

Understanding Customer Confusion in the Marketplace – A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Purpose : Customers typically experience uncertainty, a lack of clarity, and confusion as a result of the exponential increase in information, products/services, and touchpoints in today's quickly changing marketplace. The purchase experience of clients has been greatly impacted by customer confusion, so marketers must solve this issue. Therefore, this analysis offered a thorough grasp of the phenomena by methodically reviewing the body of literature already available on consumer uncertainty.

Methodology : The study examined 110 research studies from 1966 (since its beginning) to July 2024 using Scopus and the Web of Science. It used a framework based on the antecedents, decisions, and outcomes — theories, contexts, and methods (ADO-TCM) to give a thorough knowledge of consumer uncertainty in the marketplace.

Findings : The review presented the antecedents, decisions, outcomes, theories, contexts, and methods relevant to exploring customer confusion and proposed future research directions.

Practical Implications : The literature review provided implications for marketers, brands, and retailers. It offered practical insights to reduce customer confusion in the marketplace.

Originality/Value : The literature review adopted an ADO-TCM framework-based approach to structure the review findings.

Keywords : customer confusion, consumer confusion, systematic literature review, ADO-TCM framework

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Confusion is a mental state that affects an individual's ability to process information and make decisions (Fitzgerald et al., 2019). In today's marketplace, which is characterized by multiple touchpoints and channels, customers interact with numerous touchpoints across various platforms, channels, and devices (Cocco & Demoulin, 2022; Kaurav, 2023). As a result, customers are confronted with an exponential rise in the amount of information, products/services, and touchpoints, which often result in customers experiencing uncertainty, lack of clarity, and confusion. This confusion significantly affects the customer's buying journey, making it crucial and relevant for marketers to address it (Garaus & Wagner, 2016; Sharma et al., 2024).

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The abundance of choices and information overload both in physical stores (Garaus et al., 2015) and online spaces (Garaus, 2018) can overwhelm customers, leading to confusion and ultimately resulting in difficulty in making purchase decisions (Gupta, 2023; Shiu & Tzeng, 2018; Shiu, 2017). Moreover, other factors like complex pricing structure (Xue et al., 2020), insufficient information (Sertoğlu & Kavak, 2017), and store environment (Garaus & Wagner, 2016) can also lead to confusion in customers' minds. This confusion can lead to several negative consequences for retailers, like purchase postponement, purchase abandonment, or customer dissatisfaction (Shiu, 2017). To overcome the negative consequences of customer confusion, understanding the causes of customer confusion and customers' responses to confusion becomes highly crucial for researchers, marketers, and retailers.

Even though understanding customer confusion in the marketplace is highly significant to marketers, it remains understudied in the marketing literature (Anninou, 2018; Chauhan & Sagar, 2021a). Previously, Mitchell et al. (2005) proposed a conceptual framework suggesting three significant antecedents of customer confusion: similarity confusion, overload confusion, and ambiguity confusion. Later, Chauhan and Sagar (2021a) presented a systematic literature review to integrate the previous studies on customer confusion. However, there is still a lack of in-depth exploration of customer confusion dynamics (Anninou, 2018; Chauhan & Sagar, 2021a). Thus, in the current review, an in-depth study on customer confusion has been done to understand how it has been conceptualized in the literature, its evolution over time, and how it affects the consumer journey in today's rapidly evolving marketplace.

It is essential to incorporate the body of research on consumer confusion since consumers' purchasing decisions are greatly influenced by the confusion they encounter in the marketplace (Garaus, 2018). Moreover, a comprehensive understanding of customer confusion will enable businesses to devise strategies to mitigate it, enhance customer satisfaction, and foster long-term loyalty (Chauhan & Sagar, 2021a). Through the synthesis of current research on consumer confusion, future scholars will be better equipped to comprehend the intricate nature of this phenomenon, examining its causes, expressions, and consequences in diverse settings.

The paper adopts the systematic literature review approach and organizes the findings based on the Antecedents, Decisions, and Outcomes-Theories, Contexts, and Methods (ADO-TCM) framework. According to Lim et al. (2021), the ADO framework arranges the antecedents, decisions, and results to show “what do we know” about customer confusion, while the TCM framework looks at the theories, contexts, and techniques used by earlier researchers to study customer confusion in order to answer the question “how do we know.” Lastly, the paper proposes future research directions for research in this domain. Thus, this paper aims to address the following research questions through a systematic review of existing literature on customer confusion.

↪ **RQ1:** How is customer confusion conceptualized in the literature?

↪ **RQ2:** What are the antecedents, decisions, and outcomes of customer confusion?

↪ **RQ3:** What are the various theories, contexts, and methods used in the literature to study customer confusion?

↪ **RQ4:** How is customer confusion measured in the literature?

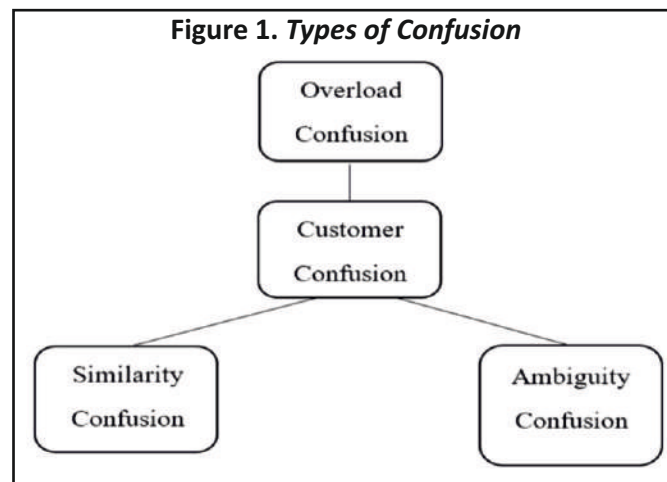
Conceptualization of Customer Confusion in the Literature

