Consumers' expectations of furniture labels during their pre-purchase information search: an explication of proposed furniture labelling specifications

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate consumers' expectations of furniture labels during the pre-purchase information search, in order to propose furniture labels that would serve as a more relevant source of external information during the consumer decision-making process. A mixed-method approach using a two-phase exploratory design was followed. The qualitative phase consisted of semi-structured interviews with experienced sales assistants, while the quantitative phase entailed a questionnaire filled out by consumers during furniture shopping. These results were used to design potential furniture labels during a final phase. Qualitative findings indicated participants' opinions regarding the appearance of and information on specific types of furniture. General information requested to be on furniture labels included price, care instructions, guarantees, warrantees, style and dimensions. Quantitative results showed that the majority of respondents deemed the price, materials used, cleaning instructions, guarantees and warrantees as important information that should appear on furniture labels. This coincided with their pre-purchase search criteria. There was no practically significant difference between consumers' expectations of the information and appearance of different types of furniture labels. Consumers therefore expect all labels to be similar in appearance and to contain general information, apart from product-specific information that would be necessary on different types of furniture, for example leather furniture. Appearance characteristics of furniture labels, such as colour, size and layout, were summarized and potential furniture labels were recommended accordingly. These labels can be used by product developers, marketers and the furniture industry to assist consumers during their pre-purchase information search.

Introduction

South Africa is considered one of the world's largest emerging economies (Selvanathan and Selvanathan, 2004) and consumers' characteristics and behaviour in this country are thus not typical that of consumers in other emerging countries (Du Plessis, 2003, p. 49). The average consumer in South Africa, for example, spends more on furniture than the average consumer in 43 other countries, but they spend less on housing, medical care and recreation (Selvanathan and Selvanathan, 2004). Consumers in emerging economies also have lower levels of product knowledge due to limited product-related consumer socialization (Gothan and Erasmus, 2008), resulting in uninformed consumer behaviour. Product knowledge is an important prerequisite for responsible

decision making and furniture labels may play an important role in increasing this knowledge.

Furniture is expensive and not frequently purchased (Assael, 2004, p. 43) and is therefore perceived as high-risk purchases associated with potential financial losses (Solomon, 2011, p. 346) and uncertainty (Mitchell, 1992). In order to reassure consumers, information should be obtained prior to furniture purchasing. This may involve an extensive decision-making process, entailing problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives before product choice and post purchase evaluation, i.e. (dis)satisfaction (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2010, p. 36). Extensive decisions are more complex and require a comprehensive information search, from both internal sources (memory) and external sources (Hawkins *et al.*, 2007, p. 532). Product labels serve as a

source of external information (Bleda and Valente, 2009). When a consumer fails to get hold of all the relevant information (Kivetz and Simonson, 2000), information search failure is experienced (Mansourian, 2008), which increases the need for retail and industry to provide accurate, appropriate (D'Souza *et al.*, 2006), complete (Kivetz and Simonson, 2000) and informative (Dimara and Skuras, 2005) product information in the store. In a study conducted by Erasmus *et al.* (2002), it was found that consumers actually depend on the in-store environment to acquire all the relevant product information that they need. However, excessive information on product labels (Sonnenberg and Erasmus, 2005) may cause confusion, which negatively impacts on the consumer's final decision (Johnson and Russo, 1984), because a consumer may experience an information overload and may then ignore even some of the crucial bits of information. Three factors to consider during the development of labels are the information, the appearance and the placement of the label on the product.

Literature indicates manufacturing materials (Nicholls and Bumgardner, 2007); country and process of production (Tustin and De Jongh, 2008); brand names (Maqalika-Mokobori, 2005); and practical care information (Sonnenberg and Erasmus, 2005) as compulsory information on various product labels. Thus, the need to make similar information compulsory on furniture labels should be investigated. Furniture labels may also contain information regarding safety standards in order to contribute to consumers' purchase decision and peace of mind, because South African regulations currently exist regarding the safety of the furniture, although none are prescribed for furniture labels.

