

**ONLINE APPAREL SHOPPING BEHAVIOUR OF SOUTH AFRICAN  
PROFESSIONAL WOMEN: THE ROLE OF CONSUMERS' APPAREL SHOPPING  
SCRIPTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to explore the role that female consumers' apparel shopping scripts play in the adoption of the Internet for apparel purchasing from a social-cognitive approach. In this study, the focus was on exploring the cognitive structures (shopping scripts) that consumers have and use to make decisions such as adopting the Internet for apparel purchasing.

Rogers' (1995) adoption of an innovation model was used as theoretical framework for the study and a social-cognitive perspective theory (source) was incorporated into this model. A qualitative research strategy was adopted and 24 semi-structured interviews were held with professional women, living in a major city in South Africa. As a stimulus technique, the participants were asked visit various apparel web sites. Data analysis was done according to the data analysis process proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994).

The participants explicitly mentioned that they currently value certain steps, actions and procedures such as touching and scrunching textiles as well as trying on the items before deciding to buy them. They indicated that their current purchasing practices played an important role in their considering whether to adopt the Internet or not.

This study is one of the few that have used qualitative research methods to explore consumers' adoption of the Internet for apparel purchasing. The social-cognitive approach used in this study enables retailers and marketers to study consumers' adoption processes from the consumer's perspective. A limitation of the study is that only professional women, from a homogeneous culture, residing in the same major city were used as participants. This

however, does not give a representative view of South African online shopping behaviour or that of a third world country. Future studies are needed, focusing on a more national as well as multi-cultural perspectives.

**Keywords:** Apparel, Consumer, Internet usage, Shopping behaviour, Scripts, professional women

## INTRODUCTION

Internet retailing continues to be the fastest growing retail channel (Kim, Kim & Lennon, 2007). Various researchers underline the importance of apparel as a product category on the Internet and are of the opinion that online apparel purchases will become an ever-increasing part of online sales (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2002; Park & Stoel, 2002; Yoh & Damhorst, 2000). This is in accordance with Nielsen's global consumer report which states that there is a significant growth in online apparel shopping (Nielsen, 2008). Apparel sales recently outpaced computer goods for the first time in the United States and are one of the merchandising categories contributing to the high sales volume of e-tailers. Apparel, accessories and footwear contributed approximately \$14 billion of the \$220 billion spent online between 2003 and 2006 in the USA (Forrester, 2007). In 2007 the total spent on online retail goods in South Africa was \$123 million. Even though a growth of 35% in South African online retailing was expected in 2007 this does not include apparel and still only pertains to popular product categories purchased online, such as books, CDs and DVDs, travel products and groceries (Goldstuck, 2007).

According to Hawkins, Best and Coney (2001), "...*acquiring consumption-related knowledge is a life-long process.*" Consumers are socialized to shop in a specific manner over a life-time. The discrepancy between the United States and a country such as South Africa may be attributed to the USA's century-old practice of purchasing apparel via mail. Sears and

Roebuck sold clothing via their catalogs as early as 1895 (Searsarchives). Thus, consumers in the USA have a history of ordering apparel through the mail. As a result apparel as a mail-ordering category was probably more easily converted into an online product category in the USA. South African consumers, however, have a history of purchasing books and CDs via mail which was probably more easily converted into online product categories and into online sales (Goldstuck, 2002). Consumers from the USA may have established scripts for purchasing apparel through catalogs and adapted them to purchasing apparel over the Internet. Many consumers from countries other than the USA may not have shopping scripts for purchasing apparel via catalogs that could be adapted for the Internet. The purpose of this study was therefore to explore and describe the role that existing apparel shopping scripts play in female consumers' adoption of the Internet for online apparel purchasing in South Africa.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Consumers' cognitive structures are established over time, through consumer socialization, exposure and personal experiences (Nagasawa, Hutton & Kaiser, 1991). Consumers use these cognitive structures to make sense of the commercial world they interact with. These internal cognitive structures or frameworks (also called schemata) represent the total integrated network of information, feelings, attitudes and associated ideas and behaviours that consumers have about a product category, brand, store or shopping medium (Foxall & Goldsmith, 1994). "A special type of schemata, called a script, is a stereotyped event sequence describing what a consumer should do in a particular consumption situation" (Foxall & Goldsmith, 1994). According to Shoemaker (1996) these scripts contain knowledge of how to purchase a specific product or how to do things. Scripts resemble production rules in the form of a condition/action pairing Anderson (1982). In other words certain sequences, actions and procedures of how to buy goods will be contained in a script. The memory of how

an action sequence should occur for purchasing apparel could therefore be referred to as a shopping script. Shopping scripts are necessary for consumers to shop effectively (Hawkins *et al.*, 2001). Understanding the sequence of events involved in shopping is an important aspect of understanding consumer's decision-making behaviour (John, 1999). A well-known consumption situation, such as apparel purchasing, will have an apparel shopping script which will contain complex sequences of behaviour for the apparel purchasing situation.

Shopping scripts are thought to be useful to consumers because they can be activated automatically when the consumer is confronted with a familiar situation, and because they guide behaviour without requiring much thought or deliberation from the consumer (Bozinoff, 1982). Shopping scripts are of particular interest because they contain information relevant to a specific situation or event and once established help individuals interpret such or similar situations (Baron & Byrne, 1997). DeLong, Minshall and Larntz (1986) hold that script theory is especially applicable for evaluating new information or situations such as purchasing apparel online because it may help to understand the effects of cognitive structures on this phenomenon. In terms of this study, the term script pertains to all the knowledge consumers have about their current purchasing practice (purchasing apparel in a store or via catalogs) and how they use it to address a new purchasing channel (adopting the Internet for purchasing apparel online).

