

Chapter 1

THE RESEARCH IN PERSPECTIVE

This chapter provides the background and justification for the study. It introduces the research problem as well as important and relevant concepts that were used to guide the study.

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND JUSTIFICATION FOR THE RESEARCH

Dramatic socio-political changes in South Africa over the last decade have resulted in major changes in the life styles and living conditions of millions of previously disadvantaged citizens. A sharp increase in black consumers in the middle-income group is the result of increased educational status, better job opportunities and higher earnings since the introduction of a new socio-political dispensation in 1994 (Black middle class on the rise, 2004; Perspektief 1; Wortley & Tshwaedi, 2002:9). This has changed the profile of the average South African consumer who drives the economy. Retailers consequently have to deal with challenges in terms of the provision of consumer goods and services that will satisfy the needs of emergent consumer groups. A sustained increase in GDP growth (Du Plessis & Rousseau, 2003:49) and employment opportunities in South Africa has resulted in an increased demand for certain consumer goods, particularly the more expensive commodities such as electrical goods and household appliances.

Global influences also enable exposure to sophisticated products that compare favourably with those found in affluent countries elsewhere in the world. A key concern, however, is that despite the improvement in the living conditions of millions of South Africans, limited product-related consumer socialisation and inadequate product knowledge and experience unequivocally restrict consumers' ability to make informed buying decisions,

especially regarding the expensive, complex, durable commodities they are confronted with in retail (Erasmus, Makgopa & Kachale, 2005:10).

Consumers with limited product-related experience do not have the knowledge (Malhotra, Ulgado, Agarwal, & Baalbaki, 1994: 97;) to handle sophisticated technology in terms of the design of modern household appliances correctly or to its full capacity (Erasmus et al., 2005:97; John, 1999:6). Rapid changes and developments in new appliances exacerbate matters further (Wingo, 1996:176). In addition, consumers are not necessarily properly informed and educated on the use of these appliances owing to inadequate assistance by sales people, a lack of guiding information in stores and the consumers' apparent hesitance to trust sales people (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:99; Gothan & Erasmus, 2003:10). Consumers therefore need to be assisted to make informed, responsible buying decisions when selecting major electrical household appliances, and the in-store environment seems to provide a logical opportunity for this assistance.

1.2 A FOCUS ON CUSTOMER SERVICE IN RESEARCH

The abundance of research that has been published in various accredited journals over the past two decades on the topic of customer service (CS) and related topics, such as the influence of price, product quality, the performance of salespeople and the like on buyer behaviour, bears evidence of their significance in retail and marketing. These publications however, largely reflect scenarios in First World circumstances and often only emphasise a particular aspect of customer service, for example price.

A scrutiny of articles that have been published on customer service in prominent accredited journals since 2000 confirms the neglect of attention to culture as an influencing factor on customer service while references to *augmented customer service* and its relevance in terms of informed, responsible buyer decisions, especially in emerging countries, are insignificant. Reports on such endeavours with regard to the sales of household appliances that represent a category of complex, durable and expensive merchandise are

equally limited. A key concern is that there is limited empirical evidence for any efforts being made in retail to counteract and/or facilitate global influences that have enabled the proud presentation of sophisticated merchandise to all corners of the globe – especially to consumers who regrettably do not necessarily possess the relevant knowledge or experience to handle buying decisions, especially those concerning these sophisticated appliances (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:98).

1.3 CUSTOMER SERVICE AND SERVICE QUALITY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

1.3.1 Introduction

From a global marketing viewpoint consumers' needs can be satisfied in different ways, depending on or because of the differences in culture, tradition or way of managing business (Korey, 1995:75, 76; Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:7; Nilsson, 2007:367). When offering a service to customers, a company should therefore refrain from adopting a standardised marketing approach and rather focus on multilateral strategies, taking into consideration the five different perspectives (technical, organizational, personal, international and cultural) that influence this service offering. In today's complex retail world the provision of customer service, based on European and American principles, is no longer enough. It has to be augmented to address consumer differences. The relationship between the concepts of the globally accepted service offering to consumers, the quality of the actual service delivery and the benefits thereof has to be clarified (Grönroos, 1988:12).

Significant differences have been reported between the practical implementation of the dimensions of service quality between developed and developing countries, as a result of environmental and cultural differences. In developed countries the focus is on service reliability based on consistency, dependability and accuracy. Developing countries, however, are generally of lower financial and technological affluence, and therefore the human touch in service quality is considered more important. Henry and Caldwell (2006:1031), in their discussion of powerlessness as a constant in everyday life, explain that the

prolonged stigmatisation of being non-confident may cause semi-literate consumers to limit themselves to familiar products rather than to explore other attractive consumption opportunities.

1.3.2 Retail-related problems

In a world that has become technologically advanced, globally inspired and highly competitive, the consumer often depends on the in-store environment and especially the salesperson to make a sensible and satisfying product decision. Ironically, South African consumers function in a context where market activities are subject to pertinent limitations. A key concern is that, despite the improvement in the living conditions of South African consumers since 1994, limited product-related consumer socialisation, as well as inadequate product knowledge and experience, and under trained or incompetent salespeople (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:98), unequivocally restrict consumers' ability to make informed buying decisions, especially with regard to the expensive, complex, durable commodities they are confronted with in retail. Customers thus become highly dependant on the assistance of sales people. Customers associate the salespeople with the store itself: the service provided by salespeople will thus determine customers' opinion about the store (Anderson & Zemke, 1991:4, Blem, 1995:33; Gothan & Erasmus, 2003:2).

Facilitation refers to the use of a range of skills and methods to support consumers when making buying decisions in the often-bewildering world of technology and change (Townsend & Gebhardt, 1988:3). During the facilitation process information should be provided with sensitivity, acknowledging personal preferences and emotional issues such as the importance of portraying specific psychological, social and cultural needs and wants (Erasmus, 1998:150). Rude, uncaring or incompetent sales people lead to dissatisfied consumers who are likely to switch to other service providers (Naylor & Frank, 2000:311).

1.3.3 Challenges for salespeople in developing countries

Consumers in developing countries have lower service quality expectations and are therefore more tolerant of ineffective services compared with consumers in developed countries (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:1–5). In South Africa, major department stores such as Game, Dions, Makro, Furniture City and Hirsh's Homes are patronised by many consumers in the middle and lower income groups. These stores thus deal with Third World elements, as well as the sophisticated characteristics of a First World environment. This poses many challenges for retail in terms of their service delivery.

Seth (2006:84) also argues that service modelling in the context of the supply chain has not yet been adequately addressed (Internet: Dion, 2006; Makro, 2006). Ultimately an improved understanding of customer service in terms of an augmented service offering would address the seemingly paradoxical situation in South Africa where the provision of appliances in retail and consumers' ability to select major household appliances for personal use are incongruent (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:100). It is suggested that, in developing countries, emphasis should be placed on staff and their interaction with customers. Salespeople may represent different cultures and store management should therefore take advantage of their own authority and implement activities that are acceptable to all (Hofstede, 1984:264).

1.3.4 Augmented customer service in developing countries

Inexperienced consumers in a developing country need a store that augments CS in terms of certain crucial elements to enable them to make informed responsible buying decisions (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:89). Customer satisfaction is generally considered the ultimate in any customer service offering (Rust, Danaher, Varki, 1995:59). The quality of the service as perceived by customers is related, although not necessarily equivalent to, satisfaction (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988:15). Consumer satisfaction may be clouded by limited and unrealistic consumer expectations, and service providers ultimately have to decide whether they want customers that are satisfied with the service, or whether they should deliver the maximum level of perceived service quality (Spreng & Mackoy, 1996:201). Unfortunately, because of limited product

knowledge, inexperience and probably ignorance, customer satisfaction does not necessarily reflect informed responsible buying behaviour.

The elements of CS in retail provide the structure for improving service quality (SQ) that will fill or even close these gaps (Gummesson, 1988:4). Any attempt to evaluate CS in department stores and to augment the CS to improve SQ in terms of those elements of the CS offering that would enhance informed responsible buyer behaviour, would have long-term benefits for consumers, retail and the industry, would reduce complaints and exchanges, and would extend the service life of appliances and fully utilise all the features of those appliances (East, 1993:19–21).

1.4 A UNIQUE SOUTH AFRICAN CONSUMER MARKET

1.4.1 South Africa as an emerging economy

Compared with their European and American counterparts, South African consumers are unique: the South African consumer market is diverse; the country acknowledges eleven official languages, and consumers represent a broad socioeconomic spectrum from the extremely poor to very affluent and sophisticated consumer groups. Retail, especially major department stores have to provide for the needs of a diverse population (Executive Briefing: South Africa 35–40).

South Africa is by far the largest economy on the African continent. The economy is two-tiered: one that rivals other developed countries and another prominent segment with limited resources and only the most basic infrastructure. The formal sector, based on mining, manufacturing services and agriculture, is well developed and stands in sharp contrast to the informal sector. As part of the formal sector, approximately 90% of the South African population resides in areas surrounding the big cities, which represent the country's major areas of economic activity and consumer markets (Welcome to the South Africa Biz Guide:1). In recent years, many programmes have been implemented to introduce low cost housing, electricity and water to previously

disadvantaged households. With these amenities has come an inevitable increase in the demand for household electrical appliances, which are regarded by many as necessities and not luxuries (Domestic electrical appliances, 2008:1; Weiss & Gross, 1995:1).

Research commissioned by the *Financial Mail* and studies conducted by UNISA's Bureau for Market Research show that a large percentage of South Africans have become middle-income earners since 1994 (the start of the new political dispensation) as a result of increased educational status, better job opportunities and higher earnings (Black middle class on the rise, 2004:1). According to the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF), 1.4 million South African adults have migrated from poverty into LSM 5 since 1998, while 1.6 million have moved into LSM 6, most of them young women (Living Standards Measure: 1; Young women rise from poverty, 2005:2).

The LSM 5 and 6 groups have been the fastest growing groups in SA, and consist of semi-skilled workers, shop cashiers, security guards, junior police officers and students with a high school education and a monthly income of R2 500 to R4 000 (Young women rise from poverty, 2005:1). This has been described as the country's biggest economic wave yet, and it has consequently resulted in an increase in black spending power (Black middle class on the rise, 2004; Wortley & Tshwaedi, 2002:9). The buying power and living conditions of many previously disadvantaged consumers have thus changed dramatically in a relatively short period while their product-related experience does not necessarily support their activity in the marketplace. What is not certain though, is how retail has adapted in terms of its customer service to accommodate this new customer profile and whether any effort has been made to counteract shortcomings in CS in favour of an improved service offering.

1.4.2 Problems faced by South African consumers

1.4.2.1 Culture differences

Culture provides a framework for social interaction in a society and has different effects on buyer perceptions and the behaviour of consumers (Winsted, 1997:337). Culture is to humans collectively what personality is to an individual. In developed countries non-personal contact and respect for a person's privacy and rights may for example be more significant, while in developing countries personal contact and social norms may be more important (Hofstede, 1984:23). Providing detailed and complex information that is geared specifically to individuals may be a more effective way of communicating in developed settings, while providing more basic, generic information may work better in developing areas. In emerging markets the focus will probably be more on company tradition and the physical safety of the customer (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:1-8). Because of evidence that culture affects the product information that is required by consumers, institutions that serve a mixed market, such as in South Africa, should acknowledge the needs of vulnerable groups in order to enhance the level of their service offerings.

1.4.2.2 Limited product knowledge

Owing to limited product-related consumer socialisation, emerging consumers in South Africa still lack the product knowledge needed to make a responsible buyer decision (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:90). In 1994, only 14% of South Africans had a matric and 8% a post-matric education. By 2004, 25% had earned their matric and 9% education beyond matric (Young women rise from poverty, 2005:2). Although this indicates a rise of functional literacy in the population, i.e. the rudimentary skills in language and arithmetic that are required in a typical retail environment (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2007:541) the average consumer still needs to be helped to comprehend the consequences when buying complex products such as household appliances.

Research published in 2005 by Makgoba and Kachale concludes that inexperienced consumers in South Africa do not have adequate knowledge of

the functional and performance attributes of appliances to support informed responsible buyer decisions. However, it was also clear that even consumers with a lifelong experience of electricity and appliance ownership had insufficient knowledge to conclude informed buying decisions, which resulted in them relying on secondary indicators of quality like brand names and store image (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:99; Williams, 2002:251).

This coincides with a report by Dawar and Parker (1994:82), which states that certain purchase criteria are of universal importance to all consumers, irrespective of their country, culture or social status. Brand name has been identified as the most important indicator of quality, followed by price and the reputation of the store. It seems as if changes in technology leave most customers confused and restrict their ability to make responsible informed decisions (Wingo, 1996:176). Although inexperienced consumers need special assistance, experienced consumers can also benefit from it.