The visual appearance of labels should also be considered when designing product labels (Dimara and Skuras, 2005), including furniture labels. The first visual stimulus of labels registered is colour (Ambrose and Harris, 2003, p. 166), which might encourage purchases (Funk and Ndubisi, 2006). Imagery as a visual cue should also be considered for furniture labels, because research confirms that pictures on food labels increase consumers' attention (Underwood *et al.*, 2001), conveying an idea, instructions, information or feelings to the consumer (Ambrose and Harris, 2003, p. 127). The placement of the furniture label is another important consideration, as consumers prefer a consistent label positioning to reduce searching for the label on the product in the store (Maqalika-Mokobori, 2005).

Product labels in general have been researched thoroughly in the past, with multiple studies that have specifically focused on the comprehensiveness of various products labels (Kivetz and Simonson, 2000; Grossman *et al.*, 2006). While non-scientific sources mention that consumers demand furniture labels (Cabinet Maker, 2000), there is inadequate scientific evidence to support this demand, nor is there evidence of the existence of such labels. Furthermore, only one South African standard for furniture labels exists, and this monitors the packaging of furniture (ARP 41:2008) (SANS, 2008), rather than prescribing the information on labels. A recent study (in the North West Province) indicated a need among South African consumers for furniture labels (M. Heyns *et al.*, unpublished). The objectives of the present study were, therefore (1) to qualitatively explore what product information consumers frequently request from store assistants prior to furniture purchasing; (2) to qualitatively explore store assis-

tants' opinions regarding important information, the appearance characteristics of furniture labels and the placement of these labels on furniture; (3) to quantitatively determine consumers' expectations of furniture labels regarding the product information on labels, the appearance of labels (colours and pictures), and the placement of labels on furniture; and (4) to make suggestions towards the specifications for furniture labels based on consumers' expectations in order to assist consumers during their pre-purchase information search.

Research method

Research approach and study environment

A mixed-method research approach was followed, using a two-phase exploratory design. A qualitative method was used in phase one, in order to determine the relevant variables for inclusion in the measuring instrument for the second, quantitative. The findings of the quantitative investigation were used to make recommendations for furniture labels in phase three. Data collection during all phases took place in various branches of a major furniture outlet in Gauteng, South Africa. As previous studies showed that consumers are not necessarily bound to stores in their immediate areas (Williams and Hubbard, 2001), a moderately representative sample could be drawn from well-known stores that were centrally located in Gauteng.

Study population and sampling

Different consumers were recruited for each phase of the research (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007:279). During the qualitative phase (objective one and two), three experienced sales assistants from the various stores were recruited through non-probability, purposive sampling with the intention to involve experienced participants (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007:112) who were familiar with questions frequently asked by consumers prior to furniture purchases.

For the second, quantitative phase (objective three), non-probability, accidental sampling was used for data collection based on recommendation of Maree and Pietersen (2007, p. 177). A sample size of 131, which seemed sufficient to estimate the true underlying multinomial proportions of the population was calculated (Angers, 1984) with the assistance of the Statistical Consultation Services (SCS) of the North-West University based on the results of a pilot study.

The inclusion criteria for the second phase were middle- to upper-income class consumers above the lawful age of 18 years, irrespective of gender or population affiliation. They were intercepted in stores while shopping for furniture. As a result of the decrease in South Africans' disposable income in recent years (Whitfield, 2008), mostly moderate- to high-income consumers are in a financial position to purchase new furniture and therefore no effort was wasted to involve lower-income consumers. Age has no significant influence on consumers' choice of furniture (Nicholls and Bumgardner, 2007) and furniture purchase is a joint decision between genders, and not mainly the role of either the man or woman in a relationship (Ndubisi and Koo, 2005), which explains why no discrimination was made in terms of age.

