



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

An explanation of consumer complaint behaviour
concerning performance failure of
major electrical household appliances

Suné Donoghue

PhD Consumer Science (Interior merchandise management)

Supervisor: Prof HM de Klerk

Co-Supervisor: Dr L Ehlers

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by

Suné Donoghue

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

PhD Consumer Science (Interior merchandise management)

in the

Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences
University of Pretoria

August 2007



Declaration

I declare that the thesis, which I hereby submit for the degree PhD Consumer Science (Interior merchandise management) at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

Suné Donoghue

Synopsis

An explanation of consumer complaint behaviour concerning performance failure of major electrical household appliances

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In this study, three lines of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction and complaint behaviour research were integrated, namely 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 explain consumers' complaint behaviour concerning their dissatisfaction with major household appliances. Additionally, consumer-related variables (demographic characteristics) and product-specific variables (specifically the severity of the product failure) were incorporated, as these factors are linked to consumer complaint behaviour.

Traditional thinking concerning the disconfirmation of expectations only recognises a direct link from disconfirmation to satisfaction/dissatisfaction. However, evidence suggests that the disconfirmation of expectations acts as an important causal agent for generating attributional processing. In a consumer behaviour context, the performance failure of major household appliances often brings about a causal search. Consumers' affective reactions (generated by their causal attributions and the underlying properties of locus, stability and controllability) and their expectations for future product failure were found to determine their complaint behaviour.

The unit of analysis for this study was 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. Attributes for the demographic variables were: gender, age, level of education, level of income and culture. A convenience sampling technique was employed, with 216 respondents having completed a self-administered questionnaire.

This study showed that consumers' complaint behaviour concerning dissatisfactory major household appliances was directed by a combination of functional and symbolic performance failures. A profile of complainers engaging in private versus public complaint action in terms of differences in gender, age and level of education could not be determined. However, respondents' race and household monthly income were important factors in their complaint behaviour. Relatively fewer formal complaints (i.e. complaints to retailers or manufacturers) were made than one would expect, based on the expressed levels of dissatisfaction. A large number of respondents engaged in a variety of "hidden" or indirect complaint activities such as adverse word-of-mouth marketing, boycotting the retailer and switching brands. The majority of the respondents avoided more formal complaint actions such as contacting a consumer protection organisation/department or writing a letter – activities which would require more effort and inconvenience. Irrespective of respondents' taking complaint action or not, they attributed the causes for product failure to the manufacturer, retailer or some outside agent in the situation. However, they seemed undecided about the stability and controllability dimensions for the causes of product failure in terms of their complaint action. Anger was a significant predictor of negative word-of-mouth. Deciding whether to take action or not appeared to be determined by consumers' perception of the severity of the product problem. Researchers can gain valuable insights into the reasons for consumers' specific complaint behaviour by looking at the coping strategies (in terms of the related behaviours and cognitions) that consumers employ to reduce the stress caused by product failures.

This study clearly has practical implications for manufacturers, retailers and policy makers.

Acknowledgements

I have many people to thank for their valuable input and patience:

- Prof. Elmarie de Klerk (Supervisor) and Dr. Lené Ehlers (Co-supervisor)
- Mrs. Rina Owen (Research Consultant, Division for Research Support, UP) and Mr. Sollie Millard (Statistician, Department of Statistics, UP)
- Dr. Anna-Mart Bonthuys (Language Editor)
- Mr. Russell Cagnacci (Development Manager, Consumer Goods Council of South Africa), who believed in this research from the beginning
- Family and friends, for their continuous understanding and support

This research was partly funded by the Consumer Goods Council of South Africa.



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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ANOVA	Analysis of variance
CCB	Consumer complaint behaviour
CS/D	Consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction
K-W one-way ANOVA	Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance
LSM	Living Standards Measure
SAARF	South African Research Foundation



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