

# When transparency pays off: Enticing sceptical consumers with two-sided advertising

José Mauro da Costa Hernandez  | Murilo Carrazedo Marques da Costa Filho  |  
Maria Paula Veronezi Strano

Universidade de São Paulo, Sao Paulo, Brazil

## Correspondence

Murilo Carrazedo da Marques Costa Filho,  
Universidade de São Paulo, Sao Paulo, Brazil.  
Email: [murilocarrazedo@hotmail.com](mailto:murilocarrazedo@hotmail.com)

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## Abstract

It has been generally assumed that higher levels of scepticism towards advertising invariably lead to higher resistance to advertising appeals. The main purpose of the present research was to examine whether highly sceptical consumers' resistance can be overcome by appeals associated with higher credibility. We tested our hypotheses using message sidedness as an advertising variable that has been associated with higher (two-sided) versus lower (one-sided) credibility. In three experimental studies, we examined more versus less sceptical consumers' responses to two- versus one-sided appeals. We found that two-sided messages are more effective in increasing purchase intentions, through enhanced credibility, but only for consumers who are more sceptical of advertising. Less sceptical consumers trust both messages equally and their purchase intentions are not affected by the type of message. Importantly, we also showed that highly sceptical consumers trust two-sided appeals as much as their less sceptical counterparts. The study contributes to the literature on advertising and persuasion knowledge by showing that advertising scepticism does not elicit a single response tendency, as originally conceptualized. Rather, advertising scepticism is more consistent with the underpinnings of the Persuasion Knowledge Model, in that higher knowledge about persuasion tactics aids consumers to better cope with, and not invariably resist persuasion attempts. We conclude that transparency pays off because it may entice a more sceptical audience and, at the same time, it does not harm less sceptical consumers' trust and purchase intentions.

## KEYWORDS

advertising credibility, advertising skepticism, messages, persuasion, persuasion knowledge, two-sided

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Advertisers use innumerable tactics to entice the interest of consumers, but this is challenging because consumers, in general, do not trust advertising. A recent international survey by Kantar (2020) revealed that advertising is the least trusted source to get information about a product or service, with only 38% of consumers saying that they trust this medium. This low level of trust can be highly

consequential for marketers because consumers who are sceptical about advertising are usually less likely to attend to advertising and are more likely to counter-argue or denigrate the source of advertising (Obermiller et al., 2005).

Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998, p. 160) conceptualized consumer scepticism towards advertising as a “tendency toward disbelief of advertising claims” and claim that it “refers to a single response tendency” (op. cit., p. 163). In other words, the more sceptical the

consumer, the less likely she is to believe in ad claims. Extant research has generally assumed this notion and examined this direct relationship (e.g. Amawate & Deb, 2021; Baek & Morimoto, 2012; Luo et al., 2020; Raziq et al., 2018). Less attention has been given to contextual message variables that may potentially moderate this relationship. Put differently, can highly sceptical consumers be led to trust advertising as much as their less sceptical counterparts?

In the present research, we predict and present evidence that ad scepticism does not always entail a single response tendency, positing that sceptical consumers do not invariably resist advertising claims. We draw our hypotheses from the tenets of persuasion knowledge theory (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and from recent research showing that higher persuasion knowledge can lead to more acceptance of, rather than greater resistance to, persuasion attempts, when a more credible tactic is used (Isaac & Grayson, 2017, 2020). Because advertising scepticism and persuasion knowledge share the same nomological network, the pattern of differential responses to more versus less credible ads between individuals with high versus low advertising scepticism should be similar to the differences between individuals with high versus low persuasion knowledge in responses to persuasion attempts that use more or less credible tactics. Therefore, higher scepticism towards advertising should not always lead to the single tendency to discount advertising claims, as originally claimed by Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998).

We test our predictions in the advertising domain using a tactic that is associated with higher versus lower credibility: message sidedness. Advertising messages can be either one-sided, showing only positive brand claims and attributes, or two-sided, usually depicting the brand favourably along with more important attributes, but also unfavourably in other attributes. By recognizing the weaknesses of the advertised products and services, two-sided advertising messages tend to be more credible (Crowley & Hoyer, 1994; Eisend, 2006; Pechmann, 1992). Thus, we contend that high-credibility advertising tactics such as two-sided messages, compared to one-sided messages, should elicit distinct responses from highly sceptical consumers than from less sceptical ones.

In three experimental studies, we show that two-sided (vs. one-sided) messages lead to more positive purchase intentions of the advertised product by increasing the credibility of the ad but only among more sceptical consumers. Conversely, less sceptical consumers tend to respond equally to both one- and two-sided appeals. The study contributes to the advertising literature by demonstrating that advertising scepticism is an important boundary condition for the effectiveness of appeals that are associated with more or less credibility, such as message sidedness. Moreover, we provide theoretical clarification on the advertising scepticism construct, a stable marketplace belief (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998) which has been sometimes confused with induced situational scepticism. The study also provides important managerial implications, suggesting that marketers may benefit from employing more transparent advertising messages such as two-sided appeals to entice sceptical consumers.

In what follows, we provide a theoretical background on advertising scepticism and persuasion knowledge literature. We then present

an overview of message sidedness and develop our hypotheses about the interactive effects between message sidedness and advertising scepticism on credibility and purchase intentions. Next, we present the research methodology, results, and findings. Finally, we offer a discussion of our results, theoretical and managerial implications, and the study's limitations with suggestions for future research.

## 2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 | Consumer advertising scepticism

In a seminal article, Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998, p. 160) developed a scale to measure consumer scepticism towards advertising, which they defined as a “tendency toward disbelief of advertising claims”. The authors (op. cit., p. 163) conceived advertising scepticism as a “stable and generalizable marketplace belief”, and proposed that socialization, marketplace experiences, personality traits, and education shape consumers' scepticism towards advertising. As a result, consumers with higher levels of advertising scepticism tend to disbelieve and counterargue advertising claims to a greater extent (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998, 2005). Obermiller and Spangenberg's scale to measure consumer scepticism towards advertising has been used in many subsequent studies and has been proved reliable and valid (Hamby & Brinberg, 2018; Lopes & Goulart-da-Silva, 2021; Pan et al., 2017; Raziq et al., 2018; Chari et al., 2016; Yang & Hsu, 2017; Yang & Mundel, 2021).

Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998, p. 163) claimed that advertising scepticism “refers to a single consistent response tendency”. This means that highly sceptical consumers should display a general tendency to disbelieve all forms of advertising to a greater extent than their less sceptical counterparts. They admitted that situational factors such as product type or ad execution variables may moderate highly sceptical consumers' attitudes, but contended that these consumers should be less likely to believe ad claims than their less sceptical counterparts (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998, 2000).

Therefore, although within-individual variations in attitudes or message credibility may be expected when exposed to ads with different contents or structures, consumers with higher advertising scepticism should always be expected to resist the message's persuasion attempt more than consumers with lower advertising scepticism. Extant research has indeed shown that, overall, increasing levels of ad scepticism are associated with lower credibility and purchase intentions in many marketing domains such as retargeted ads (Zarouali et al., 2017), native advertising (Lee et al., 2016), personalized advertising (Baek & Morimoto, 2012), cause-related marketing (Amawate & Deb, 2021; Chang & Cheng, 2015), and green product advertising (Luo et al., 2020). However, whether this relationship is moderated by the message's structural characteristics has been less investigated.

In the present research, we contend that advertising scepticism does not entail a single response tendency. On the contrary, we argue that messages that differ in credibility elicit different patterns of differential response effects depending on the level of scepticism. We

draw on persuasion knowledge theory and findings from past studies to support our arguments.

## 2.2 | Persuasion knowledge

In their seminal paper, Friestad and Wright (1994) theorized about how consumers develop knowledge on persuasion attempts in their Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM). The authors defined persuasion knowledge as “folk knowledge” about persuasion intentions that people learn or acquire over time from many sources, like their experiences in personal interactions, encounters with persuaders, word-of-mouth communication, parental advice, the media, etc. Persuasion knowledge is intuitive knowledge embedded in an interpretive belief system developed over time through socialization and exposure to persuasion episodes. Through repeated experiences with persuasion episodes, people develop and consolidate beliefs about the tactics that marketers use to achieve persuasion goals, as well as about the effectiveness and appropriateness of these tactics (Friestad & Wright, 1994). The higher the persuasion knowledge, the higher the consumer's ability to recognize, reflect upon and evaluate the intentions of persuasion agents (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022).