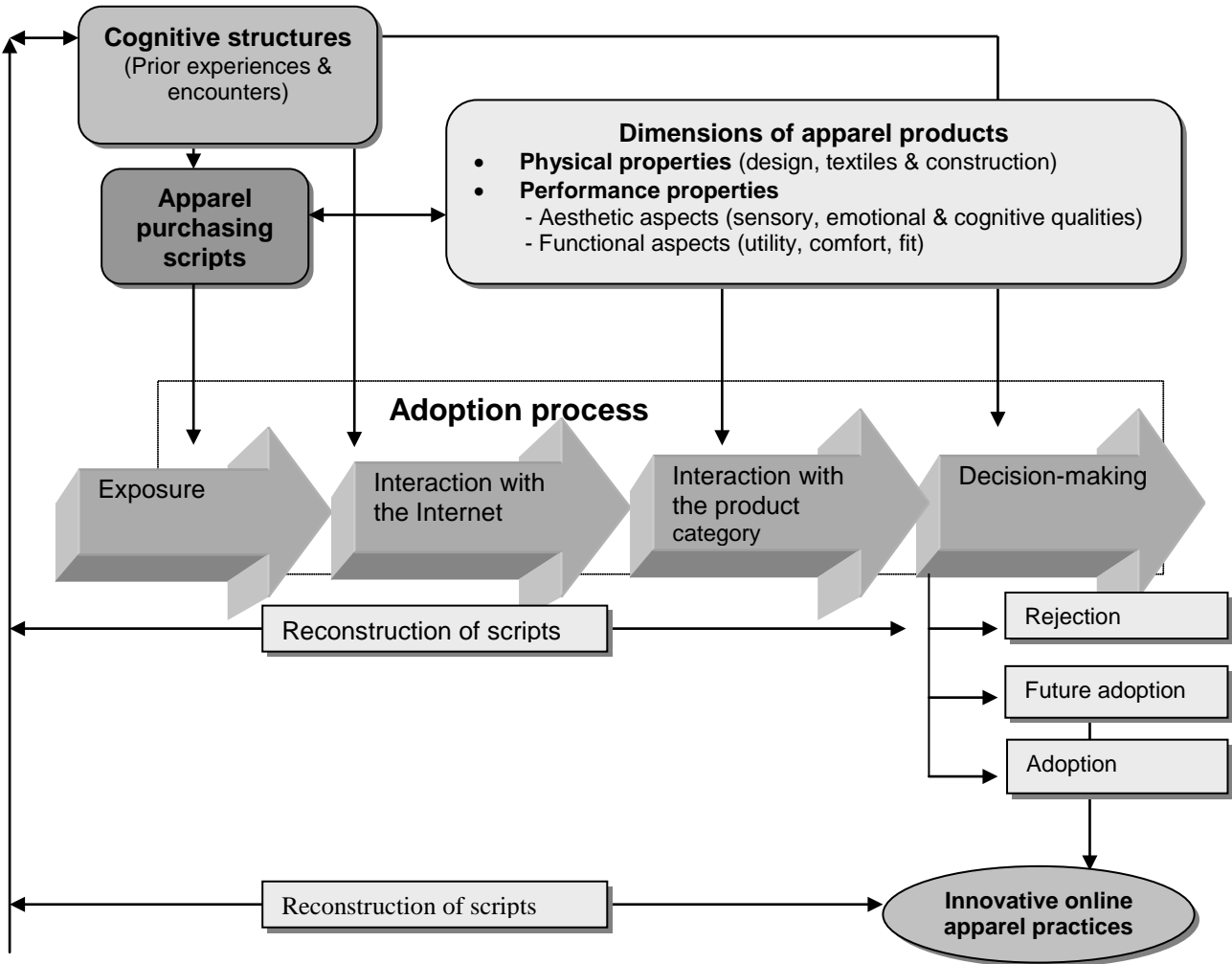
In this study, Rogers' (1995) innovation decision-making process model (the process of how individuals adopt something new for instance adopting the Internet for apparel purchasing) was used to initiate the conceptual framework. Social-cognitive script theory as well as clothing-consumer behaviour theory was incorporated with Rogers' (1995) model in order to create a conceptual framework for the study (Figure 1). The innovation-decision-making process consists of various subsequent stages. In all the stages, various factors

influence the consumer's adoption process. These stages were adapted for this study to Exposure, Interaction with the Internet, Interaction with the product category and Decision-making. During the **Exposure stage** consumers' previous experiences, practices, needs, and innovativeness are prior conditions that predetermine and direct the adoption of the innovation (Rogers, 1995). In terms of this study the consumer is exposed to a new apparel-purchasing practice. The consumer is aware of the new form of purchasing, but does not have sufficient information and knowledge about it. The consumer's cognitive structures play a very important role in the exposure stage particularly where previous Internet experiences and existing apparel purchasing practices are combined into their shopping scripts. The shopping scripts contained in consumers' mental framework for purchasing apparel will probably regulate any future or innovative purchasing situation.

