

# THE EFFECT OF CONSUMER CONFUSION PRONENESS ON INTENTION TO RECOMMEND THE ROLE OF DISCRETE EMOTIONS

**Ragu Prasadh Rajendran, Loyola Institute of Business Administration**  
**Joe Arun, Loyola Institute of Business Administration**

## ABSTRACT

*Ever-increasing amounts of information in the marketplace confuse consumers' minds. Consumer confusion has become a problem for consumers and marketers. The purpose of this study is to enhance the understanding of the effect of the three dimensions of consumer confusion proneness namely similarity confusion, overload confusion, and ambiguity confusion on intention to recommend. Grounded on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion, the authors consider the role of three discrete emotions namely anger, joy, and awe on the relationship between consumer confusion and intention to recommend. The three discrete emotions play the role of moderators in this study. The hypotheses framed in this study suggest that marketing managers should induce as many positive emotions as possible to reduce the negative effect of the dimensions of consumer confusion on intention to recommend. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Consumer Confusion, Discrete Emotions, Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion, Intention to Recommend.

## INTRODUCTION

Today, consumers have many choices, marketing communications, and complex information to comprehend. Consumers experience confusion in almost every decision that they make (Snider, 1993). Consumers in different product markets such as fashion, telecommunications, health and travel insurance experience confusion. Confused consumers do not make rational buying decisions and hence marketers are increasingly focusing on consumer confusion (Jacoby & Morrin, 1998). Also, confused customers experience cognitive dissonance and engage in negative word of mouth. Marketers attach high importance to consumer satisfaction and word of mouth. More than 60% of the firms rely on consumer satisfaction and loyalty measures (Ambler, 2003).

Generally, we assume that consumers have enough product information and can comprehend that information to make purchase decisions. However, when consumers become confused the above-said assumption does not hold. Walsh et al. (2007) came up with the dimensions of consumer confusion proneness. Research on how to mitigate consumer confusion by inducing emotions is sparse. Hence, drawing from the concept of consumer confusion proneness, this paper sheds light on the relationship between consumer confusion and intention to recommend by taking into account the moderating effects of discrete emotions namely anger, joy and awe. Since emotions play a significant role in the decision-making process of the consumers, this paper provides insights on whether marketers can reduce the negative effect of consumer confusion on intention to recommend by inducing discrete emotions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

### Similarity Confusion Proneness

Similarity confusion occurs when consumers perceive that there is a visual and functional similarity between different products in a product category (Walsh et al., 2007). Similarity confusion happens when there is a similarity between past and present stimuli. Advertisements, interpersonal communications, similar store environments or products are some of the marketing-related examples (Keller, 1991; Brengman et al., 2001). Consumers may buy fake products because of the perceived similarity of the products. Consumers may buy wrong brands because of confusion. Confusion may lead to frustration and indecision and consumers may buy wrong products.

### Overload Confusion Proneness

Because of limited cognitive abilities, consumers experience confusion when the amount of stimuli passes a certain limit. Consumers experience information overload. Overload confusion occurs when consumers face difficulty in comprehending alternatives because of more product information (Walsh et al., 2007). When consumers experience overload confusion, they may engage in communications with friends and family members to clarify their confusion. To reduce anxiety, customers may seek advice from friends and relatives. Consumers may engage others in the purchase decision-making process to reduce overload confusion (Walsh and Mitchell 2010).

### Ambiguity Confusion Proneness

When consumers experience ambiguity confusion, they are not likely to comprehend the product characteristics correctly. For example, false claims that the product is nutritious or healthy can lead to ambiguity confusion. Different information from different sources about the product characteristics can lead to ambiguity confusion (Mayer et al., 1993). Consumers may defer choices because of ambiguity confusion. Lots of product and marketplace information can cause ambiguity confusion.

### Intention to Recommend

Many scholars focus on relationship marketing. If the relationship with the customers is good, firms tend to see greater profitability and higher customer loyalty. Loyal customers tend to recommend. For at least the past thirty years, researchers have considered word-of-mouth to be very important. Prior research regarding word-of-mouth focused on complaining behaviour. Recently, research has focused on recommendations and customer advocacy. To predict the recommending behaviour, intention to recommend is the best metric available (Reichheld, 2003). Intention to recommend is also used to predict purchasing behaviour. Andreaasen et al. (2006) found that in numerous conversations taking place on the Internet, the recommendation is one of the four unique dialogues.

