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A review and agenda for future research

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Effects of consumer suspicion: a review and agenda for future research

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Abstract

Purpose – The objective is to identify the effects of suspicion as well as knowledge gaps, especially in noninterpersonal contexts. This study aims to propose a robust framework for future research. The overarching goal is to foster a comprehensive understanding of consumer suspicion, its implications and its potential avenues in the ever-evolving field of consumer behavior.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on a focused review of the literature, this study synthesizes the effects of suspicion in interpersonal and noninterpersonal contexts to unveil its importance for consumer behavior.

Findings – The cognitive, affective and behavioral effects of suspicion are identified. Furthermore, a discernible imbalance is observed, as the predominant focus on interpersonal consumer contexts leaves a significant gap in the comprehension of how consumers navigate and perceive suspicion in noninterpersonal interactions. This topic is important especially in an era dominated by complex brand interrelationships and digital touchpoints. Also, the operationalization of the suspicion construct in a plethora of studies seems to be suboptimal, suggesting a need for improvements with respect to its dynamic nature. In this regard, this review provides insightful directions to advance research in the abovementioned domains.

Research limitations/implications – The synthesis of the findings of the empirical articles did not focus on variations in consumer suspicion across different cultures or regions. In addition, the dynamic nature of suspicion and the evolving landscape of consumer behavior mean that findings and implications may require periodic reassessment to maintain relevance. Also, this review did not delve into the methodological diversities across the studies examined.

Practical implications – This review offers marketers and businesses critical insights into the consumer suspicion dynamics. By understanding these nuances, companies can tailor strategies to mitigate suspicion and optimize consumer relationships.

Originality/value – Through synthesizing the effects of suspicion and providing avenues for future research, this study significantly contributes to consumer behavior literature.

Keywords Consumer psychology, Marketing, Consumer behavior, Operationalization, Consumer suspicion, Focused review

Paper type Literature review

1. Introduction

In an era characterized by rapidly evolving consumer landscapes, shaped by the propagation of digital technologies, heightened awareness of corporate ethics and an ever-expanding array of consumer choices, the role of *suspicion* in influencing consumer behavior has emerged as a topic of paramount importance (Janssen *et al.*, 2022; Siano *et al.*, 2017). More particularly, corporate scandals like the "Dieselgate" involving Volkswagen in 2015 cheating laboratory emissions testing (Siano *et al.*, 2017), or the Cambridge Analytica in 2018, raising concerns about data privacy and transparency in political processes (Huang and Rust, 2021), and the 2017 Equifax data breach (Novak and Vilceanu, 2019), which compromised the personal information of millions of consumers, leave individuals in a state of suspicion as they strive to uncover the truth. These events, among others, demand for transparency, illustrating the critical need to understand and address the implications of suspicion in the marketplace. Given these examples, the importance of investigating the construct and effects of suspicion becomes evident, as understanding consumer suspicion can offer valuable insights into developing more transparent and ethical business practices.

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Suspicion has been perceived as a prerequisite to acquiring knowledge according to past philosophers (Hume, 1748/2000). Suspicion is defined as the psychological state under which individuals entertain ulterior motives that could explain one's behavior (Fein *et al.*, 1990; Fein, 1996; Kim and Levine, 2011). The notion of suspicion includes an individual's experience of ambiguity regarding another's behavior as she/he entertains rival interpretations simultaneously about it (Sinaceur, 2010). Suspicious perceivers think actively and systematically to interpret another actor's behavior activating an attributional mindset (Fein, 1996), and evaluating the different motives and alternatives in an attempt to avoid deception (McCornack and Levine, 1990). Imagine, for instance, a consumer is shopping online for a new smartphone. They come across a website selling the latest model at a price significantly lower than other retailers. Despite the tempting offer, they start feeling suspicious. They wonder if the website is legitimate or if the phone might be counterfeit or stolen. This suspicion leads them to conduct further research: they check the website's reviews, look for customer feedback and verify the site's security measures. Only after gathering enough information to alleviate their suspicion, they feel comfortable making a purchase.

Over the past 30 years, suspicion has been a subject of considerable academic inquiry, yet its specific implications have remained rather underexplored in various consumer research contexts (Bobko *et al.*, 2014; Petrescu *et al.*, 2022). This research gap is principally noteworthy given the pivotal role that consumer suspicion, defined as the suspicion perceived by the consumer (Kirmani and Zhu, 2007; Petrescu *et al.*, 2022) plays in shaping purchasing decisions, trust dynamics, brand and marketplace interactions. Indeed, consumer suspicion has recently attracted attention in the research areas of sales, marketing, consumer psychology and communication. Yet, a comprehensive examination of the consequences of suspicion within consumer contexts remains absent in the extant literature, rendering prior research notably incomplete.

Considering this, in this review, we seek to provide an overview of the pivotal role of suspicion in consumer behavior, delving into its effects, theoretical underpinnings, contemporary relevance and the pressing need for further research of its effects within specific consumer contexts. Thus, in this study, we provide a *focused review* of the literature of consumer suspicion in interpersonal and noninterpersonal contexts. We highlight that, upon synthesis of the findings, a discernible imbalance emerges, as the predominant focus on interpersonal settings leaves a significant gap in our comprehension of how consumers navigate and perceive suspicion in noninterpersonal interactions (i.e. toward the firm or brand), especially in an era dominated by complex brand interrelationships and digital touchpoints. Furthermore, the operationalization of the suspicion construct in a plethora of studies seems to be suboptimal, suggesting a need for improvements with respect to its dynamic nature. Such a review is not merely academic in its implications, but also instrumental in shaping future marketing strategies, communication paradigms and, essentially, the foundation of consumer–brand relationships in the evolving marketplace.

The subsequent sections of this paper are structured as follows: We initiate to disentangle the notion of consumer suspicion from related constructs to reach a better understanding of it (Section 2). Then, a Methodology section is provided delineating the methods employed in our investigation (Section 3). This is followed by the Findings section, which presents the results derived from the analysis (Section 4). Subsequently, in the General Discussion (Section 5), we highlight potential avenues for future research. We also address the inherent research limitations encountered during our study. We then conclude summarizing the key insights and implications of our research.

