

# On the curvilinear effect of suspicion on consumer judgement suspension: The role of uncertainty towards the brand and product imagery

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## Abstract

When exposed to advertisements, consumers are often suspicious of brand claims. To that end, prior research has explored how individuals evaluate claims to form a judgement under a state of suspicion. Yet, consumer research has not examined how suspicion affects consumers' suspension of their judgement towards the brand. We experimentally investigate the effects of three (low vs. moderate vs. high) levels of consumer suspicion on judgement suspension. Study 1 shows that compared with low or high levels, moderate levels of suspicion lead to significantly higher judgement suspension. Studies 2 and 3 replicate this inverted U-shaped effect for additional brand and product category contexts and unveil that uncertainty towards the brand mediates the effect of suspicion on judgement suspension. In turn, the impact of uncertainty towards the brand on judgement suspension is mediated by product imagery. This research corroborates the effects of suspicion on consumer judgement suspension.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, consumers are exposed to information from various sources such as news outlets, advertisements, and social media. Although information is abundant, its truthfulness is often questioned, creating problems in consumers' evaluation of advertised brands (Visentin et al., 2019). Corporate scandals such as Volkswagen's 'Dieselgate' (Parloff, 2018) and false advertising claims (Janssen et al., 2022; Luo et al., 2020; Siano et al., 2017) have infiltrated the public sphere and have led to high mass media coverage uncovering more and more cases of corporate inconsistencies (Darke et al., 2008; Suneson & Harrington, 2020). Such incidences have increased consumers' vigilance towards advertising claims and made them suspicious about the authenticity of brand motives behind certain

company messages (Xie, 2016). Drawing on prior research (Fein, 1996, p. 1165), we refer to *suspicion* as the dynamic state where individuals 'actively entertain multiple, plausible rival hypotheses about the motives or genuineness of one's behaviour'.

Prior research on suspicion has been conducted in the context of marketing and consumer research (e.g., Campbell & Kirmani, 2000), communication (e.g., Kim & Levine, 2011), social psychology (DeCarlo & Barone, 2009; Hilton et al., 1993), and negotiations (e.g., Sinaceur, 2010) mostly assuming an interpersonal context, with few exceptions (e.g., Petrescu et al., 2022; Zhuang et al., 2018). These previous research lines have highlighted the effects of suspicion on, for instance, attitudes towards a salesperson (DeCarlo, 2005), deception detection accuracy (Kim & Levine, 2011), attitude acceptance (Echebarria-Echabe, 2010), and recommendation likelihood (Craig et al., 2013). The main assumption of existing research is that under a state of suspicion, consumers readily form a final judgement. However, little is known about how consumers can react to varying

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intensity levels of suspicion to eventually postpone instead of forming their judgement in non-interpersonal brand contexts.

Aiming to address this gap, we examine an under-researched notion in consumer research, namely, *judgement suspension*. Judgement suspension refers to the (un)readiness to decide, otherwise, the tendency to postpone the (purchase) decision to a future date (Shu & Gneezy, 2010; Sinaceur, 2010). Judgement suspension is aligned with a notion endorsed by ancient Greek philosophers, named *epoché* (ἐποχή). According to the ancient philosopher Pyrrho, 'epoché' was the state under which all judgements for ambiguous matters are suspended until individuals have more information on the actor's motives (Suber, 1996). Until then, individuals are unable to neither deny nor affirm anything.

Exploring judgment suspension within consumer behaviour holds significant importance due to its relevance in understanding the complexities of decision-making processes. While deciding to purchase a product is related to a formed and immediate intention, judgment suspension pertains to the postponement of the purchase decision regardless of the outcome. Exploring the factors leading to and the mechanisms behind consumer judgment suspension provides crucial insights into phenomena that can obstruct or postpone purchase decisions. Such research can be invaluable for marketers and businesses seeking to comprehend and potentially mitigate judgment suspension tendencies, helping them to facilitate quicker and more successful product adoption, thereby enhancing overall market performance.

Judgement suspension can be closely related to suspicion since it includes recognising how uncertain the outcomes of a brand offering can be (Bernstein, 1998). By suspending their judgement, the suspicious consumer may be able to consider the brand message or evaluate the product on its own merits rather than making an immediate decision. Judgement suspension may also occur because present decision outcome costs seem much higher than future costs, and the benefit of completing the decision task is perceived as higher if such a task is postponed (Shu & Gneezy, 2010). However, as of today, scholarly research has not explored the effects of suspicion on the suspension of judgement, nor has it delved into the underlying mechanisms behind such effects.

Interestingly, a significant majority of research on suspicion (e.g., DeCarlo et al., 2013; Ferguson et al., 2011; Harrison-Walker & Jiang, 2023) has focused on measuring suspicion instead of manipulating it. Additionally, extant experimental research does not discriminate between different levels of intensity of suspicion, which does not allow for a deep understanding of how this state impacts consumer judgement suspension. It has mostly adopted a binary (i.e., no/low vs. high) operationalisation of suspicion that has identified linear effects (e.g., Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; DeCarlo, 2005). Instead, the present study has adopted a three-level (i.e., low vs. moderate vs. high) operationalisation of suspicion, which, to the best of our knowledge, has been overlooked in previous consumer-related literature. A similar approach has been followed by Kirmani and Zhu (2007, Study 1), who explored the effects of a neighbouring construct (i.e., manipulative intent) on brand evaluations and persuasion knowledge. Our three-level operationalisation addresses previous calls for

further research (e.g., Levine & McCornack, 1991) and, most importantly, facilitates the investigation of the state of suspicion under varying levels of uncertainty. Specifically, we expect that both low and highly suspicious brand claims lead to lower uncertainty towards the brand. Nonetheless, under a moderate level of suspicion, consumers are more likely not to be directly inclined in any direction (trust vs. distrust), reaching the highest levels of uncertainty towards the brand. Thus, the suggested three-level operationalisation (low vs. moderate vs. high) of suspicion allows us to investigate how consumers respond differently, in terms of judgement suspension, to brand claims that make the consumer more certain as well as claims that make the consumer more uncertain.

We contribute to previous literature by manipulating, instead of measuring, suspicion in three levels to unveil its curvilinear effects on consumer judgement suspension. Such an operationalisation provides greater control over the research environment, allowing for a more effective testing of causal relationships. We also investigate the underlying mechanism for this effect by unveiling how uncertainty towards the brand mediates the effect of suspicion on judgement suspension. Furthermore, we examine how product imagery (i.e., the process that consumers undergo to represent information in working memory; MacInnis & Price, 1987) mediates the effects of suspicion on judgement suspension. Finally, we test the underlined effects for both brand-induced and non-brand-induced suspicion manipulation to ensure the generalisability of the results.

