

THE PERTINENCE OF STATUS FACTORS IN CONSUMERS' CONSIDERATION OF MAJOR HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCES

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OPSOMMING

Benewens die werkverrigting van huishoudelike toerusting word hulle in moderne huishoudings ook as belangrike tyd- en arbeidbesparende hulpmiddels beskou. Die toenemende belangrikheid van handelsmerke, ontwerp en gesofistikeerde tegnologie het daartoe gelei dat huishoudelike toerusting egter ook simbole van welvaart geword het. Hierdie verkennende studie wat in 2010 in Tshwane uitgevoer is, het ten doel gehad om vas te stel hoe belangrik die ek-spressiewe dimensie van toerusting is wanneer verbruikers verskillende alternatiewe oorweeg: 446 bruikbare voltooide vraelyste is herwin vir ontleding. Verkennende faktorontleding het aangedui dat sewe faktore ter sake is wanneer verbruikers aankoopbe-sluite neem, waarvan vier status-verwant is. Tipiese aspirerende verbruikersgroepe, dit wil sê jonger en beter opgeleide verbruikers, was beduidend meer begaan oor die indrukwekkendheid van toerusting – 'n faktor wat die sosiale betekenis van toerusting pertinent geïmpliseer het en wat ook die potensiaal het om iemand se eie waarde te verhoog. Die belang van estetika en kommer oor die reputasie van toerusting blyk universeel te wees. Bevindinge kan klein-handelaars en die industrie lei om hulle dienslewering te verbeter deur verbruikers se risikopersepsie te beperk en verbruikerstevredenheid te verhoog.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, household technology has secured itself as a primary indicator of progress. It is, for example, used as a key indicator of social status in South Africa's classification of consumer life style segments (LSM) (Du Plessis & Rousseau, 2003). Apart from acquiring major household appliances for their functional performance characteristics, consumers' purchases may thus also be value driven, for example to display status and to gain social affiliation. In emerging economies such as South Africa, consumers are nowadays exposed to an increased array of products and brands due to improved infrastructure, the opening of large shopping malls in major cities and global marketing that have stimulated consumers' product needs and kindled materialistic values (Nieftagodien & Van den Berg, 2007).

Technology has thus to a certain extent contributed to a materialistic orientation in how people define quality of life. In modern, Westernised societies, people are judged by the houses they live in and by their possessions rather than their human qualities (Hittman, 1987). People may even intentionally buy goods that will express different aspects of their "self" and to gain the admiration or the envy of other people they interact with (Arthur & Sherman, 2010; Nunes, 2009; Castilhos & Rossi, 2008). McMeekin and Tomlinson (1998) explain that consumers find themselves in a certain position in a class structure and then intentionally choose products in accordance with the constraints and the opportunities within a specific social category to purchase expensive appliances or sought-after brands and to display them visibly. Household appliances have thus become semiotic markers of fortune and comfortable living (Mehlwana, 1999) and may even boost excessive and/or irrational consumption.

Although consumers across all social status strata participate in visual consumption, different social and income groups differ in the ways in which they do so (Arthur & Sherman, 2010; Eastman *et al.*, 1999). Attempting to deny the reality, poverty-stricken consumers may even collect and display broken appliances in their homes for decoration and to signify status (White *et al.*, 1998; Mehlwana, 1999), while consumers in lower income and lower social levels would acquire appliances such as microwave ovens that are more affordable yet "success" enhancing (Nieftagodien & Van der Berg, 2007). Professional people with higher education levels who "belong" to higher socio-

economic groups would distinguish themselves by purchasing specific types of appliances such as dishwashers and wine cabinets that have a lower market penetration, and/or opt for more sophisticated brands that are not easily affordable (Weiss & Gross, 1995).

When discussing future trends in the appliance industry in 1997, representatives of industry, retail and consumer organisations concluded even then that it had become increasingly difficult to attend to consumers' product needs because these were not necessarily concrete, realistic or clear. In addition, the inter-purchase times for major household appliances are so long that consumers seldom possess relevant, recent experience to judge appliances' functional and performance characteristics confidently. When confronted with a new purchase, consumers inevitably then revert to more obvious, easy to interpret characteristics such as distinct design and new technological features to guide their purchase decisions (Creusen & Schoormans, 2005; Curry, 1982).

