

Consumer Information-seeking for Social Products

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THIS study proposes that marketing communication can be approached within a socio-psychological framework, where market-related information is subject to both internal (cognitive) and external or social influences, specifically reference groups. The concept of information-seeking within this framework implies that the consumer is actively involved in the interchange of market-related information, and that he actively seeks information relevant to his goals in the purchase situation. A broad spectrum of literature on information-seeking is systemized according to the nature and sources of information seeking. From this model, a number of propositions regarding the nature and sources of consumer information-seeking for social products are formulated, which form the basis of the empirical investigation. While the findings of the study point to the pervasive influence of reference groups in information-seeking and consumer behaviour, they also indicate that there is a clear distinction between direct, verbal reference group influence communicated by informal personal sources and indirect, non-verbal reference group influence communicated by formal, non-personal sources. A number of implications for marketers and advertisers are suggested.

1. Introduction and background

Basic psychological concepts have been used as important building blocks for theoretical development of consumer behaviour as it is affected by communication, together with the recognition of a lack of sound theoretical frameworks applicable to marketing communication. In this respect, concepts



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taken from social psychology have been found to be particularly important. These concepts have included social influence (Lazarsfeld, 1969); decision processes (Howard and Sheth, 1969); socialization and social learning (Moschis, 1976; Moschis and Churchill, 1978); personality (Gottlieb, 1969; Horton, 1979); conformity (Venkatesan, 1970); and risk-taking (Cox, 1967a). The integrated nature of marketing communication and consumer behaviour can be more fully developed and understood within a framework of social psychology.

Marketing communication within a social-psychological framework needs to consider three important aspects; first, the internal influences or cognitions

(specifically attitudes) affecting the consumer, which will determine the goals he will select in a specific purchase situation; secondly, the external or social influences affecting the consumer, specifically reference groups which determine the attitudinal posture assumed by the individual and which prescribe consumption norms; and third, segments of individual consumers which share the same specific traits, needs and interests. These three aspects correspond closely to what Ray (1982) has identified as the three levels of marketing communication, viz. the individual, two-person (group) communication and mass-marketing communication.

Within a social-psychological framework communication is often regarded as a synonym for social interaction (Wasson, Sturdivant and McConaughy, 1968). Given that consumer behaviour comprises the specific types of behaviour that are market-related, consumer communication can be defined as an interchange of market-related information (Davis, 1972). This explains the relevance of marketing communication to consumer behaviour, and it highlights the key concept of "information" in this paper.

2. The concept of information-seeking

Defining consumer communication as an interchange of market-related information implies that the consumer takes a great deal of initiative in the communication process by actively acquiring information. The concept of information-seeking sets forth that consumers do not merely respond to marketing communication, but actively seek information in an attempt to satisfy their information needs. The definition of Walters (1978) can then be adapted to define information-seeking as the mental and physical activities undertaken by consumers to seek and provide information on market-related matters. Consumers are highly selective in their use of information; they will seek information relating to their frames of reference, and they will ignore information in which they have no interest.

Many determinants of information-seeking have been documented which may account for the extent and patterns of information search in consumers. Those to which most existing research findings gravitate are individual differences (Cox, 1969; Cacioppo and Petty, 1980); previous products experience (Arndt, 1972; Ross, 1974); types of products (Katona and Mueller, 1955; Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971; Ray, 1982); price (Wells and Tigert, 1971; Olson, 1977; Rousseau, 1984);

message characteristics (Bauer and Cox, 1967; Cox, 1967b; Britt, 1978); medium characteristics (Reeves, Chaffee and Tims, 1980); brain activity during media exposure (Hansen, 1981; Weinstein, 1982); involvement (Moore and Moschis, 1978a; Burnkrant and Sawyer, 1983; Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann, 1983); perceived risk (Cox, 1967a; Cunningham, 1967; Woodside and Delozier, 1976); brand loyalty (Green 1966; Sheth and Venkatesan, 1968); and impulse purchase behaviour (Newman, 1966).

