

**The application of appraisal theories of emotions in the case  
of consumer confusion: theoretical and practical  
implications**

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**The application of appraisal theories of emotions in the case of consumer confusion: theoretical and practical implications**

**Abstract**

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to suggest a novel framework of consumer confusion based on the appraisal theories of emotions. Extant theoretical and empirical evidence on confusion continues to be vague on the connection between the emotional dimensions and behavioural consequences. The appraisal theories of emotions can help to expand the field of inquiry which is related to the topic of consumer confusion.

Design/methodology/approach – A concept- centric review of 112 publications on consumer confusion and research on emotions, provides an integrative critical analysis of the nature of confusion and extends the literature. The review demonstrates that past research has advanced our understanding but not sufficiently explained all of the processes implicated in consumer confusion.

Findings – On the above grounds, the paper suggests that although confusion is environmentally driven, it can be seen as a dynamic process implicating two levels of consumer appraisals. Uncertainty/ lack of understanding, goal inconsistency and motivational state form the basis of confusion; agency attribution and coping potential are, however, shaping the development of subsequent emotions and ultimately the expectations on consumer behaviour. Considered as a dynamic process, confusion has coping and behavioural implications. At the most central level the importance of agency (or attribution) and coping potential is highlighted and the way these appraisals lead to different emotions and behaviours is discussed.

Originality/value – The paper advances extant consumer decision-making literature and proposes diverse emotions that are associated with the experience of confusion, behaviours that are expected, along with marketing implications and actions required for each of them.

Keywords: Consumer confusion; appraisal theories of emotions; agency; coping potential; behavioural consequences.

Paper type: Conceptual paper

## Introduction

Despite intense efforts through category management or shopper marketing to facilitate consumer decision-making (Gooner *et al.*, 2011; Gelper, *et al.*, 2016; Grewal, 2016) the evidence indicates that consumers are still finding it hard to make choices (Wang and Shukla, 2013). This inability to choose and the way it influences shoppers, can be placed within the wider issue of ‘*complexity*’ (Schweizer, 2004). Complexity theory has developed in popularity in sociological and management research as a result of the global, interconnected and complex conditions (Cunha and Cunha, 2006; Ahrweiler, 2010). Evidence for the increasing complexity of the marketplace is ubiquitous. Day (2011) brings forward the example of the mobile phone market but also the augmentation of traditional communication media through other means, as an illustration of this.

This conceptual paper will contribute broadly to the areas of complexity and shopper marketing practices. The focus will be on the concept of consumer confusion. It is on the aforementioned grounds that the investigation of confusion is more relevant than ever and should not be taken lightly. More effort is necessary to understand this phenomenon. Two previously developed frameworks have provided a good grounding based on attitudinal approaches. Mitchell *et al.*, (2005) have developed a conceptual model which depicts confusion as an evaluative, attitude-like phenomenon, possessing an affective, cognitive and behavioural component and moderators such as age, education and tolerance of ambiguity. Kasabov (2015) emphasising the concept of ‘*confusion marketing*’- (see also Chen and Chang, 2013 on a similar topic), focused on the implications of confusing marketing practices on consumers. The focus is on the drivers of confusion, practices that have been intentionally, (or unintentionally), developed to confuse consumers (e.g. pricing, tariffs, and inconsistent complaining systems as sources of confusion). Although these are both valuable approaches, they do not provide the required breadth or depth for the study of the construct. Kasabov

(2015) focuses on the drivers of one specific area, that of ‘confusion marketing’ and Mitchell et al., (2005) framework does not allow for clarity on the way confusion leads to distinct behavioural consequences.

Despite notable developments, extant confusion literature remains limited, in terms of both its conceptual scope and empirical findings. Research suffers from a lack of precision about the actual experience of such a state as confusion and especially the connections of the emotional and behavioural implications (Garaus and Wagner, 2016). To fill this gap, this article offers a systematic conceptual exploration in order to provide a more holistic appreciation of the construct. This analysis differs from previous attempts: first of all, this conceptual paper integrates knowledge from diverse streams of social sciences: psychology, sociology, marketing and neuroscience. Taking into consideration the fact that the construct has been very much treated based on its cognitive dimensions (Walsh *et al.*, 2007), a comprehensive search of the literature on the distinction between cognitions and emotions indicates interesting streams that can expand our understanding of consumer confusion. Thus, as a second point, the emphasis is placed on the experience of confusion and especially the emotional dimensions. The paper proposes appraisal theories of emotions as an alternative stream of theories that can add value to the application of the construct.

Based on the above argument, three primary objectives are pursued: (1) to offer an overview of the relevant research which will point towards an understanding of the nature of the construct, (2) to provide a framework that extends the scope of consumer confusion (cognitive and emotional experience and consequences) through a review of substantial contributions especially from the field of appraisal theories of emotions, and (3) to identify and suggest areas that deserve further research attention. Confusion is defined broadly following Kasabov (2015) as a conscious consumer experience of discomfort and uncertainty. The main contributions of the paper rest on the integration of the literature on the psychology

of emotions, the thorough understanding of consumer confusion and, specifically, the psychological processes that are identified; the role of specific appraisals in the formation of confusion and subsequent affect which is translated and explain precise but diverse behaviours.

### Approaches to the study of emotions

Over the years, a competent body of knowledge has been formed around the area of consumer emotions. Of central concern have been the ways emotions influence consumer decision-making (Han *et al.*, 2007; Angie *et al.*, 2011), environmental responses (especially in retailing e.g. Walsh *et al.*, 2011; Ladhari, Souiden and Dufour, 2017), perceptions of advertising effectiveness (Yang, Kim and Yoo, 2012) and experiential consumption (Bahl and Milne, 2010). There are three generally accepted approaches for the study of emotions: categorical, dimensional and cognitive appraisal theories.