1.4.2.3 Limited product-related consumer socialisation

When purchasing major household appliances, lack of experience may be even more significant than lack of product knowledge. Consumers with limited product-related knowledge and experience might, for instance, rely on cues such as store image, salespeople, friends and colleagues, advertisements and warranties to determine quality (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:99). Brand recognition apparently plays a major role in influencing consumers, although differences in the organisation of brand information in the memory between more informed and less informed consumers affect the brands that are chosen. When encoding, less informed consumers tend to absorb only the brand information that is appropriate for using the appliance and do not organise brands by subcategory in the memory. They consequently tend to retrieve the same set of brands regardless of the usage situation when evaluating alternatives. More informed consumers, on the other hand, assimilate brand information that is appropriate for different usage situations and organise this information by product subcategories. This allows them to retrieve the brands that are appropriate for the usage situation and to vary the set of retrieved brands as the usage situation changes (Cowley & Mitchell, 2003:443).

Cognitive and social development during childhood provides a backdrop for children's development of consumer knowledge and decision-making skills. Consumer socialisation is a developmental process that proceeds through a series of stages as children mature into adult consumers. Because children in developing countries are seldom exposed to the transactions and activities of the marketplace from an early age, they do not gain transactional knowledge. Transactional knowledge is achieved when children are exposed to stimuli and experiences that they interpret in order to understand marketplace transactions. This includes knowledge of stores, products and brands, shopping scripts as well as shopping skills and pricing. Children's brand awareness increases as they grow older: adult-orientated product categories then become more salient or more relevant (John, 1996:11).

Adult consumers in developing countries may therefore lack the customer socialisation by which they would have acquired the skills, knowledge and attitudes that would enable them to function as consumers in the marketplace. The information-processing theories of child development focus on the development of children's skills in the areas of acquisition, encoding, organisation and retrieval of information. Social development entails forming a social perspective related to purchase influence and negotiation skills. Impression formation involves the ability to make social comparisons, and is strongly related to understanding the social aspects of products and consumption (John, 1999:4-6). Consumer socialisation is therefore supposed to help a child grow into a mature customer who can make responsible buyer decisions, such as those pertaining to known appliances (John, 1999:6; McGregor, 2001:1).

In the RSA, where many consumers (adults) have not had exposure to or experience with certain commodities during their childhood years, the changes in living conditions and lifestyles since 1994 have left them dismayed.

1.4.2.4 Difficulties encountered during the decision-making process

Informed responsible consumer decision making refers to a situation where a consumer has the product knowledge needed to make a responsible buying decision that is having the relevant product knowledge and understanding the consequences of the choice they make. Informed, responsible buying decisions not only contribute to consumer satisfaction and limit problems during the use of appliances; they also reduce negative interactions with retailers and service providers (Erasmus & Donoghue, 1998:35).

Informed, responsible buying decisions become increasingly important when buying expensive and durable household appliances. This is a time when consumers should consider various criteria for evaluating product alternatives (Engel *et al.*, 1995:25; Du Plessis & Rousseau, 2003:94), for example, benefits that are considered utilitarian, that is, objective, economic, rational and functional or hedonic (abstract) and benefits arising from experiential, abstract, subjective, emotional, symbolic, sensory, non-rational and aesthetic attributes (Buttle, 2004:26; Sarin *et al.*, 2003:71; Sweeney *et al.*, 1999:81).

Research indicates that the relative importance of evaluative criteria may vary according to the purchase situation, the nature of the alternatives evaluated, the involvement level and the amount of purchase experience (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004:520-523). Despite the importance of functional and performance attributes, it has been reported that the most important values of consumers' utility for consumer durable goods are social values, stimulation and materialism (East, 1993:19-21; Erdem *et al.*, 1999: 138; Charon 1979:23, La Rossa & Reitzes, 1993:138). Previously disadvantaged consumers and those living in developing countries may therefore, in their eagerness to improve their lifestyles, focus on image-building factors during product evaluation, rather than factors that would ensure hassle-free product use (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:93). Such consumers may therefore rely on status factors e.g. brand names and price as heuristics during product evaluation, as these are seen as primary indicators of personal substance (Hunt *et al.*, 1996:65; Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:6), and not necessarily consider the consequences of the purchase.

Makgopa and Kachale (2005:100), in their research on the product choice of RSA consumers, found that inexperienced consumers have the need, ambition and often also the financial ability to acquire major household appliances, but they often lack the ability to handle the various types of risk (e.g. functional, financial, performance, social and safety risks) involved, which limits their potential to make informed responsible buying decisions (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:100). Too much information may unfortunately confuse and bewilder inexperienced consumers, so that they shut everything out (Erasmus, 2002:26). It is therefore crucial to identify the type of information that should be provided. Choice overload can also make it difficult and even impossible for a consumer to make an informed, reliable decision, even when certain brands are screened out using non-compensatory strategies to reduce the number of brands and the information to be processed to a manageable amount (Asseal, 1992:182, 183; Nelson, 2002:190; Wingo, 1996:176).

1.5 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ACQUISITION OF HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCES

Against a background of a sustained increase in GDP growth (Du Plessis & Rousseau, 2003:49) and employment, demand for consumer goods edges upwards, particularly for more expensive retail goods such as major household appliances. The buying habits of the upcoming LSM 5 and 6 groups characterise those of the middle classes, including the ownership of household appliances. In 1994 only 48% of South Africans owned a fridge; by 2004 this had risen to 66%. Microwave oven ownership increased from 18% to 32% and stoves from 41% to 51% in the same period (Young women rise from poverty, 2005:2). Indications are that the upper end of the market is opening up for more contemporary designs and appliances (silver, grey and stainless steel), although there is still a strong demand for white appliances, free-standing cookers and twin-tub washing machines that are more affordable (Young women rise from poverty, 2005:2). Researchers argue that self-fulfilment, acceptance and status are pertinent in terms of a household's decision to acquire most household appliances (Black spending power on the up, 2004:1).

The local white-goods industry in South Africa is, however, predominantly import-orientated. According to the US Foreign Commercial Service, refrigeration equipment worth US \$630m was imported in 2001, an increase of 19.7% on the previous year. In 2002, refrigeration equipment worth US \$150m was imported. Defy Appliances (SA), Whirlpool (US) and LG Electronics (South Korea) dominate the white goods market. Samsung (South Korea) and Carrier (US) are other leading players (Executive Briefing: South Africa: 35-40). Foreign products, especially from the Far East, have gained value-share over local suppliers, owing to highly competitive prices as domestic production finds it hard to compete with production costs. International companies also have the wealth to put more capital into research, product development and advertising, whereas local companies strongly rely on brand names (Domestic electrical appliances, 2008:2). Global influences thus enable exposure to product ranges and brands that compare favourably with those of affluent countries elsewhere in the world (Lin *et al.*, 2000:1).

The wide variety of high-technological appliances that is available on the market today may cause confusion, even for experienced consumers. Appliances are designed to embrace new concepts, configurations, materials and manufacturing methods, and are therefore constantly changing (Wingo, 1996:176), which explains why proper consumer facilitation in retail stores is crucial, irrespective of consumers' socio economic – or educational status and their functional literacy.

Product knowledge that is required to evaluate product alternatives at the point of purchase would inevitably entail at least some knowledge of the basic functional and performance attributes of an appliance, a realistic service-life expectancy, as well as an awareness of personal responsibilities, such as correct installation, correct use and maintenance procedures, and adhering to the stipulations of the guarantee and after sales service. The decision-making process therefore becomes a very complex process (Cronin *et al.*, 2000:210; Engel *et al.*, 1986:234; Erasmus, 1998:149; Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:90).

Salespeople cannot assume that more experienced customers are more familiar with new appliances or that they know how to discriminate between

products, because consumers often base product decisions on emotional factors or react impulsively out of ignorance or information overload (Blem, 1995:30; Collins, 1987:9). The acquisition of major household appliances – in terms of the importance of the purchase, the consequences and impact of purchase decisions in the short and the long term – is thus described as a high-risk buyer decision, which may create a considerable amount of confusion and tension, even more so for the inexperienced or insufficiently informed consumers (Beatty *et al.*, 1996:224; Buttle, 2004:15-26).

Retailers consequently have to deal with challenges in terms of the provision of consumer goods and services that will satisfy the needs of emergent consumer groups. A product that is understandable, easy to use and does not break down will probably ensure a happy customer. Products of good quality provide tangible evidence of a company's basic values; they increase sales confidence and reduce the cost of keeping the customer satisfied (Blem, 1995:27).

1.6 RESEARCH PROBLEM

Extant literature mainly follows a marketing-dominated approach on how customer service (CS), service quality (SQ) and customer satisfaction levels relate to relevant relationship-orientated outcomes that will result in store loyalty, positive word-of-mouth communication, return intentions and recommendation of the store. Little has been done to date to evaluate the retail environment in terms of actions, conditions and processes that would enhance consumers' ability to make informed, responsible buying decisions, especially with regard to complex, expensive commodities such as major household appliances. Any effort to augment customer service is not straightforward, however. Customer service in fact represents a complex phenomenon where the interactive contributions of the individual elements of CS are integrated meticulously in terms of a particular CS scenario, such as selling major household appliances in a department store setting. An improved understanding of CS in terms of an augmented customer service offering would address the seemingly paradoxical situation in RSA where the provision of

appliances in retail and the consumers' ability to make informed responsible buying decisions seem incongruent.

1.7 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The following research objectives directed the research in terms of the research design and the methodology:

1. To investigate and discuss **consumers' judgement** of the service offering in the appliance departments of selected retail channels in the RSA in terms of (i) tangible evidence of the service offering as well as (ii) their perception of the service quality, i.e. a SERVQUAL judgement to
 - relate consumers' satisfaction with the customer service and their perception of the service quality to specific indicators such as age, product knowledge, interpretation of the ease to conclude the buying decision and product related experience
 - relate consumers' judgement of the service offering to their product knowledge as an indication of their potential to conclude informed, responsible buying decisions.
2. To investigate and describe the service offering in appliance departments in selected retail channels from the point of view of **store management** in terms of
 - *the visual presence* of the various elements of customer service (i.e. product; price; physical environment; personnel; processes; promotions) as defined in literature as elements of the marketing mix
 - *sales personnel's suggestions* for optimal application and presentation of the various elements of CS during a sales encounter.
3. To investigate and describe **industry's view** of their potential contribution towards augmented CS in appliance sales departments in retail stores

and to discuss their potential contribution to ultimately enhance informed responsible buying decisions.

4. To identify shortcomings in the service offering in appliance departments in prominent retail stores in terms of aspects that are neglected or counteract the potential of consumers to conclude informed, responsible buying decisions.
5. To formulate suggestions on how the customer service (CS) in appliance departments in retail stores could be augmented to ultimately enhance the service quality (SQ) beyond positive judgements to a service offering that encourages informed, responsible buying decisions.

A simultaneous investigation of consumers' product knowledge and their perception of service quality will provide invaluable evidence of shortcomings in the service offering that could be addressed to enhance the service offering so that it becomes more conducive for informed, responsible buying decisions.

1.8 PRESENTATION AND STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

Chapter 1 provides the background and justification for the study. It introduces the research problem as well as a definition and brief discussion of important and relevant concepts that were used to confine the scope of the study.

Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical perspectives, namely the systems approach and the cognitive perspective, which were used to structure and eventually interpret the research process and the ensuing discussions. The theoretical background is presented to indicate and clarify extant research in terms of the context of this research and to support the research approach and consequent discussions. The conceptual framework is presented in terms of a systems approach to distinguish the relevant concepts for the research.

Chapter 3 presents the problem statement, followed by the research objectives, which distinguish three principal areas of investigation, i.e. an investigation of **consumers'** satisfaction with customer service and their

consequent perception of service quality; a judgment of the service offering in retail by **salespeople** who deal with customers on a daily basis and who have first hand experience of the contribution of management and industry in terms of the sales task they have to perform; an overview of **representatives of industry** in terms of their responsibility and contribution to enhance informed, responsible buying decisions. The research strategy and the methodology are presented in the actual order of investigation.

Chapter 4 presents results of the different phases of the research presented in accordance with the objectives of the study. Results are presented in the form of graphs and tables and are interpreted in terms of the objectives of the research.

Chapter 5 presents the discussions of the findings in terms of the objectives that were formulated for the research and provides recommendations on how the customer service in appliance sales departments could be augmented to enhance informed, responsible buying decisions. The context refers to prominent RSA department stores as an example of an emerging economy.

