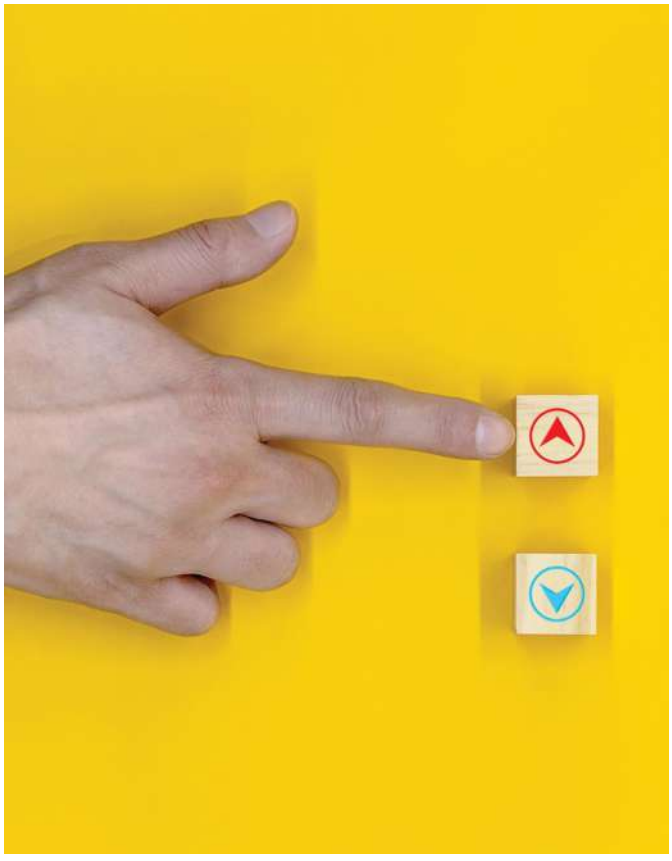
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The Majority Illusion: When Consensus Cues Are Not Proof Of Product Quality

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Problem of practice

If customers see '90% prefer Product A', will they think it is evidence that Product A is better than other products in the market? Such ratings, reviews, and 'most popular' labels are often used by brand and product managers to help customers make a decision. These signals reduce the time and effort customers spend searching for products and often result in a short-term increase in sales. But a recent study by Graham Overton, Ioannis Evangelidis, and Joachim Vosgerau indicates that customers may misinterpret consensus as actual preference.[1] *This 'Majority Illusion' presents brand and product managers with a problem. Although such popularity signals can lead to faster adoption, they also raise expectations about a product beyond what it actually is. The customer may eventually get dissatisfied if the product doesn't meet their expectations, and the product's reputation suffers. So how can managers decide whether to amplify, constrain or supplement such popularity/ consensus with more transparent performance information? With a framework that considers the size of the actual quality gap between competing products and the communication objective*

[1] The article 'People Believe If 90% Prefer A over B, A Must Be Much Better than B. Are They Wrong?' by Graham Overton, Ioannis Evangelidis, and Joachim Vosgerau, featured in Volume 52, Issue 1 of *Journal of Consumer Research*, talks about how consumers interpret a consensus in favour of one product as the average liking of that product being considerably higher than the average liking of other product

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Consensus is not superiority

A survey in 2017 asked 3,000 customers: 'The Honda Accord or the Toyota Camry, which is better?' A resounding 72% chose Accord.[2] Does this indicate Accord is better than Camry? Not necessarily. When people come across statements like '72% prefer Accord', they mentally convert it to 'Accord is better', even if the difference were barely noticeable in actual use.

This gap between what brands communicate and what people think is the 'Majority Illusion'— a double-edged sword for the brand and managers. On the one hand, such popularity nudges can make a particular choice seem easy; on the other hand, if popularity is taken as evidence of superiority, it sets expectations that the product may fail to meet. So, why does this matter to brands and managers?