The ensuing sections are organised as follows. First, we offer a theoretical overview of the role of suspicion in consumer research and develop the study's hypotheses and conceptual framework. Then, we present the experimental studies and analyse each study's design, measures, and results. The paper concludes by discussing the theoretical and managerial implications, the limitations, and future research propositions.

## 2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

### 2.1 | On suspicion

Suspicious individuals question the authenticity of the motives of the other actor's behaviour, entertaining rival interpretations about it (Sinaceur, 2010) and promoting the notion that the other actor might hide important information from them (Fein et al., 1990). Consequences of suspicion include incremental attributional thinking (Fein, 1996) and information search (Sinaceur, 2010).

The notion of suspicion is significantly less explored in a non-interpersonal brand context, which is also the approach of the present study. For instance, Kirmani and Zhu (2007) examined how the regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention) interacts with suspicion to affect brand attitude. In a similar vein, Craig et al. (2013) highlighted how communication messages of varying levels of suspicion influence consumers' coping mechanisms, showing that brain activation under moderate levels of suspicion is significantly greater compared to low

and high levels. Furthermore, Xie (2016) showed that consumers perceive highly suspicious communication messages to be more effective for others than for themselves, while other researchers (e.g., Harrison-Walker & Jiang, 2023; Petrescu et al., 2022; Zhuang et al., 2018) unveiled the effects of suspicion on attitude formation and purchase intentions in an online product review context. The research findings indicate that manipulating online product reviews by adding positive comments or deleting negative ones can initially boost sales but eventually arouse consumer suspicion, particularly when overdone, leading to decreased trust and adverse effects on purchase intentions (Zhuang et al., 2018). Interestingly, consumers rely on specific cues when suspecting whether an online review is fake. These cues may include, for example, disclosures that the reviewer was given a product discount for providing the review, or positive reviews that greatly outnumber the negative reviews (Harrison-Walker & Jiang, 2023).

We extend these lines of research by exploring the effects of suspicion on consumer judgement in a non-interpersonal brand context through an in-depth examination of the distinct effects of suspicion on judgement suspension. Table S1 of Appendix A presents the effects and underlying mechanisms of suspicion and related constructs based on prior research and highlights the contribution of the present study.

## 2.2 | Hypotheses development

Increased attributional thinking, defined as more complex and sophisticated attributional cognitive activity (Fein et al., 1990; Hilton et al., 1993), is a prominent cognitive mechanism underlying states of suspicion. In general, when human beings learn about the behaviour of an actor (hereby, brand) about whom they have little prior information, they usually take such behaviour at face value and attribute it dispositionally (Yoon et al., 2006). However, when consumers are suspicious, they avoid committing to such correspondent inferences about the other's positive disposition. Instead, they tend to generate multiple, plausible hypotheses about the motives behind a brand's claims and, in general, doubt the validity of information offered to them (Schul & Burnstein, 1990; Yoon et al., 2006). As a result, suspicious perceivers suspend their judgements until they can determine which brand claims are accurate.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) can provide useful insights into how consumers might react to varying levels of suspicion to suspend their judgement. The ELM suggests an 'elaboration continuum' ranging from low elaboration to high elaboration. Elaboration hereby refers to the extent to which consumers think about relevant arguments in a brand message regarding persuasion and final decision. The ELM predicts two distinct routes to persuasion, the 'central route', with higher elaboration likelihood and increased motivation to engage in relevant thinking (e.g., about the brand claim), and the 'peripheral route', with low elaboration likelihood (Petty & Briñol, 2011; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; also see Le et al., 2020). In the central route, consumers are expected to process information through a potentially greater depth of processing. In

contrast, in the peripheral route, consumers often take less time, through the potential use of heuristics or other cues, without any motivation for increased elaboration.

Based on the above theoretical foundations, the present research aims at extending prior research on suspicion. It predicts a non-linear effect of suspicion on consumer judgement suspension, such that the highest levels of judgement suspension will be experienced under moderate levels of suspicion. Our proposition is based on two main arguments. First, recent research shows that under low and high levels of suspicion, consumers easily reach a point where they have attributed (or not) ulterior motives to a specific brand claim (Craig et al., 2013). Specifically, under low levels of suspicion, consumers are expected to be led to a truth-bias, believing each message (i.e., advertising claim) to be truthful (Kim & Levine, 2011; McCornack & Levine, 1990). On the other hand, consumers experiencing a highly suspicious stimulus are often led to lie-bias and distrust because they interpret each message as untruthful information (Marchand & Vonk, 2005). Hence, for both low and high levels of suspicion, a peripheral route is expected to be activated, characterised by low elaboration. In this case, judgement formation regarding the brand claims is more likely than judgement suspension.

Second, when people are unable to be inclined towards a truth-bias or a lie-bias (i.e., under a moderate level of suspicion), they tend to perceive ulterior motives (Bobko et al., 2014; DeCarlo, 2005; DeCarlo et al., 2013; Hilton et al., 1993) and are motivated to entertain plausibly rival hypotheses about the genuineness of another actor's behaviour (Fein, 1996). Therefore, under a moderate level of suspicion, consumers may be vigilant to avoid making mistakes and prevent undesirable consequences from believing the brand claims, resembling a prevention focus strategy (Hsuan-Hsuan et al., 2012). For such reasons, consumers are expected to commit to more systematic thinking (Craig et al., 2013; Fein, 1996; Main et al., 2007) by processing information more cautiously and being willing to invest more effort during their decision-making process (e.g., Alter et al., 2007). Therefore, a central route is expected to be activated. This increased motivation for more effortful decision-making is, in turn, expected to delay consumers' judgement formation.

Applying the above theoretical grounds in a brand context, we suggest that under moderate levels of suspicion, consumers are more incapable of deciding whether to trust the brand claim(s), thus, they are in a state of highest suspended judgement. Therefore, we propose that:

**H1.** Suspicion has a curvilinear direct effect on judgement suspension, such that a moderate level of suspicion leads to the highest degree of judgement suspension, compared to a low or a high level of suspicion.