Chapter 6 offers conclusions and recommendations and presents suggestions for further research.



Chapter 2

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter introduces the theoretical perspectives, namely the systems approach and the cognitive perspective, which were used to structure and eventually interpret the research process as well as ensuing discussions. The theoretical background and the conceptual framework are presented.

2.1 CHOICE OF THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

In this research two distinct theoretical perspectives were implemented to focus on the behaviour and actions of the three main role players in the research situation, namely the industry, store personnel and the consumer, who all see customer service and the standard of service quality represented in the store from their own perspectives, shaped and postulated by their frames of reference. Firstly, systems theory is applied as part of the consumer's decision-making process, as inputs like product standards, social class and resources available will influence their choice of appliances. After the transformation that is embodied by the actual buying transaction that takes place in the store, the output should be a satisfied customer who has made a responsible, informed buying decision. As this is not always the result in the retail of major household appliances, this study aims to identify and compile guidelines for augmented customer service that would aid in the desired output.

The cognitive perspective focuses on mental processes; on information stored about the "self", and the role these processes play in emotions and behaviour. The cognitive perspective is applied when studying the consumer and social cognition. The way people interpret, analyse and use their surroundings influences their attitudes and behaviour towards the world around them.

People use the objects around them as clues to determine their behaviour. One of the cognitive strategies used to understand and interpret the world is the use of schemata where the unknown is compared to a previous experience, making it possible to understand and use the strange object. One of the deficiencies of customer service in retail could be that the industry including the sales personnel assumes that all consumers have schemata that they can use to understand appliances. The inexperienced customer lacks this organised set of information that could guide him towards a specific set of actions to handle the strange situation. The objective of this study is therefore to suggest the support that should be provided by ACS in guiding customers to make informed, responsible decisions.

2.1.1 The systems approach

2.1.1.1 Motivation for following a systems theory approach

The systems approach is an approach that was proposed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy in the 1940s to study complex, natural, artificial and sociopolitical cultural phenomena (Mora, Gelman, Forgionne, Petkov & Cano, 2007:1; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:325). It is generally used to describe and explain the behaviour of a complex, but organised and structured, system. Literature clearly defines and describes both customer service (CS) and service quality (SQ) as separate entities that are defined and researched at an integrated level (the wholeness), as well as on a factor (dimensional) level. This is in agreement with the basic assumptions of the systems approach. It was thus decided to formulate the overall objectives and discussions for this research in terms of the basic assumptions of a system.

2.1.1.2 Core assumptions of the systems theory

In any system, the effect of the whole is greater than the sum of its parts:

According to systems theory, systems should be treated on an integrated level or in terms of their components (Alter, 2007:10). CS per se can thus be studied or perceived as the offering of a complete service as well as in terms of the individual elements it comprises. These individual elements form the holistic

offering of CS by the store and through the systems perspective CS as a service offering can be studied in terms of how the individual elements contribute to the integrated service. The same applies to SQ, which is defined as an integrated phenomenon or in terms of its dimensionality. The five dimensions of SQ identified by Parasuraman (*et al.*, 1988:15), namely intangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy, jointly represent the construct. SQ is expected to be and experienced as a complete concept. SQ and CS are therefore perceived by consumers as holistic phenomena, according to the well-known Gestalt concept of wholeness described as "the whole is also greater than its parts" (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:328). Wholeness refers to the unitary function and existence of a system in synergy, unpredicted by an evaluation or any subassembly of the parts (O'Connor, 2008:313; Steele, 2003:3; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:325).

The parts of a system are interrelated and interdependent:

Systems theory focuses on the arrangement of and relationships between the parts in the system, which form them into a whole (Heylighen & Joslyn, 1992:1). A system may be defined as a set of elements that are interrelated (Alter, 2007:10; Steele, 2003:1; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:325). Systems theory thus indicates that CS (as well as SQ) should be analysed and evaluated in terms of the individual elements or dimensions in order to identify potential problems or deficiencies. The interactive effects between the elements can be evaluated to indicate the routes of interaction in the operation of the system as a whole to understand how they affect the system (either CS or SQ) as a whole (Alter, 2007:10). A customer's perception of CS and SQ will thus inevitably be affected by his perception of individual elements or dimensions. The importance of each of the elements or dimensions of CS or SQ can therefore not be discussed or considered in isolation. The behaviour of the components also exhibits mutual influence: what happens in one element/attribute generally affects the other (Alter, 2007:11; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:332). Some elements/dimensions, however, may also be regarded to be more crucial by the customer than other role players. If a customer, for instance, disapproves of the physical environment of the store, but finds the cheaper prices highly attractive, he may still patronise the store because price may be regarded as more important. A negative experience with one of the elements

of CS or SQ will not necessarily result in a negative perception of the CS in that store, because the various elements of the service may compensate for one another (Hawkins, Best & Coney, 1992:17).

The interaction of subsystems leads to homeostasis:

In systems theory it is postulated that systems are open to, and interact with, other systems in their environment, and that they can acquire new properties, resulting in continuous evolution (Alter, 2007:8; Heylighen & Joslyn, 1992:1). CS and SQ can both be described as open systems, as the boundaries between the system and the environment allow the flow of matter, energy and information in and out of the system. Elements of CS and dimensions of SQ exhibit multiple interfaces owing to direct or indirect transactions between customers and the store. CS and SQ may, for example, be viewed differently depending on the context, for example, an appliance sales context versus a grocery store (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:333).

Any system is discussed in terms of inputs, transformation of inputs and outputs:

When explaining CS or SQ, it is meaningful to identify and describe all the factors (elements) that influence the information about and/or aspects of the internal and the external environment of the store that act as inputs, that is, factors that affect consumers' perception of the service offering. Transformation occurs when the inputs are collectively interpreted in customers' minds (cognitive frameworks) on the basis of prior experience and expectations to result in an outcome, that is, a positive or negative service encounter (Alter, 2007:9). All factors that affect CS or SQ are thus acknowledged as inputs. These inputs are transformed within cognitive frameworks that are pre-established and result in an output, namely, commendable CS (or not) and exceptional SQ or not. The latter depends on a consumer's ability to appraise and interpret the service offering critically.

Every system has a clear goal/purpose:

Purposefulness is a core property of a system, for example, commendable CS and exceptional SQ (Mora *et al.*, 2007:3). The final state of a system should be at equilibrium, where the feedback and control indicate that the inputs were transformed to produce the desired outcome (Alter, 2007:10; Von Bertalanffy,

1968:1). Equilibrium is unequivocally determined by the initial inputs. If the elements of CS and the dimensions of SQ are not perceived in the same way as was intended by the store, equilibrium may still be possible through equifinality. Equifinality occurs when equilibrium is reached from different initial conditions and in different ways, for example, when CS is perceived to be good as a result of very affordable prices, despite poor attention of personnel. In another store CS could be perceived favourably owing to attentive personnel, despite high prices (Von Bertalanffy, 1968:1; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:334).

2.1.2 The cognitive perspective

2.1.2.1 Motivation for incorporating the cognitive perspective

The cognitive perspective focuses on mental processes and how information that is stored in memory affect emotions and behaviour. A person's cognitive processes will organise and manipulate any information received by analysing, interpreting, encoding and retrieving it in order to progress towards problem solving and decision making, enabling the person to reach a certain goal (Introduction to cognitive perspectives on personality, 2003:1; The cognitive perspective, 2008:2). In a shopping environment consumers are exposed to lots of information, as well as sensory stimuli. They thus need to cope with, integrate, organise and process this information by means of cognitive monitoring to adjust thoughts and behaviours. These thoughts and behaviours will direct consumers' buying behaviour. A consumer's cognitive thought processes with regards to a buying encounter are developed through consumer socialisation: a consumer develops the relevant schemata and shopping scripts to handle the buying decision (or otherwise) (John, 1999:12). If a consumer has the relevant buying experience it will permit him to handle the buying activity better, as he will be able to process the information and that will guide him towards making a buyer decision (The cognitive perspective, 2008:1). Without the relevant experience a consumer will thus probably not be able to make an informed buyer decision, as there is no precognition that could guide the processing of the information offered through the store's CS offering. Perceived service quality (SQ) will therefore also be clouded because a consumer's expectations will probably be low.

2.1.2.2 Application of the cognitive perspective in the research

Within a systems framework that was discussed earlier on, the cognitive perspective becomes relevant during the transformation stage. When consumers are exposed to stimuli (inputs) they may try to simplify the experience by using cognitive structures and shortcuts based on what they are familiar, that is, by using schemata and stereotyping.

A schema is a cognitive structure that acts as an organisational unit, which influences all the perceptual cognitive activities that are part of the processing of information (Schema theory, 1995:1; Venkatraman & Villarreal, 1984:355). It functions as "slots" that can be filled in by context, or by additional information (Schema theory, 1995:1). For example, a consumer who has used an automatic washing machine in the past, may not become overly confused by the unknown attributes of modern automatic washing machines – these new inputs are screened against existing schemas to fill in missing information based on prior experience and knowledge, especially if they are linked by physical proximity of the two. If an appropriate schema is not found to link new information to, a new schema is created, or existing and related schemas may be transferred to process the new input (Venkatraman & Villarreal, 1984:355-357). If the consumer has never used an automatic washing machine before, schemata need to be formed to accommodate the new input. This becomes a major problem if retail and industry assume that customers have the schemata for understanding their products. This is when and why the role of personnel has to increase in providing optimal CS and SQ. The processing of information involves the perceiving, encoding, storing and retrieving of information, as well as the final concluding of a buyer decision. The consumer enters the buying situation with certain expectations as well as certain cognitive and individual capabilities (Chakravarti, Macinnis & Nakamoto, 1990:910).

2.2 AN EXPLICATION OF CUSTOMER SERVICE WITHIN THE SYSTEMS APPROACH

2.2.1 Introduction

Customer service (CS), as an example of services, is a complex phenomenon that involves a series of activities and processes that are produced and consumed simultaneously, with the service provider and the consumer as participants. Quality control and marketing generally take place during service production and consumption. Services are largely intangible, subjectively experienced processes that have a critical impact on consumers' perception of the service. In developing countries, however, the production and consumption of services, and marketing activities and the perception of quality, are not necessarily comparable or equal to those in developed countries. The CS offering in an emerging economy such as South Africa, with its diverse population, should therefore be investigated and adapted to meet the needs of all consumers, to ultimately encourage informed responsible buyer decisions and to provide new evidence of SQ.

2.2.2 Customer service defined

CS is defined as a combination of the activities/strategies offered by retailers with the intention of providing a rewarding shopping experience in an effort to increase *service quality* and ensure *customer satisfaction* (Ackermann, 2002:5; Howardell, 2003:1; Levy & Weitz, 2001:586; Schwerdtfeger, 2003:1; Woodruf, 1997:139). CS appears to be an assumption of the total outcome of relationships in the interaction between the company and the customer (Blem, 1995:6; Zolkiewski & Lewis, 2004:1).

The complexity of CS can be explained and understood by studying its different but interrelated elements, which, McCarthy suggests, are an expositional device for classifying and discussing the major elements of a company's marketing mix (Bahia & Nantel, 2000:86; Bennett, 1997:151; Buttle, 2004:233; Kotler, 1994:91; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:328). Some of these elements (products, price, physical environment, personnel, processes, promotions) are sometimes intentionally manipulated to distinguish the services of one store

from another in order to attract and retain customers: for example by emphasising price more when an increase in sales and profits is more important to a company than the other elements (Rhee & Bell, 2002:225; Rust *et al.*, 1995:59; Woodruff, 1997:140). Apparently, more than 69% of retail customers are not loyal to a specific store, but will buy from different stores as a direct consequence of unsatisfactory CS (Gowan, Seymour & Lackey, 2001:278). Companies that are successful in retaining customers generally are those that make the effort to understand what their customers value and then supply them with it consistently (Graham, 2002:1; Lin *et al.*, 2000:277; Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1990:2).

In today's competitive world, the key to sustainable competitive advantage lies in delivering high quality service. CS, SQ and customer satisfaction are closely related and intertwined and represent important aspects of marketing theory and practice (Spreng & Mackoy, 1996:201). This research will approach issues surrounding CS and SQ separately and will attempt to explain this in terms of the content of the research.

Consumers' overall assessment/satisfaction with the utility of the service is based on perceptions of what is offered and what is received (Cronin *et al.*, 2000:204; Gagliano & Hathcote, 1994:61; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990:32). Bagozzi suggests that cognitive evaluations of a store or service precede emotional responses, for example satisfaction (Cronin *et al.*, 2000:209). From the point of view of the discipline of Consumer Science, consumer satisfaction should evolve around informed and responsible buyer decisions. In the case of complex buyer decisions, consumers typically do not have enough skill, expertise or education to evaluate the service adequately; therefore they will rely more on peripheral cues such as the personal attention they receive from the service provider (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:5-13; Shemwell, Yavas & Bilgin, 1998:156, 157).