### Emotions and Consumer Behaviour

Across all industries, emotions play an important role in influencing consumers' behavioural decisions. Psychology and economic sciences have long stressed the importance of

emotions in deciding consumers' judgments, evaluations, and decisions. Emotions are defined as the reactions of the body to external or internal stimuli. Emotions play a significant role in determining consumers' physical health, well-being and problem-solving skills (Lazarus, 1991). Emotions can be positive, negative, or mixed. Emotions also influence how much consumers are willing to pay (Williams, 2014). Emotions have an impact on consumption as well. If we decrease the negative affect, consumers are willing to pay more for a variety of products. If consumers are involved in the cognitive processes, they are believed to be taking the right decisions. However, several studies (e.g., Lee, 2006) contradict this view. Emotional status strongly influences impulsive purchase decisions.

### **The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion**

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion is of the view that affective states could have an impact on attitudes (e.g., Petty et al., 1988). The ELM suggests that depending on the amount of thinking or elaboration, attitude could change. Under low levels of thinking or elaboration, the current emotional state could influence individuals' attitudes. When in a positive mood, consumers may attribute the positive feeling to the product and may develop a positive attitude towards the product. However, under high levels of thinking or elaboration, emotions play a role in biasing individuals' processing such that a positive emotional state could lead to positive implications coming to mind, and a negative emotional state resulting in negative implications coming to mind.

When consumers have positive implications in the mind, they may have positive intentions to recommend the product to others. When consumers have negative implications in the mind, they may not have intentions to recommend the product to others. The authors argue that when consumers are confused, they will have high levels of thinking or elaboration, because of huge amounts of information. Hence, the ELM holds for confused consumers.

When marketers induce positive emotions, it might result in positive implications in consumers' minds and consumers might recommend the product or service to others. When marketers induce negative emotions, it might result in negative implications in consumers' minds and consumers might not recommend the product or service to others. In this study, the authors focus on three discrete emotions. Awe and joy are positive emotions. Anger is a negative emotion. The authors believe that when consumers experience awe and joy, the negative relationship between consumer confusion and intention to recommend is reduced. When consumers experience anger, the negative relationship between consumer confusion and intention to recommend is strengthened.

### **Anger**

Individuals frequently experience anger, and this emotion affects consumer behaviour in the marketing context (Funches, 2011). Consumers experience anger because of unwanted circumstances. When the promises are broken and when the treatment is unfair, consumers experience anger. Consumer anger has an effect on profitability and it negatively affects the relationship of consumers with brands. Researchers call for more research to explain the role of anger in the marketing context.

*H<sub>1</sub>: Anger moderates the negative relationship between similarity confusion proneness and intention to recommend such that this relationship is stronger for consumers exposed to anger (as compared to individuals not exposed to anger).*

*H<sub>2</sub>: Anger moderates the negative relationship between overload confusion proneness and intention to recommend such that this relationship is stronger for consumers exposed to anger (as compared to individuals not exposed to anger).*

*H<sub>3</sub>: Anger moderates the negative relationship between ambiguity confusion proneness and intention to recommend such that this relationship is stronger for consumers exposed to anger (as compared to individuals not exposed to anger).*

## **Joy**

Joy is a positive emotion. Joy serves as a motivation to cherish the joyful events and consumers might seek similar events in the future as well (Roseman, 1996). Joy is a highly pleasant feeling. When people are joyful, they tend to think that they can handle situations with relative ease. People also think that they can attain the goals easily when they are joyful. This emotion is accompanied by feelings of comfort and safety.