Suspicion can influence the perceived uncertainty towards the brand. Uncertainty is theoretically distinguishable from suspicion (Sinaceur, 2010). While the former refers to when individuals generally lack knowledge or are not sure about something (Tiedens &

Linton, 2001), the latter goes beyond uncertainty and involves the belief that something can have conflicting interpretations without leaning towards any specific direction (Sinaceur, 2010). Hence, suspicion activates an attributional mindset involving the belief that another (i.e., the brand) might have hidden motives (Hilton et al., 1993). Nonetheless, when people perceive such motives, they subsequently experience uncertainty about the meaning of a certain behaviour (Hilton et al., 1993; Sinaceur, 2010).

Prior research has suggested that uncertainty and suspicion are not linearly related; instead, their relationship may be described as inverted curvilinear (Craig et al., 2013; Marchand & Vonk, 2005). In the context of the present research, both low and highly suspicious brand claims are expected to lead to lower levels of uncertainty towards the brand since individuals have reached a point where they have attributed (or not) ulterior motives to the brand, concluding to either a state of trust or distrust. Nonetheless, under a moderate level of suspicion, consumers are more likely not to directly incline in any direction (trust vs. distrust), reaching the highest levels of uncertainty towards the brand and its motives (Craig et al., 2013; Marchand & Vonk, 2005).

In turn, the presence of uncertainty due to suspicion can lead to suspension of judgement (Hilton et al., 1993). Indeed, the time needed to decide indicates the degree of uncertainty or doubt that the decision maker has experienced (Van de Calseyde et al., 2014). If consumers are more certain (i.e., below some threshold of uncertainty) about the authenticity of motives behind the brand claims, they may be more prone to making decisions instead of waiting (Hilton et al., 1993). On the contrary, when they are more uncertain, such uncertainty may be related to generating attributions of possible (mal) intent or to cognitively generating alternative explanations for the observed behaviour (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; DeCarlo, 2005; Fein, 1996; Levine & McCornack, 1991). Such cognitive mechanisms are activated to resolve uncertainty and are expected to delay judgement formation.

Based on the above rationale, we propose uncertainty towards the brand as a mediator of the relationship between suspicion and consumer judgement suspension. Specifically, we expect that consumers experience the highest levels of uncertainty towards the brand for a moderate level of suspicion. In contrast, when suspicion levels are either low or high, uncertainty towards the brand is expected to be lower, resulting in lower judgement suspension compared to that under a moderate level of suspicion. It is hypothesised that:

**H2.** Uncertainty towards the brand mediates the effect of suspicion on judgement suspension such that moderate levels of suspicion result in the highest levels of uncertainty and subsequent judgement suspension.

Product imagery, defined as the process that consumers undergo to represent information in working memory (MacInnis & Price, 1987), is an essential skill during consumer decision-making (Pearson et al., 2015). Consumers use their imagination, engaging their perceptual information processing to visualise a certain product or

consumption outcome (Heller et al., 2019). For example, when deciding on a furniture purchase, consumers employ mental imagery to enable a representation in their minds and visualise the object in their personal space (Phillips et al., 1995), facilitating their decision-making. This ability to 'generate images of products outside the immediate sensory experience drives much of customer information processing across different points-of-sale' (Heller et al., 2019, p. 97).

As product imagery relies on stored knowledge, the evocation and vividness of the image are likely to depend on the level of knowledge development (MacInnis & Price, 1987). However, experiencing uncertainty under the state of suspicion is expected to decrease an individual's available cognitive resources (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000) due to the activation of an attributional mindset to avoid deception (Fein, 1996). These decreased cognitive resources are expected to hinder knowledge development (MacInnis & Price, 1987) and, therefore, the evocation and vividness of the product image. Hence, when uncertainty towards the brand is higher, product imagery is expected to be lower.

In turn, consumers' visualisation of an offering's potential value is fundamental to successful judgement formation as it allows them to gain confidence about the satisfaction that may arise from a certain consumption (Bar, 2007; Phillips et al., 1995). Individuals frequently engage their imagery to fill in potentially missing product information (Schwartz & Black, 1999) so they can better form a judgement (Chang et al., 2023). Therefore, the lack of product imagery could function as an impediment to judgement formation. Otherwise, this lack of the ability to project a mental image will make customers unable to decide about the product and, thus, unable to form a judgement (Luce et al., 2001; Simon, 1955) but instead suspend it. Thus, we hypothesise that:

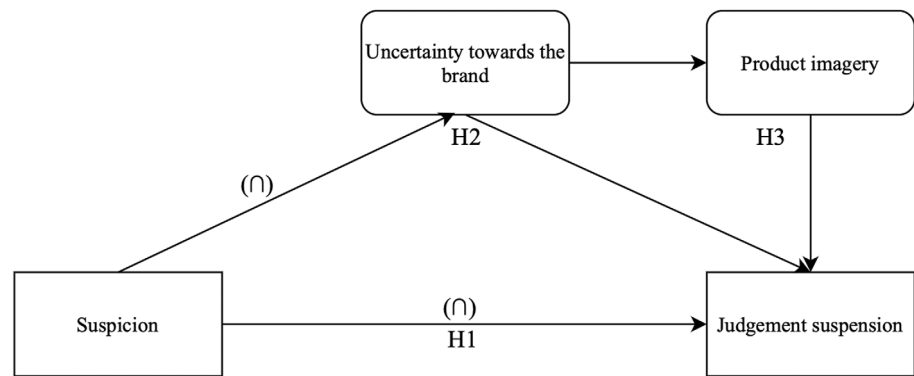
**H3.** Product imagery mediates the effect of uncertainty towards the brand on judgement suspension such that higher uncertainty leads to lower levels of product imagery, which, in turn, is negatively associated with judgement suspension.

### 3 | EMPIRICAL STUDIES

We test our hypotheses through three experimental studies. Study 1 tests H1 on the effect of suspicion on judgement suspension for a fictitious brand. Study 2 attempts to replicate the findings of Study 1 for a real brand. It also tests the mediating role of uncertainty towards the brand on the relationship between suspicion and judgement suspension (H2). Study 2 also investigates the mediating role of imagery on the effect of uncertainty towards the brand on judgement suspension (H3). Study 3 replicates the findings of Studies 1 and 2 (H1, H2, and H3) for a different product category and through a different suspicion induction to enhance the generalisability of our findings.

To determine whether the samples and observed effects achieved statistical power consistent with established standards (power level

FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework.



>0.80) to minimise the risk of Type II errors (Cohen, 1992), we conducted post hoc power analysis tests using the G\*Power 3 software (Faul et al., 2007). The post hoc tests revealed that acceptable levels of power were achieved for all Studies.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of the present research:

### 3.1 | Study 1

The aim of this study was to test H1 on the inverted curvilinear relationship between suspicion and judgement suspension through a brand-unrelated suspicion induction.