Customer confusion literature suggests that it has been conceptualized differently by different authors. The early studies on customer confusion investigated customer confusion in the retail context and regarded it as a psychological variable (Friedman, 1966). With time, confusion has been linked with an individual's ability to process the available information and make decisions (Mitchell & Papavassiliou, 1999; Sharma et al., 2024; Walsh et al., 2007). Garaus and Wagner (2016) conceptualized customer confusion as a multi-dimensional

construct having cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. The cognitive dimension deals with information processing abilities; the affective dimension represents emotions and feelings of discomfort during the state of confusion; the conative dimension deals with behavioral intention. Consequently, these dimensions of confusion lead to a range of cognitive outcomes, including dissonance and cognitive overload, affective outcomes such as anger, fatigue, and stress, as well as behavioral outcomes like purchase postponement or abandonment (Anninou & Foxall, 2019; Lu & Gursoy, 2015).

Types of Customer Confusion

Mitchell et al. (2005) presented a conceptual framework for customer confusion wherein the authors discussed the three types of confusion (refer to Figure 1). Later, in multiple studies, these three types of confusion were discussed and explored by various researchers (Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Tjiptono et al., 2014; Wang & Shukla, 2013; Xue et al., 2020).



Overload confusion occurs when customers are confronted with more information, products, or services than they can process (Kasabov, 2015; Walsh et al., 2007). In such situations, customers feel the cognitive load and face difficulty in decision-making (Xue et al., 2020). Information overload and choice overload are two significant reasons for overload confusion. Similarity confusion is when customers face difficulty distinguishing between products or services offered due to their perceived similarity (Xue et al., 2020). Several reasons could lead to perceived similarity in customers' minds, such as similar packaging, advertisements, product attributes, or look-alike brands (Walsh & Mitchell, 2005). Moreover, similarity confusion can arise from a reduction in inter-brand distinctions and an increase in the availability of parity products (Tjiptono et al., 2014).

Ambiguity confusion arises when customers experience a lack of clarity or uncertainty due to inconsistent, unclear, unreliable, or misleading information (Xue et al., 2020). Walsh et al. (2007) claimed that ambiguity perplexity is also connected to a customer's ability to tolerate information that is imprecise or deceptive.

Evolution of Definitions of Customer Confusion

Understanding how the concept has been defined, with different perspectives and varied contexts, is always considered critical. We have synthesized some popular definitions of customer confusion, and based on that, we have proposed a definition that has been used in our paper for further reference (refer to Table 1).

Table 1. Evolution in Definitions of Customer Confusion in the Literature

Authors	Definitions
Foxman et al. (1992, p. 125)	"Consumer brand confusion consists of one or more errors in inferential processing that lead a consumer to unknowingly form inaccurate beliefs about the attributes or performance of a less-known brand based on a more familiar brand's attributes or performance."
Mitchell & Papavassiliou (1999, p. 327)	"Confusion is more than subconscious mistakes; it is a state of mind that affects information processing and decision making. The consumer may, therefore, be aware or unaware of confusion."
Turnbull et al. (2000, p. 145)	"Consumer confusion is defined as consumer failure to develop a correct interpretation of various facets of a product/service during the information processing procedure."
Schweizer et al. (2006, p. 185)	Customer confusion is defined as "occurring when an individual's capacity threshold for taking in and processing environmental stimuli is temporarily exceeded." An emotional state known as "consumer confusion" makes it challenging for customers to choose and understand stimuli.
Kasabov (2015, p. 1779)	"Confusion is defined here in terms of subjective consumer experiences of mental discomfort and behavioral uncertainty engendered by misjudgments, information processing errors and inaccurate beliefs relating to products or services, affecting consumers' overall evaluation of products and services."
Garaus & Wagner (2016, p. 3461)	Retail shopper confusion is defined as a "three-dimensional, reflective second-order construct, consisting of the three reflective first-order dimensions: (a) emotion, which represents affective feelings of the discomfort associated with retail shopper confusion, (b) cognition, which captures the exceedance of cognitive processing abilities; and (c) conation, which describes the restriction in behavioral intention."
Fitzgerald et al. (2019, p. 308)	"Consumer confusion is a negatively valenced state of mind with emotional and cognitive components in which consumers lack comprehension or understanding of marketplace stimuli."
Chauhan & Sagar (2021a, p. 446)	"Customer confusion is an uncomfortable cognitive state of mind in the decision-making process that affects choice behavior through its affective (emotional) and behavioral consequences."