Pilot study

During the pilot study of the first phase, which involved consumers who met all the proposed criteria for participation, the interview schedule was adapted twice, in order to extract the information needed to develop a measuring instrument for the second phase. Results of the second pilot study were used to determine the relevance and reliability of the questionnaire and to determine the sample size for the main study. No changes were necessary and the content and composition of the questionnaire was accepted. All ethical precautions were considered while conducting all phases of this study, which also had to be approved by the Ethics Committee of the North-West University (reference number: NWU–00024–09–S1).

Data collection

The first phase of data collection was done by means of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions that addressed the first and second objectives of the study. Data were collected during August 2009 by the researcher and responses were captured by means of audio recordings and field notes. Data saturation took place after three semi-structured interviews. The second phase of the research was conducted by the researcher during September 2009 by means of a questionnaire, which consisted of, among others, dichotomous and 5-point Likert-type scale questions (1 = not important and 5 = very important). In order to determine whether consumers expect to see different labels on different furniture types, the questionnaire differentiated consumers' expectations of wooden, upholstered and leather furniture. The results of the quantitative investigation were used by a qualified graphic designer to design a potential furniture label (objective four) that acknowledged consumers' expectations.

Data analysis

Data from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed from audio recordings and field notes. Thematic analysis (Gomm, 2004, p. 10) was used to produce intelligible and interpretable data (Kruger *et al.*, 2005, p. 217), by grouping participants' statements into categories and concepts (Rubin and Babbie, 2005, p. 534). These concepts were then used to develop questions for the quantitative phase (questionnaire).

Data analysis of the questionnaire was done in conjunction with the SCS of the North West University, using Predictive Analytics Software Statistics version 18 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Descriptive statistics (percentages and means) were calculated, where after, Cohen's effect sizes were calculated ($d = 0.2$ – small; $d = 0.5$ – medium; $d = 0.8$ – large) (Ellis and Steyn, 2003) to establish whether there was a practically significant deviation between respondents' opinions (Field, 2005, p. 32) regarding information that seemed important for different types of furniture. Cross-tabulation was done to determine the degree of association (Kruger *et al.*, 2005, p. 239) between respondents' expectations of furniture labels and the information searched required prior to furniture purchasing ($\omega = 0.5$ – practically significant) (Cohen, 1969, p. 111).

Trustworthiness, reliability and validity

In order to obtain trustworthiness in phase one, the researcher's involvement was kept to a minimum (Babbie and Mouton, 2001, p. 250) and all participants were selected in the same manner and represented a specific group (Denscombe, 2007, p. 299). The semi-structured interviews were pilot tested and conducted in similar environments, and audio-recorded and transcribed as soon as possible to ensure accurate and complete transcripts (Babbie and Mouton, 2001, p. 277). Unanticipated findings were also considered and investigated further for significance through inclusion in the questionnaire of the second phase. The theoretical background of the study was thoroughly explained in order to make the research understandable and transferable to other studies (Denscombe, 2007, p. 299).

In phase two, reliability was obtained by pilot testing the questionnaire with respondents that met the prerequisites of the study to assess the consistency of the measuring instrument (Denscombe, 2002, p. 101). The internal consistency was satisfactory as the Cronbach's alpha values of all items were greater than 0.7 (Field, 2005, p. 679). Content validity was obtained by testing the measuring instrument during the pilot study to ensure that appropriate language was used (Pietersen and Maree, 2007, p. 217) and that it revealed the correct information. Construct validity was determined by means of exploratory factor analysis with principle component analysis as an extraction method, and varimax with Kaiser Normalization as a rotation method (Field, 2005, p. 644).

Results and discussion

Consumers' frequently-asked questions prior to furniture purchasing and store assistants' opinions regarding furniture labels (Phase 1)

According to participants, consumers enquire about the materials used during the manufacturing of the furniture item ('*Usually they ask what type of wood the item is made of.*'). This information is important for informed decision making (Nicholls and Bumgardner, 2007) as US consumers were found to evaluate furniture based on the finish and design (Brinberg *et al.*, 2007). Findings confirmed that consumers sometimes ask what finishes are used, but not often about the design of the furniture. Yet, consumers who did enquire about the design enquired about the style of the item ('*... you get your contemporary or your classical styles ... so they also ask that*'). The quality of furniture was one of the most prominent aspects consumers enquired about ('*Quality ... and colour. That's about the two biggest things they want to know*'), because they apparently use it as part of their search criteria when evaluating alternative products (Brinberg *et al.*, 2007). Participants indicated that the quality of the furniture item itself and of the materials used for manufacturing ('*... good quality material*') was important.

