

RESEARCH NOTE

Do masks matter? Consumer perceptions of social media influencers who wear face masks amid the COVID-19 pandemic

Sona Klucarova 

Marketing, Sales and Communication Department, Montpellier Business School, Montpellier, France

Correspondence

Sona Klucarova, Marketing, Sales and Communication Department, Montpellier Business School, 2300 Avenue des Moulins, 34080 Montpellier, France.
Email: s.klucarova@montpellier-bs.com

Abstract

The rapid spread of COVID-19 brought about an increased use of face masks among the general public. Focusing on disposable surgical masks in particular, this article examines consumer perceptions of and intentions toward social media influencers who wear such masks amid the pandemic. Drawing on the theory of product symbolism, this research experimentally demonstrates that masked (vs. unmasked) influencers remind consumers of highly competent healthcare professionals, leading in turn to greater competence inferences about and more favorable behavioral intentions toward these influencers. Additional analysis demonstrates that this effect might not hold for other groups of professionals who are considered relatively competent at the outset and/or whose profession is less reliant on external cues. Overall, this research suggests that apart from curtailing the spread of the pandemic, mask wearing might prove beneficial to certain groups of professionals, such as social media influencers, who have traditionally struggled to establish credibility. In a broader context, this research establishes mask wearing as a new form of nonverbal communication that warrants further examination.

KEYWORDS

competence inferences, COVID-19, face masks, nonverbal communication, social media influencers

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of COVID-19 has necessitated multiple safety measures to help prevent the spread of the virus. Apart from frequent hand washing and social distancing, people are encouraged to wear face masks in public (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021), a practice that was virtually nonexistent in the Western world until recently (Leung, 2020). Such mask wearing can be considered a part of nonverbal communication, which plays an important role in a variety of applied contexts, including sales (Kidwell & Hasford, 2014), retailing (Puccinelli et al., 2010), and organizational settings (Bonaccio et al., 2016). Importantly, mask wearing might alter people's perceptions of the mask wearer's abilities, which in applied contexts could translate into consumers' altered views of and intentions toward masked professionals.

This research focuses specifically on disposable surgical masks and the effect of wearing such masks by social media influencers, an understudied group of marketers (Taylor, 2020). Consumers often view influencers as relatively incompetent (Bratu, 2019; Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019) because of factors such as the lack of formal education requirement for influencers and low credibility of social media platforms (Alrubaian et al., 2019; Kim & Ahmad, 2013). Yet an influencer's perceived competence plays a crucial role in influencer marketing. For example, positive perceptions of an influencer's competence can elevate consumers' trust in the promoted content, their attitudes toward the influencer and the promoted brand, and their intention to "like" the influencer's promotional posts and purchase the promoted product (Kim & Read, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Thus, elevated competence inferences about an influencer can positively affect various consumer outcomes, benefiting both the influencer and the promoted brand.

I propose that in times of COVID-19, influencers can increase their perceived competence through the simple act of wearing a disposable surgical mask in their social media posts. I hypothesize that disposable surgical masks, traditionally associated with trusted and competent healthcare workers, can create the impression of heightened competence when worn by seemingly less competent social media influencers. I further propose that these elevated competence inferences will prompt consumers to have more favorable behavioral intentions toward masked influencers. In building my predictions, I draw on the theory of product symbolism, which suggests that because of their associations with specific users, products can acquire symbolic meanings that can then be transferred to new product users (Aaker, 1997; Allen, 2002; Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998).

