

# The decision-making processes of visually impaired consumers in an apparel retail environment.

Aubrey RAMATLA & Anne MASTAMET-MASON

*Tshwane University of Technology*

## Abstract

*One of the most severe disabilities known to man is the loss of sight, as it deprives the individual of the primary sense used to acquire information and knowledge about their direct environment. Visual impairment limits effective decision making as it severs the individual's essential involvement in society. Such individuals have restricted mobility and are mostly dependent on other people and as a result their ability to make decisions, and develop a sense of purchasing orientation is hampered. This research aimed at exploring the shopping experiences of visually impaired consumers in regards to clothing prices, colour choices, fibre content and the feel or hand of the fabric used for the garment. The study used qualitative research approach whereby a group of visually impaired consumers were interviewed regarding their shopping experiences in a retail environment. Following the gathering of this information, a decision making process is developed to aid the retailers and marketers in catering adequately for the blind consumers.*

**Keywords:** *decision making, visually impaired and apparel retail environment*

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## Introduction and Background

The physical prevalence of fragilities refers to biological aspects of disability. Disability has a distinctive influence on an individual's ability to do certain actions. The damage of eyesight is one of the greatest severe disabilities well-known to human beings. Loss of sight denies an individual one of the major senses through which to obtain understanding about the world and immediate environment surrounding one. Visually impaired persons are limited in terms of freedom of movement and lack of understanding communications which are necessary for full participation in the society (Sauerburger, 1993: vii; Kaufman-Scarborough, 2001).

Visually impaired persons cannot comprehend written communications at the same level with people who have their complete sense of sight, hence their greater dependence upon others. People who are visually impaired and totally blind do not have direct access to the printed material/words, nor can they directly experience such things as distant scenery, paintings, or objects (Scott, 1991:5). Kaufman-Scarborough (2001) observes that visually impaired consumers are challenged in their abilities to access market information and therefore they cannot perceive and process certain information in the way that is traditionally expected. For example, people deprived of visual stimuli rely on certain point of references such as feeling the surface properties of items, recognising subtle smells or sounds of certain things to provide a clue of what to expect (Ceranka & Niedzwiecki, 2007). Marketers of products are therefore encouraged to make these points of references easily available to the visually challenged consumers.

Visual impairment is not confined to medical attention only, but it is also a learned social role which is acquired through an ordinary process of social learning. Scott (1969: 14) report that immediate social interaction with sighted people, individuals learn behaviour and attitudes associated with visual impairment. The way that clothing swing tags and labels are presented to visually impaired consumers can either make

them more alienated from the society if information given on the swing tags and labels are not done effectively.

### Consumers' Decision Making Processes

Decision making is a set of cognitive processes, which interprets stimuli and organises thoughts and ideas (Newman & Cullen, 2002:134). Consumer decision making is depicted as multi-staged recognition before initiating a progression of actions to reach a conclusion of satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Harrel, 1990:740; Cox, 1967). As a point of departure on decision making processes, the traditional 5 stage model formulated from a normal sighted consumer (Figure 1) is used. The five stages (Figure 1) of a normal sighted consumer consist of Problem acknowledgment or recognition, Information exploration or processing, Assessment of alternatives, the response/purchasing decision, Repeat purchases and Post buying assessment (Shibury, Quick and Westerbeek, 2003:39-39; Cant *et al.*, 2009:193-204).

