

Consumer skepticism and suspicion towards brands: impact on their behavior. Theoretical and managerial implications

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Abstract:

Consumer sensitivity to environmental concerns and the social impact of products has increased but these new demands go hand in hand with an increase in their mistrust of companies and brands. The objective of this research is to understand the origins of suspicion and skepticism and what elements can help consumers change their attitude. We carried out interviews among 16 French consumers in 2023. Our results show that each variable is composed of 3 dimensions and there exists a continuum: for skepticism, it goes from the received idea then to doubt to finally lead to mistrust; for suspicion from lack of transparency to dishonesty and finally to accusation. There is an overwhelming majority among the consumers who are skeptical about brands particularly in fast fashion, but many respondents believe that environmental actions and human rights can play a role in limiting their skepticism and help brands to show their transparency.

Keywords: skepticism; suspicion; sustainability; brands; societal commitment

INTRODUCTION

Consumer sensitivity to environmental concerns, sustainability, ethics, and the social impact of purchased products has increased: consumers seek new modes of consumption (degrowth, local products and organic products) and distribution (short circuits). According to a global study by Bain in 2024¹, consumers who have adopted lifestyle habits that support sustainability do it by recycling (67% of interviewers), limiting purchase of disposable products (68%) or composting food waste (66%). With this increasing environmental consciousness, manufacturers are attempting to show that their products contribute to sustainability and reduce harmful impacts on the environment (Cho & Taylor, 2020). Sustainable initiatives can allow companies to differentiate their products thus gaining a competitive advantage (Farooq & Wicaksono, 2021), improve reputation and corporate performance (Lii & Lee, 2012), influence directly or indirectly the image of brands (Wu & Wang, 2014), increase consumer satisfaction (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006) or impact consumer loyalty (Stanaland et al., 2011). However, these new consumer demands go hand in hand with an increase in their mistrust of companies and brands: only 25% of consumers in the world trust company claims about their environmental practices². They are skeptical about sustainability claims because half the global population say they have seen or heard false or misleading information about sustainable actions taken by brands³. Yet, one may wonder how consumers define these concepts and what impact they have on their behavior and attitude towards brands. The objective of this research is double (1) to understand the origins of suspicion and skepticism among consumers and to contribute to improve knowledge on these variables; (2) to identify their impact on consumers' behavior and what elements can help them change their attitude.

1. LITTERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Trust has often been studied by many researchers that concluded that it was a dynamic and reflexive process (Castaldo et al., 2010; Lewicki et al. 2006) but there is less research for suspicion or skepticism. Usually trust and suspicion are often considered to be at the two extremes of a continuum. However, as Levine etMcCornack (1991) point out, trust is not the opposite of suspicion because the notion of trust presupposes a positive attitude: confident people expect positive behavior from others. This is not the case for suspicious individuals who expect negative behaviors based on the belief that the relationship can only be a source of disappointment (Bond & Lee, 2005). But if we know what elements can lead to trust what can we say about suspicion and skepticism? It seems important to better clarify and deepen these concepts.

Definition of skepticism and suspicion

Deutsch (1958) defines suspicion as a psychological state induced by the certainty or feeling that the other will act in a malicious or undesirable manner which must lead to react in order to reduce negative consequences. It is also a dynamic state that leads the individual to make multiple assumptions about the motives or sincerity of another person's behavior (Fein, 1996). For DeCarlo (2005), suspicion is defined as an individual questioning the motives underlying the behavior of his interlocutor and questioning the authenticity of that behavior. Suspicious individuals would wait before deciding until their doubts are cleared. Suspicion is also the belief that a person's speech or actions are hypocritical even if there is no evidence of this duplicity (Buller & Burgoon, 1996). Skepticism was studied to assess the consumer's attitude

¹ <https://www.bain.com/insights/what-do-consumers-really-want-ceo-sustainability-guide-2024>

² <https://nielseniq.com/global/en/insights/commentary/2023/private-label-fmcg-opportunities-2023/>