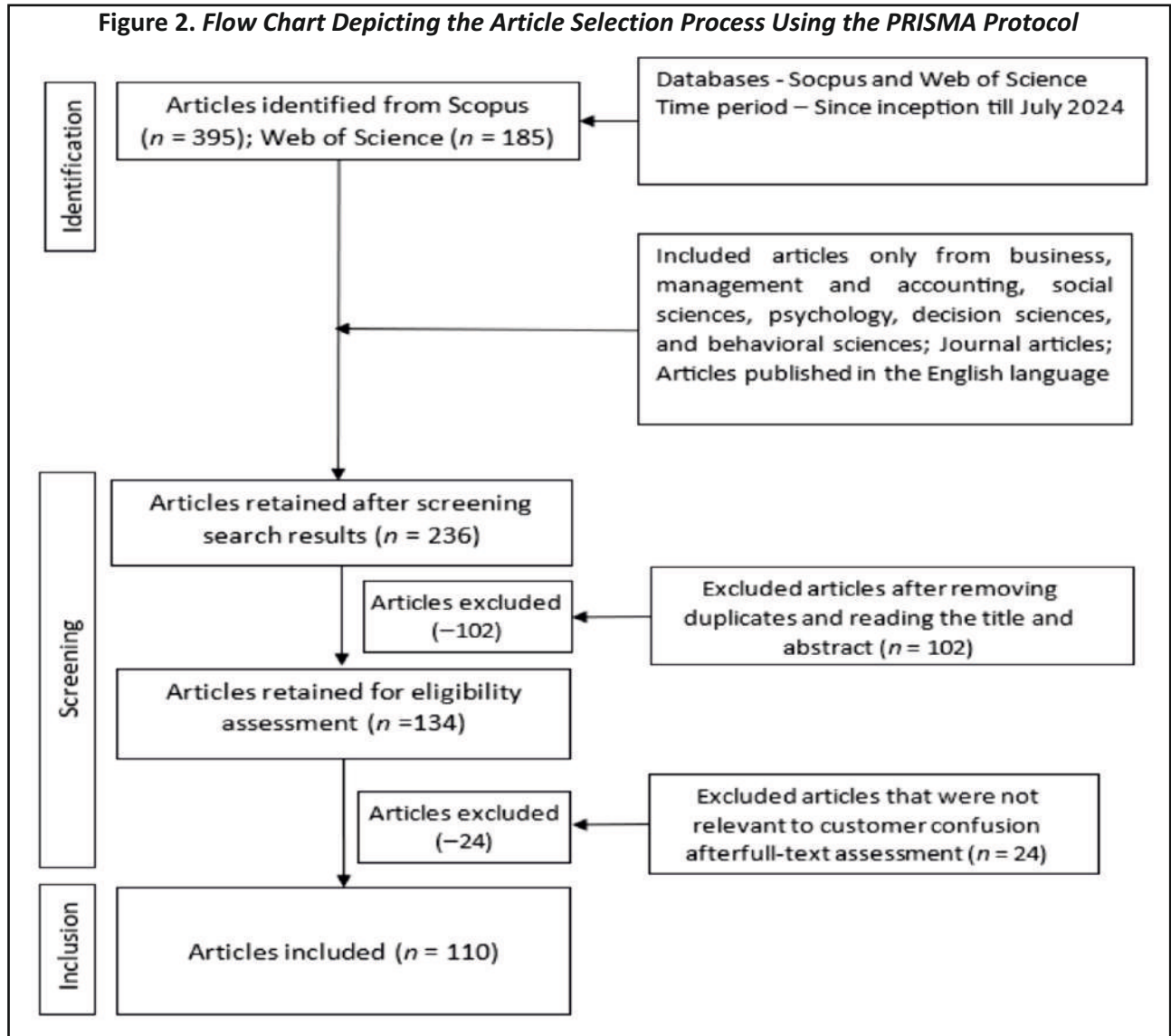
Thus, by developing an understanding from the previous studies, this study defines customer confusion as “an undesired state where customers experience difficulty, uncertainty, or lack of clarity while trying to understand, evaluate, or make purchase decisions about products or services. It often arises from information overload, information scarcity, information similarity, and information ambiguity, resulting in a range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses in customers.”

Research Methodology

This study uses a systematic literature review and a structured approach to retrieving the articles. Figure 2 depicts the “PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses)” flowchart, which represents the stages of identifying, screening, and including articles in the review process (Page et al., 2021).

Stage 1: Identification

The articles were gathered from the Scopus and Web of Science databases, including articles from the inception in 1966 (the first study) and 1992 (the following research) until July 2024. Based on a thorough literature review,



relevant search keywords were identified to design the search string. The database search employed the string mentioned below to identify the relevant articles :

Customer confusion OR Consumer confusion OR Shopper* confusion OR Customer dilemma OR Consumer dilemma OR Customer decision*making dilemma OR Consumer decision*making dilemma OR Customer decision difficulty OR Consumer decision difficulty OR Customer purchase decision*making dilemma OR Consumer purchase decision*making dilemma OR Customer buying difficulty OR Shopping dilemma

As a result, 395 articles from Scopus and 185 from the Web of Science databases made up the initial pool. The social sciences, psychology, decision sciences, and business and management were the only subjects included in Scopus. There were 245 articles from Scopus and 67 from Web of Science, with the topic areas in Web of Science being restricted to business, management, psychology, psychology interdisciplinary, social sciences multidisciplinary, behavioral sciences, psychology social, and sociology.

Stage 2: Screening

Further screening was done to narrow down the search criteria, focusing on including journal articles that were peer-reviewed and published in English. Conference papers, working papers, and book chapters were excluded from the scope of the review. This resulted in a total of 236 papers combining both databases. These 236 papers were subjected to the removal of duplicates and a rigorous screening process based on their titles and abstracts. The authors finalized 134 articles for a full-text assessment.

Stage 3: Inclusion

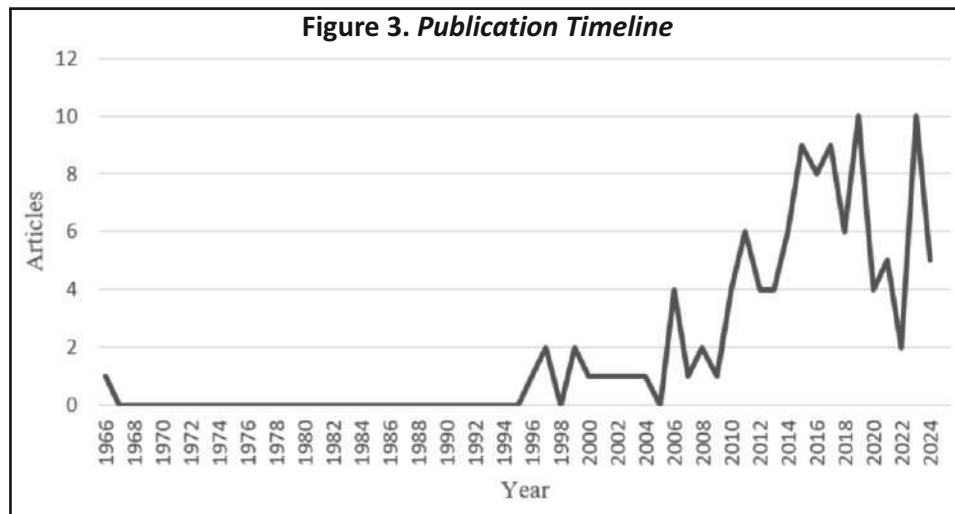
Out of these 134 papers, 24 were excluded because, after a full-text assessment, these studies were not typically dealing with customer confusion; instead, they were focused on investigating confusion and decision-making in general. These papers mainly focused on individual and organizational decision-making. They had no direct relevance to customer confusion. Thus, after a full-text screening, the authors ended up with 110 articles constituting the final set of inclusions. Then, a content analysis approach was used to structure and categorize the information extracted from these chosen articles. This involved systematically mapping the content from the selected papers into the ADO-TCM framework.