Consensus cues

In 2026, approximately 91% of consumers read at least one online review before making a purchase, while 84% actively seek positive reviews before making an offline purchase.[3] So across channels, consumers rely heavily on signals such as ratings, popularity badges, and social proof. Consensus cues have now become marketing devices that shape how consumers judge product quality itself.

But as research by Overton and team suggests, when consensus cues raise customer expectations too high, even objectively adequate performance can cause disappointment. The problem is determining when consensus should function as: a decision shortcut, evidence of category legitimacy or implied proof of superior performance.



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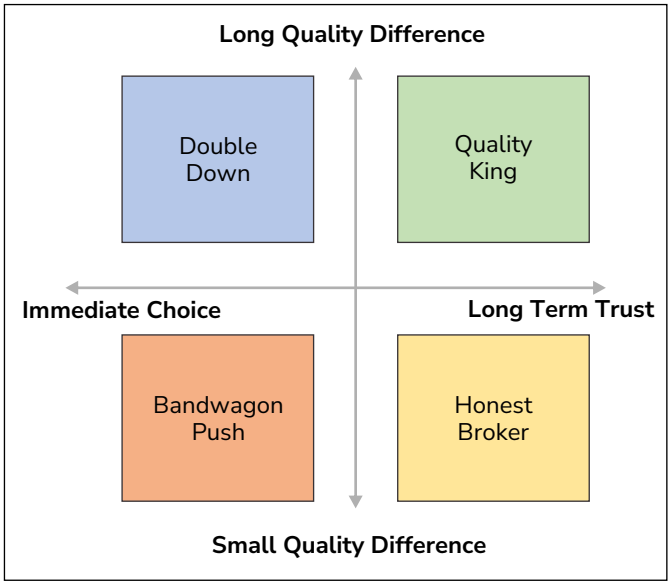
Decoding consensus communication

To better understand how the managers can frame their communication to ensure the signal matches the quality gap and the communication objective. The framework is based on two managerial questions:

1. Is the managerial objective to promote immediate choice or long-term trust?
2. How large is the actual difference in quality?

The above questions can be visualised in **Figure 1**, where the horizontal axis represents the managerial objective, while the vertical axis captures the true difference in quality.

Figure 1: Framework to map how managers should present preference data



Source: Created by the authors based on Graham Overton, Ioannis Evangelidis, Joachim Vosgerau, 'People Believe If 90% Prefer A over B, A Must Be Much Better than B. Are They Wrong?', Journal of Consumer Research, ahead of print, 13 September 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucae055

This framework also identifies four distinct communication postures.

1. Bandwagon Push

Managers use consensus cues to reduce customer indecision in low-stakes or routine purchases such as FMCGs. Such consensus framing works best when customers want to be assured that they are not making a wrong choice. For products such as toothpaste, detergents or packaged snacks, the products are essentially the same. Consumers have many choices but don't have enough time or motivation to carry out thorough comparisons. When toothpaste brands claim '9 out of 10 dentists recommend', it resolves uncertainty by indicating that the choice is broadly accepted and is not likely to cause any problems (see **Figure 2**).[4] In such situations, consensus functions as a decision shortcut, not as a guarantee of superiority.

Figure 2: Manufacturer claims



Source: Screenshot taken by author from amazon.com

E-commerce companies apply this principle on a large scale. Badges like 'best seller' or 'Amazon's Choice' are frequently used to help customers choose between products that are similar in rating and price. In such cases, the decision is simplified by referring to the consensus without distorting customers' expectations, since the purchase risk and performance differences are small (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3: Best seller and Amazon's Choice tags on products



Source: Screenshot taken by author from amazon.com

Managers are, in effect, saying this is a choice that is safe and accepted by society. They are not claiming: "This product is far better in every way".