3. Information sources and types of social influence

Communication channels provide the means by which market-related information is disseminated. Such channels perform different functions for the consumer and provide different types of information, given their varying characteristics.

The many classifications of information sources in marketing settings are grouped according to whether the marketer exercises control over the communication channel. Thus Cox (1963) has identified marketer-dominated sources (e.g. advertising, retail stores), consumer-dominated sources (e.g. family and friends) and neutral information sources (e.g. government and independent reports). Based on Howard and Sheth's (1969) classification, Bennett and Kassarian (1972) have substituted the terms marketer-dominated sources and consumer-dominated sources with commercial and noncommercial sources respectively. The classification of information sources in this study is more specific, since it lends itself to a description of the types of influence operative in the case of each source.

Information sources can be classified as either formal or informal sources (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1983). Formal sources can be equated with Cox's (1963) marketer-dominated sources and Bennett and Kassarian's (1972) commercial sources. Informal sources broadly refer to the consumer-dominated sources identified by Cox (1963) and the noncommercial sources specified by Bennett and Kassarian (1972). Each of these two types of sources in turn exist along two dimensions, viz. whether they are personal or nonpersonal. From the resulting classification four categories of information sources can thus be identified: formal nonpersonal sources, formal personal sources, informal personal sources, and informal nonpersonal sources. Schiffman and Kanuk (1983) elaborate on this classification by equating personal and nonpersonal sources with

interpersonal and mass communication respectively.

In addition to these four categories of sources, two types of social influence can be identified which may be operative in information-seeking. These are Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) concepts of informational and normative social influence. Informational social influence is based on the idea that consumers want to make informed decisions. Faced with uncertainty, a consumer will seek information. From the many sources available, those most likely to be accepted will be the sources viewed as most credible. Informational social influence has been operationalised more recently in empirical studies by Park and Lessig (1977), Moore and Moschis (1978a) and Bearden and Etzel (1982). Normative social influence is based on Asch's (1952) concept of utilitarian reference group influence and is reflected in attempts to comply with the wishes of others to achieve certain rewards. The concept of normative social influence has been operationalised in studies by Park and Lessig (1977) and Moore and Moschis (1978a).

3.1 Formal nonpersonal sources

All formal information sources can be identified as part of the marketing mix – product, price, distribution and communication (advertising, personal selling, sales promotion and public relations/publicity). Formal nonpersonal sources thus refer to conventional marketing channels which seem to exclude interpersonal communication. Both informational and normative social influence will operate for formal nonpersonal sources (Moore and Moschis, 1978a). Specifically, formal nonpersonal sources such as the mass media may be perceived as credible where they operate in accord with informal sources. Normative social influence may be operative since consumers may often pay attention to the mass media in order to retrieve information on images conveyed through the use of specific products or brands. Moore and Moschis (1978a) found that print advertisements are perceived as more credible by consumers whose goals in the buying situation are influenced by group norms.

3.2 Formal personal sources

Formal personal sources include representatives of formal organisations such as salespeople or company spokespersons who are compensated in some way or another for persuading consumers to act in the desired way. They may thus include representatives in the retail outlet (e.g. in-store clerks,

managers, shelf packers), salesmen and the like.

Informational social influence has been found to operate here as well (Moore and Moschis, 1978a). Informational social influence, in the sense that it involves seeking information from persons viewed as acknowledged experts, can be expected to be related positively to formal personal source credibility. Normative social influence can be expected to be weaker, since the consumer does not always deliberately consult these sources or consider them as persons whose expectations have to be met.

3.3 Informal personal sources

Informal personal sources refer primarily to social influences, especially reference groups, with whom the consumer comes into contact. In addition, they comprise indirect influences such as social class and culture. However, the consumer does not deliberately consult the latter sources for information, and therefore the present study is concerned mainly with the more direct influences. Several studies have dealt with informal personal communication or have shown that it occurs (e.g. Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Dichter, 1966; Rousseau, 1982).