This research was inspired by a lack of discussion in literature of the pertinence of different types of product attributes during consumers' judgement of major household appliances, i.e. products that are generally regarded as complex (due to the technology involved), high-risk products (due to possible incongruities in terms of consumers' expectations and appliances' eventual performance in terms of functional utility, social significance, service life et cetera). This encompassing research project investigated consumers' regard for different product features and the findings were dealt with in various reports. This report reflects on the investigation of consumers' consideration of the expressive dimension of household appliances (as explained by Venkatesh, 1985), which typically involves product attributes that are associated with status and sophistication – to determine whether such characteristics serve as pertinent heuristics in terms of consumers' product choices. Status-related product features include brand name, style, design, materials used during manufacture, exterior finishes used, and technological features.

THEORY

The significance of extrinsic product cues

The appropriateness of a product is generally evaluated by means of its relative superiority over its competitors, for example, the ability of a product to attract attention through its colour, size, shape, materials and finishes when a consumer enters a store (Zeithaml, 1988; Dawar & Parker, 1994). Prior research indicates that consumers across all age groups are inclined to deduce the quality of household appliances from design characteristics (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005). Creusen and Schoormans (2005) also conclude that consumers tend to infer the utilitarian value and the quality of appliances from their external physical characteristics. Manufacturers may unfortunately manipulate this to their advantage to increase the perceived quality of appliances. Industrial product development and design therefore not only aim at

creating pleasing product shapes and styles, they purposely aim to communicate the image of the company as well as the quality and integrity of their products (Yamamoto & Lambert, 1994).

All consumers enter into a purchase situation with pertinent expectations that are derived from beliefs or pre-existing ideas concerning the functional (instrumental) and/or symbolic (expressive) performance of appliances (Laufer, 2002; Donoghue *et al.*, 2008). While functional performance relates to the utility and durability of a product/appliance, symbolic performance encompasses what the product symbolises to the consumer. Symbolic performance refers to a "psychological" level of performance that is derived from a consumer's response to a product's physical properties (Donoghue *et al.*, 2008), but does not pertain to the actual physical properties of a product (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Erasmus & Donoghue, 1998; Erasmus *et al.*, 2005; Donoghue *et al.*, 2008). Appliances that are installed in areas in the home where they would be noticeable to visitors may thus become social symbols that signify socio-economic status and reflect the lifestyles of the homeowners (Donoghue & Erasmus, 1999; Donoghue *et al.*, 2008). As such, a product's appearance, i.e. its expressive performance, may fulfil product owners' emotional and cognitive needs, for example to impress others (Brown & Rice, 2001).

Status consumption

Status consumption encompasses people's efforts to improve their social status through conspicuous consumption of consumer goods that can confer and symbolise social status for them and their family, over and above the functional/performance utility of such goods (Heaney *et al.*, 2005). Status consumption suggests emotional involvement and entails the purchasing and consumption of products and brands of status in a socially or publicly visible way (Chao & Schor, 1998). The emotional relationship between the user and the product is largely determined by the symbolic dimension of the product, i.e. it relies on the shared understanding between individuals of pertinent symbols. Objects and brands acquire meaning and become social objects through social interaction with others such as reference groups (Charon, 2001). If reference groups become associated with particular brands, such meaning may be appropriated by consumers to construct their self-concepts (Nunes, 2009; Castilhos & Rossi, 2008; Escalas & Bettmann, 2005). The effect is however moderated by the degree to which the brand is symbolic and communicates something about the user, as well as the degree to which it is socially visible, consumed publicly and considered less of a necessity (Batra & Homer, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Symbols are thus intentionally used by individuals/households to define themselves and their relationships with others. "Symbolic consumption" is actually a quasi-language through which people communicate with others (McCracken, 1989; McDonagh *et al.*, 2002).

