

An Investigation of the Antecedents of Consumers' Confusion in Purchasing an Outbound Package tour in the City of Isfahan by Fuzzy Delphi Method

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Abstract

The concept of consumer confusion has gained a considerable attention in consumer behavior literature during recent years. However, it is considered as a relatively new concept in marketing, particularly in businesses that provide intangible products such as tourism. This study aimed to investigate factors that potentially influence consumer confusion proneness in purchasing outbound package tours. It also ranked the influential factors based on their importance or perceived influence strength from the experts' point of view through a two-phase methodology constituting of Thematic-Analysis and Fuzzy Delphi Method. As a qualitative method, the first phase was done based on data collected from 23 in-depth qualitative interviews with the consumers of outbound tours. This phase resulted in a list of drivers potentially functioning as the antecedents of consumer confusion in the target society. The second phase was based on group consensus acquired from a panel of qualified experts providing their opinions on a specific issue. In this phase, 15 experts of consumer behavior, tourism, and psychology were interviewed to provide professional opinions and responses to tourism-oriented questions. The group consensus was obtained after the third round of running the questionnaires among experts. According to the consensus, 23 factors had potential influence on consumer confusion in buying an outbound package tour.

Keywords

Consumer confusion, Package tour, Tourism industry, Overload confusion, Similarity confusion, Ambiguity confusion.

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1. Introduction

The concept of consumer confusion has often been discussed in marketing and consumer behavior literature during recent years, however, this construct is seldom investigated by scholars (Fitzgerald, Russo, Kees, & Kozup, 2019). Regarding the broad meaning of this concept and the variety of its consequences in different industries, there is yet a strong need for further studies with the focus on the different aspects of products and services. This is because consumer confusion is not associated with a specific factor or product. There are several factors affecting the likelihood and intensity of consumer confusion, which could not be investigated by a limited number of studies. In a survey conducted by "Which Group", around one-fifths of interviewees mentioned that they bought a wrong product due to the similarities of products from two different product categories. Moreover, 13 percent said that they felt being deceived or misled and 38 percent felt frustrated because of buying a wrong product (Falkowsky, Olszewska, & Ulatowska, 2015). In addition, consumers do not follow the rational decision-making process to make an optimal purchase decision when they face a confusing situation. Instead, they make shortcuts to faster decision-making processes by relying on prominent criteria such as persuasive advertisements, lower prices, or other default biases (Chioveanu, 2019).

Consumer confusion should be studied not only for these reasons but also for the trends according to which investigating this phenomenon is necessary (Mitchell & Papavassiliou, 1999). Some of these trends are:

- Consumers have never faced such a huge amount of information about products and producers;
- The changes and evolution of products have been very fast and radical during the past two decades;
- Companies are increasingly implementing imitation strategies;
- Complex products such as computers and the products of recycling industry have made consumers more confused than ever, and
- Consumers increasingly shop during overseas travels or from foreigner companies despite the fact that purchasing in a new and unknown environment could increase consumers' confusion

prone to confusion and their vulnerability against possible fraud and decrease their ability to self-protect.

Tourism industry is an industry in which the concept of consumer confusion requires to be investigated rigorously. The specific nature of tourism products and services that differentiates them from other product categories highlights the need to study consumer confusion in the tourism industry. These products are more complex and thus make it difficult for consumers to make decisions. This is because there are complex trade-offs and several features to compare, even in situations where the consumer has a clear preference for specific features (Kalayci & Potters, 2011). In addition, tourism products are consumed in a place and time different from the ones the consumer experiences in a given situation. Consumers have to rely on information provided by formal and informal personal resources when they do not have a real personal experience. Moreover, it takes a longer time for the consumers of tourism products to plan how to use tourism services and products in comparison with other kinds of products. Finally, this type of product costs more than other product categories (Chieh Lu, Dogan, & Rong Lu, 2016).

Another factor that highlights the importance of investigating consumer confusion is associated with consumer's characteristics. Consumers have different behavioral patterns in different cultures. This may lead to different levels of confusion proneness in making purchasing decisions. This fact also demonstrates the necessity of studying consumer confusion in different cultures. According to Hofstede's cultural model (Hofstede, 2011), the uncertainty avoidance related to the level of stress perceived by people from a society encountering an unknown phenomenon constitutes one of the dimensions upon which different societies are classified and is closely related to the concept of consumer confusion. This study has been conducted in Iran. Iranian consumers' specific characteristics differentiate them from other consumers for various reasons. Investigating the different aspects of consumer confusion for this group of consumers might provide a comprehensive and more accurate perception of their characteristics and the factors that may influence their confusion proneness. Social parameters as well as political and economic restrictions have formed a behavioral framework within

which Iranian consumers make purchasing decisions. A consequence of such a cultural situation is the unfamiliarity with e-commerce and its implications in different industries. Regarding the fact that using outbound tour packages as a tourism product is a relatively new trend for Iranian consumers (in general), the knowledge and experience of this group of consumers are somehow lower than consumers in more developed countries. In addition, the level of uncertainty avoidance in Iran's social culture is relatively high. This might influence Iranian consumers' behavior in two main ways. The first is perceived ambiguity due to economic uncertainties that has made the consumers more conservative and less open to new experiences. Furthermore, Iranian consumers' unfamiliarity with new tourism trends such as outbound tour packages and e-tourism industry has fortified their resistance against un-clarity and ambiguity associated with the nature of these products. Moreover, the findings of previous studies in this area have described consumer confusion as a situation-dependent concept with highly situation-specific dimensions (Anninou & Foxall, 2019). Therefore, as scholars claim, further studies are required to investigate and explore the implications of a situation-specific understanding of this concept (Walsh, Lindridge, Mitchell, Deseniss, & Lippold, 2017; Terblanche, 2018).

Consumer confusion relates to marketers as well. The chance of making rational decisions, choosing products that provide the best quality in exchange for the money paid, and enjoying a satisfying purchase experience are too low for a confused consumer, something that marketing specialists could simply ignore. The reason for such a situation seems obvious: the ultimate goal of marketing is to meet customers and consumers' needs and wants and provide them with the highest possible level of satisfaction from pre-purchase to post-consumption phases. Thus, the whole process could not be accomplished smoothly and successfully when the consumers experience difficulties in the primary stages of this process (Walsh & Mitchell, 2010).

Based on the review of literature, there is a need to respond to the gap between the existing knowledge in the area of Iranian consumption behavior patterns in tourism industry and the implications of such a culture-specific type of consumer confusion.

Therefore, this study implemented a two-phase research method constituting of Thematic Analysis and the Fuzzy Delphi Method to investigate the factors that might potentially influence consumer confusion proneness in making outbound tour package purchasing decisions, and to rank them based on their importance and/or perceived influence strength from marketing, consumer behavior, and tourism experts' point of view.