*H<sub>4</sub>: Joy moderates the negative relationship between similarity confusion proneness and intention to recommend such that this relationship is weaker for individuals exposed to joy (as compared to individuals not exposed to joy).*

*H<sub>5</sub>: Joy moderates the negative relationship between overload confusion proneness and intention to recommend such that this relationship is weaker for individuals exposed to joy (as compared to individuals not exposed to joy).*

*H<sub>6</sub>: Joy moderates the negative relationship between ambiguity confusion proneness and intention to recommend such that this relationship is weaker for individuals exposed to joy (as compared to individuals not exposed to joy).*

## **Awe**

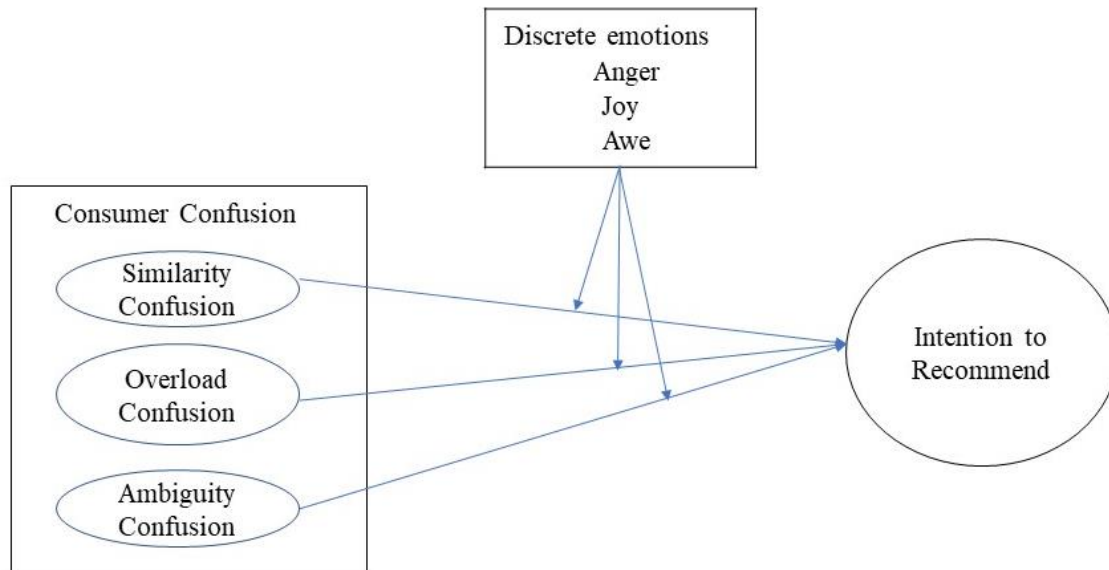
Awe is considered a positive emotion though it is accompanied by negative emotions such as fear. When people experience awe, it motivates them to enhance their understanding of the concerned object (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). External elicitors play a significant role in inducing awe and individuals do not experience this emotion by themselves. Awe is a highly pleasant feeling. When individuals experience awe, they do not give much importance to personal goals. Individuals feel that they are a small part of something larger in Figure 1.

*H<sub>7</sub>: Awe moderates the negative relationship between similarity confusion proneness and intention to recommend such that this relationship is weaker for individuals exposed to awe (as compared to individuals not exposed to awe).*

*H<sub>8</sub>: Awe moderates the negative relationship between overload confusion proneness and intention to recommend such that this relationship is weaker for individuals exposed to awe (as compared to individuals not exposed to awe).*

*H<sub>9</sub>: Awe moderates the negative relationship between ambiguity confusion proneness and intention to recommend such that this relationship is weaker for individuals exposed to awe (as compared to individuals not exposed to awe).*

Fig 1: Conceptual Framework



**Figure 1**  
**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

## DISCUSSION

In response to calls for researchers to shed light on consumer confusion, the primary objective of this study is to examine the relationship between three dimensions of consumer confusion and intention to recommend. Extending the current research in marketing, this research demonstrates the predictive power of specific emotions in influencing the relationship between consumer confusion and intention to recommend. Marketers should induce positive emotions (such as awe and joy) through advertising appeals. Marketers could employ visual effects, music, and sophisticated imagery to induce positive emotions. Marketers could create on-site experiences that exceed expectations and delight consumers. Marketers should be cautious in ensuring that consumers do not experience negative emotions such as anger, anxiety and dejection. By inducing positive emotions, marketers should aim to mitigate the negative effect of consumer confusion on intention to recommend.

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