Categorical theories identify categories of distinct emotions (for example anger, annoyance and rage form one category of emotions with similar implications) (Plutchik, 1994). Following this approach, emotions are treated and measured individually or in groups of similar meaning. Dimensional theories identify some core dimensions that can characterise all different emotions (e.g. positive or negative valence; high vs low levels of arousal), or place these emotional dimensions as mediating the relationship between environmental influences and consumer actions (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974; Morrison *et al.*, 2011).

Finally, cognitive appraisal theories provide a solid foundation for the identification of emotional antecedents and also coping potential (Nyer, 1997; Watson and Spence, 2007; Rucker *et al.*, 2014). No matter the polyphony, as a core statement, appraisal theories identify some few cognitive appraisals that give rise to specific emotions.

These approaches have been employed in marketing and have their own merits and limitations. Havlena and Holbrook (1986) identified that dimensional theories (in the form of pleasure, arousal and dominance) are better able to capture consumption-specific information and to characterise consumption experiences compared to categorical theories (in the form of Plutchik's basic emotions). It is true, however, that these theories should be seen as providing alternative types of perspective. When it comes to the application of these theories on confusion for example, categorical theories would argue for treating confusion as an emotion (e.g. Cartwright, McCormick and Warnaby, 2016); dimensional theories would establish the levels of pleasure, arousal and dominance of confusing situations (confusion was previously found as a highly unpleasing, unaroused and powerless situation- Russell and Mehrabian, 1997) and explore how these influence behaviours like approach or avoidance; whereas, appraisal theories would reveal the cognitive processes implicated in the formation of confusion and the way each of these might subsequently lead to specific behaviour. The appraisal theories can provide a good grounding for the understanding of confusion and will find application in the developed framework of this paper.

**Confusion in consumer behaviour research**

Confusion has been variably described in the literature as a cognition (Storm and Storm, 1987; Keltner and Shiota, 2003), a metacognitive state (Clore, 1992; Hess, 2003) and rarely as qualifying for addition to the category of emotions (Rozin and Cohen, 2003a and b). No matter its classification, literature agrees that this type of state has great *informational and emotional value* for theory development but also every-day decision making (Rozin and Cohen, 2003a and b). The requirement to further elucidate and understand terms like confusion, to reveal their multiple characters and to discuss their role in theoretical and empirical undertakings has been stressed by previous researchers (Rozin and Cohen, 2003a and b) and is further emphasised through this paper. Consumer behaviour researchers tend to

treat confusion based on its environmental, cognitive and personality trait dimensions and it has also been described within a process of antecedents and consequences (Mitchell *et al.*, 2005; Walsh *et al.*, 2007).

### ***Investigations of confusion***

The common characteristic of the marketing studies dealing with confusion is that the 'state of being confused' itself is not widely studied (for a recent exception see Garaus and Wagner, 2016), nevertheless confusion drivers have been cited, mentioned and investigated to a great extent, but either in an isolated manner, or because these serve or disturb other aspects of consumer behaviour such as consumer attitudes, choice and decision-making (West *et al.*, 2002; Drummond, 2004; Casini *et al.*, 2008). The early studies on confusion have been characterised by the 'information overload' paradigm (Jacoby *et al.*, 1974 a and b; Jacoby, 1984; Malhotra, 1982; Lurie, 2004; Fasolo *et al.*, 2009; Lee, Son and Kim., 2016), a topic that still draws much attention as 'choice overload', 'assortment overload' or 'hyperchoice' (Mick *et al.*, 2004; Scheibehenne *et al.*, 2010). Issues such as product similarity (Foxman *et al.*, 1992; Kapferer, 1995; Warlop and Alba, 2004; Miceli and Pieter, 2010), store layout and aesthetics (Kotler, 1973; Babin and Attaway, 2000) and confusing marketing practices (e.g. the case of tariffs) (Chen and Chang, 2013; Kasabov, 2015) have appeared in the literature forming the foundations of the concept.

Mitchell *et al.*, (2005) presented a comprehensive review of the confusion-related literature and developed a conceptual model which depicted confusion as an *evaluative, conscious, attitude-like phenomenon*, which possessed an affective, cognitive and behavioural component and leads to behavioural consequences. The conceptualisation provides antecedents of confusion in terms of the market environment (overchoice of products and stores, similarity of products/ brands and, finally, ambiguous, misleading or inadequate

information- see also Matzler *et al.*, 2011; Cheng Chieh Lu and Gursoy, 2015), moderators such as age, education, mood and cognitive type and, finally, outcomes like confusion coping strategies and consequences. Although this framework is very comprehensive, the specific connections among the antecedents, confusion and its consequences are not detailed. Confusion is for example assumed to be leading to either decision postponement or increased loyalty but the rationale explaining why different consumers react in diverse ways is not detailed. Thus, ‘a black box’ of the actual connections between emotionality and behaviour is created.

On this same rationale, Walsh *et al.*, 2007 and Walsh and Mitchell, 2010 conducted a series of studies in order to validate a scale of consumers’ general confusion proneness and provide evidence of how it could affect several consumer behaviours: purchase postponement, loyalty behaviour or word of mouth. Three consumer confusion proneness traits were identified as relevant for explaining confusion proneness; that is: perceived similarity, overload and ambiguity. The results support the idea that confusion proneness is a conscious, multidimensional phenomenon which impacts on purchase postponement and loyalty (Walsh *et al.*, 2007), word-of-mouth, trust and, ultimately, consumer satisfaction (Walsh and Mitchell, 2010) – nevertheless, these studies overlook the role of emotions in the process.

***Consumer responses to confusion***

Mitchell *et al.* (2005) divided consumer responses to confusion into coping strategies and adverse consequences. The first of the coping strategies is abandoning the purchase altogether (Tversky and Shafir, 1992; Greenleaf and Lehmann, 1995; Dhar, 1997; Huffman and Kahn, 1998; Anderson, 2003) and the second includes a number of confusion reduction strategies: narrowing down the alternatives, displaying status quo and omission bias (one



manifestation of status quo bias could be an increased loyalty towards existing brands) (Lin and Huang, 2014, p.168), reduced information search (as in Kasper *et al.*, 2010) or sharing the decision with a knowledgeable other (e.g. asking help from staff).