#### 3.1.1 | Materials and methods

##### Design and procedure

A three-level (low vs. moderate vs. high) between-subjects design of suspicion manipulation was employed. One hundred and fifty-one individuals (74 females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 28.50$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 6.91$ ,  $\text{age}_{\text{min}} = 18$ ,  $\text{age}_{\text{max}} = 55$ ) were recruited from the Prolific online panel and completed the study. At the beginning of the study, participants read general introductory information regarding advertising in the 21st century. Then, we manipulated the three levels of suspicion (i.e., low, moderate, and high) by randomly assigning participants to one of the three experimental conditions through a fictitious Nielsen consumer report pertaining to the trustworthiness of advertisements. In the low suspicion condition (50 participants), participants were exposed to the following statement: 'Just 0.1% of the advertisements have been recorded as untrue. Therefore, misinformation of the public is not as likely through advertising'. In the moderate (53 participants) and high (48 participants) levels of suspicion, the proportions of untrue advertisements were 15% and 80%, respectively (see Appendix B).

Participants responded to manipulation checks. Afterwards, they were exposed to an advertisement for a fictitious camera brand named Boemer (see Appendix C). The advertisement contained general product information, usually presented in similar real-life advertisements. Participants were then asked to respond to measures of judgement suspension and basic demographic questions. We also

included a measure of familiarity with the product category as a covariate. After this step, we thanked the respondents for their participation.

##### Measures

After allocating participants to one of the experimental conditions, we checked whether the manipulation of suspicion was effective. Specifically, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they felt suspicious and the extent to which they experienced suspicion at that moment, adjusting the measure from DeCarlo and Barone (2009). These two 11-point ('strongly disagree–strongly agree') items were used as *manipulation checks* ( $r = .71$ ). To measure *judgement suspension*, we used a two-item 11-point ('not at all–very much') scale ( $r = .71$ ), adapting the Chang et al. (2023) (also see Thompson et al., 2009) measure of consumer's willingness to postpone judgement. Participants thus indicated the degree to which they were ready to decide and the degree to which they would like to postpone deciding whether to purchase the advertised camera. The first item was reverse-scored. A single 11-point ('very unfamiliar–very familiar') item measured participants' familiarity with the product category of cameras. All constructs and measures are available in Table S2 of Appendix A.

#### 3.1.2 | Results and discussion

To ascertain whether the Study 1 samples and observed effects achieved satisfactory statistical power, we conducted post hoc power analysis tests using the G\*Power 3 software (Faul et al., 2007). The post hoc tests showed that acceptable levels of power were achieved (power = 0.99).

A  $3 \times 1$  (low vs. moderate vs. high) analysis of variance (ANOVA) with suspicion as an independent variable and the manipulation check as a dependent variable revealed that the manipulation of suspicion was successful [ $F(2, 148) = 31.90$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .30$ ]. Participants in the low suspicion condition reported significantly lower ratings ( $M = 5.09$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ) of suspicion than those in the moderate suspicion condition ( $M = 6.68$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ),  $t(101) = -4.47$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, participants in the high suspicion condition reported significantly higher ratings of suspicion ( $M = 7.78$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) than those in the moderate condition,  $t(99) = -3.55$ ,  $p = .001$ .

To examine H1 pertaining to the inverted curvilinear effect of suspicion on judgement suspension, a  $3 \times 1$  (low vs. moderate vs. high) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with familiarity with the product category, age, and gender as covariates unveiled a significant main effect of suspicion on judgement suspension [ $F(2, 145) = 13.34, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$ ]. Consistent with H1, under a moderate level of suspicion, participants exhibited significantly higher judgement suspension ( $M = 7.94, SD = 1.63$ ) compared to those in low suspicion ( $M = 6.40, SD = 2.22, t(101) = -4.03, p < .001$ ) and high suspicion conditions ( $M = 6.08, SD = 2.10; t(99) = 5.00, p < .001$ ). The difference in judgement suspension between participants in the low and high suspicion conditions was non-significant ( $p = .47$ ). The effect of the covariates on judgement suspension was non-significant ( $p = .10, p = .48, \text{ and } p = .54$  for familiarity with the product category, age, and gender, respectively).

Study 1 provides initial support for the curvilinear effect of suspicion on judgement suspension, thus confirming H1.

## 3.2 | Study 2

The aim of Study 2 is to (a) replicate the results of Study 1 utilising a real instead of a fictitious brand for greater generalisability of our findings and (b) investigate the mediating role of uncertainty towards the brand in the relationship between suspicion and judgement suspension (H2) and the mediating role of product imagery on the effect of uncertainty on judgement suspension (H3).

### 3.2.1 | Materials and methods

#### Design and procedure

One hundred and fifty-eight individuals (78 females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 29.50, SD_{\text{age}} = 10.78$ ) were recruited from the Prolific online panel and completed the study. A three-level (low, moderate, and high) between-subjects design of suspicion was employed, as in Study 1. In this study, we used the same manipulation of suspicion as in the previous study (fictitious Nielsen consumer report; see Appendix B). After participants were randomly allocated to an experimental condition of suspicion, they responded to the manipulation checks. Afterwards, they were exposed to an advertisement for a new digital camera of the Nikon brand (see Appendix C). The advertisement again contained general product information, as in similar real-life advertisements. Participants were then asked to respond to measures of judgement suspension, uncertainty towards the advertised brand and product imagery, and basic demographic questions. To control for covariate effects, participants also responded to a measure of brand familiarity. Then, participants were thanked for their participation.

#### Measures

As in the previous study (Study 1), we used the same two items for the *manipulation check* of suspicion ( $r = .85$ ) and the same two items to measure *judgement suspension* ( $r = .78$ ). Regarding *uncertainty*

towards the brand, we adapted six items from Sinaceur (2010) on 11-point ('not at all-very much') Likert-scale items ( $\alpha = .78$ ). Specifically, we asked participants how uncertain and puzzled they were towards the brand, how confident and certain they were, how easily they would predict, and how knowledgeable they were about the brand's intentions. The last four items were reverse-scored. Furthermore, we measured *product imagery* using the three 11-point items ( $\alpha = .83$ ) adapted from (Lee & Qiu, 2009). More specifically, participants responded to questions on whether they imagined what it would be like to use the product ('completely disagree-completely agree'), about the extent to which images came to their mind ('to no extent-to a very large extent') and the extent to which images experienced while thinking about the product ('no images at all-a lot of images'). For this study's covariate (i.e., brand familiarity), participants responded how familiar they were with the brand Nikon with one 11-point ('not at all-very much') item (see Table 2).