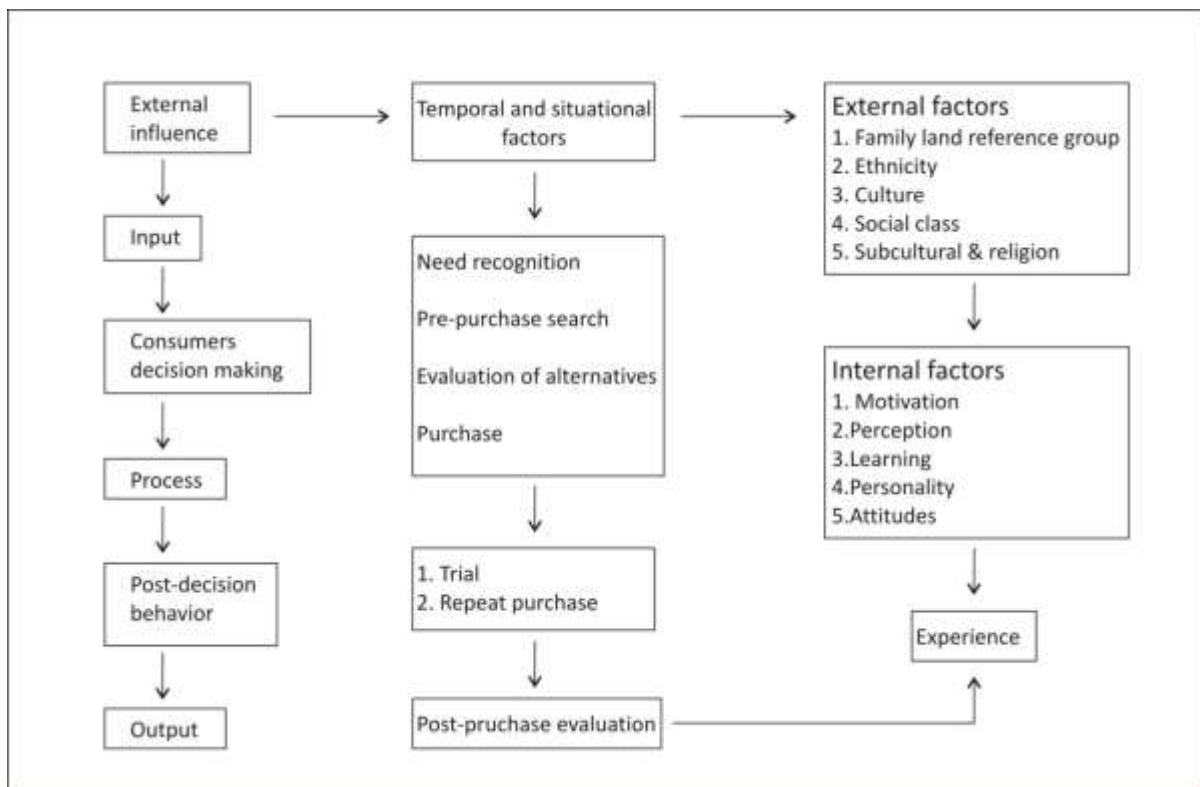


Figure 1: A logic format of sighted consumer decision making (Source: Quick & Westerbeek, 2003:38-39)

#### Problem acknowledgment:

This stage entails recognizing a problem, which arises when consumers recognize the need to change the existing state of affairs to conform to the desired or ideal state (Cant *et al.*, 2009:195). For example when an individual is obliged to replace a worn out garment, a problem exists in form of desire to replace it with a new one. Problem recognition is predominantly a perceptual phenomenon whereby the difference between the existing and the desired state of affairs triggers a state of motivated behaviour. The result is the development of a spectrum of mental activities and altitudinal reaction which is referred to as “cognitive process”. Problem acknowledgement for visually impaired consumer can be viewed differently due to lack of vision. If a garment for example is faded, visually impaired consumers will not be able to notice the problem; instead they rely on other people to inform them about the condition of the colours. However, visually impaired consumer will rely on his or her sense of touch, or tactile ability to feel the worn out texture or part of a garment in addition to what friends or relatives notice as a problem. An occasion, function or activities requiring a new garment could

also be viewed as a problem acknowledgment. It can be argued therefore, that visually impaired consumers will continue to experience challenges in identifying needs for new garment because they may not notice what is happening with existing inventories.

### **Information Search**

Information exploration stage involves searching for and processing information. Once consumers recognize problems, they begin to look for information about a product to be bought (Cant *et al.*, 2009:197; du Plessis & Rousseau, 2007:263). This information is sought and can be discovered by a sighted consumer in a wide scope that can be formal through electronic and print media as well as other informal means such as associates, family members and friends (Beech & Chadwick, 2007:89

The process of consumer decision making will depend on individual consumers' level of involvement in that process. The extent of the involvement is determined by the extent at which a consumer feels a product will yield results that they value. The participation process requires a motivational state of arousal that a person experiences about a purchase and includes both feelings and thoughts (Wilkie, 1990:80). It implies that the product(s) is important to consumers' self-identities and that can bring strong attitudes and preferences to the surface. In reference to visually impaired consumers information about a product is likely to be obtained from associates, family members and friends. This therefore denies visually impaired consumers a chance to independently search for information.