Findings

This section starts by providing the descriptive statistics of the studies considered for the review. It then organizes the findings in an ADO-TCM framework (Lim et al., 2021). An organizing framework such as ADO-TCM helps to provide a better structure and systematically arrange the literature's findings (Paul & Criado, 2020). Furthermore, the study also highlights how we have measured customer confusion.

Descriptives of Research

Descriptive statistics help to understand the growth of literature over time (Sahni et al., 2024). The study presents a year-wise trend in the publication of research papers on customer confusion (refer to Figure 3) and top journals publishing on customer confusion (refer to Figure 5).



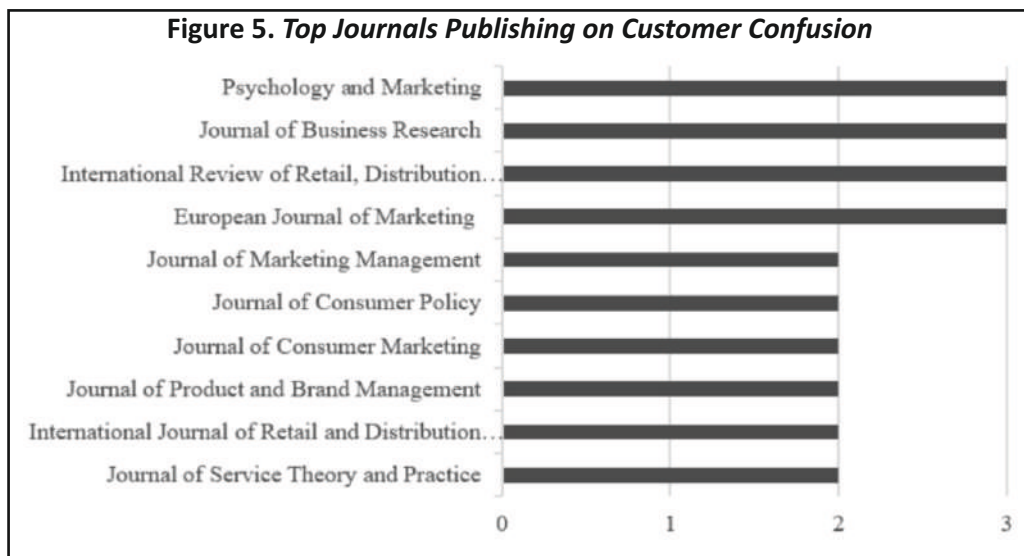
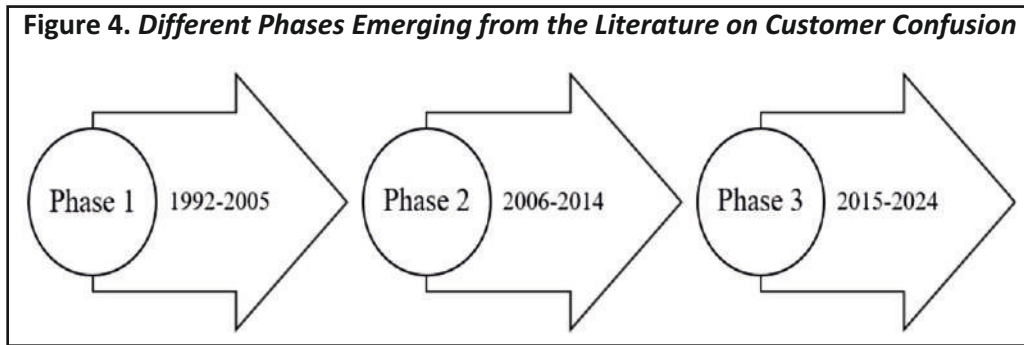


Figure 3 represents annual scientific productions. The very first article on customer confusion was written to understand customer confusion in supermarkets in the year 1966 (Friedman, 1966). After that, the rate of publication remained negligible for two decades. In the late 1990s, a seminal work on customer confusion was published by Mitchell and Papavassiliou (1999). There is no constant growth rate in the publication of articles on customer confusion; the publication rate remained comparatively high in some years compared to others. However, we have divided the timeline into three phases (refer to Figure 4): Phase 1 (1992–2005), Phase 2 (2006–2014), and Phase 3 (2015–2024), details of these phases are discussed in the discussion section.

Figure 5 represents the top journals publishing on customer confusion. The journals with the maximum number of articles on customer confusion include *Psychology & Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research*, and *European Journal of Marketing*.