During **the Interaction with the Internet stage** the nature of consumers' past experiences with an object (Internet) or activity (shopping) also influence their script development (DeLong *et al.*, (1986). Once users have been online for a considerable time they become more at ease with the more challenging aspects of the Internet, such as e-commerce. The regular use of the Internet could lead to future apparel purchases amongst consumers (Goldstuck,2007; Mostert, 2002). Yoh and Damhorst (2000) determined that consumer's previous experiences with the Internet played the most important part in their intention to purchase apparel online.

During **the Interaction with the product category stage** the nature of the product plays an important part in that it has certain dimensions. Consumers' experience with and evaluation of the type of product, in the case of this study, apparel, are important aspects of consumers' decision to adopt the Internet for purchasing (Vrechopoulos *et al.*, 2001), **Decision-making stage:** Consumers are regarded as information processors that use thought processes or heuristics (scripts / decision-making rules) as mental short cuts to simplify the

decision-making process (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000). The acceptance of the Internet by consumers, specifically for apparel purchasing, presupposes a decision where the consumer uses his existing shopping scripts that resulted directly from past experiences or previous purchasing practices, to make a decision. The consumer evaluates and judges the adoption of the Internet as suitable (or not) for the purchasing of apparel within his existing script to be able to reach a rational decision. The consumer's defined ideas on how a product category should be purchase can be seen as a unique cognitive strategy applied by the consumer (Shoemaker, 1996).



**FIGURE 1: SCHEMATIC CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

## **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of the study was to explore and describe the role that existing apparel shopping scripts play in professional women's' adoption of the Internet for online apparel purchasing in South Africa. An ideographic, contextual research strategy was followed which emphasizes that a phenomenon should be understood in terms of the specific context in which it took place, rather than the generalisation of the data (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:273). For the researcher to get a better understanding, the phenomena was explore from the consumer's point of view by using a qualitative approach with individual, semi-structured interviews as a data-collecting technique for the inquiry.

For an ideographic, contextual research strategy as followed in the present study, a smaller sampling framework (5-25 participants) is recommended in order to conduct in-depth inquiry into the context (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Purposive sampling was therefore selected. Purposive sampling increases the scope of the specific information collected because participants can be selected purposefully on the grounds of predetermined characteristics and transferability is enhanced because the findings can be applied in other contexts or to other respondents (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). A criterion for inclusion that directed the purposive sampling was developed from theory. The identified participants had to be professional women between the ages 25 and 35 years, with at least three years tertiary education and who use the Internet on a regular basis. Innovators are generally younger and are characterised by higher levels of academic training in comparison to their peers (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000). Citrin *et al.* (2000) also determined that consumers using the Internet for communication, entertainment and/or education have a greater tendency to adopt it for future purchasing. Professional women's apparel purchasing patterns differ from that of non-working women. Their involvement with time-saving behaviour as well as their evaluation of suitable work clothes also differs from non-working women (Shim & Drake, 1988). Informants were used



to gain access to suitable participants. The informants (identified by the researcher as professional women) were informed about the type of study, the way in which the research would be conducted as well as the objective of the study. They were asked to identify suitable participants that would be willing to participate in the study, comply with the criteria of inclusion for the sampling framework, and who were unknown to the researcher. The participants were between the ages of 25 and 35 years. Their occupations varied from medical doctors, accountants, lawyers to engineers.

Twenty four (24) individual, semi-structured interviews were held with professional women, living in an urban environment in a major city in South Africa. The topics for the semi-structured interviews were derived from the theory incorporated in the conceptual framework. Participants were asked to firstly describe how they currently purchase apparel (steps, actions and sequences). This was done to explore and describe their existing apparel purchasing scripts. They were then requested to go through an online apparel shopping experience as part of a stimulus technique. They had to visit a list of apparel websites and were interviewed on their impressions, experiences, evaluations and assessments regarding 'shopping' for apparel on these websites. The predetermined web-sites consisted of traditional South African clothing retailers with a web-site.

The web-sites visited, covered a spectrum of department stores (culturally/price appropriate) and specialty stores. A list of Internet retailers used in this study is presented in Table I (adopted from the one used in Kim, *et al.*, 2007 to categorise websites used in their study). Participants visited these web-sites in no particular order. They were also given two web-site addresses of well known North-American e-retailers (Lands End/LLBean). This was only for them to have a way of comparing the SA online purchasing situation with an overseas situation.

Web site	Type of retailer/e-tailer	Product Category	Apparel category
www.edgars.co.za	Store e-tailer	Apparel, home and other products	Women's, men's and children
www.foschini.co.za	Store e-tailer	Apparel	Women's
www.queenspark.co.za	Store e-tailer	Apparel	Women's and men's
www.stuttafords.co.za	Store e-tailer	Apparel, home and other products	Women's and men's
www.truworhths.co.za	Store e-tailer	Apparel and other	Women's and men's
www.woolworths.co.za	Store e-tailer	Apparel, home and other products	Women's, men's and children
www.yde.co.za	Store e-tailer	Apparel	Women's and men's
www.landsend.com	Catalog e-tailer	Apparel and home	Women's, men's and children
www.llbean.com	Multi-channel	Apparel and home	Women's, men's and children

**TABLE 1 LIST OF APPAREL WEB SITES VISITED IN THE STUDY**

Babbie and Mouton (2001:277-278) proposes the notion of objectivity and trustworthiness in terms of a qualitative approach. The four basic issues, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirm-ability of trustworthiness was applied by the researcher. Credibility and confirm-ability was, achieved through referential adequacy (recording and transcribing each interview), prolonged engagement (stopping the collection of data the moment the data reach a theoretical saturation point (Schurink, 1998)); member checks (verification of the collected data and interpretation by the participants), and peer debriefing (the findings, interpretations and conclusions were given to a colleague to review in terms of the researcher's perception, insight and analyses). Dependability refers to the degree to which the generating of similar findings are possible if repeated. All the research methodology,

data-collection techniques, selection of unit of analysis, and data-analysis were documented in order for other researchers to use them as frame of reference.