2. Literature Review

Scholars argue that consumer confusion has emerged as a relatively new concept in marketing area (Matzler, Bidmon, Faullant, Fladnitzer, & Waiguny, 2005). However, different definitions have been provided for this concept. Researchers believe that confusion is associated with the situations in which consumers encounter new information from external sources and this new information does not have a continuous and appropriate compatibility with their existing/prior knowledge. Consumers cannot arrange it immediately due to information processing interruption caused by inconsistencies in the information stream or because new information is not integrated into existing knowledge base (D'Mello, Lehman, Pekrun, & Graesser, 2014). Consumer confusion is defined as “an uncomfortable state of mind that primarily arises in the pre-purchase phase and negatively affects consumers' information processing and decision-making abilities and can lead to consumers making sub-optimal decisions” (Hall-Philips & Shah, 2017, p 119). According to another definition, consumer confusion occurs when consumers are not able to perceive and interpret different features of a product or service while processing the information (Turnbull, Leek, & Ying, 2000). It is also defined as “a lack of understanding and potential alteration of a consumer's choice or an incorrect brand evaluation caused by the perceived physical similarity of products or services” (Mitchell, Walsh, & Yamin, 2004, p. 4).

2.1. Consumer Confusion Dimensions

Consumer confusion is defined as a conscious mental state that could occur either before or after purchasing process. Studies have found that consumer confusion includes not only cognitive aspects but also behavioral ones (Mitchell, Walsh, & Yamin, 2005). In the existing literature of consumer behavior and according to all studies conducted

in this area, there are three consumer confusion aspects, namely similarity confusion, overload confusion, and ambiguity confusion. Similarity confusion is argued to be a result of similar brand or product attributes, whereas the cause of ambiguity confusion is the complex, ambiguous, and conflicting information. Finally, overload confusion is the result of a wide range of alternatives or an overly information-rich environment (Hall-Philips & Shah, 2017). Although different roots have been introduced for each dimension, all dimensions are perceived to be essential for forming a comprehensive view of different market dynamics (Anninou & Foxall, 2019).

2.1.1. Similarity Confusion

Similarity confusion is defined as “a lack of understanding and potential alteration of a consumer’s choice or an incorrect brand evaluation caused by perceived physical similarity of products or services” (Mitchell, Walsh, & Yamin, 2004, p 4). According to another definition, similarity confusion proneness is someone’s “propensity to think that different products in a product category are visually and functionally similar” (Walsh, Hennig-Thurau, & Mitchell, 2007, p 702).

This type of confusion might be caused by a situation in which the stimulus or information received by the consumer is similar to the ones he/she has faced and learned in past (Walsh & Mitchell, 2010). In the marketing context, such a situation generally arises in relation to advertisement, interpersonal relationships, shopping environment, or products that are too similar (Bregman, Magie, & Palriek, 2001). It is also likely to arise when competitors imitate a brand or when product features are too similar in alternative products, and when different advertisements and advertising messages provide the same information and content (Chieh Lu, 2014). This happens because consumers rely on visual cues in positioning and differentiating brands, product information, product packaging, or advertisement. Thus, when they face similar stimulus or information related to each item, they might buy a product imagining that a wrong (fake) brand is the original one or a similar package presents the right original product (Wang & Shukla, 2013). Thus, consumers who are prone to get confused because of similarity might change their choice when

they encounter apparently similar information that arises from physical similarities among products. This situation would lead to dissatisfaction. Similarity confusion resulted from observing several similar products has negative consequences such as disability to make an optimum decision, frustration, and too much processing effort that could result in purchasing a product which is not necessarily wrong, but does not meet consumer's needs either, at least as appropriately as the product that could have been bought if he/she had not got confused (Walsh & Mitchell, 2010).

Another source of similarity confusion is look-alike products (products that are similar in terms of physical aspects and features) in the market. An increase in the number of such products leads to higher levels of consumer confusion and makes it challenging or even difficult for the consumer to distinguish products or products' quality standards. In addition to similar brands (although the existing similarity in the case of fake brands is an intentionally set strategy) and products with physical similarities, perceived similarity in advertisement and commercial ads could function as a source of such confusion (Mitchell et al., 2005). Some consumers believe that similar products have similar features, functionality, and quality. This belief might cause serious problems in terms of dissatisfaction for the producers of original products (Falkowsky et al., 2015).

2.1.2. Overload Confusion

Another logical basis of consumer confusion is information (or stimulus) overload. Overload confusion is defined as "a lack of understanding caused by the consumer being confronted with an overly information rich environment that cannot be processed in the time available to fully understand and feel confident in the purchase environment" (Mitchell et al., 2005, p 143). Overload confusion is also defined as "being confronted with more product and market information and alternatives than consumers can process" (Anninou & Foxall, 2019, p 142). Consumer overload confusion is derived by the idea that stimulus proliferation would lead to confusion due to human's "bounded rationality" related to the amount and diversity of information (Mitchell et al., 2005). In other words, consumers have a limited cognitive capacity, and because of this constraint, information

overload arises when the amount of stimulus goes beyond a specific level, which increases the likelihood of confusion (Mitchell & Papavassiliou, 1999). This kind of confusion is based on the fact that consumers are in an environment overwhelmed by information. Such amount of information will decline consumer's ability to process the information correctly and will decrease his/her confidence in purchasing occasions (Chieh Lu, 2014). Also, consumers feel frustrated when they encounter an information-rich environment while they are not often able to control or stop this trend by themselves (Mitchell & Papavassiliou, 1999).

Product proliferation is not the only antecedent of overload confusion. It can also be a result of increasing decision-relevant information about products in purchasing environmental context. Therefore, the more the criteria to be taken into consideration in decision making, the more difficult decision-making will be, and the more thinking cost will be imposed (Mitchell et al., 2005). Furthermore, Chieh Lu (2014) believes that information overload is derived by increasing the alternatives available as well as decision-relevant information about each alternative. Previous research has indicated that people have difficulties in handling complicated choices. As both the number of choices and the information associated with them increase, people tend to process a very small piece of the whole available information, choose the alternative they have always chosen, postpone decision making, or primarily do not buy (Wang & Shukla, 2013). In other words, although having several options available may be desirable, this situation will ultimately decline people's motivation for making a purchase decision (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000).

2.1.3. Ambiguity Confusion

Confusion does not always take place due to similarity among stimulus and information or the number/amount of them. Indeed, in some situations, confusion occurs as the result of its ambiguous and unclear nature. Information ambiguity refers to inconsistent, unclear, and misleading information that might cause consumers to get confused when they come across that information and are not able to process it (Wang & Shukla, 2013). Ambiguity confusion is defined as

“a lack of understanding during which consumers are forced to re-evaluate and revise current beliefs or assumptions about products or the purchasing environment” (Mitchell, et al., 2005, p 143). Some researchers (e.g. Mitchell, Walsh, & Frenzel, 2004) also believe that ambiguity confusion is caused by unclear information and is associated with complex products, functions, and features (Mitchell, Walsh, & Frenzel, 2004).