Beyond the above coping strategies, confusion has been connected to adverse results such as dissatisfaction (Walsh and Mitchell, 2010; Wang and Shukla, 2013; Hall-Philips and Shah, 2017), negative word-of-mouth (Turnbull *et al.*, 2000; Walsh and Mitchell, 2010), cognitive dissonance (Mitchell and Papavassiliou, 1999), shopping fatigue (Mitchell and Papavassiliou, 1997), decreased (or increased) loyalty and trust (Walsh and Mitchell, 2010; Chen and Chang, 2013). It is evident that the question of 'exit, voice or loyalty', in accordance with Hirschman's treatise (1970) can find an application in the case of states such as consumer confusion.

The rationale underlying the way consumers are likely to act along with an understanding of the emotional core of confusion are two largely unexplored topics and both will be bridged here through the utilisation of the appraisal theories of emotions.

### **Utilising the appraisal theories of emotions to explain consumer confusion**

The main attitudinal framework suggested from the existing literature (Mitchell *et al.*, 2005) provides clear and easy-to-follow guidelines for the study and measurement of confusion, along with antecedents and consequences. This paper will significantly extend the existing understanding based on a novel 'appraisal emotional framework'. The focus is on the actual experience of being confused, the cognitions and emotions that are implicated, and provides more explanatory power around confusion related behavioural consequences.

### ***Appraisal theories of emotions and confusion***

In their more general form, appraisal theories argue that humans constantly evaluate their environments resulting in action tendencies, experienced as emotions (Arnold, 1960;

Smith and Ellsworth, 1985; Lazarus, 1995; Roseman, 2001; 2013; Ellsworth and Scherer, 2003; Shiv, 2007). Appraisal theories are useful in the study of emotions as their application offers all- inclusive frameworks for understanding emotional experiences. One of the first models introduced was the transactional theory of stress (Lazarus *et al.*, 1970). Appraisal theories have since then extended beyond stress and include appraisals and approaches that help explain most of the experienced emotions (e.g. Roseman, 2001; Brosch, 2013). Theorists of appraisal theories have introduced different appraisal dimensions but the categories proposed tend to have more similarities than differences. Dimensions such as goal congruency, motivation, pleasantness, agency or control have been proposed (see Ellsworth and Scherer, 2003; Watson and Spence, 2007 for clear and comparative reviews of different appraisals).

Many of these frameworks and especially the early models (e.g. the stress model by Lazarus *et al.*, 1970), have been criticized as highly cognitive, presenting the emotions as the end result of a complex process. These early models and criticisms are not in accordance with the progress in appraisal theories. Recent theoretical and empirical work of appraisal theorists has promoted a much less ‘causal’ and much more fluid relationship between consumers’ cognition and emotions (cognition has been described as possibly being all three- the cause of emotions, part of the experience of emotions or the consequence of emotions - Roseman and Smith, 2001). These developments are in accordance with recent findings from neuroscience (Phelps 2006; Barrett *et al.*, 2007) which support this notion of a gradient relationship.

Their application in consumer behaviour has been explained and supported by authors such as Nyer (1997), Bagozzi *et al.* (1999), Watson and Spence (2007) and Kumar and Garg (2010) who argue that appraisal theories allow for a comprehensive exploration of consumption emotions together with their causes and consequences. Watson and Spence

(2007) summarised the diverse appraisal theories and proposed a model that can be applied to consumer behaviour (as in figure 1).

\_\_\_\_INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE\_\_\_\_

Roseman (2001) proposes seven appraisals of events that can influence emotions: unexpectedness, motive consistency, motivational state, uncertainty, agency, control potential and problem type (instrumental or intrinsic nature). The varied combinations of these appraisals result in 8 positive (motive-consistent) and 11 negative (motive-inconsistent) emotions. For example, anger is the outcome of appraising an outcome as motive-inconsistent, caused by another person with one's control potential seen as relatively high. Frustration is the outcome of appraising an event as motive-inconsistent, based on the desire to get something rewarding that was not realised and based on high control potential.

The suggested confusion appraisal framework is based directly on Roseman (1979; 1991; 2001; 2013). It will take into consideration the indications of Ellsworth (2003); Hess (2003); Keltner and Shiota (2003); Rozin and Cohen (2003a and 2003b) and Watson and Spence (2007). It finally builds on the argument of Moors *et al.* (2013) that emotions are best seen as dynamic processes, where several appraisals, behavioural, and physiological responses interact and evolve to produce 'emotional episodes', rather than only one specific emotion.

Following this pattern, the framework suggests that the drivers of confusion are environmental (complexity, similarity, novelty etc.); however it is the way that these are interpreted by each individual that determines the occurrence and level of confusion.

\_\_\_\_INSERT TABLE 1 HERE\_\_\_\_

Confusion can be described as a process of two levels of appraisals, that of primary and secondary appraisals. Primary appraisals are central to the concept of confusion and these are the kind of appraisals necessary for an individual to have the subjective experience of confusion. In this category are appraisals such as *motivational state*, *motive inconsistency* and *uncertainty/ lack of understanding*. The second level of appraisals implicated in confusion are appraisals of *agency* and *control potential* (see tables 1 and 2 for an overview) and it is at this point that other subsequent emotions (consequences/ part of the experience of confusion) are formed and guide successive behaviour based on the behavioural urge that has been found to characterise them.