In a more general context, this research implies that apart from inhibiting the spread of COVID-19, mask wearing might provide an added bonus in the form of favorable social perceptions to certain groups of professionals who have traditionally struggled to establish credibility. As such, mask wearing might constitute a new form of nonverbal communication that can have significant implications in marketing and other applied contexts.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: In the next section, I lay out the conceptual framework for my predictions. Then, I describe three experimental studies that provide empirical support for my hypotheses. In the final section, I discuss overall findings, contributions, and limitations and provide suggestions for future research in this emerging area.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Mask wearing as a new form of nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication refers to “all communicative acts except speech” (Mandal, 2014, p. 418), including physical behaviors such as body movements, postures, facial expressions, distance from others, and touching (Mehrabian, 1972), as well as the way people speak or dress (De Waele et al., 2019; O’Neal & Lapitsky, 1991). Nonverbal communication is heavily used in a variety of applied contexts, so the ability to decode such communication is of importance to various stakeholders. For example, understanding nonverbal communication in the context of marketing and sales enables marketers to better apprehend customer needs (Puccinelli et al., 2010) and use proper tactics to influence consumers (Kidwell & Hasford, 2014). Beyond understanding the nonverbal behavior of consumers, gaining insights into the nonverbal behavior of marketers is also important, given that such behavior can significantly influence consumers’ attitudes and behaviors toward both the marketer and the promoted brand (Kim & Read, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Scott et al., 2013).

The widespread use of face masks initiated by the COVID-19 pandemic has made some aspects of nonverbal communication, such as facial signals, more difficult to recognize and decode (Schlögl & Jones, 2020). I propose that apart from presenting challenges to certain forms of nonverbal communication, the mask-wearing trend in response to COVID-19 has itself produced a new form of nonverbal communication that warrants further examination. Just as individuals’ choice of clothing affects how others perceive them (O’Neal & Lapitsky, 1991), so too can their choice with respect to mask wearing affect others’ inferences about them. An individual’s decision to wear or not wear a face mask during the pandemic can alter the extent to which others perceive this person as responsible, caring, or trustworthy. Such altered perceptions can in turn result in altered behavior toward the individual. For example, Americans seemed to take a dim view of the former President Donald Trump after his refusal to wear a mask in public, as evidenced by plummeting poll numbers (Vazquez et al., 2020).

While different types of face masks exist, in this research I focus specifically on disposable surgical masks and their role in an understudied context of influencer marketing (Taylor, 2020). Namely, I investigate how wearing (vs. not wearing) a disposable surgical mask by a social media influencer can alter consumer perceptions of said influencer’s competence.

Social media influencers and perceived competence

Social media influencers are online personalities with a large follower base to whom they promote products, services, or ideas (Balaban & Mustătea, 2019). Given the relative newness of the influencer marketing industry (Chopra et al., 2021), many consumers might not have deeply rooted social perceptions of influencers, especially in comparison with perceptions of professionals from well-established industries. This might make consumers more prone to rely on external cues (such as face masks) when making inferences about influencers’ abilities (Bem, 1972), including their level of competence. The importance of visual presentation and imagery in influencers’ job (Kim & Read, 2021) might also explain the significant impact of external cues on competence inferences made about influencers.

Despite their key role in online strategic communication (Enke & Borchers, 2019), influencers often struggle to establish credibility (Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019). Only 52% of

adult consumers in the United States believe that influencers are knowledgeable about the issues they promote, and only 26% believe that influencers' recommendations are accurate (Bratu, 2019). Influencers' perceived lack of competence might be caused by factors such as the absence of a formal education requirement and the low credibility of social media platforms through which influencers deliver their messages (Alrubaian et al., 2019; Kim & Ahmad, 2013).

I propose that wearing a mask (as a form of external cue) might significantly alter competence inferences about seemingly incompetent social media influencers. In building my hypotheses, I draw on the theory of product symbolism (Aaker, 1997; Allen, 2002; Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998), as described next.

Product symbolism and its application to mask wearing

Product symbolism refers to “the image of the product, encompassing abstract ideas and associations with the product as well as beliefs about the kinds of people who use the product” (Allen, 2002, p. 2476). Existing research suggests that many consumers believe in psychological contagion, a notion that a person's essence gets transmitted to a product he or she has used (Marchak & Hall, 2017; Rozin et al., 1989). Furthermore, there is a tendency to associate products with their users (Newman et al., 2011), resulting in a belief that products can symbolize human characteristics (Aaker, 1997). The perception of these characteristics can then be transferred to new product users (Belk, 1988). As an illustration, consider the following example: Your mother, an epitome of sophistication, has been using a specific perfume for years. As a result, you have come to associate this perfume with your mother (Fournier, 1998). Smelling this perfume on another person will instantly remind you of your sophisticated mother, resulting in your perception that the other perfume wearer is also sophisticated.