Sales assistants stated that consumers enquire about guarantees and warrantees offered ('*They usually ask what the guarantee is ...*'), on which they base their choice of store ('*People come to the store because of our warrantees and our guarantees*'). Performance is an aspect often included in general search criteria for furniture (Rousseau, 2003, p. 111) because consumers

might perceive it as a risk when its performance is not satisfactory (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2007, p. 272). Sales assistants, however, indicated that only a few consumers enquire about the performance of furniture ('*Very few people actually come in looking for specific rub counts and stuff*'), and also stated that they only get '*occasional*' or '*odd*' enquiries about cleaning instructions. There were, however, sporadic consumer enquiries regarding the care instructions for hard furnishings in humid climates.

Participants' opinions regarding the information that they regarded important for furniture labels, firstly, indicated that too much information on furniture labels should be avoided, so as not to '*confuse people*'. Furthermore, general information should be present on all furniture and specific information on wooden, upholstered, leather and plastic furniture. Concepts that emerged for all furniture types, except for leather, were dimensions ('*[Dimensions are] something that is actually very important to a lot of our customers . . .*') and the price of the item ('*. . . and then obviously the price*'), while guarantees and warrantees were only mentioned for leather furniture labels ('*. . . what its guarantee and warrantee is because it is leather*'). The general information on all furniture labels also included furniture type ('*What the product is . . .*'), '*type of style*', and care instructions for the item ('*They've got a label that states the washing instructions, so I think it would be cool if it's on a furniture piece as well*').

With reference to the appearance of furniture labels, participants noted that labels should be clearly visible, in either neutral or corporate colours ('*. . . a plain colour such as beige or white that is striking, so that people can see that there's a label . . .*') and that the lettering on labels should be in a plain font ('*. . . plain draws the attention more . . .*') and of readable size ('*. . . big enough that people don't struggle to read*'). Although there were different opinions regarding the size and layout of labels, participants agreed that labels should not be '*too big*' and should contain a '*company name*' or '*logo*'.

Participants' opinions on the type and placement of furniture labels indicated that labels should be placed where consumers could clearly see them ('*. . . next to or underneath it*'; '*. . . as close to the item as possible*'; '*. . . so that they see it together with the price . . .*'), unless the label was fixed (permanent), in which case it should be out of sight ('*. . . under the couch . . .*'; '*. . . under the seating cushion*').

Demographic characteristics of the sample (Phase 2)

The majority of respondents were female (69%) and that 16.8% were aged between 25 and 30 years. These results may possibly be ascribed to women's increased role in decision making and the phenomenon that they often adopt the role of the 'suggester' when purchasing furniture, consistent with consumer behaviour in the UK (Ward and Sturrock, 1998). Female respondents were also more inclined (51%) to a pre-purchase information search than male respondents (20%). Older consumers are less mobile and therefore visit retailers less often (Cummins and MacIntyre, 1999) and they have possibly already furnished their homes as well, in contrast with younger people who are more active in furniture shopping.

Results regarding the income of respondents in the current study coincided with the target market of the store that was involved in this study, i.e. more affluent and upwardly mobile consumers (Kolbe, 2002). The majority of respondents (93.8%) had an average household income of more than R5 386/month (£1 ≈ R12), which falls between living standards measure (LSM) 6 and LSM 10 (higher income groups) (SAARF, 2009). The majority of respondents (51.0%) had an income above R26 001/month, thus representing the middle- to higher-income target population. South African consumers inevitably purchase less furniture when under economic pressure as was the situation of the economy at the time of the study (Selvanathan and Selvanathan, 2004).