During their lives, consumers experience both positive and negative persuasion episodes that elicit positive or negative disconfirmation of the claims made by persuasion agents. However, because people are generally more sensitive to negative than to positive events and information—a phenomenon named negativity bias (Baumeister et al., 2001)—higher levels of persuasion knowledge are likely to be associated with higher levels of suspicion towards persuasion attempts. For example, Darke et al. (2010) evidenced a negativity bias in claim-fact discrepancies in advertising claims, so that negative disconfirmation of advertising claims led to greater levels of distrust than positive confirmation led to trust.

Thus, since higher persuasion knowledge is associated with more experience with persuasion attempts in social interactions, and because individuals are more sensitive to negative than positive persuasion episodes, consumers with higher persuasion knowledge usually tend to be more cautious and react more defensively to persuasive attempts (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022). Experimental studies have indeed shown that participants who are primed to access persuasion knowledge directly, or who receive cues about persuaders' manipulative intentions, reduce their overall evaluations of the persuasive agent (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; DeCarlo, 2005; Isaac & Grayson, 2017 [study 2]; Kirmani & Zhu, 2007; Wentzel et al., 2010; Xie & Johnson, 2015) and react more negatively to the persuasion attempt (Marchand et al., 2015).

However, Friestad and Wright (1994, pp. 1–3) contend that more persuasion knowledge does not invariably lead to greater resistance to persuasion attempts. Rather, their Persuasion Knowledge Model is concerned with how people use that persuasion knowledge “to refine their attitudes toward products and marketers” and “select and execute coping tactics believed to be effective and appropriate.” In essence, they argue that persuasion

knowledge's main function is to aid consumers in better distinguishing a misleading from a fair persuasive attempt. Thus, consumers with higher persuasion knowledge are more able to anticipate and cope with the effects of persuasion episodes and are more likely to present distinctive reactions to fair versus manipulative persuasive attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994, 1995).

Past research has shown support for Friestad and Wright's (1994) proposition. Responses to marketing stimuli are more distinctive among people with higher (vs. lower) persuasion knowledge, or when people are primed to access persuasion knowledge (Isaac & Grayson, 2017, 2020; Forehand & Grier, 2003; Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2013; Hamby & Brinberg, 2018; Kim et al., 2016; Ku & Chen, 2020; Lim et al., 2020; Morales, 2005; Seo et al., 2019; Wei et al., 2008). Therefore, more persuasion knowledge increases the ability to distinguish honest from deceitful marketing practices. For instance, Kim et al. (2016) examined the moderating effects of persuasion knowledge on the effect of different combinations of publicity (non-paid message; higher credibility) and advertising (paid message; lower credibility) on brand attitudes and evaluations. They showed that brand evaluations were higher when the brand was presented as publicity than when it was presented as advertising alone, or in combination with publicity. However, this effect occurred only among participants whose persuasion knowledge was activated while attitudes and evaluations did not differ across conditions among participants in a control group.

## 2.3 | Consumer advertising scepticism versus persuasion knowledge

Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) acknowledged the similarity between advertising scepticism and persuasion knowledge. They reasoned that the “arguments for the importance of consumer persuasion knowledge also are arguments for consideration of consumer ad skepticism”, and “the sources of persuasion knowledge (...) are arguably the same factors that shape ad skepticism” (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998, p. 162). The authors also construe advertising scepticism as socially developed and shaped by marketplace experiences, as Friestad and Wright (1994) did. However, they claim that, whereas persuasion knowledge is more general and includes a broad array of different responses to persuasion attempts, advertising scepticism refers to a single consistent response tendency. In other words, advertising scepticism, as opposed to persuasion knowledge, was conceived as always leading to more resistance to advertisers' claims, rather than as a coping mechanism. Another difference is that Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) give more emphasis to the influence of personality traits in shaping scepticism.

Given both constructs' shared phenomenological origins and nomological network, we should expect similar consequences from advertising scepticism and persuasion knowledge as related to advertising. Indeed, past research has found significant positive correlations between knowledge about persuasion tactics and measures of advertising scepticism (Boush et al., 1994; Mangleburg & Bristol, 1998).

Moreover, both persuasion knowledge (Boush et al., 1994; Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022; Hudders et al., 2017; Nelson, 2016) and advertising scepticism (An & Kang, 2019; Mitra et al., 2019; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 2000) increase with age and are influenced by socialization agents (Mangleburg & Bristol, 1998; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 2000).

Therefore, highly sceptical consumers, like people with higher persuasion knowledge, should better distinguish between ad claims that are more or less trustworthy (and adjust their judgements accordingly) than less sceptical consumers. In other words, rather than a single response tendency, we should expect larger differences in responses to higher vs lower credibility advertising from highly sceptical consumers, compared to less sceptical consumers. Empirical support for this prediction is scant, but the results of some recent studies in the domain of corporate social responsibility have revealed that people with higher advertising scepticism tend to show more distinctive responses than people with lower scepticism, rewarding (punishing) companies when they act more (less) transparently (Joireman et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2019; Yang & Mundel, 2021). For instance, Yang and Mundel (2021) found that participants with high advertising scepticism significantly reduced their perceptions of brand opportunism in cause-related marketing (CRM) campaigns when the brand-cause fit was higher. In contrast, participants with low advertising scepticism showed no differences.

Given the aforementioned discussion, we propose that, compared to less sceptical consumers, consumers who are highly sceptical towards advertising (like people with higher persuasion knowledge) should be, in general, more distrustful of advertising. But they are also more likely to distinguish better between higher and lower credibility ads and to adjust their evaluations accordingly, compared to less sceptical individuals. In other words, we expect that highly sceptical consumers should trust more an advertising appeal associated with higher credibility than an appeal associated with lower credibility, while less sceptical consumers are more likely to trust both appeals similarly. In the present research, we examine this proposition with an advertising tactic that has been associated with higher versus lower credibility: message sidedness.

## 2.4 | Messages sidedness

Marketers often present their products and services in favourable terms, highlighting their brand's positive attributes. However, marketers may sometimes present some negative information along with positive claims (Crowley & Hoyer, 1994; Eisend, 2006, 2007). The inclusion or not of pros and cons in the context of marketing communications has been referred to as message sidedness. A one-sided advertising message presents only positive claims about the product, whereas a two-sided message claims some attributes positively while disclaiming other attributes and presenting them unfavourably (Anderson & Golden, 1984). At first glance, it seems counter-intuitive for marketers to try to persuade consumers to buy their

products by admitting a flaw or some inferiority relative to a competitor. However, this may be more effective than a one-sided message that omits negative information or weaknesses of the advertised product, because people perceive the two-sided message as more credible.

Past research has consistently evidenced that two-sided messages enhance ad credibility (e.g. Anderson & Golden, 1984; Bohner et al., 2003; Campos, 2017; Crowley & Hoyer, 1994; Eisend, 2006; Golden & Alpert, 1978, 1987; Kamins et al., 1989; Kamins & Marks, 1987; Rucker et al., 2008; Semaan et al., 2018) and strengthens perceptions that the advertised brand does possess the positively claimed attributes (Golden & Alpert, 1987; Hunt & Kernan, 1984). Recent studies show that these effects hold for new forms of advertising, such as native ads, social media ads, and digital influencer merchandising (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Krouwer et al., 2021; Lee & Johnson, 2022). Outside the advertising field, two-sided refutational messages have been shown to lead people with strongly held beliefs to be more open to counter attitudinal information on issues as diverse as gun control (Xu & Petty, 2021), vaccination (Featherstone & Zhang, 2020), genetically modified crops (Lyons et al., 2019), and political candidates (Kim, 2020).