Before the pandemic, the use of disposable surgical masks in the Western world was reserved almost exclusively for healthcare workers. This might have resulted in a long-standing association between such masks and healthcare professionals (i.e., a product-user association). Consumers consistently rank healthcare professionals, such as physicians and nurses, among the most trusted professions (Brenan, 2018). As trust is often based on perceived competence (Kee & Knox, 1970; Lee, 2004), this would imply that consumers perceive healthcare professionals as highly competent. According to product symbolism theory, disposable surgical masks should then symbolize high competence associated with these masks' traditional wearers—healthcare professionals. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 has led to the increased adoption of disposable surgical masks by the general public (Feng et al., 2020). Applying product symbolism theory to this context, I argue that new professional users of such masks might remind consumers of healthcare professionals. As a result, the competence inferences associated with medical workers should also rub off on these new mask users. Given the positive association between inferred competence and behavioral intentions (Cuddy et al., 2008; Kim & Read, 2021; Scott et al., 2013), the elevated competence inferences triggered by mask wearing should also lead to more favorable behavioral intentions toward the new mask wearers.

However, these hypothesized effects might not be equally strong for all new wearers of disposable surgical masks. As implied previously, these effects may be especially pronounced for social media influencers who are often considered relatively incompetent (Bratu, 2019; Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019) and whose profession is heavily reliant on the use of imagery and external

cues (Kim & Read, 2021). Conversely, these effects may be mitigated for people in other professions who fare more favorably in terms of baseline competence inferences and/or whose competence is not as heavily judged by external cues.

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

I test my predictions in three experimental studies. Study 1 demonstrates that priming consumers with a photo of a masked social media influencer increases the salience of thoughts related to healthcare professionals in consumers' minds. Study 2 shows that these thoughts play a mediating role in the relationship between mask wearing and competence inferences; that is, a masked (vs. unmasked) influencer is considered more competent as a result of eliciting thoughts about highly competent healthcare professionals in consumers' minds. Furthermore, this study precludes the possibility of participants inferring that a masked influencer is a healthcare worker who promotes products related to the healthcare industry—a so-called “nursefluencer” (Jennings, 2019). Study 3 reveals that heightened competence inferences lead to favorable behavioral intentions toward a masked influencer, thereby demonstrating a specific practical consequence of mask wearing for social media influencers. Furthermore, this study suggests that the predicted effect is exclusive to social media influencers and mitigated for professionals in other occupations.

STUDY 1

Method and results

In July 2020, 99 workers from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk; $M_{\text{age}} = 38.57$, 38.4% female, U.S. residents) took part in the study, which employed a single-factor design with two levels. Participants read about a fictitious social media influencer named Mary Hall. The description was accompanied by Mary's photo, in which she was either wearing or not wearing a face mask (see Supporting Information for complete stimuli).

Participants then indicated on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*) the extent to which looking at Mary's photo reminded them of nurses, medical doctors, and healthcare professionals ($\alpha = .93$). To capture individual attitudinal and behavioral differences with regard to mask wearing, participants indicated their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) with two statements (“Wearing a face mask is important these days” and “Everyone should wear a face mask these days”; $r = .86$) and specified their likelihood of wearing a face mask on their next visit to a shared public space (1 = *very unlikely*, 7 = *very likely*). As a manipulation check, participants evaluated Mary's lower face on two 7-point bipolar scales (uncovered/covered, unprotected/protected; $r = .96$). Finally, participants indicated their age and gender.