Data analysis was done according to the data-analysis process proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). The data-analysis was done in three phases, namely data reduction, data display and drawing of conclusions and verification. Data reduction included the systematising and coding of the transcripts. The typed verbatim transcripts were coded by selecting and marking of specified themes, words or paraphrases on the transcripts manually. For example, the phrase: “...*I want to feel the textile against my skin. That’s important to me. It is difficult for me to make those purchases over the Internet...*” was coded as – Theme/Category: Evaluation and assessment of alternatives/Performance properties of apparel/Interaction with the product category. The coding of data was done according to identified themes/categories from the schematic conceptual framework. In the process certain new themes/categories and sub-categories also emerged. The reduced data was then inputted into computer text files. Further reduction and coding was done on these text files. Data display included the organized and summarized presentation of data. Data not applicable or relevant to the present study were ignored. Syntheses of coded and analyzed data were made in order to be able to draw conclusions. Themes were identified between the cases and were related to other categories in a systematic fashion. Relevant verbatim quotations from the transcribed interviews were used to verify the findings and to provide significant descriptions.

The drawing of conclusions and verification of data formed the last step in the data-analysis process. Contradictory sets and corresponding themes and patterns in the data made it possible to make interpretations and draw conclusions. The conceptual framework developed for the study was used to make interpretations and draw conclusions. New themes/categories and sub-categories that emerged were incorporated into a revised conceptual framework.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

An inductive approach was followed during the analysis of the data and the subsequent discussions. The inductive approach followed implied that instead of just using existing theory and hypothesis as a point of departure, the researcher also attempts to present and develop new syntheses and interpretations of the data (Babbie & Mouton, 200).