ADO-TCM Framework

An organizing framework serves as a guide for synthesizing key literature findings (Lim et al., 2021). First, the ADO framework is a popular organizing framework where “A” stands for antecedents, “D” stands for decisions, and “O” stands for outcomes; it helps to organize the findings of previous studies in a structured manner (Lim et al., 2021; Paul & Benito, 2018). In this study, antecedents are the factors contributing to customer confusion, the decisions are the customers' behavioral response to the confusion, and the outcomes are the consequences emerging from these behavioral responses or no response. Second, the TCM framework, which

represents theories, contexts, and methods, organizes previous studies' findings in a structured manner and offers future researchers the means to advance knowledge in the domain. Integration of both these frameworks (ADO-TCM) provides a thorough understanding of the existing literature and also stands crucial in offering future research directions (Lim et al., 2021; refer to Figure 6).

Antecedents of Customer Confusion

Several informational, individual, and situational factors contribute to customer confusion. These can be broadly classified into informational factors (information overload, information similarity, information ambiguity), individual factors, and situational factors (Chauhan & Sagar, 2021a).

The overload of information present in the marketplace makes it difficult for customers to process that information, which affects their ability to make decisions and leaves customers in a confused state (Kasper et al., 2010; Lu et al., 2016; Shiu, 2017). The utilization of imitation strategies and look-alike brands further blurs distinctions and confuses (Falkowski et al., 2015). Moreover, unclear and ambiguous information (Fitzgerald et al., 2019) and ineffective marketplace stimuli (Sharma et al., 2023a) can also lead to customer confusion by failing to provide the necessary guidance and clarity in the decision-making process. Furthermore, as customers venture into unfamiliar market environments, they may face confusion due to the unfamiliarity of the setting (Mitchell & Papavassiliou, 1999).

Moreover, there are also various individual factors such as customer decision-making styles (Chatterjee & Kundu, 2020; Coothoopermal & Chittoo, 2017), information processing abilities (Chen & Chang, 2013; Kasabov, 2015; Walsh & Mitchell, 2010), need for cognition (Lu et al., 2016; Lu & Gursoy, 2015), and individual's level of awareness (Chauhan & Sagar, 2021a; Laheri, 2020) that can lead to confusion. Coothoopermal and Chittoo (2017) mentioned that there are various situational factors that can lead to customer confusion such as the customers' task definition, factors like customers' mood, illness, fatigue, etc. Lately, Garaus and Wagner (2016), in their study on retail shopper confusion, mentioned that the store atmospherics and the store environment also have an impact on customer confusion.

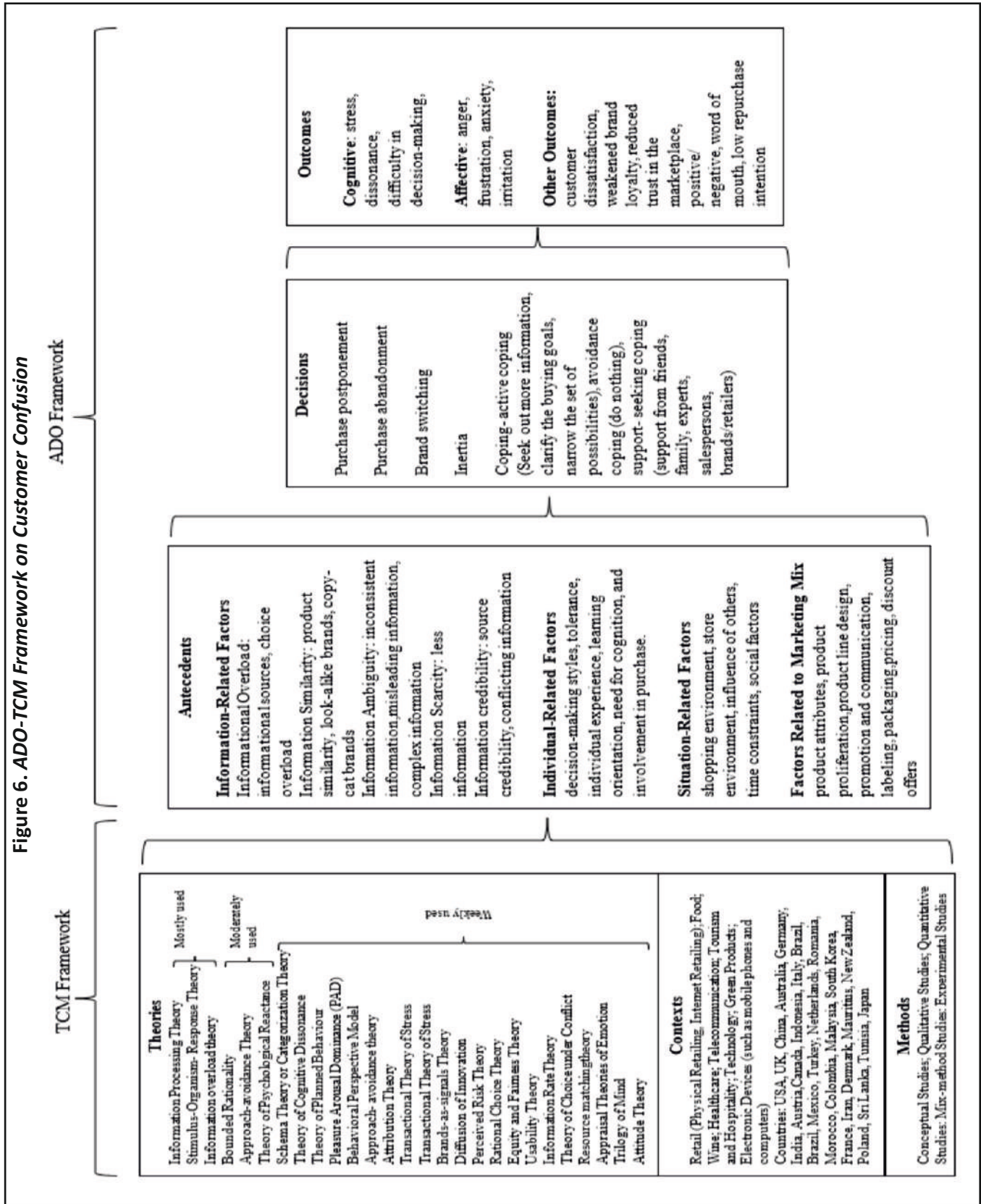
Customer confusion can also result from labeling practices (Bogliacino et al., 2023; Lemken et al., 2021; Torma & Thøgersen, 2024). Additionally, Moon et al. (2017) investigated customer confusion in eco-labels and highlighted the potential negative consequences, such as increased distrust and dissatisfaction, when customers struggle to comprehend environmentally oriented labels. Furthermore, some studies have also examined how complex pricing structures impact customer decision-making (Chioveanu, 2019). Bertrandie and Zielke (2019) explored the impact of multi-channel pricing strategies on customer confusion. Additionally, in the context of online hotel bookings, Xue et al. (2020) in their study investigated how factors like pricing complexity can contribute to customer confusion.