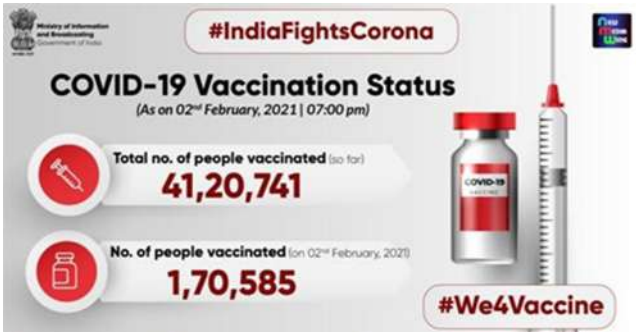
> Across channels, consumers rely heavily on signals such as ratings, popularity badges and social proof

2. Double Down

Managers combine strong consensus cues with objective performance evidence when a product offers a substantial advantage and timely adoption is a priority. The approach works best when the underlying performance advantage is genuinely substantial and rapid adoption is strategically important.

This can be seen in the early use of the COVID-19 vaccines. Public health communication combined strong consensus signals, such as millions already vaccinated, with objective outcome data regarding reduced hospitalisation and mortality risk.[6] The difference in quality is genuine, urgent and supported by solid data. Hence, it strengthened the message about the product's benefits without creating inflated expectations (see **Figure 4**).

Figure 4: Government of India showing the number of people vaccinated



Source: Screenshot taken by author from pib.gov.in[5]

But long-term or high-stakes situations generally need a different approach and managers have to make a significant strategic decision about how consensus should be understood.

3. Honest Broker

Managers acknowledge popularity but avoid exaggerated expectations by providing transparent

ratings, benchmarks, caveats and context to build credibility. The approach normalises participation by communicating the risks, uncertainties and linking them to the time frame.

Retail investing is a good example. In the past, diversified equity investments beat fixed deposits over long periods, but the results were volatile and depended on investor behaviour.[7] If a financial institution presents equities as superior, it could lead to unrealistic expectations during market corrections. The fact that 'many long-term investors allocate money to equities' serves to justify participation without suggesting that there will be guaranteed superior performance.

The approach is more restrictive: rather than amplifying a product's adoption and popularity, managers deliberately prevent consumers from drawing exaggerated conclusions. Consensus is presented as proof of widespread adoption, not as evidence of superiority (see **Figure 5**).

Although this approach may reduce short-term persuasion efficiency, it helps maintain long-term credibility and reduces the likelihood of backlash from unmet expectations.

Figure 5: Honest Broker strategy example

> "In 2025, we advanced our position as one of the world's most trusted and successful financial institutions."

Source: Taken by author from Royal Bank of Canada Annual Report 2025

4. Quality King (The gold standard)

Managers focus on delivering consistent product performance over time. Strong performance builds customer trust and establishes the consensus cues. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle of trust and market leadership.

Apple provides a good example, since its position as the 'most loved smartphone' is supported by consistently high customer satisfaction scores. The claim regarding its popularity and the actual product experience reinforce each other.[8] Rolex achieves the same result through its reputation. Decades of



guaranteed precision, controlled supply, and strong resale value resulting in the brand's widespread popularity serve as a sign of genuine quality.[9]

This approach regards popularity as proof of continued superior performance. It is effective when the actual performance advantage is lasting and continually confirmed by customer experience.



It's all about the fit

The framework is not about whether consensus is 'good' or 'bad'; it is about strategic fit (see **Table 1**). If the strength of cues corresponds with the actual extent of quality gap, it encourages adoption without setting unrealistic expectations. But if it doesn't, popularity can give rise to overly high expectations.

Table 1: Strategic consensus communication postures

Communication Posture	Core Logic	Communication Style	Risk	Typical Product/Category Example
Bandwagon Push	Reduce friction	Social proof	Mild expectation inflation	FMCG products like toothpaste
Double Down	Accelerate adoption	Social proof + hard metrics	Overreach risk	COVID-19 vaccines
Honest Broker	Protect trust	Balanced transparency	Lower short-term conversion	Mutual funds, Healthcare services, Financial advisory
Quality King	Sustain category leadership	Reputation-based authority	Complacency	Apple iPhone, Rolex