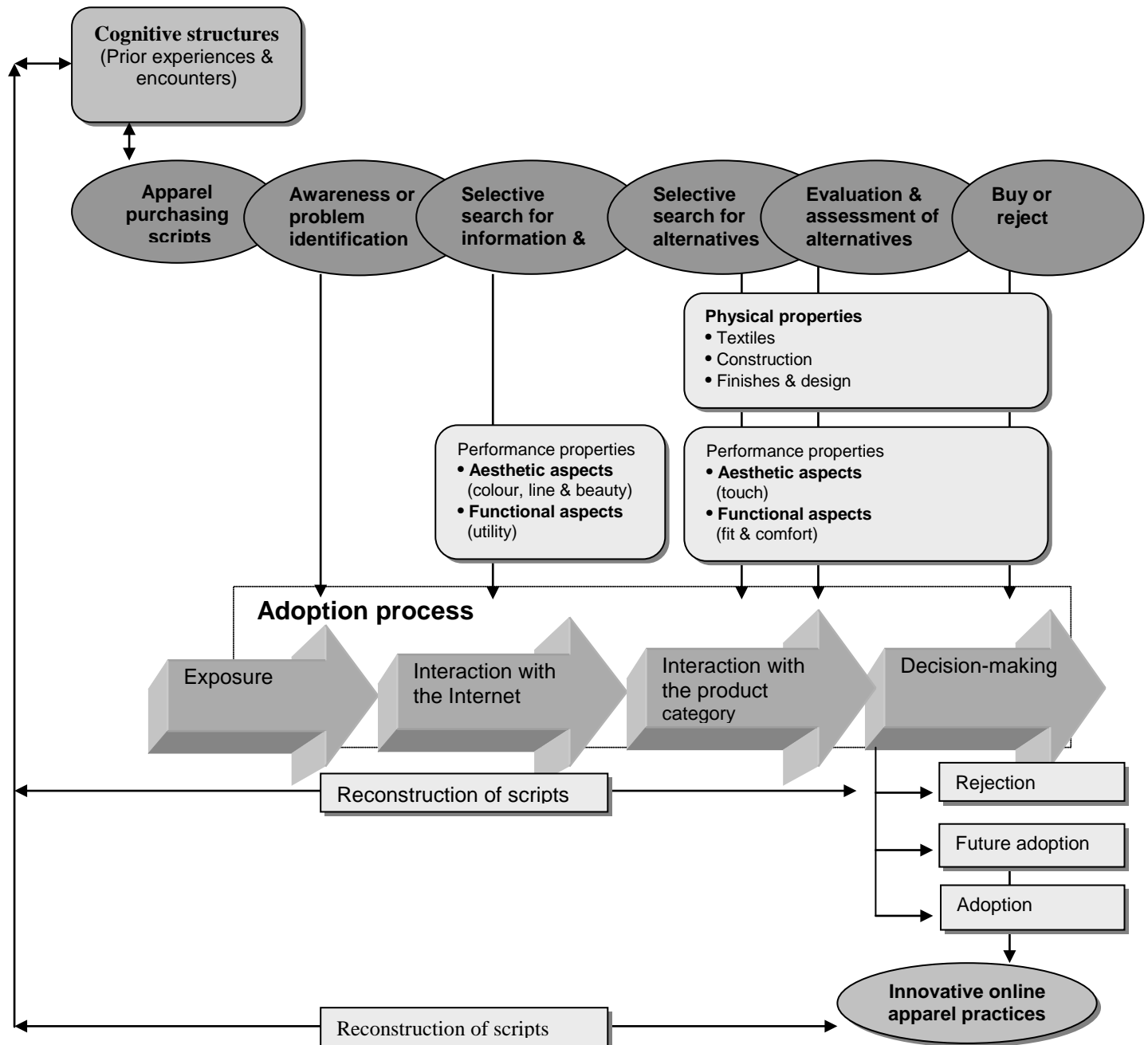


FIGURE 2: REVISED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Professional women's responses regarding their existing apparel purchasing practices as well the impressions, experiences and evaluation of the simulated online apparel 'shopping' experience were used to develop and build new interpretations and theory inductively. From the findings the schematic conceptual framework developed for this study needed to be revised. Sproles and Burns' (1994) model for the consumer apparel decision-making process was incorporated with Rogers' (1995) adoption of an innovation model in order to describe more accurately the role that consumers' apparel shopping scripts play in adopting the Internet for apparel purchasing (Figure 2). The typical sequences, actions and procedures included in apparel purchasing scripts, and referred to by the participants resemble the same stages as indicated by the apparel decision-making process of Sproles and Burns's (1994). The participants' scripts contained complex sequences of behaviour (series of steps followed by consumers in reaching decisions), actions (selecting a store, selecting an appropriate suitable garment), as well as the typical procedures (trying on garments or paying by means of a credit card) for getting things done when purchasing from a store. Sproles and Burns's (1994) model suggests that the consumer apparel decision-making process includes five basic stages: problem awareness, information search, interest, evaluation, trial and buying or rejection of the apparel item. Due to the similarities between the sequences, actions and procedures contained in the participants' scripts and the stages of the apparel decision-making process described by Sproles and Burns (1994) their model was used to organize the participants responses that emerged from the data analysis.

Consumers are prone to revert to scripted activities that are somewhat related to habitual response behaviour. When consumers are confronted with the adoption of an innovation such as the Internet for apparel purchasing they will use their established apparel shopping scripts to guide their decisions. The structure of professional women's apparel shopping scripts can

thus play a role in terms of how easily they are convinced to change or adapt their existing scripts in accepting a new way of purchasing apparel.

*“...you have been doing it for so many years now and yes, you fall into your normal routine of this is how you do it.”*

*“...If you are used to something specific and it works for you, it is difficult to take a step in a different direction.”*

The steps, actions, and procedures emerging from the interviews were categorized, and for better clarification summarized in the revised conceptual framework as awareness or problem identification, selective search for stores and information, selective search for alternatives, evaluation and assessment of alternatives, and buy or reject. Professional women's apparel shopping scripts contained a certain structure. These prior experiences regarding the purchasing of apparel were already contained in a script and established in their memory frameworks. The nature of each participant's apparel shopping script was different and unique for each individual participant. According to Stoltman, Tapp and Lapidus (1989) the nature of scripts may vary between consumers for the same purchasing situation.

Although they would not do something totally removed from what they are familiar with. This is in agreement with Bozinoff and Roth (1983) who state that consumers' use of their scripts are related to what they are familiar and comfortable with and that they are opposed to learn or accept new ideas or a new manner of doing something.

### **Awareness or problem identification**

Shopping scripts are goal-orientated and the actions in the script are intended to accomplish a given purpose; they are hierarchical and are organized sequentially (Shoemaker, 1996). In other words, if a consumer becomes aware of a specific problem, for instance a need for a black dress, her apparel shopping script will direct the planning of her actions and procedures

in order to accomplish her set objective. She will already have a plan in mind as to what she requires, how to get it, and where to get it. Consumers are motivated to improve the situation by reaching a more positive result, that is, actually finding what they want or need (Belch & Belch, 1998).

The first step in all the participants' apparel purchasing scripts seemed to be awareness or problem identification. In this step, the participants followed certain actions and procedures such as purposefully planning to go shopping for a suitable apparel item to fill an identified gap in their wardrobes or for an upcoming occasion or function.

*"...Sometimes you find there's a gap in your wardrobe and you really don't have decent black pants. Then I will go to the shops. Usually I will walk through the stores I usually buy from and I will search specifically / purposefully."*

*"...I will first look at what I need. Then I decide ... I would like a pair of black pants and, say, three tops with that ... and then I will go to the shops."*

### **Selective search for information and stores**

According to Kim, *et al* (2007) consumers use the information components provided by websites to obtain information about merchandise and to make a decision about suitable retailers. According to Park and Stoel (2002), the Internet is also able to provide consistent and comprehensive product and customer service information to consumers. Extended information is provided in a more non-sensory manner than possible in brick-and-mortar stores (Park & Stoel, 2002). The participants stated that they usually use the Internet for information searches and they could easily see themselves converting to using the Internet for apparel product searches, although some of them said they would only use the Internet to see what products are available in the stores and in fashion as well as the prices and colours available, but they would not make their final decisions while on the Internet.

*“...I would never make my final decision on the Internet. I was wary of using it because I had never known about it. But what I imagine I will do is, look what is there and if I like something, go to the store and buy it.”*

*“...But I would definitely, now that I have been introduced to this, look on here first to see what stuff is in the shops...”*

The participants used their previous experiences with the brick-and-mortar stores, characteristics of the stores and products on offer to choose the websites on the Internet. The participants' specific perceptions about a certain store's type of products, sizes and quality influenced their willingness to visit the store on the Internet as well as motivating them to consider the store in their future adoption of the Internet. Thus, if a store had a reliable reputation with them they were willing to purchase apparel online from that store.