Consumers' expectations regarding furniture labels

Principle component analysis extracted five factors for wooden furniture and four similar factors for upholstered and leather

Table 1 Relationship between respondents' search criteria and expectations towards the information on a general furniture label

Attribute	Phi	Effect[a]
Country of origin	0.38	Medium effect
Manufacturer	0.50	Practical significant
Performance	0.51	Practical significant
Guarantee and warrantees	0.25	Medium effect
Design	0.38	Medium effect
Finish	0.31	Medium effect
Materials used	0.21	Medium effect

[a]Small effect: $\omega = 0.1$; medium effect: $\omega = 0.3$; large effect: $\omega = 0.5$ (Cohen, 1969, p. 111).

Table 2 Mean importance that respondents attach to information on different furniture labels (5-point Likert scale[a])

| Attributes[b] | Types of furniture | | | |
	Wood	Upholstery	Leather	Mean
Care instructions for different climates	4.10	4.12	4.17	4.44[b]
Cleaning instructions	4.20	4.52	4.51	4.41[b]
Price	4.37	4.38	4.38	4.39[b]
Guarantee	4.24	4.29	4.40	4.31[b]
Warrantees	4.17	4.26	4.34	4.25[b]
Materials used	4.03	4.36	4.31	4.22[b]
Products to clean with	3.95	4.35	4.24	4.18[b]
Warnings	3.88	4.02	4.09	4.00[b]
Finish	4.02	3.89	4.06	3.99[b]
Performance	3.59	3.68	3.64	3.63
Type of product	3.38	3.78	3.66	3.60
Design	3.44	3.46	3.54	3.48
Manufacturer	2.97	3.17	3.42	3.20
Country of origin	3.08	3.09	3.17	3.12

[a]1 = unimportant; 2 = slightly important; 3 = undecided; 4 = important; 5 = very important.
[b]Attributes recommended to be included in proposed furniture labels.

Figure 1 Label for wooden furniture from the (a) front and (b) back.

furniture based on eigenvalues larger than one (Field, 2005, p. 640), explaining 71.47%, 65.85% and 68.52% of variations respectively. Factor loadings larger than 0.4 were used to extract the attributes for each factor. The factors were related and consequently labelled according to literature regarding consumers' search criteria and expectations of furniture labels. The factors and items in each factor for all furniture types were labelled as *value for money* (price, guarantee and warrantees), *appearance* (design, finish and type of item), *maintenance* (cleaning instructions, products to clean item with, care instructions for different climates and warnings) and *production* (country of origin and name of the manufacturer). Wooden furniture included a fifth factor, namely *construction*, with reference to materials used for production and the performance of the item. These two items, however, loaded as *maintenance* for upholstered furniture, and *appearance* for leather furniture, which

means that consumers perceive the construction as an integral part of the maintenance of these types of furniture.

In order to determine whether respondents might use furniture labels during their pre-purchase information search, their involvement with furniture purchasing was investigated: 74% of the respondents stated that they searched for information prior to furniture purchasing. They mostly searched for information regarding the *quality* (69.5%), *design* (48.9%), *finishes* (46.6%) and *materials* (46.6%) used for furniture, which concur with literature originating from South Africa (Rousseau, 2003, p. 118) and the US (Brinberg *et al.*, 2007). Respondents thus expect to see this information on furniture labels to guide them during their pre-purchase information search.