Participants in the face mask (vs. no face mask) condition perceived Mary's lower face as significantly more covered and protected, $M_{\text{face mask}} = 6.78$ versus $M_{\text{no face mask}} = 3.28$; $t(97) = 9.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .506$. This result confirms the success of the manipulation. Next, I examined the effect of the face mask on salience of thoughts related to healthcare professionals while controlling for individual differences with respect to mask wearing. To do so, I ran an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) on salience of thoughts about healthcare professionals, with face

mask as a fixed factor and attitude toward mask wearing and likelihood to wear a face mask as covariates. The effect of face mask was significant, $F(1, 95) = 13.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .124$, such that the masked Mary reminded participants of healthcare professionals significantly more so than the unmasked Mary (adjusted means: $M_{\text{face mask}} = 5.02$ vs. $M_{\text{no face mask}} = 3.77$). The effects of both attitude toward mask wearing and likelihood to wear a face mask were nonsignificant, attitude: $F < 1$; likelihood: $F(1, 95) = 1.35$, $p = .249$.

Discussion

Study 1 offered empirical support for the predicted effect of mask wearing on salience of thoughts about healthcare professionals. That is, seeing a photo of a masked social media influencer increased the salience of thoughts related to healthcare professionals in consumers' minds. The aim of Study 2 is to examine competence inferences about social media influencers resulting from thoughts about healthcare professionals evoked by mask wearing.

STUDY 2

Method

In January 2021, 101 MTurk workers ($M_{\text{age}} = 41.65$, 53.5% female, U.S. residents) participated in the study, which used a single-factor design with two levels. Similar to Study 1, participants were presented with a photo and description of a fictitious social media influencer. To test the robustness of the findings across the influencer gender, the influencer featured in this study was a man named Mark Hall. He was either wearing or not wearing a face mask. Mark was described as a social media influencer specialized in the promotion of personal electronics (see Supporting Information for complete stimuli) to preclude participants from assuming that he is a "nursefluencer" (Jennings, 2019).

First, participants rated Mark's competence on three 7-point bipolar scales (incompetent/competent, unintelligent/intelligent, poorly trained/well trained; $\alpha = .95$; Scott et al., 2013). Similar to Study 1, participants then indicated on a 7-point scale the extent to which looking at Mark's photo reminded them of nurses, medical doctors, and healthcare professionals ($\alpha = .97$). Participants' attitude toward mask wearing (two items; $r = .95$) and their likelihood to wear a face mask on their next visit to a shared public space were also captured with the same measures as in Study 1. The same two bipolar scales ($r = .996$) as in Study 1 served as the manipulation check. Finally, participants' demographic information was collected.

Results

Manipulation check

Participants considered Mark's lower face as significantly more covered and protected when he was wearing a face mask than when he was not, $M_{\text{face mask}} = 6.78$ versus $M_{\text{no face mask}} = 1.04$; $t(99) = 69.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .980$. This result indicates that the manipulation worked as intended.

Competence inferences

I sought to establish the effect of mask wearing on competence inferences while controlling for potential confounding effects of demographic variables and individual differences in terms of mask wearing. To do so, I conducted an ANCOVA on competence inferences with face mask as a fixed factor and age, gender, attitude toward mask wearing, and likelihood to wear a face mask as covariates. The effect of face mask was statistically significant, $F(1, 95) = 4.11$, $p = .045$, $\eta_p^2 = .041$, such that participants perceived a masked (vs. unmasked) Mark as significantly more competent (adjusted means: $M_{\text{face mask}} = 5.32$ vs. $M_{\text{no face mask}} = 4.83$). Furthermore, the results revealed nonsignificant effects of all four covariates, age: $F < 1$; gender: $F(1, 95) = 2.25$, $p = .137$; attitude: $F(1, 95) = 1.51$, $p = .222$; likelihood: $F(1, 95) = 1.84$, $p = .178$.

Mediation

I explored the underlying process of salience of thoughts about healthcare professionals through a two-step analysis. First, I ran an independent samples t -test whose results indicated significantly greater salience of thoughts about healthcare professionals in the face mask (vs. no face mask) condition, $M_{\text{face mask}} = 2.81$ versus $M_{\text{no face mask}} = 1.47$; $t(99) = 4.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .169$. Second, I ran the PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2018) with 10,000 bootstrap samples. I included face mask as the predictor, competence inferences as the outcome variable, and salience of thoughts about healthcare professionals as the mediator in the model. The indirect effect through salience of thoughts about healthcare professionals was statistically significant (indirect effect = .25, 95% CI [.08, .53]; see Figure 1), providing support for the predicted mediator.