³ <https://www.kantar.com/inspiration/sustainability/what-is-the-sustainability-value-case-for-brands>

towards communication: Obermiller & Spangenberg (1998) defined advertising skepticism as a tendency to disbelieve the informational claims of advertising. This can have consequences both on the effectiveness of the message but also on the credibility of the brand. This definition was later refined by Obermiller et al. (2005) as an individuals' willingness not to believe advertising claims and observing considerable aversion to blindly believing claims. That can explain why some individuals may be more skeptical than others. This confirms the findings of Helm (2004) that consumers' skepticism about advertising can lead them to sometimes reject the messages presented by companies completely. Consumers often don't trust advertising unless they have reason to believe the company's message (Cho & Taylor, 2019). Echebarria-Echabe (2010) have suggested that individuals tend to take a preventive attitude towards the message when they think it may be an attempt at manipulation.

Influence on these variables on consumers' behavior

Greenwashing practices can make consumers skeptical about green claims and increase their confusion about sustainability information when they are making their purchasing decisions (Cho & Taylor, 2020). Wagner et al. (2009) show that proactive communication (when statements about responsible business practices precede observed behavior) leads the consumer to perceive a higher hypocrisy than when communication is reactive (when statements follow observed behavior). This perceived hypocrisy can lead consumers to doubt the intentions of the company, especially the discourse about corporate social responsibility and sustainable development and damage its image. Once this suspicion is established, it becomes difficult to change this feeling, and the consumer could adopt negative attitudes: either complain or stop seeing him or speak badly about it to his friends or family about it (op. cited). As more and more cases of corporate hypocrisy are discovered, consumers have developed an inherent general skepticism towards CSR campaigns of companies (Connors et al., 2015). Elving (2012) claimed that high levels of skepticism negatively affect purchase intention and attitude towards the company. It was found that the consumers' enduring level of trait-based skepticism predicted the degree to which consumers were likely to generate firm-serving attributions of firm behavior (Forehand & Grier, 2003). For Rim & Kim (2016) there is a negative relation between customer skepticism and attitude toward the brand image. Skepticism can negatively affect the purchase intention of consumers and give the company a negative image, resulting in increased expenses (Farooq & Wicaksono, 2021). But when the company has a good reputation, consumers will have a better image and be less suspicious of its motives (Campbell, 2007).

Research's methodology

We chose to conduct individual interviews because the subject may seem sensitive and individual interview is more suitable than focus groups to avoid bias of social desirability. We interviewed 16 French consumers in January 2023 who were chosen randomly but mainly in the area of Paris because it was a sample of convenience (appendix 1). We conducted a thematic content analysis as advised by some authors (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and constructed a coding grid by selecting broad categories that corresponded to the main themes of the interview guide: perception of brands, skepticism toward brand and the advertising, definition of suspicion and skepticism, responsible brands actions (appendix 2).

We've stopped the number of interviews using the principle de data saturation. Usually, Glaser and Strauss (1967) defined theoretical saturation as the point at which no additional data is found that would allow the researcher to further develop the properties of the phenomenon which corresponds. But other researchers indicated that saturation can be used in four ways in qualitative research: theoretical saturation, data saturation, code or thematic saturation, and meaning saturation (Bowen, 2008). Code or thematic saturation refers to a

stage in the data analysis process where repetitive codes or themes are identified, and no new information or relationships between them emerge (op.cité). It explains why we've decided to stop the number of our interviewees to 16.