In general, if the customer's expectations have been met, he will be satisfied, as expectations serve as the basis for satisfaction judgements (Buttle, 2004:144-146). Consumer expectations may differ vastly, for example, in some cases material input provides the key to improving customer satisfaction. Maytag, a large manufacturer of washing machines in the United States, for example,

buys raw rubber and manufactures its own seals and gaskets to ensure that these critical components meet its high standards of durability (Blem, 1995:29). In other cases, satisfaction evolves around the actions and assistance of the salesperson in the store. The fulfilment of the first role of a salesperson, namely the collecting of information about the customer's needs and interests, enables the salesperson to perform the second role, that is, managing the relationship. This involves handling the customer's queries and complaints and representing the customer's needs and interests to the company, subsequently ensuring the customer's satisfaction with the product purchased (Buttle, 2004:252, 253; Gothan & Erasmus, 2003:98).

In order to evaluate CS and SQ objectively, and to consider how CS can be improved to ensure a specific outcome, that is, informed, responsible buying behaviour, all the various components/elements of CS have to be evaluated individually to assess the way they collectively influence consumers' experience and satisfaction with CS. From the viewpoint of Consumer Science, this among other things concerns itself with the well-being of consumers. A customer's satisfaction with CS should also be based on whether the service offering contributed to/facilitated a responsible, informed buyer decision. Although an inexperienced customer with limited knowledge of high technological household appliances may perceive and interpret the elements of CS differently to an experienced customer, it is hoped that guidance towards informed, responsible consumer decision making would be to the benefit of all (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:334).

2.2.3 The elements of customer service (CS) (Inputs of the system)

For the consumer, CS represents an offering of various individual service elements. The following elements of the marketing mix broadly represent the resources or capabilities of a store. These elements will be addressed according to their contribution to CS in terms of Service Quality (SQ), leading to customer satisfaction, as it unfolds in the purchase of major household electrical appliances. In the conclusive recommendations for optimal CS, namely augmented customer service, the offering of the elements of CS must assist the consumer collectively in not only experiencing satisfaction with the

purchase situation, but also making an informed, responsible buying decision that will benefit all parties involved.

2.2.3.1 Products

Products refer to the merchandise offering (in this instance, major household appliances) of a store and contain all the dimensions that are relevant to a product range, for example quality, variety and availability (Mitchell, 2002:79). In any retail channel the household appliances in stock, in terms of brands and types, coincide with what is regarded as suitable for the relevant market segment. Department stores thus stock a basic product variety that is selected according to the needs of their target market. Specialty stores, on the other hand, may offer more technological advanced and top-of-the range appliances that would once again meet the needs of a more sophisticated target market (Dion, 2006; Makro, 2006; Shoprite Holdings, 2006).

The local white-goods industry in South Africa is, however, predominantly import-orientated. Foreign products, especially from the Far East, have gained value-share over local suppliers owing to highly competitive prices, as domestic production finds it hard to compete with overseas production costs. In addition, international companies have the wherewithal to put more capital into research, product development and advertising, whereas local companies have to rely more on product name (Domestic electrical appliances, 2008:2). Global influences thus enable exposure to product ranges that compare favourably with those of affluent countries elsewhere in the world. Product evaluation is influenced and complicated by the different technical functions of new appliances, as well as by the aesthetic and symbolic value of the product design (Creusen & Schoormans, 1998:551). This makes it exceptionally difficult for inexperienced customers to conclude product decisions.

Stores display and specialise in products, but customers do not buy a product; they buy a solution to a problem. Products should therefore be presented in such a way that the customer is able to evaluate their characteristics and make informed responsible decisions (Blem, 1995:33; Buttle, 2004:233). Guidance by well-trained salespeople, in explaining digital, automotive and

electronic appliances, is therefore essential (Weiss & Gross, 1995:1). Household appliances are generally evaluated in store through a comparison of product characteristics on the spot where appliances can be viewed. The evaluation may include a combination of functional, financial, durability, status and aesthetic factors against a set of parameters that the individual anticipates or expects (Bahia & Nantel, 2000:86; Buttle, 2004:233; Kotler, 1994:91).

2.2.3.2 Price

In an economic perspective, underlying the functioning of many stores, profitability and productivity are the two basic financial objectives of a company, with emphasis on gross margin, profit contribution and net profit (Hawkins *et al.*, 1992:634; Sureshchandar *et al.*, 2002:366). Many stores focus mainly on price to attract customers because profit may be more important to them than, for instance, the personnel or customer satisfaction or a responsible buyer decision (East, 1993:176; Spreng & Mackoy, 1996:202).

Price may be a very important determinant of a consumer's eventual product choice, especially with regards to expensive merchandise such as major household appliances. Price is a concrete measure for indicating affordability, exclusiveness, value for money and even quality for different consumers (Dunne, Lusch & Griffith, 2002:369). Consumers sometimes buy the cheapest product for the sake of affordability or they buy the most expensive product, as they regard the price as a guarantee of quality. The assumption of a price-quality relationship is a very firm, and often justified, market belief (Solomon, Bamossy & Askegaard, 2002:255; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007:452). A consumer will regard the price as acceptable if the value of the appliance equals or exceeds the value of the money that is spent (Buttle, 2004:237, 238). Expensive products, like household appliances, involve a higher perception of monetary and psychological risk, and therefore they are usually purchased only after an extensive information search (Solomon *et al.*, 2002:246).

Consumer decisions are often manipulated through pricing strategies in a subtle way to close a deal and consumers are generally not equipped to guard against these (Dunne *et al.*, 2002:43; Peter & Olson, 1993:392). Retailers that

offer better CS tend also to be more expensive (Dunne *et al.*, 2002:370). Eventually all financial characteristics that refer to the relative cost and affordability of appliances should be disclosed to ensure informed consumer decisions, that is, the initial purchase price, the cost of repairs and maintenance and running costs. In the case of inexperienced buyers, this information needs to be explained by sales personnel in order to enable a responsible buyer decision (US Department of Energy, 2002:1).

2.2.3.3 Physical environment

Extant research indicates that nonverbal, affective elements of the environment have the capacity to influence a consumer's evaluation of a product (Solomon *et al.*, 2002:273). The store design and layout, lighting and display fixtures, colours and decor, the overall size of the store, temperature and noise levels, smell, music and employee sociability are therefore aimed to improve customers' in-store emotions and to provide pre-purchase information (Bruner, 1990:94). These mood improvements may lead to a host of desired behaviours, including greater willingness to purchase, longer stays and enhanced satisfaction (Dabholkar, Thorpe & Rentz, 1996:4; Mano, 1999:149; Peter & Olson, 1993:395; Soriano & Foxall, 2002:139; Spangenberg, Crowley & Henderson, 1996:67). Mood improvement is therefore an automatic, non-cognitive process, which is believed to influencing consumer preferences unconsciously (Groenland & Schoormans, 1994:184).

Although the elements of the marketing mix have a collective influence on the customer (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:328), enhancement of the in-store environment, for example, the display of the appliances, ease of demonstration and space for possible evaluation, will benefit the customer (Dabholkar *et al.*, 1996:4). Constant monitoring of the store's image and adapting it to the target market is therefore required to enhance store loyalty (Bloemer & De Ruyter, 1998:500; Bloemer & Odekerken-Schröder, 2002:69). Any attribute that affects the pleasantness of the surroundings could influence and even determine potential customers' interpretation of the customer service offered (Machleit, Eroglu & Mantel, 2000:29) even though it might have no effect on whether a customer has a better understanding of the appliance he/she intends to

purchase. The physical environment may thus be an important consideration in deciding whether to patronise a store or not.

2.2.3.4 Personnel

Personnel include any person that becomes part of the sales experience encounter, for example salespeople, managers and cashiers. To the customer the salesperson represents the company and will help to shape the customer's opinion about the company. Personal communication and interaction with the salesperson is important to build a relationship that benefits both the salesperson and the consumer, as they may increase consumers' felt involvement with the product and the conscious buying decision (Evans, Kleine, Landry & Crosby, 2000:512; Gothan & Erasmus, 2003:96; Plank & Reid, 1994:43; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999:509; Roberts, Varki & Brodie, 2003:169; Sweeney *et al.*, 1999:77). The significance of frontline employees as boundary spanners between the company and its customers is often recognised in the literature (Gothan & Erasmus, 2003:95; Hughes, 2006:114; Peter & Olson, 1993:357). The salesperson's capacity as consumer facilitator, culminating in his/her skills and knowledge, may be considered invaluable to inexperienced customers in the transformation process, especially in terms of the prevention of cognitive dissonance and the reduction of risk perception (Sarin *et al.*, 2003:71; Sharma, 2001:125; Sweeney *et al.*, 1999:77). It is therefore alarming that South African consumers are apparently hesitant to trust salespeople and that salespeople are not consulted to indicate the quality of appliances (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:97). Marx and Erasmus (2006:65) state that a noteworthy percentage of participants indicate that assistance and efficiency of both general frontline staff and management in South African retail is unsatisfactory.

Salespeople who realise the importance of proper consumer facilitation may provide the key to informed, responsible buyer decisions, resulting in ACS. The ideal is that salespeople should be seen as competent, trustworthy, friendly, expert, honest, helpful and concerned about satisfying the needs of the consumer (Crie, 2003:69). Customers often build up personal relationships and bonds of trust with employees, instead of the store, especially in a fast-paced world where consumers tend to open up easier and build high levels of trust

more quickly (Beatty *et al.*, 1996:224; Jacobs, Hyman & McQuitty, 2001:48; Seth, 2004:4). Several authors agree that a retailer, through his sales personnel, must first thoroughly understand the customer and his/her needs and then apply this to understanding and serving the customer (Anderson & Zemke, 1991:96; Beatty *et al.*, 1996:223; Blem, 1995:34, 50).

Sales personnel should never assume that customers are familiar with appliances, even if they seem confident. Some buyers fail to buy what they really need out of ignorance (Blem, 1995:30; Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:90), or they may be influenced by secondary indicators, like friends or store image (La Rossa & Reitzes, 1993:136). Therefore personal interaction with personnel in the store may motivate them to attend to and comprehend the information the salesperson shares about the product. The interactive communication situation should, on the other hand, allow salespeople to adapt their sales presentations to fit the informational needs of each potential buyer (Peter & Olson, 1993:395).

In developed markets, the competence of employees is highly regarded and emphasis is placed on individual initiative and achievement (Hofstede, 1984:264). Evidence indicates, however, that frontline employees in South African retail are typically underpaid, under trained, overworked and highly stressed. Salespeople seem to be caught up between the customers' demand for attention, and management's demand for efficiency and productivity (Singh, 2000:15, 16). Economic incentives received, including salary, and recognition and other awards, may influence a salesperson's commitment to the facilitation and offering of CS to consumers (Beatty *et al.*, 1996:229; Gothan & Erasmus, 2003:97; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:332). Coping with role ambiguity and role conflict may result in burnout customer relationships that may contribute to lower SQ standards (Singh, 2000:16). In emerging economies the service organisation as a whole often overshadows individual identity. Personnel's skills and initiative are thus often overlooked (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:1-8). Marriott's motto, "It takes happy employees to make happy customers" should be seen as a fundamental guideline for ACS (Gummesson, 1988:17).

2.2.3.5 Processes

Processes involve the delivering of the service to the customer and enhancing customer-perceived value, with customer satisfaction as an important outcome of the service delivery process (Bendall-Lyon & Powers, 2004:115). This, among other things, involves SQ management, prompt delivery and installation of appliances, availability of credit facilities that include quick purchase approvals and/or special discounts, financial information, such as the discounts available, special offers, terms of payment and availability of credit facilities (Blem, 1995:30; Buttle, 2004: 248; Peter & Olson, 1993:390-395). Processes in fact contribute to hassle-free shopping and peace of mind, and the retailer's intention to prevent and minimise frustration for their customers. Accuracy, completeness and convenience of service delivery are implied. Convenience is becoming increasingly important to customers, especially time-related perceptions (Berry, Seiders & Grewal, 2002:1). Cultural factors can, however, affect consumers' attitudes towards time scarcity, value of time, and sensitivity to time-related issues. Waiting time in queues was for example mentioned as an important reason for dissatisfaction with some retail stores among sophisticated consumers (Marx & Erasmus, 2006:63).