Discussion

Study 2 examined the effect of mask wearing on competence inferences while establishing the mediating role of salience of thoughts about healthcare professionals. Specifically, consumers perceived a masked social media influencer as more competent than an unmasked one. This effect occurred because seeing the masked influencer increased the salience of thoughts about healthcare professionals in consumers' minds, which in turn affected their competence inferences about the influencer. By explicitly describing the influencer's specialization as promoting

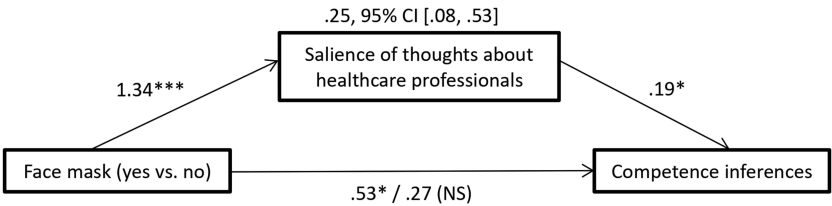


FIGURE 1 Mediation analysis (Study 2). Note: The regression coefficients are unstandardized. * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

personal electronics, this study precluded the possibility of participants assuming that the influencer was a healthcare worker.

Study 3 seeks to confirm that the predicted effect of mask wearing on competence inferences is unique to social media influencers. Furthermore, this study aims to establish that increased competence inferences about masked influencers lead to positive behavioral intentions toward such influencers.

STUDY 3

Method

In April 2020, I recruited 574 participants from MTurk ($M_{\text{age}} = 31.92$, 50.2% female, U.S. residents) to take part in the study, which used a 2 (face mask: yes vs. no) \times 5 (occupation: social media influencer vs. salesperson vs. news anchor vs. politician vs. medical doctor) between-subjects design. Participants read about Mary Hall, who either was a social media influencer or held one of the other four jobs. The description was accompanied by Mary's photo (same as in Study 1), in which she was either wearing or not wearing a face mask.

Participants evaluated Mary's competence on the same three 7-point bipolar scales ($\alpha = .89$; Scott et al., 2013) as in Study 2. Furthermore, participants specified their behavioral intentions toward Mary by indicating their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) with three statements ("I would recommend Mary to my friends," "I would follow Mary's advice," and "I would like to receive professional advice from Mary"; $\alpha = .91$; Scott et al., 2013). Attitude toward mask wearing (two items; $r = .84$), likelihood to wear a face mask, and manipulation check (two items; $r = .97$) were then recorded using the same measures as in Study 1. As the final step, participants indicated their demographic information.

Results

Manipulation check

I ran an analysis of variance (ANOVA) using face mask, occupation, and their interaction to predict participants' evaluations of Mary's lower face. As expected, only the main effect of face mask was significant, $F(1, 564) = 2183.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .795$, such that participants in the face mask (vs. no face mask) condition perceived Mary's lower face as significantly more covered and protected ($M_{\text{face mask}} = 6.63$ vs. $M_{\text{no face mask}} = 1.73$). Both the main effect of occupation and the face mask \times occupation interaction were nonsignificant ($F_s < 1$).

Competence inferences

I conducted an ANCOVA using face mask, occupation, and their interaction to predict participants' competence inferences about Mary, with attitude toward mask wearing and likelihood to wear a face mask as covariates. The results indicated significant main effects of face mask, $F(1, 562) = 5.12$, $p = .024$, $\eta_p^2 = .009$, occupation, $F(4, 562) = 10.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .066$, attitude toward mask wearing, $F(1, 562) = 6.48$, $p = .011$, $\eta_p^2 = .011$, and likelihood to wear a face

mask, $F(1, 562) = 5.76, p = .017, \eta_p^2 = .010$. Importantly, the face mask \times occupation interaction was also significant, $F(4, 562) = 2.57, p = .037, \eta_p^2 = .018$. Specifically, participants rated social media influencer Mary as significantly more competent when she was wearing (vs. not wearing) a face mask, adjusted means: $M_{\text{face mask}} = 5.69$ versus $M_{\text{no face mask}} = 5.01$; $F(1, 562) = 13.51, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .023$. This difference disappeared when Mary was a salesperson, a news anchor, a politician, or a medical doctor ($ps \geq .229$; see Figure 2).