Decisions (Customers' Behavioral Response to Confusion)

Decisions, here, mean the customers' behavioral response to confusion. Behavioral responses include avoidance behavior, purchase abandonment, purchase postponement, and switching behavior (Kasper et al., 2010; Shiu, 2017; Turnbull et al., 2000; Walsh et al., 2007) (refer to Figure 6).

Furthermore, in situations where customers experience confusion, they utilize various coping mechanisms to mitigate or eliminate it. Coping involves both cognitive efforts and behavioral efforts to deal with the stressful and undesired state of confusion (Leek & Kun, 2006). Mitchell and Papavassiliou (1997) identified six general coping strategies for reducing confusion, as follows: taking no action, delaying the purchase or abandoning the purchase decision, involving others in the decision-making, clarifying purchasing goals, seeking additional information,

Figure 6. ADO-TCM Framework on Customer Confusion



and narrowing the options (Leek & Kun, 2006 ; Lu & Gursoy, 2015). These strategies can be broadly classified into three categories: active coping strategy, avoidance strategy, and support-seeking strategy (Duhachek & Kelting, 2009). Customers employing active coping aim to formulate action plans and resolve confusion (Duhachek, 2005). Those using avoidance as a coping mechanism detach themselves from the situation to cope with confusion (Strizhakova et al., 2012). Additionally, support-seeking coping is when customers look for support among their communities, friends, and family or search for assistance from the retailers themselves.

Outcomes of Customer Confusion

Customer confusion is an undesirable and negative valence state of mind (Fitzgerald et al., 2019). Literature suggests customer confusion evokes cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses (Shiu & Tzeng, 2018; Tjiptono et al., 2014; Walsh & Mitchell, 2010).

On the cognitive front, customers facing confusion may experience decision paralysis (Mitchell & Papavassiliou, 1999), wherein the overload of information or choices creates a cognitive overload and affects their ability to choose effectively. Customers may also experience cognitive dissonance when confronted with contradicting information or options, which can result in emotions of inefficiency while making decisions (Mitchell et al., 2005; Walsh et al., 2007).

Affective outcomes to confusion are often characterized by emotions such as anger, frustration, irritation, anxiety, helplessness, and stress, resulting from the frustration of being unable to navigate a complex decision-making process (Anninou, 2018; Johnson et al., 2021). Customer confusion has been shown to have a negative effect on customer happiness, brand loyalty, and consumer trust in the marketplace (Sharma et al., 2023a).

Theories

This section lists the theories used in the literature regarding customer confusion. Figure 6 presents the theories used in the reviewed papers. Many papers in the literature lack theoretical frameworks (Chauhan & Sagar, 2021a). This study observed that most of the theories were rooted in psychology, social sciences, and decision-making. Further details are discussed in the discussion section.

Contexts

Customer confusion is studied across various contexts in the literature. To develop a better understanding of customer confusion, this section discusses the various contexts in detail where customer confusion is majorly studied in the literature.

↳ **Retail** : Several studies have explored how confusion plays an essential role in influencing customers' intentions to make purchase decisions (Anninou & Foxall, 2019; Bertrandie & Zielke, 2017; DeRosia et al., 2011; Hwang et al., 2023; Roy & Shaikh, 2024; Sombultawee & Pannarom, 2024). Understanding the factors associated with customer confusion helps retailers comprehend that customer confusion can have long-lasting consequences on customer loyalty and brand image (Garaus et al., 2015; Garaus & Wagner, 2016). In the retail sector, customer confusion was considered a psychological variable in the early studies (Friedman, 1966). Later, customer confusion in the retail industry has been associated with various psychological, behavioral, and experiential factors (Anninou & Foxall, 2019; Garaus & Wagner, 2016).

↳ **Tourism and Hospitality** : Antecedents and outcomes of customer confusion have been explored in the online tourism domain (Lu et al., 2016). Lu and Gursoy (2015) presented a comprehensive model that explores customer

confusion in online tourism. Wei et al. (2023) have acknowledged that customer confusion affects the effectiveness of online travel agencies. Xue et al. (2020) examined factors such as pricing complexities and hotel booking decisions that affect customer confusion. Sharma et al. (2023a) have also studied the role of negative emotions in mediating customer confusion in e-hospitality. Moreover, Sharma et al. (2023b) have highlighted how customers' beliefs in their abilities can moderate the confusion they experience. Studying the nexus between information and customer confusion highlights how information presented to customers can affect customer clarity and lead to confusion (Dharmasena & Jayathilaka, 2020). Thus, several researchers within the tourism and hospitality sector have explored customer confusion (Dharmasena & Jayathilaka, 2020; Kim, 2024; Lu et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2023a; Sharma et al., 2023b; Wei et al., 2023; Xue et al., 2020).

