

# An exploratory investigation into the role of extrinsic factors in consumer decision-making for interior soft furnishings

Nadine C Sonnenberg\* and Alet C Erasmus

## OPSOMMING

Te midde van toenemende belangstelling in interieuromgewings en die gevolglike gebruik van besittings om lewenstyl te reflekteer, kon min inligting gevind word wat lig werp op verbruikers se keuseprosesse ten opsigte van interieurprodukte. Belangstelling in hierdie produkategorie spruit uit die besondere estetiese waarde daarvan en die moontlikheid dat hierdie produkte doelbewus gekies kan word - soos wat in die simboliese interaksionisme aangevoer word - om die selfbeeld van 'n verbruiker te projekteer (Hawkins *et al*, 2001:429). Daarby moet die produkte ook aan sekere kriteria voldoen om optimaal te funksioneer tydens gebruik. Bewys dat winkel- en handelsmerkbeeld oënskynlik gebruik word om verbruikersbesluite te rig, veral ten opsigte van visueel opvallende produkte (Youn-Kyung & Seunghae 2000:58), kan belangrike implikasies vir verbruikers se kritiese bewustheid van produkeienskappe inhou. Hierdie navorsing het ten doel gehad om 'n bydrae tot die teorie, spesifiek wat die verstaan van verbruikers se aankoopgedrag ten opsigte van 'n spesifieke kategorie interieurprodukte, te maak. Hierdie produkte is geïdentifiseer as voorbeeld van visueel opvallende produkte. Implikasies vir die handel in terme van verbruikersfasilitering en gevolge in terme van verantwoordelike, ingeligte verbruikersbesluitneming, is geïdentifiseer.

Doelbewuste steekproefneming is gebruik (Babbie, 1989:204) om jong onafhanklike stedelike verbruikers uit hoër sosio-ekonomiese groepe vir deelname aan 'n kwalitatief georiënteerde navorsingsprojek te werf. Data-opname is in verskillende stadia gedoen.

Daar is gevind dat verbruikers neig om handelsmerke en winkelbeeld met generiese produktenmerke te assosieer. Deelnemers kon nie oortuig dat hulle oor die vermoë beskik om produkte se intrinsieke kenmerke objektief te beoordeel nie. Hoewel die gebruik van surrogaat indikatore gerieflik blyk te wees, mag dit dui op 'n onvermoë of traagheid om relevante aankoopkriteria te formuleer, die afwesigheid van 'n kritiese bewustheid van funksionele produktenmerke en 'n verskuiwing van die verantwoordelikheid na die handel om verbruikersbehoefes te antisipeer. Sulke aankoopgedrag is strydig met die basiese sentiment van verbruikerswese en kan nadelige langtermyngevolge inhou wat aangespreek

behoort te word ter wille van verantwoordelike, ingeligte verbruikersbesluitneming. Die feit dat daar tydens produkevaluering oënskynlik op die handelaarsbeeld gesteun word, is in ooreenstemming met wat die simboliese interaksionisme voorhou, naamlik dat die komplekse samelewing op simbole staatmaak om betekenis te verkry. Interieurprodukte sal dus waarskynlik by sekere handelaars gekoop word wat vir verbruikers aanvaarbaar is omdat simbole wat bepaalde realiteite teenwoordig, daar verkrygbaar is.

## — Ms NC Sonnenberg

*Department of Consumer Science  
University of North-West, Potchefstroom*

## — Dr AC Erasmus

*Department of Consumer Science  
University of Pretoria, Pretoria*

\* This article is based on research for an M-degree in Consumer Science, Department of Consumer Science, University of Pretoria.

## INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

The introduction of several new interior retail outlets such as @Home, Home etc and Mr Price Home to the South African market over the past few years bears testimony of an increased awareness of our interior surroundings and the view that interior environments have become significant in contributing to a sense of our well being (Kilmer & Kilmer, 1992:2). Modern society apparently spends a growing amount of time indoors. While retail faces the challenge to supply goods and services that would address consumers' need for a more expressive interior environment, it must be emphasized that consumers do not merely buy, in a passive manner, what retailers have to offer. Instead, they consciously select and use products to shape their realities and to express themselves visually (Bennington, 2002:168; Hawkins *et al*, 2001:429; Risch, 1987:40; Kaiser, 1985:41). Consumers thus often reject products that have mass appeal and prefer brands that are "tailored" to reflect their needs (Elsasser, 2004:7). A supply-demand scenario there-

fore oversimplifies and does not explain the matter satisfactorily.

Although retailers provide access to material symbols and purvey a material culture, it is said that products are made in factories while brands are shaped in people's minds in terms of *inter alia* product image, store image and self-image. Du Plessis and Rousseau (1999:277) are of the opinion that the marketing battle is fought in consumers' minds rather than in the store or on the showroom floor. There is evidence that, when the marketplace becomes crowded (i.e. when consumers' senses become blurred due to an overwhelming market offering of product ranges and stores), consumers tend to revert to store- or brand image to select the most suitable products rather than to evaluate products' actual physical attributes (Purohit & Srivastava, 2001; Youn-Kyung & Seunghae, 2000). It is claimed that consumers actually patronize the *image* of a store (Purohit & Srivastava, 2001), which suggests an increased trust in surrogate indicators to facilitate purchase decisions. Buyer behaviour of this kind could be exploited to manipulate consumer decisions.