Symbols that may convey social status

A multitude of symbols may convey product status. Status is for example associated with *ownership of certain types of products*, e.g. higher-income consumers' ownership of induction hobs that represent sophisticated technology, or low-income consumers' ownership of microwave ovens (Nieftagodien & Van der Berg, 2007). Certain *brands* could also add perceived value amidst competition because they are imported, scarce or expensive (Heaney *et al.*, 2005), and a brand may even reduce risk perception when uncertainty is experienced (Zeithaml, 1988; Brucks *et al.*, 2000). Consumers are also inclined to assume that *higher prices, i.e. more expensive products* signify higher quality (Babin & Harris, 2011:224) when they are inexperienced and when intrinsic information is limited or inadequate (Creusen & Schoormans, 2005). *Product design*, including aesthetic features such as *colour and style*, can also create a differential advantage for a product in the market place (Veryzer, 1995; Hekkert *et al.*, 2003). Consumers' attention to and judgement of aesthetic attributes are however influenced by cultural, social and personal influences such as design acumen, prior experience, personality and the perceived aesthetic 'fit' of a product, considering the products that a consumer already owns (Creusen & Schoormans, 2005). Hekkert and co-workers (2003) suggest that consumers would choose unique, original designs, provided that the novelty of new products do not divert too drastically from what they are familiar with. Because the range of household appliances in people's homes are generally purchased over time, with long inter-purchase times for product replacements, consumers' product choices may eventually be based on heuristics, such as the brands and design of appliances that they have been exposed to, are more familiar with and which they already possess. Products and brands that are preferred on aesthetic grounds generally reflect an intricate combination of features that consumers like or are familiar with, as well as novel features that provide some element of surprise and excitement (Hekkert *et al.*, 2003; Creusen & Schoormans, 2005).

Consumer characteristics associated with status consumption

Although consumers from all social strata may purposely buy certain products to acquire status within the limitation of their incomes and social environments (Eastman *et al.*, 1999), consumers with certain demographic characteristics are apparently more status prone, for example females; higher educated consumers; higher-income levels and urban consumers (Lens *et al.*, 2010; Castilhos & Rossi, 2008; Heaney *et al.*, 2005). Castilhos and Rossi (2008) explain that people are in constant contact with one another, which makes it common practice to judge their possessions and their acts.

Theoretical perspective

The relevance of symbolic interactionism in terms of the goods we own is well established, as evidence

that consumer goods are often intentionally chosen to convey symbolic meaning – assuming that these meanings are created socially and are shared. Consumers may thus prefer and choose specific appliances to benefit from particular product characteristics. The brand could for instance aid in the expression of a person's identity and different "selves", i.e. a *personal, social and/or extended self*. Through ownership of specific goods/brands people actually attempt to adopt and possess the symbolic meaning that is attached to the product. Reasons for consumers' choice of specific appliances inevitably then go beyond the functional. Consumers would, for example, make an effort to construct and uphold social meaning within their homes through premeditated use of symbols, e.g. expensive brands, and the type and variety of products that they own. In addition to the need to purchase a dishwasher that performs well, a consumer would perhaps focus on admirable sought-after exterior design features and sophisticated technology that would gain him/her the admiration of others (Charon, 2001; Sandstrom *et al.*, 2006). They would then typically install these products/appliances where visitors could see, appreciate and admire them (Tian & Belk, 2005; Sandstrom *et al.*, 2006), to express their extended selves and to secure their position in society (Charon, 2001; Sandstrom *et al.*, 2006). People are apparently in constant evaluation and re-evaluation of who they are and would like to become (Charon, 2001; Solomon *et al.*, 2006:214). In fear of being judged by others and trying to establish a changing self, commodities that are visible to others thus become tools that signify where the owners of the goods aspire to belong within the social hierarchy, i.e. they become tools that confer status and wealth. Such behaviour is however not necessarily predictable and one cannot necessarily assume that, when the opportunity arises, consumers would focus on status features to impress others or to indicate their ability to afford imported and/or impressive products. Evidence to such behaviour – especially in a South African context – is inadequate.