### **Assessment of alternatives**

Evaluative criteria are the features or benefits a consumer looks in replying the direction of a particular type of problem (Beech & Chadwick, 2007:89-90). Consumers use different evaluation criteria when evaluating products and stores, and may change criteria in response to the situation or particular environment (Cant *et al.*, 2009:20; du Plessis & Rousseau, 2007:265). Before purchasing any apparel item, a consumer might be concerned with, style, colour, cost, size, garment functionality and durability. The criteria for buying a winter jacket, for example, will include performance (thermal characteristics), durability, appearance and price - all these evaluative criteria require five common sense. The primary ingredients for enduring involvement are the products importance to the self-image of a consumer, on-going interests in the product's emotional appeal and its badge value to the consumer's reference groups (Assael, 1995:14). Visually impaired consumer therefore will be forced to rely on opinion leaders rather than their own favourable and positive attitudes (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004: 45).

### **The purchasing decision**

Consumer decision is the outcome of evaluation and involves mental process of selecting the most suitable alternative from a set of options that a consumer has generated. Consumers generally must select outlets as well as products. Decisions can be made by selecting an outlet first and then an item second or vice versa (Cant *et al.*, 2009:202). Unfortunately for visually impaired consumer, such variables as point-of-purchase exhibit, price reductions, store design, store ambiance, sales personnel and brand or product stock outs cannot be seen due to lack of vision.

### **Repeat purchases and post buying assessment**

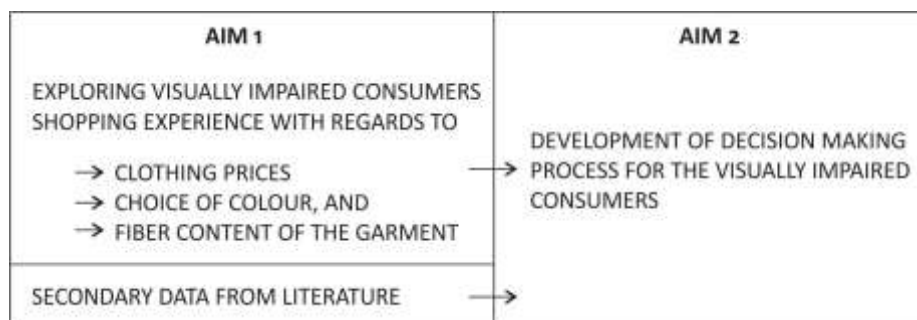
The reason taking decision about a product is the perception of a difference between what is owned or in possession and what is needed. Consumers' buy certain products in order to fulfil their needs and seek greater

satisfaction (Cant *et al.*, 2009:202). Following some purchase, consumers experience doubts or anxiety about the wisdom of the purchase, and this is referred to as post purchase dissonance. Evaluation of the performance of the product in relation to set criteria is done once it has been bought (Beech & Chadwick, 2007:90). The post buying phase involves different forms of psychological processes that a consumer can experience after buying a product. These processes include:

- Post – buying learning whereby the consumer discovers something about the product and stores the new knowledge in their long term memory that could be used in future decision making (Wilkie, 1990:80; du Plessis & Rousseau, 2007:268).
- Post – buying dissatisfaction relates to a negative assessment. Consumers experience dissatisfaction when the outcome does not match their expectations or when they feel that the product bought falls short in noteworthy ways (Beech & Chadwick, 2007:90 -91). When consumers realize that an alternative would have been more attractive and fulfilling, they tend to be more dissatisfied with the product they chose (Sheth, Mittal & Newman, 1999).