Behavioral intentions

Next, I ran an ANCOVA using face mask, occupation, and their interaction to predict participants' behavioral intentions toward Mary, with attitude toward mask wearing and likelihood to wear a face mask as covariates. The results indicated nonsignificant main effects of face mask, $F(1, 562) = 2.43, p = .120$, and likelihood to wear a face mask, $F(1, 562) = 2.46, p = .118$, and significant main effects of occupation, $F(4, 562) = 13.00, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .085$, and attitude toward mask wearing, $F(1, 562) = 5.39, p = .021, \eta_p^2 = .010$. Importantly, a significant face mask \times occupation interaction emerged, $F(4, 562) = 2.54, p = .039, \eta_p^2 = .018$. That is, when Mary was a social media influencer, participants expressed more positive behavioral intentions toward her when she was wearing (vs. not wearing) a face mask, adjusted means: $M_{\text{face mask}} = 4.77$ versus $M_{\text{no face mask}} = 3.99$; $F(1, 562) = 11.60, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .020$. This difference disappeared in the remaining four occupational conditions ($ps \geq .406$; see Figure 3).

Mediation

Next, I explored the mediating role of competence inferences in the relationship between mask wearing and behavioral intentions. Because the previous analyses demonstrated that

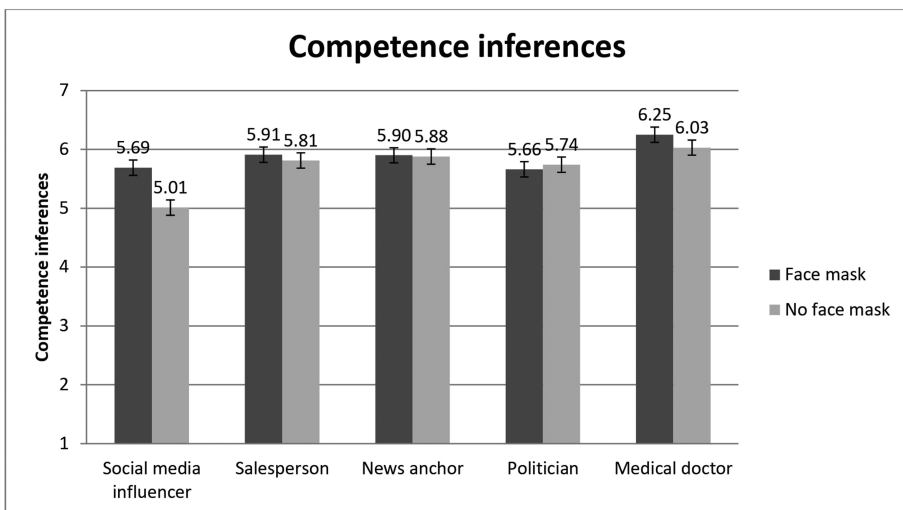


FIGURE 2 Competence inferences (Study 3). *Note:* The mean values displayed in the graph have been adjusted for covariates (i.e., attitude toward mask wearing and likelihood to wear a face mask)

