

CHAPTER 6 **DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION**

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of data implies that the broader meaning and the implication of the research results as well as their congruence or lack of congruence with the results of other researchers are sought (Kruger *et al.*, 2005:218). Whereas the conceptual definition of interpretation includes both “the search for meaning” and “the search for implication”, this chapter only focuses on the meaning of the research results. The implication of the results is dealt with in Chapter 7.

The purpose of this study was to explain consumers’ complaint behaviour against the theoretical background, and to explore and describe the role of specific consumer-related variables, product specific variables, and causal attribution in dissatisfied consumers’ complaint behaviour concerning the performance of major electrical household appliances.

In this chapter the research results are discussed and interpreted against the viewpoints of the theories that were chosen as conceptual background for this research, the work of previous researchers and other theories deemed necessary for the interpretation of the results.

The discussion and interpretation is presented in a specific sequence. The first part deals with consumers’ perceptions of major electrical household appliance failure. The second part focuses on consumers’ attributions for the performance failure of major electrical household appliances. The third part deals with consumers’ dissatisfaction with the performance of major electrical household appliances. The fourth part focuses on consumers’ complaint behaviour regarding major electrical household appliances. Finally, the last part deals with the role of attribution, product-specific and consumer-specific variables in consumers’ complaint behaviour.

6.2 CONSUMERS' PERCEPTION OF MAJOR ELECTRICAL HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCE FAILURE

It is clear from the results that respondents experienced problems with all types of major electrical household appliances included in this research. According to the Income and Expenditure of Households Survey of 2000 (Gauteng area: including the Witwatersrand, Pretoria, Centurion and Akasia), 33% of the participating households' expenditure on appliances was made on refrigerators, deep freezers and refrigerator/deep freezer combinations (as a category) compared to 15% on stoves and ovens (including microwave ovens) (as a category), 15% on washing machines, dishwashers and tumble dryers (as a category), 5% on vacuum cleaners, polishers and carpet cleaners and 32% on small electrical appliance and non-electrical appliances (as a collective category).

The above-mentioned survey shows that refrigerators and the other cooling appliances constitute a very large part of consumers' expenditure compared to the other categories of appliances. This might explain why 17.59% of the respondents in this study had experienced problems with their refrigerators. In general, microwave ovens are less expensive than stoves and ovens (Nieftagodien & Van der Berg, 2007), which may cause higher purchase figures for microwave ovens, and may explain why 22% of the respondents under consideration experienced dissatisfaction with their microwave ovens compared to 19.45% of the respondents who experienced dissatisfaction with their ovens and stoves (as a collective category) (refer to Chapter 5, par. 5.2.2). In many households, refrigerators, freezers, microwave ovens, stoves, ovens and washing machines are considered to be high priority appliances without which many people would not be able to function properly. According to Kachale (2005:26-32), less essential appliances such as dishwashers and tumble dryers are considered to be luxury appliances and are not purchased as often as the other essential appliances (see also Erasmus *et al.*, 2005; Nieftagodien & Van der Berg, 2007). This might explain why the respondents in this study experienced fewer product problems with dishwashers and tumble dryers as compared to other (more essential) appliances.

The literature about product failure distinguishes between functional performance dimensions (i.e. physical performance, durability, ease of use and ease of care) and symbolic performance dimensions (i.e. what the product does for, or symbolises to, the consumer in a psychological sense). Evidence from the literature hints that for some products (i.e. utilitarian products such as laundry soap), determinant attributes may involve primarily instrumental performance, while both instrumental and expressive dimensions may be features for products where other people judge

consumers based on basis of what they purchase, such as clothing, major appliances, furniture and cars (Swan & Combs, 1976; Donoghue & Erasmus, 1999; Belk in Clark *et al.*, 2000; Hawkins *et al.*, 2001:641). Considering the results of this study, specifically the results of the open question (*Describe what happened/went wrong*) (Chapter 5, par. 5.3.1), it appears that performance failure of major household appliances could be mainly associated with the functional performance failure dimension, with more than 52% of the responses indicating "unusual performance/functioning in terms of intended end-use". One would expect that consumers' dissatisfaction with household appliances would be determined mainly by the functional performance failures and to a lesser degree by symbolic failures, since the major function of these products are "to perform their job well to save time and energy". However, from the results of the exploratory factor analysis (Chapter 5, par. 5.3.2) - looking deeper than the surface (results of the open questions), it is evident that the respondents did not actually differentiate between the functional and symbolic performance dimensions of dissatisfactory major household appliances. The respondents actually considered the functional and symbolic performance failure dimensions collectively when reasoning about the performance failure of their appliances.

Consistent with the assumptions of script theory (Bozinoff & Roth, 1983; Brown, 1992) and the research of Erasmus, Boshoff and Rousseau (2002), the results of this study, among other things, imply that the respondents not only have a specific script (event schema) concerning the acquisition of major electrical household appliances (from the assessment of needs to the purchase process, delivery and installation of major appliances), but also concerning the post-purchase evaluation of appliance performance (from the evaluation of actual product performance in terms of existing expectations to engaging in consumer complaint behaviour). In this case, the respondents did not differentiate between functional and symbolic performance when they experienced dissatisfaction with the performance of their appliances, and most probably also had not differentiated between these factors when they initially evaluated the products during the purchase decision.

Whether a particular item is purchased because of its presumed superior functional performance or because of some other reason, consumers have some level of expected performance in mind, ranging from quite low to quite high, that it should provide (Hawkins *et al.*, 2001:639). Expectations are based upon prior experience with the product, word-of-mouth endorsements/criticisms and/or the marketing efforts of companies (Woodruff *et al.*, 1983; Solomon, 1996:325; Laufer, 2002). When a product does not live up to the consumer's expectations, the consumer will experience disconfirmation. The traditional disconfirmation of

expectations paradigm recognises a direct link from disconfirmation to satisfaction/dissatisfaction. With attribution theory and the work of previous researchers in mind, it was, however, reasoned in this research that disconfirmation of expectations does not lead directly to consumer dissatisfaction, and that the effects of disconfirmation are mediated by attributional processing. However, disconfirmation is a prerequisite for attributional processing and satisfaction/dissatisfaction.

The mean score of 2.67 (which is more than 2.5) indicates that the respondents were not completely sure that the appliance's combined functional and symbolic performance was less than the initial expectations (See Chapter 5, Table 5.7). This may imply that they either did not have clear expectations with regard to how the appliance should perform (i.e. what the product should do for them), or did not know how to evaluate appliance performance. Research evidence suggests that product experience is important for customer satisfaction. Consumers who have no prior product experience are relatively easy to satisfy, but with increasing experience it becomes more difficult to satisfy them. Then, when they reach a certain level of experience, satisfaction again becomes easier to obtain. At this point, consumers are regarded as "experts" because they generate more realistic expectations (Engeset *et al.* in Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard & Hogg, 2006:331). When inexperienced consumers buy major electrical household appliances they may tend to focus only on a small number of product features and on non-functional attributes, such as brand name and price to distinguish among alternatives. Additionally, they are more likely to rely on the opinions of others, who in many cases lack product experience. When interpreting marketing communications of companies, such as advertisements, they may be more impressed by the sheer amount of technical information presented in an advertisement than by the actual significance of the claims made (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005; Urbany *et al.* in Solomon *et al.*, 2006:270-271).

Consumers with considerable experience in purchasing and using any product will have had an opportunity to acquire knowledge about the basic aspects of the product's performance and develop a basis for forming specific prior expectations of performance and for evaluating actual performance (Day, 1984). Therefore, experienced and knowledgeable consumers will be better able to discern when a product's performance does not match prior expectations for that product (Sujan in Somasundaram, 1993). On the other hand, inexperienced and less knowledgeable consumers may struggle to determine whether product performance fails to meet expectations (Day & Landon, 1976; Day, 1977).

Contradicting the above-mentioned reasoning, younger respondents, respondents with a lower level of education (both of which are generally considered to be less experienced and knowledgeable about the performance of appliances) and respondents with a lower income (from this study) were more certain that their appliances' combined functional and symbolic performance was less (but not definitely less) than their initial expectations compared to their older counterparts, respondents with a higher level of education and respondents with higher incomes. However, there is no statistical significant evidence that age, level of education and level of monthly household income played significant roles in respondents' perceptions of the degree to which their appliance's performed to their expectations (see Chapter 5, Table 5.7).

Nevertheless, gender and culture played distinctive roles in the respondents' perception of the degree to which their appliances' performed to their expectations. Females were significantly more certain that their appliances' combined functional and symbolic performance was less than their initial expectations for product performance compared to males (see Chapter 5, Table 5.7). This may imply that the female respondents had definite/explicit expectations about their appliances' product performance and/or knew how to evaluate product performance (i.e., determine whether the product performed according to expectation or not) compared to the male respondents. In many cases the general division of household labour among South African couples is still drawn along traditional lines, implying that females and males perform stereotypical household tasks that are associated with their specific gender roles. Since females generally use major electrical household appliances more often than males, it can be safely argued that the female respondents might have gained more knowledge and experience with major electrical household appliances and were therefore better able than their male counterparts to determine whether these products performed according to expectations.

Due to their continual consumption of major appliances during the old and new political dispensation, Caucasian consumers, in the LSM groups 5 to 10, can generally be regarded as "more experienced and knowledgeable", therefore, having "realistic" expectations concerning product performance. However, the results of this study show that Caucasian respondents were significantly more uncertain that their appliances' combined functional performance was less than their initial expectations for product performance compared to the black respondents (see Chapter 5, Table 5.7). Since blacks have gained access to the higher socio-economic classes within the last few years, they probably have been exposed to a variety of marketing efforts of companies, have gained experience with the major electrical household appliances that they own and increasingly have become more sophisticated compared to the past (Research Surveys, 2006; Nieftagodien & Van der Berg, 2007). However, they may still need to catch up

with the more experienced Caucasian consumers who may have more realistic expectations for product performance. It is therefore postulated that the differences in Caucasian and black respondents' perception of the degree to which their appliances performed to their expectations are related to the reality of their expectations, which are based on their product knowledge and personal experience with products.

From an expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm point of view, one could argue that females and black respondents would therefore probably be more dissatisfied and inclined to complain more compared to male and Caucasian respondents respectively. Against the viewpoints of attribution theory and the reasoning in this research, such a link can, however, not be made (see Chapter 3, par. 3.4.2).

To bring the above interpretation in perspective with the sub-objectives, it should be noted that the interpretation relates to sub-objectives 1.1 and 1.2.

6.3 CONSUMERS' ATTRIBUTIONS FOR THE PERFORMANCE FAILURE OF MAJOR ELECTRICAL HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCES

In the disconfirmation paradigm, satisfaction/dissatisfaction is a direct consequence of the disconfirmation process. However, in attribution theory, people are seen as constantly searching for reasons to explain why an event turned out the way it did. The underlying causes for a specific event or outcome are very important if they are to understand and predict the environment accurately, make valuable decisions and possibly control behaviour and events (Mizerski, Golden & Kernan, 1979; Williams, 1982:70; Kelley in Fiske & Taylor, 1991:23; Försterling, 2001:11-12). In this study the question that comes to mind is: what role does causal attribution play in consumers' explanation of their appliances' performance failure? The answer to this question lies in investigating consumers' perceptions of the causes (attributions) for the performance failure of their appliances, the dimensional quality (i.e. locus, stability and controllability) of the perceived causes, as well as the differences between specific demographic groups concerning the dimensional quality of perceived causes. Additionally, an investigation into the dimensional quality of perceived causes for product failure forms the foundation for the explanation of consumers' emotions (anger) experienced in response to the product failure.

Studies on consumers' dissatisfaction with durable products (including household appliances), their reasons for being dissatisfied and their subsequent complaint behaviour showed that the respondents provided reasons that were primarily external to themselves (i.e. related to the

products as such, the manufacturers and the retailers) (Day & Ash, 1979; Rousseau, 1988; Broadbridge and Marshall, 1995). In this study, the majority (84.65%) of the respondents mainly attributed the failure of major household appliances to the manufacturers' "wrong-doing" (i.e. the manufacturer provided an appliance with poor styling and design features, used inferior materials/finishes (trimmings), or provided poor workmanship) compared to human error (13.03%), and other reasons (2.33%), confirming the results of previous studies (see Chapter 5, Table 5.25). This might be indicative of people's inclination to attribute bad outcomes (in this case product failures) to external factors (manufacturers) rather than to their own transgressions (i.e. the person operating the appliance did not know how to use it, mistreated (abused) it or did not follow the prescribed operating instructions). The latter attribution fallacy is better known as "self-serving attributional bias" (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:67, 93; Försterling, 2001:103-105). From an attribution theory point of view, it is important to note that people's attributions for negative events (in this case product failures) do not necessarily deal with the true causes of things but rather with their perceptions of what the causes for the negative events are (Williams, 1982:70). This is an important notion, since people's behaviour is influenced by their perceptions of the truth rather than by reality per se.

Weiner's influential taxonomy for causal attributions allows the researcher to "group qualitatively distinct causes as the same or different" (Weiner, 1986:17, 44-46; Försterling, 2001:110-111). Theoretically it is possible to classify the causes for negative outcomes within one of eight cells (2 locus levels x 2 stability levels x 2 controllability levels) (Hewstone, 1989:33; Folkes, 1984; Weiner, 1986:50; Oliver, 1989; Weiner, 2000) (refer to Chapter 3, par 3.4.1). In this study, respondents' perceived causes for appliance failures were classified on the basis of Weiner's locus x stability x controllability classification scheme. However, Table 6.1 shows that only four of the eight cells in terms of the locus x stability x controllability were relevant to this study. It should be noted that the researcher provided the respondents with a list of causes from which they had to select what they believed was the most important cause for the performance failure or poor performance of their appliances. No additional causes were provided by the respondents.