Both informational and normative social influence are operative here. The former will operate where buyers are dependent on the expert views of others in their purchase decision. Such an "expert" could refer to an opinion leader. Opinion leaders can be distinguished from formal personal sources as they are not usually compensated for influencing the consumer. However, they may coincidentally belong to formal organisations as well. Moore and Moschis (1978a) found that strong correlations exist between informational social influence and opinion leadership. The idea that an opinion leader *informally* influences the actions or attitudes of others implies that opinion leaders may act as a normative social influence as well, since opinion leaders are located in reference groups.

In contradiction to the conception of a vertical opinion leader whose influence emanates from the highest status group and "trickles" down to the lower levels, both King (1969) and Lazarsfeld (1969) constitute that information flows primarily horizontally within social strata. The importance of friends and peers as potential opinion leaders was highlighted more recently in a South African study by Rousseau and Saunders (1985). The term opinion leader as it is used in this paper thus refers to a horizontal opinion leader. A significant relationship between normative social influence and opinion

leadership was established by Moore and Moschis (1978a). Since normative social influence is embedded in wishes to comply with reference groups, it will be strong where information is sought from reference groups as well.

3.4 Informal nonpersonal sources

Informal nonpersonal sources refer to what Cox (1963) has termed "neutral" sources. They include consumer reports from government and research agencies, laboratory results, consumption data based on production and similar statistics, books and articles in newspapers and magazines and the like. Since neutral sources have been defined as information sources which "are more objective in the information they transmit" (Howard and Sheth, 1969:320), they can be expected to act primarily as an informational social influence.

On the basis of the discussion above, the classification of the various information sources and their respective types of influence can be seen in Figure 1 below.

FIGURE 1.1
CLASSIFICATION OF INFORMATION SOURCES AND INFLUENCE TYPES

	Personal	Nonpersonal
Formal	personal selling sales promotion retail stores (store managers, in-store clerks, service personnel) public relations/ publicity <i>Influence type:</i> informational	product (and packaging) sales promotion retail store (point-of-purchase advertising, aisle display materials) public relations/ publicity <i>Influence type:</i> informational/ normative
Informal	reference groups horizontal opinion leaders <i>Influence type:</i> informational/ normative	news stories consumer reports articles laboratory results etc. <i>Influence type:</i> informational

Empirical evidence generally supports the conclusion that formal information sources, particularly advertising, are effective in creating awareness

about a product or brand, while informal information sources are more influential in reinforcing attitudes once they reach the consumer (Engel, Kollat and Blackwell, 1968; Day, 1971). One possible explanation may be that formal information sources vary in the completeness with which they represent the social reality of the consumer (Reeves *et al.*, 1980). Where consumers perceive formal channels as good sources of information about functional and technical aspects of a product, informal sources are important in providing relevant social and psychological information (Cox, 1967a).

Owing to the capacity of informal channels to provide social and psychological information (related to their normative social influence), the research evidence does seem to indicate a greater relative effectiveness of these sources in diverse purchase areas (Katona and Mueller, 1955; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Silk, 1966; Sheth, 1971; Arndt, 1967; Newman and Staelin, 1972). The significance of informal personal sources as prime sources for information-seeking in consumers was highlighted more recently in a South African study on pre-purchase information-seeking by Rousseau (1982).

4. Consumer self-concept and information-seeking

Normative social influence in the case of informal personal sources and formal nonpersonal sources may imply that the consumer self-concept will determine information-seeking, since the self-concept arises out of interaction with reference groups.

While the self has been construed from a multi-dimensional perspective (e.g. Walters, 1978), the most popular type of definition of self-concept assumes that it can be defined in terms of attitudes towards the self. Such attitudes arise through interactions with significant others. The conception of self as member of a group is more important to the individual than other self-conceptions (Kuhn and McPartland, 1957; Kemper, 1960; Douglas, Field and Tarpey, 1967). As the individual forms attitudes toward the group, these attitudes become part of his self-concept.