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INSERT TABLE 2 HERE  
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Roseman’s framework is by no means far from what other theorists suggest, however, it has been described as one of the most comprehensive appraisal theories (Éthier *et al.*, 2008) and it can provide a better basis for the construct. Confusion can be defined as a detailed process that gives rise to subsequent emotions with distinct behavioural patterns and can explain the variety of behaviours connected to confusion. The value of other appraisal frameworks, that can provide a good basis to confusion, is unquestionable. According to Smith and Ellsworth’s (1985) framework, for example, confusion can be characterised by uncertainty, unpleasantness, increased attention and effort, loss of control and varied attribution of responsibility (self, agency and circumstances); this conceptualisation cannot nonetheless provide depth to the types of emotions expected as a consequence.

***Primary appraisals***

Motivational State and Motive Inconsistency:

Roseman is one of few appraisal theorists to introduce the concept of type of motivation as part of the appraisals of emotions. *Motivational state* relates to whether the event is being related to a desire to get less of something punishing (aversive motive) or a desire to get more of something rewarding (appetitive motive). Applying the concept to shopping motivation and confusion, consumers with appetitive motives are likely to seek to maximise shopping and consumption enjoyment while consumers with aversive motives will focus on the reduction of mistakes and shopping disruptions. According to Ellsworth (2003) consumers perceive a sense of goal obstruction when confused- *motive inconsistency*- interpreting shopping uncertainty as an unwanted event. They are either receiving less of an appetitive motive (in consumer terms this might result in a sense of inability to choose the best product/ failing to enjoy shopping for example) or getting more of an aversive motive (a sense of not being able to minimise wrong choices or reduce shopping time).

The distinction between utilitarian and hedonic value is well documented in the literature of shopping motivation (Babin *et al.*, 1994; Haas and Kenning, 2014; Yim *et al.*, 2014). Utilitarian shopping value is seen as consumers' behaviour which is task-related and rational and the value derived from it mainly depends on whether the particular consumption need was met (Babin *et al.*, 1994). Haas and Kenning (2014) define purchase uncertainty as a situational utilitarian motivator and purchase efficiency orientation as an individual utilitarian motivator with main emphasis of both on the avoidance of wrong decisions from the consumer perspective. At the other end shopping and product enjoyment is the main hedonic motivator they suggest. Bagozzi *et al.* (1999, p. 200; Arnold and Reynolds, 2012) have also pointed out the importance of maximising happiness (or personal welfare) as a central hedonic motive of consumers' actions. There are good reasons then to suggest that aversive motivation is most likely to be related with consumers who have utilitarian shopping motivation and appetitive motives with consumers with hedonic motivation. Although

existing research in appraisal theories have not tested or proved of a relevant connection, the impact of utilitarian and hedonic motives on the formation of different patterns of emotions as per the above theoretical framework is worthy of investigation. More specifically, motivational state is suggested as creating a good level of distinction between emotions such as frustration and disgust/ anger and contempt/ guilt and shame. Frustration/ anger and guilt are the result of motive inconsistency with an appetitive motive (*I wish to enjoy more* but it is not possible- *hedonic motive inconsistency*); while disgust/ contempt and shame result from motive inconsistency with an aversive motive (*I want to minimise shopping interruptions* but it is not possible- *utilitarian motive inconsistency*). These emotions as affirmed from their behavioural dimensions motivate consumers to act in different ways. Motivational state doesn't influence the experience of fear, dislike and regret.

***P1: Consumers with hedonic shopping motivation who find shopping environments motive inconsistent, are likely to experience frustration, anger and guilt while those with utilitarian shopping motivation disgust, contempt and shame (when control potential is perceived as high).***

Observing the behavioural implications of these different emotions: disgust, contempt and shame are 'retreat' emotions- urge people to move away from a situation- while frustration, anger and guilt are what has been described as 'agonistic' emotions (Harmeling, Magnusson and Singth, 2015). Consumers with utilitarian motives can be identified as those more likely to get distressed in silence because of confusion and more likely to exit a relationship compared to those with hedonic motives.

Uncertainty:

Certainty- uncertainty is one of the dimensions that accompany emotions. Some emotional situations are about feeling uncertain, not understanding what is happening and

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3 feeling unsure about what is coming next (Ellsworth and Scherer, 2001). In consumer  
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5 behaviour this has equated to knowledge, evaluation and choice uncertainty (Shiu *et al.*,  
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7 2011) and is part of the first level of appraisals which is common for all consumers  
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9 experiencing confusion (Ellsworth, 2003).  
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12 The literature on appraisal effects suggests that the level of certainty when  
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14 experiencing an emotional episode influences the level of certainty in subsequent situations  
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16 and in the case of confusion subsequent decision-making. More specifically theoretical and  
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18 empirical evidence indicates that certainty related emotions lead to more certainty in  
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20 subsequent judgements and cognitive processing. Tiedens and Linton (2001; see also Urbany,  
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22 Dickson and Wilkie, 1989 for a similar finding in the context of decision-making) have  
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24 proved that when the dimension of uncertainty is present in emotional situations, consumers  
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26 resort to systematic processing of subsequent decisions while certain emotions usually create  
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28 a situation where people rely on heuristic processing. This is an interesting finding as it  
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30 suggests that when experiencing confusion (an uncertain decision situation) consumers  
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32 should always seek to exert more effort and rely on searching of additional information  
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34 (systematic processing) rather than abandoning or relying on heuristics such as loyalty.  
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36 Existing research has shown however that at least in the case of confusion, systematic  
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38 processing is not the only way consumers respond (Walsh *et al.*, 2010). The justification of  
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40 this 'unreasonable' behaviour comes then from the second level of appraisals that are related  
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42 to confusion. The first three appraisals-uncertainty, motivational state and motive  
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44 inconsistency- cause consumers to experience confusion, but the way they will respond to  
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46 this emotional situation is very much determined by the subsequent appraisals of agency and  
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48 control potential. These subsequent appraisals determine the specific types of emotions that  
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50 will be enacted and have the final effect on the way consumers respond during confusing  
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52 situations.  
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**P2: Uncertainty in confusing shopping situations is followed by further situational appraisals and diverse emotions and thus can lead to both systematic and heuristic processing and responses.**