TABLE 6.1: PERCEIVED CAUSES OF PRODUCT FAILURE ON THE BASIS OF LOCUS X STABILITY X CONTROLLABILITY CLASSIFICATION SCHEME

Classification in terms of dimensions	Causes for product failure
Internal-stable-controllable	N/A
Internal-stable-uncontrollable	N/A
Internal-unstable-controllable	The person operating the appliance mistreated (abused) it
Internal-unstable-uncontrollable	N/A
External-stable-controllable	The purchaser of the appliance did not do enough research before purchasing it The manufacturer provided an appliance with poor styling and design features Manufacturers' use of inferior materials and finishes (trimmings)
External-stable-uncontrollable	N/A
External-unstable-controllable	The manufacturer provided poor workmanship
External-unstable-uncontrollable	Flaws/defects are inevitable with complicated appliances

The above classification makes sense for all the causes of product failure with the exception of the causes “The purchaser of the appliance did not do enough research before purchasing it” and “The manufacturer provided poor workmanship”. This could be explained by the notion that attribution theory does not necessarily deal with the true causes of things but with what a person perceives the cause to be (Williams, 1982:69). Respondents might find it difficult to acknowledge their own mistakes and might therefore rather perceive their lack of doing research as external when they, for instance, reason that they are not to blame for doing too little research, but that some external factor is to be blamed. This might be indicative of peoples’ preference to attribute bad outcomes (in this case product failures) to external factors rather than to themselves. A respondent thinking that manufacturers are in control of their workmanship, might believe that poor workmanship is caused by the manufacturers’ unwillingness to provide good workmanship, implying that the reasons for poor workmanship were factors within the manufacturers’ power.

Weiner suggests that, despite the large number of perceived causes for any one event, the specific type of cause attributed to an event is less important than its latent dimensionality (Weiner, 1986:121; Ployhart & Harold, 2004). In a product failure context, this implies that although there may be many different causes for product failure, the causes as such are less important than the way in which consumers perceive the dimensionality of these causes. Thus the causes for product failure will not determine the specific complaint action taken but rather the

dimensionality of those causes (Curren & Folkes, 1987; Folkes, 1988, 1990:150-155; Ployhart & Harold, 2004).

The uni-variate analysis for the locus dimension (mean score of 8.02 out of 27) indicates that the respondents perceived the causes for product failure as external (see Chapter 5, Table 5.26), implying that respondents mainly blamed manufacturers for product failure. When explaining respondents' perception of the locus for causes, it is important to bear in mind that the attribution process may be influenced by persistent errors. People generally find it difficult to accept responsibility for failure and therefore might attribute causes for failure rather to external factors than internal factors (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:67, 93; Försterling, 2001:103-105). As such, research suggests that people are likely to blame others for a product failure (Phau & Sari, 2004). In this study, the prevalence of external locus might be due to respondents' preference for attributing product failures to external factors rather than internal factors (self-serving attributional bias).

Table 5.27 (Chapter 5) indicates that the respondents interpreted the locus dimension differently for the particular causes. Poor workmanship (mean score of 5.89 out of 27), the inevitability of product flaws (mean score 7.25 out of 27) and defects, the manufacturer's use of inferior materials and finishes (trimmings) (mean scores of 7.30 out of 27) and the manufacturer's provision of poor styling and design features (mean score of 9.08 out of 27) were respectively evaluated as external (i.e. consumers believed that the cause of the product failure could be attributed to the manufacturer or some outside agent in the environment or situation or product). However, when one compares the above-mentioned mean scores (on the index of 1 to 9 out of 27), it is evident that respondents considered the manufacturer's provision of poor styling and design features to be less external compared to the other causes. Concrete concepts i.e., "poor workmanship" (as a category) and "product flaws" and "inferior materials and finishes" (as a category) are considered to be more external than "poor styling and design features" (as a category). This difference may be due to the fact that people may struggle to define the concept of "poor styling and design features" (i.e., it may be regarded as abstract or vague). The lack of research prior to purchasing the appliance (mean score of 12.64 out of 27) and the abuse of the appliance on the part of the person operating it (mean score of 14.78 out of 27) were both evaluated as relatively external. This contradicts logical reasoning. The lack of research prior to purchasing the appliance and the abuse of the appliance are usually considered to be internal attributions, since consumers themselves are responsible for these causes of product failure. These mean scores might indicate that respondents were biased in attributing these causes of product failure (i.e. respondents denied their own responsibility for product failure by perceiving causes that would normally be considered to be internal, as external).

The uni-variate analysis for the stability dimension (mean score of 13.63 out of 27) indicates that the respondents perceived the causes as relatively stable (i.e. a mean score of 13.63 which falls within the range (index) of 10 to 18 out of 27) (see Chapter 5, Table 5.26). The stability dimension signals whether the same problem can be expected in the future or whether the event was perceived as a coincidence and not likely to recur in the future (Laufer, 2002). Failure attributed to stable factors implies the (fearful) anticipation that it will recur in future, meaning that consumers could be more certain of future product failure (Folkes, 1984). In this case, however, respondents were relatively undecided concerning the stability dimension (i.e., uncertain about recurring product failure in the future), which might explain consumers' passivity regarding formal complaint behaviour. Additionally, Table 5.27 (Chapter 5) indicates that the respondents evaluated all the causes for product failure similarly as far as the stability dimension was concerned.

The controllability dimension reflects the power available to the different role-players to alter the outcome (Laufer, 2002; Weiner, 2000). The uni-variate analysis for the controllability dimension (mean score of 14.86 out of 27) indicates that the respondents perceived the causes as relatively controllable (i.e. a mean score of 14.86 that falls within the range of 10 to 18 out of 27) (see Chapter 5, Table 5.26). It seems therefore that respondents were relatively undecided about who had control over the factors that caused the product failure. Table 5.27 (Chapter 5) shows that the respondents interpreted the controllability dimension differently for particular causes. The inevitability of product flaws and defects was evaluated as relatively uncontrollable (mean score of 12.46 out of 27) (i.e. consumers believed that retailers and manufacturers did not really have control over flaws and defects). The abuse of appliance (i.e. misuse of the appliance on the part of the person operating it) was evaluated as relatively controllable with a score of 18.00 out of 27 (i.e. the highest score located closest to the 19 to 27 benchmark (index)). The respondents considered this particular cause to be more controllable compared to the purchaser's lack of research prior to purchasing the appliance (mean score of 14.50 out of 27). Poor workmanship on the part of the manufacturer (mean score of 15.25 out of 27), the manufacturer's provision of poor styling and design features (mean score of 15.70 out of 27) and the manufacturer's use of inferior materials and finishes (trimmings) (mean score of 16.27 out of 27) were considered to be fairly controllable.

Recently, a number of articles suggested that consumer segments assess blame differently in situations where products are considered to be defective or dangerous (i.e. product harm crisis) (Laufer, Silver & Meyer, 2005). For example, Laufer and Gillespie (2004) found differences in blame attributions between men and women. Women blamed a company more than men did for

a product harm crisis because they felt more personally vulnerable. Laufer *et al.* (2005) proposed a conceptual model to study differences between older and younger consumers' attributions of blame for a product harm crisis. They suggested that older consumers are less impacted by fundamental attribution error in certain situations and are also less likely to infer controllability. Studies in psychology also suggest that blame attributions can differ across consumers in different countries (Weiner, 1986:73-75; Au *et al.*, 2001; Laufer, 2002; Poon *et al.*, 2004). In a consumer context, Laufer (2002) suggests that consumers in individualistic societies may be more likely to attribute product failures to a company, whereas consumers in collectivistic societies may rather consider situational factors than simply blame the company.

No significant differences exist between respondents' perceptions of the cause for product failure in terms of the locus, stability and controllability dimensions and gender, age, level of education and monthly household income respectively. Generally, respondents from the different gender, age, level of education and monthly household income groups considered the cause for product failure to be external, relatively unstable to relatively stable and relatively controllable (refer to Chapter 5, Table 5.28). However, a significant difference exists between black and Caucasian respondents' perceptions of the cause for product failure in terms of the locus and controllability dimensions. Whereas the black group considered the cause for product failure to be relatively external (locus = 10.07) and relatively controllable (controllability = 15.62), the Caucasian group perceived the cause for product failure as external (locus = 7.12) and relatively less controllable (controllability = 14.52). No significant difference exists between black and Caucasian respondents' perception of the stability of the cause for product failure. Both groups considered the cause for product failure to be relatively stable (blacks: stability = 14.13, Caucasians: stability = 13.41) (refer to Chapter 5, Table 5.28). There is ample evidence that the principle of causal attribution differs across cultures (Weiner, 1986:73-75; Au *et al.*, 2001; Laufer, 2002; Poon *et al.*, 2004). Considering previous research results, the differences in black and Caucasian respondents' attributions for blame can be explained in terms of the individualistic/collectivistic dimensions of culture. Additionally, Weiner suggested that blame is related to the locus and controllability dimensions and these two dimensions of attributions lead to an overall judgement of culpability (Laufer *et al.*, 2005).

People in individualistic cultures exhibit a tendency to be more concerned with their own needs, goals, interests, achievements and success. Self-reliance, self-interest, self-confidence, self-esteem and self-fulfilment are prevalent manifestations of individualism, implying a rejection of dependency on others. Therefore, individualists stress the uniqueness of the individual (i.e. think in terms of "I") and attribute success to individual effort rather than to group efforts (Chelminski,

2001; Hofstede in Liu & McClure, 2001). On the other hand, people in collectivistic cultures tend to emphasise sharing ideas for the good of the group, feeling of involvement in other lives, fitting in the group and behaving according to the social norms that are designed to maintain social harmony among the members of the in-group (i.e. think in terms of “we”) (Chelminski, 2001; Hofstede in Liu & McClure, 2001). From a cross-cultural point of view, black and Caucasian cultures are traditionally regarded as collectivistic (i.e., group-oriented) and individualistic (i.e., self-oriented) societies respectively. Most of the South African black people subscribe to a mixture of African and Western values while most of the South African Caucasian people subscribe to Western values (Rousseau, 2003b:41). The principle underlying the African collective will is the concept of *ubuntu*, a term describing societal/community supportiveness and cohesion (Mbigi & Maree in Rousseau, 2003b:401).

In this study, Caucasians (individualists) blamed manufacturers significantly more for product failures (locus = 7.12) compared to the blacks (collectivists) (locus = 10.07) (refer to Chapter 5, Table 5.28). Since individualists attribute success to their own efforts, they might explain failures (specifically product failures) in terms of factors external to them. Another possible reason for cross-cultural differences in attribution styles is related to differences in level of locus of control (Laufer, 2002). When failures are viewed as controllable, blame is targeted to the entity perceived as having had control (Laufer, 2002). Cross-cultural research has shown that Westerners (individualists) and Orientals (collectivists) differ in their sense of control. Westerners believe that reward is dependent upon one’s behaviour or contingent upon forces within one’s control (i.e. success and achievement is related to one’s own effort), implying that when attributing causes for failure to external parties, they may also believe that failures are within those parties’ control). Orientals believe that events are predetermined by fate, which may lead them to believe that they or other parties have less control over events such as product failure (Slowikowski & Jarratt 1997; Lowe & Corkindale, 1998; Laufer, 2002; Poon *et al.*, 2004). However, in this study, the black respondents considered the cause for product failure to be relatively controllable (control = 15.62) and the Caucasians perceived the cause as relatively less controllable (control = 14.52). (A significant difference exists concerning race and consumers’ perception of the controllability dimension.) The Black respondents believed that manufacturers were more in control of product failures compared to the Caucasian respondents’ belief in this regard. This implies that cross-cultural comparisons of similarities and differences concerning black and Caucasian respondents’ perceptions of the causes for product failure in terms of both the locus and controllability dimension, might shed some light on their judgements of culpability and their subsequent complaint behaviour.

Consumers experience both dissatisfaction and anger in response to product failures. Bougie *et al.* (2003) indicate that anger and dissatisfaction are different emotions, with dissatisfaction being antecedent to, and necessary for, anger. From an attribution theory point of view, consumers' interpretation of the dimensional quality of perceived causes for product failure forms the foundation for the explanation of their emotions experienced in response to the product failure. Differently stated, specific emotions follow from specific causal attributions for product failure (Neumann, 2000). Weiner (1986) argues that the precise emotion felt is partly dependent on the attribution that the consumer makes about who is responsible. Weiner proposes that anger results from the external attribution of a negative outcome, whereas guilt results from the internal attribution of a negative outcome. Additionally, anger follows from a negative outcome (in this case product failure) that is perceived as controllable by others. Folkes *et al.*, (1987:539) and Folkes (1990:152) explain that consumers who believe that manufacturers/retailers have control over the cause of product failure, will feel angry and desire revenge more than when they believe them to lack control.

Cognitive appraisal theory, mostly attributed to the work of Lazarus and his colleagues, has gained wide acceptance in the fields of psychology, sociology and consumer behaviour – in understanding peoples' behaviour when they are confronted with a stressful situation (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994:152-159; Nyer, 1997; Stephens & Gwinner, 1998; Mathur, Moschis & Lee, 1999). Cognitive appraisal has been described as “a process through which the person evaluates whether a particular encounter with the environment is relevant to his/her well-being, and if so, in what ways” (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994:143-145; Stephens & Gwinner, 1998; Schoefer & Ennew, 2005). The cognitive appraisal theory of emotion argues that emotive reactions are often an outcome of cognitive appraisal efforts. That is, specific emotions and their intensity are tied to an appraisal of the event eliciting the emotional response (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998; Schoefer & Ennew, 2005). In a consumer behaviour context, specifically product failure, the specific emotions that result from cognitive appraisal vary according to the attributions of responsibility (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998; Forrester & Maute, 2001). Negative emotions associated with negative consumption events include anger, worry, irritation, depression and disappointment (Westbrook, 1987; Mattsson *et al.*, 2004). Westbrook (1987) found that complaint behaviour appears to be directly related to affects involving anger, hate, disgust and contempt.