Attribution theory (Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1973) has been used in the majority of past research to explain the positive effects of two- versus one-sided appeals on credibility (Crowley & Hoyer, 1994; Eisend, 2006, 2007). Eisend (2007) compared explanatory models of two-sided effectiveness and found the model based on attribution theory to have superior goodness-of-fit to the empirical data. Attribution theory focuses on how people use the information to make causal inferences and explanations for events, what sort of inferences are made, and the consequences of such inferences (Folkes, 1988; Kelley, 1973). Most research on message sidedness in advertising (e.g. Golden & Alpert, 1987; Settle & Golden, 1974; Sparkman, 1982; Swinyard, 1981) has used Kelley's (1973) discounting principle to explain the differences in the effectiveness of two-sided versus one-sided claims. According to Kelley (1973, p. 113), "the role of a given cause in producing a given effect is discounted if other plausible causes are also present." For instance, if a person praises the quality of a car, one is likely to attribute the statement to the car's attributes. However, if one learns that the person is trying to sell the car, they will likely discount the car's attributes as a cause for the statement and infer the desire to make a sale as a second causal explanation (Sparkman, 1982). Therefore, the validity of the car's quality is less certain in the latter case.

In the context of advertising, product claims in a message may be attributed to the advertiser's desire to sell the brand, or to the actual characteristics of the product. Messages that only claim product superiority will likely lead people to attribute such claims more to the firm's ulterior selling motive rather than to the actual characteristics of the brand; as a result, consumers will be less certain about the actual superiority of the product. On the other hand, messages admitting that a competitor's product might be superior in some aspects are more likely to be attributed, at least to some degree, to the product's overall quality, increasing consumers' certainty and credibility about

the features of the advertised brand. In other words, attribution theory holds that the positive claims are more likely due to the validity of the products' attributes and performance than to an ulterior motive to sell the product, when the message is two-sided (Anderson & Golden, 1984; Golden & Alpert, 1978; Settle & Golden, 1974; Smith & Hunt, 1978). Hence, when the communicator acknowledges a weakness, the receiver is likely to trust the message more (Eisend, 2006, 2010).

Most of the extant research on message sidedness effectiveness has focused on the role of variables related to the message's content, such as the amount of negative versus positive information (Eisend, 2006; Golden & Alpert, 1987), the importance of negatively disclaimed attributes (Anderson & Golden, 1984; Pizzutti et al., 2016), the correlation between positive and negative claims (Bohner et al., 2003; Pechmann, 1992), the presence (or not) of refutation (Cornelis et al., 2015; Cornelis et al., 2020; Kamins & Assael, 1987), type of product (search vs. credence, Pechmann, 1992), or the presence of humour in the message (Becker & Anderson, 2019; Eisend, 2021). Although content-related variables that render two-sided messages effective have been relatively well studied, less is known about receiver-related variables. In other words, the types and contents of two-sided messages which are more effective are relatively well known, but less is known for whom they yield better results. Some past research has indeed shown that the effectiveness of two-sided ads is contingent on individual differences, such as involvement (Eisend, 2013), self-confidence (Huertas & Hanna, 2020), need for cognition (Kao, 2011), regulatory focus (Florack et al., 2009), or cultural background (Ertz et al., 2021). The present study aims to investigate consumer advertising scepticism as an individual variable that moderates the influence of message sidedness on credibility and purchase intentions.

## 2.5 | Interactional effects of message sidedness and advertising Scepticism

In the previous sections, we argued that advertising scepticism is closely related to consumer persuasion knowledge in the narrower domain of advertising. Consumers with higher persuasion knowledge tend to distinguish well between deceptive and more honest persuasion attempts. They tend to resist deceptive persuasion agents but reward truthful ones (Hamby & Brinberg, 2018; Isaac & Grayson, 2017, 2020; Ku & Chen, 2020; Lim et al., 2020; Seo et al., 2019). Hence, in an advertising context, both consumers with higher advertising scepticism and consumers with higher persuasion knowledge should respond differently to more (vs. less) credible advertising tactics (Joireman et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2019; Yang & Mundel, 2021), such as two- and one-sided messages. More specifically, we posit that highly sceptical consumers should be more likely to trust a two- than a one-sided message. Conversely, consumers with lower levels of advertising scepticism, like consumers with lower persuasion knowledge, should be less able to differentiate between more and less credible advertising tactics. Therefore, these consumers are

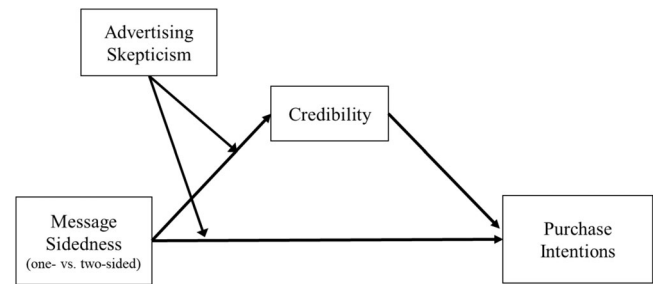


FIGURE 1 Conceptual model of the study

likely to trust two- and one-sided ads similarly. Consequently, we suggest that the effect message sidedness on credibility will be greater for people with higher than for people with lower ad scepticism. Thus, we propose our first hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** Two-sided messages will result in significantly higher credibility than one-sided messages, and this effect will be greater as levels of advertising scepticism increase.

The effectiveness of two-sided messages on purchase intention has been rather ambiguous, as opposed to the consistent findings on credibility. There is empirical evidence that two-sided messages may increase purchase intention by increasing advertising credibility (e.g. Eisend, 2007; Pizzutti et al., 2016). However, as two-sided messages disclaim one or more product attributes, this may harm product quality perceptions and reduce its favorability; that is, disclaiming very important attributes may damage product evaluations, potentially offsetting credibility gains (Pizzutti et al., 2016). On the other hand, disclaiming irrelevant attributes may not render the message any more credible (Crowley & Hoyer, 1994; Eisend, 2006, 2010; Settle & Golden, 1974; Stayman et al., 1987). Thus, we expect two-sided messages to increase purchase intentions through increased credibility, provided the discounted attribute is neither too important nor too irrelevant. Thus:

**Hypothesis 2.** Two-sided messages will result in higher purchase intentions than one-sided messages and this effect will be greater as levels of advertising scepticism increase.

**Hypothesis 3.** The effect of message sidedness on purchase intentions will be mediated by advertisement credibility, but only among individuals with higher advertising scepticism.

In sum, we expect advertising scepticism to moderate the effect of message sidedness on credibility and purchase intentions, and message credibility to mediate the influence of message sidedness on purchase intention. Our hypothesized relationships are represented in the conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1.

### 3 | METHOD AND RESULTS

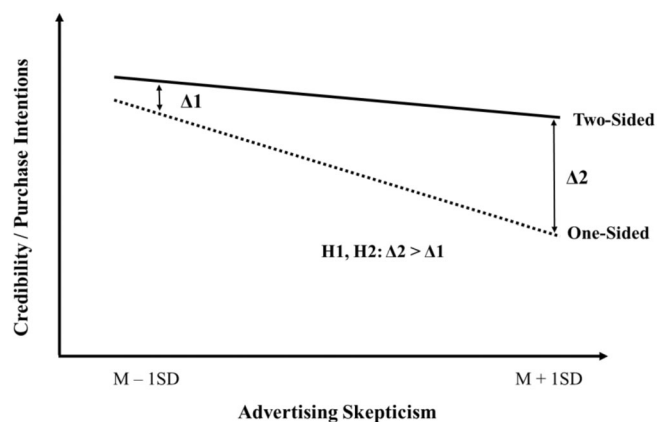
#### 3.1 | Overview of studies

To test our hypotheses, we conducted three laboratory experiments, in which we manipulated the type of message as either one- or two-sided. For the two-sided messages, we selected a negative attribute that was neither too important nor too irrelevant, as per the discussion on the development of Hypotheses 2 and 3. In all studies, participants were exposed to either one- or two-sided messages and were asked to evaluate the ad's credibility and indicate their intention to purchase the advertised product. Participants were undergraduate students from a large university in southern Brazil, and all those who accepted to participate in the studies were included. We used different types of products in each study to generalize our findings. Study 1 used a provider of cable TV, a hedonic service product, as the target object; the negative attribute of the two-sided message was selected after a pretest. Study 2 was designed to replicate the findings of Study 1 by using a different product (a winter jacket that is both hedonic and utilitarian) as the target object. Rather than pre-testing attributes, we manipulated the importance of the negative attribute. To further generalize our findings, Study 3 also manipulated the importance of the negative attribute and used a more utilitarian good.