The form of social interaction which is of significance in marketing communication is interaction which takes place through the consumption of products. For marketing communication, the foregoing assumptions are best summarised in Grubb and Grathwohl's (1969) self-concept theory of consumer behaviour, in which they state that the consumer

behaviour of an individual is directed toward enhancing self-concept through the consumption of goods as symbols. This theory acknowledges the pervasiveness of reference groups, since enhancement of self-concept only occurs when a desired reaction evolves from significant others. Much subsequent research on the self-concept in consumer behaviour has been generated by this theory (e.g. Grubb and Hupp, 1968).

According to Schiffman and Kanuk (1983), consumer information-seeking is an integral part of consumer behaviour. A number of significant theoretical standpoints support the proposition that the self-concept (as it is infused with reference group membership) may determine information-seeking or, stated differently, that information seeking may be found on the level of normative social influences and relations.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) postulates that persons have a drive for self-evaluation. When persons are unsure as to the appropriateness of their opinions or emotional responses, they will seek out others similar to themselves in order to determine which responses they should display in a given situation (e.g. an act of purchase). Previous research has used social comparison theory to explain information-seeking behaviour (Clarke, 1973; Moschis, 1976). In addition, Van Rooyen's (1976) concept of attitude/issue salience is based on Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory and can be used to explain reference behaviour in information-seeking. A "salient" attitude can be described as an attitude still being tested for its feasibility by the individual through engaging in communication with others around him.

Further, Kelman's (1961) concept of "identification" is relevant here.* Identification occurs when a consumer accepts the communication because there is a relationship with the information source which forms part of the consumer's self-concept. Identification is related to value-expressive reference group influence, where the person wishes to create the impression of attachment to the group. Thus identification may be related in turn to Katz's (1970) value-expressive function of attitudes, in which the individual derives satisfaction from expressing attitudes central to his self-concept. Value-expressive reference group influence has been operationalised in a recent study by Bearden and Etzel (1982). A final theoretical standpoint suggests that individuals may seek information to provide a basis for future interpersonal communication (Rees and Paisley, 1967;

Chaffee and Mcleod, 1973; Moore and Moschis, 1978b).

* "Social modelling" theories (e.g. Bandura, Hicks, etc.) may also throw some light on the development of the self-concept.

In addition to these theoretical standpoints, some empirical research suggests that the self-concept may be related to information-seeking. Cox and Bauer (1964) constitute that consumers wanting to purchase a product for social goals will seek information from sources providing knowledge about the social aspects of the product. Moreover, Moore and Moschis (1978a) report that social information is preferred to the extent that consumers have social buying goals. A number of studies on information-seeking have furthermore hypothesised that a related concept, general self-confidence (which is associated with self-evaluation) may encourage product-related communication among reference groups (Cox and Bauer, 1964; Bell, 1967; Locander and Hermann, 1979).

Against this background, one can elaborate on Figure 1 presented earlier. Based on the proposition that there is a theoretical relationship between consumer self-concept and information-seeking, and that normative social influence will be significant for informal personal sources and formal nonpersonal sources, these respective areas in the classification can now be shaded as in Figure 2 below.

While self-concept as it is infused with reference behaviour may have a significant influence on information-seeking behaviour of consumers, this influence is selective in that it does not apply equally to all products. Overton (1981) constitutes that the self-concept of the consumer plays an important role in the selection of products on the basis of social goal orientations. Where products are selected on the basis of social goal orientations, the consumer will be responsive to information that is communicated about the social rather than functional or rational image of the product. Social images are related to the consumer's perception of the type of person who uses the product and what the consumer will express about himself by using the product. Many of the "soft sell" approaches in marketing communication used for products such as perfumes, cigarettes and liquor are deliberately designed to be ambiguous enough so that consumers impose their own associations on the situation. Walters and Paul (1970) state in this respect that a product

FIGURE 2
EXTENSION OF THE CLASSIFICATION OF
INFORMATION SOURCES AND TYPES OF
SOCIAL INFLUENCE

	Personal	Nonpersonal
Formal	personal selling sales promotion retail store (store managers, in-store clerks, service personnel) public relations/ publicity <i>Influence type:</i> informational	product and packaging advertising sales promotion retail store (point of purchase advertising, aisle display materials) public relations publicity <i>Influence type:</i> informational
Informal	reference groups opinion leaders etc. <i>Influence type:</i> informational	news stories consumer reports articles laboratory results etc. <i>Influence type:</i> informational

does not exist in a vacuum, but in various symbolic forms in the cognitive world of the consumer. According to Overton (1981), the "symbolic" and "social" dimensions of products are inseparable.