As expected, respondents did not depend heavily on labels when purchasing furniture, probably because labels seldom occurred on these items (17.6%). The use of furniture labels is,
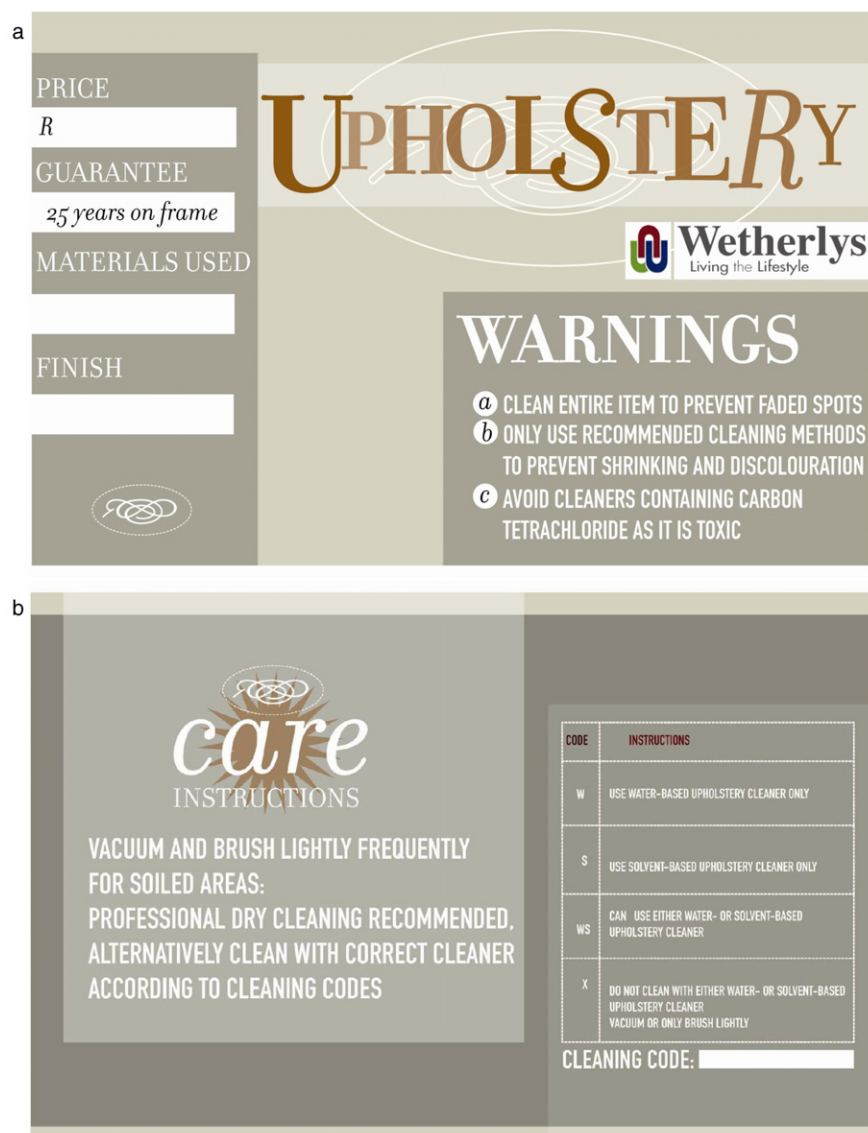
Figure 2 Label for upholstered furniture from the (a) front and (b) back.

however, expected to increase once they become available, because cross-tabulation showed a medium to practically significant relationship between respondents' search criteria for furniture and their expectations of furniture labels (Table 1). Literature also confirms that similar to South African consumers, Australian consumers also use labels of other products during decision making (D'Souza *et al.*, 2006).

Respondents had to distinguish between information that they deemed important to be on labels of different types of furniture. For general furniture labels, the majority reported that *price* (74%), *materials* used (64.9%), *cleaning instructions* (64.1%) as well as *guarantees and warrantees* (63.4%) were important. Contrary to literature indicating that Turkish and US consumers regarded the country of origin as important on product labels (Kucukemiroglu, 1997), respondents in this study did not regard country of origin to be important. A reason for this might be that South African consumers, similar to other non-ethnocentric consumers, have not yet realized the advantages of local furniture

manufacturing (Tustin and De Jongh, 2008). Table 2 summarizes the importance of information that respondents expected to see on different furniture labels that was rated according to a 5-point Likert-type scale, expressed in terms of mean values. Attributes with a mean > 3.9 were considered as important and thus recommended to be included on furniture labels. A comparison of the results of respondents' expectations of wooden, upholstered and leather furniture labels showed only small to medium effect sizes ($d = 0.00–0.43$), which indicated practically no significant relationship between respondents' expectations of the labels of different types of furniture (results not shown). Consequently, the same information (Table 2) and visual/appearance characteristics could be used for all types of furniture labels.