The intentional choice and consumption of certain commodities may be attributed to ignorance, an inability to judge product quality and/or a reluctance to formulate relevant purchase criteria. It might even be used to project and maintain a certain image. Intentional consumption behaviour and the use of surrogate indicators are typical of a materialistic value system (Kasser & Kasser, 2001). Lipscomb (1988) describes materialism, which is even referred to as a so-called consumption ethos, as a basic core value of contemporary culture in the USA (Watson, 2003).

Purohit and Srivastava (2001) explain that, for most products, consumers are unable to identify the quality of competing products, especially when goods are concealed by their wrapping or when the properties only become noticeable during the actual use of products (e.g. interior products such as bed linen). Sometimes the product information that are available (e.g. the fiber content of textile products), contribute to confusion rather than to facilitate product decisions, which explains why consumers often prefer to use simple heuristics to discriminate products. Unfortunately the use of heuristics may contribute to further confusion: clever use of camera and close-up techniques may for example create unrealistic expectations regarding the performance and quality of products (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003). Excessive interest in, and emphasis on extrinsic product attributes may also encourage lavish spending and even overspending by consumers (Richins & Dawson, 1992), which should be discouraged in terms of responsible decision-making behaviour. Unfortunately, empirical findings on consumers' choice processes regarding interior soft furnishings - especially regarding the importance of extrinsic properties and consumers' ability to judge quality during the selection of these products are limited.

The discipline of Consumer Science *inter alia* concerns itself with responsible, informed consumer deci-

sion-making. Professionals in this field attempt to educate consumers and to assist them with relevant product information to enable informed buyer decisions. Consumer behaviour that indicates the contrary is regarded as a matter of concern. An improved understanding of consumers' choice and consumption behaviour of interior products, as an example of products that are considered visually significant, would be invaluable in terms of consumer education, consumer facilitation as well for the supply of needs satisfying goods in retail. Watson (2003) supports this view in terms of economic psychology and expresses the hope that research in this field would be encouraged.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Elsasser (2004:7), in a discussion of important demographic trends relating to American consumers' choice of interior home furnishings, accentuates an increased importance of value-oriented and up-scale shopping for the future as a result of higher incomes. She is of the opinion that convenience will become more significant in terms of product choice and that consumers will become more conscious of service in the retail setting. It is further anticipated that micromarketing will increase (tailoring of merchandise according to consumers' specific needs) and that well-known brands will take precedence over others (Elsasser, 2004:7). While one might argue that such trends might not necessarily apply to the South African scene, other researchers have come to similar conclusions and have reported an emphasis on store- or brand image during the acquisition of especially highly visible commodities (Youn-Kyung & Seunghae, 2000:58). This predicts noteworthy consequences in terms of consumers' critical awareness of product attributes.

The overwhelming offering of interior goods on the market in recent years and the belief that buyer decisions are dominated by extrinsic product characteristics prompted this research. The main objective of this study was to investigate consumers' selection of interior soft furnishings (bedding and towels) with specific reference to the importance of extrinsic factors during product evaluation.

The scholarly contribution of this research is twofold. It attends to a limited understanding of consumers' choice of interior products and it investigates the responsibility of retail to facilitate consumer decisions that would result in informed buyer behaviour and ultimately, consumer satisfaction.

## CONSUMERS' CHOICE OF INTERIOR PRODUCTS

### The complexity of consumer decision-making

Despite all that has been published to date, consumer decision-making remains complex in terms of the activities and the considerations that are involved during different stages of the decision-making process. To

complicate matters, consumers are continually evolving and changing as they process new information so that purchases not necessarily follow the same route as previous ones (Hawkins *et al*, 2001:28, 488). This supports the symbolic interactionists' view that everything about the human should be considered as "being in process". Charon (1979:29) describes the individual as a dynamic actor who remains in a "state of becoming, unfolding, acting." Within this perspective an individual constantly changes through interaction so that perceptions of life and being are learned, altered and transformed on a continual basis. Research provides evidence of the use of goods to acquire satisfaction in life, to provide a sense of security and to express self-concept (Griffen *et al*, 2002; Richens & Dawson, 1992). Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) reflect on our possessions as the props on the theatrical stage of our lives that situate our characters in a specific context. Individual differences and situational factors thus make it virtually impossible to anticipate consumer decisions beforehand.