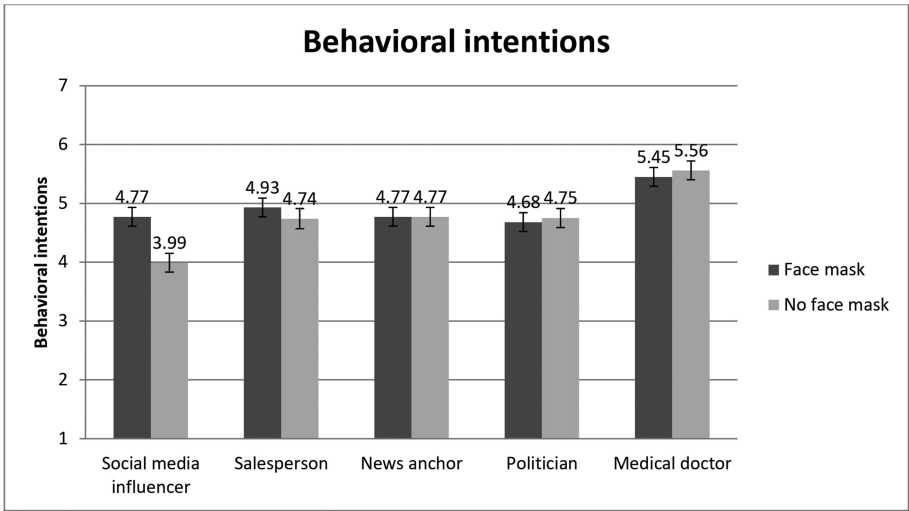


FIGURE 3 Behavioral intentions (Study 3). *Note:* The mean values displayed in the graph have been adjusted for covariates (i.e., attitude toward mask wearing and likelihood to wear a face mask)

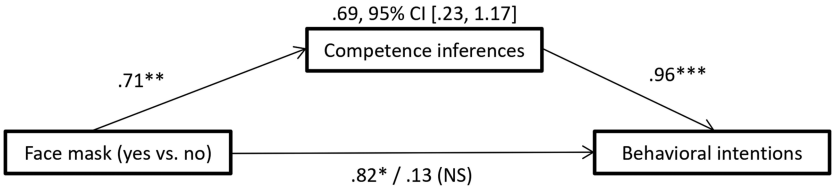


FIGURE 4 Mediation analysis (Study 3). *Note:* The regression coefficients are unstandardized. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

mask wearing only affected inferences about and intentions toward social media influencers, the analyses that follow included only the 115 participants randomly assigned to read about the social media influencer. As the first step, I conducted an independent samples t -test, whose results indicated significantly greater competence inferences made about a masked (vs. unmasked) social media influencer, $M_{\text{face mask}} = 5.72$ versus $M_{\text{no face mask}} = 5.01$; $t(113) = 3.05$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .076$. As the second step, I ran PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2018) with 10,000 bootstrap samples. I included face mask as the predictor, behavioral intentions as the outcome variable, and competence inferences as the mediator in the model. As expected, the indirect effect of face mask on behavioral intentions through competence inferences was significant (indirect effect = .69, 95% CI [.23, 1.17]; see Figure 4).

Discussion

Study 3 examined the effect of a face mask \times occupation interaction on competence inferences about and behavioral intentions toward a fictitious professional. Specifically, while a masked (vs. unmasked) social media influencer elicited greater competence inferences and behavioral intentions, this effect was mitigated in the case of the remaining four occupations. Furthermore,

this study provided evidence for the mediating role of competence inferences in the relationship between mask wearing by influencers and behavioral intentions toward those influencers.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The easy spread of COVID-19 has increased the use of face masks by the general public (Feng et al., 2020). While many people consider mask wearing a nuisance, this research suggests that disposable surgical masks in particular might be a blessing in disguise for social media influencers, a group of professionals often struggling to establish credibility (Bratu, 2019; Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019). Drawing on the theory of product symbolism (Aaker, 1997; Allen, 2002; Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998), I predicted and demonstrated that masked (vs. unmasked) influencers remind consumers of highly competent healthcare professionals, leading in turn to greater competence inferences about and more favorable intentions toward these influencers.

This research enriches extant literature on nonverbal communication in applied contexts (Bonaccio et al., 2016; Kidwell & Hasford, 2014; Puccinelli et al., 2010) by identifying mask wearing as a new form of nonverbal communication that is gaining prominence in these contexts. The findings suggest that just like a seller's attire or car (Scott et al., 2013), a social media influencer's face mask can alter consumer perceptions and intentions.