According to Mitchell et al. (2005), ambiguity confusion occurs when consumers should review and re-evaluate their current beliefs and assumptions about the product or purchase environment. Such a situation may arise when consumers receive either reliable or wrong information related to the product that is not consistent with their current knowledge. It means that what makes the consumers confused is actually the quality of the information and not its quantity (Chieh Lu, 2014). In today's complicated market environment, consumers often encounter ambiguous claims associated with products transferred through advertising messages. Some of this unclear information is actually a strategic decision made by producers to keep their product in consumer's choosing set through generating a delicate ambiguity (Wang & Shukla, 2013). Experimental findings demonstrate that ambiguity might make people feel embarrassed because they cannot understand and process unclear messages or information about the product accurately and finally might postpone or even abandon purchasing decision (White & Hoffrage, 2009).

2.2. Consumer Confusion in Tourism Industry

One of industries within which several confusion cases are reported is tourism industry (Mutzler, Waiguny, & Fuller, 2007). However, few studies have been conducted on consumer confusion in tourism context. There are serious undesirable consequences such as negative word of mouth, consumer dissatisfaction, cognitive dissonance, purchase fatigue, decreased trust and loyalty, and misleading other consumers that make it necessary to understand how confusion happens and how consumers cope with this situation in tourism businesses (Chieh Lu, 2014).

The concept of consumer confusion is observed particularly in highly turbulent industries specified with fast technological changes

and intensive competition (Chieh Lu et al., 2016). Therefore, it has a considerable importance in tourism industry as an increasingly international competitive industry (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Consuming tourism products and services (such as spending holidays in another city or country) usually requires more time and effort than many other kinds of services. Moreover, standardizing tourism products is difficult due to their unique nature (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). According to all of these characteristics as well as the ones mentioned in previous parts, consumers tend to perceive more levels of financial and emotional risks in decision-making. Therefore, they increase their information searching activities in order to decrease the perceived risk of buying tourism products and services (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). Ironically, searching for more information and the ensuing overload make many people feel confused. In addition, the increased use of the Internet as an information resource in recent years has made this situation even more complicated (Chieh Lu, 2014).

2.3. Consumer Confusion Antecedents

Marketing literature has pointed out many indications that reveal the influence of consumer confusion on consumers' ultimate behavior. Confusion functions as an antecedent of consumers' behavior. Its main influence on consumers' shopping behavior is negative and is mostly illustrated through decreased overall satisfaction (Anninou & Foxall, 2019). Hence, there is a need to identify the root causes of such a strong behavior driver. According to the investigations conducted in the field of consumer confusion, we can conclude that confusion is mainly derived by the stimulus sent from the source of a message or by the information recipient's disability to process the stimulus or information. In all types of interactional processes, the primary reason for the consumer confusion is either the naturally confusing marketing stimulus generated by the marketers or a lack of ability from consumer's side to understand and process the stimulus (Mitchell et al., 2005). In the marketing literature, the main focus of studies has been on the perspective of the source of message (sender), because different aspects such as information quality, form, content, and transfer approach strongly influence how it is received, perceived, and interpreted by the recipient (Chieh Lu, 2014). On the other hand,

what has been introduced as confusion antecedent from the consumer's (recipient) perspective refers mainly to personal differences including demographic factors, personality characteristics, and learning styles and motivations (Kim, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007). The existing literature has presented several factors as potential antecedents of consumer confusion. However, in the light of the purpose of this study, the most repeated factors related to consumers' cognitive and situational characteristics are explained here.

Educational level. Educational level is a variable whose impact on consumer confusion has been supported by different studies. Studies conducted with different groups of participants have found that in confusing situations, the groups with lower levels of academic education are more likely to have wrong choices as compared to well-educated groups. They are also less likely to have right choices in such situations in comparison with the latter groups (Xia, 2004).

Age. Age has been found to have contradictory impacts on consumer confusion. On the one hand, it could decrease confusion through creating an experience framework. On the other hand, confusion might happen since the information processing capability gets weaker as time goes by and people get older (Chieh Lu et al., 2016). Similarly, Elliot (1990) conducted a study on a group of participants in different age groups, based on which the lowest levels of confusion were observed among people aging from 36 to 45 years old, while the highest confusion levels were among people at the age of 56 to 65.

Perfectionism. Mitchel et al. (2005) claim that perfectionist consumers attempt to have the best choices and buy the products with the highest levels of quality. Therefore, they would involve in a complete and systematic process of searching all available alternatives, making a comprehensive comparison between them, and choosing the best possible option. The potential consequence of such a complex process will be the phenomenon we call here "confusion."

Need for cognition (NFC). This is defined as a need for structuring interrelated situations in a meaningful and integrated manner that reflects the need for understanding and creating an experimental rational world (Cohen, Stotland, & Wolf, 1955). According to another definition, NFC is a mental tendency and motivation to get involved in

active information processing (Chieh Lu, 2014). Scholars argue that consumers with high levels of NFC usually engage in a considerable number of active cognitive tasks and evaluate the quality of information through the central route according to Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) logic. On the other hand, there are people who have a lower level of NFC and prefer the peripheral route to process message content (Mowen & Minor, 2014). Studies have also found that NFC positively corresponds with people's willingness to pay a comprehensive attention to confronting challenging cognitive tasks and negatively corresponds with their willingness to ignore, refuse, or skip new information (Lord & Putreavu, 2006). In comparison to groups with lower levels of NFC, people with higher levels of NFC are highly motivated to have a comprehensive, complete thinking. Therefore, the members of this group are less likely to get confused when they face purchasing situation as a decision-making task (Gong, Huang, & Farh, 2009).

Price consciousness. This is an evaluative judgment made by different people with different levels of strength. The differences are due to the conditions in which the person has grown up and socialized and lead to the importance he/she puts on economizing as well as the absence or presence of cognitive beliefs about saving money (Chieh Lu, 2014). Price conscious consumers aim to achieve the best value against the money they pay. Therefore, they tend to have specific clear purchasing criteria, and their approach toward purchasing is comprehensive and efficient (Wang & Shukla, 2013). The attitude of this group of consumers in information processing is to take an accurate, systematic, and scrutinized method leading them expectedly to be protected from getting confused in information searching and purchase decision-making process (Chieh Lu, 2014). Similarly, Mitchel et al. (2005) claim that price-conscious consumers are less likely to experience all three kinds of confusion due to their specified clear purchasing criteria as well as their systematic efficient approach.

Tolerance of ambiguity. This concept refers to one's willingness to perceive ambiguous situations as a desirable situation (Conchar, Zinkhan, Peters, & Olavarrieta, 2004). Psychologists also believe that this concept reflects the extent to which people are able to handle their need to have a clear and complete perception and understanding of the

environment (Mitchel et al., 2005). This concept refers to the way people or groups receive and process information when faced with a set of unfamiliar, complicated, and inconsistent cues in an unclear, vague situation. When we talk about vague situations, we mean a new, complex, or conflicting situation that includes too many cues (Gurel, Altinay, & Daniele, 2010). If consumers attempt to clarify the situation and have an accurate and reliable purchase, they will experience a state of ambiguity. The occurrence of such a situation is more likely during the phase of searching the information (Chieh Lu, 2014). It is argued that the tolerance of ambiguity is one of the most important personality attributes related to consumer confusion because people with lower tolerance of ambiguity collect more information during risk processing, evaluate vague situations as high risk situations, and are not willing to take risks in decision making. This group will search and process information with more motivation so that they could eliminate or decrease perceived ambiguity (Chieh Lu et al., 2016). On the other hand, people who are not ambiguity tolerant might stop information processing activities too soon and resist new information as well. In this situation, the consumer confusion will arise when the level of information unclarity is higher than consumer's uncertainty threshold (Chieh Lu, 2014).