We adapted real print ads from existing brands to bring more realism. We chose brands that were largely unknown to the participants (no more than 6% of participants knew the brand in any of the studies) to avoid brand familiarity effects (we also checked if familiarity influenced the results). In all studies, the graphic and visual stimuli elements, such as colour, size, etc., were the same for the one- and two-sided ads. We only manipulated the claim by adding one negative attribute to the two-sided message. Therefore, by controlling for all the other elements of the messages, we assured that the only variation between conditions was message sidedness.

In all studies, to test Hypotheses 1 and 2, we ran regression tests using credibility or purchase intention, respectively, as the dependent variable, and advertising scepticism, message sidedness (one-sided = 0; two-sided = 1), and their interaction as independent variables. Following our theoretical framework (Figure 1), we tested the interaction effect using advertising scepticism as a moderator. We applied the Johnson-Neyman technique to identify the range of advertising scepticism for which the simple effect of message sidedness is significant (i.e. floodlight analysis, Spiller et al., 2013). Additionally, we tested the interaction effect using message sidedness as a moderator and analysed simple effects at conditional values corresponding to one- and two-sided messages. This offered a complementary perspective on how advertising scepticism influences the dependent variables for each level of message sidedness (i.e. one- or two-sided).

We report the main findings of our regression analyses and the sizes of all the main and interaction effects in Appendix B. Figure 2 illustrates a prototypical example of our predictions: the higher the scepticism, the larger the effect of a two- versus one-sided message in enhancing ad credibility and purchase intentions.



**FIGURE 2** Expected results: As advertising scepticism increases, the effect of two-sided messages in eliciting higher credibility (H<sub>1</sub>) and higher purchase intentions (H<sub>2</sub>) will be stronger

In all studies, advertising scepticism was measured by a 7-point, nine-item Likert-type scale adapted from Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).<sup>1</sup> Ad credibility was measured by a 7-point, four-item semantical differential scale adapted from Eisend (2010), and purchase intentions were measured along with four items, using a 7-point, Likert-type scale (1 = totally disagree; 7 = totally agree). The items of all scales were averaged to form composite indices. We assessed the reliability and validity of the scales by running confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) in all studies and also in a pooled sample comprising all three studies. We found support for composite reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity for all latent constructs, except for convergent validity of credibility in Study 1 and purchase intentions in Study 3, which were below benchmark thresholds. However, as in the other two studies and also in the pooled sample, there were no problems, we believe that, as a whole, our measures can be satisfactorily employed. Details on the scales and the results of the CFAs are shown in Appendix C. Means and SDs for independent and dependent variables are reported in Appendix D.

#### 3.2 | Study 1

##### 3.2.1 | Participants and design

Undergraduate Business students ( $n = 140$ ; 60% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 22$ ) received course credits to participate in a 2-group (advertising sidedness: one-sided vs. two-sided), between-subjects, laboratory experiment, in which advertising scepticism was measured.

##### 3.2.2 | Procedures

At the beginning of the experiment, participants were informed that they would be exposed to an ad for a cable TV service ad that was new in town. Participants watched the ads on a PC screen in a

laboratory; the viewing conditions were identical for everyone. The ads were identical in all details and design elements, such as font, copy size, colour, layout, and image. Only the copy content varied so that variations in the dependent measures could be attributed solely to the difference in the message sidedness of the ad claim (see 2.3 Appendix A1). We used an existing brand of cable TV service (GVT) that did not operate in the region where the participants lived to avoid prior brand attitudes from influencing the results. The main title of the one-sided ad emphasized only one positive attribute (best price) and read “We have the best price in the market”. The main title of the two-sided advertisement coupled a negative attribute (limited number of HD channels) with the same positive attribute and read “We do not have the highest number of HD channels but we have the best price in the market”. Thus, contrary to the one-sided message, the two-sided message emphasized both a negative (smaller number of HD channels than competitors) and a positive attribute (lower price).

The number of HD channels was selected as the negative information of the two-sided message after a pretest ( $N = 28$ ) revealed that it ranked fifth in importance (1 = not important at all; 7 = very important) among seven attributes of cable services (price, wi-fi speed, total number of channels, number of HD channels, HBO included, landline included, number of rooms served, and customer assistance). Thus, it should enhance the credibility of the ad without harming a positive attitude towards the product.

### 3.2.3 | Measures

To check the manipulation of the message, participants were asked to evaluate the new service (1 = terrible; 7 = excellent) across eight attributes, including the number of HD channels and the price (the two features mentioned in the ads' titles). Next, participants assessed ad credibility and purchase intentions, completed the consumer advertising scepticism scale, answered demographic questions, and were thanked for their participation. We also checked for brand familiarity (“How well do you know GVT?; 1 = “never heard of; 2 = “heard of, but do not know it”; 3 = “know a little”; 4 = “know well”) and ownership (“Do you have a cable TV?; 0 = “yes”; 1 = “no”) as potential covariates. Only 6% of the participants answered that they knew the brand well and 68% reported that they owned a cable TV plan.

### 3.2.4 | Results

#### *Manipulation checks*

Because the only difference between conditions was the limited number of HD channels in the two-sided message, we expected that participants would assign lower evaluations to this attribute in the two-sided message condition, while all the other attributes should be equally evaluated. A series of  $t$ -tests on the eight attributes of the new service as dependent variables, and advertisement sidedness as the independent variable, revealed a significant difference for “the number of HD channels” ( $M_{\text{one-sided}} = 4.41$  vs.  $M_{\text{two-sided}} = 3.86$ ;  $t$

[138] = 2.34,  $p = .021$ ) but not for any of the other attributes (all values of  $p > .3$ ), suggesting that the manipulation was successful.

#### *Advertising credibility*

As predicted, the results of our regression analysis revealed a significant message sidedness  $\times$  advertising scepticism interaction ( $b = .35$ ,  $t[136] = 2.20$ ,  $p = .03$ ;  $\eta^2 = .035$ ). As shown in Figure 3a, floodlight analysis revealed that there is a significant and positive effect ( $b = .37$ ,  $SE = .19$ ,  $p = .05$ ) of advertisement sidedness on advertising credibility for values of advertising scepticism above 4.57 (65% of the sample). Therefore, as predicted, the two-sided message enhanced the credibility of high, but not of low, advertising sceptics, lending support to Hypothesis 1. From a different perspective, testing the interaction with message sidedness as moderator revealed that, as advertising scepticism increases, credibility significantly decreases when the message is one-sided ( $b = -.32$ ,  $t[136] = -2.85$ ,  $p = .005$ ), but it is not affected when the message is two-sided ( $b = .03$ ,  $t[136] = .29$ ,  $p = .77$ ). As expected, this suggests that message credibility decreased with increasing levels of scepticism only for the one-sided message. On the other hand, the two-sided ad was equally trusted by both high and low sceptics.