### 3.2.2 | Results and discussion

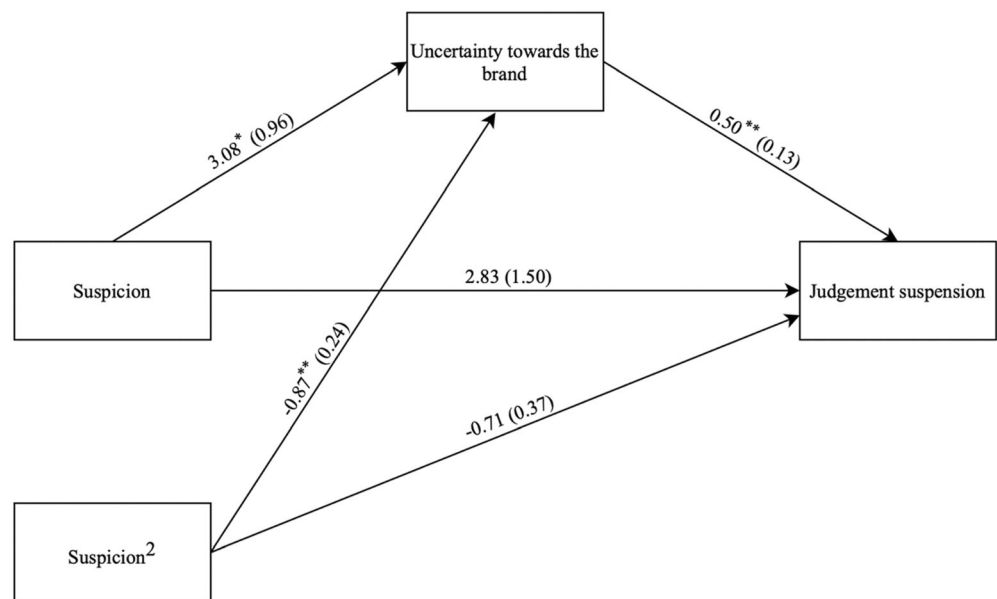
Sixteen participants failed the attention check and were therefore eliminated from the subsequent analysis. One hundred and forty-two participant responses (71 females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 29.30, SD_{\text{age}} = 10.46, \text{ age}_{\text{min}} = 18, \text{ age}_{\text{max}} = 76$ ) were retained for the analyses (low suspicion: 46 participants, moderate suspicion: 46 participants, high suspicion: 50 participants). Similar to Study 1, post hoc tests revealed that acceptable levels of power were achieved (power = 0.81).

A  $3 \times 1$  (low vs. moderate vs. high) analysis of variance (ANOVA) with suspicion as an independent variable and the manipulation check as a dependent variable revealed that the manipulation of suspicion was successful [ $F(2, 139) = 12.76, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$ ]. Participants in the low suspicion condition reported significantly lower ratings ( $M = 5.14, SD = 2.26$ ) of suspicion than those in the moderate suspicion condition ( $M = 6.21, SD = 2.16, t(90) = -2.31, p = .023$ ). Similarly, participants in the high suspicion condition reported significantly higher ratings of suspicion ( $M = 7.26, SD = 1.73$ ) than those in the moderate condition,  $t(94) = -2.65, p = .009$ .

An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with suspicion as an independent variable, suspension as a dependent variable, and brand familiarity, age, and gender as covariates unveiled a significant main effect of suspicion on judgement suspension [ $F(2, 136) = 4.92, p = .009, \eta^2 = .07$ ]. Under a moderate level of suspicion, participants exhibited significantly higher judgement suspension ( $M = 8.32, SD = 1.83$ ) compared to those in the low suspicion [ $M = 7.39, SD = 2.22, t(90) = -2.18, p = .032$ ] and high suspicion conditions [ $M = 6.95, SD = 2.18; t(94) = 3.31, p = .001$ ]. The difference in judgement suspension between low and high suspicion conditions was non-significant ( $p = .33$ ). H1 was further established. The effects of the covariates on judgement suspension were non-significant ( $p = .70, p = .98, p = .99$  for brand familiarity, age, and gender, respectively).

To test the curvilinear indirect role of uncertainty towards the brand in the relationship between suspicion and judgement

**FIGURE 2** The curvilinear mediation of uncertainty on the effect of suspicion on judgement suspension (Study 2). Path values represent direct effects with unstandardised coefficients and standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .



**TABLE 1** Overview of mediation analysis results for Study 2.

Curvilinear mediation (MEDCURVE)		
Suspicion → $\theta$ → Uncertainty → Judgement suspension	BCCI	Theta ( $\theta$ )
-1 SD (low suspicion)	[0.1114, 1.1133]	0.49
Moderate suspicion	[-0.4634, -0.0811]	-0.22
+1 SD (high suspicion)	[-1.7441, -0.3956]	-0.94
Linear mediation (PROCESS Model 4)		
Uncertainty → Product imagery → Judgement suspension	BCCI	Indirect effect
	[0.0171, 0.2756]	0.15

suspension, we implemented the approach of Hayes and Preacher (2010). This statistical procedure calculates the instantaneous indirect effect ( $\theta$ ), which denotes the rate of change of the independent variable (i.e., suspicion) on the dependent variable (i.e., judgement suspension) through its mediator (i.e., uncertainty towards the brand). In the hypothesised curvilinear mediating effect (H2), suspicion exerts an inverted U-shaped influence on judgement suspension and uncertainty towards the brand, and uncertainty towards the brand is positively and linearly associated with judgement suspension. Therefore, using the MEDCURVE plugin on SPSS statistics 29, we performed the bootstrapping procedure with 5000 replications, calculated the bias-corrected confidence intervals (BCCI), and estimated the  $\theta$  value at the suspicion sample mean and at  $\pm 1$  SD from its mean.

The results of the curvilinear mediating effect (H2) are illustrated in Figure 2. First, a significant positive effect of suspicion ( $\beta = 3.08$ ,  $p = .017$ ) and a significant negative effect of suspicion<sub>squared</sub> ( $\beta = -.87$ ,  $p = .004$ ) on uncertainty towards the brand indicate that uncertainty is lower at the low level of suspicion than at the moderate level of suspicion, in which it reaches its peak. Conversely, uncertainty decreases once suspicion escalates from the moderate to high level. Furthermore, we found a significant positive effect of uncertainty on judgement suspension ( $\beta = .50$ ,  $p = .001$ ). The results of the

MEDCURVE procedure provide support for the inverted U-shaped indirect effect of suspicion on judgement suspension through uncertainty towards the brand at low ( $\theta = 0.49$ , BCCI [0.1114, 1.1133]), medium ( $\theta = -0.22$ , BCCI [-0.4634, -0.0811]), and at high levels of suspicion ( $\theta = -0.94$ , BCCI [-1.7441, -0.3956]).

