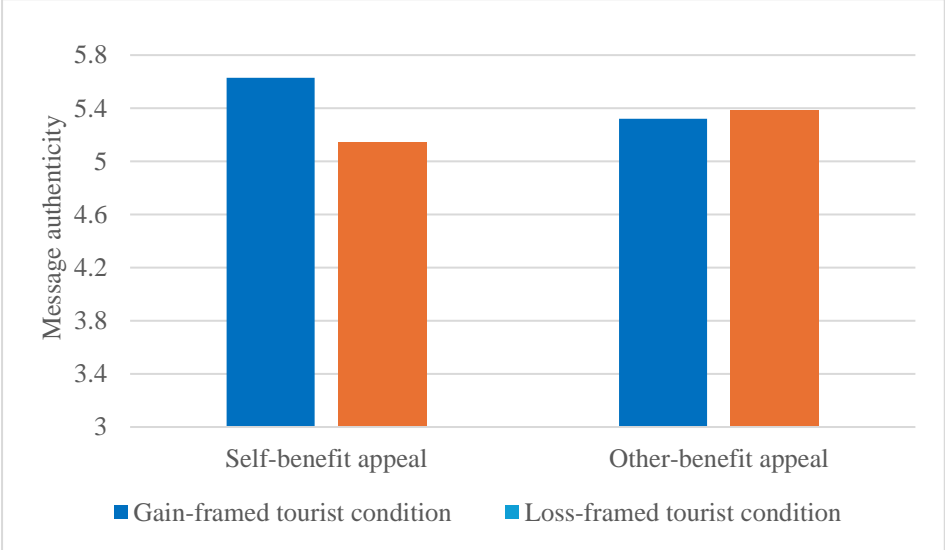


Table 1. Participants' profile

Variable	Study 1 (N = 233)		Study 2 (N = 213)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Age				
18-20	12	5.2	9	4.2
21-30	122	52.4	109	51.2
31-40	87	37.3	81	38.0
41-50	10	4.3	11	5.2
51-60	2	0.9	2	0.9
≥ 61	0	0	1	0.5
Gender				
Male	76	32.6	74	34.7
Female	157	67.4	139	65.3
Education				
High school or below	4	1.7	7	3.3
Vocational institute	15	6.4	39	18.3
Undergraduate	193	82.8	152	71.4
Postgraduate	21	9.0	15	7.0
Occupation				
Governmental officer	11	4.7	9	4.2
Entrepreneur	28	12.0	33	15.5
Professional	29	12.4	34	16.0
Private business owners	3	1.3	4	1.9
White-collar worker	116	49.8	92	43.2
Salesperson	13	5.6	9	4.2
Self-employed	11	4.7	10	4.7
Students	17	7.3	18	8.5
Retired	1	0.4	1	0.5
Others	4	1.7	3	1.4
Personal monthly income (CNY)				
< 3000	19	8.2	19	8.9
3000-4999	27	11.6	20	9.4
5000-6999	56	24.0	48	22.5
7000-9999	72	30.9	59	27.7
≥ 10000	59	25.3	67	31.5
Travel frequency per year before COVID-19				
1-5 times	14	6.0	9	4.2
6-10 times	162	69.5	160	75.1
11-20 times	50	21.5	40	18.8
More than 21 times	7	3.0	4	1.9
Confirmed positive COVID-19 cases yesterday in the city that I live				
No	192	82.4	175	82.2
1-5	36	15.5	32	15.0

6-10	5	2.1	5	2.3
≥ 11	0	0	1	0.5

Table 2. The effect of benefits appeal and destination message framing strategy on message authenticity

Source	F	p
Age	.994	.320
Gender	1.364	.244
Education	.016	.899
Job	3.217	.074
Income	1.998	.159
Travel frequency before COVID-19	.022	.883
COVID-19 situation	1.846	.176
Benefit appeal	.076	.783
Message framing strategy	.377	.540
Benefit appeal * Destination message framing strategy	5.189	.024

Table 3. The effect of benefit appeal and tourist attribute on message authenticity

Source	F	p
Age	.082	.776
Gender	.013	.908
Education	.045	.832
Job	1.125	.290
Income	2.606	.108
Travel frequency before COVID-19	1.789	.182
COVID-19 cases	1.106	.294
Benefit appeal	.082	.775
Tourist attribute	2.735	.100
Benefit appeal * Tourist attribute	4.465	.036

Table 4. Results of the measurement model

Constructs	Experiment 1	Experiment 2
	Factor loading	Factor loading
Message authenticity	a = .879; CR = .880; AVE = .647	a = .879; CR = .879; AVE = .645
I think the message is authentic	.749	.772
I think the message is realistic	.802	.781
I think the message is believable	.834	.822
I think the message is truthful	.830	.835
Destination trust	a = .774; CR = .778; AVE = .637	a = .724; CR = .725; AVE = .570
I feel secure about the destination	.746	.719
I feel that the destination is trustworthy.	.847	.789
Visit intention to the destination	a = .845; CR = .846; AVE = .646	a = .832; CR = .837; AVE = .632
I intend to travel to this destination in the near future.	.808	.727
I am planning to travel to this destination in the near future.	.840	.876
I will certainly invest time and money to travel to this destination in the near future.	.762	.775

Table 5. Construct intercorrelations

Experiment 1			
	Message authenticity	Destination trust	Visit intention
Message authenticity	.804a		
Destination trust	.708	.798 a	
Visit intention	.789	.737	.804 a
Experiment 2			
	Message authenticity	Destination trust	Visit intention
Message authenticity	.803a		
Destination trust	.692	.755a	
Visit intention	.725	.701	.795a

Note: Square root of the average variance extracted