***Secondary appraisals***

Agency:

Agency in the form of ‘attribution’ has been proposed as a determinant of the outcomes of confusion before (e.g. Mitchell *et al.*, 2005). Previous frameworks do not provide a compelling reasoning on the rationale of why subsequent behaviour is to be expected. Appraisal theories are better able to specify these relationships. Agent refers to ‘locus’ meaning the attribution of a motive consistent or inconsistent event to circumstances, other people (the retailer or brand in this case) or the self (Smith and Ellsworth, 1985; Ortony *et al.*, 1988; Roseman, 1991). It is one of the two appraisals (along with goal consistency) that has been found to have a major effect on the determination of emotions (Smith and Ellsworth, 1985; Ortony *et al.*, 1988; Roseman, 1991). It has been found to be more important when considering negative emotions because such events are more likely to generate clear accounts of blame rather than when a positive event occurs (Peeters and Czapinski, 1990). One of the most widely known distinctions among emotions influenced by agency are those of shame (attributed to oneself), anger (attributed to an agent) and frustration (attributed to circumstances) (Lerner and Kelner, 2000).

**P3: In uncertain, motive inconsistent (confusing) shopping situations that consumers feel in control, they will a) immediately abandon a purchase decision (run, get to safety because of shame) when this is attributed to themselves, b) criticise/ complain towards a specific brand/retailer (move against other because of anger) when these are attributed**



to the brand/ retailer and c) adjust the shopping process (try harder because of frustration) when attributed to the circumstances.

Although attributions can be personality (people with higher/ lower levels of self-confidence), experience/ familiarity but also situation related, a common basis of most attributional research is the self-protection principle. This describes the tendency of consumers to attribute good outcomes to oneself and bad outcomes to external or situational causes (Folkes, 1988; Harris, Mohr and Bernhardt, 2006). This might explain the fact that confusion has rarely been discussed in terms of causing such self-conscious emotions as shame, guilt and regret but more frequently in terms of causing anger and/ or frustration (Mitchel *et al.*, 2005). This leads to the proposition:

**P4: Consumers are more likely to attribute confusion externally (to general market conditions or to specific retailers and brands) rather than internally (to oneself).**

This is important because consumers with external emotions are likely to turn against the industry or an organisation while consumers with internal emotions might require further support but will not (as a rule) have implications for the reputation of the industry or specific brands. The argument on internal and external attribution is getting more complicated since Smith and Lazarus (1991, p. 620) claim that often consumers perceive themselves as external agents. In that case they can be '*angry towards oneself*'. Although the proposed confusion framework (this study) doesn't account for this possibility, it seems likely that in case confusion is attributed internally consumers can still report anger instead of regret, shame or guilt. In this case however any behavioural consequences of anger e.g. criticize, hurt etc. will be against oneself and not against an organisation.

Control/ Coping Potential:

Coping potential in appraisal theories has been connected to the ability of an individual to cope with an event, consisting of sub-checks for (a) *control*: the degree to which an event and its consequences are controllable; (b) *adjustment potential*: the degree to which an individual is able to cope by changing internal concerns and goals rather than external events (for example being flexible with the types of products purchased or with purchase situations); and (c) *power*: the degree to which the person having the emotion is able to influence the occurrence of an event in the future either through their own means or with external help (Scherer, 1988).

Confusion is undeniably followed by perceived higher levels of effort, higher attention needed and possibly a sense of lack of control (Ellsworth, 2003) and has been described at a core level to be a low control situation (e.g. Russell and Mehrabian, 1997 found a high negative correlation of confusion with dominance). Even though control potential is expected to be low, adjustment potential and power are subjective dimensions influenced by consumers' situational perceptions and can act as the core of confusion coping potential dimension. A well-known dimension of attribution concerns stable and unstable actor evaluations and can assist with the explanation around perceived coping potential (Hess, Ganesan and Klein, 2007). If consumers believe that they are confused because of lack of ability to deal with the marketplace in general this is a stable, internal attribution. In case confusion is attributed to lack of shopping time on a certain occasion (Abhisek, 2016) this is an unstable, internal attribution. The person who blames the general formation of retail stores of a retailer for confusion makes a stable, external attribution while that person claiming a specific store is not well-formatted makes an unstable, external attribution. In cases of stable attributions, the same outcome is anticipated in the future and consumers have a sense of lesser control compared to cases of unstable attributions, which imply that the future might

not be the same as the past (Weiner, 2000). The dimension of stable and unstable evaluations and its relationship to control is explained in table 3.

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INSERT TABLE 3 HERE  
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**P5: During confusion, consumers will make stable or unstable control attributions.**

**These will determine their subsequent emotions and behaviour.**

In the case of agency as ‘other caused’, consumers will experience dislike in the low control/ stable appraisal but anger or disgust in high control/ unstable situations. These latter emotions (anger, disgust) are stronger in both their negative valence and behavioural implications (complain, act) because in this case consumers feel more confident that there is an opportunity to change something in the situation- for example retailers are perceived as having some power to improve the environment. Considering the fact that customers’ have ever greater expectations from business services and retailing (IBM, 2014) this intensity of emotions and behaviours when external unstable attributions are made should not be seen as a disclosure.

### **Theoretical implications and research directions**

Two central identified gaps in the literature and one request for specific focus indicate the necessity for the development of a novel approach to confusion. Explicitly, a) lack of clear explanation on the existence of variable behaviours demonstrated in the case of confusion, b) a lack of detailing (and connections) of the emotional and behavioural implications in the case of confusion from previous literature and c) a request for further attempts to explain the actual subjective experience of confusion (Garaus and Wagner, 2016) have been identified in the literature. Appraisal theories have been proposed as a fruitful avenue for bridging and providing answers on these gaps and for the further study of consumer confusion.