↳ **Healthcare** : Chauhan and Sagar (2021b) and Ross et al. (2011) have investigated customer confusion in the healthcare industry and offered diverse perspectives on decision-making related to healthcare products and services. Chauhan and Sagar (2021b) proposed an empirical model to understand patient confusion and explored various aspects of customer confusion in healthcare decision-making. Customers' choices related to assistive devices (like hearing aids and listening devices) have also been studied, and customer confusion about these products has been explored in the literature (Ross et al., 2011).

↳ **Telecommunication and Mobile Phone**: Ghosh and Rao (2014) have investigated how cognitive factors influence customer decisions in mobile application purchases. Customer confusion is primarily studied in the context of the mobile phone industry and telecommunication networks (Ghosh & Rao, 2014; Johnson et al., 2021; Kasper et al., 2010; Turnbull et al., 2000). Kasper et al. (2010) studied the strategies adopted by customers in the Dutch mobile phone market to cope with prevalent confusion. Thus, several studies have explored customer confusion in telecommunication networks (Omar et al., 2019) and smartphone markets (Kasper et al., 2010; Tjiptono et al., 2014).

↳ **Food and Fine Dining** : Dinçer et al. (2023) used a qualitative methodology to study customers' perceptions of organic food confusion. Bogliacino et al. (2023) investigated information overload in labeling seafood and highlighted how too much information can lead to customer confusion. Cornish and Moraes (2015) have explored the influence of customer confusion on nutrition literacy and subsequent dietary behavior. Additionally, in the context of German food retailing, a study has considered the moderating role of trust in mitigating customer confusion (Wobker et al., 2015). Moreover, studies on meat labeling highlight the impact of different terminologies on customer confusion (DeMuth et al., 2023). Thus, studying customer confusion has been the focus of several researchers within the food industry (Bogliacino et al., 2023; Frostling-Henningsson et al., 2014; Lemken et al., 2021; Olsen, 2012; Parasidis et al., 2015; Wobker et al., 2015).

↳ **Technology** : Biswas (2023), Ellway (2016), and Johnson et al. (2021) acknowledged that customer confusion affects customers' adoption of new technology. Johnson et al. (2021) examined the impact of customer confusion on mobile self-checkout adoption. They studied how customer confusion affects its adoption, taking theoretical support from the diffusion of innovation theory (DOI). Similarly, studies have theorized customer confusion and frustration in interactions with interactive voice response (IVR) systems (Ellway, 2016), providing valuable insights into technology-driven customer service experiences (Singh et al., 2024).

Methods

This study has reviewed 110 research articles, including conceptual, literature review papers (only three review papers), quantitative, qualitative, mixed-method, and experimental studies. Most papers used quantitative methodology, such as regression analysis and structural equation modeling. Thematic analysis, content analysis,

and case studies were the main techniques used in the works that used a qualitative approach. Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used in the mixed-method investigations.

Measurement of Customer Confusion

Walsh and Mitchell (2005) have developed several scales to measure customer confusion. One of the initial scales that was developed focussed on similarity confusion to measure customer confusion. Later, Schweizer et al. (2006) and Walsh et al. (2007) developed scales to measure customer confusion considering the various informational factors (information overload, information similarity, and information ambiguity) that contribute to the occurrence of confusion in the customers' minds. Moving forward, Garaus and Wagner (2016), in their study, developed a scale to measure retail shopper confusion. The details of scales developed to measure customer confusion are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Customer Confusion Scales

Authors	Factors	Items
Walsh & Mitchell (2005)	Perceived product similarity	6
Schweizer et al. (2006)	Stimuli variety, stimuli novelty, stimuli complexity, stimuli conflict, stimuli comfort, and stimuli reliability	26
Walsh et al. (2007)	Similarity confusion, overload confusion, ambiguity confusion, decision postponement, and brand loyalty	19
Sarabhai & Singh (2014)	Overload confusion	12
Garaus & Wagner (2016)	Emotion, cognition, and conation	13
Sertoğlu & Kavak (2017)	Confusion stems from the presence of others/others' thoughts, confusion stems from personal characteristics, price confusion, and product confusion	16

Legal Aspect of Customer Confusion

In addition to marketing aspects related to customer confusion, some studies deal with the legal aspect of customer confusion. Peterson et al. (2024) and Wang (2018), in their study, have investigated this aspect, with a particular focus on trademark laws. These studies have discussed how trademark infringement (for instance, cases of look-alike products and look-alike packaging) and intellectual property rights (IPR) infringement (for instance, imitation in advertising and marketing communication) also contribute to customer confusion and how legal mechanisms are essential in addressing and reducing the customer confusion. Studies have pointed out how trademarks serve as vital identifiers that protect brand integrity and foster customer trust (Chronopoulos, 2014; Humphreys et al., 2017), and how GI protection ensures the authenticity and origin of products (Wang, 2018). Thus, they highlight the significance of robust trademark laws in preventing customer confusion and preserving the integrity of brand identities.

Discussion and Implications

This literature review offers a comprehensive understanding of customer confusion in the marketplace. This study divided the research trends into three phases to better understand how research on customer confusion has evolved with time. This helps in understanding how the focus of studies on customer confusion has shifted. The identified phases are as follows:

↳ **Phase 1 (1992–2004)** : In Phase 1, the predominant focus was on retailing in physical stores, particularly addressing confusion arising from brand confusion, look-alike brands, copy-cat brands, product proliferation, and product attributes within physical stores (Foxman et al., 1992; Mitchell & Papavassiliou, 1997).

↳ **Phase 2 (2006–2014)** : This phase witnessed the widespread penetration of computers, mobile phones, and the internet, marking the era of e-commerce expansion. During this period, Ghosh and Rao (2014) and Kasper et al. (2010) explored customer confusion with increased choices and increased sources of information available to consumers in the evolving digital landscape.