Answering calls for more academic work on influencer marketing (Taylor, 2020), this research establishes several important findings related to social media influencers. First, unlike the literature that provides evidence of influencers' perceived incompetence through the use of surveys (Bratu, 2019; Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019), this research employed an experimental approach that allowed for direct comparison of competence inferences across occupations. The findings provided robust evidence that, all else being equal, (unmasked) social media influencers are considered less competent than salespeople, news anchors, politicians, and medical doctors (see Figure 2). Second, this research identified mask wearing as one way to increase influencers' perceived competence, which plays a key role in the success of both the influencer and the promoted brand (Kim & Read, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Finally, the use of disposable surgical masks by non-medical professionals might be viewed as taking away resources from those who need them most (i.e., medical professionals), potentially resulting in negative inferences about the mask wearer. Paradoxically, in the case of social media influencers, wearing such masks results in a positive outcome manifested in elevated competence inferences and behavioral intentions.

In a broader context, this research also contributes to the literature on (non)conformity and competence inferences. While prior studies have shown that nonconforming (vs. conforming) behaviors lead to greater inferences of competence (Bellezza et al., 2014), the current research identifies a specific context in which a conforming behavior (i.e., wearing a mask during COVID-19) leads to greater competence inferences than a nonconforming behavior (i.e., not wearing a mask during COVID-19). Finally, this research also contributes to the growing stream of literature examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on attitudes and behaviors (Rigotti et al., 2021).

From a practical perspective, the results of this research imply that the simple act of wearing a mask can be a powerful tool that influencers can use in their favor. Many countries currently enforce mask wearing in public areas where social distancing is not possible (O'Grady, 2020), giving the public no freedom of choice with respect to wearing masks in such areas. By contrast,

social media influencers often take photos in secluded areas (e.g., home, private yacht, hotel room) where mask wearing is not enforced. This research suggests that to be viewed more favorably, influencers should stick with wearing masks even in these secluded areas.

While this research offers an initial exploration of mask wearing in the context of nonverbal communication, more work remains to be done. First, this research examined only one type of face masks. While the theorizing presented herein suggests that the predicted effect of mask wearing on competence inferences is triggered by disposable surgical masks (and not by other types of face coverings), additional empirical evidence is in order. To gather this evidence, future studies could manipulate the face mask type. Second, this research established that the predicted effect of mask wearing holds for social media influencers and not for other occupations, including salespeople, news anchors, politicians, and medical doctors. Additional research should investigate this effect in the context of occupations not examined herein. Third, while this research demonstrated the effect of mask wearing with fictitious influencers, examining this effect with real influencers would also be beneficial. Fourth, while this research ruled out the confounding effects of demographic variables and individual differences in mask wearing, future research might examine other individual differences (e.g., political affiliation, power distance belief) that might affect the effect of mask wearing on competence inferences. In a similar vein, future research might test alternative explanations driving the effect of mask wearing on competence inferences. One such alternative explanation could be the perception of the mask wearer as adhering to new moral norms introduced by COVID-19 (Prosser et al., 2020). To explore an array of potential underlying mechanisms, future studies could include an open-ended question asking participants why they believe the target is wearing a face mask. Future research could also explore warmth inferences about masked influencers, given that perceived warmth plays an important role in predicting admiration for influencers (Kim & Read, 2021). Since wearing a mask can make it challenging for influencers to display a broad smile (a predictor of perceived warmth; Wang et al., 2017), it is possible that masked influencers might not be perceived as warm. In addition to warmth inferences, future studies might explore other outcomes relevant to the context of influencer marketing and social media, such as consumers' following intentions (Balaban et al., 2020) and affiliation intentions (Klucarova & Hasford, 2021) toward masked influencers. Finally, this research drew conclusions based on studies conducted between April 2020 and January 2021. As the COVID-19 continues and mask wearing becomes even more omnipresent in Western societies, the symbolic meaning of different types of face masks might change, potentially affecting the generalizability of the current findings.

Taken together, this research suggests that apart from curbing the spread of COVID-19, mask wearing might prove beneficial to certain groups of professionals who have traditionally struggled to establish credibility. As the use of face masks becomes an everyday reality in many parts of the world, I invite scholars to further explore the nuances of mask wearing in applied settings.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was conducted in accordance with general ethical guidelines.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are available from the author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Sona Klucarova  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6400-7282>

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