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3 Firstly, although the expected outcome in case that consumers feel uncertainty is to  
4 increase the effort and resort to systematic processing (Tiedens and Linton, 2001), evidence  
5 clearly suggests that this is not the case (Mitchell *et. al.*, 2005). Consumers resort to  
6 abandonment, increased/ decreased loyalty and/ or complaining behaviour (Walsh *et al.*,  
7 2010). Attribution has been suggested in the past as a factor influencing the way consumers  
8 respond to confusion, however no theoretical framework has been identified to clearly detail  
9 the reasons that the subsequent emotional and behavioural differences might exist. Secondly,  
10 although emotional reactions have been discussed in the literature of confusion (see  
11 Schweizer, 2004), attempts to understand the role of emotions and the process of behaviour  
12 development are limited. This study then builds and extends previous frameworks (e.g.  
13 Mitchel et al., 2005) which have suggested the cognitive, emotional and behavioural elements  
14 of confusion but have been short in providing clarity specifically on their nature and  
15 connections. It offers new insights on the appraisals implicated (which extend beyond the  
16 environmental evaluations of ambiguity, complexity, overload etc.) and more clarity on the  
17 identified relationships between appraisals and emotions. More importantly it provides a  
18 rationale and increased ability to predict the way consumers will behave variably.  
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38 The objectives of this study specifically concern the provision of an understanding of  
39 the *nature of the construct*, a *framework* that extends the scope of consumer confusion  
40 (actual *cognitive and emotional experience and consequences*), and the identification and  
41 suggestion of areas that deserve *further research* attention. The way that this study has met  
42 these objectives and a thorough discussion follows based on these three areas.  
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50 *The nature of confusion*  
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52 Firstly, connected to the nature of confusion and based on this conceptual exploration,  
53 confusion should be understood as a dynamic process of highly subjective and adjusting  
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3 cognitions and emotions. The main implication of this is that consumers do not only deal with  
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5 confusion but also subsequently with other emotions that might co-exist in the process.

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7 Secondly, the appraisals implicated in confusion can act as an interesting new direction for  
8  
9 the development of a new measurement for the construct. The measurement can include  
10  
11 factors such as uncertainty, motivation, agency and control. This approach is in accordance  
12  
13 with recent voices arguing for a measurement of confusion based on consumers' subjective  
14  
15 experience (Garaus and Wagner, 2016). These experiences can give interesting new  
16  
17 directions to the study of the state. For example the inclusion of agency (which acts to  
18  
19 differentiate among several emotions) in the measurement can assist with the clear prediction  
20  
21 of the types of emotions to be expected during confusion episodes as explained below.  
22  
23

#### 24 25 *Confusion appraisal framework* 26

27  
28 Answering the second objective of identifying specific appraisals and emotions  
29  
30 implicated in the process, the proposed framework proposes that environmental appraisals  
31  
32 will lead to particular emotions and subsequently to diverse behaviours. The confusion  
33  
34 appraisal framework clearly fills both gaps identified in the literature and explains the diverse  
35  
36 behaviours that consumers resort to when experiencing confusion.  
37  
38

39  
40 In terms of appraisals, uncertainty, motivation, motive inconsistency, agency and  
41  
42 coping potential have been identified as defining confusion. Within the boundaries of these  
43  
44 appraisals, the role of hedonic and utilitarian motivation, motive inconsistency, systematic  
45  
46 and heuristic processing, external versus internal and stable versus unstable attributions have  
47  
48 been explored. Agency and coping potential are two central appraisals that determine  
49  
50 subsequent emotions.  
51  
52

53  
54 Agency has been loosely identified and discussed in the past as associated with the  
55  
56 implications of confusion (Mitchel et al., 2005) but without providing a clear reasoning on  
57  
58

the way that the relationship between agency and behaviour works. This study contributes significantly in the role of agency attributions in the case of confusion by suggesting differences between externally, internally or other attributed emotions. The appraisal framework suggested further provides some rationale on the reason that, in the past, certain emotions have been heavily connected to confusion (i.e. anger/ frustration/ dislike etc.) while self-related emotions (shame, guilt) have received less attention. Specifically, consumers sometimes attribute confusion to the self but can experience themselves as an external agent, in that case external emotions can also be directed towards oneself (I am angry towards myself- anger is not necessarily directed towards an external agent).

Coping potential in the form of low/ stable and high/ unstable control potential, further acts to provide differentiation among experienced emotions. This is one of the first attempts to connect confusion outcomes with coping potential and the stable/ unstable attributions. One of the central implications discussed in psychological research around stable attributions is that of the learned helplessness hypothesis that has dominated psychological research for long (Seligman, 1975). The learned helplessness implies that when consumers consistently feel they lack control when faced with aversive stimuli this will lead to motivational deficits (giving up any further effort). Thus, although the experienced emotions related to stable attributions might be of immediate lower valence compared to high control situations (see above on this point), the long term implications of experiencing low control in confusing situations might be more detrimental for marketing. These might lead to adopting further situation regulation strategies like abandoning a situation altogether. The area of learned helplessness hypothesis and its connection to confusion is a very interesting area and it might explain the reason of long term shopping abandonment in specific markets by consumers.

Turning to *emotions*, the emotions of fear, frustration, disgust, dislike, anger, contempt, regret, guilt and shame are all suggested as possible consequences of the process of confusion. Table 4 summarises the behavioural implications of these emotions as proposed by previous literature, indicating the suggested behavioural consequences in the case of confusion. These have not been tested before and act as fruitful opportunities for future research.

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INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

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One of the noteworthy suggestions of the framework is that consumers experience either shame or guilt when confused depending on their motivational state. This comes in partial corroboration to the typical anthropological approach that shame comes from a public exposure of some shortcoming whereas guilt results from private events and involves mentally undoing some part of the past event (Yi and Baumgartner, 2011). Although Tangney *et al.*, (1996) found no support for this classic view, consumers feel guilt when their motivation is to enjoy the experience but this is not materialised (possibly because lack of enjoyment is something they experience internally) and feel shame when their motivation is to minimise wrong choices (possibly because they feel that this is something that could potentially be understood by others in the social/ shopping environment). A main implication of experiencing these emotions is related to the subsequent expectations on processing; guilt-driven consumers are expected to make product choices based on secondary product features while shame driven consumers value primary features (Han, Duhachek and Agrawal, 2014).