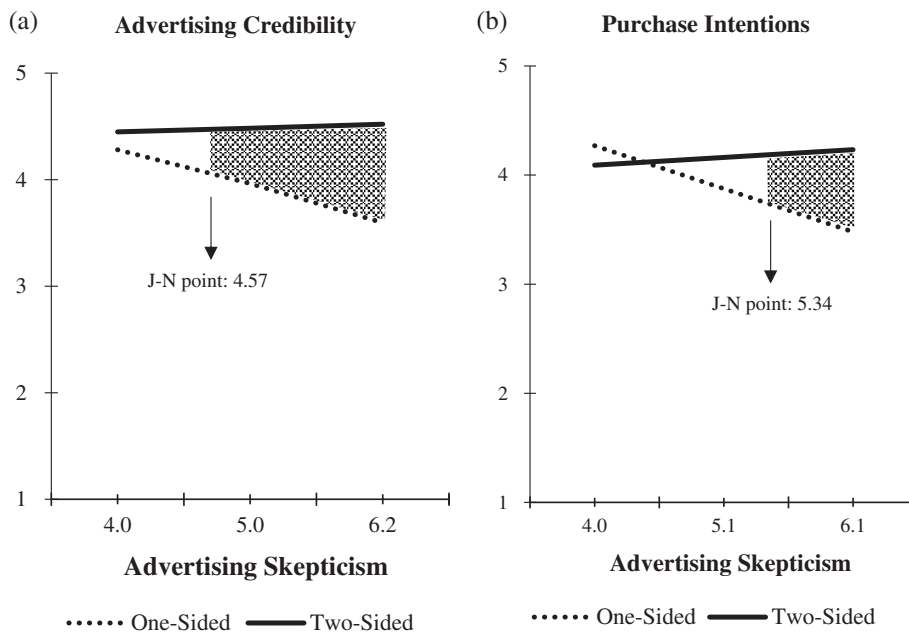
#### *Purchase intentions*

The interaction between message sidedness and advertising scepticism was significant ( $b = .44$ ,  $t[136] = 2.32$ ,  $p = .02$ ;  $\eta^2 = .038$ ). Floodlight analyses revealed that, when advertising scepticism scores are 5.34 (39% of the sample) or higher, there is a significant and positive effect ( $b = .41$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $p = .05$ ) of message sidedness on purchase intentions (see Figure 3b), lending support to Hypothesis 2. Analysis of simple effects using message sidedness as the moderating variable revealed the same pattern of results as those for credibility. Purchase intentions significantly decreases as advertising scepticism increases when the message was one-sided ( $b = -.37$ ,  $t[136] = -2.81$ ,  $p = .006$ ), but was not affected when the message was two-sided ( $b = .07$ ,  $t[136] = .50$ ,  $p = .62$ ).

We performed the same analyses for credibility and purchase intentions factoring brand familiarity and ownership as covariates in the model. None of the covariates were significant and the results remained largely unchanged. We report the regression results in Appendix B2.

#### *Mediation effects of advertisement credibility*

Hypothesis 3 predicted that the influence of two-sided messages on purchase intentions is mediated by advertising credibility, but only at higher levels of advertising scepticism. To test this moderated mediation, we ran a regression analysis using PROCESS Model 8 (Hayes, 2018). We used bootstrap tests (Preacher & Hayes, 2004) to assess the significance of the hypothesized paths. Bootstrapped confidence intervals based on 10,000 resamples that do not contain zero at a 95% confidence level provide the support for statistically significant mediation path coefficients. The results suggest a significant mediation effect for highly sceptical individuals (mean + 1 SD) ( $a \times b = .34$  [.11: .70]), but not for less sceptical ones (mean - 1 SD)



**FIGURE 3** Interaction effect of consumer advertising scepticism and message sidedness on advertising credibility (a) and purchase intentions (b). Shaded areas represent the Johnson-Neyman regions of significance. The values on the horizontal axis represent the mean  $\pm$  1 SD (study 1)

( $a \times b = .06 [-1.04: .26]$ ). In other words, two-sided messages increase ad credibility in the advertisement, which in turn increases purchase intentions, but only for individuals with higher levels of scepticism, lending support to  $H_3$ .

### 3.2.5 | Discussion

Consistent with our predictions, the results from Study 1 revealed that individuals with higher levels of advertising scepticism are more able to distinguish between higher versus lower credibility persuasive attempts. More sceptical individuals perceived two-sided messages as more credible than one-sided messages, which enhanced credibility; this, in turn, increased their purchase intentions. Conversely, less sceptical individuals perceived both types of messages as equally credible, and, as a result, did not have their purchase intentions affected. Interestingly, we also found that neither credibility nor purchase intentions were affected by advertising scepticism when the message was framed as two-sided. However, when the message was framed as one-sided, both credibility and purchase intentions significantly decreased with increasing levels of advertising scepticism. In other words, high and low sceptics were equally trustful of the ad and willing to purchase the advertised brand when the appeal was two-sided. However, when the appeal was one-sided, high sceptics displayed significantly less credibility and purchase intentions than low sceptics.

One possible limitation of Study 1 is that we selected the negative attribute based on a pretested ranking of the importance of cable TV plan attributes. As such, we could not assure that the attribute would be considered of average importance by everyone; some respondents may have found the number of HD channels more or less important, and therefore adjusted their ratings. In the next study, we manipulated the importance level of the negative attribute of the

two-sided ad to better control for this factor. By manipulating the importance of the attribute, we ensure more uniformity in interpreting the attribute and its evaluation.

## 3.3 | Study 2

In Study 2, we used a different product (a winter jacket) to improve the generalizability of Study 1 findings. Also, we manipulated the importance of the negative attribute of the two-sided message, rather than selecting an attribute from pretest ratings, as we did in Study 1.

### 3.3.1 | Participants and design

Undergraduate Engineering students ( $n = 116$ ; 65% female;  $M_{age} = 21$ ) received course credits to participate in a 2-group (advertising sidedness: one-sided vs. two-sided) between-subjects, laboratory experiment, in which advertising scepticism was measured.

### 3.3.2 | Procedures

At the outset of the experiment, participants were asked to imagine that they would travel to a cold region and needed to purchase a winter jacket for the trip. Participants were asked to read an alleged excerpt from a travel magazine that contained information about the attributes people should pay attention to when shopping for a winter jacket. The excerpt described six attributes, ranked in order of importance, from the top (most important) to the bottom: number of pockets, lightness of the material, fabric flexibility, type of material, waterproofness, and number of layers (see Appendix A2). Each



attribute was accompanied by a short explanation of why it was important (e.g. “lightness of the material: the lighter, the easier to store and carry”). The lightness of the material was chosen as the disclaimed attribute of the two-sided message and was thus manipulated to be of moderate importance.

We then manipulated the message. Participants were exposed to either one of two print ads for a winter jacket brand (‘Mountain HardWear’) that were identical in all respects but the title (see Appendix A3). Whereas the main title of the one-sided advertisement emphasized only a positive attribute (“Our jacket is the one that will keep you the warmest in harsh winter”), the main title of the two-sided advertisement also contained a negative attribute coupled with the same positive attribute (“Our jacket is not light, but it is the one that will keep you the warmest in harsh winter”). As in Study 1, all the other elements of the ad in both conditions were controlled for and participants were subjected to the same ad viewing conditions.

### 3.3.3 | Measures

To check the manipulation of the message, we measured the importance (1 = not at all important; 7 = extremely important) and overall assessment (1 = terrible; 7 = excellent) of all six attributes included in the fictitious magazine excerpt. Next, participants assessed advertisement credibility and purchase intention for the Mountain Hardwear winter jacket and completed the consumer advertising scepticism scale. We used the same scales as Study 1 for the dependent variables and covariates. Only 3% of the participants answered that they knew the brand well and 59% reported that they owned a jacket. Finally, participants completed demographic questions and were thanked for their participation.

### 3.3.4 | Results

#### *Manipulation checks*

The importance assigned by the participants to the six attributes followed the ranking of importance displayed in the travel magazine stimulus. As intended, lightness of the material appeared as the second least important attribute ( $M_{\text{pocket}} = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ;  $M_{\text{lightness}} = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ;  $M_{\text{flexibility}} = 4.95$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ;  $M_{\text{material}} = 5.67$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ;  $M_{\text{waterproof}} = 6.09$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ;  $M_{\text{layers}} = 6.58$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ). A series of *t*-tests revealed that the importance of material lightness was significantly different from the importance of all other features (all values of  $p < .01$ ). Moreover, a series of *t*-tests, using evaluations of the six attributes of the winter jacket as dependent variables and advertisement sidedness as an independent variable revealed, as expected, that lightness of the jacket was better evaluated in the one-sided advertisement ( $M_{\text{one-sided}} = 4.95$  vs.  $M_{\text{two-sided}} = 3.25$ ;  $t[114] = 5.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ). There was also a significant difference for the attribute fabric flexibility ( $M_{\text{one-sided}} = 5.13$  vs.  $M_{\text{two-sided}} = 4.32$ ;  $t[114] = 3.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ), presumably because of inferences that flexibility is related to jacket lightness, as indicated by a high correlation

between these variables ( $r = .68$ ;  $p < .001$ ). For all the other attributes, there were no differences in evaluations between one- versus two-sided messages (all values of  $p > .15$ ). Taken together, these results suggest that the manipulations of product importance and message sidedness were successful.