5. Operationalisation

From what has been said above, the self-concept was operationally defined for this study as reference behaviour. Reference behaviour can be described as a cognitive process in which the evaluation of self takes place by means of referents (Stafford, 1974). The consumer thus defines and evaluates himself in terms of reactions from others. These reactions may be both direct (when they come from members of immediate reference groups, or informal personal sources) or indirect (when they are reflected by formal nonpersonal sources such as advertisements, which may for example associate a product with a specific lifestyle or reinforce a specific stereotype).

6. Aim and propositions of the study

From the foregoing, the aim of this study was to

develop a factorial scale or measuring instrument for the nature and sources of consumer information-seeking for social products. Based on the model presented above and previous theoretical and empirical work in related disciplinary areas, the following propositions were formulated to this end:

1. From the notion in the model that normative social influence will operate where information is sought from informal personal sources and formal nonpersonal sources, the first proposition was formulated, viz. self-concept operates as a determinant of information-seeking.

The two categories of sources which were identified as susceptible to normative social influence provided the basis for the following three propositions.

2. Where self-concept operates as a determinant of information-seeking, reference groups are consulted as information sources. Further empirical support for this proposition is offered by Cox (1967b) and Rousseau (1982).

3. Where self-concept operates as a determinant of information-seeking, horizontal opinion leaders are consulted as information sources. Empirical support for this proposition by King (1969), Lazarsfeld (1969), Moore and Moschis (1978a) and Rousseau and Saunders (1985) was outlined above.

4. Where self-concept operates as a determinant of information-seeking, image advertisements are consulted as information sources. Image advertisements will only reflect rather than directly prescribe norms (Arndt, 1967; Day, 1971). Empirical support for this proposition comes from Moore and Moschis (1978a). Advertisements have been identified as the only formal nonpersonal source susceptible to normative social influence mainly because the available research is confined to the mass media, specifically advertising as an information source.

5. Regarding the nature of information-seeking, it was stated that where self-concept determines information-seeking, social influence will be normative.

7. Method and results

7.1 The measuring instrument

The propositions formulated above provided a starting point for the construction of the measuring instrument. The theory and findings supporting each

proposition were summed up. Using previous measures of information-seeking (e.g. Moore and Moschis, 1978a; 1978b) as a guideline, each of the concepts and findings were rewritten as personalised statements. All statements were written to bear directly on reference behaviour (operationalisation of self-concept). Sixteen items were formulated for each proposition, resulting in a total of eighty items. The final eighty items were then incorporated into a Likert-type questionnaire, in which the response categories were based upon a five-point scale where the intensity varied from "strongly disagree" with 1, to "strongly agree" with 5. In addition to the eighty items, an open question was formulated at the end of the questionnaire. This question reads "what products were you thinking of when you answered this questionnaire?", and was included to establish whether the present study confirms previous research findings on social products. Background information was provided in the instructions that the questionnaire comprised factors which may influence information-seeking only for social products.

7.2 Selection of the sample

It was decided that students be used as respondents as students represent a valid consumer segment. Two male and two female residences at Rand Afrikaans University were chosen, in order to rule out the effects of selection problems. A stratified random sample of 250 students was drawn from a total population of 989 students in the four residences. Testing took place simultaneously in all four residences at the beginning of the second semester.

The initial response was approximately 63 per cent (158 respondents). Of the 158 initial questionnaires eight were spoilt, as they had been incorrectly filled in. The remaining 150 questionnaires (60 percent response) were all used.