### Influences that affect product choice

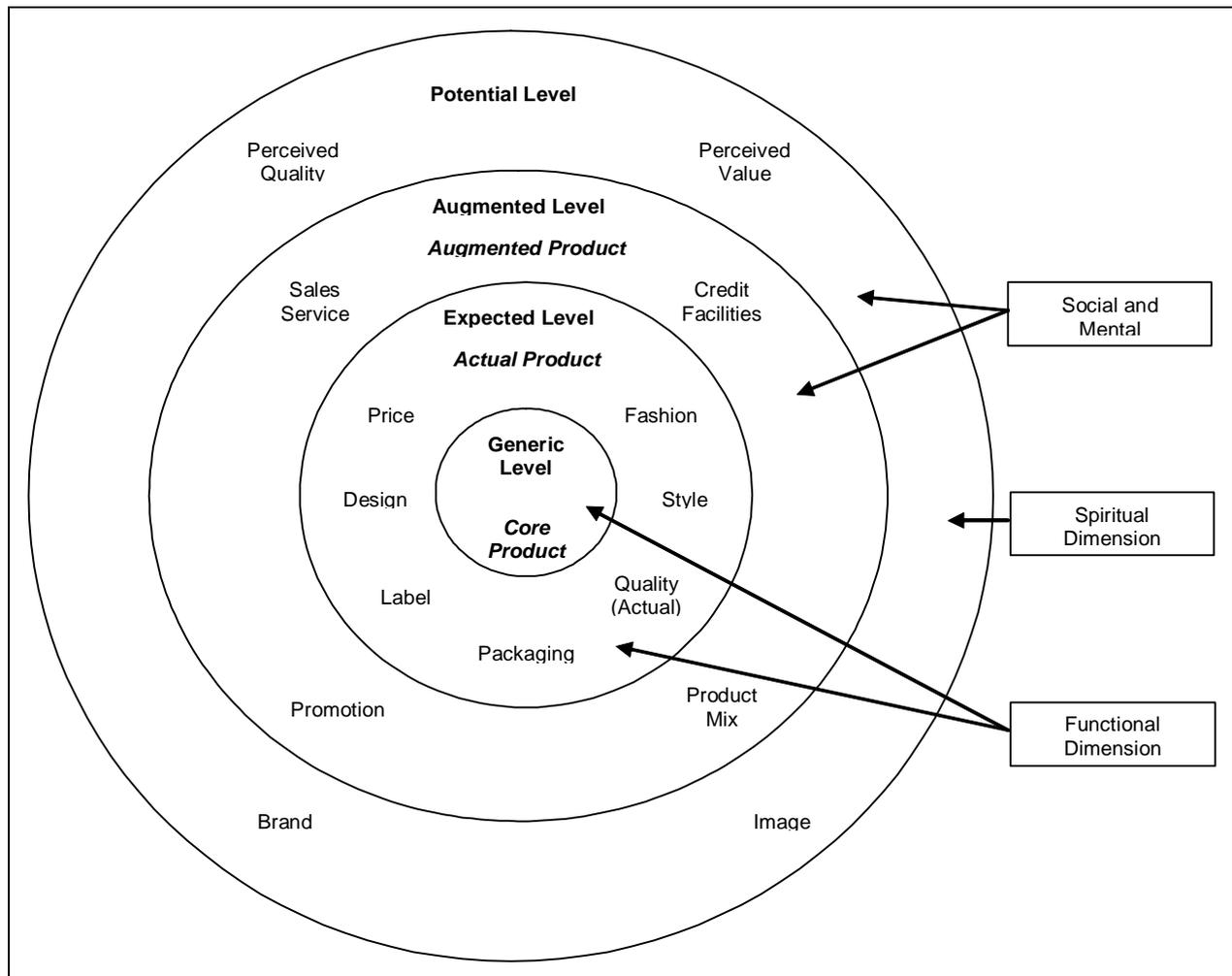
**Consumer socialization** Consumer socialization is a life long process whereby people acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace (Hawkins *et al*, 2001:212; Lipscomb, 1988). Consumer socialization is inevitably intertwined with socialization in the broader sense, which refers to our interaction with other beings in a social context. During primary socialization we form our conceptions of the self (Kaiser, 1985:154). During this period meanings associated with social and physical objects (such as interior products) are learned as the individual develops a self-concept. In a materialistic world, the home environment may become a formative agent towards the adoption of a materialistic value system and may contribute to the persuasive influence of aspirational factors on our buyer decisions. It may even encourage an emphasis on possessions to reflect socio economic status as a token of our extended selves and financial well-being (Ahuvia & Wong, 2002; Lipscomb, 1988). Secondary socialization thus involves processes that allow us to maintain and/or refine our self-concepts (Kaiser, 1985:155). Relevant to this study is the symbolic interactionists' view that changes in a consumer's interior environment symbolize a fluidity in one's self-concept: the consumption of interior products allows/facilitates experimentation with one's image and helps to adapt to social changes as long as the consumer agrees with, and accepts the meanings that others assign to specific objects (Kaiser, 1985:155).