#### *Advertising credibility*

Consistent with Hypothesis 1 and replicating the results of Study 1, we found a significant message sidedness  $\times$  advertising scepticism interaction ( $b = .38$ ,  $t[112] = 2.16$ ,  $p = .03$ ;  $\eta^2 = .040$ ). The floodlight analysis (Figure 4a) revealed that the two- versus one-sided message increased ad credibility ( $b = .36$ ,  $SE = .18$ ,  $p = .05$ ) when advertising scepticism was greater than 5.46 (41% of the sample). Therefore, as predicted, two-sided messages were shown to be effective in increasing adt credibility for high, but not for low advertising sceptics, supporting Hypothesis 1. As opposed to Study 1, analysis of simple effects when testing for the interaction using message sidedness as moderator did not reveal significant effects (one-sided:  $b = -.19$ ,  $p = .14$ ; two-sided:  $b = .19$ ,  $p = .12$ ).

#### *Purchase intentions*

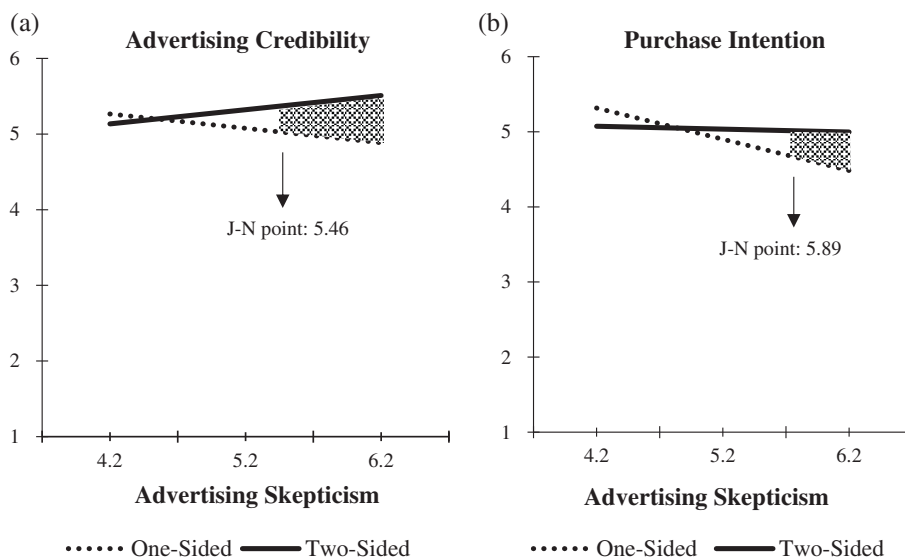
The results replicated those of Study 1 for purchase intentions. We observed a significant interaction between message sidedness and advertising scepticism ( $b = .38$ ,  $t[112] = 2.26$ ,  $p = .03$ ;  $\eta^2 = .044$ ). As shown in Figure 4b, floodlight analysis revealed that, for values of advertising scepticism equal to or greater than 5.89 (26% of the sample), there was a significant, positive effect ( $b = .41$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $p = .05$ ) of advertising sidedness (one-sided vs. two-sided) on purchase intentions, supporting Hypothesis 2. Replicating Study 1, we also found that purchase intentions were negatively affected by advertising scepticism in the one-sided (one-sided:  $b = -.42$ ,  $t[136] = -3.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not in the two-sided message ( $b = -.04$ ,  $t[136] = -.33$ ,  $p = .74$ ). The coefficients for brand familiarity and winter jacket ownership were not significant when they were entered into the models as covariates, nor did they affect the results in any meaningful way (see Appendix B2).

#### *Mediation effects of advertisement credibility*

We used the same procedure as in Study 1 to test the moderated mediation. The results suggest a significant mediation effect for individuals with high (mean + 1 *SD*) ( $a \times b = .26$  [.03: .63]) but not with low advertising scepticism (mean - 1 *SD*) ( $a \times b = -.05$  [-.33: .15]). In other words, the mediated path “message sidedness  $\rightarrow$  advertising credibility  $\rightarrow$  purchase intentions” is significant only at higher levels of advertising scepticism. At lower levels of ad scepticism, the mediated path is not significant. These results replicate those of Study 1 and lend further support for  $H_3$ .

### 3.3.5 | Discussion

Using a different product, and manipulating the importance of the disclaimed negative attribute in the two-sided message, Study



**FIGURE 4** Interaction effect of consumer advertising scepticism and message sidedness on advertising credibility (a) and purchase intentions (b). Shaded areas represent the Johnson-Neyman regions of significance. The values on the horizontal axis represent the mean  $\pm 1$  SD (study 2)

2 replicated the findings of Study 1, lending additional support for Hypotheses 1–3. The positive effect of message sidedness on purchase intentions was mediated by advertising credibility, but these effects were only observed for more sceptical individuals. They become significant and stronger as advertising scepticism increases beyond a threshold level. Besides, as in Study 1, high sceptics displayed lower levels of purchase intentions than low sceptics when exposed to the one-sided, but not the two-sided message.

### 3.4 | Study 3

We conducted a third study to further generalize our findings, using a utilitarian product (air conditioner), which is described by more technical features. In the previous experiment, although our manipulation proved successful, some participants could have used their own evaluations about the importance of the features, because a winter jacket is a fairly common item (around 60% of participants reported that they owned one). We chose air-conditioners because they have technical features that are relatively unknown to most people. Therefore, it should be unlikely that participants came to the study with prior assessments of the importance of these features. Moreover, we performed a different manipulation of the positive and negative attributes of the two-sided message. Instead of providing a ranking of importance, we manipulated the importance of the attributes more subtly by simulating a purchase guide with a description of the features to be considered before buying an air-conditioner. We highlighted the positive feature as the most important one and left the remaining features not ranked.

#### 3.4.1 | Participants and design

Undergraduate engineering students ( $n = 102$ ; 26% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 21$ ) participated in a 2 (message sidedness: one-sided vs. two-sided)

between-subjects, laboratory experiment in which advertising scepticism was measured.

#### 3.4.2 | Procedures

At the beginning of the experiment, participants were informed that they would watch an ad for a (fictitious) brand of air-conditioner named “Bryant” that was going to be launched in the market.<sup>2</sup> Before watching the ad, they were asked to read a fictitious “air-conditioner guide” that described eight attributes that people should consider when purchasing an air conditioner. Two of the eight attributes—BTU/KW ratio and inverter technology—were used as the positive and negative attributes, respectively, featured in the two-sided ad. All participants read the following text:

Before buying an air conditioner, it is necessary to pay attention to some essential characteristics. In the first place, it is very important to pay attention to the efficiency of the air-conditioner, which is measured by the relationship between the heat removed by the appliance (in BTU) and the power consumed (in Kilowatts). This ratio is measured in BTU/KW and the larger the number, the more efficient the device. It is also worth paying attention to other attributes that are not present in all devices or are not informed by the seller. Among them is the inverter, responsible for maintaining the compressor's constant operation; the dehumidifier, responsible for balancing the humidity of the environment to make it healthier; automatic temperature control and programming, which are important for saving electricity; and, finally, the directional airflow that guarantees more comfort and equal distribution of the cold air generated throughout the environment.

After reading the guide, participants were exposed to a print ad for a fictitious air-conditioner brand. They were assigned to one of two ads that were identical in all details but the title (see Appendix A4). The main title of the one-sided ad emphasized only the positive attribute (BTU/KW ratio) and stated: "We have the best BTU/KW ratio in the market". The main title of the two-sided ad comprised a negative attribute (absence of inverter technology) coupled with the same positive attribute: "We do not have inverter technology, but we have the best BTU/KW ratio in the market". As in the previous studies, we controlled for all the other visual elements of the ads in the two conditions, so that the only difference between them was the negative attribute in the copy claim.