The respondents in this study mainly perceived the causes for product failure to be external to themselves. However, the respondents were relatively undecided as far as the controllability and stability dimensions of the causes for product failure were concerned. This implies that they were not certain whether the manufacturers could control the cause for product failure (i.e. they did

not know whether the manufacturers could be held responsible for the product failure), nor did they know whether the product failure could be attributed to something temporary/unstable (a failure that occurs only once in a while) or to something that is likely to occur each time the product is purchased or used (stable). Respondents' uncertainty concerning the manufacturers' power to control product failures may explain why nearly one half of the respondents experienced no anger to reasonable anger and the other half were very angry to extremely angry respectively. Respondents who are uncertain about the manufacturers' power to control product failures, might probably experience less anger compared to respondents who are certain about the manufacturers' power to control product failures. Since the respondents were in effect not very angry about the product failure it can be expected that they will not truly engage in formal complaint action. From an attribution theory perspective, the quality of emotions is determined by locus and controllability factors, whereas the stability factor tends to intensify them (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:52). For example, if a cause is seen as stable, the resulting affect will be more pronounced than if the cause is unstable (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:52). In this study, the cause for product failure was considered to be relatively stable, implying that the resulting anger would be less pronounced if the cause were considered to be stable.

The above interpretation relates to sub-objectives 3.1 to 3.3 and 3.5 (partially).

6.4 CONSUMERS' DISSATISFACTION WITH THE PERFORMANCE OF MAJOR ELECTRICAL HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCES

Prior to purchasing and consuming a product, consumers form expectations of its performance in a particular use situation. After or while using a product, consumers will evaluate its performance according to their specific expectations. In terms of the confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm, consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction results from a type of comparison process (Woodruff *et al.*, 1983; Chen-Yu *et al.*, 1999; Giese & Cote, 2000; Desmeules, 2002). Consumer dissatisfaction is therefore conceptualised as a negative feeling (emotion), in response to, or following, a specific consumption experience (Woodruff *et al.*, 1983; Day, 1984; Westbrook, 1987; Swan & Oliver, 1989; Blodgett & Granbois, 1992; Erasmus & Donoghue, 1998). The post-purchase evaluation of dissatisfactory major electrical household appliances thus involves cognitive activities (disconfirmation) as well as an affective or emotional component (dissatisfaction). The confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm proposes that dissatisfaction is a direct outcome of disconfirmation. However, evidence suggests that consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction is mediated by causal attributions for disconfirmation (product failure) (Oliver, 1989; Manrai & Gardner, 1991; Laufer, 2002).

Only the consumer can decide whether he/she is dissatisfied. A consumer's level of dissatisfaction experienced may vary for several reasons. A significant majority (76.28%) of the respondents in this study were very dissatisfied to extremely dissatisfied, while nearly a quarter (23.72%) of the respondents experienced slight to moderate dissatisfaction (see Chapter 5, Table 5.8). Well-informed consumers may have more dissatisfactory product experiences simply because they know what to expect and are more likely to spot a problem. Knowledgeable consumers are able to better discern when a product's performance does not match prior expectations for that product (Somasundaram, 1993), as might be the case with consumers who belong to the LSM groups 5 to 10 who theoretically have gained experience concerning the operation of major electrical household appliances and therefore have acquired knowledge accordingly. Alternatively, certain consumers may not recognise their dissatisfaction with poor product performance because of ignorance or inexperience. It is also possible that consumers might experience dissatisfaction due to unrealistic expectations about product performance, as might be the case with the newly emerging middle class (i.e. respondents who had previously been economically disadvantaged and have now gained access to the LSM groups 5 to 10) (see par. 6.2).

The respondents' relatively high levels of dissatisfaction experienced, create the impression that a fair amount of respondents would certainly engage in complaint action, specifically formal complaint action (see Chapter 5, Table 5.8). The respondents who took action, took private action (i.e. complained to family and friends, decided to use another brand name and stopped supporting the retailer), and complained publicly to retailers and/or took their appliance to independent repair services. However, almost no responses were obtained for contacting a consumer protection organisation/department, writing a letter to the press (newspaper, magazine etc.) or to a consumer complaint website, or contacting a legal representative (see Chapter 5, Table 5.10). Additionally, despite the high level of dissatisfaction experienced, nearly 20% of the respondents did not take any action at all (see Chapter 5, Table 5.9). This study therefore confirms the general supposition that relatively fewer formal complaints are made than would be expected from expressed levels of dissatisfaction (Barnes & Kelloway, 1980; Ash in Oliver, 1987; Dolinsky, 1994; Tronvoll, 2007). Although consumer complaint behaviour is presumably triggered by feelings of dissatisfaction with a product (Singh, 1988; Morel *et al.*, 1997; Halstead, 2002), dissatisfaction has been found to explain only a small percentage of complaining behaviour (Day, 1984; Oliver 1987; Halstead & Dröge, 1991; Singh & Pandya, 1991; Blodgett & Granbois, 1992). This implies that consumers' complaint action is not merely a matter of the perceived degree of dissatisfaction with their appliances only, but that additional variables beyond satisfaction also have a role to play.

The foregoing interpretation relates to sub-objective 1.3.

6.5 CONSUMERS' COMPLAINT BEHAVIOUR CONCERNING THE PERFORMANCE FAILURE OF MAJOR ELECTRICAL HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCES

Once dissatisfaction occurs, consumers may engage in behavioural and non-behavioural responses to resolve it (Day & Landon, 1977:229-432; Broadbridge & Marshall, 1995).

Consumers may refrain from action by rationalising and forgetting about the problem.

Consumers may engage in private actions such as warning family and friends about the product and/or seller, boycotting the type of product, and switching brands or retailers. Additionally, consumers may engage in public action such as seeking redress (i.e. a refund, an exchange or free repairs and replacement of defective parts, depending on the nature of the product and the particular circumstances) directly from the retailer or manufacturer, complaining to the retailer or manufacturer, complaining to a public consumer protection agency, complaining to a voluntary organisation or the media, or taking legal action against the retailer or manufacturer (Day & Landon, 1977:229-432; Day & Bodur, 1978; Broadbridge & Marshall, 1995; Phau & Sari, 2004). Obviously, combinations of private and public actions may occur.

A significantly lower public to private complaint ratio (44:56) for major electrical household appliances was obtained in this study, which contradicts Broadbridge and Marshall's (1995) findings where a higher public to private complaint ratio (57:43) for electrical goods was obtained (see Chapter 5, Table 5.10). Concerning public action, the respondents in this study mainly engaged in seeking redress from retailers/manufactures and avoided more formal complaint action such as contacting a consumer protection organisation/department or writing a letter – activities which would require more effort and inconvenience. These findings are fairly consistent with those of Broadbridge and Marshall (1995). However, it is alarming that hardly any respondents engaged in more formal public action, as forums/authorities for formal complaint action do exist. Additionally, nearly 20% of the respondents did not take any action at all, implying that the respondents were more passive compared to Broadbridge and Marshall's results, where a no-action response rate of 10% was found. The majority of the responses were obtained for engaging in negative word-of-mouth complaining (private complaint action), which does not require a great deal of effort as such, but may be quite damaging to retailers and manufacturers, who are unaware of such actions.

Bearing cognitive appraisal theory in mind, the appraisal of stressful environmental encounters (such as product failures) allows consumers to select appropriate strategies for coping with the

resultant psychological stress (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998; Bagozzi, Gopinath, Nyer, 1999; Schoefer & Ennew, 2005). However, in order to engage in coping strategies, the individual needs to know who is responsible for the specific stressful event (product failure) (Lazarus in Stephens & Gwinner, 1998). Coping strategies, including problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping or avoidance coping, involve both behavioural and cognitive attempts aimed at managing psychosocial stress. While many authors have considered avoidance as a type of emotional coping, others have argued that it is a separate coping style (Mathur *et al.*, 1999). A problem-focused strategy is one in which a consumer deals squarely with the problem by taking direct action or by making plans to take action. The focus of such a coping strategy is external, aimed at the other party. In a consumer complaint behaviour context, direct action consists of voicing displeasure to the offending party (Lazarus & DeLongis in Stephens & Gwinner, 1998) in the form of face-to-face, phone or mail-based complaint contact(s). Problem-focused coping takes place when consumers feel harm or threat to their personal well-being, but also perceive themselves as having strong coping potential. Coping potential reflects an evaluation by the individual of the potential for, and the consequences of, engaging in a coping activity (Scherer in Nyer, 1997). In contrast to problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping strategies are directed inward. In this way, individuals attempt to regulate their mental response to the problem in order to feel better. Instead of doing something about the problem, they remain “silent” (do not contact the offending party) and engage in any one of several self-deceptions such as denial or self-blame. If emotion-focused coping is successful, the unhappy situation still exists, but people’s thinking about it has changed. Several coping tactics such as self-blame, self-control, denial and seeking social support are emotion-focused. Seeking social support means explaining the marketplace problem to another person to obtain informational, emotional, or tangible support (Folkman in Stephens & Gwinner, 1998). Consumers who perceive themselves as having low coping potential and do not feel that the balance of power in the marketplace incident favours them, are likely to engage in emotion-focused coping strategies. When engaging in avoidance coping, people do not deceive themselves by repositioning the event in a positive light or telling themselves that they are to blame. Instead, they simply leave the situation. Empirical findings related to coping styles suggest that people may rely on more than one form of coping when managing stressful encounters. Specific coping methods/behaviours associated with each of the three general coping strategies have been identified (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998; Mathur *et al.*, 1999; Forrester & Maute, 2001). Refer to Table 6.2.

TABLE 6.2: COPING STRATEGIES AND COPING METHODS INVOLVED

Coping strategies	Coping methods
Problem-focused coping	Contacting the retailer/manufacturer to obtain redress Contacting the retailer/manufacturer to complain for reasons other than seeking redress for the appliance Contacting a repair service other than that supplied by the retailer or manufacturer Contacting a consumer protection organisation/department Writing a letter to the press (newspaper, magazine etc.) or to a consumer complaint website Contacting a legal representative
Emotion-focused coping	Telling friends, family and/or acquaintances about the bad experience
Avoidance coping	Taking no action Stop using the brand name Stop supporting the retailer where the appliance was purchased

In the context of the cognitive appraisal theory, consumers' complaint behaviour is considered to be coping methods/behaviours. By looking at the cognitive and emotional qualities underlying the reasons for consumers' complaint behaviour, one can determine whether the particular complaint actions were mainly driven by cognitive reasoning, emotional reasoning or a combination of both. Reasoning (ways of thinking) in this sense refers to mental processes. Additionally, insight gained in the cognitive and emotional qualities underlying the reasons for consumers' complaint behaviour, can assist the reader in understanding consumers' choice of specific coping strategies.

In the following paragraphs, cognitive appraisal theory serves as background for explaining respondents' reasons for engaging in particular complaint action. Respondents' reasons for engaging in complaint behaviour are explained in terms of the cognitive and emotional types of reasoning underlying the different coping methods/behaviours (types of consumer complaint actions).

In this study, the main reason for not taking any action was respondents' perceptions that complaining was not worth their time and effort, corroborating Broadbridge and Marshall's (1995) findings. Another reason for not taking action was the expiry of product guarantees. Only 24.19% of the responses were obtained for "the appliance's guarantee had expired", implying that 65.12% (28 of the 43) respondents were not prepared to take action, even though their appliances were still under guarantee (refer to Chapter 5, Table 5.11). This might indicate respondents' negative perceptions concerning their retailers'/manufacturers' responsiveness to complaints (willingness to handle complaints and provide corrective action). (The question whether appliances were still under guarantee when the respondents took no action, was not explicitly asked in the questionnaire since it was listed as one of the possible reasons for not taking action.) Choosing the coping method "taking no action" (associated with the coping strategy of avoidance) was directed by cognitive reasoning only, implying that emotional reasoning did not play a role in the decision to take no action. It should be noted that respondents could provide other reasons when applicable, but no additional reasons related to emotional reasoning were provided. When consumers choose an avoidance coping strategy they typically reason that complaining is "not worth the effort" and "would not achieve any resolution" (Day & Bodur, 1978; Day & Ash, 1979; Stephens & Gwinner, 1998).

In this study, the main reasons for telling friends, family and/or acquaintances about the bad experience involved "to feel less disappointed, since the appliance was expensive and supposed to last longer" and "to get rid of my anger/frustration". These reasons are associated with the emotion-focused coping strategy where social support is sought to obtain informational and emotional support (i.e. to feel better about the self or the situation). The dissatisfactory situation still exists, but one's thinking about it has changed (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998). Emotional reasoning therefore greatly influenced consumers' decision to gain social support compared to cognitive reasoning. Although reasons such as "warning other people against the brand name/manufacturer/retailer", "finding out what their opinion is about taking further action", "warning them to strictly follow the appliance's prescribed instructions" and "finding out whether any of them have had a similar problem" are considered cognitive reasoning, imparting such information can contribute to consumers' gaining social support. Consumers will engage in negative word-of-mouth primarily to gain social support, thereby venting their anger, but also causing irreparable harm to retailers and manufacturers.