**Social influences** Consumers' choice processes are influenced by others: *significant others* such as household- and family members; *generalized others* within the broader community as well as *reference groups* whom they identify with (De Klerk, 1999). Individuals use the responses from others who they identify with, to construct images of the self (the so-called "looking-glass self") (Kaiser, 1985:165) and to identify product attributes that are considered appropriate or

rejected (De Klerk, 1995; Flouri, 1999; Hawkins *et al*, 2001: 429; Hunt *et al*, 1996; Kasser & Kasser, 2001; Richins & Dawson, 1992). Several researchers have been involved in an active debate for some time about the intentional use of consumer goods to make an impression; to fit into preferred social settings and to increase self esteem (Belk, 1988; Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 1997; Richins & Dawson, 1992). The incidence of such behaviour can however not be ignored. Interior goods is an example of a product category that is used intentionally to reflect well-being and to achieve actual or symbolic membership of a group for two main reasons. Firstly, interior products are generally highly visible. Secondly, exclusive, sophisticated interior objects may be considered extravagant and a luxury, to the extent that ownership of such products could be perceived as indicative of wealth (Bennington, 2002: 169; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003; Du Plessis & Rousseau, 1999:97). Ownership of interior goods – or lack thereof - may further contribute to envy and extravagance, which are typical of a materialistic society (Flouri, 1999; Lipscomb, 1988). Individuals who depend on, or desire the acceptance of others, may be obliged to abide by collective norms that require the possession of goods that would support a certain image (Tatzel, 2002) or would compensate for personal shortcomings (Flouri, 1999).

**Product attributes** Ideally, consumers use a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic product attributes to identify the most suitable products for specific end-use situations (Figure 1). The *intrinsic*s of a product refer to core characteristics of a product, such as the fiber content of textiles, thus the purely tangible features that are usually easy to imitate. *Extrinsic*s on the other hand, are used and even manipulated to make products more appealing in a crowded market place, for example interesting packaging that is designed to characterize and differentiate a product from similar offerings. Value may be added through a specific brand name that embodies a desired image, provides customer reassurance and bears emotional appeal. With textile products, added value can also take the form of functional features such as extra details that are added when articles are made up or finishes that are added to improve the performance of the fibers and fabrics (e.g. colour fastness) (Ashton & Rigby, 1996). Du Plessis and Rousseau (1999:276) use the term "augmented product" to define a product that eventually is worth more than the sum of its physical attributes and the raw materials it consists of. A tailored augmented product is referred to as "the brand", which becomes significant in a consumer's mind. Added values are often emotional in kind and may be difficult to articulate (De Chernatony & McDonald, 1993: 8).

Product characteristics can also be described in terms of dimensions. Until the 1950s, the *functional dimension* that describes the perceived benefit of a product in terms of physical quality and efficiency was all that was communicated about the brand (Gad, 2001:94). In an attempt to differentiate products, the *social dimension* became important. This refers to a product that creates a cult around itself so that it becomes a



**FIGURE 1: MODEL OF THE VARIOUS PERCEIVED LEVELS AND DIMENSIONS OF A PRODUCT**  
(Adapted from the model of De Chernatony & McDonald, 1992:5)

social symbol in the lifestyle play of an individual (Gad, 2001:95). Symbols are often intentionally purchased and exposed to gain the admiration of others. The social dimension to a great extent reflects the relationship between consumers and groups of people who they desire to belong to. The *mental dimension* of a product incorporates a consumer's image of himself (Gad, 2001:96). Someone with a low self-esteem could thus intentionally purchase certain brands of products to reframe the mental pictures that they have of themselves (Hawkins *et al*, 2001:433).

De Chernatony and McDonald (1993:8) on the other hand, prefer a model that consists of *four* levels to describe the extent to which a product can be augmented to provide added value:

- ◆ At the *generic level*, only the most basic needs are met, e.g. a sheet that is meant to cover a mattress, in other words, the core benefit of the product. If competing offerings in a particular product category appear to be the same, the product is known as a *commodity* (Allen, 1999).
- ◆ When a commodity is "value engineered" to satisfy a specific target market's minimum purchase

conditions, e.g. certain functional abilities and pricing, it evolves to the so-called *expected level* (Allen, 1999; De Chernatony & McDonald, 1993:20).

- ◆ The *augmented level* represents products that have been adapted to satisfy both functional and non-functional needs of more experienced, more sophisticated consumers (De Chernatony & McDonald, 1993:21). In this scenario product promotions might for example be directed towards a user's peer group to reinforce lifestyle and social standing through ownership of particular products (Allen, 1999).
- ◆ The fourth level is based on the idea that consumers eventually regard augmentation as a standard requirement for various products so that value that is added thereafter involve more intangible, emotional factors that are meant to promote a product into the *potential phase* (De Chernatony & McDonald, 1993:163).

De Chernatony and McDonald's model (1993:5) was adapted for this study (Figure 1) to include all the relevant concepts for this study as well as product dimen-

sions that were identified by Du Plessis and Rousseau (1999:276) and Allen (1999:2-3).