After-sales service is another aspect of the so-called processes. It suggests that complaints must be heard positively and with understanding, be met with fair and appropriate action, reported easily and resolved with speed (Bendall-Lyon & Powers, 2004:115; Blem, 1995:29-33). This often determines customers' perception of stores as empathetic and trustworthy. Marx and Erasmus (2006:65) report that process-related attributes are one of the main contributors to poor CS. In a highly competitive marketplace, processes could very well represent the crucial discriminating factors that distinguish one outlet from another (Buttle, 2004:249).

2.2.3.6 Promotions

Promotions refers to all forms of marketing communication that convey a store's offerings visually, verbally or auditory (Shiffman & Kanuk, 2007:388) with the intention of influencing and attracting customers, or changing their opinions (Peter & Olson, 1993:393). The objective of sales promotions of limited duration

is to persuade a consumer into a hasty purchase (Aggarwal & Vaidyanathan, 2003:394). Promotions do not necessarily enhance responsible decision-making, but rather focus on aspects like social importance, price and environmental considerations. Other factors that are important in consumer acceptance are brand loyalty, warranty, price, aesthetics and after-sales availability (Weiss & Gross, 1995:70).

On the positive side, promotions provide consumers with three utilitarian benefits, namely savings, higher product quality and improved shopping convenience, and the hedonic benefits of intrinsic stimulation, fun and self-esteem (Chandon, Wansink & Laurent, 2000:65). Sometimes promotions accentuate the fact that appliances are seen as symbols, representing social images (La Rossa & Reitzes, 1993:136). Promotions may also accentuate the functional aspects of appliances (more specifically performance characteristics) as well as price (affordability) in an effort to impress/attract potential buyers (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:93). Emphasis on price reductions may increase sales rapidly, as consumers are easily overwhelmed by special offers and can be motivated by eager sales personnel to buy the product on promotion, without the necessarily consideration of other brands in order to make a responsible decision (East, 1993:176). The objective of management may thus in certain situations be to reach a specific sales volume with little emphasis on SQ.

Although consumers' purchase decisions will be influenced by all the elements of the market mix collectively (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:328), promotions may play an important role in directing the inexperienced consumer's decision. In a customer-orientated approach, promotions should be redesigned to change the focus from an economic approach to meeting all customer needs (Blem, 1995:29).

2.2.4 The interactive contribution of the elements of CS to the service offering (Transformation)

The systems perspective (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:328) postulates that the CS offered by stores can be explained as a complex organised system of

elements that represents coherently the store's marketing mix to which the customer is exposed. These elements are individually perceived and collectively interpreted against the background of the existing schemata in a consumer's memory, formed by socialisation and through experience over time (Spears & Gregoire, 2004:2). Previous experiences, whether positive or negative, will be stored in the consumer's memory and will influence consequent evaluations of products or stores (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:91). Where product socialisation and experience are limited, the relevant schemata will be absent and consumers will find it difficult to comprehend existing cues. Whatever the case, consumers will organise cues (elements of CS) in terms of existing schemata and thus prioritise accordingly. According to systems theory the elements of CS will not all be considered of equal importance.

The elements of CS are interrelated and interdependent (Spreng & Mackoy, 1996: 204; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:328) and when the interpretation and perception of one element changes, it will also affect the perception of the other elements (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:332). The consumer forms a conclusion about the CS offered by the store sometimes on a subliminal level (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007:172-179), that is, it would be difficult to explain. When one element of CS is negatively or more positively focused on than the others, the perception of CS as a whole will be influenced. The final experience of CS will be determined by the collective contribution of the elements during the purchasing transaction. Price could for example compensate for poor in-store service, or excellent assistance of personnel could compensate for poor product assortment.

This interpretation of elements within schemata in memory represents the transformation process that directs the outcome of the process (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:328). The fact that CS is interpreted as a collective whole has specific value for the customer in an emerging economy. Different elements may be perceived as important, and satisfaction (output) may be reached via different routes. This phenomenon is known as equifinality. Consumers may evaluate the CS offered in various stores across a range of attributes, computing a weight or score for each. Based on compensatory processing, the customer will select a store that scores the highest among the alternatives

evaluated (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007:456). A positive attitude of a salesperson and his concern about the satisfaction of the customer may therefore result in a consumer's satisfaction with the CS of a store despite many other shortcomings in its CS (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:3, 5).

2.2.5 Customer service as a determinant of informed, responsible buying decisions (Output)

From a CS point of view, a purchase has been accomplished successfully when an informed responsible buying decision has been made that will simultaneously fulfil the needs of that consumer. CS, as an output of a responsible informed buyer transaction, will have a positive effect on subsequent buyer decisions because the experience becomes part of a consumer's internal frame of reference, forming schemata to be used as reference in future purchase decisions (Erasmus & Donoghue, 1998:37; Erasmus, Boshoff & Rousseau, 2002:80; Hawkins *et al.*, 1992:674). It will also result in a steady word-of-mouth promotion in favour of the store and may enhance store loyalty. It reduces the business's costs in finding new customers and minimises switching behaviour among consumers (Blem, 1995:7; Goff, Boles, Bellenger & Stojack, 1997:171; Gowan *et al.*, 2001:278). Inevitably consumers place greater importance on the excellence of the CS experienced than they do on the costs associated with this acquisition (Cronin *et al.*, 2000:209).

Evidence shows that a purely cognitive approach to CS may be inadequate for modelling satisfaction evaluations (Wirtz, Matilla & Tan, 2000:348). Consumer satisfaction and especially consumer delight with the CS offered is an emotional response that reflects a positive affect regarding cognitive and affective elements (Buttle, 2004:21; Clarke, 2001:112; Goff *et al.*, 1997:171). Satisfaction judgements are thus seen as affective outcomes of elaborate cognitive processes in which consumers compare the actual performance of the product to some internal standard (Dubé & Schmitt, 1991:52). Research indicates that products are not only bought for the performance benefits, but also for social and psychological reasons that may lead to different criteria dominating the purchase decision (Erasmus, 2005:89). The imperative of ACS in

retail is to acknowledge the context. This is confirmed by Malhotra *et al.* (1994:1-8) in their caution to refrain from a standardised marketing approach in different countries, as well as Williams's (2002:249) and Winsted's (1997:337) conclusions of the specific importance and unmistakable influence of culture and context on SQ determinants.

2.3 A DISCUSSION OF SERVICE QUALITY WITHIN A SYSTEMS APPROACH

2.3.1 Service quality defined

Customer service is eventually interpreted and experienced in terms of service quality (SQ), that is, the extent to which a store provides certain desired characteristics to its customers (Crosby, in Mentzer, Bienstock & Kahn, 1993:512). SQ is defined as a primarily cognitive, left-brained, evaluative and objective concept (Shemwell *et al.*, 1998:156), as well as a type of attitude that results from comparisons consumers make between their expectations and their perception of the actual service performance and the conformance to their requirements (Bahia & Nantel, 2000:84; Bitner, 1990:71; Cronin *et al.*, 2000:195; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985:42; Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1996:32). Perceived quality is defined as a consumer's judgement of the overall excellence of a company (Kang, 2006:38). Since quality is perceived subjectively, service quality levels are defined in terms of customer expectations (Grönroos, 1988:10; Hughes, 2006:114; Langevin, 1988:3).

It is important that the essentials of both product quality and SQ are understood (Gummesson, 1988:3). Two concepts of SQ are distinguished – quality *in fact* and quality *in perception*. Quality in fact is achieved when an organisation does what it sets out to do, and quality in perception occurs when the organisation meets the customer's expectations. The complex role of quality not only affects perceptions of value and satisfaction, but also directly influences behavioural intentions (Cronin *et al.*, 2000:211).

2.3.2 The importance of SQ in retail

Offering quality service is considered an essential strategy for success and survival in today's competitive retail environment (Dabholkar *et al.*, 1996:3; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985:41; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988:15; Rust, Danaher & Varki, 2000:439). A commitment to quality must start at the top with the CEO of the organisation and must be embraced by workers down the line. The goal for every individual and department in an organisation is to ensure they understand the expectations of their customers, that they match their specifications to those expectations, and that they subsequently fulfil those specifications (Gummesson, 1988:21). Everyone needs to be aware that potential first-time buyers may be looking extremely hard for cues that indicate quality and all should be sharing the responsibility for producing quality products and services. If a service provider wants to improve his service offering, he must approach the goal of zero defects by implementing better systems, better recruiting procedures, better training of staff, improved internal marketing, better involvement of customers in the service delivery process, better premises and a better relationship between the front-line staff and the support staff (Di Primio, 1988:24).

Strong demand fluctuations of service delivery may require excess capacity and careful planning at the level of the service provider to prevent problems when the demand for service is not uniformly distributed over time (Day & Toledano, 1995:25; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985:44). The training of employees is absolutely critical as many services (e.g. retail) are primarily people based. Ultimately a programme of recognition, gratitude and incentives should be implemented to reward employees for excellent service so that the store may benefit from excellent service quality (Townsend & Gebhardt, 1988:6-11).

A company should seize every opportunity to show customers they matter. The PIMS study (Profit Impact of Market Strategy), conducted and published by the Strategic Planning Institute (Townsend & Gebhardt, 1988:6), clearly shows that organisations that are believed to provide quality products and/or services make at least twice as much money as those with a reputation for poor quality. In the intensive competition amongst stores that are constantly seeking

profitable ways to differentiate themselves and to retain and even increase their customer base inter alia through attractive prices, care should be taken that efforts do not result in lower standards of quality in terms of the service that is offered. It is a matter of delivering what the customer perceives as a reasonable match to expectations (Mittal, 2001:108). Since the 1980s, consumers in First World countries have become more preoccupied with quality and have shown an increased willingness to pay higher prices for it (Turley, 1990:5). Quality improvements affect revenue through improved image, increased sales, economy of scale, and reduced price competition. Therefore the impact of quality on profits is: "quality pays!" (Gummesson, 1988:6).

The offering of quality products is a fundamental aspect of SQ. Quality of products is defined as a conformance to certain requirements as a rated ability of the brand to perform its function (Kotler, 1994:91) or the extent to which an appliance conforms to tight manufacturing standards considering the various dimensions of quality, which include performance, durability, reliability, serviceability and aesthetic properties (Kang, 2006:38; Seth, 2006:82; Sureshchandar, Rajendran & Anantharaman, 2002:364). Perception of quality risk is defined as the potential that a product or service will not meet a customer's minimum quality standards (Turley, 1990:5). Service managers can thus reduce customers' perceptions of quality risk by concentrating on the offering/supply of products of excellent quality and through an excellent service offering.

Quality promises different things to different people: to the owner of the business it is a way of making more money, to the employee it is a way to have pride in the job, to the customers it is a way to get what they want (Rust *et al.*, 2000:439; Townsend & Gebhardt, 1988:10). The benefit of quality improvements is that the business will attract new customers, and will change current, satisfied customers into loyal customers, as there is a strong positive correlation between SQ and customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is also positively related to effective and continued commitment (Rust *et al.*, 1995:58; Shemwell *et al.*, 1998:162, 163). Services are produced and consumed simultaneously and are predominantly intangible. Quality is therefore difficult to control and service

outcomes are even harder to guarantee (Bettencourt, 1997:384; Buttle, 2004:232, 233; Grönroos, 1988:11).

2.3.3 The dimensions of SQ

The concept of SQ is complex, diffuse and abstract, mainly because of the three distinctive features of a service, namely intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability of production and consumption (Pérez, Abad, Carillo & Fernández, 2007:135).

Parasuraman *et al.* (1985:42) define SQ as a measure of how well the service delivered matches the customer's expectations, which is also closely linked to attitude. Research efforts have been focused on the intangible aspect of the service delivered. In 1988 a multiple-item scale (SERVQUAL) for measuring consumers' perceptions of SQ was developed to diagnose and uncover broad areas of a company's SQ shortfalls, the strengths that exist regarding executive perceptions of service quality and the tasks associated with service delivery to consumers. SERVQUAL used 22 items to measure customer perceptions of SQ. It was, however, argued that these items are global in nature, and to be of practical utility the service construct should be context specific (Olorunniwo, *et al.*, 2006:60). The construct of quality, as measured by SERVQUAL, involves perceived quality of an entity's overall excellence; it is a type of attitude, related but not quite equivalent to satisfaction, resulting from a comparison of expectations with perceptions of performance. Five dimensions of SQ were identified, namely intangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The significance of these can vary considerably between types of service context and individual buyers (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988:15, 17). The SERVQUAL scale was later refined and reassessed with wording and item changes (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1991:3, 4) and is still widely used in retail research to measure SQ.