2. Disentangling suspicion from related constructs

Consumer suspicion serves as a valuable mechanism for promoting transparency, accountability and informed decision-making in the marketplace. Under the state of suspicion, consumers are encouraged to question, investigate and validate claims, prompting cautious decision-making and encouraging thorough research, leading to more informed choices. This cautious mindset helps individuals avoid potential scams, fraud or low-quality products that may not meet their expectations. Suspicion is an "important yet relatively uninvestigated topic in the social sciences" (Bobko *et al.*, 2014, p. 1); however, it appears to be often associated with constructs such as distrust, uncertainty and skepticism. Clarifying the distinctions among these constructs is vital for a more thorough investigation and comprehension of the notion of suspicion.

2.1 Facets of suspicion

First, it is essential to address the presence of three distinct constructs of suspicion as identified by Levine and McCornack (1991): generalized communicative suspicion, situationally aroused and lie bias. Generalized suspicion refers to individuals' tendency toward believing that messages conveyed by others are deceitful and is considered a cognitive construct that is consistent and, enduring (Levine and McCornack, 1991). Previous research in that stream focuses on the effects of consensus information and brand familiarity on e-tailers' trustworthiness when introducing generalized suspicion (Benedicktus *et al.*, 2010) and on the interplay between generalized and specific suspicion on deceptive advertising (Xie, 2016). The second aspect, known as lie bias is defined as a cognitive predisposition to interpret and decode all messages that are presented within a specific context as deceitful (McCornack, 1988; Bond and Lee, 2005). The last facet of suspicion, central to the focus of the present review, is state suspicion triggered by cues within a particular context (i.e. interpersonal or noninterpersonal) and involves a response to contextual cues perceived as deceptive (Levine and McCornack, 1991).

2.2 Distrust versus suspicion

Academic researchers in the fields of marketing, consumer behavior, psychology and conflict resolution (Deutsch, 1958; Fein and Hilton, 1994; Fein, 1996; Schul *et al.*, 1996; Darke and Ritchie, 2007), do not differentiate between suspicion and distrust and use the two terms interchangeably without any differentiation. However, Kramer (1998) in his seminal work on Paranoid Cognition first attempts to disentangle the two constructs summarizing that distrust is an active psychological state characterized by a lack of confidence in an actor's trustworthiness resulting in potential harm (Deutsch, 1958; Rotter, 1980). As Govier (1993, p. 160) highlights "When one distrusts, one is fearful and suspicious as to what the other might do."

More recently, Sinaceur (2010), in the context of negotiations, emphasized the differentiation between distrust and suspicion. His work points out suspicion's unique attributes revealing that suspicion not only differs from distrust, but it lies at the mid-point within a trust/distrust continuum of trust judgments. In other words, suspicion represents the maximum of an inverted relationship regarding conscious attribution motives giving way to either trust or distrust. This underscores suspicion's distinct nature of distrust (Sinaceur, 2010).

To disentangle the two notions, let us imagine the following scenario: a consumer considers subscribing to a new streaming service. They come across a promotional offer that seems too good to be true: unlimited access to all their favorite shows and movies for an incredibly low monthly fee. Initially, they feel suspicious about the offer. They wonder how the company can afford to provide such extensive content at such a low price. This suspicion prompts them to read through the terms and conditions carefully, look for reviews from other subscribers and research the company's track record in providing quality service. As they delve deeper, they uncover some concerning information. They find numerous complaints from users about unexpected charges, poor customer service and frequent outages on the platform. This accumulation of negative feedback and red flags leads them to develop a sense of distrust toward the streaming service. Unlike suspicion, which involves a sense of uncertainty or caution, distrust is a stronger feeling of disbelief or lack of confidence in the company's intentions or ability to deliver on its promises. In this scenario, suspicion initially prompted the consumer to investigate further, but as they uncovered more information, it evolved into outright distrust due to the accumulation of negative evidence and experiences.

While both distrust and suspicion presuppose a certain level of lack of trust regarding the sincerity of one's motives, distrust is defined as negative expectations about another's motives (Deutsch, 1958; Rubin and Brown, 1975, Kramer, 1998; Sinaceur, 2010). More specifically, in the case of distrust (e.g. Lantieri and Chiagouris, 2009), lack of trust implies a definitive negative judgment of one's behavior (Deutsch, 1958) and is based on an information provision mechanism (DeCarlo *et al.*, 2013). Suspicion, on the contrary, is not a definitive judgment but entails a more conscious evaluation of motives leading to judgment suspension until sufficient information is gathered. Thus, it operates through an information search mechanism to determine whether to trust or distrust a certain source (Sinaceur, 2010). In this regard, consumers under the state of suspicion may provide brands with opportunities to address their concerns through additional information that they would need to eventually conclude a judgment.

2.3 Uncertainty versus suspicion

Another construct conceptually associated to suspicion is the one of uncertainty. Suspicion entails a level of uncertainty about the plausibility of a potential negative outcome (Kee and Knox, 1970) without reaching a conclusive judgment (Marchand and Vonk, 2005; Sinaceur, 2010). In other words, for an individual to become suspicious, the prerequisite is that she/he will first become uncertain in regard to the authenticity of an actor's motives. If there are no levels of uncertainty and the individual is certain about the genuineness of a behavior, then there is no suspicion experienced by the individual regarding the assessment

of a certain communication interaction as honest or deceptive (Kim and Levine, 2011).

Revisiting the previous scenario with a focus on distinguishing suspicion from uncertainty: Imagine a consumer considering subscribing to a new streaming service. They come across a promotional offer that seems too good to be true: unlimited access to all their favorite shows and movies for an incredibly low monthly fee. Initially, they feel suspicious about the offer. They wonder how the company can afford to provide such extensive content at such a low price. This suspicion prompts them to read through the terms and conditions carefully, look for reviews from other subscribers and research the company's track record in providing quality service. As they delve deeper, they find conflicting information. While some users praise the service for its affordability and wide selection of content, others express concerns about hidden fees and technical issues. This conflicting feedback leaves them feeling uncertain about whether to subscribe. In this scenario, suspicion initially prompted the consumer to investigate further, but the conflicting feedback and ambiguity surrounding the service's reputation left them uncertain about whether it would meet their expectations.

Thus, a key distinction between the two constructs is that while under uncertainty, individuals are not sure about something, under the state of suspicion, people go one step further and they start coming up with alternative motives and explanations that could explain one's behavior not being able to conclude in any judgment (Marchand and Vonk, 2005; Sinaceur, 2010). This is clearly underlined in previous research providing evidence that suspicion is a dynamic psychological state under which individuals at first have low levels of uncertainty in regard to the authenticity of one's motives (Marchand and Vonk, 2005). Based on additional cues being provided, the individuals slowly start wondering about the authenticity of motives behind a behavior, and uncertainty starts increasing. As more information is provided, participants become progressively less uncertain and more convinced about the presence of ulterior motives that could explain an actor's behavior.