### Consumers' deliberate use of interior products

Although products such as soft furnishings exist in physical form, they become social objects when they become significant through social interaction. According to Charon (1979:39) social objects (such as certain brands of soft furnishings) are deliberately used to represent whatever people agree on and then become symbols that are central to the development of a sense of living in a social world that is shared with others. Interior products may thus be used as symbols that would be considered appropriate and that might provide approval within a given social context (Stryker, 1980:53). Symbolic interaction is however not only concerned with what occurs *between* people, but also with what occurs *within* an individual (Charon, 1979:22). Consumers may for example create their own realities by deliberately managing their interior surroundings. A consumer's choice of interior goods may thus reflect a need to conform, to fit in with others or to be different.

Consumers can apparently be typified by the brands they use/prefer and their associations with certain brands (De Chernatony & McDonald, 1993:8-10). Du Plessis and Rousseau (1999:245) argue that the psychological make-up of an individual represents an important influencing variable in consumer decision-making and that relationship between self-image; product image and even store image are likely to occur. It is believed that consumers would perceive products that they own/ would like to own/do not want to own, in terms of the symbolic meaning of the product. Consumers may even perceive products and possessions as an extension of their own personalities to the extent that certain brands may deliberately be chosen to communicate a desired image. This means that objects and brands are bought only if they are perceived to be in line with, or similar to their self-images (Hawkins *et al*, 2001:433). The so-called spiritual dimension incorporates a wider ethical view on environmental issues where certain brand names may be associated with a respect for society and personal well-being. Unfortunately empirical findings on consumers' choice processes regarding interior soft furnishings - especially regarding the impact of extrinsic properties on the choice of these products are limited.

The challenge that retailers are faced with is to keep track of, and to create store and brand images that will excite and appeal to specific lifestyle characteristics of the various market segments in a highly competitive environment. Lifestyle refers to the way in which an individual lives and it serves as a function of inherent individual characteristics that have been shaped and formed through social interaction through the life cycle (Hawkins *et al*, 2001:436, 509). Lifestyle reflects consumers' needs and preferences and manifests in consequent buying habits. "Needs satisfying products" may thus be interpreted differently in different contexts. Any company that fails to understand this and remains focused on physical product attributes may

lose its competitive position in the market (De Chernatony & McDonald, 1993:11).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research approach

Although the research contained certain elements of exploratory and explanatory studies, it was mainly of a descriptive nature. It focused on describing and understanding consumers' decision-making behavior with regards to a specific product category. An interpretive approach was followed so that reasons for buyer behaviour and underlying motives could be detected through in depth discussions. Data collection was done through the implementation of qualitative techniques (focus group discussions and projective techniques in conjunction with blind- and branded testing). It was done in multiple stages to allow for triangulation and to enhance the authenticity of the data.

### Sample

**Sample framework** The study unit comprised of young consumers between the ages of 25 and 35 years, irrespective of marital status. Participants had to be financially independent, earning their own incomes and had to live in the eastern suburbs of Pretoria (as an indication of higher socio economic status based on geographical location as per Delphi classification, groups B and C) (South African Advertising Research Foundation, 2001). Based on area of residence, it was assumed that these consumers would have had access to various and more exclusive retail outlets on a regular basis. It was assumed that participants in this age group who reside in more affluent residential areas, would probably be in a financial position to choose from a wider range of products and stores to meet aspirational needs, if any.

**Sampling** Purposive sampling was used (Babbie, 1989:204) to intentionally recruit potential participants. The managers of two popular stores in a major up-market shopping center assisted with the identification of potential participants at point of purchase in their stores. Potential clients were requested to complete a short questionnaire to establish demographic data and contact details. This was used to select a relative homogeneous group of individuals who have had some experience with the purchase of soft furnishings in the past and who were unfamiliar with one another as well as the researcher (Garrison *et al*, 1999; Morris, 1992:64). Nine females and six males who were either professionals, managed their own businesses or held managerial positions and who complied with the pre-conditions for participation, agreed to participate in the study. Individuals were assured of confidentiality.

### Data-collection

Participants were informed that the research intended to determine consumers' preference for, and approach to the evaluation of specific interior products. During qualitative data collection sessions, participants were

encouraged to respond spontaneously to the various tasks. The researcher only intervened and prompted discussions when it seemed necessary to cover the research objectives.

**Session one** Participants were invited to a focus group discussion on an early Saturday morning in a private corner of a coffee shop in the shopping center. Seven females and five males (of the initial group of 16) turned up. The session followed a phenomenological approach to stimulate active discussions. Carefully pre-meditated questions based upon the objectives of the study were used to guide discussions (Macun & Posel, 1998; Fern, 1983), for example:

- ◆ How would you go about to select bedding (sheets and pillow cases) for your own home?
- ◆ If you have to purchase bed linen and towels, would you prefer specific stores? Explain.
- ◆ If you require new sheets for your guest room, how would you identify the most suitable products?
- ◆ How would you go about to select towels for friends for a wedding present?
- ◆ How would you discriminate between towels that are acceptable and ones that are not?
- ◆ What would you recommend to a friend who wants your assistance with the purchasing of new bed linen and towels for their home?

With participants' permission, extensive notes and recordings were made of all the discussions. Participants seemed very relaxed and apparently enjoyed the session, which took just under two hours to complete.