We tested H3 with PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2018) with 5000 bootstrap repetitions by setting judgement suspension as the dependent, product imagery as the mediator, and uncertainty towards the brand as the independent variable. Uncertainty was found to have a significant negative effect on imagery ( $\beta = -.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Product imagery negatively influences judgement suspension ( $\beta = -.27$ ,  $p = .003$ ). The indirect effect of uncertainty on judgement suspension was significant and positive (0.15, BCCI [0.0171, 0.2756]). The direct effect was still significant (0.42, BCCI [0.1675, 0.6666]); therefore, product imagery was found to be a partial mediator. An overview of the mediation analysis results for Study 2 can be found in Table 1.

Overall, Study 2 establishes H1 for a known brand instead of an unknown one. It also provides initial support for H2 (mediation through uncertainty towards the brand) and H3 (mediation through product imagery) on the underlying mechanism of the main effect of suspicion on judgement suspension.

**TABLE 2** Overview of mediation analysis results for Study 3.

Curvilinear mediation (MEDCURVE)		
Suspicion → $\eta$ → Uncertainty → Judgement suspension	BCCI	Theta ( $\theta$ )
-1 SD (low suspicion)	[1.2596, 2.9539]	2.04
Moderate suspicion	[0.2148, 0.7059]	0.45
+1 SD (high suspicion)	[-2.0512, -0.4309]	-1.15
Linear mediation (PROCESS Model 4)		
Uncertainty → Product imagery → Judgement suspension	BCCI	Indirect effect
	[0.0102, 0.1258]	0.06

### 3.3 | Study 3

The aim of Study 3 is to replicate the results of prior studies (H1, H2, H3) utilising a different product category for the advertised stimulus, as well as a brand-related suspicion induction (as in Kirmani & Zhu, 2007) for greater generalisability of our findings.

#### 3.3.1 | Materials and methods

##### *Design and procedure*

One hundred and sixty-four individuals (78 females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 26.69$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.62$ ) were recruited from the Prolific online panel and instructed to evaluate a new bicycle brand. They were randomly assigned to one of three (low vs. moderate vs. high) levels of suspicion induced. Participants were presented with an advertisement for a bicycle brand named Velon. The advertisement contained general product information, usually presented in similar real-life advertisements. Suspicion was manipulated by varying the source of the claim included in the advertisement (Kirmani & Zhu, 2007). Specifically, under the advertisement text, for the low suspicion condition, participants were exposed to a study conducted by an independent organisation named 'Consumer Reports', indicating that consumers rated Velon as producing more reliable and comfortable city bikes than the leading brands, such as Gazelle and Specialized. For the moderate suspicion condition, participants were exposed to the same information as in the low suspicion condition but without referring to the leading brands. For the high suspicion condition, participants were exposed to a study conducted by Velon itself instead of an independent organisation. This condition demonstrated that consumers rated Velon as producing more reliable and comfortable city bikes than the leading brand, again without naming the leading brand (see Appendix D).

Following the manipulation, participants responded to manipulation checks. We then asked participants to respond to measures of their uncertainty towards the brand, judgement suspension, and product imagery, as well as to an attention check and basic demographic questions. Finally, participants were thanked for their participation.

##### *Measures*

The manipulation checks ( $r = .86$ ), as well as the measures of judgement suspension ( $r = .77$ ), uncertainty towards the brand ( $\alpha = .84$ ),

and product imagery ( $\alpha = .85$ ), were the same as in the previous studies (see Table 2).

#### 3.3.2 | Results and discussion

Fourteen participants were excluded from the subsequent analyses because they failed the attention check. One hundred and fifty participant responses (75 females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 26.60$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.48$ ,  $\text{age}_{\text{min}} = 18$ ,  $\text{age}_{\text{max}} = 64$ ) were retained for the analyses (low suspicion: 51 participants, moderate suspicion: 50 participants, high suspicion: 49 participants). Post hoc power analysis showed that the Study's power levels were satisfactory (power = 0.99).

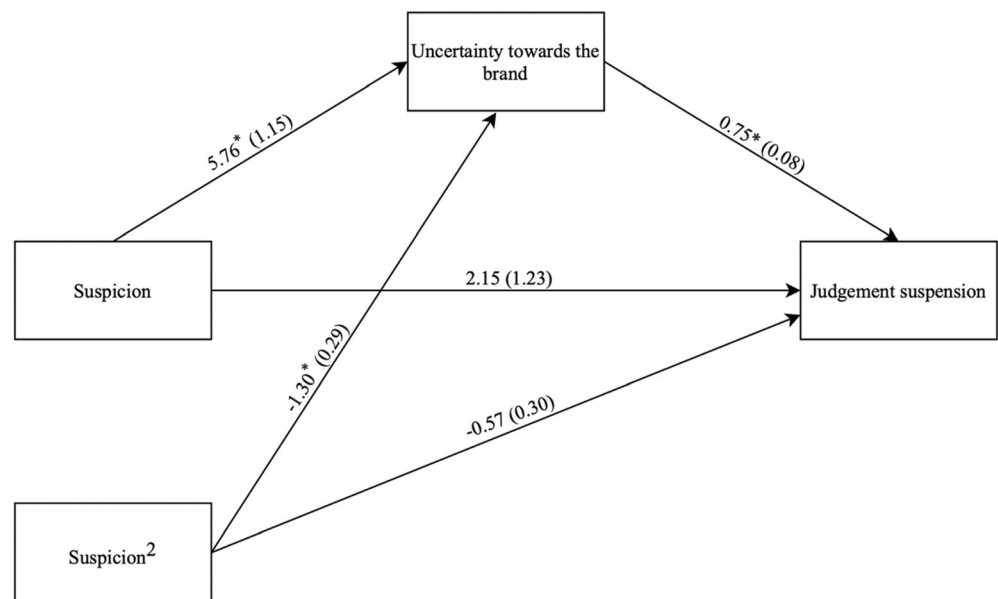
A  $3 \times 1$  (low vs. moderate vs. high) analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that the manipulation of suspicion was successful [ $F(2, 147) = 28.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .28$ ]. Participants in the low suspicion condition reported significantly lower ratings ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 2.00$ ) of suspicion than those in the moderate suspicion condition ( $M = 5.22$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ),  $t(99) = -3.91$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, participants in the high suspicion condition reported significantly higher ratings of suspicion ( $M = 6.81$ ,  $SD = 2.31$ ) than those in the moderate condition,  $t(97) = -3.84$ ,  $p < .001$ .