IMPACT OF SKEPTICISM AND SUSPICION ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

Widespread skepticism and mistrust of brands

There is an overwhelming majority among the consumers surveyed who are skeptical about brands (15/16) and the one who answers no (H2⁴) says he does have questions: *«But it's true that with the scandals we see now, I sometimes wonder»*. The reasons for this skepticism are various and can be due to brand communication: *“there is always a lot of communication around brands, there are many coms to advertise a product”* (A1); *“I am rather skeptical in the sense that we are presented with a whole bunch of benefits or miraculous things”* (A2). Some consumers do not hesitate to talk about misleading advertising: *“Yes because I think there is a lot of misleading advertising, for example the product that miraculously removes stains or beauty products that remove wrinkles”* (F1); *“I have the impression that in order to sell their products they are ready to exaggerate in order to influence us”* (F2). Others go further by questioning the strategy of these brands and their honesty: *“Because I know they are ripping us off, they are ripping us all. This is not normal”* (E1), considering that they put their interest first: *“I think they see their happiness before mine so in fact from there they have an interest”* (D2); *“I am never totally confident about a brand because there is always some shadow that we do not know”* (G1). But this skepticism towards brands can depend on their reputation: *«I will be skeptical with brands that have a bad image or brands that have been controversial»* (H1).

There is a lack of trust for some brands brands, particularly in fast fashion: *“yes, there is always a little bit of mistrust, for example, in everything that is fast fashion”* (C1); *“the big fast fashion brands who just want to sell, who think more about turnover than about the consumer, the environment, respect for human beings and who only think about numbers”* (E2). They even spontaneously quote these brands as the online brand SHEIN: *“I'm not 100% against Shein but for me, this brand in particular, it is clearly more trustworthy. There is wage abuse, and they are not even hiding it”* (C2). In addition, consumers are suspicious of brands they don't know: *“it may be new brands coming on the market, so I am a little skeptical”* (B2); *“yes especially if they are brands I do not know”* (G1). But this mistrust is also expressed towards discount or first price brands because they have doubts about the composition of their products mainly in the food field : *“Yes, I'm wary of discount brands for food because we don't know what's in it”*(F1); *“Yes especially food brands because for me there is not enough transparency in the manufacturing process”* (G1).

Mixed attitude towards brand communication and skepticism about advertising

14/16 of our consumers are skeptical about a brand advertisement, often because they doubt of their sincerity, either because of the product itself: *“publicity of brand « Comme J'aime” who promise big weight loss in a few weeks with their program. For me, I find that the advertising sounds very false”* (H2) or the content of the message *“in the cosmetics field, for example, we are going to promote a lipstick that lasts 24 hours, I am very skeptical”* (B2). Another reason for the consumers to be skeptical is related to their perception of business objectives: *“you have a brand that makes an advertisement that will highlight for example the ecology and what you will hear in the media or other well it will be contrary to what it advocates in fact and we will hear ecological scandals while ben precisely in their*

⁴ For confidentiality reasons, we chose to name respondents with a letter and a number (A1, A2, B1, B2, etc)

advertising, they say they do things for. So it's actually quite contradictory" (C1). This skepticism can also be expressed in terms of advertising objectives because consumers are aware that the objective is to create a better image and thus make the product more attractive: *"an advertisement is made to really put the beauty of the brand in light, you don't really know what's hidden behind what"* (C2).

Consumer reactions to misleading advertising are different but the impact on behavior is immediate (table 1).

(Insert table 1)

Importance of brand transparency and social commitments

The majority of respondents believe that environmental actions can play a role in limiting their skepticism (10 out of 16 consumers surveyed) while others have more mixed opinions (2 consumers) or do not believe in it (4) and think that it may be greenwashing: *"No because I know that many brands do greenwashing and so when I see that a brand is engaged I think more than they do greenwashing"* (E1). But many (6 out of 16 consumers) spontaneously cite human rights as fundamental to reduce their skepticism: *"I think the human factor can help me to become less skeptical, that is, the conditions under which the brand will treat its employees"* (H1). However, it is the transparency of brands that emerges from the interviews because at least 7 consumers spontaneously cite it as the essential element to foster their confidence: *"this brand is transparent on its manufacturing process"* (A2); *the fact that it is transparent, both positive and negative*" (D1); *I like when a brand is transparent on its packaging*"(E1); *"transparency, knowing how, where, under what conditions it is produced and whether it meets European standards for example"* (E2); *"it's transparency, I like when the brand clearly communicates information to us"* (F2) ; *"total brand transparency and proximity to customers"* (G1).