In this study, the main reason for switching brands related to the perceived unreliability of the brand name concerned. This reason is associated with the avoidance coping strategy where consumers "simply leave the situation" by not using the brand name anymore. Avoidance coping

is more common in markets that are highly competitive and in which brand switching is easy (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998). Cognitive reasoning greatly influenced consumers' decision to use another brand name, as compared to emotional reasoning.

Similarly, the respondents stopped supporting retailers because they felt that they could no longer trust them. This particular reason is associated with the avoidance coping strategy where consumers "simply leave the situation" and they "do not return to the retailer with whom they are dissatisfied". Cognitive reasoning therefore influenced consumers' decision to stop supporting the retailer much more than emotional reasoning.

Respondents mainly contacted retailers/manufacturers to obtain redress when/while their appliances were still covered by their guarantees (83 out of the 165 responses were obtained for "the appliance was still under guarantee") (refer to Chapter 5, Table 5.18). Only a few responses (15 out of 165) were obtained for "the appliance's guarantee had expired and I expected the appliance to last longer". One would expect that more consumers would try to obtain redress when their guarantees had only expired recently, since appliances are expensive, are supposed to be of high quality and to be durable. Another obvious explanation for contacting retailers/manufacturers to obtain redress included that households could not function properly without their specific appliances. Additionally respondents felt that their appliances no longer provided value for money. All of these reasons are associated with the problem-focused coping strategy where a consumer deals with the problem by taking direct action such as confronting the retailer face-to-face (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998). The reasons for the coping method "contacting retailers/manufacturers to obtain redress" were directed by cognitive reasoning only, implying that emotional reasoning did not play a role in the decision to obtain redress from retailers/manufacturers.

The respondents who contacted the retailer/manufacturer to complain for reasons other than seeking redress wanted to "stand up for their rights as consumers" and wanted to "make an objection after their effort to obtain redress/compensation for the appliance had failed". These reasons are associated with the problem-focused coping strategy where consumers deal with the problem by taking direct action such as confronting the retailer (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998). Additionally, these reasons are the result of cognitive reasoning, where the focus is on asserting oneself. There were only a few responses for the reason "to get rid of my anger/frustration" and "to get an apology from the retailer", which are considered to be emotional reasoning, as the purpose is to feel better about oneself or the situation.

Respondents mainly contacted a repair service other than that supplied by the retailer or manufacturer because their appliance guarantees had expired, implying that the respondents believed that retailers/manufacturers were no longer responsible for their appliance. This might be indicative of consumers' unnecessarily negative perceptions of retailers'/manufacturers' responsiveness to complaints. Other reasons included that their households could not function properly without their specific appliances, that the repair service was less expensive than the retailer/manufacturer's service, or that it was too much trouble to go back to the retailer or manufacturer. The physical inconvenience of not having the appliance, the inconvenience involved in taking the appliance to the retailer/manufacturer and the lower repair costs made it worth going to the alternate repair service. All of these reasons are associated with the problem-focused coping strategy where a consumer deals with the problem by taking direct action. These reasons were directed by cognitive reasoning only, implying that emotional reasoning did not play a role in the decision to contact a repair service other than that supplied by the retailer or manufacturer.

It is interesting to note that proportionally more responses were obtained for "the household could not function properly" when contacting an independent repair service (40 out of 110) compared to contacting the retailer for repairs (31 out of 55) (refer to Chapter 5, Tables 5.18 and 5.21). This might be indicative of the consumers' frame of mind when they took their appliances to a repair service other than the retailer's repair division – meaning that consumers who took their appliances to independent repair services, were more desperate to resolve the product problem/failure as compared to consumers who went to the retailer's repair division.

The reasons for engaging in third-party complaints are not explained since very few responses were obtained for this complaint action. What is of significance, is the fact that very few respondents engaged in third-party complaint behaviour.

From the above discussion it is clear that both the problem-focused coping strategy (employing coping behaviours/methods such as contacting the retailer/manufacturer to obtain redress, contacting the retailer/manufacturer to complain for reasons other than seeking redress, contacting a repair service other than that supplied by the retailer or manufacturer) and the avoidance coping strategy (employing coping behaviours/methods such as taking no action, switching brands, no longer supporting the retailer where the appliance was purchased) were significantly more influenced by cognitive reasoning than emotional reasoning. The emotion-focused strategy (employing the coping method of "telling friends, family and/or acquaintances about the bad experience") was significantly more influenced by emotional reasoning such as

wanting “to feel less disappointed, since the appliance was expensive and supposed to last longer” and wanting “to get rid of my anger/frustration” compared to cognitive reasoning. It is understandable that one would feel better after talking to significant others who might provide informational, emotional or tangible support (Folkman in Stephens & Gwinner, 1998).

It should be noted that people may rely on more than one form of coping strategy when managing stressful encounters. For example, consumers may directly contact the retailer/manufacture (behaviours associated with the problem-focused coping strategy), engage in negative word-of-mouth communication (i.e. seeking social support from friends and family) (emotion-focused coping strategy) and switch brands (avoidance coping) to deal with the psychological stress caused by the performance failure of a major electrical household appliance.

The above interpretation relates to sub-objectives 2.1 and 2.2.

6.6 THE ROLE OF ATTRIBUTION, CONSUMER-SPECIFIC VARIABLES AND PRODUCT-SPECIFIC VARIABLES IN CONSUMERS’ COMPLAINT BEHAVIOUR

From a causal attribution point of view, consumers’ interpretation of the dimensional quality of perceived causes for product failure forms the foundation for the explanation of consumers’ level of anger experienced in response to the product failure as well as their subsequent consumer complaint behaviour. However, it should be noted that complaint behaviour cannot be explained in terms of the locus, stability and controllability dimensions individually, but rather by looking at the causal dimensions collectively. In addition it was reasoned that the attribution, consumer-specific variables and product-specific variables play a role in consumers’ complaint behaviour. The following discussion is therefore structured in terms of the role of attribution, consumer-specific variables and product-specific variables in consumers’ complaint behaviour.

6.6.1 The role of attribution in consumers’ complaint behaviour

In the following paragraphs, the respondents’ perception of the dimensional quality of the cause(s) for product failure are discussed to facilitate the explanation of the different types of complaint action: took action, told friends, family and/ or acquaintances about the bad experience, decided to use another brand name, stopped supporting the retailer where the product was purchased, contacted the retailer/manufacture to obtain redress, contacted the retailer/manufacture to complain for other reasons than seeking redress, contacted a repair

service other than that supplied by the retailer or manufacturer on the one hand, and not engaging in any of these respective actions on the other hand. The mean scores for the different causal dimensions (i.e. locus, stability and controllability) concerning more formal complaint action (i.e. contacting a consumer protection organisation/department, writing a letter to the press or to a consumer complaint website, or contacting a legal representative) are discussed in terms of consumer complaint behaviour theory. However, the differences between the respondents who engaged in more formal complaint action and those who did not, as far as the different causal dimensions are concerned, are not described since very few respondents engaged in these respective actions compared to those who did not.

Additionally, consumer complaint actions are also explained in terms of respondents' perception of the dimensional quality of the cause(s) for product failure and their level of anger experienced. According to attribution theory, anger follows from a negative outcome that is perceived as controllable by others. In terms of cognitive appraisal theory, the specific emotions that result from cognitive appraisal vary according to the attributions of responsibility (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998; Forrester & Maute, 2001). Without knowing or deciding who is responsible, consumers will not be able to engage in coping actions such as taking complaint action, telling friends, family and/or acquaintances about the bad experience, using another brand name, stopping support to the retailer where the product was purchased, contacting the retailer/manufacturer to obtain redress, contacting the retailer/manufacturer to complain for other reasons than seeking redress, contacting a repair service other than that supplied by the retailer, contacting a consumer protection organisation/department, writing a letter to the press (newspaper, magazine etc.) or to a consumer complaint website, and/or contacting a legal representative. Refer to par. 6.3 for a discussion on respondents' perception of the causes for product failure in terms of the causal dimensions.

Both the groups of respondents who took action and those who did not, perceived the causes for product failure as external (i.e. the cause for product failure was attributed to the manufacturer, retailer or some outside agent in the environment or situation), and also as relatively stable and relatively controllable (refer to Chapter 5, Table 5.29). Since the respondents perceived the causes for product failure as external, it could be argued that they considered manufacturers to be responsible for the product failure (see Chapter 5, Table 5.29). Laufer (2002) and Försterling (2001:117) argue that failure attributed to stable factors implies the (fearful) anticipation that products will fail again in future, whereas attribution of product failure to variable causes could give rise to "hope" for the future (i.e. product failures are not deemed likely to recur in the future). Additionally, when consumers believe that external parties (i.e. manufacturers) have control over

the cause of product failure, they feel angry and desire revenge more than when manufacturers are believed to lack control (Folkes, 1984; Folkes *et al.*, 1987; Folkes, 1990:152). Although the respondents considered the controllability dimension to be relatively controllable, a significantly larger proportion of the respondents who were very angry to extremely angry, (88.29%) took action compared to those who varied between no anger to reasonable anger (72.12%) (see Chapter, Table 5.31). This study therefore confirms that those respondents who experienced higher levels of anger were more likely to take action than those with lower levels of anger.

Both the groups of respondents who talked to their friends, family and/or acquaintances and those who did not, considered the cause for the product failure as external (refer to Chapter 5, Table 5.29). Contrary to expectation, the group of respondents who did not engage in negative word-of-mouth, considered the cause for product failure as more external compared to those who did engage in negative word-of-mouth. (A significant difference exists between the stability dimensions for both these groups of respondents.) The product satisfaction literature reveals that consumers are more inclined to engage in negative word-of-mouth communications with other people about product failure when the cause for product failure is perceived as controlled by manufacturers/retailers than when product failure is perceived as not controlled by these parties (Curren & Folkes, 1987; Folkes, 1988). However, in this study, both groups of respondents perceived the cause for product failure as relatively controllable. Inferring a stable cause might cause people to warn their friends about the retailer so that they do not experience the same type of problem (Folkes *et al.*, 1987; Blodgett & Granbois, 1992). Also, both groups perceived the cause for product failure as relatively unstable. Although the respondents considered the controllability dimension to be relatively controllable, proportionately more respondents who were very to extremely angry told their friends, family and/or acquaintances about the bad experience, compared to the respondents who experienced no anger to reasonable levels of anger (refer to Chapter 5, Table 5.31). It is important to note that respondents who experienced no anger to reasonable levels of anger and those who were very angry to extremely angry, mainly engaged in negative word-of-mouth compared to the other types of complaint action (see Chapter 5, Table 5.31 & Table 5.10). Respondents engaged in negative word-of-mouth mainly to obtain emotional support concerning the performance failure of appliances (i.e. to vent their anger, and to gain social validation of their negative feelings).

Both the groups of respondents who decided to use another brand name and those who did not, considered the cause for the product failure as external and as relatively controllable. However, the group of respondents who used another brand name considered the cause for product failure to be relatively stable compared to the group who did not use another brand name, and

who considered the cause for the product failure to be relatively unstable (see Chapter 5, Table 5.29). (A significant difference exists between these groups with regard to stability ($p = 0.0014$).) This implies that respondents who perceived causes as stable expected the product failure to recur in future and therefore used another brand name to prevent the same failure from happening again. Corresponding with expectation, proportionately more respondents who experienced no anger to reasonable levels of anger continued to use brand names of the dissatisfactory appliance compared to the respondents who were very angry to extremely angry (see Chapter 5, Table 5.31). According to Blodgett and Granbois (1992) and Swanson and Kelly (2001), anger intensifies as outcome importance increases, and hence consumers will be more likely to refuse to repurchase the company's product and will distance themselves from the company.

Contrary to expectation, the group of respondents who stopped supporting the retailer where the product was purchased considered the cause for product failure to be less external compared to those who continued supporting the retailer. They also perceived the cause for product failure to be relatively stable compared to the group of respondents who continued supporting the retailer (who perceived the cause for the product failure as relatively unstable) – thus confirming expectation. (Significant relationships exist between these groups and the locus and stability dimensions respectively.) The respondents who perceived the cause for product failure to be relatively stable, expected the product to fail again in the future and therefore took their custom elsewhere to prevent the same failure from happening again. However, both these groups considered the cause for the product failure as relatively controllable (see Chapter 5, Table 5.29). Corresponding with expectation, proportionately more respondents who experienced no anger to reasonable levels of anger continued to support the retailer where the product was purchased compared to the respondents who were very angry to extremely angry (see Chapter 5, Table 5.31).

The fact that relatively few respondents who were very angry to extremely angry, switched brand names and retailers, points to their carelessness concerning these respective actions. It might be due to the perception that they would not benefit from “punishing the retailer/manufacturer”.

Both the group of respondents who contacted the retailer/manufacturer to obtain redress and the group who did not, considered the cause for product failure to be external and relatively controllable. Additionally, no significant differences existed between the stability dimensions for both groups of respondents – the stability dimension is considered to be relatively stable (see Chapter 5, Table 5.29). Contrary to expectation, fairly equal proportions of respondents who

experienced no anger to reasonable levels of anger and those who felt very angry to extremely angry, contacted the retailer for redress (see Chapter 5, Table 5.31). This might be due to the fact that many of the respondents' appliances were still under guarantee or had just expired (see Chapter 5, Table 5.18).