↳ **Phase 3 (2015–2023)** : This phase witnessed the penetration of m-commerce and multi-channel integration that led to an increase in online shopping and Internet retailing. This provides an understanding that with the advancements in technology (such as e-commerce or m-commerce), there persists a likelihood of customer confusion stemming from factors such as lack of awareness, limited experience, unfamiliarity, information ambiguity, or information credibility.

The findings of the current review are organized using the ADO-TCM framework, offering an exploration of antecedents, decisions, and outcomes. This framework also integrates the diverse theoretical underpinnings, contexts, and methods employed in the studies and provides a holistic understanding of the existing literature. It has been observed that the majority of the studies have focused on identifying the causes and consequences of customer confusion. Moreover, this review observes the focus on a limited set of theories to understand customer confusion in the marketplace, indicating the need to broaden the theoretical lens. Thus, the review advocates for exploring interdisciplinary theories such as decision-making theories, theories related to human-technology interactions, and human emotions. Using interdisciplinary theories to theorize customer confusion will offer valuable perspectives that can enhance the understanding of customer confusion in diverse contexts.

The scales measuring customer confusion initially focussed on informational factors (Schweizer et al., 2006; Walsh et al., 2007). The latter scales were developed considering individual and situational factors (Sertoğlu & Kavak, 2017). However, the literature lacks a comprehensive scale that integrates all dimensions relevant to customer confusion. Thus, this review recommends developing a scale that considers the various informational, individual, and situational factors crucial for customer confusion measurement.

Researchers identify that customer confusion also has a legal dimension. The legal dimension is primarily involved when brands do not adhere to standardized labeling or advertising guidelines or follow them in a manner that could mislead customers. Thus, following standardized labeling guidelines and other standards is crucial for brands to prevent customer confusion in the marketplace.

This study also holds significant importance for marketers and brands. It offers insights into various customer pain points that create confusion in the customer buying journey. Customer confusion has several negative consequences, such as dissatisfaction, weakened brand loyalty, postponement, or abandonment. Thus, it becomes imperative for brands to improvise their strategies to reduce customer confusion and offer them a smooth buying journey.

Practical Implications

The study on customer confusion holds crucial implications for businesses and marketers by offering several insights to enhance various aspects of their operations. To operationalize the insights on customer confusion, marketers should:

↳ Utilize analytics to identify confusion points within the customer journey, deploying targeted interventions to simplify decision-making processes.

- ↳ Implement A/B testing for product descriptions and marketing messages to determine the most clarity-driven approaches, ensuring communications minimize ambiguity.
- ↳ Leverage advanced, AI-powered customer support solutions, like chatbots, to offer real-time assistance and address confusion as it arises.
- ↳ Apply segmentation analysis to tailor marketing strategies, recognizing that different customer groups may experience confusion differently.

By focusing on these strategies, businesses can enhance customer satisfaction, increase loyalty, and improve conversion rates, thereby gaining a competitive advantage in the marketplace. This approach not only mitigates confusion but also aligns with a broader commitment to simplifying the consumer experience, fostering positive brand perceptions and long-term success.

Theoretical Implications

This literature review on customer confusion in the marketplace has several crucial theoretical implications. First, it contributes to understanding customer confusion by covering cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Second, the review identifies customer confusion's antecedents, decisions, and outcomes. This extends the scope for future researchers to explore and empirically test additional variables that influence customer confusion. Third, the review emphasizes the need for a standardized, reliable, and valid measurement instrument to measure customer confusion. Thus, this literature review contributes to existing literature on customer confusion and presents researchers with future research directions.

Limitations of the Study

This literature review on customer confusion offers valuable insights; however, this study does have some limitations that future researchers might address. First, despite adhering to clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, some degree of subjectivity may have influenced the selection of studies. Second, the content analysis was performed manually, which might include subjectivity and human bias. Although this manual approach was thorough, it may lack consistency and scalability. Additionally, the review exclusively focused on English-language publications, which may have excluded important findings from studies published in other languages.

Future Research Directions

This section provides promising future research directions on customer confusion. First, we can work on the theoretical advancements in this domain by including various theories from other disciplines like psychology, sociology, decision-making, and communication theories. Second, it is also evident that there is a lack of a comprehensive scale to measure the construct; thus, future research can also focus on developing a comprehensive scale for customer confusion measurement by considering all the important dimensions of customer confusion. Third, confusion also prevails in services, but there exists a lack of studies in exploring customer confusion transaction of services, for example in insurance services or banking services. Fourth, it will also be interesting to note if there exists any difference in the prevalence of customer confusion between customers of developed countries and developing countries. Fifth, future studies can also identify various social factors and cultural factors influencing customer confusion.

- ↪ **RQ1** : How can customer confusion be studied using theories from other disciplines like psychology, sociology, decision-making theories, and communication theories?
- ↪ **RQ2** : Development of a comprehensive scale that encompasses all significant dimensions of customer confusion.
- ↪ **RQ3** : What are the major reasons for customer confusion in services, and how can they be addressed?
- ↪ **RQ4** : Identify if there exists a difference in the prevalence of customer confusion between customers of developed countries and developing countries.
- ↪ **RQ5** : Identify various socio-cultural factors influencing customer confusion.

These future research directions highlight the substantial opportunity for scholarly inquiry to expand the boundaries of understanding in this domain. Thus, addressing these research directions will enable a richer understanding of customer confusion and also pave the way for the development of more inclusive, responsive, and consumer-oriented market strategies.

Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed to the study's conception and design. Each author thoroughly reviewed and analyzed the selected papers for the review. Aayushi Sharma wrote the initial manuscript draft, and the co-authors, Rahul Pratap Singh Kaurav and Surabhi Koul, provided valuable feedback on earlier versions. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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