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS: SKEPTICISM AND SUSPICION AS TWO CONTINUUMS

We asked respondents to define skepticism and suspicion. Indeed, if the literature seems to distinguish these two concepts, it seemed important for us to know what the consumer thought about them. We have taken up some verbatims that seemed to us the most emblematic in figures 1 and 2 and we were able to identify the main dimensions of these two variables. Each of these variables is composed of 3 dimensions and that there seems to exist a continuum for both ranging from at least negative to more negative. For skepticism, it goes from the received idea then to doubt to finally lead to mistrust (figure 1).

(Insert Figure 1)

For consumers, suspicion is defined as a belief and therefore something that is not necessarily tangible or proven: *"it is a belief in something that is based on arguments that have not yet been confirmed"* (H2). For this variable, the dimensions range from lack of transparency to dishonesty and finally to accusation. The terms are very strong and as consumers have pointed out, suspicion goes beyond skepticism (figure 2).

(Insert Figure 2)

We can notice that these two concepts follow a process that can be constructed as a continuum from a weak reaction to a stronger one, thus leading to suspicion or skepticism. This result is interesting because compared to the concept of trust, there are similarities. Trust is generally operationalized as an evolutionary process, growing and transforming as relationships develop

over time (Castaldo et al., 2010). Lewicki et al. (2006, p. 992) identified 2 different fields of research in trust: « (1) *the behavioral tradition of trust which views trust as a rational choice behavior; (2) the psychological tradition which attempts to understand the complex intrapersonal states associated with trust, including expectations, intentions, affect and dispositions* ». Usually, researchers focus on the factors that can influence the construction of trust but it would be interesting to study the factors that lead to suspicion or skepticism and to deconstruct them. In the case of our 2 variables, there exists also a process that, through different experiences from the consumers, can lead to mistrust and/or accusation: they can be included in the psychological research which means that it's difficult to change behaviors because it's not rational.

But some authors explain that there exists a distinction between the presence of trust and the absence or lack of distrust (Greenwood & Van Buren, 2010): "*if "lack of distrust" is therefore understood as the opposite of distrust, then the trust is best described as the opposite of "lack of trust"*" (p.427). They've based this assumption on works of Swift (2001) who indicates that the absence of trust differs qualitatively from the presence of distrust and proposes a split trust continuum: from distrust to lack of distrust and the second from lack of trust to trust and not only a continuum between trust and distrust. What is very interesting is that we could use the same terminology in our research and identify a continuum between "lack of suspicion and suspicion" then "lack of skepticism and skepticism". These results allow to enrich the research on suspicion and skepticism as well as those on trust.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS, LIMITS AND WAYS OF RESEARCH

This research has studied the impact of suspicion and skepticism on consumer behavior and identified the dimensions of these two concepts particularly their continuums. We can propose some managerial implications for brands, as for example, to modify their communication at two levels: a preventive level (before) and a curative level (in case of crisis). In the first level, we advise brands to implement communications campaigns that are more realistic and that not present an idealized image of the product that will never be achieved. Indeed, the consumer has changed, and he has become more aware of advertising mechanisms. He's not longer deceived by exaggerated communications on products. On the curative level, in the context of a reputation crisis, for example, brands must be honest and not hesitate to publicly apologize. In these times when social networks are taking over everything and where rumors grow, it is essential that brands be more transparent. It's necessary to implement a transparent communication policy that allows consumers to have evidence of their ecological and societal commitments. The concept of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) not exploited in this research could be an interesting track in the implementation of this transparency because of its three dimensions (economic, social and ecological). Without talking about CSR, consumers spontaneously raised these two last fundamental dimensions in order to reduce their suspicion and skepticism and it's only by their actions that brands could do it.