**Session two** For the purpose of triangulation the same participants were invited to a follow-up session the next Saturday. Two of the men excused them from the meeting but one of the initial recruits, a lady, joined the group. Transcriptions of the previous session were taken back to the group to reflect on the researcher's interpretation of the previous discussions. Participants were then subjected to a projective technique in written format that involved an insurance claim scenario. Participants had to describe how they would advise a friend who had to replace lost towels and bedding within certain conditions stipulated in an insurance policy: a specific amount of money was allowed and participants had to select the store of preference in the shopping centre and had to motivate their decisions. After handing in the written task, the group was asked to discuss the task: this was tape-recorded for transcription and used to verify the data obtained in the first session.

**Session three** The same participants, who participated in the second session, were subjected to a blind test on the third Saturday morning. They were confronted with actual products (various brands of linen and towels, of the same sizes, all white in colour) of which the brand names and trademarks had been removed: they had to identify and motivate the items they preferred openly. Their comments were tape-recorded with their permission. The task was then repeated in the form of a *brand test* with similar items of which the packaging, brand names and trademarks

were intact. Certain key questions based on participants' responses in previous sessions were asked (e.g.: Why do you consider towels with the XX label superior? Why do you prefer these sheets? How do you know that the towels that you have chosen are better than the others?) Concluding questions were asked (e.g.: Why would you choose bedding for your guest room differently to those for your own bedroom?) to bring closure to the discussions and to enable participants to reflect on previous comments. Responses of the participants were reflected during a brief summary of the discussions, for their approval.

### Data analysis

Tape recordings of the discussions of the three sessions were transcribed to text. Content analysis was done to scrutinize and organize data within the aims of the study and to reduce text to categories and concepts that were relevant to the study. *Open coding* was done (e.g. statements referring to *price, packaging, absorbency*, etc. as stipulated in Figure 1, were identified). *Axial coding* followed to integrate and organize categories of information, e.g. in terms of characteristics typical of the various categories, e.g. all concepts relating to price, style, fashion were identified as those pertaining to the *expected* level and all statements and concepts pertaining to service, credit facilities were categorized as pertaining to the *augmented* level. *Selective coding* involved the identification of the core categories to organize the data. *Adjunctive procedures* involved merging of memos of incidents that occurred during data collection sessions, e.g. an indication of enthusiasm when brand names were discussed or hesitation to react when they were probed about functional properties of textiles (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:492, 501).

## FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

The study primarily focused on consumers' reliance on extrinsic factors. During the conversations on product evaluation participants understandably also mentioned intrinsic factors as well, as they were supposed to indicate all the characteristics that were considered important and relevant. Intrinsic factors were thus accommodated to objectively reflect on the collective influence of product characteristics and to indicate the prominence of extrinsic characteristics.

### The influence of generic intrinsic properties related to the core benefits of products

Spontaneous discussions of the importance of certain intrinsic properties as pre requisites to achieve the intended core benefit of certain products (e.g. the importance of absorbency, size, texture and tactile perception when selecting towels) were expected. Unfortunately at the generic level, only the most basic needs of consumers are met. Limited space prevents full disclosure of transcripts but statements *inter alia* included:

- ◆ **Absorbency** is crucial, one does not want something that does not dry properly
- ◆ **Size** matters...I mean obviously you want a towel that covers your body.
- ◆ Sheets should **fit properly** over a mattress.
- ◆ The **thicker** the towel, the better the quality, I think.

### The influence of extrinsic properties

There was consensus that products differed from one store to the other. Participants' explanations revealed the impression that added values that are associated with various outlets (thus various brands) are indicative of functional product characteristics (intrinsic). Consumers apparently associate (and rely on) brands with what they expect in terms of generic functional attributes. Although specific functional attributes apparently not necessarily form part of a consumer's internal frame of reference during product evaluation, consumers apparently expect to get the required characteristics through particular brands. Although products and services are thus made to satisfy consumers' minimum requirements in terms of attributes such as packaging, design, availability, price and quantity, consumers apparently perceive the characteristics of competing brands of products in the same product category, to be different (De Chernatony & McDonald, 1993:161). Statements *inter alia* included:

- ◆ I buy the gift packs sold at A - they are **beautiful and nicely wrapped**.
- ◆ There is nothing spectacular about a towel, but one can't miss the **label**.
- ◆ When I need **trendy** towels I would rather go to C.
- ◆ I would go to C to purchase what I can **afford**.
- ◆ Sheets differ in quality, but I **won't purchase something just because its' quality is good**.
- ◆ If I see similar duvet covers at G and H at the same price, I will **rather buy from H**.

**At the augmented level** Participants were quite outspoken about the importance of reputation and convenience. According to Risch (1987:84), convenience refers to anything that would prevent frustration and enhance consumers' personal comfort. This could relate to several contributory factors such as financial implications, physical- and mental effort. The importance of the augmented product (extrinsics) was confirmed during the second data collection phase in the insurance claim scenario. Participants were quite comfortable to select a store where they could do all the replacement shopping rather than to shop around. Reasons revealed an apparent trust in or association of a store with product characteristics. They expected the products in specific stores to conform to certain requirements without actually examining the goods or considering alternatives.