Consumer develops certain expectations about the ability of the product to fulfill the instrumental and symbolic needs and these also apply to visually impaired consumer. Better perceptive approach of product information tends to lead to greater consumer confidence in purchase decision (Wendler, 1983). One of the attributes that consumer associates with are swing tickets, size and care labels information as an apparel product quality level (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995a, b; Davis, 1987; Shin, 2000), and this is a significant step in a post purchase process to assess the needs for visually impaired consumer in this regard. Visually impaired consumers must be empowered and educated to enable them interpreting the meaning of swing tickets' information such as price, fabric content, and colour. Besides, size and care labels need to be presented on signs or text that is understandable to the visually impaired consumers. Such considerate of the information provided on swing tickets, size and care labels will help them to select and care for their apparel properly. Informative swing tickets, size and care instruction label that is understood by visually impaired consumers should increase their confidence in their capability to choose and care for apparel items and in turn must reduce their perceptions of risk relating to purchase items (Moore et al, 2001; Swinker *et al*, 1999).

The aim of this study was therefore to explore consumers' shopping experiences with regards to Clothing prices, Choice of colour and Fibre content of the garment. This aim in addition to existing decision making theories was intended to aid the development of a decision making process for the visually impaired consumers. Outlined in Figure 2, shows how the objectives were interrelated for the purpose directing research methods used in this study and ultimately achieving a decision making tool.



**Figure 2: Research framework for this study**

## Methodology

In order to comprehend the aim of this study, this research has been conducted from a phenomenological qualitative approach with a descriptive exploratory nature. The focus was on visually impaired consumers' life experiences in a clothing retail environment context. The qualitative research paradigm allows the study to be relevant on a phenomenological approach as it is the most probable paradigm to work in the exploration. In this view, qualitative paradigm enabled the researcher to increase an insider perspective of the participants as suggested by Babbie and Mouton (2001:217). According to De Vos (2005:351) qualitative research methodology allows for the accumulation of information-rich research.

The sample of this study was purposefully drawn from North West (Ga-Rankuwa) province of South Africa. Most of these visually impaired consumers are employed at A Re Itereleng Trust and Workshop for the Blind and they are approximately 80 in total (according to the director of Itereleng School for the Blind). Due to qualitative nature of this study, only 30 (five focus groups comprised of six people) participated in this study. All the participants were visually challenged mature females and males between ages 20 and 60 and were able to read brailled texts. Data was collected according to the framework given (Figure 1), first Aim1 data was collected to aid in the development of decision making process (Aim 2) and thereafter information gathered from Aim 1, was used together with secondary information from the literature (Section 2) of this paper to come up with decision making process appropriate for the visually impaired consumer (Figure 3) given under results in this paper. Focus Group interviews were carefully planned group with discussions designed to obtain participant's experiences while shopping for clothing. The interviews were interactive and were carried with five separate groups of six people at different times. The recommended number of people per group range from 6 to 10 as per Goss and Leinbach (1996). Data was captured by means of a tape recorder. This method ensured that nothing was lost during the interviewing sessions. The moderator who is also the researcher and the research assistant also took field notes during discussions session to capture the most important aspects of each question.

At least five focus groups were involved or the discussions proceeded until the point of saturation was met. Content analyses of interview discussions were categorized into concepts and sub-concepts for the purposes of identifying subtle underlying themes. Transcription of raw data included word-for-word quotations of participants' characteristics, enthusiasm, body language and overall mood during the interview. This was done by editing and encoding the individual focus group responses of data to eliminate errors and then placed into Braille literacy, Blindness history, Retail type, Retail frequency and Accompaniment categories. Triangulation, credibility and transferability checks as well as dependability and confirm-ability audits were used to ensure trustworthiness. The researcher had a prolonged contact with participants who were allowed to discuss their experiences at their natural environments, hence assurance of trustworthiness and neutrality of the findings of this study. Ethical approval for this study was granted by Tshwane University of Technology Research Ethics Committee., while consent and authorization were received from the Department of Social Development and the Itereleng Trust and Workshop for the Blind where the study took place.