### **Selective search for alternatives**

The selective search, evaluation and trial of apparel specifically occur at the point of sale, which, with traditional purchasing, occurs in the store itself (Sproles & Burns, 1994; Brown & Rice, 1998). Participants' searches for suitable alternatives included deciding between the many alternatives available from a given retailer. Where the websites were neatly categorized according to apparel categories, participants were able to search on the websites for specific items. They were also able to evaluate the aesthetic aspects such as colour, line and beauty because of the visual presentation of the products, and the functional aspects including utility as well as in some cases the care instructions of the item.

*“...In this picture there is basically the price, the sizes of the clothing they have in stock and the type of material. The information is sufficient, even for me who knows nothing.”*

*“...This is something about the website that I don't like, the fact that everything isn't categorized together. This makes it difficult. And they say: 'Jewellery and Cosmetics', but they include underwear. I would've liked that to be a different category.”*



## **Evaluation and assessment of alternatives**

During the evaluation and assessment of alternatives the participants made use of the dimensions of apparel (physical and performance properties, i.e. aesthetic and functional aspects) to evaluate and assess the suitability of the alternatives products. Brown and Rice (1998) hold that during this step the aesthetic features of the apparel item will either attract the attention of the consumer or deter her. Colour, pattern, style, and fabric are the characteristics that were found to attract consumers initially to items on the rack and determine their initial selection of items to try on (Eckman, *et al.*, 1990). In evaluating the alternatives, the sensory evaluation of apparel items was a very important procedure for the participants. They wanted to see and feel the apparel items and expected some interactive functions to evaluate the colours, sizes and textiles available. This is in agreement with Fiore and Kimle (1997) who state that feeling it by hand and feeling it on the body, are two of the important aspects in judging apparel. Consumers thus use their sensory attributes to determine whether the item is suitable. What they touch and feel, smell and see influence their choice.

*“...Yes, it’s risky; you can’t feel the material, nor can you try it on. You can’t use all your senses, except seeing it.”*

*“...on the Internet you’re confronted with something you can’t touch; you can’t get a three-dimensional view; and you can’t try it on. But in a shop you can immediately realize but the fit is wrong or the colour isn’t really you.”*

Another procedure that was particularly important to the participants was the evaluation of textiles. The participants used actions such as touching and scrunching the textiles to see whether it would crease and to assess whether it was a good quality textile. They also turned the items inside-out to look at the design construction and finishes.

*“...I want to feel the textile against my skin. That’s important to me. It is difficult for me to make those purchases over the Internet. Maybe it will become easier later on. You don’t know if the picture you see is really what you want. Clothes are all about feeling and appearance.”*

*“...I think it is easier to buy in a shop than on the Internet where you are stuck with something you can't feel or see it three-dimensionally or try it on. In the shop, you can immediately see if something will fit nicely or if the colour is wrong.”*

The participants' inability to evaluate and assess certain physical properties such as textile, construction and finishes during this step on the Internet resulted in perceived functional risks. Participants' inability to evaluate the performance properties such as fit, comfort, durability and “hand” of textiles on the Internet also led to further perceived uncertainty regarding online apparel purchasing. Although they were not able to touch the apparel items, they were able to see apparel items and hear music on the Internet. Through their sense of sight they were able to evaluate and assess physical properties such as design and performance properties pertaining to the aesthetic aspects of the apparel item such as colour and line. The only way in which the participants were able to evaluate and assess fit was if the apparel items were displayed on mannequins or on real persons.

*“...I would say on a mannequin; no, only not as flat. I want to see what it looks like when it is on. It needn't necessarily be a model, it could be a dummy, such as in store displays.”*

*“...It also depends how they display the clothes; whether they show it on a model or if they merely show a shirt like that. I would like to see it on a person. And I would enjoy it because I'm not very creative like other people myself – ‘wear this blouse with that suit’. On the model, almost like in an advertisement.”*

The try-on procedure was very important to the participants. The trying on of apparel items involved the assessment of the item on the participants' bodies. According to Eckman *et al.* (1990), the fit must be minimally satisfactory during the fitting-room stage otherwise the garment will be rejected. Styling and, possibly, colour and pattern are also reassessed as the garment is examined on the body (Eckman *et al.*,1990). The participants would typically evaluate and assess the fit. During the try-on procedure it was important for the participants to

assess suitability of the styles for their specific bodies, how comfortable the textile felt on the skin, and how comfortable they felt overall in the garment.

*“...I will always try on. Lots of times something looks nice and when you try it on it is not nice anymore. So I will always try something on. Always.”*

*“...It is a bit like catalogues, I am a bit scared because you never know if it will fit and how it will look. That’s a main thing – the fit.”*

*“...My query is: ‘How do I try it on?’ Clothing is a lot about the feel and appearance, it is not like a tin of food... you want that brand... and you want this... it makes it all quite difficult.”*

### **Buying or rejecting the apparel item on the Internet**

During the last step, the participants’ apparel scripts consist of actions and procedures regarding the decision to use the Internet as a medium to buy or not to buy apparel. During this stage, all the steps, actions and procedures were cognitively considered and weighed. This is in agreement with Solomon and Rabolt (2003) who hold that decision rules guide consumers’ choices and range from straightforward and rapid strategies to intricate processes requiring consideration and a vast amount of cognitive processing. Consumers’ choices are influenced by their prior experiences with the product and information present at the moment of purchase (Solomon & Rabolt, 2003).