Comments *inter alia* included:

- ◆ At least if you go to D or E, you know that if something goes wrong it will be refunded.
- ◆ When I have to buy linen and towels, I only go to A or B because there you know what you get. C never advertises so I know absolutely nothing about them.

- ◆ A's quality is high, so I know that I will get quality products if I go there.
- ◆ C's merchandise assortment is appealing in terms of color; style and they also stock extra length sheeting.

To maintain customer loyalty and price premiums, it is imperative that marketers augment their offerings through the addition and communication of additional benefits that would enable consumers to distinguish their products from similar products. When products appear to be very similar, consumers apparently become more aware of, and start focusing on discriminating factors. A participant *inter alia* reacted "I will go to E, because I have an account there".

**At the potential level** It was evident that brand names communicate certain benefits to consumers and apparently provide some form of security. Consumers admitted to having a certain image of a category of products that makes it easier to differentiate brands. They agreed that brand names are particularly important in instances where they have little experience to go by and when competitive products are very similar. Confirming Leahy's view (in Murphy 1990:61-62) of the importance of brand names, participants generalized that the products with the same brand name are expected to be similar in quality. They admitted to shopping with a brand name in mind and confessed that familiar brands are selected even before alternative brands are considered. Brand names are thus used to determine quality and to confirm reliability. The following were *inter alia* said:

- ◆ It is like clothing, it's a matter of brands. If one walks into A you expect to pay more.
- ◆ Different brands have different standards. One must get to know the brands.
- ◆ I would say W is more expensive, because they have the image of quality and if you go out to buy quality, you don't care about price.
- ◆ Obviously it's connected to price, I mean you are not going to get the same quality towel at P than what you are going to get at W or E.
- ◆ I only buy P (brand name) from E (retailer); it is the best there is!

During the *blind tests*, in the absence of brand names, consumers reverted to surrogate indicators to evaluate products. Choices were then predominantly influenced by a combination of intrinsic features such as perceived quality of stitching, fabric content, creasing, texture, thickness, density and tactile attributes although participants not necessarily judged products in the same way (probably due to differences in their actual product knowledge and product experience). Colour was the only extrinsic factor mentioned as reason for choice during the blind test. Reasons for choosing specific products during the blind test were *inter alia*:

- ◆ it was softer; ...nice and soft, doesn't feel scratchy.
- ◆ it was fluffier, fluffier than the rest
- ◆ one can feel the strength of the material.
- ◆ it was a bit thicker as well; ...it is a much thicker towel.

When the task was repeated with *branded products*, so-called satisfactory products were selected according to their brand names. Selections were made much quicker than during the blind test and reasons for product choice mainly referred to extrinsic characteristics such as brand name and appealing packaging. Interestingly, the selected branded products were generally more expensive than the unbranded choices in the previous round. Statements included:

- ◆ *The price difference was so small, so I chose a (brand name) - exactly what I wanted.*
- ◆ *Most sheets look alike, so I trust the (retailer) products for quality.*
- ◆ *The ones from (retailer) is definitely better quality.*

This confirms Hisrich and Peters' (1990:332) view that commendable products are often overlooked because of unappealing packaging. Tellis and Gaeth (1990) also found that a more rational, best value approach that optimizes expected utility could only be applied to select products when consumers are more knowledgeable about product quality. In the absence of product information, price becomes a prominent discriminator (extrinsic cue) for quality.

#### **The influence of social acceptance during decision-making**

Retailers and brands (extrinsics) were mentioned prominently whenever discussions steered towards products that are preferred or considered more acceptable. Functional attributes seldom surfaced as a prominent discriminator within participants' internal frame of reference.

**Group influences on consumers' choice of interior soft furnishings** The impact of previous experiences as explained by Kaiser (1985:165) surfaced during group discussions. It seemed as if female participants were more concerned with the social impact of product decisions than their male counterparts. Statements included:

- ◆ *If people see W, they know it's good. If they see P, they know it is cheap stuff.*
- ◆ *I must confess that I removed the packaging before she could see that I bought it at A.*
- ◆ *I will go to W because their brand is tops. If you want quality, you go there. That is where I will buy a wedding present. I can unfortunately not say the same about P.*
- ◆ *Forget about the sheets – nobody sees it anyway. But a towel is another cup of tea – there you buy the best.*

Haynes and Helms (1991) explain that although certain products are expected to perform satisfactory, they also have to portray the right image because they are used in social settings. Towels would understandably then be more severely criticized than sheets of which the labels are out of sight. Likewise, participants agreed that when buying gifts, they would much rather purchase towels than sheets.