Criticism of SERVQUAL is based on using different items for various services and adapting the produced dimensions to the service being studied (Carman, 1990:35). Alternative scales were thus developed, such as the revised SERVQUAL scale (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1991:67), and the SERVPERF

scale (Cronin & Taylor, 1992:55), both offering the five dimensions. In an effort to conceptualise SQ, Sureshchandar *et al.* (2002:365) identifies five factors from the customers' point of view, as crucial in terms of SQ. These form the core service, namely sales, the human element of service delivery, the systematisation of service delivery (nonhuman element), tangibles of service and social responsibility. Another approach by the "Nordic school" describes SQ in terms of six criteria: professionalism and skills, attitudes and behaviour, accessibility and flexibility, reliability and trustworthiness, recovery reputation and control (Turley, 1990:5).

Although SERVQUAL has been used widely, there has been little support lately for the five-factor structure (Carman, 1990:33; Pérez, 2007:141). Two dimensions of SQ have been identified as the focal stimuli to which a consumer responds directly and the contextual stimuli that form the physical environment for the perception of the focal stimuli. Support for these two dimensions has been indicated by recent authors such as Mels (1997), who identified a first dimension termed "intrinsic quality" that describes the human interaction component of service, combining responsiveness, assurance, empathy and reliability. This parallels Lehtinen and Lehtinen's (1991:288) concept of interactive quality. The second dimension, "extrinsic quality", describes the tangible aspects of the service delivery, as does Lehtinen and Lehtinen's physical dimension. SQ has been defined in terms of "process quality" and "output quality" (Lehtinen & Lehtinen, 1991:288). Grönroos (1988:10) suggests that SQ issues can be split into "technical quality" (what is done) and "functional quality" (how it is done). Other authors that support two dimensions are Harrison-Walker (2001), Gottlieb *et al.* (1994) and Wakefield and Blodgett (1999) (Yap & Sweeney, 2007:141).

Dabholkar *et al.* (1996:6) adapted the SERVQUAL scale for validation in stores that offer a mix of merchandise and services. Pure service environments and retail environments may share some common dimensions, but it was stated that measures of retail SQ might capture additional dimensions. Dabholkar *et al.* propose five dimensions to SQ, namely *physical aspects, reliability, personal interaction, problem solving and policy*. Three of these dimensions however have two sub dimensions. *Physical aspects* capture appearance and convenience, while *reliability* includes promises and doing it right. In the

dimension *personal interaction*, the two sub dimensions envisioned are inspiring confidence and being courteous and helpful.

2.3.4 An interpretation of SERVQUAL

CS is defined as all the strategies of retailers that are implemented with the intention of increasing the SQ offering of a store/organisation (Ackermann, 2002:5; Howardell, 2003:1; Levy & Weitz, 2001:586; Schwerdtfeger, 2003:1; Woodruf, 1997:139). Studying the elements of CS and their interactive contribution to the service offering will explain and indicate the CS offered. However, to measure the success of the service offering /CS, the SQ as it is experienced by the customer must be evaluated (Bahia & Nantel, 2000:86; Buttle, 2004:233; Kotler, 1994:91; Zolkiewski & Lewis, 2004:1). Controlling SQ across a range of interactive service encounters requires particular attention to the different people and process issues involved (Lehtinen & Lehtinen, 1991:288). The service sector plays an increasingly important role in emerging economies. Consequently, managers of stores and organisations need to direct their efforts to understanding how customers from different cultures perceive the quality of the service, and how this is translated into consumer satisfaction and behaviour intentions. They have to develop operational definitions of constructs based on the behaviours of their service delivery personnel and specify levels of appropriate performance accordingly (Olorunniwo, Hsu & Udo, 2006:59).

In the service marketing literature, SQ is measured in terms of perception, prior experience/expectation and importance of the service offering (Buttle, 2004:232, 233; Clarke, 2001:114; Danaher, 1997:235; Grönroos, 1988:11). The perception of the *quality of the service* results from the evidence, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy of the actual shopping experience. These arise from the service delivery *process*, which entails the interaction between service personnel and customers during the service performance and the physical *environment*, and physical facilities in which the service is provided (Bendall-Lyon & Powers, 2004:115; Kang, 2006:37; Shemwell *et al.*, 1998:164; Turley, 1990:5). A characteristic mentioned by Vandamme and Leunis (1993:32) that strongly relates to both intangibility and inseparability of SQ, is

“perishability”. Consumers’ evaluation of SQ is however difficult to assess because of the intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability of the various elements of the construct (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985:42). Parasuraman *et al.* (1985:42) also suggest that quality evaluations are not made solely on the outcome of a service, but also involve evaluation of the service-delivery process. There should thus also be evidence of the impact of SQ on customers’ behavioural responses (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1991:3).

Although SERVQUAL has been used extensively in assessing SQ, it has also been subject to criticism, for example, for focusing solely on the service delivery process and neglecting technical quality (Kang, 2006:38; Grönroos, 1988:13). There are also many authors who examine the cross-cultural differences in SQ perception, and replications of SERVQUAL in non-Western cultures have failed to validate its dimensional structure. Researchers argue that consumers in different countries assign different meanings to existing SERVQUAL dimensions (Kong & Jogaratnam, 2007:276).

Dabholkar *et al.* (1996:1, 47) proposed that the SERVQUAL scale be adopted for research in retail, and thus developed a scale to measure SQ in stores that offer a mix of merchandise and service. Three perceptions of SQ were proposed: the customer’s overall perception of SQ, primary dimensions and subdimensions of SQ. They also proposed a hierarchical factor structure for SQ with five dimensions central to it, namely physical aspects, reliability, personal interaction, problem solving and policy. Three of the five dimensions are more complex and involve more than one component or subdimension that integrates related attributes (Dabholkar *et al.*, 1996:6). The adopted SERVQUAL scale of Dabholkar *et al.* (1996:1, 14) was chosen for this research as it was initially designed for an environment where a mix of services are offered and the scenario of major electrical household appliances in a department store setting that target consumers across a broad socioeconomic spectrum, seemed to fit the context.

2.3.5 Consumers' assessment of customer service (CS) and service quality (SQ)

While it is true, generally speaking, that people throughout the world have similar needs and desires, it is also true from a global marketing viewpoint that these needs can be satisfied in different ways, depending on or because of the differences in culture, tradition, lifestyle or ways of managing business (Kong & Jogaratnam, 2007:276; Korey, 1995:74). It is thus suggested that organisations in different countries should not adopt a standardised marketing approach. Malhotra *et al.* (1994:7) describe the differences between the perception and practical implementation of the dimensions of SQ between developed and developing countries and explain that in developed countries service reliability assumes consistently performing the service dependably and accurately, while consumers in developing countries with emerging economies would place the importance of the availability of sophisticated technology second to the importance of the human touch of the service.

The root causes of SQ problems are typically blamed on inadequate systems. Lack of communication and/or feedback at various levels and in all directions also seems to be a problem. Insufficient on-the-job training, especially with modern technology, is a problem that is often laid at the door of the salespeople, as is a high turnover rate in personnel, usually due to lack of motivation. Everybody does not necessarily consider quality a top priority and errors are often considered to be expected and anticipated. From the customer's point of view, the greatest concerns in terms of SQ are with quality on the accuracy level, timeliness (i.e. processing deadlines), on time delivery and responsiveness (e.g. attitude and face-to-face customer relationships) (Langevin, 1988:2, 3).

It has been reported that customers in countries with emerging economies generally have lower quality expectations and therefore demonstrate a wider zone of tolerance for ineffective services compared to customers in developed countries (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:8). While customers in developed countries place a higher value on time, timely and adequate response to enquiries and customer complaints, responsiveness in developing countries merely means

responding in substantive terms, rather than a timely response (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:4). In the individualistic societies of developed economies, the competence of service personnel is more important and higher regard is placed on individual rights, beliefs and privacy as well as on individuals' initiative and achievements (Hofstede, 1980:264; Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:5). Non-personal contact seems more significant, and higher levels of *relationship marketing* must be employed because emphasis on intangibles may achieve better results. The difference in the expectations of different consumer groups poses exceptional challenges to retailers, such as department stores in SA, that have to serve diverse consumer groups. In the collectivist societies of developing countries, on the other hand, *personal contact and social norms* are more important, and service personnel should not only abide by the widely accepted social norms of the community, but also mirror their respect for and commitment to these norms (Goodwin, 1996:387; Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:5). This is difficult to achieve in an organisation/store (e.g. in SA) where customers from diverse backgrounds have to be served. The focus is on the competence of the *organisation* that provides the service, overshadowing individual identity and skills of the service employees, which is in contrast to the approach in developed countries. A greater focus on the tangible core service may therefore be more successful in an emerging economy where these benefits will serve to strengthen the relationship bond with the customers (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:7). Emerging economies are also characterised by a large power distance, where employees at different levels of the organisation are regarded as unequal in roles, power and skills (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:6). This is generally very obvious in the working environment, for example the store.

Communication between the customer and the organisation/store is important in the provision and perception of the service offered (Buttle, 2004:24). In developing countries access to information depends on the contact between the supplier and the customer. Limited and unreliable communication will consequently result in poor information flow. For this reason, customers who find it difficult to communicate with personnel in the store, more often acquire their information from endorsements of satisfied customers, brand names, the manufacturer's image, and interpersonal factors like family, social group and social class (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:92; Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:5).

The three levels of relationship marketing involve financial incentives, combined financial and social benefits customising the relationship with their clients and structural bonds, in addition to social and financial bonds to solidify this relationship. In emerging economies relationship marketing is at most at the first level, and organisations/stores restrict their marketing edge and competitiveness merely to financial incentives that are offered to customers (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:9).

Ultimately, store managers should engage in deliberate efforts to reduce perceived quality risk, especially for inexperienced consumers in developing countries. This would prevent problems at an early stage and prevent potential catastrophes with dissatisfied customers later (Gummesson, 1988:7). Given the intangible nature of services and the inseparability of the production and consumption of the bulk of services, it is difficult for customers to perform prior *evaluation* of a store's service. Thus the trustworthiness, believability and credibility of the service supplier (store) are crucial in terms of store patronage. A service supplier, for example a retail store, operating in an emerging economy should stress its long tradition and importance in that society as a means of highlighting the credibility and trustworthiness of the store.

A consumer might still not be able to make a responsible, informed buyer decision, despite the fact the service was experienced as being "impressive" and despite the fact that the customer seemed satisfied when he left the store. A quantification of SQ therefore still depicts only part of the scenario that influences consumer decisions (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994:6). In analysing foreign markets, different perspectives are therefore needed when looking at customers. Research should demonstrate an insight into such analysis and a willingness to adjust to new and different conditions.

A positive evaluation of SQ does unfortunately not guarantee that the service offering enhances informed, responsible buying decisions. However, a positive evaluation of SQ would probably indicate satisfaction with the service performance. This may lead to the probability of a repeat purchase, which means that return visits to the store could be capitalised on to inform and

educate consumers in making informed buying decisions (Yap & Sweeney, 2007:139).

2.4 SOUTH AFRICAN CONSUMERS' SITUATION IN AN EMERGING ECONOMY

2.4.1 Consumer socialisation

Despite an improvement in the living conditions of millions of previously disadvantaged consumers in the RSA since 1994, limited product-related consumer socialisation and inadequate product knowledge and experience unequivocally restrict consumers' ability to make informed buyer decisions, especially regarding the expensive, complex, durable commodities that they are confronted with in retail. In research done by Kachale and Makgopa in Gauteng, South Africa (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:90), it became clear that the average black consumer's knowledge of the basic properties of appliances is below average and that even the more experienced consumers' product knowledge was too limited to support informed buying decisions.

Many consumers therefore rely on secondary indicators of quality, namely price, guarantee and advertisements. Instead of asking for information from the salesperson, who is supposedly a trained and informed facilitator, they prefer to rely on friends and family for advice (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:91). Inexperienced consumers apparently define quality in terms of brand name, and will retrieve the same set of brands regardless of the usage situation whereas it is preferable for them to use brand information that is appropriate for different usage situations and should be able to organise this information by product subcategories that allow them to retrieve the brands appropriate for the usage situation (Cowley & Mitchell, 2003:443). The absence of appropriate schema may be the reason for inexperienced consumers' tendency to buy new appliances with a well-known brand name to decrease risk perception (Beatty *et al.*, 1996:224; Buttle, 2004:15-26; Cowley & Mitchell, 2003:443; Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:99; Williams, 2002:251).