It was clear that the participants, when confronted with the acceptance of a new purchasing situation such as purchasing of apparel on the Internet, schematically interacted with their existing apparel shopping scripts. The participants felt uneasy with the new Internet apparel-purchasing practice because it did not coincide with their existing apparel shopping practices. This led in all probability to the rejection of the Internet by some of the participants. But, the participants who perceived the online apparel purchasing as measuring up to their expectations, and offering better benefits compared with their existing practices

were more prone to adapt their apparel-purchasing practices and accept the Internet for apparel purchasing. Three types of decisions emerged during this stage.

**Rejection** For some of the participants the comparison between their existing apparel-purchasing practices and the Internet as medium for purchasing apparel led to cognitive dissonance. The online purchasing of apparel was not compatible with their existing practices. The trying on and touching of items were too important actions and procedures in their existing practices. These participants mentioned that they would not purchase apparel without trying it on. They perceived the Internet as too risky and the relative advantages were too small for them. They were also not prepared to absorb the financial risks (loss of items in the mail) regarding purchasing apparel online.

*“...I’ll compare prices but then I’ll still go to the shop and try it on and then buy it. I’ll definitely look [on the Internet], it’ll save me trouble to hunt around in the shops, but I wouldn’t buy.”*

*“...I don’t know, personally I don’t think that I’ll ever buy clothes over the Internet. For the good reason that I want to try it on. I think that that is the main reason why I see it as a no-no, why I regard it as negative. Something such as toothpaste where you know what you want is really easier. Clothes still have got that – it first has to look good on you before you can decide whether you want it.”*

**Future adoption** These participants were willing to adopt the Internet in the future. The participants mentioned that, if their lifestyles should change in the near future because of more work pressure, time constraints or being less mobile they would consider adopting the Internet for apparel purchasing. According to Sin and Tse (2002), a more time-conscious consumer would consider the opportunity cost of traditional shopping to be higher and will tend to seek the convenience of online shopping. It seemed that the relative advantages would then be more evident for them. These participants stated that the practice of purchasing

apparel on the Internet could be compatible with their existing apparel shopping scripts in the future.

*“...At present one is quite mobile; your time is your own; you’ve got a lot more freedom. But I think that as soon as your life becomes complicated, you know, with children, when you’re tied down, then I would more easily buy clothes over the Internet and accept the risk that it might not fit.”*

**Adoption** Consumers’ cognitive styles influence the ways in which they react to innovations. According to Citrin, *et al.* (2000), consumers who score high on the open-processing innovation cognitive style will be more open to new endeavours such as purchasing apparel over the Internet. According to Shoemaker (1996) consumers with advanced scripts are more likely to use solutions learned in one situation (previous apparel purchasing behaviour) to help them overcome potential problems in other situations (apparel purchasing over the Internet). Consumers are more likely to see commonalities in different situations and mix and match their scripts. Although the participants were open and willing to consider adopting the Internet for apparel purchasing, they were not prepared to do this without thinking about it first. The participants who were willing to consider adopting the Internet immediately for apparel purchasing were already using the Internet on a regular basis for Internet banking and the purchasing of their monthly groceries. These participants were willing to absorb the financial, functional and physical risks associated with online apparel purchasing because the relative advantages outweighed the risks. The Internet as medium for online apparel purchasing was compatible with their existing apparel shopping scripts and if they obtained more relative advantages with this practice, they were willing to absorb the risks.

*“...I’ll definitely consider buying over the Internet. I’ll start by buying one item first just to see how it works out. I think I’ll do it systematically that way. I think I’ll try it and depending on the result I’ll do it again. If it goes well, I’ll carry on. I think it’s ideal for the professional woman.”*

*“...I didn’t have sufficient time to go to the shops. For a long time now I wanted to try it. I easily feel claustrophobic, so I don’t like a lot of people around me. ”*

*“...Do you know? I’m going to try it and see how it works. From our discussions I’ve realized what I’m looking at. At the end of the day you’re looking at the material... the composition, washing instructions... and LL Bean they are wonderful... they show all these things. I’m going to try it and see how it works. I’m prepared to take the chance... now that I’ve discovered what wonderful websites there are. I won’t make my first purchases from London; I’ll do it locally and see what problems I might run into before attempting it overseas.”*

## **CONCLUSIONS AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

It can be concluded that when professional women are exposed to the Internet for online apparel purchasing they have to make a decision in the end as to whether the innovation is compatible with their existing apparel shopping script or not. According to Loudon and Della Bitta (1993), a script is a representation in memory of a series of actions occurring in some particular type of past situation as, for instance, an apparel-purchasing situation. . These prior experiences regarding the purchasing of apparel are already contained in a script and established in the consumer’s memory frameworks. This relates to the view of Shoemaker (1996) that scripts contain knowledge of how to purchase a specific product.