#### **The social impact of one's choice of interior soft**

**furnishings** During the group discussions, participants agreed that consumers can be typified by the retail outlet that they patron. They also agreed that the image of stores and their products are very important:

- ◆ *A sells very bright colours. It is as if a certain kind of person goes there.*
- ◆ *The more trendy people with money will go to L (store).*
- ◆ *People who can afford trends will go to H (store). Only people with money can follow that lifestyle.*
- ◆ *Different people buy at E because you can buy on credit. People who buy at P are broke!*
- ◆ *I know someone who shops at M. He has money, style, class, everything. He buys only a few very expensive items and does not waste his money on the little pieces of junk sold at P. That is who he is.*

Gad (2001:90) explains that consumers use brands and price in the same way that actors use theatrical props to augment and clarify their role and personality. The price-belief schema results in a perception that price indicates quality to the extent that consumers are inclined to pay more to get the best quality (Lichtenstein *et al*, 1993).

#### **CONCLUSION**

The data collection procedures that were used were successful in prompting spontaneous discussions to generate relevant, rich data. Participants co-operated enthusiastically and the role of the researcher during the discussions was reduced to the initiation of discussions and the explanation of specific tasks.

Although intrinsic factors were mentioned as important indicators of interior products that would provide consumer satisfaction, these characteristics were usually deduced or mentioned as off spins of extrinsic variables (e.g store; brand names; trade names; logos). Extrinsic factors were generally spontaneously used to differentiate products that were considered outstanding. Indicators that referred to the retailer, however featured more prominently than indicators that referred to manufacturers of goods. Consumers apparently tend to associate retailers with reputable brand names and tend to trust retailers' judgment instead of going through a tiresome process of evaluating an array of intrinsic product features during decision-making. On the negative side for the manufacturers, is the impression that brand names are overshadowed by retailers' brands, which apparently, for many, "says it all". This coincides with reports on clothing textile products (Ashton & Rigby, 1996).

Social acceptance and the influence of the social dimension of certain brands in terms of the choice of interior products were well debated. Participants discussed the matter enthusiastically and agreed (during focus group discussions as well as in projective techniques) that brands and packaging (extrinsics) are influential in making the right decision. Although they confirmed the importance of these discriminators in

terms of the quality of products, they were not very successful in detecting quality differences during the blind test. Consumers thus seem to be *aware* of intrinsics and use the relevant concepts quite comfortably as jargon but failed to prove that they understand how to judge them objectively. This supports Tatzel's conclusion (2002) that consumers perceive certain brands to be superior.

There is little doubt that store images are "alive and doing well" in terms of attracting specific types of consumers. Participants spontaneously admitted their support of certain stores and unequivocally rejected others in terms of their products as well as their customers. Stores were undoubtedly described in terms of customers: i.e. their incomes, lifestyle and even age groups. The findings therefore suggest that a relationship between the young urban consumers' self image and the image of a specific outlet of soft furnishings is likely to occur. This coincides with the symbolic interactionist perspective that complex human society demands and depends on human symbolic life and that interior products would be purchased from certain outlets to serve as symbols to define or represent realities, initiate responses, provide cues and organise behaviour, in terms of what is considered appropriate. The importance of store and/or brand images that appeal to particular market segments was evident and supports research that indicates that conspicuous spending will signal one's status in a social context (McGowan & Sternquist, 1998; Tatzel, 2002). This explains the apparent illogic of being attracted to, and preferring, high prices.

In terms of the responsibility of the retail environment and more specifically, augmented customer service that would result in informed consumer decision-making, it is recommended that the in store environment becomes more conducive in terms of consumer education. Consumers apparently like to linger in the interior sections of department stores. During discussions they admitted to frequent browsing and touching of textile products to get the "feel" of the products. Any effort to provide product information would thus stand a better chance of being attended to when provided in the store where goods are displayed. Product packaging could be improved by indicating very practical, hands on information to educate consumers on the proper use and care of textile products. Warnings about the consequences if proper care is ignored may also be helpful. Even if the fiber content of textile products is provided, consumers not necessarily understand the implications in terms of use: a participant for example mentioned that she insisted on percale sheets because she understood it "to be superior" but never realized that it would crease that much! Brochures could be made available, not only with the latest trends in interior, but also including practical information whereby consumers could make more informed product decisions.

This study clearly indicated that participants were aware of intrinsic product features but it was also found that they were not able to explain these product features or to discriminate them in the absence of

extrinsic factors. It thus seems as if intrinsics are assumed in the presence of certain extrinsic factors such as a brand name, price or store image. It is further suggested that sales personnel be trained in terms of functional/generic product attributes (intrinsics) to enable them to facilitate consumers' evaluation of products at point of purchase. This would augment customer service to a level where it not only contributes to informed consumer decision-making but also contributes to the image and the reputation of a store.

The findings shed some light on young urban consumers' approach to the choice of interior soft furnishings because it is believed that, due to a materialistic value system, consumers often go to extremes to attain or sustain a certain standard of living, by consuming products that bears witness to that specific lifestyle. Such behaviour could result in an over emphasis of extrinsic product features to attract consumers and to maintain customers and a neglect of fundamental product characteristics that signal quality and indicate functional design. It is suggested that the research be extended to other product categories as well as other consumer groups to determine the extent of this kind of buyer behaviour so that a concerted effort could be made with the cooperation of manufacturers and retail to encourage informed responsible consumer decision-making.

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