The majority (58%) of respondents selected a hang tag for all furniture types that provided product information during purchasing, but not necessarily during usage. In terms of the appearance of the label, respondents preferred the label to be neutral in colour (48.3%), with the name and logo of the company printed at the top

Figure 3 Label for leather furniture from the (a) front and (b) back.

and the information underneath (54.8%), and with only symbols for care instructions included (54.5%). More than 40% of respondents selected a medium-sized Arial, straight line, bold font for the headings and information, but preferred headings to be in uppercase. Results also showed that 41% of respondents expected the label to be visibly placed on the furniture item, similar to textile labels (Maqalika-Mokobori, 2005, p. 108), with the size depending on the item size (46.3%).

Recommended potential furniture label (Phase 3)

Based on the quantitative results, a single set of guidelines was recommended for all furniture types. Different labels based on product-specific information from the participating store (study location) general pricing labels and store assistants were designed for wooden, upholstered and leather furniture. Similar colours, layout and basic information were used for each. The logos of the

retailer and the North-West University (where research was conducted) were positioned on the labels (Figs 1–3). All labels were designed as hang tags to attract consumers' attention.

Conclusion

Product labels serve as a source of information prior to the purchasing of consumer goods. However, no literature on labels for furniture could be located. The questions consumers frequently ask prior to furniture purchasing (objective one) and store assistants' opinions regarding important information and appearance characteristics of furniture labels (objective two) were explored in phase one of this study. Findings in existing literature showed that consumers enquire about similar information, which also forms part of their search criteria. The opinions of participants in this research coincided with literature that found that consumers value information and appearance characteristics of product labels. Therefore, a parallel can be drawn between consumers' pre-

purchase search criteria and the information expected from furniture labels, such as *materials* and *finishes* used, quality, *guarantees and warrantees*, and the *maintenance* of furniture.

Consumers' expectations regarding furniture labels (objective three) were determined in phase two. Confirming phase one, the majority of respondents also regarded factors in their search criteria as important to be included on furniture labels. Practically no significant differences existed between respondents' expectations of the information on and appearance of different types of furniture labels. Therefore, the same appearance characteristics and attributes of furniture could be used on all types of furniture labels, except for product-specific information.

The final objective was addressed through applying the results of phase two in order to propose a furniture label. It was evident that consumers preferred the appearance of labels not to differ for different furniture types, and that product-specific information should be provided. Three similarly appearing labels were thus designed, each providing information regarding the specific product to which they were attached.

Furniture labels that are designed according to consumers' expectations may result in a situation where consumers are more satisfied with the furniture, because the proposed furniture labels could assist consumers to make informed furniture purchasing decisions, thereby reducing their risk perception and reducing cognitive dissonance. Product developers, marketers, policy makers and the furniture industry could also apply the results of this study to acknowledge consumers' needs for a complete source of pre-purchase information. Furniture labels could be developed to assist consumers during their furniture purchasing and also to establish retailer loyalty, which could ultimately increase sales. In the absence of furniture labels, as is the situation at present, the results could also be applied to train role players in the furniture industry so that they could support and educate consumers during the in-store decision-making process.

Limitations of the study were the relatively small scale and exploratory nature of the research. A larger sample would increase the sample probabilities up to 99% accuracy in terms of the true population probabilities, instead of the current 95%. As a result of the exploratory nature and non-probability sampling used in the study, results cannot be generalized to a wider population. Further research could be performed to test the labels that are proposed in the current study. Consumers' intended use of the labels could be determined and compared with their actual use of the furniture labels. It is also recommended that the current study should be repeated in other provinces in South Africa in order to gain information regarding South African consumers' expectations of furniture labels. Because no scientific literature regarding furniture labels could be located either locally or internationally, the results of the current study could be applied to similar research projects internationally.

Acknowledgements

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