A  $3 \times 1$  analysis of variance (ANCOVA) with suspicion as an independent variable, suspension as a dependent variable, and age and gender as covariates unveiled a significant main effect of suspicion on judgement suspension [ $F(2, 145) = 10.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .12$ ]. Consistent with H1, under moderate levels of suspicion, consumers showed significantly higher judgement suspension ( $M = 8.16$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ) compared to low suspicion [ $M = 6.33$ ,  $SD = 2.33$ ,  $t(99) = -4.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ] and high suspicion [ $M = 6.89$ ,  $SD = 2.00$ ,  $t(97) = 3.28$ ,  $p = .001$ ]. The difference in judgement suspension between the low and high suspicion conditions was non-significant ( $p = .20$ ). The effect of the covariates on judgement suspension was non-significant ( $p = .17$  and  $p = .70$  for age and gender, respectively).

To test H2 on the inverted U-shaped indirect role of uncertainty towards the brand in the relationship between suspicion and judgement suspension, we implemented the approach of Hayes and Preacher (2010), as in Study 2, and calculated the instantaneous indirect effect ( $\theta$ ). As presented in Figure 3, we found a significant positive effect of suspicion ( $\beta = 5.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and a significant negative effect of suspicion<sub>squared</sub> ( $\beta = -1.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ) on uncertainty towards the brand, thereby confirming the inverted U-shaped effect of



**FIGURE 3** The curvilinear mediation of uncertainty on the effect of suspicion on judgement suspension (Study 3). Path values represent direct effects with unstandardised coefficients and standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < .001$ .



suspicion on uncertainty towards the brand. Furthermore, we found a significant positive effect of uncertainty on judgement suspension ( $\beta = .75, p < .001$ ). Then, we conducted the bootstrapping procedure with 5000 replications using the MEDCURVE to test the inverted U-shaped indirect effect of suspicion on judgement suspension through uncertainty towards the brand. Consistent with Study 2, we identified a significant instantaneous indirect effect at low ( $\theta = 2.04$ , BCCI [1.2596, 2.9539]), medium ( $\theta = 0.45$ , BCCI [0.2148, 0.7059]), and at high levels of suspicion ( $\theta = -1.15$ , BCCI [-2.0512, -0.4309]).

We tested H3 with PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2018) with 5000 bootstrap replications by setting judgement suspension as the dependent, product imagery as the mediator, and uncertainty towards the brand as the independent variable. Uncertainty was found to have a significant negative effect on product imagery ( $\beta = -.32, p = .0005$ ). Product imagery negatively influences judgement suspension ( $\beta = -.20, p = .004$ ). The indirect effect of uncertainty on judgement suspension through product imagery was significant and positive (0.06, BCCI [0.0102, 0.1258]). The direct effect was still significant (0.72, BCCI [0.5745, 0.8731]); therefore, product imagery was found to be a partial mediator. An overview of the mediation analysis results for Study 3 can be found in Table 2.

The replication of the results of Studies 1 and 2 supports our proposition that H1 persists in a different product category and under brand-related suspicion induction. H2 and H3, on the underlying mechanisms of the effect of suspicion on judgement suspension through uncertainty towards the brand and product imagery, were further established.

## 4 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our research investigates the effect of varying levels of suspicion on judgement suspension in a non-interpersonal brand context and uncovers the mechanism through which consumers suspend their

judgement instead of forming it. Study 1 indicated that moderate levels of suspicion lead to significantly higher judgement suspension when compared with low or high levels of suspicion. Indeed, under moderate levels of suspicion, consumers tend to entertain plausibly rival hypotheses about the genuineness of the other actor's behaviour (Fein, 1996). They cannot conclude to either a trustful or a distrustful judgement and, thus, suspend their judgement. On the contrary, under low and high levels of suspicion, consumers are expected to be led to truth or lie-bias (McCornack & Levine, 1990), facilitating judgement formation.

We conducted Studies 2 and 3 to extend the findings of Study 1 by investigating the mediating role of uncertainty. The results show that uncertainty towards the brand mediates the relationship between suspicion and judgement suspension. In line with previous research highlighting the effect of suspicion on uncertainty (e.g., Sinaceur, 2010), Studies 2 and 3 indicate that under a moderate level of suspicion, consumers are more likely to be unable to decide whether to trust a certain brand claim, reaching the highest levels of uncertainty towards the brand (Craig et al., 2013; Marchand & Vonk, 2005), and thus, suspend their judgement.

Studies 2 and 3 also indicate that product imagery mediates the effect of uncertainty towards the brand on judgement suspension, uncovering it as an additional cognitive mechanism. Uncertainty towards the brand leads to a decrease in cognitive resources (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000), which in turn are inadequate for the evocation and vividness of the product image. Our findings are also in line with previous research on the importance of product imagery on judgement formation (Pearson et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 1995; Schwartz & Black, 1999).

### 4.1 | Theoretical implications

Despite significant research on the impact of suspicion on consumer behaviour (e.g., DeCarlo et al., 2013; Kirmani & Zhu, 2007; Main

et al., 2007; Zhuang et al., 2018), there is often the assumption that consumers eventually form a definite judgement. Instead, our paper is the first to our knowledge to empirically investigate the effect of suspicion on judgement suspension, as well as the underlying mechanisms for this effect; hence, it contributes to the literature in several important ways.

First, we challenge the assumption of definite judgement formation and address this gap by examining the conditions under which consumers, when experiencing suspicion, cannot form judgements, thus suspending them. In three experimental studies employing both fictitious and real brands, we contribute to prior research by examining the under-researched notion of judgement suspension. The majority of previous research measures rather than manipulates varying levels of suspicion (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2011; Petrescu et al., 2022; Xie, 2016) or relies on a binary manipulation (e.g., DeCarlo & Barone, 2009). The present research contributes to existing literature by providing the first empirical evidence for the process of suspending consumer judgement while employing a three-level manipulation of suspicion. Such a clear distinction between low, moderate, and high levels of suspicion aligns with previous calls for further research (e.g., Levine & McCornack, 1991). Additionally, it enables the investigation of unexplored cognitive consequences of suspicion, such as judgement suspension or the ability to (indirectly) generate product imagery because of uncertainty towards the brand.