The above theoretical grounds are in line with recent research showing that suspicion, as the attribution of ulterior motives, and uncertainty are not linearly related to each other (Craig *et al.*, 2012). Research from the area of neuroscience, using neuroimaging methods such as functional magnetic resonance imaging data, shows that low suspicious claims lead to lower levels of uncertainty as well as highly suspicious claims, since the individuals have reached a point where they have attributed ulterior motives to a certain behavior (Craig *et al.*, 2012). In contrast, participants under moderate levels of the state of suspicion, entertaining rival alternatives that could explain one's behavior, do not incline in any direction (trust vs distrust), reaching the highest levels of uncertainty. To sum up, even though suspicion does entail the aspect of uncertainty, the two constructs differ from each other following an inverted curvilinear relationship (Marchand and Vonk, 2005; Craig *et al.*, 2012). In summary, while suspicion may contribute to feelings of uncertainty and uncertainty is a requirement for one to enter the psychological state of suspicion, the focus and implications of these two constructs are distinct because uncertainty revolves mostly around certain lack of information or predictability without any entertainment of ulterior motives being attributed.

2.4 Skepticism versus suspicion

Skepticism coming from the Greek word "skeptomai" meaning to think, to consider, to examine (Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013) is another construct that is often associated with suspicion but is qualitatively distinct from it (Bae, 2018; Ford *et al.*, 1990; Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013). In a seminal study, Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998, 160) define skepticism toward advertising as "the tendency toward disbelief of advertising claims", being dependent on the personality traits of cynicism and self-esteem. It is perceived as a consistent marketplace belief under which consumers believe that advertising can be trusted to some degree. More recently, Obermiller *et al.* (2005) further refined their definition of skepticism as the inclination and willingness to distrust informational advertising claims highlighting a tendency to refrain from blindly believing claims. In addition, recent studies on skepticism define the construct as the tendency to doubt and question product information (Cho *et al.*, 2018). Such skepticism might arise either due to the perceived truthfulness of advertising claims or due to the value of the information or due to the perceived appropriateness of certain advertising claims for audiences such as children, or for specific products (e.g. cigarettes or alcohol) (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998).

Furthermore, extensive research into skepticism characterizing it as a negative context-specific, cognitive facet of consumer attitudes toward various areas such as green advertising (e.g. Leonidou and Skarmeas, 2015; Yu, 2018; Manuel *et al.*, 2014; Mohr *et al.*, 1998), sustainability (e.g. Cho and Taylor, 2020; Cho *et al.*, 2024), corporate social responsibility and cause-related marketing (e.g. Amawate and Deb, 2021; Connors *et al.*, 2017; Bae, 2018; Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013; Newman and Trump, 2019), social media (e.g. Luo *et al.*, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2019) and online reviews (e.g. Ahmad and Guzmán, 2021; Sher and Lee, 2009). From the above theoretical grounds, while skepticism and suspicion could be related constructs, skepticism is a broader tendency of questioning claims and does not inherently entail suspicion, whereas suspicion arises by an immediate situation (Xie, 2016).

3. Methodology

We used the paradigm of a focused review (Roembke *et al.*, 2023; Taylor *et al.*, 2016) to analyze and synthesize the concepts and theories most relevant to the effects of suspicion in a consumer context. A focused review is characterized by its targeted examination of a specific set of literature that is highly pertinent to the research focus at hand, thereby providing concise and specific insights into the subject matter. The originality of this focused review lies in its targeted synthesis of current literature to address a specific research gap, namely, to synthesize on the effects of suspicion in a consumer context, to identify research gaps and to provide clear directions for future research.

To compile the relevant literature for this focused review, we conducted a literature search on reputable academic databases, including Scopus and Google Scholar. Keyword combinations used in the search included "consumer suspicion," "customer suspicion," "suspicion" AND "consumer behavior" OR "consumer psychology." This search was conducted to identify articles published between 1990 and 2023, ensuring the inclusion

of seminal articles together with a focus on recent developments and trends in the field.

We defined specific criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of literature. Specifically, literature written in the English language was considered. Only literature with full-text articles accessible for assessment was retained. Articles published in peer-reviewed international academic journals and conference papers were considered for inclusion. Articles that merely mentioned consumer suspicion in passing without offering substantial insights or only cited suspicion-related literature without further development were excluded from the analysis. Also, articles which discussed primarily the effects of other constructs that are conceptually different than suspicion (see Chapter 2) instead of focusing on the effects of suspicion were not retained. In addition, publications in noninternational journals, preprints or those lacking peer-reviewed status were excluded.

This process resulted in 40 records. After removing duplicate records, only those articles deemed to have direct relevance to the effects of consumer suspicion were selected for further review. To augment the pool of selected literature, a cited search was conducted. This involved employing a snowball technique to explore citations within the initially selected articles, as well as identifying and retaining relevant papers that cited these articles. This iterative process helped identify additional sources that contributed to the comprehensive understanding of suspicion's effects in a consumer context.

Through the abovementioned process, a total of 24 articles were identified and retained for this focused review (see Figure 1 and Table 1 for the pool of retained articles). These selected articles served as the foundation for synthesizing critical concepts and insights pertaining to the effects of consumer suspicion within the context of fields such as consumer psychology, cognition, judgment and decision-making.

4. Findings

Following the methodology section, we identified and synthesized the findings from the selected papers. This allowed us to extract and aggregate the primary themes and observations related to suspicion's effects in consumer contexts. This integrative approach not only aims to consolidate the diverse insights from the literature but also to identify recurring patterns, and emergent trends in the academic discourse surrounding consumer suspicion.

4.1 Cognitive, affective and behavioral effects of suspicion

Based on the synthesis of the pool of articles and inspired from Panigyraki (2020), we clustered the identified effects of suspicion into three primary categories: cognitive effects, affective effects and behavioral effects.