7.3 Factorial structure of consumer information-seeking for social products and construction of the response scales

The eighty items used to determine social information seeking were firstly intercorrelated. A principal component analysis (PCA) of the 80 × 80 matrix of correlations was carried out to reduce the items to a smaller number of underlying dimensions (as determined by Eigen values > 1 000). With the number of factors specified, a principal factor analysis (PFA) on the 80 × 80 component correlation matrix was conducted.

Secondly, the clusters of items yielded by the fac-

tor analysis were meaningfully interpreted. Subscores for each respondent were computed (using varimax rotation) for each meaningful cluster of items and intercorrelated. A principal component analysis was performed on the derived correlation matrix. The number of factors was subsequently determined and a second-order factor analysis (using direct oblimin rotation) was carried out. The items were then divided into as many clusters as there were second-order factors, and separate item analyses were conducted on each cluster of items to form response scales with acceptable reliabilities.

7.4 Working hypotheses

Two hypotheses were set up for research:

1. The first-order factor analysis reduces the great number of items to a smaller number of underlying dimensions.
2. The second-order factor analysis reduces the first-order factors with common dimensions to a smaller number of factors.

7.5 Results

7.5.1 First-order factor analysis

The principal component analysis yielded 23 factors (specified by Eigen values > 1 000). From this the number of factors was specified and the principal factor analysis was conducted. Of the 23 factors which were extracted, the last 10 factors, with the exception of factor 18, had only one significant loading each. The first 13 factors, representative of 74% of the total variance, were analysed. A summary of the first-order factor analysis can be seen in Table 1.

From the first-order factor analysis hypothesis 1 was largely confirmed, as the eighty items were reduced to a smaller number of common dimensions. These were: information-seeking from others (factors 2, 3, 6, 8, 12, 13); general information-seeking (factors 4, 11); communication of social information through consumption (factors 5, 7); product imagery (factor 10); and advertisement imagery/ advertisements as information sources (factor 9).

7.5.2 Second-order factor analysis

The principal component analysis on the intercorrelated subscores for the thirteen clusters of items yielded three factors. A second-order factor analysis (using direct oblimin rotation) was subsequently carried out (specified by Eigen values > 1 000). The three factors represented 90,8% of the total variance. A summary of the second-order factor analysis can be seen in Table 2 below.

TABLE 1
FIRST – ORDER FACTOR ANALYSIS

Factor	Factor name	Eigen value	Proportion of total variance %	Items	Item type
1	Product and advertisement imagery	15,340	27,6	6/7/13/16/17/25 39/50/54/55/66 75/76	My purchase of specific products or brands is often influenced by stereotypic images associated with the products or brands
2	Information-seeking from others	6,746	12,1	53/62/63/64/65 71/72/78	Where the use of a products or brand reflects my lifestyle, I will consult others knowledgeable on the product or brand prior to purchase about whether the product suits me
3	Information-seeking from others	3,162	5,7	10/12/22/34/57 61/73/74	After I have seen advertisements for a product, I will first consult others (e.g. friends, family, fellow workers) familiar with the relevant product area before I decide to buy it
4	General information-seeking	2,254	4,1	31/40/41/46	If the purchase of a product has great personal relevance for me, I will acquire more information about the product prior to purchase
5	Communication of social information through consumption	2,077	3,7	19/20/26/27	I often buy products or brands which reflect my lifestyle
6	Information-seeking from others	1,771	3,2	23/30	I often take others (e.g. friends, family) to the store with me to assist me in my purchase decision
7	Communication of social information through consumption	1,694	3,0	33/37	Some of the products I buy reflect the ways in which I think of myself