Second, our findings disentangle the notions of suspicion from uncertainty and highlight the role of uncertainty towards the brand as a cognitive consequence of suspicion that can facilitate—or hinder—judgement formation. We contribute to previous literature by interlinking suspicion and uncertainty (Sinaceur, 2010). We also add to research on identified cognitive consequences of suspicion (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Fein, 1996; Fein et al., 1990; Hilton et al., 1993; Marchand & Vonk, 2005; McCornack & Levine, 1990). More specifically, we provide empirical evidence that under moderate levels of consumer suspicion, individuals experience the highest levels of uncertainty, thus being unable to make an immediate decision. From this perspective, we extend previous findings on potential cognitive consequences of suspicion, such as attributional cognitive activity and systematic thinking (e.g., Fein et al., 1990; Marchand & Vonk, 2005), as well as a decrease in cognitive resources (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Craig et al., 2013). We also contribute to the literature on how uncertainty can lead to suspension of judgement (Hilton et al., 1993).

Finally, we extend previous literature on product imagery (Bar, 2007; Chang et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 1995) by establishing it as a partial prerequisite for judgement formation, which increases our understanding of consumers' coping mechanisms when experiencing suspicion. Research has paid limited attention to important cognitive effects of suspicion, such as consumers' ability to generate a product mental image in the process of forming a judgement under a state of suspicion. We highlight that uncertainty towards the brand, as a result of suspicion, impacts our ability to visualise products (Heller et al., 2019) and, in turn, form, or postpone, judgements about them.

## 4.2 | Managerial implications

Our research has meaningful implications for practitioners. In addition to advertisements inherently inducing suspicion, consumers frequently encounter various forms of external information, such as news, consumer reports, and other media content, prior to viewing an advertisement. Such exposure can also foster suspicion, which can, in turn, impact consumer judgment formation or suspension. From a managerial perspective, it is crucial to understand the relevant strategies needed to either better manage or completely avoid judgement suspension to optimise brand-related outcomes. One would expect managers' predictions of consumer judgements to rotate along the plausible assumption that only high levels of suspicion might lead to adverse outcomes for the brand. On the contrary, we reciprocate the perspective that even moderate levels of suspicion can lead to maximised judgement suspension, with uncertain and potentially detrimental effects on brand preference and choice.

To that end, we encourage marketing practitioners to pretest their marketing communication efforts before implementation when there is a possibility of brand-related elements that can induce suspicion. Specifically, marketing managers can be inspired by the present research to optimise the content of brand claims in advertising (e.g., claims based on third-party vs. own company reports) so that such claims do not fuel suspicion but enhance brand credibility.

Finally, we highlight the impact of the product imagery process on consumer decision-making (Heller et al., 2019) and elucidate its central role in forming judgements under uncertainty towards the brand, with immediate technological implications. For instance, recent advances in technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence, Augmented Reality, and Virtual Reality (Jayawardena et al., 2023; Polyportis & Pahos, 2024), are rapidly transforming customers' decision-making processes (Barhorst et al., 2021) by aiding individuals to visualise products and services or consumption situations (Jessen et al., 2020). Marketers are advised to use such emerging technologies to reduce the effort needed to generate product imagery on occasions when consumers might experience suspicion. Facilitating product imagery may positively affect subsequent customer responses (Park & Yoo, 2020) through judgement formation instead of suspension under a state of suspicion.

## 4.3 | Limitations and future research

While the present research yields important contributions, it does not come without limitations. First, we did not examine the potential effects of consumer suspicion on specific marketing-related outcomes, such as purchase intentions. Furthermore, previous literature has examined how imagery-evoking strategies, such as descriptions of background, sound effects, vivid verbal messages, and instructions to imagine, affect consumer responses to advertising (Burton et al., 2015), including brand attitude (Babin & Burns, 1997), emotional responses (Miller & Marks, 1997; Yoo & Kim, 2014), perceptions of product newness (Togawa et al., 2023) and behavioural intentions

(Yoo & Kim, 2014). From this perspective, future research may examine the effects of varying levels of suspicion on emotional and attitudinal responses and how such effects can be influenced by various imagery-evoking strategies. To that end, we acknowledge that an initial measurement of trust or attitude towards Nikon was not included in Study 2 (real brand), which could have provided deeper insights into how pre-existing brand trust or attitude moderates the effects of suspicion on consumer judgement. This aspect represents a limitation of our current research and suggests a valuable direction for future studies, which could explore the potential moderating effects of brand trust and brand attitude on the mechanisms identified in our model. Finally, we also suggest that marketing managers proactively orchestrate their marketing campaigns towards enhancing brand trust (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001) to counterbalance or limit any potentially aversive future effects of uncertainty towards the brand on judgement suspension.

Furthermore, to answer the demand for sustainable products, companies sometimes wrongly advertise their products as sustainable, also referred to as greenwashing. Greenwashing corresponds to a mismatch between the corporate environmental performance of a company and its green advertising communications (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Polyportis et al., 2023). For instance, based on attribution theory, Parguel et al. (2011) investigated the role of sustainability ratings on consumers' responses to companies' CSR communication and unveiled the mediating role of intrinsic brand motives. Nevertheless, when, how, and for whom do CSR initiatives work if consumers are suspicious of the brand (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013)? Future research may focus on unveiling how varying levels of suspicion towards a brand may influence perceptions of brand motives within a CSR initiative and subsequent consumer responses to its sustainable products.

Furthermore, in the present paper, we unveiled a purely cognitive mechanism of the effects of suspicion on judgement suspension through the mediating role of uncertainty towards the brand and through product imagery. Nonetheless, suspicion has also been correlated with emotions of fear and anxiety (Bobko et al., 2014). Emotions emerging because of suspicion can also shape subsequent decisions. In general, affective states can shape judgements through the content (Lerner et al., 2015) and depth of processing (Polyportis et al., 2020; Tiedens & Linton, 2001). Future research may investigate whether varying levels of suspicion may influence subsequent consumer judgement through the effects of affective states deriving from suspicion.

Finally, scholars may focus on specific types of information that could be provided to consumers (e.g., brand or product-related information, abstract vs. concrete information) that would facilitate suspicion resolution in the attempt to avoid judgement suspension and thus lead to judgement formation instead. A more in-depth comprehension of the process of suspicion resolution, which could trigger a reward mechanism (Mazodier & Quester, 2014), could lead to positive outcomes of suspicion, such as increased brand engagement, product satisfaction, purchase intention, brand recall, and brand loyalty.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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