## **RESULTS**

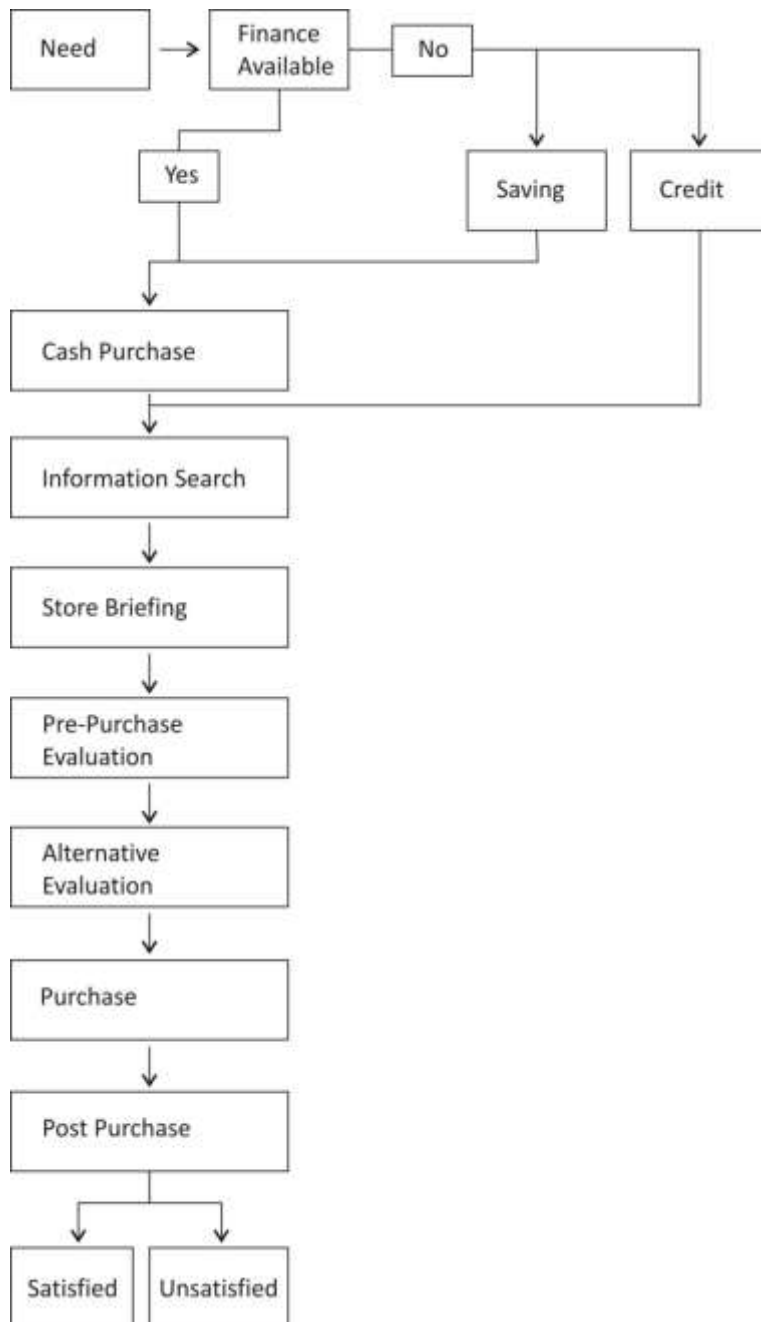
The aim of this study was to develop a decision making process of the visually impaired consumers. In order to achieve this aim, focus groups of visually impaired consumers were interviewed to give account of their shopping experiences in a clothing retail environment. The results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Outcome of the focus group’s discussion during the interview**