Our study has a main limit associated with the nature of the sample: most of our sample are women, which can be explained because they are the ones who are shopping for 68% of them according to a study in 2023⁵. The sample is also rather young (14 are under 35), which may be a bias but will also provide interesting elements on this population. The ways of research could be to broaden this sample by interviewing an older population in order to compare these two studies. The second could be to focus on the CSR aspect of brands and identify what is perceived by consumers. Indeed, by working on concepts such as skepticism

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<https://www.nestle.fr/media/femmes-charge-alimentation-familles#:~:text=sein%20des%20familles-,En%202023%2C%20les%20femmes%20continuent%20de%20porter%20la%20charge%20de,alimentation%20au%20sein%20des%20familles>

and suspicion, it is possible that this has influenced the results and led consumers to only look for negative aspects of brands. Focusing on the positive dimension of brands through their CSR strategy could perhaps help identify other levers that are more accessible to brands.

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Table 1. Consumers' reactions

Reactions	Verbatims
Indifference	<i>“I don't do anything” (E1); “I haven't changed my behavior” (F1); “Sometimes I criticize on the couch while watching TV, but I don't go so far as to boycott the brand” (F2)</i>
Disappointment and resentment	<i>You are quite disappointed I think, you think you have something and finally it is something totally different. I think you're partly mad at the brand” (A1); “I was disappointed” (G2)</i>
Change of brands	<i>“I have not bought anymore, and I have gone to another brand that seems clearer in its products and its speech” (G1)</i>
Negative word of mouth	<i>“Well, I know that I avoid the mark and tell my friends about it and tell them to be wary of this mark” (E2); «So I'm not going to buy the product in question and if I ever talk about it with friends, I won't hesitate to tell them not to buy and avoid these brands” (H1)</i>

