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INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

INTRODUCTION

Household appliances undoubtedly signify the extensive and impressive technological progress of the past few decades. Induction hobs, combination convection-microwave ovens, pyrolytic and catalytic self cleaning ovens, frost free household fridge-freezers and front loading automatic washing machines with variable programmes and sensitive touch control panels are only a few of the exciting products that await consumers in-store. Despite the undeniable impact of technology and especially household appliances on households in recent times, an understanding of consumers' choice processes in this regard remains fragmented and under researched (Venkatesh, 1985:193).

Arguments that could be used in support of an increased understanding of, and consequently more research in this particular field, are *inter alia* that:

Household appliances are no longer perceived to be luxury items. Appliances have a major impact on modern households and fulfill specific needs and goals that can not be ignored, for example improving task performance, contributing to cost savings and efficient use of time and human energy, to communicate emotions, to express family related values and to alter life styles. Many household decisions eventually evolve around household technology or at least the availability thereof (Badami & Chibat, 1998:36; McMeekin & Tomlinson, 1998:873; Cooper, 1994:4,12; Burton, 1992:383-394; Fournier, Antes & Beaumier, 1992:329-332; Joag, Gentry & Hopper, 1985:585, 586; Venkatesh, 1985:193). Consumers' needs in terms of household technology ultimately depend on circumstances and consumer characteristics but the increased importance and contribution of household appliances in modern households, cannot be denied.

Household technology has become advanced yet also more complex, leading to a bigger range and more sophisticated appliances to choose from. Consumers' choices have thus become more exciting, but also more problematic. Hill and King (1989:144) state that advances in new product technology have resulted in a well documented "information vacuum" that complicates consumer decision-making. Even higher educated consumers require increased cognitive effort to cope with continual change in household technology and consumers are seldom fully aware of the variety awaiting them in-store when they are confronted with a purchase (Bettmann, 1993:8; Fournier et

al, 1992:329–332). This has resulted in a situation where consumers often consider themselves incapable of evaluating the performance characteristics of new appliances (Niemeyer, Rai & Kean, 1997:46, 49; Hill & King, 1989:144).

The long-term implications of ownership of appliances have become a major issue. Replacements and repairs to household appliances often imply an outlay of large sums of money at unexpected times (Ahluwalia & Shackford, 1998:21-22). According to Srinivasan (1993:288) the purchase of an expensive product is usually characterized by an extensive decision-making process because consumers go through intensive cognitive effort while processing external information and all the influences imposed on them. The situation is further complicated (as seems typical during the acquisition of household appliances) when consumers are faced with limited and incomplete information to guide their decisions (Burke, 1990:250). Consumers consequently often consciously neglect objective evaluation criteria by choosing expensive products assuming that higher prices are indicative of high quality (Kanwar & Pagiavlas, 1992:589-595). Because higher prices simultaneously indicate affordability and status, not only rational, but emotional aspects also become prominent during the decision-making process (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000:441).

Globalization has resulted in South African consumers having access to the same appliances (brand name and models) as in developed first world countries. Although there is no doubt that consumers find new ranges of appliances exciting, they generally experience more pressure when there are so many alternatives to choose from (Cooper, 1994:14; Dhar, 1992:735; Burke, 1990:253). Product variety, differences in price, design, functional aspects and performance characteristics therefore create confusion and complicate the decision-making process (Du Plessis & Rousseau, 1999:82-83).

In most cases when consumers are faced with the task of purchasing an appliance, explicit, well-defined probabilities rarely exist and are difficult to formulate. This creates uncertainty with regards to the outcome and specific benefits that will emerge from their purchase decisions. For products such as appliances that are expensive, that are regarded as socially visible products, that have to last for a considerable length of time and that are not bought frequently, consumers' uncertainties result in anxiety over the possibility of making errors that might negatively reflect on their ability to handle the purchasing decisions (Ungerer, 1999:28-30; McMeekin & Tomlinson, 1998:875; Hansen, 1992:175; Kanwar & Pagiavlas, 1992:589-595; Wright, Claiborne & Sirgy, 1992:316; O'Shaughnessy, 1985:310). As a result of the complexity of the purchase decision and the risk involved when purchasing major household appliances, consumers seldom make purchases without experiencing cognitive dissonance (Hansen, 1992:175; O'Shaughnessy, 1985:310). This often leads to reliance upon surrogate indicators such as specific brand names, higher priced appliances or impressive product features that could in some way serve as a defense mechanism (Toivonen, 1994:46; Wright *et al*, 1992:311-313).

From what have been reported with regards to the purchasing of complex, high-risk products, and accepting that the purchasing process is generally approached with caution, there is confusing evidence of how consumers handle complex decisions. Some reports indicate more extensive information search and product evaluation (Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 1990:532) indicating that purchases are made over a longer period of time to allow for more intensive information seeking and the evaluation of potentially suitable alternatives (Du Plessis & Rousseau, 1999:82; Bozinoff & Roth, 1983:655; Bozinoff, 1982:481). Other studies, however, indicate that consumers handle complex decisions by reverting to more simplistic decision-making strategies. It has for example been reported that for many products, consumers spend very little time or do not even engage in some of the sequential activities suggested as being important during decision-making. Many consumers in fact do little or no pre purchase information search and do the minimum planning prior to entering retail stores (D' Astous, Bensouda & Guindon, 1989:433).

Conflicting evidence on consumer decision-making strategies resulted in the so-called *rational* consumer becoming the subject of critics (D' Astous *et al*, 1989:433, Zajonc & Markus, 1982 in Lofman, 1991:729). Inevitably, traditional consumer decision-making models that were originally compiled with the intention to portray the consumer decision-making process and to reflect the various steps of the decision-making process became a focus of dispute because of their predominant positivist, rational approach.