8	Information-seeking from others	1,650	3,0	4/9/21/52	Where my brand preferences are similar to those of my friends and family, I will compare my opinion of a brand with the opinions of my friends and family before I buy the brand
9	Advertisement imagery/ advertisements as information sources	1,484	2,7	29/44	Advertisements for specific products which reflect the ways in which I and others similar to me feel about life often influence my decision to buy the product
10	Product imagery	1,313	2,4	14/38/69/80	Buying a product which is regarded as popular or fashionable often makes me look good in front of others
11	General information-seeking	1,301	2,3	2/36	I often want to buy a specific product but then hesitate until I have acquired more information about whether the product suits me
12	Information-seeking from others	1,214	2,2	43/47/48	If I am unsure in my decision to purchase a product, I will often consult others as to the appropriateness of my choice before I buy the product
13	Information-seeking from others	1,129	2,0	11/60	I often acquire more information about a product before purchase by engaging in informal product-related conversations with my friends

TABLE 2
SECOND-ORDER FACTOR ANALYSIS

Factor	Factor name	Eigen value	Proportion of total variance %	First-order factors
I	Information-seeking from others	4,169	63,5	2/3/4/6 8/11/12/13
II	Product and advertisement imagery	1,113	17,0	1/9/10
III	Product imagery	0,679	10,3	5/7

Factor I represents 63,5% of the total variance, and is clearly indicative of information-seeking from others, whether from reference groups or horizontal opinion leaders. Item groups 4 and 11 (general information-seeking) can be meaningfully interpreted with the rest of the cluster as they emphasize information-seeking in a social context.

Factor II represents 17% of the total variance. Communication of social information ("imagery") through products and advertisements is the underlying dimension, and it draws strongly on information-seeking and product selection on the basis of social goal orientations in consumers.

Factor III comprises 10,3% of the total variance. Both first-order factors in factor III were originally named "communication of social information through consumption". However, a second glance at this factor revealed that it almost exclusively stresses product imagery. A significant result is therefore revealed by this third factor which was not obvious from the input data. From the second-order factor analysis hypothesis 2 has essentially been confirmed as the first-order factors with common dimensions had been reduced to a smaller number of second-order factors.

7.5.3 Item analysis

The cluster of items of the second-order factor I (information seeking from others) were placed into a grouping termed "batch 1"; the items of the second-order factor II (product and advertisement imagery) were placed into a grouping termed "batch 2"; and the items resorting in factor III (product imagery) were placed into a grouping termed "batch 3". An item analysis of the item in each batch was subsequently carried out. The criterion was set at 0,30 with an increment step of 0,02 and a maximum of ten

iterations.

The Kuder-Richardson reliability coefficient for the first two batches was particularly high (0,907 after 6 iterations for batch 1, and 0,876 after 9 iterations for batch 2). The loss of items (three items in batch 1, and two items in batch 2) is appreciated, since they were mostly items stated ambiguously or containing more than one thought. The Kuder-Richardson reliability coefficient for batch 3 after 10 iterations remained unchanged (0,777) with the loss of no items. This score is reasonably high when one takes into account that the third batch contained only six items. From the item analysis reliable response scales for the measurement of social information-seeking were thus derived. Fifty-one of the initial 80 items were retained.

7.5.4 Products with high frequencies

The final part of the method was exploratory and consisted of a tabulation of the frequencies at which certain products were mentioned in response to the last question. The products perceived as social products corresponded closely to classifications of social products in previous research. Products named most frequently by respondents were clothes (79%), cosmetics (38%) and jewellery (34%).

8. Discussion of results

A significant feature of the results of the factor analysis was that only first-order factors with common dimensions were reduced to respective second-order factors. The ordering of the three underlying dimensions in this way adds to the interpretability of the findings.

Regarding pre-purchase information-seeking from others, an important pattern revealed by both the relevant first-order and second-order factors is that

information-seeking from reference groups and from horizontal opinion leaders were ordered under common factors. This seems to support the notion stated earlier that opinion leaders per definition are located in reference groups, and it supports previous findings by King (1969), Lazarsfeld (1969) and, more recently, Moore and Moschis (1978a) and Rousseau and Saunders (1985). On a broader scale, the idea of a "horizontal" rather than "vertical" opinion leader seems to endorse the conception of an active mass communication audience rather than the presupposition of a linear flow of communication to consumers.