A special note should be made around the state of satisfaction and its connection to consumer confusion. Satisfaction has not been distinct component of the suggested confusion appraisal framework, in similar manner to all the other well-known appraisal theories (Smith and Ellsworth, 1985; Lazarus, 1991; Roseman, 1991; this study). Bagozzi *et al.* (1999) also

point towards the importance of identifying distinct emotions rather than only one summary emotional response like satisfaction. It is imperative however to argue that most studies identify a valence congruent relationship between negative emotions and satisfaction (intense negative emotions lead to lower satisfaction) (Westbrook, 1987, White, 2010). Thus lower satisfaction still has a role to the confusion framework, as an outcome of the negative emotions implicated in confusion.

*Areas for future research*

Finally, having introduced a novel framework for consumer confusion, this study has identified numerous areas for future research. Studies can build on and develop further on the conceptualisation and shape a new measurement of consumer confusion. The exploration of the emotions suggested along with their subsequent behavioural implications is another central topic. The exact behavioural consequences of each of the emotions can be explored in detail. Although these have been proved in previous consumer related studies (e.g. Yi and Baumgartner, 2011), an exploration based on explicitly confusing situations is essential for proving the ecological validity of the framework. The role of hedonic and utilitarian motivation and their relationships with confusion and specific emotions as proposed, is a stimulating, unexplored area. Finally, the role of the learned helplessness hypothesis and its connection to long term shopping abandonment is an additional theoretical suggestion that is worthy of further investigation.

**Practical implications**

Either seen as an attitude, emotional state or a process implicating cognitions and emotions, confusion is a state of negative valence and has negative implications in terms of avoidance or other consequences. The use of appraisal theories finds application to any confusing situation and introduces the importance of agency and control level to the



formation of additional emotions that direct behaviour. The approach justifies a variety of behaviours related to confusion and explains which thoughts and emotions subsequently influence specific behaviours. Although retailers cannot clearly control the way appraisals will unfold and this very much depends on the individual situation, they can offer appropriate methods to avoid or decrease the effect of specific behaviours (see table 4 above for a comprehensive overview of actions suggested). As explained in the theoretical implications, retailers need to be aware that during confusion it is not only confusion that they have to provide solutions for (e.g. provide a clear retail layout and clear information) but also they have to act on subsequent emotions that are involved. For example angry consumers may be provided with places or opportunities to complain privately so that they do not perceive social media which are ubiquitous as the main avenue of their complaining behaviour. Frustrated consumers can be offered assistance when examining their alternatives, consumers who experience fear would require opportunities to reduce their cognitive dissonance through for example social media and communication reassurance, ashamed consumers will appreciate opportunities to increase self-esteem.

One of the aspects that should be taken into consideration is that different emotions might require quicker or more intermediate interventions depending on their severity or lasting nature (anger is usually described as an intense emotion in the short term while contempt is more long lasting and has reputational implications for the brands involved- Fischer and Roseman, 2007). The framework then offers an interesting pattern from where retailers can choose the way to deal with the consequences of confusion (please refer to table 4 above).

## Conclusion

Over the past decades there has been an increasing concern around the implications of complexity to consumer wellbeing (Marcus and Schwartz, 2010). Being highly related to complexity, consumer confusion has received considerable, but fragmented, attention in the literature, mainly focusing on overchoice and other environmental and cognitive processes. Having identified gaps in the treatment of confusion, which mainly concern the lack of clarity around its emotional and subsequently the multitude of behavioural implications, this study provides novel insights that can assist with the adoption of better shopper marketing practices.

Extending on the debate on whether marketing concepts (Yi, 1990) should be evened with their antecedents (e.g. confusion measured as overload), their outcomes (e.g. confusion measured as purchase abandonment) or are better perceived as a process (e.g. confusion as a process that includes all of the different cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions) confusion until now has found its conceptualisation based on its antecedents or drivers. The significance of these dimensions is not challenged in this paper. The present framework however suggests that although confusion is environmentally driven, it is a subjective, dynamic process comprised of two levels of consumer appraisals. Uncertainty/ lack of understanding, goal inconsistency and motivational state form the basis of confusion; agency attribution and coping potential are shaping the development of subsequent emotions and ultimately the expectations on consumer behaviour. This conceptual paper offers theoretical and practical implications and new directions for the study of confusion and decision-making.

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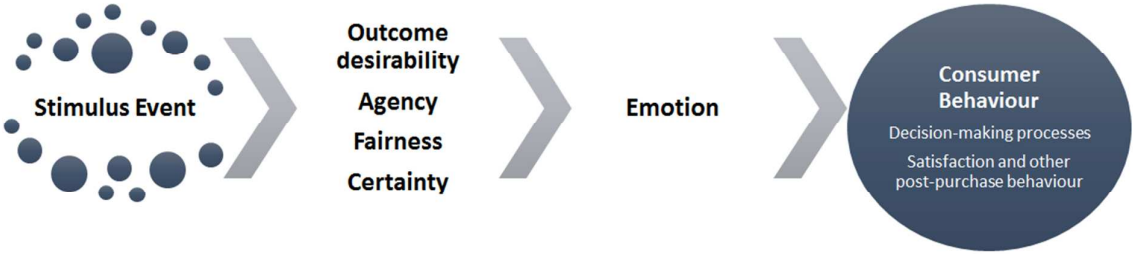


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**Figure 1. Model depicting cognitive appraisal theory in consumer behaviour.**  
**Source: Figure created based on Watson and Spence, 2007.**