4.1.1 Cognitive effects of consumer suspicion

Attributional thinking, characterized as an intricate cognitive process (Fein *et al.*, 1990; Hilton *et al.*, 1993), stands out as an established cognitive effect of suspicion. Under states of suspicion, people, striving to rationalize another's actions, formulate alternative reasons that could potentially explain such behavior. This leads to a depletion of cognitive resources (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000) but simultaneously prompts heightened cognitive activity (Fein, 1996; Marchand and

Figure 1 Flowchart of the study selection process
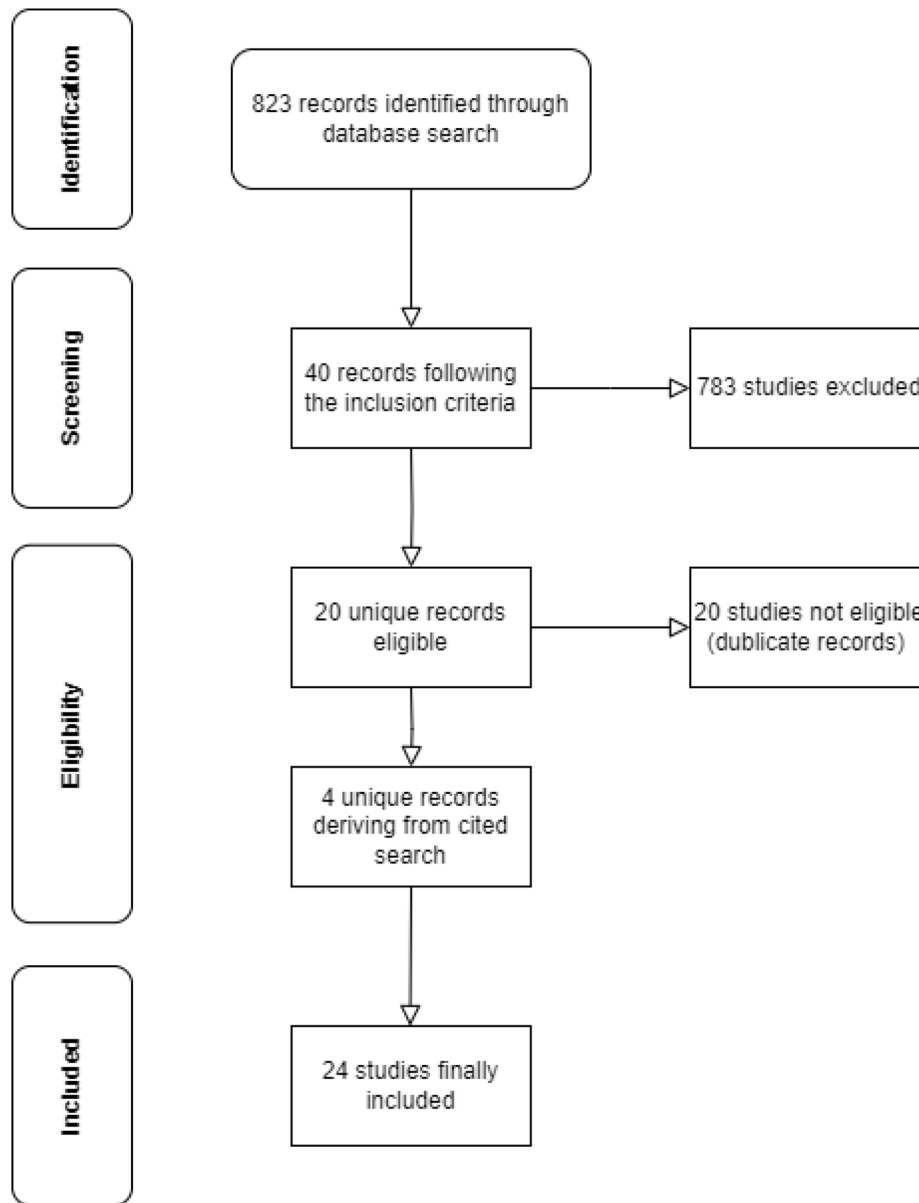
Source: Authors' own work

Vonk, 2005; Main *et al.*, 2007). Notably, contemporary neuroscience studies have highlighted two distinctive brain activity patterns under suspicion:

1 early-stage precuneus activation; and
2 superior temporal sulcus and temporal-parietal junction activation, underscoring significant cerebral engagement during suspicious instances (Craig *et al.*, 2012).

Furthermore, deception detection efficacy is heightened among moderately suspicious individuals. Research suggests that participants with a moderate suspicion index can more accurately discern between truthful and deceptive statements in video-recorded interviews (McCornack and Levine, 1990). Hence, an air of suspicion proves advantageous for unmasking deceit (e.g. McCornack and Levine, 1990; Fein, 1996). Suspicion has also

been shown to potentially negatively affect attitude formation process (DeCarlo, 2005; Friestad and Wright, 1994; Kirmani and Campbell, 2004).

Suspicion has been found to aid in diminishing correspondence bias. This is because suspicious individuals often exhibit a heightened capacity to peer beyond superficial presentations (Fein *et al.*, 1990; Fein, 1996), a trait not as pronounced in their nonsuspicious counterparts. Previous research also shows the effects of suspicion on judgment suspension until individuals have more information about the actors' motives (e.g. Marchand and Vonk, 2005; Sinaceur, 2010) and neuroimaging techniques show that under the state of suspicion cognitive processing terminates further elaboration of suspicious claims (Craig *et al.*, 2012). Campbell and

Table 1 Overview of suspicion studies in interpersonal and noninterpersonal contexts