DATA REFLECTING RESPONDENTS’ DECISIONS MAKING PROCESSES			
THEME	CATEGORY	CONCEPT	PARTICIPANTS’ RESPONSE
DECISION MAKING PROCESSES	Need recognition	Maintenance Limitation , Credit Access, Occasion and Body Change	<p>“My pants get worn out in the bottom part and between the thighs. After several attempts to patch the pants ...”</p> <p>“I have a bit of credit to take new stuff...”</p> <p>“I buy when I attend a wedding...”</p> <p>“I buy clothes when I get frustrated by my growing belly.”</p>
	Information search	Family Accompaniment Assistance and Store Orientation	<p>“I would ask my daughter to accompany me to the reasonably affordable store. As my daughter loves to do window shopping , most of specials and sales get the information from her”</p> <p>“...We usually ask the assistance to explain how the store section is so that we don’t get lost ...”</p>
	Pre - purchase alternatives	Item location	<p>“When we have finally got to the right place we then search for the actual shoe style that I like and try to fit it.”</p>
	Evaluation of alternatives	Quality, Functionality, Price, and Former Experience	<p>“...Strength of the material , the practicality of the apparel, ...”</p> <p>“I normally compare prices...”</p> <p>“The shops where I am treated like a customer who is going to buy and not a beggar are where I go...”</p>
	Purchase decision	Store Service, Pricing Fabric Characteristics and Aesthetics	<p>“When the fabric feel right according to what I want...”</p> <p>“...I go back and buy due to good service...”</p> <p>“...Then I buy if the price is what is promised...”</p> <p>“I ask my daughter, if it looks nice on me”</p>
	Purchase	Fit, Sensory Tactile, Affordability, Colour and Accompaniment Persuasion	<p>“When the size is okay.”</p> <p>“When the fabric quality is satisfactory according to what I can feel when I touch the apparel.”</p> <p>“When the item is within a budget...”</p> <p>“The chosen colour does suit my skin colour...”</p> <p>“My daughter would persuade me to buy it...”</p>
	Post purchase evaluation	Approval and Disapproval	<p>“I am normally unhappy with the garments after using it...”</p> <p>“After wearing the item I normally get unsatisfied ...”</p> <p>“I am normally satisfied with the clothes after using it”</p>

As shown in Table 1, the various, themes, categories, and concepts are illustrated according to the 5 focus group responses when questioned about how they make their decisions from their state of need to their next purchase, there were many stages that overlaps with the traditional model (Figure 1), however, there are unique processes that emerged from the visually impaired group. The most common attributes that emerged from all the five focus groups was then regrouped to evaluate their similarities, differences and new knowledge that developed, this eventually led to the VICDP being the nine stage process given in Figure 3.

As visually impaired consumers move through these stages, marketers have the chance to respond to and influence behavior with effective communication and marketing plans that address each of these stages and the variables that affect every phase.



**Figure 3: A decision making process for visually impaired consumer**

The visually impaired consumer decision process (VICDP) model offers a chronological order of how blind consumers find their way in a world of consumption decision. The VICDP is adapted from seven step decision making model from Blackwell *et al.* (2006:75)

## Conclusion

Although people with disabilities are part of the low income group, the study attempts to enlighten marketers about the significant proportion of the South African visually impaired consumers market. Additionally the study is expected to assist consumer behavior researcher to compare the traditional sighted consumer decision making process with that of the visually impaired consumers. The findings offer insight into a unique decision making processes of the blind. The visually impaired consumer decision process (VICDP) model as displayed in figure 3 shows the difference between sighted consumers process in figure 1 as adapted from the generic decision making model. The VICDP is adapted from seven step decision making model from Blackwell *et al.* (2006:75).

The results reveal that visually impaired consumers face challenges when participating in the apparel retail environment. To assist consumers at the checkout counter, it is important that the cashiers are trained by the retailer to do so to the best of their abilities.

Furthermore the study research into the retail area practice of visually impaired consumers in South Africa is nonexistent or lack thereof suggest that existing policies and practices regarding the making signs, purchase are based on the behavior of sighted consumers.

To make known the specific disability related shopping challenges faced by visually impaired consumers in South Africa, this study suggest that more work has to be done in order to address these challenges in the teaching of the retail management and / or consumers behavior for people with disability. The aim is to give the public policy makers the opportunity to empower the significant portion of the population, while fashion institutions play their role of community engagement as they teach issues affecting the visually impaired consumers.

Additionally architecture, interior and industrial design education should encourage improvement in the life of visually impaired persons in South Africa, by designing any product that empower the visually impaired group which can help advance their life styles and functionality within any exterior and interior retail environment.

Finally, the study has shown that unlike sighted consumers who are credited with capacity to receive and handle considerable quantities of information, blind consumers on the contrary undertake extensive pre-purchase searches and display a high involvement purchases as well as evaluation.

The use of qualitative data collection methods such as focus group interviews and quantitative demographic statistics contributed significantly to the formulation of VICDP. This will lobby to the positive action by the government, retailers, consumer rights activists and the association for the blind among others.

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