Major household appliances are unequivocally part of most households and the product chosen at any given point in time entails considerable functional, performance and financial risk if it fails to perform as expected (Donoghue & De Klerk, 2009). In order to facilitate consumers' buying decisions and to enhance consumers' ability to conclude informed, responsible buying decisions, empirical evidence is needed of consumers' actual attention to status-related product features when considering alternatives. For the purpose of consumer facilitation, and relevant consumer communication, it would also be useful to know whether consumers' attention to status-related product features is influenced significantly by specific demographic characteristics such as income, age, education level and gender.

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaire

A cross-sectional survey was performed during

March/April 2010 amongst middle- to upper-income households in suburbs across Tshwane, a major urban area in South Africa. A structured questionnaire based on a scrutiny of the relevant literature was designed by the researchers, and a cohort of fourth-year students in Consumer Science at the University of Pretoria as part of their undergraduate studies. The final version was pre-tested to prevent possible misinterpretation of constructs and scales. Simple questions and easy-to-interpret ordinal-, binominal- and Likert-type scales were used.

Sample

Stratified sampling was done across specific suburbs in Tshwane and convenient, snowball sampling was done to reach willing households. Intentional effort was made to involve a diverse sample of consumers in terms of age, income and education level. The students distributed 500 structured questionnaires on a drop-off-collect-later basis, and retrieved 446 useful questionnaires within two weeks. Fieldworkers assured participants of the confidentiality of their contributions and the freedom to withdraw whenever they wished.

Analysis of the data

The students coded the questionnaires and performed data checks under supervision. Three sections of the questionnaire were relevant to this report, namely Demographic information; Importance of type of product information; Importance of product features.

Descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis, ANOVAs as well as T-tests were used to analyse and interpret the data. The investigation of consumers' regard for status-related product features during their pre-purchase evaluation of major appliances involved an investigation of their regard for 35 product attributes which included several status-bearing descriptors. A five-increment Likert-type *Agreement* scale was used. Responses were subjected to exploratory factor analysis and a Varimax rotation, whilst implementing a norm of an Eigenvalue ≥ 1 to identify coherent factors. Seven distinct factors emerged that were labelled in accordance with their content (Table 1), i.e. Factor 1: FUNCTIONALITY; Factor 2: IMPRESSIVENESS; Factor 3: AESTHETICS; Factor 4: QUALITY; Factor 5: EXTERIOR FINISHES; Factor 6: REPUTATION; and Factor 7: PRICE.

Table 1 reveals all the factors that were identified, although only four factors which suggested status-bearing character will be discussed further. Factors 1 (FUNCTIONALITY), 4 (QUALITY) and 7 (PRICE) were dealt with in another report that focussed on consumers' attention to the functional utility and durability considerations of household appliances. Factor 7 (PRICE) was disregarded in this report due to its association with *affordability*, which was more appropriate in terms of durability- than status-related issues. Of the four factors that were retained as the focus of this report, Factor 2 (IMPRESSIVENESS)

contained explicit status-bearing content, e.g. referring to choice of appliances that would "... boost one's image amongst friends; ... make a good impression", while the other factors (Factor 3: AESTHETICS; Factor 5: EXTERIOR FINISHES and Factor 6: REPUTATION) more subtly inferred status and social significance. An operationalisation of the means that were calculated for the various factors are provided in Table 2.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of the sample

For the purpose of statistical analysis, the sample was divided into demographic subcategories. In terms of *gender*, a larger representation of females in the sample was coincidental because questionnaires could be completed by any willing partner in households that were approached (N = 446; females: n = 308; males: n = 136; missing: n = 2). Literature suggests that investigations related to foods, cooking and household appliances should no longer be gender-specific due to an increased interest and involvement of males in the kitchen in recent years (Silva, 2000). Three *age* categories were distinguished, i.e. consumers < 30 years of age (n = 170/ 38,1%) to distinguish less experienced and first-time buyers of appliances; ≥ 30 to 49 years of age (n = 181/ 40,5%) to represent those who were supposedly more established in their own homes in terms of appliance purchases over time (inclusive of some repeat purchases), and consumers ≥ 50 years (n = 95/ 21,4%) to represent the more established market who may have made repeat purchases on more than one occasion in the past. In terms of *monthly household income*, the sample consisted of low-income consumers earning < R5000 (n = 60/ 14,1%); a lower-middle-income group (\geq R5000 - R9999: n = 82/ 19,3%); a higher-middle-income group (\geq R10 000 to R14999: n = 78/ 18,4%), and two higher-income groups, namely households earning \geq R15000 - R24999 (n = 91/ 21,4%) and those earning \geq R25000 (n = 114/ 26,8%). The division of income categories was based on established lifestyle (LSM) discriminators (New extended LSMs, 2009; Du Plessis & Rousseau, 2003). Three level of education categories were distinguished, i.e. those who possessed a secondary school certificate \leq Grade 12 (n = 161/ 36,5%); those holding a first degree/diploma (n = 181/ 41,0%); and respondents with a postgraduate qualification (n = 99/ 22,4%).