Contrary to expectation, the group of respondents who did not contact the retailer/manufacturer to complain for other reasons than seeking redress, considered the cause for product failure to be more external and relatively unstable compared to the group who did contact the retailer/manufacturer for other reasons than seeking redress, and who perceived the cause as external and relatively stable. (Significant differences exist concerning the stability and locus dimensions respectively.) However, both these groups of respondents considered the product failure to be relatively controllable (see Chapter 5, Table 5.29). The respondents who contacted the retailer/manufacturer to complain for other reasons than seeking redress, were more certain of future product failure compared to those who did not contact the retailer or manufacturer to complain for other reasons than seeking redress. This might imply that the respondents who complained to retailers/manufacturers for other reasons than obtaining redress, might have considered it worth the trouble to complain about products that they believe will fail anyway. For example, it is worthwhile to make an objection after one's effort to obtain redress/compensation for the appliance failed, to stand up for one's rights as a consumer or to get an apology from the retailer/manufacturer (see Chapter 5, Table 5.19). Additionally, significantly more respondents who felt very angry to extremely angry, contacted the retailer/manufacturer to complain for other reasons than seeking redress, compared to the respondents who experienced no anger to reasonable levels of anger (see Chapter 5, Table 5.31). However, it is alarming that so few respondents took part in this particular action that has the potential to empower them.

Both the group of respondents who contacted a repair service other than that supplied by the retailer or manufacturer and the group who did not, considered the product failure to be external and relatively controllable. However, a significant difference exists between these groups concerning the stability dimension. The group of respondents who did not contact a repair service other than that supplied by the retailer or manufacturer, considered the cause for product failure to be relatively stable compared to the group who contacted a repair service and who considered the cause for the product failure to be relatively unstable (see Chapter 5, Table 5.29). As pointed out earlier, in the context of attribution theory, attributions for product failures concerning stable factors implies the anticipation that products will fail again in future and attributions of product failure to variable causes could give rise to "hope" for the future (i.e. product failures are not deemed likely to recur in the future) (Försterling, 2001:117; Laufer,

2002). This implies that the group who did not contact a repair service might have expected their products to fail in the future in any case, and felt that it would be useless to repair their products. The respondents who attributed the cause for product failure to relatively unstable causes might have expected that future product failures are likely not to recur, but due to reasons such as the expiration of product guarantees, they had to take the appliance to other repair services (see Chapter 5, Table 5.21). Fairly equal proportions of respondents who experienced no anger to reasonable levels of anger and who felt very angry to extremely angry, did not contact a repair service other than that supplied by the retailer or manufacturer (see Chapter 5, Table 5.31). From an attribution theory perspective, the quality of emotions is determined by locus and controllability factors, whereas the stability factor tends to intensify them (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:52). In this case, the cause for product failure was considered to be external and only relatively controllable and relatively stable. When a cause is seen as stable, the resulting affect will be more pronounced than if the cause is unstable (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:52). However, in this case, the resulting anger might be less obvious since the cause for product failure were considered to be relatively unstable or relatively stable (and not stable as such) by the respective groups of respondents.

Nearly none of the respondents engaged in formal complaint action (i.e. contacted a consumer protection organisation/department, wrote a letter to the press (newspaper, magazine etc.) or to a consumer complaint website, or contacted a legal representative). These respondents perceived the cause for the product failure to be external and were relatively undecided about the stability and controllability dimensions concerning the cause for product failure (see Chapter 5, Table 5.29). This implies that they were uncertain whether to expect future product failures or whether the product failure should be considered to be a once-off product failure, and whether the manufacturer/retailer had control over the problem failure or not. Additionally, anger did not play a significant role in these consumers' participation in formal complaint action. This may explain respondents passivity concerning engaging in formal complaining. However, one cannot ignore the notion that consumers might feel that it will be useless to complain formally since nothing will be gained.

The above interpretation relates to sub-objectives 3.4 and 3.5.

6.6.2 The role of consumer-specific variables in consumers' complaint behaviour

In the following paragraphs, the relationships between demographic variables (i.e. gender, age, level of education, monthly household income and culture) and consumers' complaint behaviour are discussed.

No significant disparities existed concerning the demographic profile (i.e. gender, age, highest level of education, monthly household income, culture) of complainers (those who took complaint action) versus non-complainers (those who did not take complaint action) (see Chapter 5, Table 5.32). Broadbridge and Marshall (1995) also endeavoured to determine whether any demographic differences were apparent between complainers and non-complainers. Their survey could also not determine a profile for complainers versus non-complainers.

Despite the earlier prediction that female respondents might be more inclined to engage in complaint action (compared to their male counterparts), based on the fact that they were more certain that the actual combined functional and symbolic performance of their appliances was less than their initial expectation (compared to men's uncertainty in this regard) (refer to par. 6.2), no significant relationship was found between gender and the different types of complaint action. Additionally, no significant relationships existed between age and level of education on the one hand, and the different types of complaint action on the other (see Chapter 5, Table 5.33), confirming that the demographic variables (i.e. gender, age and level of education) for respondents engaging in the different types of private and public complaint action, do not differ (Singh 1990a, 1990b; Broadbridge & Marshall, 1995).

In this study, respondents from the lower income groups were significantly more inclined to stop supporting retailers, and to contact retailers/manufacturers to complain for reasons other than seeking redress, compared to respondents from upscale income groups (see Chapter 5, Table 5.34) – contradicting previous research findings. Past results indicate that complainers tend to be the most financially successful segments in the marketplace (Singh, 1990b; Broadbridge & Marshall, 1995). The results of this study, however, showed that respondents with lower incomes did not necessarily react more passively in terms of their complaining behaviour compared to their "upscale" counterparts who are supposed to "take more overt complaint action when dissatisfied" (Warland *et al.* in Grønhaug & Gilly, 1991). Major electrical household appliances are expensive and essential products; therefore respondents in lower socio-economic groups might consider complaining worth the trouble since they are struggling to make

ends meet on their hard-earned money. Low-income respondents might also decide to take their business to the competition once their trust in a retailer has been betrayed. Additionally, no significant relationships were found between level of income and the rest of the private and public complaint actions.

Cross-cultural research has shown that collectivists tend not to express their emotions outwardly, and if negative emotions are expressed, they are likely to be discussed in intimate social settings (Markus & Kitayama in Liu & McClure, 2001). In this study, both the black (collectivists) and the Caucasian (individualists) respondents told their friends, family and/or acquaintances about the bad experience (see Chapter 5, Table 5.34), confirming research showing that there is a considerable incidence rate of negative word-of-mouth among dissatisfied consumers (Richins, 1983, 1987; Chelminski, 2001). However, the black respondents did not engage in negative word-of-mouth significantly more than the white respondents, as suggested by cross-cultural theory. In a collectivistic culture, dissatisfied consumers are more likely to engage in other private actions such as switching brands and taking their custom elsewhere (“exit”) than those in an individualistic culture (Liu & McClure, 2001). In this study, a significantly larger proportion of black respondents decided to use another brand name and stopped supporting the retailer, confirming previous studies in this respect (Liu & McClure, 2001).

Additionally, black respondents were more inclined to complain to retailers and manufactures to obtain redress and to complain for other reasons than obtaining redress compared to the Caucasian respondents (see Chapter 5, Table 5.34), implying that black respondents were much more actively involved in their complaint behaviour concerning major electrical household appliances than Caucasian respondents. These results contradict Liu and McClure’s (2001) findings which empirically confirmed that dissatisfied consumers in a collectivistic culture (South Korean consumers) were less likely to complain to retailers and manufacturers and were more likely to engage in private behaviour than those in an individualistic culture (US consumers). This contradiction can be explained in terms of the different value orientations guiding the behaviour of black and Caucasian cultures respectively. These days, most of the South African black people subscribe to a mixture of African and Western values while most of the South African Caucasian people subscribe to Western values (Mbigi & Maree in Rousseau, 2003b: 401). Thus, in addition to the black respondents’ collective will (yearning for societal supportiveness and cohesion), they may be increasingly adopting Western (individualistic) values and may therefore tend to exhibit higher levels of assertiveness and confidence. So, black respondents may be more inclined to complain to retailers and manufactures to obtain redress or to complain for

reasons other than obtaining redress compared to the Caucasian respondents, for instance, to safeguard their fellow black “comrades” against certain product problems with appliances. One should also bear in mind that South African consumers are in general more aware of their consumer rights due to campaigns that have been launched since 1994 to empower consumers, which might augment the collectivist view to protect others from a negative experience and the individualist view to asserts one’s rights. Nearly none of the respondents from both racial groups engaged in formal complaint behaviour. Additionally, no significant difference exists between the two racial groups in terms of formal complaint behaviour (see Chapter 5, Table 5.34), confirming Liu and McClure’s (2001) results.

The finding of this study concerning culture and complaint behaviour, confirms that “the issues surrounding culture and its effects on complaint behaviour are interesting, and are far from settled” (Blodgett *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, a need exists for research to provide richer insights regarding cross-cultural complaint behaviour. People’s cultural orientation needs to be measured to examine the mechanism of cultural influence on complaining behaviour (Chelminski, 2001). This might be especially true of countries such as South Africa, where different cultural groupings live together and have the potential to acculturate.

The above interpretation relates to sub-objective 3.2.

6.6.3 The role of product-specific variables in consumers’ complaint behaviour

In this study, 50% of the respondents experienced the severity of the performance failures of major electrical household appliances as varying between not severe to somewhat severe, and the other half experienced the severity of the performance failure as very severe to extremely severe (see Chapter 5, Table 5.35).

Proportionately more respondents who perceived the severity of the problem as very severe to extremely severe took action as compared to the respondents who perceived the problem as somewhat severe to not severe at all (see Chapter 5, Table 5.36) This implies that the more serious the problem was perceived to be, the more likely consumers were to take action, confirming previous research (Loudon & Della Bitta, 1993:581; Richins, 1983).

The majority of respondents in both of the above groups told their friends, family and/or acquaintances about their bad experience (see Chapter 5, Table 5.36). Therefore, regardless the degree of severity that consumers would ascribe to their problem, they remain likely to

engage in negative word-of-mouth. This contradicts Richins' (1983) findings that negative word-of-mouth increases when product problems causing the dissatisfaction are perceived as more severe (see also Chelminski, 2001). (Richins' (1983) study pertained to clothing items or small or large appliances as product categories.) Confirming expectation, proportionately more respondents who perceived the severity of the performance failure as very severe to extremely severe decided to use another brand name and stopped to support the retailer where the product was purchased, compared to the respondents who perceived the performance failure somewhat severe to not severe at all. Fairly equal proportions of respondents who perceived the performance failure as very severe to extremely severe and not severe at all to somewhat severe contacted the retailer/manufacturer to obtain redress, did not contact the retailer/manufacturer to complain for other reasons than seeking redress and did not contact a repair service other than that supplied by the retailer or manufacturer. Irrespective of respondents' perception of the severity of the performance failure, nearly none of the respondents engaged in formal complaint behaviour (see Chapter 5, Table 5.36).

The results of this study, concerning severity of performance failure and complaint behaviour, confirm that respondents' decision to take complaint action (as opposed to not taking action), use another brand name and stop supporting the retailer are determined by respondents' perception of the severity of the product failure causing the dissatisfaction. However, consumers' participation in negative word-of-mouth was not determined by their perception of the severity of the product failure causing the dissatisfaction. Additionally, respondents' decision to contact the retailer for redress, not to complain for other reasons than seeking redress and not to engage in formal complaint behaviour was not determined by their perceptions of the severity of the product failure. This may help to explain respondents' general passivity concerning public complaint action (especially formal complaint behaviour).

The above interpretation relates to sub-objectives 5.1 and 5.2.

6.7 CONCLUSION

The respondents considered the functional and symbolic performance dimensions of their appliances collectively when reasoning about the specific performance failure (i.e., they did not actually differentiate between the functional and symbolic performance dimensions of dissatisfactory major household appliances). The female and black groups were significantly more certain that their appliances' combined functional and symbolic performance was less than their initial expectations for product performance, compared to the male and Caucasian groups

respectively. These differences between the respective groups can be explained in terms of the reality of their expectations, which were based on their product knowledge and personal experience with such products. The majority of the respondents mainly attributed the failure of major household appliances to the manufacturers' "wrong-doing" compared to human error and other reasons. The latter finding can be partly explained in terms of self-serving attributional bias – people tend to attribute bad outcomes (in this case product failures) to external factors (manufacturers) rather than to their own faults. The respondents perceived the causes for product failure as external, relatively stable and relatively controllable. Significant differences were found between black and Caucasian respondents' perceptions of the cause for product failure in terms of the locus and controllability dimensions. Whereas the black group considered the cause for product failure to be relatively external and relatively controllable, the Caucasian group perceived the cause for product failure as external and relatively less controllable. Both groups considered the cause for product failure to be relatively stable. Significant differences exist between black and Caucasian respondents' confidence that their appliances' performance was less than expected as well as their perceptions of who should be held accountable for the failure and of the controllability of the failure.

Despite the high level of dissatisfaction, nearly 20% of the respondents did not take any action at all. The respondents who took action, took private action (i.e. complained to family and friends, decided to use another brand name and stopped supporting the retailer), complained publicly to retailers and/or took their appliance to independent repair services. Almost none of the respondents engaged in formal complaint behaviour. The respondents engaged in negative word-of-mouth to gain social support (informational, emotional, or tangible support). The main reason for switching brands related to the perceived unreliability of the brand name concerned. Similarly, the respondents stopped supporting retailers because they felt that they could no longer trust them. The latter avoidance actions were mainly spurred by cognitive reasoning. The respondents who contacted retailers/manufacturers to obtain redress or complain for other reasons, and those who contacted a repair service other than that supplied by the retailer or manufacturer, dealt with the problem by taking direct action. These problem-focused tactics were also driven in the main by cognitive reasoning. The main reason for not taking any action was respondents' perceptions that complaining was not worth their time and effort. The no action response was mainly based on cognitive reasoning.