### 3.4.3 | Measures

To check manipulation of the message, participants were asked to evaluate both the importance (1 = not at all important; 7 = extremely important) and the overall assessment (1 = terrible; 7 = excellent) of the new air-conditioner across eight attributes, including the fixed positive attribute (BTU/KW), the discounted negative attribute (absence of inverter technology), the four other attributes described in the guide, and two other attributes that were never mentioned (sunlight sensor and air filter). Next, participants assessed ad credibility, indicated their purchase intentions, and completed the consumer advertising scepticism scale, as in the previous studies. Brand familiarity and ownership of an air-conditioner were measured as potential covariates, as in the other studies. Only 2% of the participants reported that they knew the brand and 29% of them reported having an air-conditioner at home. Finally, participants completed their demographics and were thanked for their participation.\*\*\*

### 3.4.4 | Results

#### *Manipulation check*

A series of independent *t*-tests revealed that the inverter technology feature of the air-conditioner was evaluated more poorly in the two-sided message than in the one-sided message ( $M_{\text{one-sided}} = 5.2$  vs.  $M_{\text{two-sided}} = 3.5$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $\eta^2 = .19$ ). We also observed significant differences for the features dehumidifier ( $M_{\text{one-sided}} = 5.6$  vs.  $M_{\text{two-sided}} = 4.9$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $\eta^2 = .07$ ) and directional airflow ( $M_{\text{one-sided}} = 5.4$  vs.  $M_{\text{two-sided}} = 4.0$ ;  $p = .05$ ;  $\eta^2 = .04$ ). The lower evaluation of these two items that were not featured in the two-sided message may be due to a halo effect. The remaining attributes were equally evaluated between the two conditions (all *p* values  $> .26$ ).

#### *Advertising credibility and purchase intentions*

Replicating the previous studies, interactions between message sidedness and advertising scepticism were significant for both credibility ( $b = .30$ ,  $t[98] = 2.23$ ,  $p = .03$ ;  $\eta^2 = .048$ ) and purchase intentions ( $b = .41$ ,  $t[98] = 3.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\eta^2 = .11$ ). Consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 2, two- versus one-sided messages significantly enhanced

credibility ( $b = .31$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $p = .05$ ) for values of advertising scepticism above 4.41 (53% of the sample), and significantly enhanced purchase intentions ( $b = .29$ ,  $SE = .15$ ,  $p = .05$ ) for values of advertising scepticism above 4.07 (64% of the sample) (see Figure 5a,b). Also, analyses of simple effects revealed that, when a one-sided message was displayed, both credibility ( $b = -.30$ ,  $t[98] = -3.24$ ,  $p = .002$ ) and purchase intentions ( $b = -.43$ ,  $t[98] = -5.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ) decreased as scepticism increased, but remained unaffected when a two-sided message was presented (credibility:  $b = .004$ ,  $t(98) = .05$ ,  $p = .96$ ; purchase intentions:  $b = -.02$ ,  $t(98) = -.27$ ,  $p = .79$ ).

The coefficients for brand familiarity and ownership of an air-conditioner were not significant when they were entered into the models as covariates, except for the coefficient of ownership in purchase intentions, which was marginally significant ( $b = -.26$ ,  $p = .08$ ). As in the previous studies, the results were not affected in any meaningful way (see Appendix B2).

#### *Mediation effects of advertisement credibility*

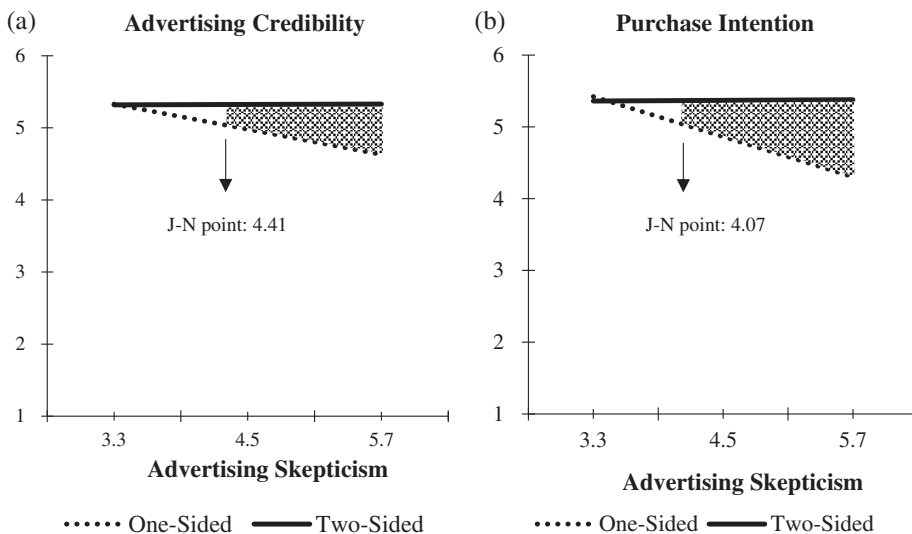
We used the same procedures as in the two previous studies to test  $H_3$ . The results of the moderated mediation replicate the two previous studies. Whereas two-sided messages rendered the advertising more credible, which in turn increased purchasing intentions for more sceptical participants ( $a \times b = .24$  [.06: .47]), this indirect path was not significant for less sceptical participants ( $a \times b = 0.00$  [-.16: 0.13]). These results lend further support for  $H_3$ .

### 3.4.5 | Discussion

Study 3 replicated the findings of Studies 1 and 2 using a more technical product, an air-conditioner, whose features were relatively unknown. By providing participants with guidelines on the important features to consider when evaluating the product, we levelled participants' consumer knowledge, avoiding potential differences in personal assessments of the attributes. The results lend additional support for Hypotheses 1–3. As in the previous studies, we found that, when compared to one-sided messages, two-sided messages increased purchase intentions through enhanced credibility at higher, but not lower levels of advertising scepticism. Similar to the other studies, when compared to low sceptics, high sceptics find messages less credible and display lower intentions to purchase the advertised product when the message is one-sided, but not when it is two-sided.

## 4 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Based on the similarities between the persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and the advertising scepticism constructs, we hypothesized that consumers with higher levels of advertising scepticism are more knowledgeable about persuasive advertising tactics and, therefore, are more capable to discern between more and less credible advertising tactics than consumers with lower levels of advertising scepticism. As a result, more credible persuasion



**FIGURE 5** Interaction effect of consumer advertising scepticism and message sidedness on advertising credibility (a) and purchase intentions (b). Shaded areas represent the Johnson–Neyman regions of significance. The values on the horizontal axis represent the mean  $\pm 1$  SD (study 3)

approaches should increase message credibility and purchase intentions for an advertised product to a greater extent among high (vs. low) sceptics. We tested this proposition using two-sided messages, an advertising tactic well-known for its higher perceived credibility compared to one-sided messages.

In three studies, we demonstrated that, as compared to one-sided appeals, purchase intentions of the advertised product are significantly increased through enhanced credibility when a two-sided appeal is used. However, consistent with our predictions, the positive effects of two- versus one-sided messages occur only above certain levels of advertising scepticism; and these effects grow stronger as the levels of scepticism increase. However, message sidedness does not affect less sceptical individuals, whose credibility levels remain relatively unchanged when exposed to either a two-sided or a one-sided message. Interestingly, our results also revealed the same level of trust in advertising that is associated with higher levels of credibility for both high and less sceptical consumers.

#### 4.1 | Theoretical contributions

We make important theoretical contributions to the literature on advertising and persuasion knowledge. First, we have empirically shown that responses to persuasion tactics are influenced in similar ways by both advertising scepticism and persuasion knowledge. Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998, p. 162) did acknowledge similarities between the advertising scepticism and persuasion knowledge constructs, but posited that they differ in the “implied response to persuasion”. The authors (op.cit., p. 163) argued that, as opposed to consumers with high persuasion knowledge, who are difficult, but not impossible to persuade, “consumers with very high ad scepticism may be impossible to persuade through information or argument”. Our findings contradict these assumptions and suggest that advertising scepticism and persuasion knowledge not only have common antecedents but also share similar response tendencies. We do not imply that the two constructs are the

same since advertising scepticism is also shaped by personality traits, as conceived by Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998), whereas Friestad and Wright (1994) give little emphasis to personality in the formation of persuasion knowledge. Nonetheless, the two constructs are related, and, as such, we believe ad scepticism may be used as a proxy measure of persuasion knowledge in the domain of advertising. This is important because the advertising scepticism scale can be easily adapted to other contexts (Ham et al., 2015), and it could be used as a reliable and valid proxy of persuasion knowledge in other persuasion domains, such as CRM and personal selling.