Consumers' consideration of product features

Four factors relating to status in consumers' choice of major household appliances were identified, namely IMPRESSIVENESS, AESTHETICS, EXTERIOR FINISHES and REPUTATION.

Consumers' consideration of the IMPRESSIVENESS of appliances (Factor 2) Respondents generally seemed hesitant and were mostly *undecided* or *slightly agreed* about the importance of attributes associated with the *impressiveness* of major household

TABLE 1: FACTORS THAT WERE RELEVANT DURING CONSUMERS' EVALUATION OF MAJOR HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCES

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7
I prefer durable appliances that will last long	0,79	-0,01	0,05	0,08	-0,01	0,12	0,07
The performance of the appliance is important	0,69	-0,08	0,18	0,13	0,04	0,02	0,00
I prefer brand names that I trust	0,67	-0,08	0,28	0,17	0,05	0,23	-0,13
Appliances should be safe to use	0,66	0,05	0,09	0,00	0,05	0,08	0,18
The product guarantee should be considered	0,62	0,11	0,17	0,12	0,05	0,21	0,11
I consider price: affordable, not necessarily cheapest	0,59	0,00	0,02	0,06	-0,03	-0,02	0,06
Appliances must be well-designed (exterior and interior)	0,55	0,18	0,30	-0,01	0,13	0,14	-0,08
Appliances must be easy to operate (not complicated)	0,51	0,07	0,17	-0,07	-0,02	0,03	0,16
Appliances must have best functions, even if it costs more	0,44	0,17	0,15	0,30	-0,08	0,06	0,22
I prefer certain brand names that cause fewer problems	0,39	0,03	0,20	0,32	-0,14	0,17	-0,11
Beautiful appliances could boost one's image amongst friends	-0,13	0,71	0,12	0,26	-0,01	0,12	0,03
Appliances that people own reveal part of their personality	0,02	0,70	0,13	0,11	-0,07	-0,05	-0,02
People prefer appliances that will make a good impression	0,12	0,70	0,15	0,15	0,14	0,14	-0,05
Appliances must have beautiful exterior features	0,03	0,62	0,22	0,03	0,18	0,12	0,00
The appliances that people own reveal their personal style	0,12	0,61	0,24	0,18	0,04	0,03	-0,03
People would buy certain brands to impress others	-0,01	0,60	-0,08	0,18	0,03	0,06	0,09
Owning beautiful appliances makes one feel good	0,04	0,57	0,09	0,03	-0,10	0,08	0,18
I prefer appliances with impressive features (new technology)	0,23	0,31	0,19	0,29	0,14	0,18	-0,18
The colour of my appliances should match my kitchen's colour scheme and décor	0,10	0,36	0,62	0,07	0,31	0,07	-0,10
The size of appliances, i.e. dimensions/capacity is important to me	0,21	0,10	0,61	0,06	-0,06	0,07	0,08
The design of appliances, i.e. shape, is important to me	0,24	0,16	0,57	0,23	-0,12	0,05	0,02
I attend to the appearance of appliances, i.e. compact /large/ conspicuous	0,20	0,29	0,55	0,20	0,02	0,06	0,07
Appliances should match to create a coordinated look	0,19	0,44	0,47	0,13	0,36	0,00	-0,14
I prefer certain brands because they are easy to service /repair	0,31	0,03	0,44	0,21	-0,17	0,11	-0,10
Electronic appliances are of a better quality than manual ones	-0,16	0,28	0,10	0,64	0,13	-0,07	0,14
Expensive products are of better quality	0,07	0,30	0,06	0,50	-0,07	0,18	-0,07
Appliances with special finishes are of good quality	0,20	0,14	0,19	0,42	0,08	0,03	0,12
I prefer appliances with electronic controls over manual controls	0,22	0,18	0,12	0,41	0,17	-0,15	0,03
The materials used signify the quality of the appliances	0,21	0,15	0,26	0,33	0,00	-0,02	-0,12
I prefer appliances made of stainless steel / a stainless steel look	0,16	0,20	0,18	0,24	0,57	0,07	0,01
I prefer white appliances, i.e. a white enamel finish	0,09	0,07	0,16	0,02	-0,58	-0,05	0,09
I prefer brand names that are recommended by my friends, family	0,15	0,12	0,06	0,01	0,10	0,60	0,11
I prefer appliances with a good reputation amongst friends, family	0,25	0,22	0,13	0,02	0,00	0,57	0,03
Appliance must be as affordable as possible, i.e. as cheap as possible	0,14	0,05	-0,02	0,00	-0,13	0,13	0,54
Price is important to me, i.e. I decide beforehand what I will pay	0,37	0,13	0,04	0,14	0,05	-0,03	0,40
Cronbach Alpha*	0,85	0,84	0,80	0,65	*	*	*
% Variance explained	0,49	0,21	0,07	0,06	0,06	0,04	0,03
Mean	43,5/50	27,2/40	23,2/30	17,3/25	6,6/10	7,6/10	7,5/10
Std dev	5,9	6,8	4,5	3,7	1,4	1,8	1,8