Learning Orientation. It is a mental state that motivates people to continuously improve and develop themselves so that they can achieve a satisfying level of sophistication (Gong et al., 2009). The more people spend time and energy to collect and process information, the less they get confused. Therefore, identifying personal characteristics that might influence the motivations and efforts to get involved in information processing could help tourism marketers understand important cues in consumer confusion (Mitchel, et al., 2005). Chieh Lu (2014) also believes that confusion is less likely to happen to people who spend more time and effort on searching and processing information in decision-making. People with strong learning orientation attempt to understand new things and improve their abilities in new tasks, activities and skills (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). People who are highly learning-oriented respond to challenging situations through adaptive, flexible, and professional reactions. This trend improves their ability to handle the situation,

encourages them to seek new solutions, and leads them to higher levels of performance (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). On the other side, there are people who have lower levels of learning orientation and tend to protect their self-image by dissonant behavioral patterns. In challenging situations, this group often faces overload or ambiguity confusion, shows a decreased performance, and avoids more challenges (Gong et al., 2009). Generally speaking, in purchasing situations, consumers with high levels of learning orientation are expected to spend more time and effort to collect, process, and understand all available information. This trend results in lower confusion expected to happen to this group in comparison to consumers with lower learning orientation (Chieh Lu, 2014).

Involvement. Chieh Lu et al. (2016) argue that since there are low levels of information searching and processing in low-involvement purchase, the overload confusion is not likely to happen in such situations. Likewise, Mitchell et al. (2005) believe that ambiguity confusion is positively related to fast decision making, as consumers are not involved in analyzing vague product-related information. On the other hand, in the high-involvement context, decision makers implement mental effort to their choices by applying decision-making styles that need more evaluation and clarification. This situation helps them avoid confusion. However, applying more mental effort will only decrease the possibility of confusion when:

- a) all needed information is available and understandable,
- b) the consumer has the necessary processing capabilities to analyze the information.

If one of these conditions is missing, consumers will get confused due to the need to apply more effort to evaluate their choices (Chieh Lu, Dogan, & Rong Lu, 2016).

Equivalence Range. It refers to the extent to which people generalize any received stimulus. People with wide equivalence range (or less conceptual distinction capabilities) consider different cues as similar, even when there is an inconsiderable similarity between cues. Therefore, consumers with a wide equivalence range are more vulnerable to similarity confusion (Mitchel et al., 2005).

3. Methodology

In order to meet the study objective – i.e. to investigate and prioritize consumer confusion antecedents in purchasing an outbound package tour a two stage quantitative-qualitative methodology was used, containing thematic analysis and Fuzzy Delphi Method. The thematic analysis aimed at identifying the potential antecedents of consumer confusion through real consumer's (people who had been in the situation of making decision for purchasing an outbound tour package from travel agencies) experiences. On the other hand, a Fuzzy Delphi Method was applied to investigate the potential antecedents through expert group consensus. Then the antecedents identified through both approaches were prioritized based on their importance.

3.1. Thematic Analysis

At the first stage, a semi-structured in-depth interview was used to collect needed primary qualitative data. For this purpose, a group of interviewees who had recently used travel agents' services to purchase an outbound packages-tour was selected and a qualitative interview was conducted with each interviewee. The interview forms were constituted of two main parts. The first part asked the respondent's demographic characteristics and needed information about his/her destination and, time of purchase, and the experience of such a purchase (if existed). The second part was designed to acquire respondents' experience during the information searching and purchase decision-making phases. They were asked to think about their recent experience of information search and decision making about a package tour and to explain whatever made them feel confused in terms of the feelings such as doubt, worry, ambiguity, and hesitation. They responded by describing their mental state in that decision-making situation. The responses were recorded entirely by a voice recorder to ensure that no noticeable point would be missed.

The thematic analysis method was then implemented to achieve the themes most related to the study objective. Thematic analysis is defined as a methodology to comprehend, analyze, and report the patterns of qualitative data. It provides rich and detailed information from a collection of divers or dispersed data (Braun & Clark, 2006). This method is an effective practical approach widely used in

qualitative studies and provides simple and effective tools to identify the patterns embedded in a collection of qualitative data (Abedi Jafari, Taslimi, Faghihi, & Sheikhzadeh, 2011). The method is implemented through three steps. The first step is to transfer the verbal descriptions into written texts and develop codes through reviewing the qualitative data collected from interviews. To do this, the interviews are reviewed and the concepts most relevant (directly or indirectly) to the study objective are highlighted. In the second step and according to the thematic analysis approach, the identified concepts are adjusted to thematic forms aligned with the study objective, leading to a list of basic, organizing, and global themes. A theme is a bold feature repeated in the text that shows a unique special understanding or experience related to the objective of study (King & Horrocks, 2010). The themes are categorized into three levels: “basic themes” that describe the key codes and points of the text; “organizing themes” which are the themes achieved via combining and analyzing basic codes; and the “global theme” that is the ultimate theme including framework of the text as a whole (Braun & Clark, 2006). In the last step, the thematic network is developed based on the output of previous steps. The thematic network provides an illustrative graphical plan by arranging basic, organizing, and global themes and finally shows the themes of the three levels as well as their interrelations (Abedi Jafari et. al, 2011).

3.2. Fuzzy Delphi Method

Based on the purpose of the study, which is to investigate factors that have the main influence on consumer confusion likelihood, we used a qualitative decision-making approach. One of the most popular qualitative techniques to have a rational consensus in forecasting is the Delphi Technique, developed by Rand Corporation in the 1960s (Anderson, Sweeney, & Williams, 1998). This approach aims to provide the forecast through achieving a group consensus by a group of qualified experts (Cheng & Lin, 2002). The validity of information gathered through this method is assured by having qualified experts in the panel (Mohamad, Embi, M., & Nordin, 2015). This method is based on four main bases. First, the process is implemented by a group of experts called “the panel” who do not meet through the process.

Second, the responses can be received and gathered through mail or fax in order to reduce the time needed for data collection. Third, the process is done through a repetitious basis with normally two to four rounds of information gathering. Finally, the process is started in the first round by asking specific questions and gathering each expert's opinions about every single criterion. Then, all the responses are collected and analytical results are given back to experts to start the second round. All panel members are then asked to alter their opinions about each question if they are willing to do so. This procedure will continue until no one changes his/her ideas, which means that a specific level of consensus is achieved (Cheng & Lin, 2002).