Study	Independent variable(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Interpersonal vs product/brand context
McCornack and Levine (1990)	• Suspicion	• Deception detection	• Interpersonal
Hilton et al. (1993)	• Suspicion	• Correspondent inferences	• Interpersonal
Fein and Hilton (1994)	• Suspicion	• Judgment formation	• Interpersonal
Fein (1996)	• Suspicion	• Attributional thinking • Correspondence bias • Attitude	• Interpersonal
Campbell and Kirmani (2000)	• Accessibility of ulterior motives • Cognitive capacity	• Salesperson sincerity perception	• Interpersonal
Marchand and Vonk (2005)	• Number of cues	• Judgment formation (actor evaluation)	• Interpersonal
DeCarlo (2005)	• Salience of ulterior motives: (high vs low) • Sales message (stronger vs weaker)	• Attitude toward the salesperson • Purchase intention	• Interpersonal
Yoon et al. (2006)	• Benefit salience of CSR activity • Information source • Company reputation (good vs bad) • CSR/advertising ratio (high vs low)	• Company evaluations • Inferred motives • Perceived suspicion	• Noninterpersonal
Kirmani and Zhu (2007)	• Regulatory focus (promotion vs prevention) • Salience of manipulative intent (low, moderate or high) • Suspicion (externally primed vs not)	• Brand attitude • Perceived quality • Depth of processing	• Noninterpersonal
Main et al. (2007)	• Flattery (no flattery control, flattery before purchase, flattery after purchase) • Cognitive load (high vs low)	• Persuasion knowledge	• Interpersonal
DeCarlo and Barone (2009)	• Mood (neutral vs positive) • Sales presentation (stronger vs weaker)	• Purchase intentions	• Interpersonal (scenario based)
Echebarria-Echabe (2010)	• Suspicion (low vs high – Study 1) • Argument strength (strong vs weak) • Suspicion measured as a dispositional trait – study	• Attitude acceptance	• Noninterpersonal (scenario-based)
Sinaceur (2010)	• Trust vs distrust • Certainty vs uncertainty • Suspicion (low vs moderate) • Conscious motive attributions	• Judgment suspension • Value creation	• Interpersonal context (scenario-based and role play)
Ferguson et al. (2011)	• Salience of alternative motive (high vs low) • Behavior out-of-character	• Suspicion • Response behavior • Affect	• Interpersonal (scenario based)
Kim and Levine (2011)	• Suspicion (three levels)	• Deception detection accuracy • Truth-bias	• Interpersonal (interviews-based)
Craig et al. (2012)	• Cognitive load (low vs high) • Perceived deceptiveness (believable, moderately deceptive, highly deceptive)	• Recommendation likelihood • Purchase intention	• Noninterpersonal
DeCarlo et al. (2013)	• Salesperson compensation (salary-based vs compensation-based)	• Purchase intention • Salesperson trust • Suspicion-related attributions	• Interpersonal (role play-based)

(*continued*)

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Table 1

Study	Independent variable(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Interpersonal vs product/brand context
Xie (2016)	• Product recommendations (no-load vs. load mutual fund) • Advertising deceptiveness (high vs moderate) • Advertising skepticism (high vs low)	• Intrinsic distrust • Generalized suspicion • Advertisement-specific suspicion • Perceived advertising effectiveness • Self-others difference in perceived effectiveness	• Noninterpersonal (scenario-based)
Zhuang at al. (2018)	• Manipulation intensity (adding vs deleting online reviews)	• Product sales • Purchase intentions • Consumer suspicion	• Noninterpersonal
Petrescu et al. (2022)	• Attitude reviews Suspicion (mediator)	• Purchase intentions	• Noninterpersonal
Kollmer et al. (2022)	• Suspicion/deception	• Purchase intention	• Noninterpersonal
Harrison-Walker and Jiang (2023)	• Suspicion (review perceived as fake)	• Failure to complete the purchase	• Noninterpersonal
Ko and Bowman (2023)	• Brand strength, brand advertising effort, price and sales	• Likelihood of a suspicious online product review	• Noninterpersonal
Panigyraki et al. (2024)	• Judgment suspension	• Uncertainty toward the brand (mediator) • Product imagery (mediator)	• Noninterpersonal

Source: Authors' own work

Kirmani's research (2000) further demonstrates that suspicion toward salesperson tactics can subsequently impact consumers' perception of the salesperson negatively. Recent research shows how suspicion that can arise from potentially fake product reviews can lead to perceptions of lower product and brand quality (Zhuang *et al.*, 2018). That may result in consumers questioning (DeCarlo, 2005) or giving insufficient consideration to consumer reviews (Munzel, 2015), and ultimately lead to negative attitudes toward a brand impacting consumers' persuasion and the brand's overall reputation (Harrison-Walker and Jiang, 2023). Finally, research (Panigyraki *et al.*, 2024) reveals that moderate levels of suspicion result in significantly higher judgment suspension than both lower and higher levels of suspicion. This study offers empirical support for the notion that moderate consumer suspicion leads to the highest degrees of uncertainty, thus being unable to make an immediate decision.

4.1.2 Affective effects of consumer suspicion
Suspicion inherently elicits feelings of uncertainty paired with perceptions of malevolence (Bobko *et al.*, 2014). In line with Kee and Knox (1970), it is shown that under the state of suspicion, feelings of uncertainty rise and then fall as the individuals receive more information about an actor (McCornack and Levine, 1990; Marchand and Vonk, 2005). Suspicious individuals are worried about potentially being harmed or deceived (Darke *et al.*, 2008) and thus being led to feelings of self-defense to protect themselves from potential deception or harm (Xie, 2016). Most importantly, under the state of suspicion perceivers are highly alert to any information that could give meaning to one's behavior (Vonk, 1998). More

particularly, in the case that suspicion of ulterior motives is disconfirmed, individuals develop feelings of likeability toward the other actor, on the contrary, if suspicion is confirmed, then the actor is perceived as dislikable.

Furthermore, uncertainty, especially when coupled with potential adverse outcomes (perceptions of malevolence), subsequently causes higher levels of emotional arousal, including feelings of stress and threat by another actor (see also Bobko *et al.*, 2014). This, in turn, can induce elevated emotional arousal states, provoking stress and perceived threats from another actor. Research shows that under the state of suspicion, individuals experience a potential lack of trustworthiness, which in turn leads to feelings of malevolence and decreased reliability (Benedicktus *et al.*, 2010) impacting familiar brands more than brands with lower levels of familiarity.

4.1.3 Behavioral effects of consumer suspicion
From a behavioral perspective, Sinaceur (2010) stands out as the seminal article that presents empirical evidence for suspicion propelling a stronger inclination toward information-seeking behaviors to affirm or refute the genuineness of an actor's intent. Also, as unveiled by DeCarlo *et al.* (2013), suspicion often drives individuals to seek further information, ultimately guiding their judgments about an actor's underlying intentions. Moreover, suspicion has been shown to indirectly impact purchase intentions through its influence on attitudes toward salespeople (DeCarlo *et al.*, 2013; Kollmer *et al.*, 2022; Harrison-Walker and Jiang, 2023).

A summary of the effects of suspicion is presented below in Table 2.