**Table 1: Consumer confusion based on appraisal theories of emotions.**  
**Source: this conceptual work.**

| Appraisal Theories  |
|---|
| Confusion as an uncertain, motive-related and motive-inconsistent state.<br>Appraisals of coping potential and attribution of agency vary among consumers. These appraisal processes comprise and lead to different emotions that accompany confusion. These diverse emotions lead to differences on the behaviour adopted. |

**Table 2. Appraisal processes implicated in confusion (suggested framework)**  
**Source: this conceptual work based on Roseman, 2001, p. 70-71; Roseman, 2013.**

|   |  |   |  |                         |                                     |
|---|--|---|--|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Environmental complexity or intense homogeneity | Uncertainty  | Lack of Understanding/ Not Knowing  |  | 1st Level of Appraisals |                                     |
|   |  | Confusion is a Motive-Inconsistent Process                                      |  |                         |                                     |
|   | Circumstance Caused                                      | <b>Appetitive Motive</b><br>(e.g. I want to enjoy shopping but I cannot)        | <b>Aversive Motive</b><br>(e.g. I want to reduce possible mistakes but I cannot) |                         |                                     |
|   | Uncertainty  | <b>Fear</b><br>Vigilance/ inhibition or run/ get to safety                      |  | Low Control Potential   | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Level of Appraisals |
|   | Uncertainty  | <b>Frustration</b><br>Exert effort/ overcome/ try harder                        | <b>Disgust</b><br>Remove/ expel/ move something away from you                    | High Control Potential  |                                     |
|   | Other-Caused   |   |  |                         |                                     |
|   | Uncertainty  | <b>Dislike</b><br>Decrease attention to/ dissociate/ move away from other       |  | Low Control Potential   |                                     |
|   | Uncertainty  | <b>Anger</b><br>Hit/ criticize/ hurt/ complain/ move against other              | <b>Contempt</b><br>Look down on/ reject/ exclude                                 | High Control Potential  |                                     |
|   | Self- Caused   |   |  |                         |                                     |
|   | Uncertainty  | <b>Regret</b><br>Do over/ do differently/ correct/ improve/ move away from self |  | Low Control Potential   |                                     |
| Uncertainty                                     | <b>Guilt</b><br>Reproach/ punish self/ move against self | <b>Shame</b><br>Withdraw/ get self out of sight/ move self away                 | High Control Potential   |                         |                                     |

Colour coding based on the behavioural implications: light grey- run/ get away (exit); black- move against self or retailer (voice) or dark grey- try harder/ improve (loyalty).

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**Table 3: Relationship between control/ attribution stability and agency (with examples of application on the case of confusion).**  
**Source: this conceptual work**

|   | Circumstances                              | Other  | Self  |
|---|--|--|---|
| <b>Low Control/<br/>Stable<br/>Attribution</b>    | The state of the market is confusing.      | All of the stores/ portfolio configuration of this retailer/ brand is confusing. | I am not capable to deal with the complexity of the market. |
| <b>High Control/<br/>Unstable<br/>Attribution</b> | The shopping situation today wasn't ideal. | One specific store/ the website of a brand/ retailer is confusing.               | I did not have enough time for proper shopping.             |

**Table 4. Emotions, behavioural urge, consequences and marketing and retail actions.**

Source: Mitchell *et al.*, 2005/ Roseman, 2001/ Yi and Baumgartner, 2004/ Yi and Baumgartner, 2011; based on judgement and discussion with 2 key informants in the area of marketing and retailing.

| Emotion     | Behavioural urge   | Suggested confusion behavioural consequences   | Suggested marketing and retailing actions  |
|-------------|--|--|--|
| Fear        | Vigilance/ inhibition or run/ get to safety                    | Do nothing, postpone purchase/ thoughts that decisions are more risky/ fears of increased cognitive dissonance/ increase loyalty to feel safer.  | Provide opportunities to reduce dissonance through social media, reduce risk through information, provide assistance with choice, ratings and promotional offers to shift loyalty. |
| Frustration | Exert effort/ overcome/ try harder                             | Clarify buying goals/ seek additional information/ consult staff/ report shopping fatigue.   | Provide assistance, available staff/ website/ blogs to assist with decision-making and fatigue, additional/ comparative information- labeling.                                     |
| Disgust     | Remove/ expel/ move something away from you                    | Decrease loyalty/ decrease trust/ negative WOM.  | Reduce risk through information, provide assistance with choice, remind choice availability.   |
| Dislike     | Decrease attention to/ dissociate/ move away from other        | Mental disengagement/ abandon decision- purchase.  | Easy format of information provided, clear communication to remind of options/ choices.  |
| Anger       | Hit/ criticize/ hurt/ complain/ move against other             | Complaining behaviour/ negative W-O-M.   | Provide opportunities for private/ in-store complaining, develop a system to reply to consumer online complaining.   |
| Contempt    | Look down on/ reject/ exclude                                  | Decrease loyalty/ decrease trust.  | Reduce risk through information, provide excellent service, remind choice availability.  |
| Regret      | Do over/ do differently/ correct/ improve/ move away from self | Narrow down the set of alternatives/ seek additional information/ share-delegate the purchase.   | Provide assistance, available staff to assist with decision-making and fatigue, additional/comparative information, clear return policies.   |
| Guilt       | Reproach/ punish self/ move against self                       | Decrease loyalty (high coping potential means consumers believe that there are alternatives available)/ reduced self- confidence/ place emphasis on planning purchases, focus on secondary product features when making choices. | Opportunities for self-reassurance through social media, reduce risk through information provision, provision of information and details on secondary product characteristics.     |
| Shame       | Withdraw/ get self out of sight/ move self away                | Abandon purchase/ reduced self-confidence/ focus on primary product features in case choice is to be finalised.  | Reduce risk through information, provide assistance with choice and emphasise primary product characteristics, remind choice availability.   |

Colour coding based on the behavioural implications: light grey- run/ get away (exit); black- move against self or retailer (voice); dark grey- try harder/ improve (loyalty).