More experienced consumers may also have formed schemata about specific brands that will influence the evaluation of the brand either positively or negatively. Some consumers may even regard "buying the right brand" to be an image builder (La Rossa & Reitzes, 1993:136) as well as proof of good quality. Positive associations with previously used and therefore well-known brands are transferred to the new product, especially when the products share some attributes, for example large electrical household appliances. Marketers use this consumer characteristic when they extend a well-established brand name to a new product via for example family branding (Chakravarti *et al.*, 1990:910).

Social development involves a social perspective that relates to purchase influences and negotiation skills (Darden, Darden, Howell & Miller, 2001:655; John, 1999:189; McGregor, 2001:1). Impression formation that involves the ability to make social comparisons is strongly related to an understanding of the social implications of products and consumption. Therefore, consumer socialisation impinges on shopping orientations and store choice criteria, as well as on the ability of the consumer to make informed, responsible buying decisions (John, 1999:187–189; McGregor, 2001:1). Implications for retail where less and more experienced consumers are dealt with simultaneously are thus challenging.

In developing countries, consumers' problems may have originated in childhood, as they may lack the consumer socialisation that is supposed to develop a child into a mature customer who can make responsible buyer decisions in the marketplace. Consumers typically acquire product knowledge through informal learning processes, like exposure to and continuous use of products (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007:162). It has been found, however, that despite the rising sales in electrical appliances over the past decade, consumers do not have adequate product knowledge to make informed, responsible decisions (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:99).

The development of cognitive and social knowledge and skills in children by experiencing various shopping experiences helps the adult consumer to understand retail institutions. When an individual is exposed to an unfamiliar

situation, his subconscious processes become conscious and his general knowledge (semantic content) will dominate his decisions. The long-term memories (knowledge) of a young child are stored as schemata (Abelsohn, 1981:715) that enable him to cope with life (Erasmus et al., 2002:2). When young consumers are exposed to retail, they learn to understand shopping procedures and scripts/schemata and therefore learn to compare prices and qualities, and understand pricing as a mechanism for relaying value (Erasmus et al., 2002:2; John, 1999:196). Consumers who have not been exposed to transactions in the marketplace from an early age will probably not have acquired the relevant shopping knowledge and skills to cope without assistance. They will not understand the sequence of events involved in shopping, or have the experience needed to enable them to complete a retail transaction with confidence (John, 1999:197). Piaget believed that the child's intellectual development is the result of the interaction of hereditary and environmental factors (Ginn, 2008:1). Knowledge is invented and reinvented through constant interaction with the environment and others. If this interaction is limited because the child is not exposed to the marketplace, he is not actively involved and therefore neither assimilation nor accommodation of new information takes place (Ginn, 2008:2).

As children grow older they will develop better decision-making skills and therefore acquire more shopping skills. They will address different information sources to collect information on important functional aspects of products, they will use more information when evaluating and considering products, and they will adapt their decision-making strategies to the nature of the decision they have to make. They will evaluate and compare product offerings, focusing more on important and relevant attributes to form preferences (John, 1999:200). Inexperienced consumers, with limited consumer socialisation, do not possess these schemata that would guide their buying decisions. Only when a consumer accumulates more experience and acquires the cognitive abilities needed, can he compile more abstract and complex scripts based on individual shopping experiences (John, 1999:187-189; McGregor, 2001:1).

The lack of scripts (social schemata) owing to little or no exposure to retail transactions that contribute to limited memory may be the reason for poor

knowledge of household appliances (Erasmus *et al.*, 2002:3). One would therefore expect an inexperienced consumer with limited consumer socialisation (John, 1999:187-189; McGregor, 2001:1) to rely on the salesperson and the store to assist and guide him during the consumer decision-making process. From a Consumer Science point of view, one of the most important responsibilities of a salesperson is to assist consumers in making informed, responsible buying decisions (Erasmus, 1998:147; Gothan & Erasmus, 2004:97). However, inexperienced consumers apparently rather rely on friends and family for advice (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:90). Proper consumer education and facilitation is therefore needed to enhance informed responsible decision making (Crie, 2003:66; Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:100; Phau & Sari, 2004:410).

2.4.2 Ownership of household appliances

Electrical household appliances are acquired for several reasons of which the saving of human energy and time are often mentioned as highly important motivational factors (Burton, 1992:383; Carter, 1998:1). However, research indicates that consumer goods are often bought for benefits other than their time and energy saving characteristics. They are often bought for less obvious aspects such as *social and psychological benefits*, for example, experiencing a sense of prestige and personal achievement (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:93).

The acquisition of major household appliances – in terms of the importance of the purchase, the consequences and impact of purchase decisions in the short and the long term – is generally described as a high-risk decision that may create a considerable amount of confusion and tension, especially for the inexperienced and uninformed consumer (Beatty *et al.*, 1996:224; Buttle, 2004:15-16; Sweeney *et al.*, 1999:78). When purchasing durable goods, consumers will therefore consider various criteria during evaluation of product alternatives (Du Plessis & Rousseau, 2003:94; Erasmus *et al.*, 2002:19), for example benefits that are considered utilitarian, that is, objective, economic, rational and functional or hedonic (abstract); and benefits arising from experiential, abstract, subjective, emotional, symbolic, sensory, non rational and aesthetic attributes (Buttle, 2004:26; Sweeney *et al.*, 1999:81; Sarin *et al.*, 2003:71,72). Some however report that the most important values of

consumers' utility for consumer durable goods are social values, stimulation and materialism (East, 1993:19-21; La Rossa & Reitzes, 1993:138).

Apart from their functional value, household appliances (white goods) also have symbolic appeal and are considered image builders (Broadbridge & Marshall, 1995:10; Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:93). Previously disadvantaged consumers who are eager to improve their lifestyles may therefore focus on status factors during product evaluation (Malholtra *et al.*, 1994:6) and not necessarily on the consequences of the purchase, for example service life expectancy, product performance and maintenance. Consumers could then become more ego-involved with some products than with others to demonstrate, amongst others, that they can afford the type or brand of appliance, although they may not necessarily possess adequate knowledge about the performance and functional characteristics of the product to make an informed buyer decision (John, 1999:201; McNeal, 1985:34).

As the living conditions of black consumers in South Africa in particular have improved dramatically in recent years, owing to higher salaries and access to electricity, there has also been an increase in the purchase of electrical household appliances. In this scenario factors other than performance characteristics and durability often dominate purchase criteria at the point of purchase. This could lead to consumers choosing an appliance that is exceptionally expensive or technologically too advanced to be used to its full potential – a scenario of failed consumer education or consumers who are insensitive or ignorant (Erasmus, 2005:89).

2.4.3 Confusion created by rapid development in technology

Products such as household appliances are designed to embrace new concepts, configurations, materials and manufacturing methods (Wingo, 1996:176) and this may cause confusion during product evaluation. Even more experienced consumers may struggle to choose between the product alternatives and to interpret relevant choice criteria. Understandably consumers often feel incapable of evaluating the functionality of new products

due to differences in design, functional aspects, performance characteristics and differences in price (Erasmus *et al.*, 2002:76).

Salespeople should not assume that customers are familiar with new appliances or that they know and understand the properties of the appliances that are on display (Blem, 1995:30). In developing countries and in retail where inexperienced consumers are served there is an increasing need for personal assistance and facilitation to enable informed responsible buying decisions. Facilitation means making things easier in the world of technology and change that can be bewildering. Salespeople use a range of skills and methods to help customers make decisions and achieve the results they want (Townsend & Gebhardt, 1988:9). In the facilitation process information should be provided with sensitivity, acknowledging personal preferences and emotional issues such as the importance of portraying specific psychological, social and cultural needs and wants (Erasmus, 1998:150). Rude, uncaring or uninformed employees will probably cause dissatisfaction and the likelihood that consumers will switch to other service providers (Graham, 2002:3; Naylor & Frank, 2000:312).

2.4.4 Consumers' inability to handle information overload

The purchase of major household appliances suggests extensive consumer decision-making. Indications are, however, that quite the opposite usually takes place, probably due to incomplete information, confusing or too difficult product information or too much information to comprehend (Erasmus, 2002:26). Although a consumer desperately needs assistance and information, he may be easily overwhelmed by too much information about competitive brands and diverse product characteristics (Wingo, 1996:176), and then he may ignore it all (Erasmus, 2002:26). A consumer would often then rely on the brand (Cowley & Mitchell, 2003:443) as a secondary indicator of quality (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005:97; Williams, 2002:250). Product assortment offered by a retailer may be important in retail competition and in satisfying consumer wants, but choice overload also makes it difficult and even impossible for the consumer to manage an informed responsible buying decision (Simonson, 1999:347, 348). He may even screen out certain brands with non-compensatory strategies to

reduce the number of brands and the information to be processed to a manageable amount (Assael, 1993:182, 183; Nelson, 2002:190; Wingo, 1996:176). A salesperson's assistance in terms of a responsible buyer decision is therefore crucial (Gothan & Erasmus, 2004:97).

2.5 CUSTOMER SERVICE IN TERMS OF SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

2.5.1 Customer service with the intention to achieve customer satisfaction

CS is defined as a combination of the activities/strategies offered by retailers with the intention of providing a rewarding shopping experience in an effort to increase SQ and to ensure *customer satisfaction* (Ackermann, 2002:5; Howardell, 2003:1; Levy & Weitz, 2001:586; Schwerdtfeger, 2003:1; Woodruf, 1997:139). The CS offered to a customer by a store is a combination of six elements (products, price, physical environment, personnel, processes, promotions) that are interdependent and jointly represent the physical and social environment where the retail transaction takes place (Bahia & Nantel, 2000:86; Bennett, 1997:151; Buttle, 2004:233; Kotler, 1994:91; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:328).

The customer plays no active part in how the elements of CS are offered, other than to interpret and utilise the service when visiting the store. CS appears to be an implicit assumption within the notion of relationships, be it from an interaction or other relationship perspective, between the company and the customer (Zolkiewski & Lewis, 2004:1, Blem, 1995:6). The perception and interpretation of the elements of CS should contribute to/facilitate a responsible informed buying decision that results in customer satisfaction, where satisfaction is defined as the customer's overall evaluation of performance of a consumption-related experience, based on all prior experiences in a store (Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2004:515; Buttle, 2004:21; Wirtz *et al.*, 2000:346, 348).

2.5.2 A perception of service quality relates to customer satisfaction

The extent to which a store provides certain desired characteristics will influence the quality of service perceived (Crosby, in Mentzer *et al.*, 1993:512). Services are produced and consumed simultaneously and are predominantly intangible making quality more difficult to control and service outcomes harder to guarantee (Buttle, 2004:232, 233; Grönroos, 1988:11). The customer's perception of SQ is influenced by the technical quality of the end result of the service transferred to the customer and the functional quality or the method by which the service was transferred. SQ is determined every day in relationships between service providers and customers and is a major influence in the formation of service loyalty (Goodwin, 1996:400; Turley, 1990:5). Perceived SQ is the result of a subjective comparison of the customer's expectations of what a store should provide and the amount of satisfaction experienced (Chakraborty, Srivastava & Marshall, 2007:21; Graham, 2002:1; Grönroos, 1988:10; Jones, 2006:60; Langevin, 1988:2; Spreng & Mackoy, 1996:201, 202).

The distinction between consumer satisfaction and perceived SQ is important to managers and researchers because service providers need to know whether their objective should be to have consumers who are satisfied with their performance or to deliver the maximum level of perceived SQ (Spreng & Mackoy, 1996:201, 202). Most researchers maintain that these two constructs are distinct (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988:15) but it is felt that greater understanding of the relationship between perceived service quality and satisfaction is needed. In more recent literature, SQ is described as a simpler, primarily cognitive construct, while satisfaction is a complex concept with both cognitive and affective components (Shemwell *et al.*, 1998:158). There is ample empirical support for SQ as an antecedent of customer satisfaction in the form of a type of attitude that is predictive of future and repurchase intentions (Anderson, 1994:53; Bitner, 1990:71; Clarke, 2001:114; Cronin *et al.*, 2000:195; Oliver, 1981:26; Oliver, Rust & Varki, 1997:312; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988:12; Solvang, 2007:111).

To date, the study of SQ, service value and satisfaction issues have dominated the services literature (Cronin *et al.*, 2000:193). Despite the debate relating to the interrelationship between SQ and customer satisfaction, both literature

pools share a certain degree of common ground. For example, both seek to define expectations and their interrelationship with perceptual evaluations and both apply Oliver's (1977) disconfirmation-of-expectations paradigm as their core theoretical underpinning (Bitner, 1990:70). It is therefore theoretically possible to cross-fertilise concepts relating to consumer expectations from the SQ into the satisfaction literature (Santos & Boote, 2003:143). Both SQ and consumer satisfaction are at the core of marketing concepts, being conceptually distinct but closely related constructs (Spreng & Mackoy, 1996:201). Particular attention must be given to the relationships among and between these constructs to develop an understanding of the constructs, in terms of how they subsequently drive purchase behaviour (Cronin *et al.*, 2000:194, 195).