Questions that came to mind, were:

- How do consumers handle the acquisition of major household appliances to eventually conclude decisions with potentially satisfying outcomes?
- Whether consumers in general are able to make informed choices from the spectrum of household appliances that are available in the market place. If an attempt is made to study consumers' acquisition of major household appliances, how could researchers structure and approach such studies taking into consideration that traditional consumer decision models probably do not satisfactorily reflect what happens in practice and keeping in mind that there is conflicting evidence regarding consumers' approach to and dealing with the purchasing task?
- Whether an alternative to traditional consumer decision models could be found/generated to serve as a more realistic portrayal of the consumer decision-making process so that research in this regard could be approached and structured more satisfactorily.

THE NEED FOR AN IMPROVED UNDERSTANDING OF CONSUMERS' ACQUISITION OF HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCES

An improved understanding of consumers' approach of the acquisition of major household appliances would be of interest to

- **Industry.** Modern communication such as informative web-site facilities are designed through the initiatives of industry and driven through corporative initiatives. Although there is ample chance for communication between consumers and salespeople (who act on behalf of, and represent the retail sector) on an *interpersonal* (e.g. with salespeople) and *impersonal* level (marketing efforts through mass media such as advertisements) (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000:229), there is limited interaction between consumers and industry. An improved understanding of consumers' approach to the acquisition of major household appliances could be of use to industry in terms of their marketing strategies, the level of information and attention given and the supply of goods and services to the consumer market.
- **Retail.** In South Africa, retail (specifically salespeople), plays a prominent role in the sales of household appliances and in the interaction with consumers because catalogue and internet shopping has still not come off the ground. An improved understanding of consumers' acquisition of household appliances could contribute to constituting a consumer friendly in-store environment where the type of service that is provided and the interaction between salespeople and consumers would be in the interest of and to the benefit of all parties involved.
- **Consumers.** Limited experience of complex, expensive and highly sophisticated products cause consumers to be easy prey of their own ignorance, confusion or exploitation in the market place (due to a lack of information rather than deliberate misleading). By being able to detect shortcomings in consumers' handling of purchasing decisions, attempts could be made to assist consumers to make well informed, properly deliberated decisions that would address their specific needs.
- **Professionals and academics in the field of consumer science.** Consumer education and consumer facilitation can only be successful if approached and planned in the interest of consumers and based on actual consumer needs (Erasmus, 1998:145-149). Consumer science is a relatively young discipline that has and is still borrowing from the theory of disciplines such as economics and marketing, psychology, sociology and social psychology. Although multi disciplinary studies and theory building have many advantages, efforts to expand theory within the discipline of consumer science itself should be encouraged.

Household decision-making and consumer search behaviour were specifically mentioned as areas in consumer behaviour research identified by Sheth in 1981 (Sheth, 1981:668) that lacked proper understanding in the discipline and needed to be extensively researched. A few years later, Schurr (1986:498), in reaction to these recommendations, postulated "that *purchasing scripts* can result in accurate predictions of buyer attitudes and judgment". Because little evidence of the implementation of the suggestions could be found and because the study of consumers' acquisition of major household appliances seemed to have merit, an attempt to elicit and organize a script to be used as an alternative to traditional consumer decision-making models seemed to coincide with recommendations for future research in the study field of consumer behaviour that forms an integral part of the domain of consumer science.

The script concept is generally accepted to be a valid construct with wide application (Taylor, Cronin & Hansen 1991:17) and has been applied in areas such as cognitive, social developmental and clinical psychology and cognitive anthropology (Rummelhart 1980; Abelson, 1976; Den Uyl & Van Oostendorp, 1980; Leigh & Rethans, 1983:667; Bartlett, 1932, Bransford & Franks, 1971, Mandler, 1979, Minsky, 1975, Rumelhart & Ortony 1977, Schank & Abelson, 1977 in John & Whitney, 1982:75).

Scripts, due to their basic properties and characteristics and the fact that purchasing scripts by definition portray specific events from the view of consumers, have the potential to offer valuable insight into the bases of consumer behaviour (Taylor *et al*, 1991:16). Any further research in this regard will thus contribute to expanding theory in consumer behaviour.

OBJECTIVES

Based on formerly stated concerns regarding the use of traditional consumer decision-making models to inter alia reflect the consumer decision-making process of purchasing household appliances (Erasmus, Boshoff & Rousseau, 2001:88), the following research problem was formulated:

Can a script that conforms to the properties and structural characteristics of a script according to basic script theory be elicited and organized within the consumer behaviour context to portray the acquisition of major household appliances?

The following *research objective* and *sub objectives* were formulated:

- To elicit and organize a script for the acquisition of major household appliances within the consumer decision-making context that coincides with the basic properties and structural characteristics of a theoretical script.
- To *elicit the relevant script norms* for the organization of a script for the acquisition of major household appliances, i.e. to stimulate experienced consumers to spontaneously expose/identify the relevant:
 - *Person schemata*: everybody involved during the decision-making process
 - *Role schemata*: the contribution of participants during the decision-making process, i.e. so-called influencers, decision makers et cetera
 - *Object schemata*: the various objects involved in the decision-making process, e.g. information sources, retail outlets
 - *Decision-making schemata*: the actions taken/implemented during the decision-making process.
- To *generate a script* that coincides with the basic properties and structural characteristics of a script within basic script theory by integrating and ordering the relevant script norms and actions indicated as typical of the event (acquisition of major household appliances).

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