During the exposure stage consumers are exposed to a new innovation such as online apparel purchasing and their existing apparel shopping scripts will in all probability direct their adoption decision-making process. They move through the different stages of the innovation decision-making process, making use of their scripts, before they are prepared to accept or reject the Internet for apparel purchasing. This is in agreement with Rogers (1995) who is of opinion that consumers’ previous practices, needs, innovativeness, and norms are prior conditions that predetermine and direct the adoption of the innovation. The online

apparel purchasing process is constantly evaluated and assessed in comparison with existing apparel shopping scripts. If their scripts contain certain steps, actions and procedures that are important to them, they would expect to be able to follow similar steps, actions and procedures in the online apparel purchasing process. Consumers are thus prone to revert to scripted activities that are somewhat related to habitual response behaviour. This is in agreement with DeLong *et al.* (1986) who hold that consumers' formed scripts will guide their encounters. During the interaction with the Internet stage the participants were constantly comparing their own experiences and encounters with the Internet as well as their apparel scripts with the online situation. For example the participants translated their knowledge of traditional stores to the web sites and the Internet. If the aspects they would have expected in traditional stores were not similar to the web sites they seemed disappointed. Consumers' use of generalized apparel purchasing scripts has implications for apparel marketing over the Internet. When purchasing apparel over the Internet consumers rely heavily upon their generalized apparel purchasing scripts. When the actual decision-making and purchasing process online does not resemble this script, dissatisfaction occurs because of the discrepancy (DeLong *et al.*, 1986:25). The adoption of the Internet for online apparel purchasing could therefore be slow because consumers have established a set script over time in their minds about how apparel should be purchased, and such a set script is not easily changed.

Calculated adoption can also stem from the product category. According to Midgley *et al.* (1989:137) the complexity of the apparel purchasing process stems from the inherent social symbolism of apparel and the constant variety and change within this product category, which requires consumers to make relatively frequent and difficult choices. During the Interaction with the product category stage it was clear that the participants' scripts contained certain steps, actions and procedures that they considered in their evaluation of the Internet as

a medium for purchasing apparel as a product category. The participants found it difficult to imagine how they would be able to evaluate apparel online. The different steps, actions and procedures contained in professional women's apparel shopping scripts that were mentioned as being important to them pertain more specifically to the selective search for alternatives and the evaluation and assessment of alternatives.

The first step in the participants' apparel scripts seemed to be problem identification. In terms of the Internet this step seemed to play a lesser role in their adoption process.

The second step was selective search for stores and information. In terms of adopting the Internet this step also seemed to play a lesser role. Firstly, the participants are used to utilizing the Internet for information searches and they could easily convert to using the Internet for apparel product searches, but they would not make their final decision on the Internet. Secondly, the participants were able to search on the websites for specific items if the websites were neatly categorized according to apparel categories. Lastly, they were able to evaluate the aesthetic aspects such as colour, line and beauty because of the visual presentation of the products as well as the functional aspects including utility and in some cases the care instructions of the item.

The selection of alternatives posed more of a problem for the participants. The initial search for alternatives plays a role in their overall evaluation and assessment of apparel as well as in their adoption of the Internet for online apparel purchasing. The use of their senses in the selective search for suitable alternatives was a very important action for the participants. They wanted to see the apparel items and expected some interactive functions to evaluate the colours, sizes and textiles available. During this step the participants made use of the dimensions of the garments to evaluate and assess apparel products especially the physical and performance properties of the garments were important evaluative aspects. The



physical handling and trying-on of the apparel items were important to the participants and that they perceived the lack thereof as playing a role in their adoption of the Internet for online apparel purchasing. The try-on procedure was especially important to all the participants because apparel is perceived by them as important to the image they want to project as professional women, the high expenses associated with apparel as well as the time it takes to make a final decision. The evaluation and assessment of alternatives as a step in their apparel shopping scripts could potentially pose a problem when buying over the Internet because participants place a high value on these steps, actions and procedures. Contrary to the situation in a shop, evaluating garments over the Internet is limited to visual inputs, leaving out perception by means of the other senses. Because consumers rely heavily on information stated or visual product images on screen (Park & Stoel, 2005), apparel e-tailers should ensure that pictorial and written information is provided about the attributes their consumers consider important when purchasing apparel (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995). Typical information that should be displayed will be colour and style, textile performance features, care instructions, sizes, price ranges, and construction and finishes. Retailers should also focus in their marketing strategies on the convenience of trying-on apparel products in the privacy of their own homes as well as on the flexibility of their return and exchange policies, if their customers are not satisfied with the fit of the item. This can reduce the risks consumers experience with the evaluation and trial steps when using the Internet.

During the last step the participants' apparel shopping script consists of actions and procedures regarding the decision to buy or not to buy the item. This stage is related to the decision to adopt the Internet for purchasing the item and in terms of the perceived risks participants experienced during the decision-making stage. Some participants experienced financial risks in terms of the safety and security aspects in using their credit cards on the Internet. They proposed risk-reducing strategies such as buying on their accounts or using

debit cards. The participants that had already purchased goods on the Internet experienced no financial risks in terms of using their credit cards on the Internet.

Apparel retailers should realize that consumers' reluctance to utilize the Internet for apparel purchasing could stem from their established apparel shopping scripts. Altering consumers' existing apparel shopping scripts to appropriate new shopping scripts for acquiring apparel in a new manner (for example over the Internet), are some of the difficulties new forms of retailing are facing. Understanding script theory could thus provide retailers with important guidelines on how to go about altering or adapting consumers' behaviour in terms of purchasing apparel via the Internet. This by implication can provide e-tailers with a better understanding of specific consumer groups' behaviour by describing consumers in terms of how they think as well as how they learn, interpret and act on information in the marketplace. Understanding such shopping scripts can aid e-tailers in targeting customers as well as in merchandizing products and services more effectively on the Internet

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