"Product and advertisement imagery" (factor II) and "product imagery" (factor III) both draw strongly on prepurchase information-seeking and product selection on the basis of social goal orientations in consumers, which presupposes that the self-concept plays a pivotal role in consumer behaviour (Overton, 1981). It moreover lends support to Grubb and Grathwohl's (1969) self-concept model outlined earlier. Further, product imagery suggests that products are perceived as symbolic by consumers. A social consumer orientation implies that per definition "social" products are perceived as symbolic by consumers (Overton, 1981).

The dimensions revealed in factors II and III moreover emphasize the significance of indirect reference group influence, which was discussed under point 5 above. One can elaborate on this by stating that the findings of the present study seem to indicate a two-dimensional concept of social information-seeking. The factors reveal a clear distinction between direct reference group influence communicated by informal personal sources (reference groups and horizontal opinion leaders) and indirect, nonverbal reference group influence communicated by formal nonpersonal sources (products and advertisements). The empirical findings closely reflect the model of information-seeking and social influence types formulated in this paper, where informal personal and formal nonpersonal sources were shown to be strongly subject to normative social influence.

The reliability of the theoretical construct was essentially confirmed with the item analyses.

With respect to the final part of the method, the products mentioned most frequently as social products corresponded closely to classifications of social products in previous research (Overton, 1981; Vaughn, 1986). Broadly speaking, products mostly classified as rational products were mentioned at a lower frequency than social products.

9. Implications for marketers and advertisers

The following implications of the findings for marketers and advertisers are suggested:

1. Following the guidelines suggested by Corder (1976), Puth (1979) and Jooste (1985), marketers should assess the possibility of using self-concept as a basis for marketing strategy, specifically marketing segmentation and product positioning. Consumers could be segmented into homogeneous self-concept groups, and brands should be positioned so that they are perceived as possessing attributes consistent with self-concept.
2. Marketers should focus on the social products consumers buy and perceptions of these products, in order to develop commonly understood symbolic meanings for products which feature in each element of the marketing mix during a marketing communication campaign.
3. Advertisers should stimulate opinion leadership and favourable word-of-mouth communication about products in order to support image advertisements and brand names.
4. Where self-concept through reference group influence is operative, advertisers should stress the types of people who buy the product in their campaign, reinforcing where possible existing stereotypes of users. On the other hand, where products are not associated with self-concept, advertisers should stress more rational qualities such as price, product attributes and advantages over competitor's products.

10. Conclusion

The argument may be put forward that the far-reaching influence of reference groups is intuitively known to marketing communication practitioners. However, the two-dimensional concept of social information-seeking which emerged in the present study shows that there is a definite distinction between direct and indirect reference group influence, each operating through different sources. This distinction offers some clarity to the vagueness surrounding the concept of social information and the distinction between social and rational information.

Moreover, previous literature on information-seeking in consumer behaviour and related disciplinary fields has been systemized into a coherent framework, in which the nature and sources of information-

seeking are clearly identified. This model forms the basis of a theoretical and empirical relationship between consumer self-concept and information-seeking.

The pervasive influence of reference groups in information-seeking and consumer behaviour seems to indicate that the study of marketing communication within a social-psychological framework is justified. Specifically, it suggests that standpoints in communication theory such as the uses and gratifications approach are as applicable in consumer behaviour and marketing communication as they are in more "traditional" areas of communication research.

11. Directions for future research

In order to alleviate the shortcomings of the present

study, the following suggestions can be made with respect to future research:

- Application of the derived scale to a sample of representative consumers, in order to determine firstly which of the dimensions identified in the present study is most significant for various social products and various market segments; and secondly to establish whether scores obtained are higher for social than for rational products.
- The frequency and intensity of information-seeking for social products, as well as factors which may account for variations in the amount of search.
- The effectiveness of information source usage as a basis for market segmentation (e.g. Westbrook and Fornell, 1979).

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