2.5.3 Customer satisfaction achieved

Customer satisfaction is the outcome of the consumer's expectations versus his experience of the purchase. Sometimes the terms "quality" and "satisfaction" are used interchangeably as if the two are an essentially evaluative construct. Jacobucci, Ostrom and Grayson (1995:278, 296), however, found that SQ is determined by price, back-stage service and expertise of the salespeople, while customer satisfaction depends on timeliness, service recovery and the physical environment. The customer's on-site service experience is impacted on by the speed of the service, how well recovery takes place if an error is made and the appearance of the environment in which the encounter occurs. Thus the difference between quality and satisfaction may mirror managerial versus customer concerns. Characterising quality as being within the domain of managers and satisfaction as the evaluative reaction of customers would offer a clear basis for distinction. "Quality" programmes involving total quality management would focus on improving the managerially controllable concepts of the service-delivery system and measures of customer satisfaction would capture consumers' reaction. It was found that both improvements in service quality and service value were significant predictors of satisfaction, leading directly to favourable behavioural intentions (Bendall-Lyon & Powers, 2004:115; Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2004:515; Cronin *et al.*, 2000:198; Gummerus,

Liljander, Pura & Van Riel, 2004:175; Jacobucci *et al.*, 1995:278, 296; Swan & Trawick, 1981:52).

Research has found that consumer complaint behaviour (CCB) is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by a multiplicity of factors in the choice of a particular complaining action (Crie, 2003:8; Kong & Jogaratnam, 2007:277; Phau & Sari, 2004:3-5). Most CCB research raises questions as to the transportability of findings to non-Western markets. Previous research in cultural psychology has found that an individual's values, concepts of self, perceptions of others and patterns of interaction with his environment are influenced by the "cultural meaning systems" in which they operate (Liu & McClure, 2001:56; Solvang, 2007:110). When studied from an international perspective, differences in complaining behaviour are typically explained in terms of underlying cultural norms and values, such as individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance or Confucian dynamism. Studies have indicated that collectivist cultures tend to discourage complaining behaviour and those individuals who are high in uncertainty avoidance are less likely to seek redress or to engage in negative word of mouth (Blodgett, Hill & Bakir, 2006:104).

As satisfaction is based on the customer's reaction to the perceived difference between performance appraisal and expectations (Anderson *et al.*, 1994:54; Bendall-Lyon & Powers, 2004:115), not all customers have a guideline to base expectations on, and also not the knowledge to evaluate the information and facilitation offered. They may therefore be satisfied with a purchase that was by no means the best or a responsible choice. Dissatisfaction may arise after some time when an increase in experience highlights the negative aspects of the decision. Disconfirmed expectations cause the customer to approach a state of dissatisfaction, while the confirmation of expectations leads to satisfaction (Bendall-Lyon & Powers, 2004:114; Oliver *et al.*, 1997:316; Swan & Trawick, 1981:53; Wirtz *et al.*, 2000:348).

The ideal outcome of CS and SQ is therefore "customer delight", which is considered a higher form of customer satisfaction. When the experience of CS and SQ surpasses customers' expectations, delight is experienced (Solvang, 2007:115).

2.6 AUGMENTED CUSTOMER SERVICE

2.6.1 Definition

“Augmented” suggests the improvement/enlargement/broadening of an objective or an idea, *inter alia* in terms of a memorable experience of meeting expectations and satisfying needs (Anderson & Zemke, 1991:v; Goff *et al.*, 1997:171-183). Value-added service is more easily understood in terms of experience than in definition. It provides the feeling of politeness and caring when delivered in a person-to-person context. The CEO of the Baldrige winner, AT & T Universal Card, however, reported that “sheer survival means companies have to deliver more than customer satisfaction”. Executives from other leading companies have also made it clear that they consider customer satisfaction to be insufficient, and that going *beyond* customer satisfaction to *customer delight* is required. While satisfaction focuses on today and deals with avoiding problems in known circumstances and variables, delight requires more, and provides unexpected value or unanticipated satisfaction (Oliver *et al.*, 1997:313; Solvang, 2007:115).

2.6.2 The challenge in terms of CS

Consumer Science is concerned about the well-being and protection of consumers, especially of inexperienced consumers. Supporting Buttle's view (2004:247), this study aims to provide guidelines to improve the service offering in retail to ultimately enhance informed, responsible buying decisions over and above consumer satisfaction. Gummesson (2002:326) identifies customer service as one of the important areas where marketing practices need to develop to attend to changing realities.

Augmented customer service in a particular context may involve the improvement of certain elements of customer service. Depending on the context, it may even include additional elements and constructs such as risk perception (e.g. a coffee shop versus an appliance store). As more decisions

than ever are made in-store, the challenge is to create an environment in which the customer perceives a one-to-one relationship with the store, to optimise the customer's time and to make it appear as if the ranging and categorisation of products have been personalised just for him. In this way retailers will deliver an experience that the customer will want to repeat (Soars, 2003:628). For the inexperienced customer the focus on the elements of customer service may differ, but through equifinality, a customer should be able to reach the same outcome as an experienced customer, that is, an informed responsible buying decision (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:334).

In order to establish augmented customer service that potentially has implications for better conduct of interactions between retail stores and their customers, strategic decisions have to be made by the stores to establish new pathways of creating CS. This may require personnel to be deployed differently or the application of new processes (Hughes, 2006:118). In terms of augmented customer service, all the elements have to be addressed, although those elements that would contribute to informed, responsible buying decisions should become a priority. Any initiative that aims to improve only one of the variables without considering the rest will however be an incomplete strategy and will probably not have the desired effect. Collective efforts to improve SQ and customer satisfaction in general may improve customer service perceptions but may not necessarily improve consumers' competence to make informed, responsible buying decisions (Cronin *et al.*, 2000:209; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993:334) where they understand the consequences of their decisions and accept responsibility for it. Buttle (2004:247) states that augmented customer service is achieved when the business focuses on the needs of the customer rather than actions that would lead to more profit. When CS and the offering of quality service is driven by an economic perspective, price and profit will be accentuated, leading to financial payoffs for the company, while customer service may be neglected (Blem, 1995:15,16).

Customer service is a multidimensional construct that consists of various elements that are interrelated and that individually and collectively influence consumer decisions. In order to augment customer service to ensure/ achieve

informed, responsible buying decisions, customer service need to be revised to address the needs of consumers that enter the store, should limit problems during use of appliances and should reduce negative interactions with retailers and service providers. Consequent higher levels of satisfaction may eventually also produce the more evasive goals of store loyalty (Oliver *et al.*, 1997:312).

2.7 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK¹

Relevant concepts as discussed in the literature review, are presented in terms of the following conceptual framework and the discussion follows below:

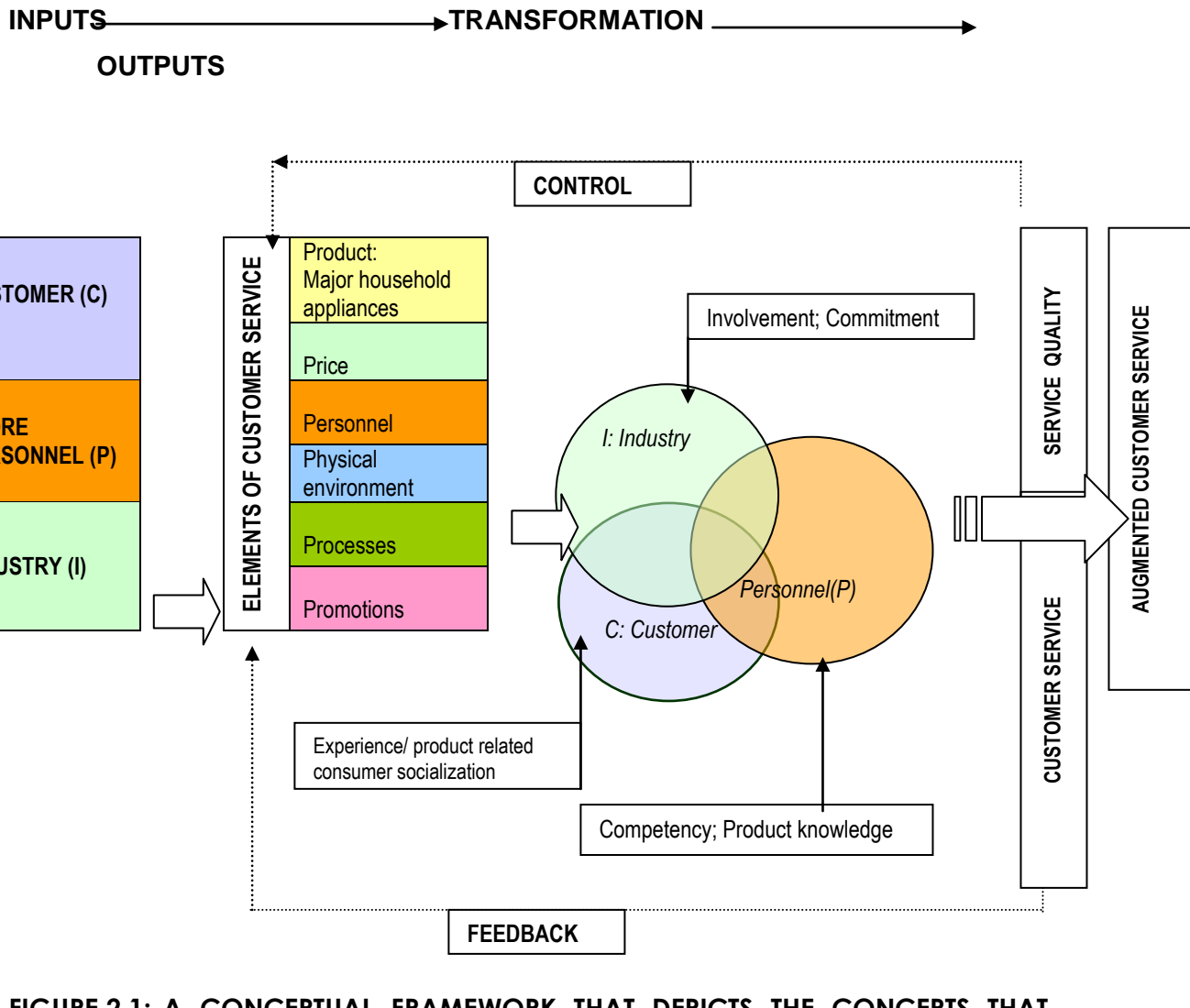


FIGURE 2.1: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK THAT DEPICTS THE CONCEPTS THAT PERTAIN TO AN INVESTIGATION OF THE SERVICE OFFERING (CUSTOMER SERVICE AND SERVICE QUALITY) IN RETAIL STORES WITHIN THE SYSTEMS APPROACH

¹

C: Consumer

P: Personnel

I: Industry

Customer service in the retail environment is inevitably influenced by customers (C), store personnel (P) who are involved with the policy and dealings of the store on a daily basis as well as partners in industry (I) that supply the merchandise that is offered in the store. The contribution of each of the role players towards the service offering (INPUTS) differ and can be described in terms of demands, needs, preferences that relate to the elements of the marketing mix (products, price, personnel, physical environment, processes and promotions). The transformation of these inputs towards the eventual service offering that is judged in terms of service quality (SQ) will indicate some agreement between the various role players in terms of what and how the service offering should be but there may also be disagreement in terms of what should be offered, how, and the relative importance of each of the elements of the marketing mix. While consumers' needs, expectations and preferences are based on their experience, i.e. product related consumer socialization that is not necessarily realistic or objective, the personnel's contribution towards the service offering will be influenced by factors such as their competency and product knowledge. Industry's commitment and involvement in the stores will affect their influence on the customer service and the eventual service quality (OUTPUT). Augmented customer service, from the perspective of the discipline of Consumer Science, visualizes a service offering that focuses on informed, responsible buying decisions. This suggests that consumers' purchase decisions should be based on a thorough investigation of the product alternatives (cognitive approach) and that the product information that is required is supplied in the store in a format that is understood by and acceptable for the customers who patronize the specific store. 'Responsible' buying decisions suggest that consumers take responsibility for the buying decisions: if a buying decision is emotional in kind, a consumer should at least be informed in terms of the consequences of that decisions and take responsibility for the outcome. Within the systems perspective a consumer's experience will feed back into his memory to support future decisions and the manner in which the elements of customer service is perceived during consequent in store encounters.