Although the evaluations made by panel members directly rely on their individual expertise, the outcomes of each round are subjective. Therefore, it is needed to convert their subjective evaluations in terms of verbal measures into quantitative measures so that we could have a more objective perception of the results and also be able to analyze the collected information using quantitative statistical methods. These requirements lead us to use the Fuzzy Delphi Method (FDM) that was developed by Kaufmann and Gupta as a solution for the problems of traditional Delphi method (Kaufmann & Gupta, 1988). Figure 1 illustrates the framework of the Delphi method used in this study to achieve the group consensus.

3.3. Statistical Population and sampling

This study aims to investigate factors that could potentially influence consumer confusion likelihood in purchasing an outbound package tour. Therefore, the statistical population of the first phase (interview) is constituted of people who have been involved in at least one experience of buying an outbound tour package from travel agencies in the city of Isfahan. Regarding the qualitative nature of the study, the sampling was done through a judgmental or purposive sampling method and the size of sample was determined based on the theoretical saturation according to which sampling is stopped when new samples do not extend the existing theory of study (Ranjbar et.al, 2013). Based on this approach, the sample of the first phase ultimately included 23 members. The panel members of Delphi technique were also selected according to standards defined by scholars. Having an

appropriate panel is a critical factor in successful implementation of Delphi method. The number and composition of experts are two essential factors to be taken into consideration (Mahmoudi, Ranjbarian, & Fathi, 2017). In the Delphi method, a sample with 10 to 50 members is considered as an appropriate panel size. However, the exact number of experts should be enough to demonstrate a specific pattern in the information received. On the other hand, it should not be too large as it might increase the complexity and lead to too different viewpoints (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). In other words, in Delphi method, the emphasis is mainly on the experts' qualifications and competencies rather than their number (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963). Required competencies include a sufficient level of knowledge, experience, and expertise in the given field of study (Mahmoudi et al., 2017). In this study, we used a panel of 15 experts with expertise in marketing, consumer behavior, tourism, and psychology.

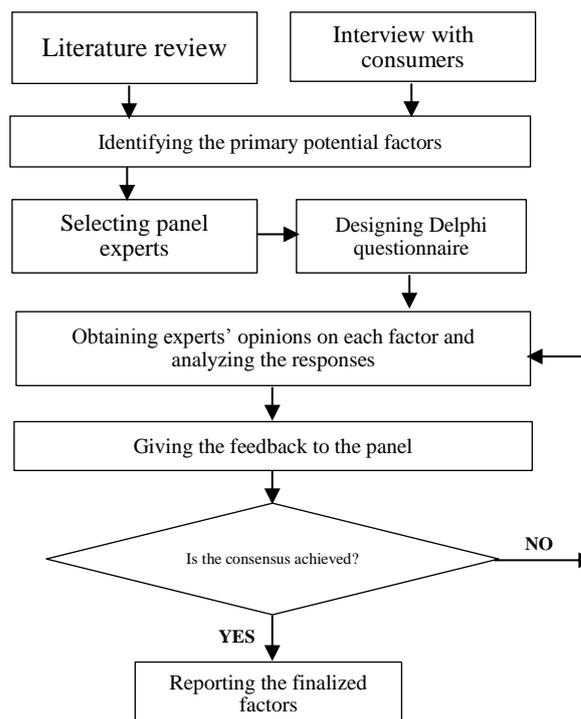


Fig. 1. Fuzzy Delphi Method algorithm, source: authors

4. Results

4.1. Thematic Analysis

As mentioned in part 3.1, the first stage was to interview with real consumers to identify their perspective. We used an unstructured interview to discover how confused the potential consumers of outbound tours in Isfahan have been when searching, processing, and interpreting information they had gathered (or had faced) through various channels, and when they were making decisions about destination, preferred tour package, and travel agency in their recent overseas travel. The interviewees were asked to describe how they felt during purchasing process. Then their descriptions were recorded completely to be analyzed through thematic analysis to find out the aspects in which they had felt confused and factors that accelerated confusion. The interviews resulted in three main information categories: 1) demographic information as well as purchasing situation in terms of time, single/group decision-making, macro-economic situation, and past experience, 2) consumer confusion dimensions, and 3) the potential antecedents of such a confusing situation. Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the sample and Table 2 shows the destination of sample members.

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of the study sample

Parameter	gender		Age range				Education status		Past experience		Job		Total					
	Female-	Male-	Under 25-	25-35-	36-45-	46-55-	More than- 55-	High school-	Bachelors-	Masters / PhD-	No experience-	One purchase-		More than one-	Public sector	Private sector-	Self-owned-business	Others-
Num.	13	10	2	10	6	3	2	3	11	9	8	8	7	5	8	4	6	23
Per.	56.5	43.5	8.70	43.48	26.09	13.04	8.70	13.04	47.83	39.13	34.78	34.78	30.43	21.74	34.78	17.39	26.09	100

Table 2. Chosen destinations

Sample	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
Destination	Indonesia	Azerbaijan	Turkey	France	Spain	Malaysia	Turkey	Russia	Turkey	UAE	Ukraine	Thailand	Turkey	UAE	Thailand	UAE	Turkey	Turkey	Netherland	Germany	China	Russia	Georgia

According to thematic analysis, all descriptive responses were reviewed comprehensively in order to identify primary codes embedded in consumers' provided ideas and feedback. As a result, 397 primary codes were identified through analyzing the responses. Table 3 illustrates the findings of the first step, including the most relevant concepts to the study objective and the number of times that each concept has been mentioned in the interviews from the most repeated to the least repeated ones.

Table 3. Reviewing the texts and code development

Mentioned concept	frequency
Uncertainty about the value perceived through the travel experience	33
Uncertainty about the flight safety (the airline with which the travel agency collaborates)	27
Similar information related to the tour package	25
Uncertainty about the performance of travel agency	24
Too much information provided by tourism websites	24
Too many similar alternatives	23
Similar prices for different destinations/ tour packages	23
Worries about destination safety	21
Too many price offers	21
Similar information about different destinations	21
Too many variables influencing the optimum choice	19
Uncertainty about the flight quality (the airline with which the travel agency collaborates)	18
Too many tour package alternatives	18
Too much information provided by the travel agency	18
Similar offers proposed by the travel agency	18
Worries about personal abilities during the travel	16
Too much information provided by the social media	16
Worries about probable language challenges	11
Uncertainty about natural/geographical conditions of the destination	8
Worries about cultural differences with locals	7
Worries about the food (different food cultures, meal prices, etc.)	6

The next step involved classifying the developed codes based on the main concepts embedded either semantically or latently related in relation to the study objective with the aim of identifying the basic themes, and consequently the organizing themes. The output of this step was a list of 22 basic themes that led to the ultimate global theme “consumer confusion.” Table 4 shows the output of step 2 in details.