In some cases, significant differences were found between the groups of respondents who engaged in a particular complaint action and those who did not concerning the respondents perception of the locus, stability and controllability dimensions of the perceived cause for product

failure. Although some of the differences are surprising, it should be noted that the differences lie in relative terms (i.e. the mean score for a specific dimension fell within the range of 10 to 18 out of 27 – implying a relative quality). For example, distinctions were made between relatively external and relatively internal, relatively stable and relatively unstable, relatively controllable and relatively uncontrollable. Implying that respondents were fairly uncertain (undecided) concerning the dimension in question compared to the other extremes of the continuum (i.e. external vs. internal, stable vs. unstable, controllable vs. uncontrollable). The respondents perceived the causes for product failure as external, relatively stable and relatively controllable. This may explain why respondents did not actively engage in formal complaint action.

No significant relationships existed between gender, age and level of education on the one hand, and the different types of complaint action on the other, confirming that the demographic variables (i.e. gender, age and level of education) for respondents engaging in the different types of private and public complaint action, do not differ (Singh 1990a, 1990b; Broadbridge & Marshall, 1995). However, respondents from the lower income groups were more inclined to stop supporting retailers, and to contact retailers/manufacturers to complain for reasons other than seeking redress, compared to respondents from upscale income groups. Additionally, a significantly larger proportion of black respondents decided to use another brand name, stopped supporting the retailer, complained to retailers and manufactures to obtain redress and complained for other reasons than obtaining redress – compared to the Caucasian respondents. When consumers attribute a product failure to an external, uncontrollable cause, they will probably assign less blame to other entities such as the manufacturer or retailer. However, when failures are viewed as controllable, blame is targeted to the entity perceived as having had control (Laufer, 2002). The interplay between the locus and controllability dimensions might augment respondents' perception of blame for the product failure and their subsequent complaint behaviour. The latter assumption might explain why black respondents engaged more actively in the above-mentioned complaint actions compared to the Caucasian respondents. It is therefore argued that comparisons of different cultures' perceptions of the causes for product failure, in terms of both the locus and controllability dimensions, might broaden our understanding of their judgements of culpability and their subsequent complaint behaviour. Additionally, the individualism-collectivism construct for describing and comparing cultures, as well as the influence of acculturation should be considered.

From an attribution theory perspective, the quality of emotions is determined by locus and controllability factors, whereas the stability factor tends to intensify them (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:52). For example, if a cause is seen as stable, the resulting affect will be more pronounced

than if the cause is seen as unstable (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:52). The respondents in this study mainly perceived the causes for product failure to be external to themselves. However, the respondents were relatively undecided as far as the controllability and stability dimensions were concerned. When consumers believe that manufacturers/ retailers have control over the cause of product failure, they will feel angry and desire revenge more than when they believe those parties to lack control. Although the respondents considered the controllability dimension to be relatively controllable, a significantly larger proportion of the respondents who were very angry to extremely angry, (88.29%) took action, compared to those who varied between no anger and reasonable anger (72.12%). This study therefore confirms that, the higher the level of anger experienced, the more likely consumers are to take action as opposed to no action, to switch brand names and to stop supporting retailers (private action), and also to contact the retailer/manufacturer to complain for other reasons than seeking redress. Irrespective of the level of anger experienced, the respondents engaged in negative word-of-mouth, causing irreparable harm to retailers and manufacturers. Contrary to expectation, fairly equal proportions of respondents who experienced no anger to reasonable levels of anger and those who felt very angry to extremely angry, contacted the retailer for redress. This might be due to the fact that many of the respondents' appliances were still under guarantee or had just expired. Additionally, significantly more respondents who felt very angry to extremely angry, contacted the retailer/manufacturer to complain for other reasons than seeking redress, compared to the respondents who experienced no anger to reasonable levels of anger. Additionally, anger did not play a significant role in the respondents' participation in formal complaint action. Although half of the respondents indicated that they were very angry to extremely angry, they were uncertain concerning the manufacturers' power to control product failure – which may explain their passivity concerning engaging in formal complaint behaviour. In the context of cognitive appraisal theory, consumers might not employ the problem-focused complaining, in this case formal complaint action, when they believe that they have low coping potential (i.e., respondents might believe that it is worthless to complain formally, as nothing will be gained).

People employ different complaint actions in an effort to cope with a stressful situation (i.e., product failure) and the resultant anger. In the context of Day and Landon's (1976) taxonomy of consumer complaint behaviour and cognitive appraisal theory, the respondents engaged in private complaint action by means of emotion-focused coping (told friends, family and/or acquaintances about the bad experience) and avoidance-focused coping (stopped using the brand name and stopped supporting the retailer where the appliance was purchased). The respondents also employed public complaint action through problem-focused coping (contacted the retailer/manufacturer to obtain redress, contacted the retailer/manufacturer to complain for

reasons other than seeking redress, contacted a repair service other than that supplied by the retailer or manufacturer). Additionally the respondents who did not engage in complaint action (took no action) coped with the product by avoidance behaviour.

The results of this study, concerning the severity of the product failure and respondents' complaint behaviour, confirm that respondents' decision to take complaint action (as opposed to not taking action), use another brand name and no longer support the retailer, were determined by their perception of the severity of the product failure causing dissatisfaction. However, consumers' participation in negative word-of-mouth was not determined by their perception of the severity of the product failure causing dissatisfaction. Additionally, respondents' decision to contact the retailer for redress, not to complain for other reasons than seeking redress and not to engage in formal complaint behaviour was not determined by their perceptions of the severity of the product failure. This may help to explain respondents' general passivity concerning public complaint action (especially formal complaint behaviour).

Chapter 7 presents the conclusions of the study, an evaluation of the study, its contribution to the theory, recommendations, implications of the results of the study, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 7 **CONCLUSIONS, EVALUATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

7.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the conclusions of the study, an evaluation of the study, its contribution to the theory, and the relevant implications and recommendations. Additionally, some suggestions for future research are provided.

7.2 CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions are presented in the sequences of the research objectives for this study (refer to Chapter 1, par 1.3 and Chapter 4, par. 4.2.2). It should be noted at this point that due to the convenience sampling technique, the results of the study are limited to the specific sample, which means that the findings cannot be generalised to the larger South African population. The sample consisted of consumers who had recently purchased major household appliances (within the prior four-year period) and who could recall an unsatisfactory experience concerning the performance of such appliance. Nearly 70.00% of the respondents were female, while nearly 30.00% were male. The majority (72.23%) of the respondents were 25-45 years of age, while 27.77% were 46-83 years old. Whereas a total of 20.83% of the respondents' highest level of education was Grade 12/Standard 10/NTCIII or less, 36.11% of the respondents had Grade 12 and an additional certificate(s)/diploma(s). A total of 43.06% of the sample held either a Bachelors degree or a post-graduate qualification. A total of 25.93% and 26.85% of the respondents fell in the monthly household income categories of R 2 000 – R 5 000 and R 5 001 – R 10 000 respectively. A total of 47.22% of the respondents belonged to the monthly household income category of R 10 001 or more. About two thirds of the respondents (69.44%) were Caucasian, while nearly a third of the respondents (30.56%) were black. Despite the aforementioned limitation (caused by the convenience sampling technique), this does not mean that the implications of this study should be regarded as of no significance.

7.2.1 The nature of the performance failure that caused consumers to be dissatisfied with major electrical household appliances

A combination of functional and symbolic performance failures seems to direct consumers' complaint behaviour concerning dissatisfactory major household appliances. The consumers in this study did not differentiate between the two dimensions, but considered them jointly when they evaluated the performance of their appliances.

Gender and culture apparently play significant roles in consumers' perception of the degree to which their appliances perform to their expectations. Female and black consumers in the study were more certain that their appliances' combined functional and symbolic performance was less than their initial expectations for product performance, compared to the male and Caucasian consumers in the study.

Proportionately more respondents were very dissatisfied to extremely dissatisfied with the actual performance of their major electrical household appliances, compared to the respondents who were slightly to moderately dissatisfied with the actual performance of their major electrical household appliances.

7.2.2 The nature of, and the reasons for, dissatisfied consumers' complaint behaviour concerning the performance failure of major electrical household appliances

Despite the high level of dissatisfaction that the respondents experienced concerning the performance failure of major electrical household appliances, a notable number of respondents did not take any complaint action at all. Those who took action, engaged in private (hidden or indirect) action (i.e. complained to family and friends, used another brand name and stopped supporting the retailer), and complained publicly to retailers and/or took their appliance to independent repair services. Despite their high levels of dissatisfaction, respondents tended not to engage in formal complaint behaviour.

Respondents engaged in negative word-of-mouth to gain social support (informational, emotional, or tangible support) concerning their dissatisfaction with the performance failure of their major electrical appliances. The main reason for switching brands relates to the perceived unreliability of the brand name concerned. They stopped supporting retailers because they felt that they could no longer trust them. Such avoidance actions are mainly spurred by cognitive reasoning. Respondents who contacted retailers/manufacturers to obtain redress or who

complained for other reasons, and those who contacted a repair service other than that supplied by the retailer or manufacturer, dealt with the problem by taking direct action. Such problem-focused tactics are also mainly driven by cognitive reasoning. The main reason for not taking any action involved respondents' perceptions that complaining was not worth their time and effort. The no-action response is therefore mainly impelled by cognitive reasoning.

7.2.3 The relationship between causal attribution and dissatisfied consumers' complaint behaviour concerning the performance failure of major electrical household appliances

The respondents mainly attributed the cause for product failure to factors external to themselves, such as the manufacturers' "wrong-doing" ("the manufacturer provided poor workmanship"), compared to human error and other reasons. Although they perceived the cause for product failure as external, they were ambivalent in their perception of the stability and control dimensions (i.e. they were uncertain about whether their appliances would fail if they were to purchase the same appliances in the future, and about whether retailers and manufacturers really have control over product failures).

Black and Caucasian respondents' perceptions of the cause for product failure differed in terms of the locus and controllability dimensions. Whereas the black consumers considered the cause for product failure to be relatively external and relatively controllable, the Caucasian consumers perceived the cause for product failure as external and relatively less controllable. Both Caucasians and blacks considered the cause for product failure to be relatively stable.

In some cases, there were significant differences between respondents who engaged in a particular complaint action and those who did not, as far as their perception of the locus, stability and controllability dimensions of the perceived cause for product failure were concerned. Although some of the differences are surprising, it should be noted that the differences lie in relative terms as opposed to absolute terms, explaining why consumers do not actively engage in formal complaint action. The respondents who did not engage in negative word-of-mouth considered the cause for product failure to be more external, compared to the respondents who did engage in negative word-of-mouth. However, both these groups considered the cause for product failure to be relatively unstable and relatively controllable. Both the group of respondents who decided to use another brand name and the group who did not, considered the cause for the product failure as external and as relatively controllable. However, the group of respondents who switched to another brand name considered the cause for product failure to be relatively

stable, compared to the group who did not use another brand name, and who considered the cause for the product failure to be relatively unstable. Contrary to expectation, the group of respondents who stopped supporting the retailer where the product was purchased considered the cause for product failure to be less external, compared to those who continued supporting the retailer. They also perceived the cause for product failure to be relatively stable compared to the group of respondents who continued supporting the retailer (and who perceived the cause for the product failure as relatively unstable) – thus confirming expectations. However, both these groups considered the cause for the product failure as relatively controllable. Contrary to expectation, the group of respondents who did not contact the retailer/manufacturer to complain for other reasons than seeking redress, considered the cause for product failure to be more external and relatively unstable compared to the group who did contact the retailer/manufacturer for other reasons than seeking redress, and who perceived the cause as external and relatively stable. However, both these groups of respondents considered the product failure to be relatively controllable. These findings concerning the above-mentioned complaint actions imply that, although respondents perceived the locus dimensions to be external (whether it is external or more or less external), and the controllability dimensions to be relatively controllable, they expected future product failures. These expectations impelled their complaint behaviour.

The interplay between the locus and controllability dimensions might have augmented respondents' perception of blame for the product failure and their subsequent complaint behaviour. Anger was a significant predictor of negative word-of-mouth behaviour. Those respondents who experienced higher the levels of anger experienced were more likely to take action as opposed to no action, switch brand names and stop supporting retailers (private action), and to contact the retailer/manufacturer to complain for other reasons than seeking redress, compared to those with lower levels of anger. Irrespective of the levels of anger experienced, respondents contacted retailers for redress. Additionally, anger did not play a significant role in the respondents' participation in formal complaint action. In the context of cognitive appraisal theory, consumers might not employ the problem-focused complaining, in this case formal complaint action, when they believe that they have low coping potential (i.e., respondent might believe that it is worthless to complain formally (i.e. nothing will be gained).

7.2.4 The relationship between specific consumer-related variables and dissatisfied consumers' complaint behaviour concerning the performance failure of major electrical household appliances

No significant relationships exist between gender, age and level of education on the one hand, and the different types of complaint action on the other. However, in the study, consumers from the lower income groups were more inclined to stop supporting retailers, and to contact retailers/manufacturers to complain for reasons other than seeking redress, compared to respondents from upscale income groups. Additionally, black respondents were more inclined to use another brand name, stop supporting the retailer, complain to retailers and manufactures to obtain redress and to complain for other reasons than obtaining redress, compared to the Caucasian respondents. The interplay between the locus and controllability dimensions might have augmented respondents' perception of blame for the product failure and their subsequent complaint behaviour. Black respondents engaged more actively in the above-mentioned complaint actions, compared to the Caucasian respondents.