Table 2 Summary of effects of consumer suspicion

Category	Effect
Cognitive	• Increased attributional thinking (Fein *et al.*, 1990; Hilton *et al.*, 1993) • Decreased correspondence bias (Fein, 1996; Marchand and Vonk, 2005) • Decreased cognitive resources (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000) • Negative attitude toward salesperson tactics (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000) • Detection of deception (McCornack and Levine, 1990; Fein, 1996) • Perceptions of lower product quality (Zhuang *et al.*, 2018) • Questioning consumer reviews (DeCarlo, 2005) • Underweighting consumer reviews (Munzel, 2015) • Decreased reputation perceptions (Harrison-Walker and Jiang, 2023) • Terminates elaboration of claims (Craig *et al.*, 2012) • Decreased persuasion (Harrison-Walker and Jiang, 2023) • Activates persuasion knowledge (Harrison-Walker and Jiang, 2023) • Judgment suspension (Panigyraki *et al.*, 2024)
Affective	• Fear and anxiety (Bobko *et al.*, 2014) • Increase of (mal)intent and uncertainty (Kee and Knox, 1970; Bobko *et al.*, 2014) • Stress and threat (Bobko *et al.*, 2014) • Worry (Darke and Ritchie, 2007) • Self-defense (Xie, 2016) • Alertness (Vonk, 1998) • Dislikability of the reviewer of online reviews (Harrison-Walker and Jiang, 2023) • Lack of trustworthiness (Benedictus *et al.*, 2010)
Behavioral	• Information search (Sinaceur, 2010; DeCarlo *et al.*, 2013) • Decreased purchase intentions (DeCarlo, 2005; Kollmer *et al.*, 2022; Harrison-Walker and Jiang, 2023)

Source: Authors' own work

4.2 Suspicion in an interpersonal context

A significant majority of prior research on suspicion assumes an interpersonal communication context (McCornack and Levine, 1990; Fein and Hilton, 1994; Fein, 1996; Campbell and Kirmani, 2000; Marchand and Vonk, 2005; DeCarlo, 2005; Kirmani and Zhu, 2007; Main *et al.*, 2007; DeCarlo and Barone, 2009; Sinaceur, 2010; DeCarlo *et al.*, 2013). Interpersonal interactions are assumed between at least two actors. For instance, in the field of social psychology, many studies take place between partners and coworkers, or even between citizens and institutions (e.g. Van Prooijen *et al.*, 2022) while in the case of marketing, the interactions are between a salesperson and consumers or observers.

From this interpersonal perspective, earlier research on the topic of suspicion mostly focused on the field of social psychology (e.g. Fein and Hilton, 1994; Fein, 1996; Marchand and Vonk, 2005; DeCarlo and Barone, 2009; Ham and Vonk, 2011). However, the emerging notion of consumer suspicion has recently attracted research interest on the fields of sales, marketing, communication, consumer research, consumer psychology and business ethics (e.g. Campbell and Kirmani, 2000; DeCarlo, 2005; Yoon *et al.*, 2006; Main *et al.*, 2007; Ferguson *et al.*, 2011; DeCarlo *et al.*, 2013). These previous research lines have established the effects of suspicion and similar constructs (e.g. salience or accessibility of ulterior motives) on, for instance, attitudes toward a salesperson (DeCarlo, 2005), deception detection accuracy (Kim and Levine, 2011) and attitude acceptance (Echebarria-Echabe, 2010).

Notably, evidence from persuasion research on sales (e.g. Darke and Ritchie, 2007) focuses on the effects of the sales message and consumer's suspicion of ulterior motives on salesperson evaluations. For example, DeCarlo (2005) investigated the effects of the strength of a sales message and its impact on the salience of ulterior motives during a sales interaction. His findings revealed that, when participants attributed ulterior motives to the salespeople's behavior, their attitude toward the salesperson was more positive when the salesperson provided a weaker than a stronger sales message. Furthermore, the higher the salience of ulterior motives (e.g. personal selling) was, the more positive was the evaluation of a salesperson when the salesperson used a weaker than a stronger sales message. Previous research has also investigated a salesclerk's smile as a factor that raises consumer suspicion (Abel and Abel, 2007), and that suspicion increases when a male salesperson smiles to a male consumer, compared to a female one, because men do not smile as often as women do (LaFrance and Hecht, 2000).

Moreover, Ferguson *et al.* (2011) examined the relationship between consumer suspicion and perceptions of fairness of prices in times of crisis and unveiled that suspicion may arise when other explanations for motives, regarding the increase of the price of a certain product in times of crisis, are plausible. This may lead to stronger negative affect toward the retailer. In addition, DeCarlo *et al.* (2013) studied consumer suspicion as arising from knowledge about the salespersons' commission when they sell financial services. Their findings indicate that when consumers have a high level of knowledge about a specific product, greater suspicion arises when they interact with a salesperson compensated with higher commissions (DeCarlo *et al.*, 2013).

Campbell and Kirmani (2000) focused on consumers' ease of accessibility of ulterior motives and cognitive capacity. The researchers revealed that during a sales interaction, an observer, who has more cognitive capacity than an actual consumer, will be more suspicious toward a salesperson attributing their behavior to extrinsic motives such as to achieve persuasion and thus perceiving him/her as less sincere. The effects of flattery by sales agents on consumer suspicion have also been investigated (Main *et al.*, 2007), showing that consumers are often led to a certain amount of attribution error, as suspicion arose even though there was no plausible ulterior sales motive.

4.3 Consumer suspicion in a noninterpersonal context

Surprisingly little research has examined how consumer suspicion influences subsequent judgment in a noninterpersonal

context (i.e. toward a firm, product or brand). Up until now, only a handful of articles (e.g. Yoon *et al.*, 2006; Craig *et al.*, 2012; Xie, 2016; Petrescu *et al.*, 2022; Kollmer *et al.*, 2022; Harrison-Walker and Jiang, 2023 – see Table 1 for details) have been identified to investigate suspicion or similar constructs without assuming an interaction between individuals but through focusing on an interaction between an individual and a brand or a product.

For example, based on theories of attribution and suspicion, Yoon *et al.* (2006) investigated the effects of corporate social responsibility (CSR) on companies with bad reputation and provide empirical evidence showing that high benefit salience of a CSR campaign's cause hurts the company when consumers learn about it from a company source and not from an independent one.