Table 4. Searching and identifying themes

Global theme	Organizing themes	Basic themes
Consumer confusion (397)	Information Ambiguity (171)	(33) Uncertainty about the value perceived through the travel experience
		(27) Uncertainty about the flight safety (the airline with which the travel agency collaborates)
		(24) Uncertainty about the performance of travel agency
		(21) Worries about destination safety
		(18) Uncertainty about the flight quality (the airline with which the travel agency collaborates)
		(16) Worries about personal abilities during the travel
		(11) Worries about probable language challenges
		(8) Uncertainty about natural/geographical conditions of the destination
		(7) Worries about cultural differences with locals
		(6) Worries about the food (different food cultures, meal prices, etc.)
	Information overload (116)	(24) Too much information provided by tourism websites
		(21) Too many price offers
		(19) Too many variables influencing the optimum choice
		(18) Too many tour package alternatives
		(16) Too much information provided by the social media
	Information similarity (110)	(25) Similar information related to the tour package
		(23) Too many similar alternatives
		(23) Similar prices for different destinations/ tour packages
		(21) Similar information about different destinations
		(18) Similar offers proposed by the travel agency

The next step was about developing the thematic network of study as the illustrative form of the themes and the hierarchical relations amongst them. Figure 2 shows the thematic network of study.

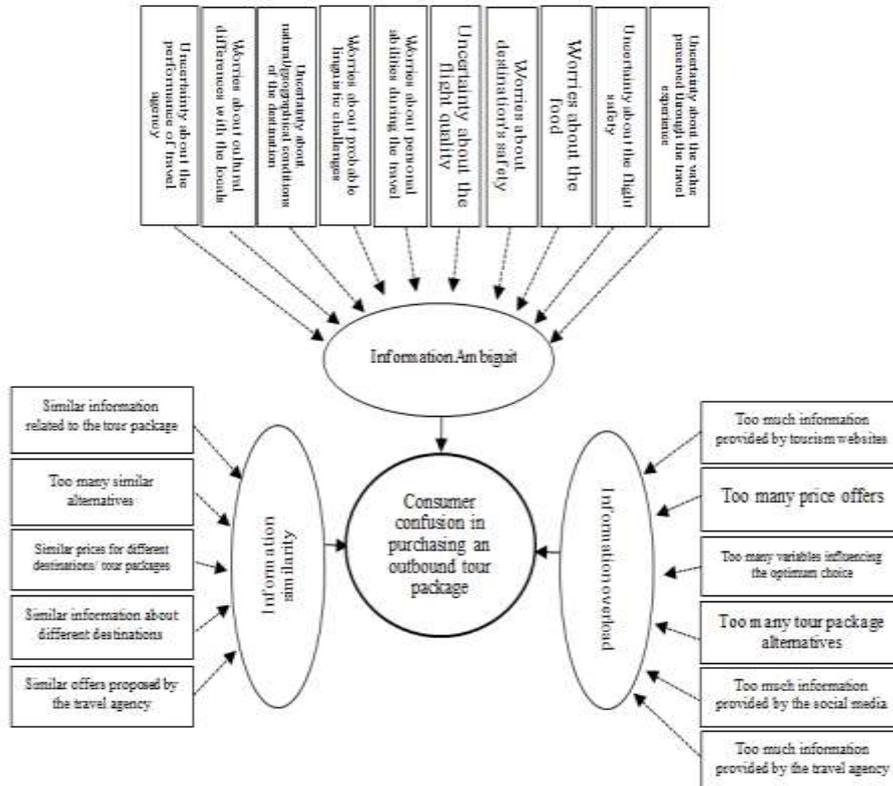


Fig. 2. Thematic network of consumer confusion in purchasing an outbound tour package

4.2. Fuzzy Delphi Method

4.2.1. Phase 1

The interviews resulted in a number of factors considered as confusion antecedents. These factors along with other factors from existing literature and studies constituted the primary basis for implementing the Delphi method. Table 5 illustrates the primary assumed consumer confusion antecedents.

Table 5. Consumer confusion antecedents based on interviews and existing literature

-Price consciousness
-Decision making style
-Past experience
-Social rank
-Age
-Gender
-Educational status
-Equivalence Range
-Perfectionism
-Ambiguity tolerance
-Need for cognition
-Learning orientation
-Involvement
-Number of optimal choice criteria
-Traveling alone or in a group
-Decision making time occasion
-Conflicting information about tour packages
-Inconsistency between the agency claims and the actual quality of services
-The quantity of consumer's interactions in social media
-The number of social media to which the consumer belongs
-Poor guidance from the agency
-Perceived geographical distance from the destination
-Perceived cultural distance from the destination
-Purchasing power

4.2.2. Phase 2

Step 2.1 As the first step in this phase, a semi-structured interview was developed including three main parts: a) questions about experts' demographic characteristics to obtain a comprehensive panel profile, b) twenty four questions according to Table 5 (resulted from the first phase outcomes, and structured based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "very high" to "very low" to achieve the experts' evaluations of the potential influence of each factor on the issue under study, and c) a general question asking all experts to indicate what other factors they think are not included in the existing questions but could influence the likelihood of consumer confusion in purchasing an outbound package tour. In order to facilitate the process of evaluation

for all the experts, and considering the possible limitations of indicating evaluations in terms of numerical values; the measures were structured in the form of verbal assessments as they are more influential and realistic for experts who take part in a qualitative survey (Cheng & Lin, 2002; Herrera, Herrera-Viedma, & Verdegay, 1998).

Step 2.2 A panel of 15 members with the expertise in consumer behavior, tourism, and psychology (including scholars and practitioners) were then either sent the questionnaires by mail or interviewed in a face-to-face meeting. They were asked to evaluate the importance weight of the factors already identified through interviews with consumers and literature reviews using the five-point Likert verbal assessments. They were also expected to add any other factor they believed would potentially affect the likelihood of consumer confusion in the process of purchasing a foreign tour package.

4.2.3. Phase 3. Data analyzing

Step 3.1 The third phase started with analyzing the responses collected from the panel. As mentioned previously, a fuzzy Delphi method was used to obtain the group consensus; therefore, the verbal assessments were described as trapezoidal fuzzy numbers. Table 6 illustrates the fuzzy numbers associated with verbal assessments.

Table 6. The fuzzy numbers associated with verbal values

Values	Associated fuzzy numbers
Very high	(0, 0, 1, 2)
high	(2, 3, 3, 4)
Medium	(3, 4, 5, 6)
Low	(5, 6, 7, 8)
Very low	(7, 8, 9, 9)

In this step, all the assessments made by the panel on the importance weight of each criterion were converted to trapezoidal fuzzy numbers illustrated in Table 6.

Step 3.2 The average of fuzzy numbers was calculated for each criterion using the following assumptions and equations (Cheng & Lin, 2002):

$$A_j^i = (a_1^i, a_2^i, a_3^i, a_4^i) \quad i = 1, 2, 3, \dots, n \quad j = 1, 2, 3, \dots, m \quad (1)$$

In which A_j^i presents i th expert's opinion about the j th criterion. Then the average value of each criterion will be:

$$A_{j\text{ avg}} = (a_{j\text{ avg}1}^i, a_{j\text{ avg}2}^i, a_{j\text{ avg}3}^i, a_{j\text{ avg}4}^i) = \left(\frac{1}{n} \sum a_1^{(i)}, \frac{1}{n} \sum a_2^{(i)}, \frac{1}{n} \sum a_3^{(i)}, \frac{1}{n} \sum a_4^{(i)} \right) \quad (2)$$

In which $A_{j\text{ avg}}$ presents the average value of all experts' opinions about the j th criteria.