Figure 1. Continuum of skepticism

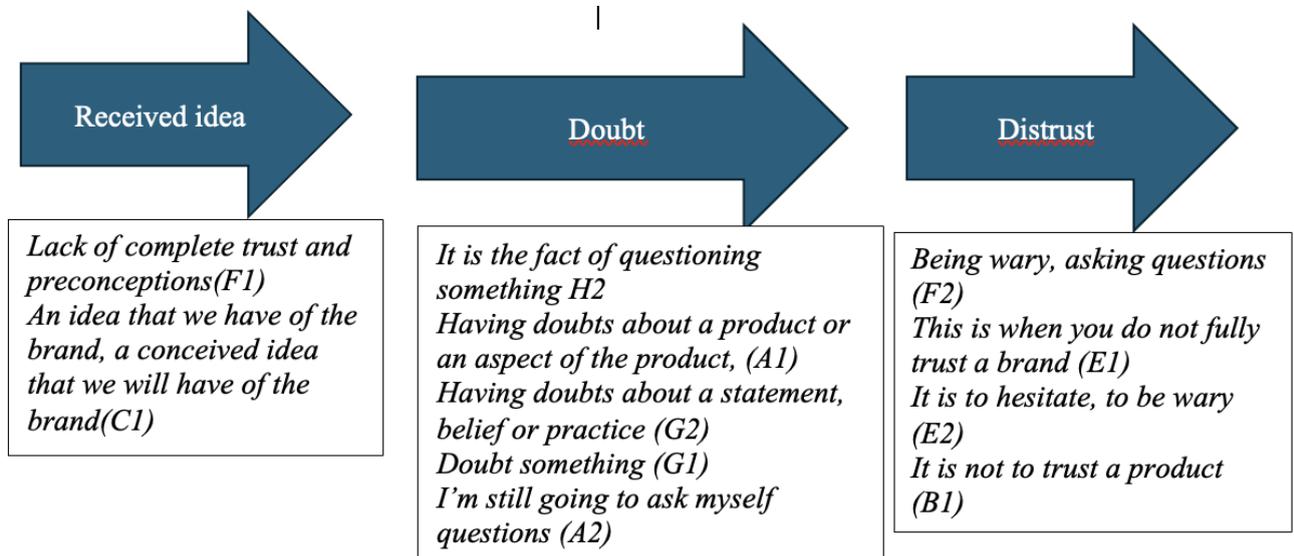
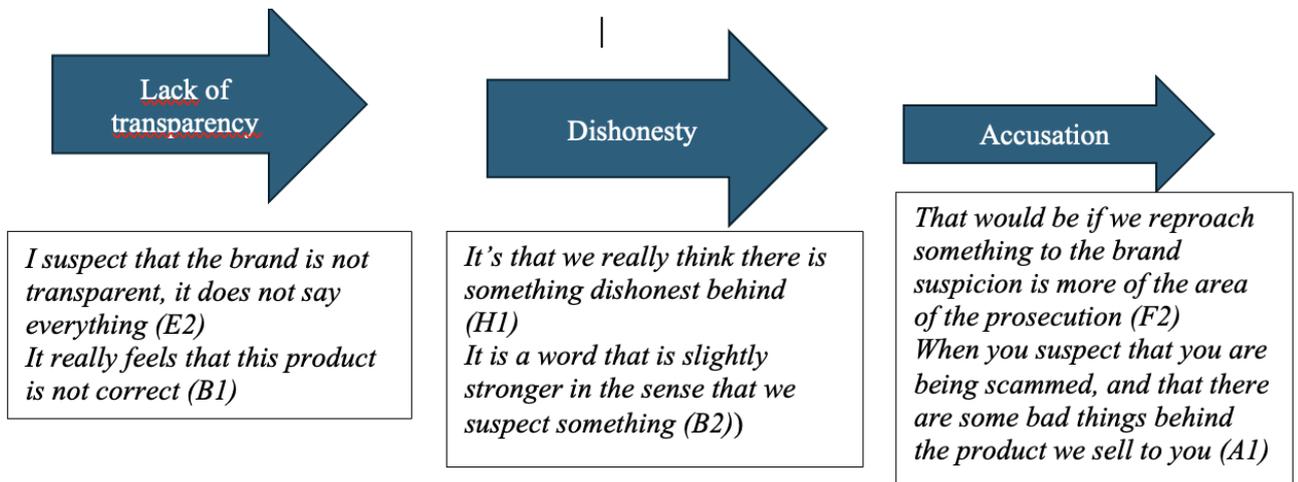


Figure 2. Continuum of suspicion



Appendix 1. Research's sample

Interviewees	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2	D1	D2	E1	E2	F1	F2	G1	G2	H1	H2
Gender	W	W	W	M	M	W	W	M	W	W	W	M	M	W	M	W
Family status (Married or In Couple, Single)	IC	M	S	S	S	S	IC	IC	IN	S	M	IC	S	M	IC	S
Children	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	1	0	0	0	1
Age	31	54	30	22	25	24	22	32	31	23	49	35	29	27	30	52

Appendix 2. Interview guide

1. Definition of concepts by the consumer

- Do you think you are skeptical towards brands? Why?
- Could you define skepticism?
- Could you define suspicion?
- Do you make a difference between the 2 terms? Which one?

2. Influence on consumer behavior

- Has advertising influenced your buying behavior? When? why?
- Have you ever been skeptical of a brand's advertising? Example?
- Does this skepticism influence your buying behavior?
- Have you ever suspected a brand of false advertising? Examples?
- What was your reaction?
- Has brand suspicion had an impact on your consumption?

3. Attitude towards brands

- Do you distrust brands? Which ones and why?
- Do you think brands are trustworthy and which ones?
- Is distrust the opposite of trust? Why?
- What elements make you trust a brand?

4. Brand behavior and strategy

- What should brands do to have a better image?
- Can a brand's ecological commitment make you less skeptical?
- What other elements are likely to make you less skeptical?
- What can brands implement to face your skepticism?
- Have you developed new expectations towards brands?