Furthermore, research on the field of marketing research and neuroscience unveiled the effects of communication messages of varying suspicion levels on consumers' cognitive coping mechanisms (Craig *et al.*, 2012) and unveiled that brain activation under moderate levels of suspicion is significantly greater in comparison to low and high levels. Past work focusing on the interplay of consumer suspicion as a state and as a personality trait on consumers' perception about advertising claims, shows that consumers perceive highly suspicious communication messages to be more effective for others than for themselves (Xie, 2016). In contrast, under low and moderately suspicious advertising claims, the difference between how the self vs others would perceive the communication was moderated by consumers' advertising skepticism.

More recent empirical work by Zhuang *et al.* (2018), Petrescu *et al.* (2022), Harrison-Walker and Jiang (2023) and Ko and Bowman (2023) in the context of online reviews, shows that suspicion can have a negative effect on product quality perceptions, consumer attitude formation and purchase intentions and suggest potential ways to overcome it.

Finally, research by Panigyraki *et al.* (2024) experimentally investigates the impact of varying levels of consumer suspicion (low, moderate and high) on judgment suspension. The findings indicate that moderate levels of suspicion result in significantly greater judgment suspension compared to low or high levels showing that uncertainty toward the brand mediates the effect of suspicion on judgment suspension. In addition, the influence of uncertainty toward the brand on judgment suspension is found to be mediated by product imagery. The low number of these prior studies provide support for the notion that researchers may have overlooked the important question of how consumer suspicion influences judgment in noninterpersonal contexts.

4.4 On the dichotomous nature of suspicion

In terms of operationalization, prior research (e.g. DeCarlo *et al.*, 2013; Ferguson *et al.*, 2011; Harrison-Walker and Jiang, 2023; Zhuang *et al.*, 2018) has tended to overlook the construct's dynamic nature (McCornack and Levine, 1990), and has mostly measured it (Ferguson *et al.*, 2011) or operationalized it as a binary construct by experimentally manipulating it in either low or high levels.

This dichotomous (high versus low/no suspicion) research approach seems to be problematic; it assumes that individuals who are exposed to the high suspicion experimental treatment are led to a lie-bias and/or outright distrust (McCornack and Levine, 1990;

Marchand and Vonk, 2005), accompanied by low levels of uncertainty during the judgment formation process. At the same time, individuals exposed to no suspicion conditions or to extremely low suspicion manipulation are led to truth bias (McCornack and Levine, 1990), believing each message to be truthful. This operationalization results in low levels of uncertainty during judgment formation, as it does not allow participants to actively consider multiple, plausible rival hypotheses regarding the genuineness of a certain behavior (Fein, 1996). Hence, it contrasts with the definition of suspicion, hindering our comprehension of how individuals manage in a state of suspicion, which inherently involves increased levels of uncertainty. Inspired by Kim and Levine (2011), a critical next step in the operationalization of consumer suspicion may be to build on enabling the discrimination between varying levels of intensity of suspicion, with respect to its dynamic nature.

5. General discussion

5.1 Directions for future academic research

To date, most research has studied the effects of consumer suspicion in interpersonal contexts, thus paying less attention on potential effects in noninterpersonal contexts, such as toward a brand or firm. Furthermore, as discussed above, the dichotomous operationalization of the focal construct raises concerns about its optimality. Below, we provide five notable research recommendation for future research.

First, while prior research on consumer suspicion has mainly unveiled that suspicion leads to negative evaluations, such as negative attitudes toward a salesperson (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000; DeCarlo, 2005) or to negative affect toward a retailer due to a price increase (Ferguson *et al.*, 2011), future research can focus on unveiling the potential positive effects of consumer suspicion as well, especially in noninterpersonal contexts. For instance, drawing on prior theory from suspicion in the context of social psychology (e.g. Kramer, 1998; Schul *et al.*, 1996), researchers may examine how suspicion increases consumers' rational information search about a product or brand, therefore decreasing the reliance on the affect heuristic (e.g. Slovic *et al.*, 2007) or on heuristic information processing (Tiedens and Linton, 2001; Darke and Ritchie, 2007; Faraji-Rad and Pham, 2017). An avenue for future research may also pertain, in the context of judgment and decision-making, to the investigation of the effects of consumer suspicion on hedonic forecasting processes and outcomes (Wilson and Gilbert, 2003; Kahneman and Thaler, 2006; Polyportis *et al.*, 2020).

Another recommendation for future inquiry in a noninterpersonal context refers to the effects of consumer suspicion in the context of marketing communications and sustainable consumer behavior. To answer the demand for more sustainable products (Pickett-Baker and Ozaki, 2008), companies sometimes wrongly advertise their products as sustainable, which is also referred to as greenwashing (Parguel *et al.*, 2011). Specifically, greenwashing corresponds to consumer attributions of a mismatch between the corporate environmental performance of a company and its green advertising communications (Delmas and Burbano, 2011; Polyportis *et al.*, 2022). While in the context of greenwashing, skepticism toward green claims, indicating consumers' general tendency to doubt corporate environmental claims, has been

extensively studied (Nguyen *et al.*, 2019; Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013), the specific state of suspicion – triggered by certain cues in marketing communications – remains under-investigated. Suspicion, in this context, operates as a critical lens through which consumers scrutinize the authenticity and underlying motives behind a company's sustainability claims (Parguel *et al.*, 2011). In this regard, understanding the dynamics of consumer suspicion in the face of greenwashing could offer novel insights into how consumers navigate and interpret sustainability claims, potentially influencing purchase intentions for sustainable products and brand perceptions. Future research could explore the immediate and nuanced effects of suspicion on consumer responses toward sustainable products, particularly those marketed by brands previously implicated in greenwashing or with indications of dubious motives. Also, understanding the role of transparency in mitigating suspicion and the potential for suspicion to either enhance or diminish the impact of genuine sustainability efforts on consumer behavior could further enrich the discourse on sustainable consumer behavior and greenwashing. The potential moderating effects of brand trust (Delgado-Ballester and Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2005) and other brand concepts (i.e. unique meanings and associations with the brand; Torelli *et al.*, 2012) could also be explored in this context.

Third, given that such the aforementioned dichotomous operationalization of consumer suspicion (and suspicion in general) is followed without discriminating between two (high versus low/no) levels of intensity of the focal construct, it fails to allow observation of the full range of potential effects that consumer suspicion may have on various processes of judgment formation or suspension, such as deception detection (i.e. to distinguish true and false statements by individual; Kim and Levine, 2011; McCornack and Levine, 1990). On the contrary, the importance of investigating a moderate level of consumer suspicion lies on the fact that only under that moderate intensity, individuals may experience higher levels of uncertainty (Marchand and Vonk, 2005). Such higher uncertainty can have differential effects on cognitive engagement at an attempt to resolve uncertainty during the evaluation of one's behavior (Fein, 1996; Sinaceur, 2010). Future research needs to address the research gap of how consumers form or suspend judgments, in their attempt to resolve their uncertainty that derives from varied levels of suspicion (e.g. low versus moderate versus high).