7.2.5 The relationship between product-specific variables and dissatisfied consumers' complaint behaviour concerning the performance failure of major electrical household appliances

The respondents who perceived the performance failure as very severe to extremely severe were more likely to take action (as opposed to not taking action), use another brand name and stop supporting the retailer than respondents who varied between not severe to somewhat severe. Irrespective of their perception of the severity of the performance failure they tended to engage in negative word-of-mouth communications, and to contact the retailer/manufacture to obtain redress. Additionally, respondents' decision to contact the retailer for redress, not to complain for other reasons than seeking redress and not to engage in formal complaint behaviour, were not determined by their perceptions of the severity of the performance failure. This may help to explain respondents' general passivity concerning public complaint action (especially formal complaint behaviour).

7.3 EVALUATION OF THE RESEARCH

7.3.1 Quality of the results

In the next section the quality of the data is discussed in terms of its validity and reliability. In terms of Mouton's (1996:111-112) validity framework, the dimensions of validity include: theoretical validity, measurement validity and inferential validity. The validity of measurements (measurement validity) can be determined by using standard yardsticks including face validity, content validity and construct validity (Babbie & Mouton, 2002:122-124; Delport, 2005:160-162). "Reliability is primarily concerned not with *what* is being measured but with *how well* it is being measured" (Delport, 2005:163).

7.3.1.1 Theoretical validity

A thorough review of the literature was done to become acquainted with established theories that have been successfully applied in similar research. The expectancy disconfirmation model (Churchill & Suprenant, 1982; Bearden & Teel, 1983), Weiner's (1986) attribution theory and Day and Landon's (1977) taxonomy of consumer complaint behaviour, all of which are established theories, were integrated into a theoretical framework to guide this research. Consumers' reasons for engaging in particular complaint actions were obtained from the relevant literature. Additionally, the central concepts of consumer dissatisfaction, attributional processing, and consumer complaint behaviour were clarified and unambiguously explicated in terms of theoretical definitions found in the literature.

Additional sources of written information (newspaper complaint letters, online letters to consumer complaint websites and product instruction leaflets) were explored, enabling the researcher to gain a better understanding of the functional and symbolic performance dimensions of major electrical household appliances and to explicate these concepts. Through exploration, the researcher learned what would be the right questions to ask and the most meaningful ways to pose questions in the larger survey.

In this study a self-administered questionnaire was administered to collect data. The respondents were pre-screened, and only those who had experienced dissatisfaction with a major electrical household appliance item within the prior four years, were included in this study. Respondents' description of an autobiographical episode (in this case a description of the performance failure of a major electrical household appliance item), followed by questions to

elicit the attributor's reasons for the specific incident (i.e. the product failure), formed the basis for coding the responses. Although respondents' memory decay may pose a source of error in terms of the reliability of the data collected, the above-mentioned Critical Incident Technique was still used because the technique reflects "real-life" reactions (respondents report on real product failures compared to experimental studies where possible causes for product failure are manipulated by the researcher).

7.3.1.2 Measurement validity

During the process of operationalisation, a measuring instrument is developed. The predominant epistemological criterion is measurement validity. The dimensions of measurement validity include face validity, content validity and construct validity. Other methodological strategies, such as scale validation and pilot testing, can be employed to ensure the measurement validity of the measuring instrument (Mouton, 1996:110, 111).

Although **face validity** is not technically a form of validation, it is a desirable characteristic of a measuring instrument (Delpont, 2005:161). In the case of the questionnaire, the indicators were structured in such a way that they were clearly relevant measurements of the variables. The questions clearly related to the performance failure of major electrical household appliances, attributions for product failures, causal dimensions and consumer complaint behaviour.

The denotations of the central concepts were accurate indicators of the connotations of concepts. Additionally, the items in the questionnaire related to the sub-objectives of the study (contributing to **content validity**).

The constructs for this study were precisely explicated, as already discussed in the paragraph on theoretical validity, thus contributing to **construct validity**. Multiple indicators were used to measure the constructs (of performance failure and causal dimension) to prevent mono-operation bias. Previous studies have verified the validity of Russell's (1982) Causal Dimension Scale as a measuring instrument (scale validation). Additionally, the questionnaire was pilot-tested.

The study leaders aided the researcher in evaluating the face validity, content validity and construct validity of the measuring instruments.

7.3.1.3 Inferential validity

In this study, appropriate statistical techniques were used for specific levels of measurement. Inferences were drawn according to the principles of statistical inference. Conclusions (as the outcome of the analysis and data-interpretation) followed logically from the empirical evidence.

7.3.1.4 Reliability

Techniques to develop the reliability of measurements include: the use of established measurements and the training of fieldworkers (Babbie & Mouton, 2002:123). In this study, an adapted version of Russell's Causal Dimension Scale was used to allow respondents to translate their causal attributions for the failure or poor performance of appliances into causal dimensions themselves. This was done to avoid what Russell called the "fundamental attribution research error", whereby attributions made by the subject are "translated" into causal dimensions by the researcher (Russell, 1982; Folkes, 1984; Russell *et al.*, 1987; Hewstone, 1989:33-34, 184). This prevented the researcher from making biased classifications of causes into causal dimensions, and so contributed to the reliability of the data. (Previous studies have verified the validity of Russell's (1982) Causal Dimension Scale as a measuring instrument.) In the Likert-type scale (to determine the different types of performance failures) and the adapted version of Russell's Causal Dimension Scale, multiple indicators of variables were used, contributing to the reliability of the data. Fieldworkers were trained and were given clear instructions concerning the aims of the study to ensure the reliability of data.

To prevent respondent bias, it was stated in the covering letter that the researcher was only interested in respondents' opinions and experiences and that there were no right or wrong answers to questions. Respondents were also assured of their anonymity.

Due to the convenience sampling technique, the results of the study are limited to the specific sample, which means that the findings cannot be generalised to a larger population. However, this limitation does not mean that the implications of this study should be considered to have no value. The implications of this study can open up new avenues for further research. Additionally, manufacturers and retailers could benefit concerning their management of complaint handling strategies (refer to par 7.4). Bearing in mind the statistical techniques for the analysis of the data, the sample size of 200 was considered to be sufficient.

7.4 CONTRIBUTION TO THE THEORY

This study made theoretical contributions to the field. For specific products (such as clothing) the constructs of functional and symbolic performance failures can be regarded as separate constructs (i.e. consumers differentiate between functional and symbolic product clothing failures) (see Chapter 2, par 2.2.2). However, as far as major electrical household appliances are concerned, the constructs of functional and symbolic performance failures can not be regarded as individual constructs, but should be regarded as a combined construct when explaining appliance failures. Therefore, from a theoretical point of view, consumers' dissatisfaction with their appliances is determined by a combination of (both) functional and symbolic performance results – thus contributing to the knowledge (theory building) about the topic.

Female and black respondents were more certain that their appliances' combined functional and symbolic performance was less than their initial expectations for product performance, compared to the male and Caucasian respondents. Since consumers expectations with appliances would inter alia be based on the previous experience with, and knowledge of, the appliances, the role of consumers' product related socialisation cannot be ignored. Experienced and knowledgeable consumers will be better able to form realistic expectations concerning product performance and will be better able to discern when a product's performance does not match prior expectations for that product (as may be the case for South African female consumers who are still the main operators of major electrical household appliances). On the other hand, inexperienced and less knowledgeable consumers may struggle to form realistic expectations for product performance and may therefore struggle to determine whether product performance fails to meet expectations (as may be the case for upcoming black South Africans).

This study describes respondents' dissatisfaction with the performance failure of their major electrical household appliances in terms of the product failure categories (cooling appliances were considered to be a major product failure category) and the types of performance failures (combined functional and symbolic performance failure), thus contributing to statistics concerning dissatisfactory major electrical household appliances. However, the interpretation of the above-mentioned is meaningless without looking at respondents' cognitions and emotions underlying their complaint behaviour. Therefore, respondents' attributions for product failure were studied in terms of their interpretation of the underlying causal dimensions of locus, stability and controllability to explain their cognitions and emotions impelling their complaint behaviour.

Product failures were mainly attributed to external factors (i.e. the retailers' wrong-doing) compared to human error, confirming the influencing role of self-serving attributional bias in consumers' interpretation of product failures.

Consumers' perception of causes in terms of the locus, stability and controllability causal dimensions influences their emotions, their expectations for future product failure and their consumer complaint behaviour. Black respondents perceived the cause for product failure as relatively controllable and relatively external, compared to Caucasian respondents, who perceived the cause for product failure as external and relatively less controllable. Both groups of respondents perceived the cause for product failure as relatively stable, implying that they possibly will expect future failure for the product if it is purchased and used again. Black consumers were more inclined to switch brand names, to stop supporting the retailer and to contact the retailer for other reasons than seeking redress, compared to their Caucasian counterparts. Black consumers seem to be generally more brand conscious than Caucasian consumers and favour symbols of style and wealth (The Black Diamonds 2007 – on the move, 2007). In today's consumerist society, luxury brands are often purchased – not only for the feeling of sophistication, but also for the need to impress other people. Black consumers (i.e. the "Black diamonds") are increasingly becoming wealthier and sophisticated, and are adopting Western (individualistic) values. They therefore tend to exhibit higher levels of assertiveness and confidence, and radiate a sense of being in control. Although the different household monthly income groups did not perceive the locus, stability and controllability differently, proportionately more lower-end income respondents stopped supporting the retailer where the product was purchased and contacted the retailer/manufacturer to complain for other reasons than seeking redress, compared to the higher-end income groups. It may be that these lower-income consumers are more selective since they simply cannot afford to buy products and brands that might fail and need to be replaced.

Despite the high levels of dissatisfaction experienced, respondents did not engage in formal complaint behaviour, implying that other factors need to be examined to study consumers' complaint behaviour. Respondents' relative uncertainty concerning the locus and controllability dimensions for product failure explain why fairly equal proportions of the respondents experienced no anger to reasonable anger, and were very angry to extremely angry respectively. The interplay between the locus and controllability dimensions probably augments respondents' perception of blame for the product failure and their level of anger experienced,

driving their subsequent complaint behaviour. Respondents who were very angry to extremely angry tended to take action (as opposed to no action), engaged in negative word-of-mouth behaviour, switched brands, stopped supporting retailers where the product was purchased, and contacted the retailer/manufacturer to complain for other reasons than seeking redress, compared to respondents who experienced no anger to reasonable anger. However, these levels of anger did not spur formal complaint action – partly explaining consumers' general passivity concerning formal complaint action.

The more severe that respondents perceive the product failure to be, the more likely they were to use other brand names and to take their custom elsewhere. Irrespective of respondents' perception of the severity of the product failure, nearly none of the respondents engaged in formal complaint behaviour – partly explaining consumers' passivity concerning formal complaint action.

This study integrated the expectancy disconfirmation model (Churchill & Suprenant, 1982; Bearden & Teel, 1983) (satisfaction/dissatisfaction research), Weiner's (1986) causal dimensions (attribution theory), and Day and Landon's (1977) taxonomy of complaint behaviour (complaint behaviour theory), to contribute to researchers' understanding of consumers' complaint behaviour in respect of their dissatisfaction with major household appliances. Additionally, the moderating role of consumer-related variables (demographics) and a product-specific variable (the severity of the product failure) were also studied. The above-mentioned theories, and specific concepts from these theories, were integrated to provide a comprehensive framework for the study of consumers' complaint behaviour.

Additionally, cognitive appraisal theory was used to explain consumers' complaint behaviour in terms of specific coping methods/behaviours. The cognitive and emotional qualities underlying consumers' reasons for their complaint behaviour were studied to determine whether the particular complaint actions were mainly driven by cognitive reasoning, emotional reasoning or a combination of both. By studying the cognitive and emotional qualities underlying the reasons for consumers' complaint behaviour, researchers can gain a better understanding of consumers' choice of specific coping strategies.

Additionally, the differences between the complaint behaviour of Caucasians and blacks were explained in terms of the individualistic/collectivistic dimensions of culture as well as the role of consumer socialisation in their expectations of product performance.

Consumers' complaint behaviour concerning their dissatisfaction with major electrical household appliances is multifaceted. A myriad of factors need to be integrated in a conceptual framework, instead of focusing on a combination of a few factors, to ensure a good understanding of the interaction between the factors influencing South African consumers' complaint behaviour.

7.5 IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has practical implications for manufacturers, retailers and policy makers, as well as for consumer scientists who take responsibility for the education of consumers.

The general conception is that consumers expect their major electrical household appliances “to perform their job well to save time and energy”. However, consumers do not complain about functional performance failures only. Marketing analysts, retailers, manufactures and complaint handling personnel should be attentive to the fact that consumers do not differentiate between the functional and symbolic performance dimensions of product performance when evaluating the actual performance of appliances – consumers actually use these qualitatively different kinds of performance dimensions in combination. This has implications for the effective handling of complaints in the sense that complaint handling personnel should see complaints through the eyes of customers (i.e. as a combination of functional and symbolic performance failures) to improve their understanding of the customers' dissatisfaction.

Since consumers' expectations are partially based on the marketing efforts of companies, companies' promotional efforts concerning the performance of appliances should be realistic, in order to avoid creating false expectations concerning the anticipated benefits to be derived directly from the products themselves (i.e. functional utility), and/or other benefits resulting from the purchase and use of appliances (i.e. what the product does for, or symbolises to, the consumer). More information about the operation, maintenance and care of appliances should be provided to consumers via in-store marketing and advertising materials. Consumers who know what to expect of their appliance in terms of its functional and symbolic performance might also be more inclined to actively engage in complaint behaviour, compared to those who are not exactly sure what to expect. This will give retailers and manufacturers the opportunity to resolve consumers' product dissatisfactions.