* Cronbach Alpha coefficients are generally not calculated for factors containing fewer than four items

TABLE 2: OPERATIONALISATION OF THE MEANS CALCULATED FOR THE VARIOUS FACTORS

Factor	Maximum value	Strongly agree	Slightly agree	Undecided	Slightly disagree	Strongly disagree
2: IMPRESSIVENESS	40	≥ 36-40	≥ 28 ≤ 36	≥ 20 ≤ 28	≥ 12 ≤ 20	< 12
3: AESTHETICS	30	≥ 27-30	≥ 21 ≤ 27	≥ 15 ≤ 21	≥ 9 ≤ 15	< 9
5: EXTERIOR FINISHES	10	≥ 8,5-10	≥ 6,5 ≤ 8,5	≥ 5,5 ≤ 6,5	≥ 2,5 ≤ 5,5	< 2,5
6: REPUTATION	10	≥ 8,5-10	≥ 6,5 ≤ 8,5	≥ 5,5 ≤ 6,5	≥ 2,5 ≤ 5,5	< 2,5

TABLE 3: CONSUMERS' CONSIDERATION OF THE IMPRESSIVENESS OF APPLIANCES

Consumer characteristic				
Age	Mean	Std Dev	Group	Sign
18-29 (n = 159)	27,4	7,0		One-Way ANOVA: p = 0,003
30-49 (n = 164)	28,1	6,4		
≥ 50 (n = 86)	25,0	6,7		
			18-29; ≥50 yrs	p = 0,031
			30-49; ≥50 yrs	p = 0,002
Level of education	Mean	Std Dev	Group	Sign
≤ Gr 12 (n = 149)	27,2	7,0		One-Way ANOVA: p = 0,34
Gr 12 + Degr/ Dipl (n = 177)	28,0	6,5		
Post-Gr (n = 97)	25,7	6,7		
			≤ Gr 12; Post Grad	p = 0,028
			Gr 12 + Degr/ Dipl; Post-Grad	p = 0,028

appliances (MHA) ($M_{\text{IMPRESSIVENESS}}: \geq 25,0 - \leq 28,4$; Maximum: 40).