Source: Created by the authors based on Graham Overton, Ioannis Evangelidis, Joachim Vosgerau, 'People Believe If 90% Prefer A over B, A Must Be Much Better than B. Are They Wrong?', Journal of Consumer Research, ahead of print, 13 September 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucae055

Where consensus backfires

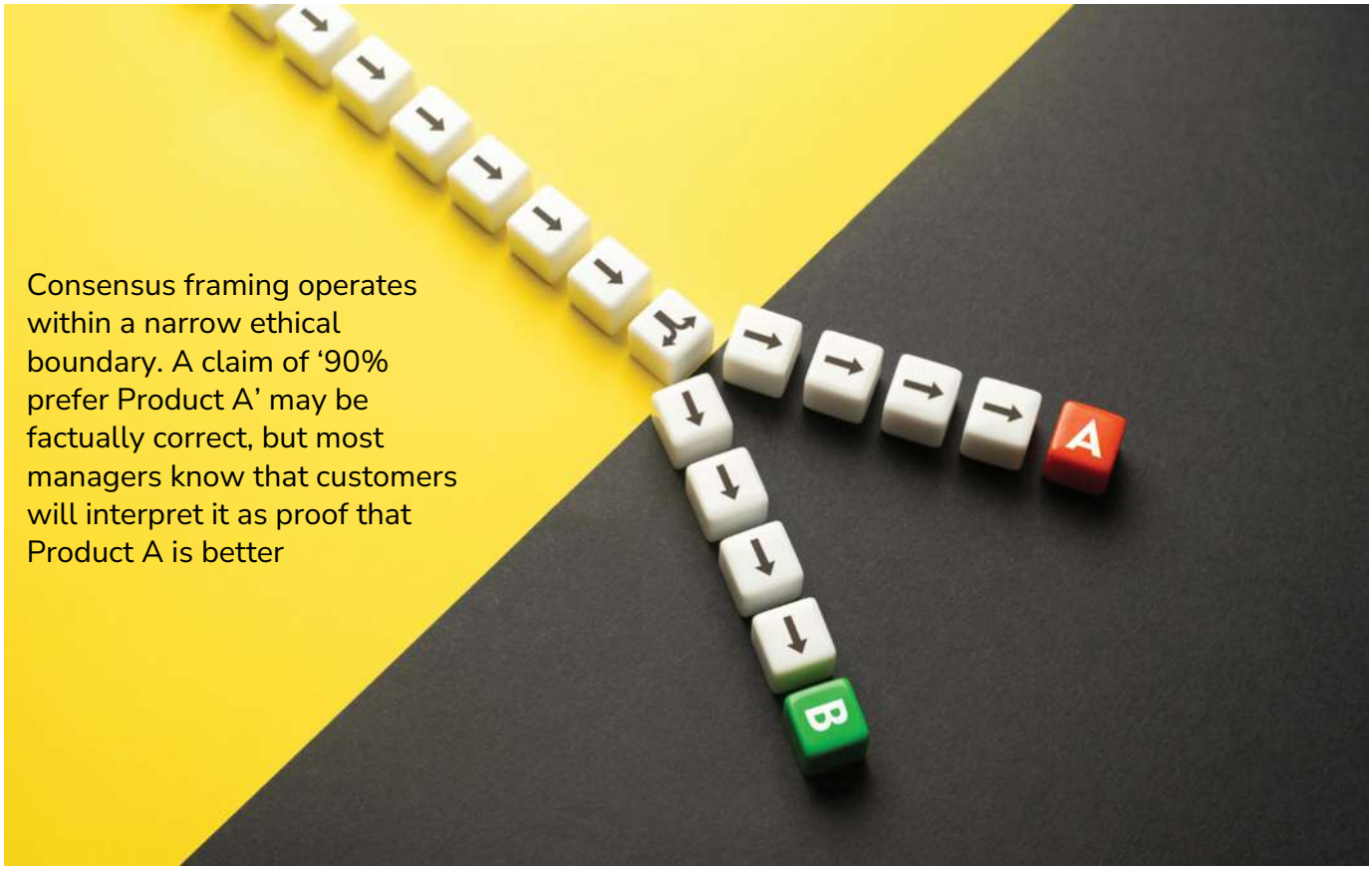
Consensus framing becomes riskier when decisions involve high stakes and long-term commitment, since indications of popularity may be interpreted as a promise of future performance.