Fourth, suspicion can result in affective consequences, such as feelings of uncertainty (Bobko *et al.*, 2014) and emotions such as fear of malintent. According to prior research on affect and decision-making (Lerner and Keltner, 2000; Lerner *et al.*, 2015), affective consequences of uncertain emotional states may influence not only the current judgment, but also subsequent judgments that are irrelevant to the context of suspicion generation. Indeed, previous academic discourse has established the key role of incidental emotional states (i.e. emotions that are unrelated to the current judgment) on later decision processes and outcomes (Lerner *et al.*, 2015; Västfjäll *et al.*, 2016; Polyportis *et al.*, 2020). The influence of incidental emotions is based on a carryover process from one situation to the next (Lerner and Keltner, 2000). From this perspective, it appears plausible that the affective repercussions of suspicion, such as uncertainty, may carry over and impact subsequent consumer experiences unrelated to the original source of suspicion. Future research could draw inspiration from the aforementioned prevalent theories on emotion and decision-making to uncover further effects of consumer suspicion in the context of sequential consumer choices (Mogilner *et al.*, 2013).

Fifth, the study of suspicion carries profound implications for emerging domains such as artificial intelligence (AI), chatbots and the metaverse. As these digital frontiers continue to develop, and trust in AI is a developing research trend (Glikson and Woolley, 2020; Polyportis and Pahos, 2024a, 2024b), the psychological effects of suspicion become increasingly relevant. Future research in AI and chatbots can explore how the design and behavior of AI technologies can either mitigate or exacerbate user suspicion. Understanding the factors that trigger suspicion in AI systems, and devising strategies to enhance user trust, will be crucial for their successful integration into various applications. Furthermore, the metaverse, with its immersive digital environments and social interactions (Mystakidis, 2022), presents a novel arena where suspicion may manifest uniquely. Examining how consumers perceive and respond to potential sources of suspicion within the metaverse is essential to foster positive experiences and ensure ethical interactions. Overall, future research should extend the study of suspicion to shed light on its implications in the rapidly evolving landscape of AI, chatbots and the metaverse, contributing to the responsible and ethical development of these technologies (Stahl and Stahl, 2021; Tigard, 2021).

5.2 Practical implications

Consumer suspicion, when properly addressed, can be transformed into an opportunity for businesses in the marketplace. Instead of viewing suspicion as a barrier, businesses can see it as an opportunity to build long-term customer relationships based on trust and loyalty. By proactively addressing concerns, providing transparent information and demonstrating commitment to ethical practices, companies can differentiate themselves from competitors and attract discerning consumers. Moreover, businesses can use consumer suspicion as a feedback mechanism to identify areas for improvement and innovate products or services that align more closely with consumer values and preferences. Embracing transparency, fostering open communication and prioritizing consumer trust can turn initial suspicion into long-term customer satisfaction and brand advocacy, ultimately driving success in the marketplace.

Understanding the effects of consumer suspicion has significant implications for the realms of consumer behavior, marketing, sales and brand strategy. From a pragmatic viewpoint, getting a grasp on the cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions of consumer suspicion is essential for businesses navigating an increasingly skeptical marketplace (Elving, 2013; Teah *et al.*, 2022). Skepticism often reflects a general disposition or broader doubt toward marketing communications, whereas suspicion tends to be a more specific, cue-triggered scrutiny of particular brand claims. This distinction underscores the importance for businesses to not only acknowledge the presence of a skeptical consumer base but also to precisely identify and address instances of suspicion. As consumer interactions, especially concerning sustainable consumer behavior or within digital marketplaces, grow in complexity, firms with a deep understanding of both the broad

skepticism and the targeted suspicions of their consumers can more effectively tailor their marketing communications, product presentations and service interactions. This strategic approach aims to directly mitigate underlying states of suspicion, thereby potentially enhancing consumer trust, promoting customer retention (Rosenberg and Czepiel, 1984) and fostering more authentic, enduring consumer–brand relationships.

Furthermore, the delineation of these effects offers a structured framework for corporate consumer engagement programs. Practitioners can leverage the provided classification to design targeted interventions addressing each of the effects of suspicion. For instance, understanding the cognitive effects of suspicion can guide the development of more transparent advertising campaigns, while insights into affective effects can inform customer service approaches to relieve consumer anxieties. In a similar vein, appreciating behavioral tendencies can aid businesses in anticipating and satisfying the information-seeking behaviors of suspicious consumers, thus proactively addressing concerns and building a foundation of credibility in the marketplace. In this regard, we suggest that stakeholders should conduct truthful green advertising campaigns to dispel consumer suspicion and target different consumer segments with tailor made green advertising and marketing campaigns to increase sales (Sun *et al.*, 2021).

5.3 Research limitations and conclusion

The present review, while comprehensive, does not come without limitations. In specific, the synthesis of the findings of the empirical articles did not focus on variations in consumer suspicion across different cultures or regions. In addition, the dynamic nature of suspicion and the evolving landscape of consumer behavior mean that findings and implications may require periodic reassessment to maintain relevance. Furthermore, the review did not delve into the methodological diversities across the studies examined, which might affect the interpretation of how suspicion influences consumer behavior across different contexts and study designs. These limitations highlight areas for future research and underscore the importance of adopting a multifaceted and culturally sensitive approach to studying consumer suspicion.

To conclude, suspicion, a fundamental psychological state, has been studied in diverse research domains. This research has explored the effects of consumer suspicion in interpersonal and noninterpersonal settings. Notably, the influence of consumer suspicion in noninterpersonal contexts has received limited attention, whereas opportunities for refining the construct's operationalization remain. Our recommendations for future research aim to inspire scholars to delve deeper into the effects of consumer suspicion in diverse contexts, fostering a more nuanced understanding of this crucial psychological state. Furthermore, from a practitioner's perspective, such enriched knowledge allows marketers, brand strategists and business professionals to craft consumer strategies that are not only responsive to contemporary challenges but are also anticipatory, paving the way for more resilient consumer-brand relationships.

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