Second, our results show that higher advertising scepticism is not always associated with greater resistance to advertising persuasion attempts; rather, the main role of advertising scepticism is to enable consumers to better discern between more and less credible advertising tactics. The present research showed further evidence that individuals who display higher levels of advertising scepticism (and arguably higher persuasion knowledge concerning advertising) respond differently to advertising tactics associated with different credibility levels and adjust their judgements accordingly. Consistent with other studies on persuasion knowledge (e.g. Isaac & Grayson, 2017, 2020; Kim et al., 2016; Ku & Chen, 2020; Seo et al., 2019), we have shown that, in the domain of advertising, increased levels of scepticism lead to higher trustworthiness and, therefore, to higher evaluations of a more credible (two-sided message) relative to a less credible tactic (one-sided message). However, these effects occur only beyond a certain threshold level; below this level, the effect of message sidedness is not significant.

Our work complements past research in some important ways. Typically, most studies in this area have manipulated persuasion knowledge access, but not actual persuasion knowledge. By showing similar result patterns at opposite ends of the advertising scepticism continuum, we offer further evidence of the phenomenon with measures of *actual* advertising persuasion knowledge, rather than priming access. Moreover, in our third study, we provided consumer knowledge by presenting guidelines on the important features to be

considered in purchasing the target product, supporting the effects of a higher-credibility tactic on persuasion knowledge in a situation where consumer knowledge was held constant. This is interesting because, if persuasion knowledge is not acquired in tandem with consumer knowledge, priming persuasion knowledge access may render consumers only more suspicious. For instance, in a recent study, Plotkina et al. (2020) showed that participants did not know how to detect fake reviews, so warning about deception in online reviews made them more suspicious of both fake and genuine reviews. In another recent study, Lopes and Goulart-da-Silva (2021) showed that highly sceptical consumers exposed to celebrity-endorsed campaigns lowered their assessments of the product when the information about the product was reduced. However, this effect was observed only among expert consumers.

The third contribution of our study is that we were able to gauge the range of advertising scepticism where the effect of a more credible tactic works. We found that two-sided messages were effective within a considerable portion of the advertising scepticism continuum, ranging from about 40 to 65% of the participants in the samples. Thus, not only did we extend past research by showing important boundary conditions in which more or less credible tactics are effective, but we also quantitatively showed the proportion of consumers to which the phenomenon occurs. The fact that only part of the audience is influenced by two-sided messages may explain, at least in part, why some past studies have failed to find evidence for the effectiveness of two-sided messages, thus questioning their advantages (e.g. Bohner et al., 2003; Crowley & Hoyer, 1994; Eisend, 2007, 2010).

The results of our studies also strengthen the role of attribution theory in explaining the effect of two-sided messages by confirming the mediating role of advertisement credibility, as posited in the model of two-sided effectiveness based on attribution theory (Crowley & Hoyer, 1994; Eisend, 2007, 2010).

## 4.2 | Managerial contributions

This work has important implications for advertisers as it shows how different tactics may be implemented to overcome resistance to persuasive attempts. Understanding in which conditions scepticism influences behavioural intentions enables marketers to anticipate and implement effective advertising tactics to reduce situational scepticism and enhance persuasion. Because advertising appeals associated with higher credibility are effective in overcoming distrust among more sceptical consumers, more credible tactics, such as two-sided ads, may be particularly suitable to brands and companies whose products face some resistance, or to target audiences uniquely distrustful. Moreover, the results of this study suggest that more honest and transparent appeals are equally effective for both high and less sceptical consumers. In other words, our findings suggest that marketers may benefit more from approaching consumers honestly and transparently than from using misleading tactics. Transparency seems to pay off: it may entice a sizeable share of the audience while not undermining the rest. Although we have

demonstrated this phenomenon using message sidedness, we believe that our results can be generalized to other contexts and persuasion tactics, such as reporting a product's exact position on a ranked list, matching competitors' lowest prices, and referring to a verifiable third-party source that may endorse the product's quality (see Isaac & Grayson, 2017). This is an interesting avenue for future studies.

Although it is not easy to target only more sceptical consumers, advertising scepticism scales such as Obermiller and Spangenberg's (1998) can be used to test the effectiveness of appeals among more sceptical consumers and to adjust them accordingly before launching a marketing campaign. Besides, if measures of scepticism are not readily available, advertisers can use proxy measures of advertising scepticism. For example, older and more educated consumers tend to be more sceptical (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998).

This work also has important implications for consumers and society at large. Although advertising scepticism is generally beneficial, excessive scepticism may prevent consumers from taking advantage of genuine offers in some circumstances, such as when they are cognitively constrained (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). By heightening their knowledge of the tactics employed by marketers, consumers will be in a better position to judge the appropriateness of advertisement claims, reject deceitful persuasion attempts, and reward marketers who comply with higher ethical standards. For instance, Nelson (2016) showed that an advertising literacy intervention among school children resulted in a significant increase in those students' understanding of the selling intent and persuasive strategies used by advertisers. Government agencies could, for instance, integrate advertising literacy into school curricula and promote other forms of educating consumers to avoid falling prey to deceptive advertising.

To marketing agents, and more specifically to advertising agents, the finding that both highly and less sceptical consumers trust more honest advertising tactics means that advertisers should use advertising strategies associated with higher credibility and avoid strategies that involve deception.

## 4.3 | Limitations and directions for future studies

One limitation of this study is the use of samples of undergraduate students. Since previous studies have shown that advertising scepticism is positively correlated with age (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998), young undergraduates may not have developed advertising scepticism at the same levels as mature adults. Thus, future studies could test our hypotheses in representative samples comprising older people. However, Eisend and Tarrahi's (2022) meta-analysis of persuasion knowledge effects found no differences in effect sizes in student samples as compared to nonstudent samples.

Another shortcoming is that we only measured advertising scepticism. Although we have highlighted the benefits of using a persuasion knowledge measure as a contribution, experimental manipulations are superior in claiming causal inferences, and chronic

measures may lead to more positive evaluations than situational measures (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022). Thus, future studies could attempt to replicate our results by manipulating advertising scepticism or persuasion knowledge in the advertising domain. Importantly, as we have pointed out earlier, future studies would benefit from manipulations of *actual* rather than only *accessing* preexistent persuasion knowledge. This is especially relevant in contexts where consumers have little knowledge (e.g. technical products) or have difficulty in detecting deception (e.g. fake reviews). The manipulation of actual persuasion knowledge acquisition has been limited to studies that used advertising literacy training programs among children (e.g. De Jans et al., 2017; del Mar Pàmies et al., 2016). These studies, in general, report significant increases in students' abilities to understand advertisers' selling intentions, persuasive strategies, etc.

A third limitation is that the interaction effects in our studies were relatively small. Future studies could investigate if the magnitudes of these effects would be enhanced by other message variables in two-sided appeals (e.g. refutation, Cornelis et al., 2020). Finally, future studies could examine the differences in responses of high versus low sceptics to other marketing tactics that have been associated with more or less credibility (e.g. the exact position in a rank, Isaac & Grayson, 2017), using different measures of persuasion knowledge (such as those listed in Ham et al.'s (2015) literature review), or the advertising scepticism scale adapted to different domains.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest in this research.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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

#### ORCID

José Mauro da Costa Hernandez  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0704-0035>

Murilo Carrazedo Marques da Costa Filho  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1982-0925>

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The original scale from Obermiller and Spangenberg's (1998) study used 5-point items and labels ranging from totally agree to totally disagree. We used a 7-point scale to allow for more discriminatory power and we reversed the labels, following other studies that have used this scale (e.g., Hamby & Brinberg, 2018; Hede et al., 2014; Raziq et al., 2018; Sher & Lee, 2009; Tutaj & Reijmersdal, 2012; Yang & Mundel, 2021)
- <sup>2</sup> At the time of the experiment, this brand was not available in the country where the study was conducted.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**José Mauro da Costa Hernandez** is an associate professor of Marketing at the Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil. He received his doctoral degree Business Administration from EAESP/Fundação Getulio Vargas, Brazil. His research focuses on consumer traits that influence judgement and decision making.

**Murilo Carrazedo Marques da Costa Filho** is a Post Doctoral Fellow at Escola de Artes, Ciências e Humanidades (EACH), Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo. He received his doctoral degree in Business Administration from the Pontifical University of Rio de Janeiro. His main research interests consumer traits that influence judgement and decision making, low-income consumers, and goal-setting theory.

**Maria Paula Veronezi Strano** received her B.A. in Marketing from Universidade de São Paulo. She works as digital marketing analyst at Porto Seguro, a Brazilian leading insurance company.

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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

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