Due to self-serving attributional bias, some people might prefer to attribute bad outcomes (in this case, product failure) to external factors (manufacturers) rather than to their own transgressions. Consumers do not have control over such biases, but manufacturers and retailers can play a

role in handling this kind of predisposition. Manufacturers and retailers should be aware of consumers' perceived causes for product failure and the latent dimensionality (locus, stability and controllability) of those causes. However, manufacturers and retailers are generally unaware of consumers' mental reasoning concerning the causes of appliance failures because they cannot "read their customers' minds"; this is especially true when consumers do not formally complain to manufacturers and retailers. In addition to the provision of honest advertising regarding products' performance to create realistic expectations for product performance, manufacturers should continuously improve the quality of their appliances. When consumers have realistic "standards" against which they can evaluate the performance of their appliances, they will be better able to interpret the causal dimensions underlying their understanding of product failures. This will allow them to attribute failures to the responsible parties and to engage in complaint action accordingly.

Good business practice requires that retailers and complaint handling employees should adhere to the notion that "the customer is always right". However, people's perceptions of what they believe the causes are for product failure are sometimes far removed from the truth. Therefore, the customer might not always be right, since some consumers unintentionally over-attribute causes of product failure to external parties (manufacturers), and some consumers are not always honest about the reasons for product failures. Retailers and complaint handling employees should be aware of these inconsistencies to facilitate their comprehension of consumers' dissatisfaction and anger when their products fail, even when retailers or manufacturer are not the responsible parties. This has implications for the formulation of complaint handling programmes to assist retailers and complaint handling employees. Complaint handling personnel should be trained to understand consumers' reasoning underlying their complaint behaviour and to deal with complaints effectively.

The problem-focused coping strategy results when consumers feel harm or threat to their personal well-being but also perceive themselves as having strong coping potential (Nyer, 1997). Dissatisfied consumers in this category will contact external parties (retailers and manufacturers) in the form of face-to-face, phone or mail-based complaint interactions. Behaviour associated with this strategy (contacting the retailer/manufacturer to obtain redress, contacting the retailer/manufacturer to complain for reasons other than seeking redress, contacting a repair service other than that supplied by the retailer or manufacturer) is mainly based on cognitive reasoning (rational thoughts directing direct action), as opposed to emotional reasoning (although anger is present). In this context, rational reasoning refers to thoughts that focus on the decision that action needs to be taken to alleviate product dissatisfaction (e.g. "the

appliance failed but is still under guarantee,” “the appliance’s guarantee has expired, but it should have lasted longer”, “the household cannot function properly without the appliance”, “the brand name is not reliable any more”). The emotion-focused coping strategy results when consumers perceive themselves as having low coping potential. These consumers will seek social support from significant others (such as family and friends) to feel less angry and less frustrated. Seeking social support is primarily determined by emotional reasoning (cognitive efforts to feel better about the situation), but consumers may also employ rational reasoning (such as “warning other people about the brand name/manufacturer/retailer”) in order to gain social support. Consumers employ negative word-of-mouth to their advantage, but it is very damaging to the company’s reputation and results in the loss of potential and existing customers, and thus impacts on the company’s revenue. Consumers who employ the coping strategy of avoidance will either take no action (do nothing at all in response to their dissatisfaction) or take their custom to the competition and/or switch brands. These actions are mainly regulated by cognitive reasoning (e.g. “I did not think it was worth the time and effort/hassle to take action”, “the appliance’s guarantee had expired”). When managing stressful situations, specifically product failure, consumers may engage in problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and avoidance coping simultaneously.

By looking at the coping strategies (in terms of the related behaviours and cognitions) that consumers employ in reducing the stress caused by product failures, researchers can gain valuable insights into the reasons for consumers’ particular complaint behaviour. Although consumers’ cognitions for complaint behaviour are not obvious to retailers and manufacturers, who are only confronted with the particular complaint behaviours, an understanding of consumers’ reasoning prior to engaging in particular complaint actions might contribute to the improvement of organisational strategies to convince consumers to engage in overt and direct voicing of their dissatisfaction rather than in covert actions. Since consumers’ coping behaviours and cognitions are spurred by attributions of blame and anger, explicit action should be taken to deal with such attributions of blame and anger. This implies that staff should be trained to deal with upset customers in a friendly and prompt manner to prevent their customers from experiencing more anger and spreading more negative word-of-mouth.

Since word-of-mouth communication usually occurs through sources that consumers view as more accessible and perceived as being more credible (i.e. family, friends, reference groups), it is thought to have a very powerful influence on consumers’ evaluations – more than information received through commercial sources (i.e. advertisements and in-store marketing) (Laczniak, DeCarlo & Ramaswami, 2001). Although retailers and manufacturers cannot prevent their

customers from engaging in negative word-of-mouth communications, their complaint handling services should be so effective as to prevent their customers from experiencing more anger and spreading more negative word-of-mouth.

Consumers' general uncertainty about their perceptions of the causes for product failure in terms of the stability and controllability dimensions might explain their general passivity and unwillingness to engage in formal complaint behaviour (i.e. complaints to third parties). A complete change of attitude for both consumers and retailers/manufacturers is needed in this regard. To encourage consumers to complain, retailers and manufacturers should provide consumers with ample information regarding their consumer rights, which inter alia include the right to be informed, the right to be heard, the right to redress and the right to consumer education. Information about consumers' rights is often supplied by independent parties such as consumer protection organisations. It is, however, high time for retailers to collaborate with these organisations to provide consumers with the relevant information, whether in the form of in-store educational programmes or informative pamphlets and DVDs. Consumer protection organisations, retailers and manufacturers should therefore empower consumers by actively promoting consumers' rights.

An understanding of cross-cultural differences in complaint behaviour could be helpful to retailers, manufactures, consumer organisations, and government agencies. South African marketers, retailers and manufacturers should use *ubuntu* to their best advantage by encouraging the multicultural society of South Africa to actively participate in public (formal) complaint behaviour (i.e. complain to retailers/manufacturers instead of taking part in private responses that never get to their attention). An understanding of consumer complaint behaviour can help to develop effective complaint resolution strategies, which may help to retain customers instead of losing them to the competition, and may reduce the likelihood of damaging covert responses. Bearing in mind the influence of the emerging upcoming middle class, specifically the "Black Diamonds", and the fact that all consumers have the right to complain about unsatisfactory products, research about product failures, consumer dissatisfaction and consumers' subsequent complaint behaviour is of vital importance. In the South African context, more studies about the correlation between culture and various consumer related, product related and redress-environment related variables concerning consumers' dissatisfaction with products will be of immense value, since the disparity between collectivistic (Afro-centric) and individualistic (Euro-centric) societies remains one of the major barriers between cultural groups. Additionally, researchers, retailers and manufacturers need to realise that the process of

acculturation in the New South Africa has important implications for the development of marketing strategies to assist and empower consumers and to retain loyal consumers.

Minor product failures can cause just as much harm as more serious product failures in terms of negative word-of-mouth. Therefore, manufacturers should maintain high standards of quality control and retailers should sell high quality products to enhance positive word-of-mouth, since no appliances are exempt from product failure. Higher levels of performance failure severity are associated with consumers' decision to use other brand names and to stop supporting the retailer from whom the product was purchased. Consumers might not engage in formal complaint actions because they are not prepared to go through the trouble of engaging in formal complaint action, implying passivity on their part. Additionally, consumers' low coping potential concerning third-party complaint action might have a role to play (i.e. consumers might believe that it is worthless to complain formally nothing will be gained). Consumer protection organisations and the media (newspapers, magazines, television, radio) should encourage consumers to complain about product failures to facilitate the improvement of product quality and to change consumers' passive mindsets to those of consumers that are standing up for their rights – a force to be heard and to be reckoned with!

Both retailers and manufacturers should be aware of, and above all, not underestimate, the impact of hidden or indirect complaint activities such as engaging in adverse word-of-mouth marketing, boycotting the retailer and switching brands. Consumers should be encouraged to take part in direct complaint action, requiring that complaint policies and strategies be in place. Although many retailers and manufacturers do have complaint policies and strategies of some kind, many members of their staff do not know how to manage consumers' complaints effectively. This implies that staff members need to be informed about complaint and return policies (especially policies concerning product warranties) and trained in effective handling of complaints. However, before staff can handle complaints, they should first gain proper product knowledge to facilitate them in recognising product problems. This remains a very big challenge in South Africa, since many employees sell products that they have never owned or used themselves. Retailers and manufacturers should encourage consumers to provide them with feedback; in fact, they should make it easier for consumers to complain. Companies should provide their mailing address, website address, contact numbers, toll-free numbers and an invitation to provide feedback, in all publicly viewed material, including promotional communications, packaging, invoices etc. Information leaflets and in-store communication via sales assistants should be provided concerning return policies and after-sales repair service to enable consumers to follow the correct route for complaint action. Customer service centres

should be clearly visible so that people may know where to go when they want to complain. In this day and age, retailers and manufacturers should have appropriate websites to allow consumers to complain on-line and to enquire about corrective action. The successful implementation of the above measures will increase consumers' coping potential and might prevent them from following hidden complaint actions or, even worse, engaging in third-party complaints (i.e. contacting newspapers, legal advisors or consumer councils).

In many instances, businesses/organisations do have all of these strategies in place, but the will to actively resolve complaints is lacking. It is stressed again that staff over the whole spectrum (including sales assistants, customer service staff, complaint handling staff, managers etc.) should be encouraged to practise good complaint handling ethics in order to increase customer satisfaction, to prevent customers from taking their business to the competition or, to prevent customers from going to third parties, and especially to stop them from spreading additional negative word-of-mouth. This can only work when the whole team is committed to effective complaint handling. Complaint handling employees should understand that dissatisfied and angry consumers usually want some form of restitution (e.g. price reduction or free repair service). Even though the provision of restitution is not always possible, the least that retailers and manufacturers could do is to provide a sincere apology and explain that corrective action has been taken to ensure that the same product problem will not recur (provided that this is the truth).

Dissatisfaction is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for consumers' complaining behaviour concerning the functional/symbolic performance failure of their major household appliances. Many factors influence the process by which dissatisfied consumers determine what, if any, action will be taken. Therefore, influencing factors (i.e. consumer-related variables, product-specific variables and redress environment variables) should be studied to aid researchers in understanding consumers' level of dissatisfaction experienced as well as their subsequent complaint behaviour, which may not necessarily be related to the level of dissatisfaction experienced. Additionally, complaint handling staff should be made aware that consumers' complaint behaviour involves more than just their level of dissatisfaction experienced. Complaint handling staff should be trained to deal with different types of consumers' dissatisfaction effectively. This implies that they should be able to deal with consumers with different levels of sophistication, in the correct manner, to avoid further dissatisfaction and frustration.

Thus, although retailers and manufacturers usually consider consumers' complaints in a negative light and want to eliminate them, retailers and manufacturers should rather encourage consumers to provide them with feedback concerning their dissatisfaction with products. This would enable them to remedy product problems, increase consumer satisfaction and retain loyal customers.

Consumer protection organisations should remind manufacturers and retailers about their social responsibility towards consumers. The different role-players should join hands to persuade consumers to actively exercise their right to complain, and so help to create a "culture of complaining" instead of a "spirit of passivity" concerning their dissatisfaction with the performance of their major electrical household appliances.

7.6 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study touched on the role that culture plays in consumers' complaint behaviour concerning their dissatisfaction with major household appliances. Studies have shown that people's experience of emotions differ in individualistic and collectivistic societies. In individualistic societies, people are more likely to experience ego-focused emotions such as anger and frustration, and the intensity of these emotions is likely to be higher compared to people from collectivistic societies (Laufer, 2002). This suggests that consumers from different cultural backgrounds might attribute causes for product failures differently (i.e. their perception of the dimensionality of causes might differ), and might therefore cope differently with product failures. Bearing this in mind, South Africa's multi-cultural context provides a rich canvas for investigating the behaviour – especially the complaint behaviour – of differing cultures. Future consumer behaviour studies should look at consumers' culture, cognitions and emotions to fully understand the roots of their complaint behaviour. People's cultural orientation need to be measured to examine the mechanism of cultural influence on complaining behaviour (Chelminski, 2001). This might be especially true of countries such as South Africa, where different cultural groupings live together and have the potential to acculturate.

One cannot study consumer complaint behaviour without looking at the object of their dissatisfaction (in this sense, dissatisfactory products). People buy products not only for functional but also for symbolic purposes. This study only investigated and described consumers' complaint behaviour concerning major household appliances. Other product industries (selling status symbols such as cars, clothing and furniture) could certainly benefit

from similar research into their customers' complaint behaviour concerning their dissatisfactory products.

It should be noted that in this case, the role of other individual characteristics such as consumers' personality traits and psychological characteristics (psychographics) in complaining behaviour was not taken into account. However, (depending on time and monetary constraints and the objectives of the research), these aspects should also be studied to get a comprehensive view of the role of consumer-related variables in consumers' complaint action versus non-complaint action.

Since a fair amount of consumers contact retailers/manufacturers for redress, especially when their major electrical household appliances are still under guarantee, the role of redress environment factors (i.e. factors that are controlled or primarily influenced by retailers) should be studied to explain consumers' reasons for their behaviour. Additionally these factors should be studied to explain why some consumers do not contact retailers/manufacturers for redress. The interplay between consumer-related factors, pertaining to the psychological costs involved in making complaints, and redress environment variables should also be studied.