The launch of the action role-playing game Cyberpunk 2077 shows what such risks entail. Before its release, the game achieved record-breaking pre orders and was regarded as one of the most highly anticipated games. Both players and investors saw this level of attention as evidence of near-unanimous agreement that the game would redefine its genre. In terms of expectation and confirmation, the standard was set very high.[10] However, many users were let down by the early technical difficulties and the developers had to issue a public apology. The problem wasn't that the game was weak, but that the strong positive opinion had led to expectations that the real experience did not meet. This shows how consensus-driven hype can inflate expectations beyond what the product experience can sustain, and how a good product might then struggle to consistently meet them.

Where the illusion reverses

But the insight is not universal; it has limits:

- **Taste-driven categories:** In categories like fashion and music, where preferences genuinely differ, a majority tells us very little about how a particular person will enjoy the product. Here the personalised niches outperform popularity signals.



Consensus framing operates within a narrow ethical boundary. A claim of '90% prefer Product A' may be factually correct, but most managers know that customers will interpret it as proof that Product A is better

- **Cultural context:** In collectivist societies, conformity is part of the value that customers are looking for, which is why the statement 'everyone uses it' accurately reflects what is being purchased. But in individualistic societies, the same claim tends to be met with scepticism, leading to varying levels of calibration across regions.
- **Expert and B2B buyers:** In B2B product purchase, procurement teams and domain experts evaluate specifications and run pilots. Here, popularity ('trusted by 500 enterprises') serves as a filter to enter the consideration set, rather than a tool for influencing the decision.

Cost of calibrated communication

Moving to calibrated communication is not free. Senior marketing leadership must take responsibility, as organisational incentives can shape communication choices. When brand managers are evaluated on short-term sales or campaign performance targets, they will prefer the popularity framing. Research found that a majority-preference frame nearly doubled choice share for the same hotel (76% vs 42%) compared with showing average ratings.[11]

Hence, management may have to sacrifice some short-term conversion for such calibrations. This is only feasible if scorecards include long-term metrics such as repeat purchase, review sentiment, customer trust, and expectation-gap complaints.

The costs of implementation also include training the brand teams to determine which quadrant a product falls into. The costs also involve updating the advertising and packaging copy, testing the amended claims, and setting up dashboards that monitor the differences between the expectations created by the claims and those reported in experience reviews. Such costs are mainly one-off process costs and fairly small.

Ethical considerations

Consensus framing operates within a narrow ethical boundary. A claim of '90% prefer Product A' may be factually correct, but most managers know that customers will interpret it as proof that Product A is better.

In low-stakes contexts such as FMCG products, the harm is limited. The situation is different in areas such as finance, healthcare, education and long-term contracts where inflated expectations can directly affect customer well-being.

Responsible communication should provide context along with popularity cues, helping customers make informed decisions.