The distance between each panel member's evaluations was then computed according to the following equation (Cheng & Lin, 2002) and sent back for any possible reevaluation with the aim of achieving a consensus:

$$\left(a_{j\text{ avg}1} - a_1^{(i)}, a_{j\text{ avg}2} - a_2^{(i)}, a_{j\text{ avg}3} - a_3^{(i)}, a_{j\text{ avg}4} - a_4^{(i)} \right) = \left(\frac{1}{n} \sum a_1^{(i)} - a_1^{(i)}, \frac{1}{n} \sum a_2^{(i)} - a_2^{(i)}, \frac{1}{n} \sum a_3^{(i)} - a_3^{(i)}, \frac{1}{n} \sum a_4^{(i)} - a_4^{(i)} \right) \quad (3)$$

Since the last part of the questionnaires asked the experts to indicate their own ideas about other factors except the ones included in the forms they believed could influence the chance of consumer confusion in the purchasing process, the next part of analyzing the information was gathering and classifying (if possible) their own proposed factors. All the suggestions were listed and then added to the existing factors (refer to Table 5) in the second questionnaire, and sent back to each expert along with the results of equation (3). Table 7 describes the factors proposed by the experts in the first round.

Table 7. Consumer confusion antecedents proposed by panel experts

-Political uncertainties/conflicts between the country of origin and the destination
-Governments' advertisements and effort to introduce their domestic tourism attractions
-Consumer's unfamiliarity with tourism websites
-Currency volatility
-Consumer's personality/psychological characteristics
-The aim / motivation for the travel
-Reference groups' influence on the consumer
-Proposing several prices, services, and other items of the tour package by different agencies

Step 3.3 In the second round, panel experts were asked to repeat the process of the first round and additionally evaluate the influence weight of the newly proposed criteria in terms of chance of consumer confusion, regarding the distance between their evaluation and the average values of the panel.

The revised assessments were collected and converted into trapezoidal fuzzy numbers (Table 6) as:

$$B_j^i = (b_1^i, b_2^i, b_3^i, b_4^i) \quad i = 1, 2, 3, \dots, n \quad j = 1, 2, 3, \dots, m \quad (4)$$

In which B_j^i presents i th expert's idea on the j th criteria.

The calculations of the average values as well as the difference between the averages and each expert's assessment were done using formulas (2) and (3) for B_j^i , as presented in step 3. 2.

Step 3.4 According to Fuzzy Delphi Method, this process will be repeated if necessary until successive means in consecutive rounds get reasonably close, i.e. when an acceptable level of consensus is achieved (Cheng & Lin, 2002). The desirable distance between two consecutive rounds has been defined to be $d_i \leq 0.2$ (Mahmoudi et al., 2017). Therefore, in this step the distance between $A_{j\ ave}$ and $B_{j\ ave}$ was calculated using the following formula (Farhadian & Shahgholian, 2015):

$$d(B_{j\ ave}, A_{j\ ave}) = \left| \frac{1}{4} [(b_{j\ ave1} + b_{j\ ave2} + b_{j\ ave3} + b_{j\ ave4}) - (a_{j\ ave1} + a_{j\ ave2} + a_{j\ ave3} + a_{j\ ave4})] \right|$$

The results are illustrated in Table 8. As this table shows, the distance between $B_{j\ ave}$ and $A_{j\ ave}$ was more than 0.2 for 12 Criteria. Moreover, for the criteria 25 to 32, the distance between means could not be calculated because there were no evaluations in the first round. Both reasons above indicated the necessity of repeating the process for the third time.

In the third round, the process was repeated as steps 3.3 and 3.4, having the mean values in terms of $C_{j\ ave}$ with the trapezoidal fuzzy numbers $C_j^i = (c_1^i, c_2^i, c_3^i, c_4^i)$. The results, as illustrated in Table 8,

show that the distance between $C_{j\text{ ave}}$ and $B_{j\text{ ave}}$ for all criteria is in the acceptable domain ($d_i \leq 0.2$), which means that the group consensus has been achieved on the factors which are considered as affecting the likelihood of consumer confusion in purchasing a foreign tour package.

Step 4. To identify the factors that could function as the antecedents of consumer confusion in the issue under study, the last step was to investigate the defuzzified mean values of each criterion (factor) based on the standards defined by scholars according to which the criteria with the average value of $A_{j\text{ ave}} \geq 5$ are considered as the potential factors of study (Mahmoudi et al., 2017).

Hence, for the fuzzy number $A_{j\text{ ave}} = (a_{j\text{ ave}1}, a_{j\text{ ave}2}, a_{j\text{ ave}3}, a_{j\text{ ave}4})$ the defuzzification is calculated as below (Cheng & Lin, 2002):

$$K_j = \frac{(a_{j\text{ ave}1} + a_{j\text{ ave}2} + a_{j\text{ ave}3} + a_{j\text{ ave}4})}{4} \quad (5)$$

The results of step 4 are demonstrated in Table 9. According to the results, some factors should be eliminated from the list of consumer confusion antecedents as their defuzzified average values are less than 5. These factors include “gender”, “learning orientation”, “the number of social media to which the consumer belongs”, “perceived cultural distance from the destination”, “governments’ advertisements and effort to introduce their domestic tourism attractions”, “consumer’s unfamiliarity with tourism websites”, “consumer’s personality/psychological characteristics”, “the aim / motivation for the travel”, and “reference groups’ influence on the consumer”. Other factors were identified to influence consumer confusion proneness in purchasing decision for a foreign tour package.

Table 8. The distance between averages

Proposed factors	2nd and 1st round	3rd and 2nd round
- Price consciousness	0.26	0.18
- Decision making style	0.16	0.00
- Past experience	0.13	0.20
- Social rank	0.30	0.04
- Age	0.27	0.00
- Gender	0.13	0.13
- Educational status	0.32	0.09
- Equivalence Range	0.17	0.00
- Perfectionism	0.45	0.00
- Ambiguity tolerance	0.14	0.13
- Need for cognition	0.28	0.00
- Learning orientation	0.11	0.04
- Involvement	0.25	0.16
- Number of optimal choice criteria	0.07	0.02
- Traveling alone or in a group	0.44	0.00
- Decision making time occasion	0.24	0.13
- Conflicting information about tour packages	0.30	0.20
- Inconsistency between the agency claims and the actual quality of services	0.16	0.00
- The quantity of consumer's interactions in social media	0.0	0.00
- The number of social media to which the consumer belongs	0.11	0.11
- Poor guidance from the agency	0.36	0.15
- Perceived geographical distance from the destination	0.20	0.00
- Perceived cultural distance from the destination	0.24	0.06
- Purchasing power	0.19	0.00
- Political uncertainties/conflicts among the country of origin and the destination	-	0.04
- Governments' advertisements and effort to introduce their domestic tourism attractions	-	0.00
- Consumer's unfamiliarity with tourism websites	-	0.00
- Currency volatility	-	0.00
- Consumer's personality/psychological characteristics	-	0.09
- The aim / motivation for the travel	-	0.00
- Reference groups' influence on the consumer	-	0.00
- Proposing several prices, services and other items of the tour package by different agencies	-	0.00