T-tests were performed to investigate possible significant differences in the gender category, and One-Way ANOVAS were applied to seek significant differences amongst consumers across the *age* as well as the *level of education* categories with respect to the *impressiveness* of appliances. A post hoc Bonferroni test confirmed significant differences in terms of the age and level of education categories. Younger consumers and those with higher education levels (post-secondary school) who are theoretically more status prone seemed significantly more concerned about how *impressive* appliances were. Consumers who were 50 years of age or older, were significantly less concerned about the *impressiveness* of appliances than the two younger consumer groups (< 30 years: p = 0,031; 30 to 49 years: p = 0,002). Consumers with postgraduate qualifications also seemed significantly less concerned about the impressiveness of major household appliances than consumers with lower levels of education (p ≤ 0,05). Mehlwana (1999) explains that young aspiring consumers may associate impressive products with a luxurious lifestyle, while the older generation may have a different symbolic attachment that may be based on their more extensive experience in this product category (John, 1999) and their being already more established socially.

According to Castilhos and Rossi (2008), the consumption of goods is a key element in the formation and upholding of social identity in poorer urban consumer groups; owning an appliance may hold more value than specific product characteristics, because consumption of consumer goods not necessarily not significantly influential in terms of consumers' regard for the impressiveness of appliances: One-Way ANOVAS could not confirm a significant difference amongst different income groups' consideration of the *impressiveness* of appliances (p = 0,149), nor was there a significant difference between the responses of *males* and *females* (p = 0,25).

Consumers' consideration of AESTHETIC attributes (Factor 3) No significant differences could be distinguished by means of T-tests for males' versus females' consideration of aesthetic attributes of major household appliances (p = 0,612). Neither could One-Way ANOVAS confirm significant differences among the other demographic subcategories in terms of consumers' consideration of aesthetic attributes (Age: p = 0,205; Monthly household income: p = 0,801; Level of education: p = 0,295). It is however worth mentioning that consumers' consideration of the *aesthetic* features of appliances seemed more pertinent than their regard for the other status-bearing factors ($M_{\text{AESTHETICS}} = > 22,7$, Maximum: 30).

The aesthetic appeal of appliances therefore seems to be of universal importance to all consumers and should not be neglected in product differentiation. Neither should it be under-estimated as a heuristic during consumer decision-making. The aesthetic attributes of an appliance will attract consumers' attention in a store and may win their admiration. This explains findings that consumer satisfaction can derive from simply observing a product, without consideration of its utility (Creusen & Schoormans, 2005).

Consumers' consideration of EXTERIOR FINISHES of appliances (Factor 5)

A general concern about the *exterior finishes* of appliances reflects consumers' attention to design trends. Coherent images seem important in modern kitchen and laundry design and have the potential to sway consumers' product decisions, despite irrelevance in terms of functional utility. Consumers' regard for the *exterior finishes* of appliances during product evaluation – specifically choosing white appliances versus those with a metallic finish – did however not differ significantly across any of the demographic subcategories (Gender: $p = 0,540$; Age: $p = 0,085$; Monthly household income: $p = 0,816$; Level of education: $p = 0,221$). Across the sample, respondents seemed *undecided* or *slightly agreed* that the exterior finishes were important in terms of their product choices (Table 2: $M_{\text{EXTERIOR FINISHES}}: \geq 6,4 \leq 6,8$, Maximum: 10).

Consumers' consideration of the REPUTATION of appliances (Factor 6)

Irrespective of the demographic category and showing no significant differences amongst demographic subcategories, respondents strongly agreed that the reputation of appliances was an important purchase consideration ($M_{\text{REPUTATION}}: \geq 7,4 \leq 7,9$, Maximum: 10). Although the findings of this research confirmed literature that advice from friends and family is generally considered trustworthy, no support could be found that so-called aspiring consumer groups (females, younger, and better educated consumers) would be significantly more concerned about the *reputation* of major household appliances during the pre-purchase evaluation process (Gender: $p = 0,294$; Age: $p = 0,077$; Monthly household income: $p = 0,496$; Level of education: $p = 0,340$). Consumers' reliance on friends and family might be based on dissimilar motivations: low-income consumers might do so to reduce functional and performance risk perception, while consumers in middle-income groups and younger consumers might thus gain "approval" and reduce social and psychological risk perception. This finding could be investigated further through panel discussions.