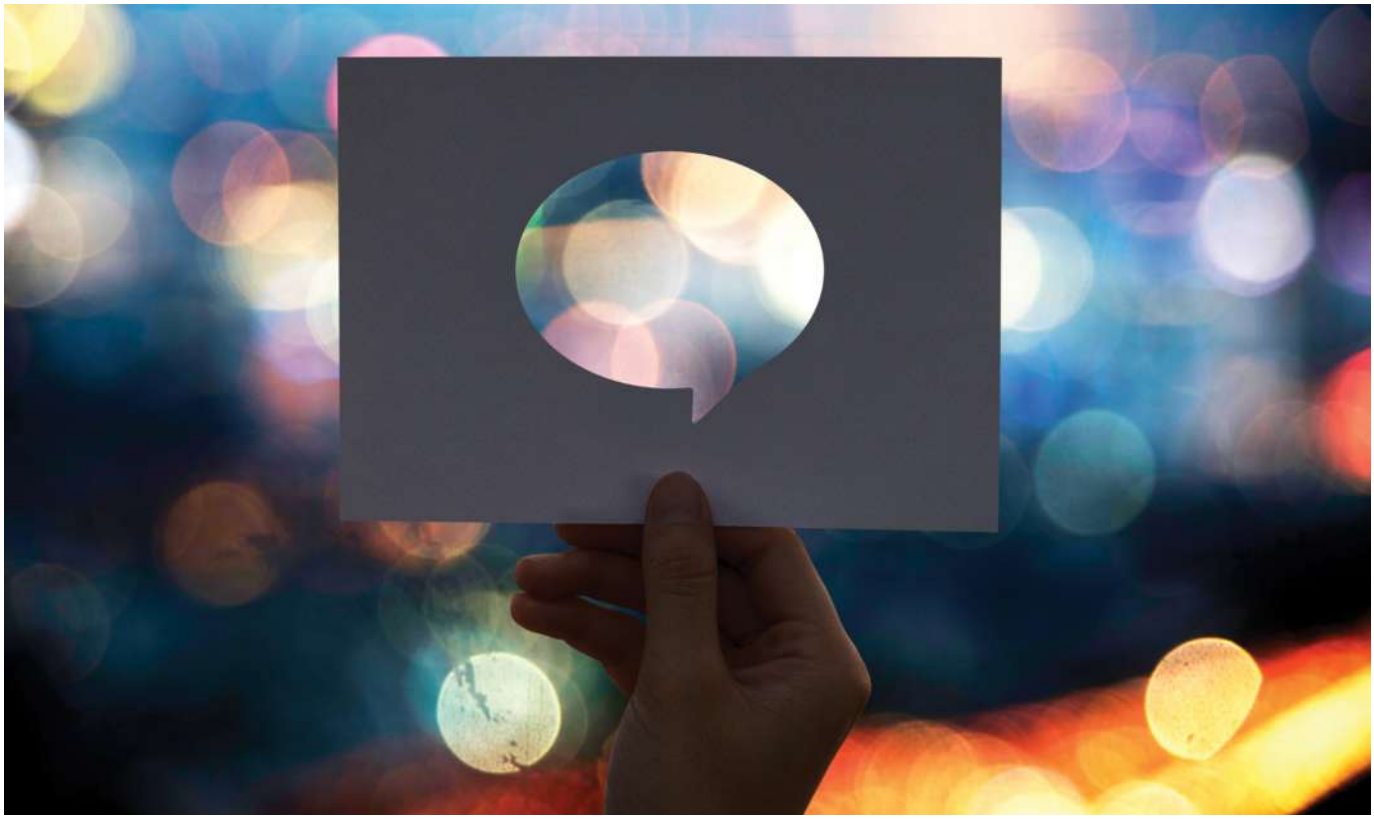
Digital platforms primarily optimise visibility, virality, and engagement, and in such markets, firms that manage expectations responsibly will build stronger, more lasting customer trust.

Direction, not magnitude

Before going ahead and approving the next communication that says '9 out of 10 prefer product A', stop and question if the product is actually superior. If the answer is 'No, but we are a bit better and widely adopted', then don't just sell more aggressively; communicate more intelligently.

Consensus does not equal conviction. High agreement signals direction, not magnitude. A product that most people prefer is not necessarily superior; it may just be winning by a few points. For brand and product managers, the practical question is where and how to use consensus framing. Use strong popularity cues to reduce friction in low-stakes decisions, where quality differences are slight. In high-stakes or long-term decisions, shift towards communication that treats popularity as one input among many, not as proof of superiority.

> The ethical test, therefore, is not legal compliance. It is whether a claim encourages misleading interpretations. Responsible communication should provide context along with popularity cues, helping customers make informed decisions



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