Table 9. The difuzzified average values

Proposed factors	1 st round	2 nd round	3 rd round
- Price consciousness	6.90	6.63	6.81
- Decision making style	5.42	5.60	5.60
- Past experience	6.73	6.60	6.80
- Social rank	6.30	6.61	6.65
- Age	5.88	5.15	6.15
- Gender	4.73	4.60	4.45
- Educational status	5.51	5.84	5.93
- Equivalence Range	6.44	6.27	6.27
- Perfectionism	5.48	5.93	5.93
- Ambiguity tolerance	6.00	6.13	6.27
- Need for cognition	5.78	5.50	5.50
- Learning orientation	4.84	4.72	4.68
- Involvement	5.88	6.13	5.97
- Number of optimal choice criteria	6.03	6.11	6.09
- Traveling alone or in a group	6.21	6.65	6.65
- Decision making time occasion	6.88	6.63	6.50
- Conflicting information about tour packages	7.55	7.25	7.45
- Inconsistency between the agency claims and the actual quality of services	7.26	7.43	7.43
- The quantity of consumer's interactions in social media	5.48	5.47	5.47
- The number of social media to which the consumer belongs	4.88	4.77	4.88
- Poor guidance from the agency	6.76	7.13	6.97
- Perceived geographical distance from the destination	5.88	6.09	6.09
- Perceived cultural distance from the destination	5.15	4.90	4.84
- Purchasing power	7.15	6.95	6.95
- Political uncertainties/conflicts among the country of origin and the destination	-	6.09	6.13
- Governments' advertisements and effort to introduce their domestic tourism attractions	-	4.11	4.11
- Consumer's unfamiliarity with tourism websites	-	4.06	4.06
- Currency volatility	-	7.13	7.13
- Consumer's personality/psychological characteristics	-	4.77	4.86
- The aim / motivation for the travel	-	4.11	4.11
- Reference groups' influence on the consumer	-	3.63	3.63
- Proposing several prices, services and other items of the tour package by different agencies	-	7.77	7.77

The ultimate objective of the study, i.e. ranking the antecedents in terms of influence importance and strength, led us to the final output illustrated in Table 10. This table indicates the antecedents of consumer confusion in purchasing an outbound tour package from the most important to the least important variables based on the weight attributed to each variable by the panel.

Table 10. Consumer confusion antecedents in purchasing an outbound tour package

1	Proposing several prices, services and other items of the tour package by different agencies
2	Conflicting information about tour packages
3	Inconsistency between the agency claims and the actual quality of services
4	Currency volatility
5	Poor guidance from the agency
6	Purchasing power
7	Price consciousness
8	Past experience
9	Social rank
9	Traveling alone or in a group
10	Decision making time occasion
11	Equivalence Range
11	Ambiguity tolerance
12	Age
13	Political uncertainties/conflicts among the country of origin and the destination
14	Number of optimal choice criteria
14	Perceived geographical distance from the destination
15	Involvement
16	Perfectionism
16	Educational status
17	Decision making style
18	Need for cognition
19	The quantity of consumer's interactions in social media

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This study extended the emphasis placed by previous studies on the importance of understanding the dimensions of consumer confusion by investigating this phenomenon in intangible products in the turbulent industry of tourism and for the culturally specific group of Iranian consumers. This study also attempted to expand the knowledge of the drivers of consumer confusion and theoretical guidelines and empirical evidence to the existing marketing/tourism literature. A two-phase study was used to identify the antecedents of consumer confusion in purchasing decision for outbound tour packages. The first phase included a quantitative study through interviewing the consumers of such products and resulted in a thematic network of consumer confusion, its dimensions, and its potential drivers. The outcomes of the interview with real consumers of outbound tour packages experiencing different levels of confusion during purchase decision process together with an overview of the existing literature made the basis of the semi-structured questionnaires.

In the second phase, the Fuzzy Delphi Method, as a popular qualitative approach to acquire a group consensus, was used to identify and prioritize consumer confusion potential antecedents. Implementing a three-round Delphi Method, 23 factors were finally identified that could potentially influence consumer confusion proneness when searching for information and deciding to choose and buy an outbound tour package from tourism service agencies. The factors were classified based on their importance in terms of influence they could have on the concept under study.

According to the final results, the most important factor with the potential to influence consumer confusion is facing several prices, services, and other items of the tour packages by different agencies. The next four factors also are categorized in ambiguity dimension. This indicates that confusion for Iranian consumer is mostly influenced by the ambiguity of information and other stimuli. This finding is consistent with one of the reasons for which the study has been developed. As mentioned in the introduction section, tourism service market is a relatively new and vague market for this society. Therefore, the Iranians are expected to have difficulties in processing

unclear, ambiguous, or conflicting information. Purchasing power, price consciousness, and social rank are the next influencing factors that demonstrate economic concerns of Iranian consumers due to macro-economic conditions they experience. While the factors in the middle of the list are generally situational factors, the ones at the lowest potential level to influence consumer confusion in the field under study could be classified as cognitive characteristics. It means that although these factors are potentially influential, their influence is strongly affected by more important concerns including no or little experience of buying tourism products and services, and economic concerns. These findings provide valuable insights about Iranian consumer behavior.

6. The Research Implications

The consideration of these factors has considerable implications for different groups involved in tourism industry as well as marketing and consumer behavior domain. The findings of this study would help these groups in three main ways:

- These findings provide the managers and practitioners in tourism industry with knowledge-based guidelines to identify the dimensions in which the consumers of outbound tour packages might get confused. Moreover, it makes it possible to identify the factors that influence the confusion so that the consumers are enabled to make effective decisions to tackle these factors or lower their effect. In addition, tourism managers and decision makers would be able to obtain a better perspective of Iranian consumers of tourism products. That would help them develop more effective strategies to meet consumers' needs and wants by identifying the right improvement areas and providing more appropriate services.
- The second group that would benefit from the findings is comprised of the scholars who are provided with valuable cues in both tourism and consumer behavior fields of study to conduct more studies according to Iran's cultural and social context. This study formed a comprehensive awareness about factors that could function as confusion antecedents from real consumers' perspective. Hence, the findings could provide other

researchers with helpful guidelines about consumer confusion in tourism industry in particular and in making purchase decisions in general. More studies could be inspired by the provided approach.

- Finally, specialists involved in marketing activities could acquire effective perspectives in terms of designing advertisements and other promotion instruments in order to decrease the potential effects of these factors or even eliminate such effects. Personal characteristics are usually linked to consumers' abilities in rationalizing and processing any received stimulus. Therefore, marketers could develop effective strategies for different target market segments through identifying personal characteristics and decrease the likelihood of confusion in potential consumers (Chie Lu, 2014). This study has provided an appropriate viewpoint about what makes the Iranian consumer concerned in decision-making.

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