Summary of results

Considering all the status-related factors, consumers showed a stronger regard for *aesthetic-* and *reputation-*related attributes than for the *impressiveness* and *exterior finishes* of major appliances ($M_{\text{AESTHETICS}} = 7,6 - 7,9$; $M_{\text{REPUTATION}} = 7,4 - 7,9$; $M_{\text{IMPRESSIVENESS}} = 6,3 - 7,2$; $M_{\text{EXTERIOR FINISHES}} = 6,4 - 6,8$). Characteristics that relate to *impressiveness* were however con-

sidered significantly more important for certain age groups and education levels that are associated with aspirational behaviour, i.e. younger consumers and consumers with the highest education levels. Significant differences between gender and amongst different income categories could not be confirmed for attention to the *exterior finishes* of appliances.

This research hence concluded that, in the context of an emerging economy, consumers across all socio-demographic categories seem concerned about certain status-related factors – specifically *aesthetics* and *exterior finishes* – when judging major household appliances. Upward mobility of aspiring consumers may however serve as an encouragement to attend to factors that more explicitly indicate status and social significance, which may explain the significantly stronger concern for the features associated with the *impressiveness* of major appliances by younger and well-educated consumers in this investigation. Confirmation of the pertinence of the *reputation* of appliances for all consumer categories needs to be investigated further, as friends' and families' recommendations could also be useful to reduce risk perception and not necessarily to ensure social significance.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This research report dealt only with the relative importance of status-related factors considering their persuasive influence as heuristics in social contexts in terms of consumers' judgement of major household appliances. This report dealt with four status-bearing factors which were identified through exploratory factor analysis and which may sway consumers' choice of major appliances, i.e. *impressiveness*, *aesthetics*, *exterior finishes* and *reputation*. While consumers seemed to integrate multiple variables that are associated with functionality and performance of major appliances to judge appliances more holistically (Table 1), they were more discerning in respect of status-related factors and distinguished smaller, more specific categories that contained fewer attributes. This suggests a more discerning approach to extrinsic attributes, which concurs with Pham's (1999) identification of three categories that affect a consumer's visual perceptions of a product. It also explains why Black and Baker (1987) suggested that design-related product attributes should be used as "a partner of marketing" rather than a "tool of manufacturing": manufacturers and retailers should be aware of customers' preferences and perceptions. When the extrinsic attributes of a product, e.g. the exterior finishes, are trendy and commendable, they become a competitive weapon (Yamamoto & Lambert, 1994) that secures increased sales. Industrial designers therefore have an on-going task to originate products that would rise to the occasion in consumers' minds as well as in stores and consumers' homes.

Evidence that aspiring consumer groups would be significantly more concerned about status-related factors, could only be confirmed for *age* and *level of education* in terms of features relating to the *impressiveness* of appliances. The findings of this study –

specifically the findings relating to *aesthetics, reputation* and *exterior finishes* – substantiate those of Eastman *et al.* (1999) as well as Castilhos and Rossi (2008), namely that status shopping is not exclusive to higher-income groups and that consumers from all social strata may intentionally buy certain products to acquire status within the limitation of their incomes and social environments. Retailers should take note of this and augment their service offering to address these needs across all socio-economic groups. Consumers' regard for aesthetics confirms a prior study (Erasmus *et al.*, 2005) that concluded that consumers of all ages appreciate "trendy" appliances.

Although a general regard for the *reputation* of appliances may indicate effort to reduce performance risk perception, consumers' concern is worth mentioning. It seems that retail and industry would still benefit from brand building and image enhancement to sway consumers' eventual product choices (Page & Herr, 2002).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was confined to an urban area. According to Heaney *et al.* (2005), urban consumers tend to be more status conscious. That may have contributed to a stronger regard for status-related factors across all demographic subsets of the sample.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings could be investigated further through in-depth panel discussions. It is possible that consumers' regard for certain factors such as *reputation* might reflect an effort to reduce functional and performance risk perception rather than to gain approval from significant others and to reduce social and psychological risk perception.

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