

Understanding The Consumer MMP-5-UTC

Student ID: 4215905

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Seminar tutor: Dr. Emily Ngan Luong

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Introduction

In marketing, consumer behaviour is studied to understand the “desires, needs, and preferences” of target consumers (Rusdian et al., 2024, p.76) whilst selecting, purchasing, using, and disposing of products, services, and experiences (Belch, 1978). However, whilst consumer behaviour underpins all areas of marketing (Hawkins et al., 2010), it remains a complex and continuously evolving topic (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In this essay, a range of high and low involvement products and services will be used to examine individual decision-making, perception, the self, personality and lifestyle, and the family. Ethical considerations will be applied, as ethical businesses have competitive advantages, enhanced reputations, and stronger relationships with customers and stakeholders (Azmi, 2006).

1. Consumer Decision-Making Models

Consumer decision-making is defined as the behavioural patterns experienced by consumers prior to, during, and following the decision to acquire products, services, or ideas to satisfy needs and desires (Du Plessis et al., 2011). Understanding consumer decision-making processes is central to the study of consumer behaviour (El Gozmir, 2023), and decision-making models help marketers to do so (Halawany-Darson et al., 2010).

Individual decision-making models often incorporate ideas from the Dewey Model (Dewey, 1910), which proposed the five stages of consumer decision-making. Firstly, problem recognition occurs, triggered by the disparity between a consumer's actual and desired state (see Appendix 1). This is followed by an information search - the extent to which this is carried out depends on the level of involvement the purchase requires, and the risk associated with purchase (see Appendix 2). Next, consumers use their evoked set to evaluate alternatives. Lastly, a purchase decision and post-purchase evaluation occurs – this may result in consumers experiencing emotional gratification (Van Boven et al., 2004), brand loyalty (Wilk et al., 2021), or post-purchase cognitive dissonance (Chen et al., 2021). Scholars have used these five stages in conjunction with the AIDAR Model (see Appendix 3).

Here is an example of a consumer purchasing a high-involvement product through the five-stage process. Firstly, the consumer recognises the need for a new car. The consumer uses internal information search to recall car brands. Following this, a high level of external information search occurs as this purchase poses a high monetary, functional, and physical risk to the consumer (Sheth, 1968). Next, the consumer evaluates the alternatives in their evoked set. The consumer's conjunctive decision rules set criteria on the price, engine power, and safety features of the product. Performance is the top lexicographic decision rule for the consumer. Resultantly, a Porsche is purchased, and the consumer evaluates the product. As the consumer's needs are met, the consumer experiences emotional gratification.

Next, the Schiffman Model (Schiffman, 2018) incorporates stages from the Dewey Model, whilst considering wider factors such as the impact of the marketing mix, communication sources, psychological and sociocultural influences on decision-making. Here is an example of a purchase following the Schiffman Model. Firstly, the consumer recognises the need for a new phone after being exposed to advertisements promoting the newest Apple iPhone model and observing friends with the phone. Next, the consumer's primary purchase motivation is projecting an ideal self-concept. The consumer's information search revolves around finding phones that project a wealthy, sophisticated self-image. The consumer searches through social media and seeks the recommendations of friends to find a suitable product. Finally, the consumer leverages new knowledge and past experiences to evaluate alternative products and reach a purchase decision. As the iPhone 16 was recommended by friends, advertised using discounted price offerings, and perceived as desirable by the consumer, it is purchased. This product meets the consumer's needs, and the consumer is likely to purchase new iPhones in future when assortment replenishment is needed (Sethna, 2023).

Decision-making models have many strengths. Firstly, decision-making models help marketers understand and predict how consumers will behave in different purchasing situations by acknowledging the effects of key variables on purchasing behaviour (Chaffey & Chadwick, 2022). Decision-making models provide key insights into how consumers gather and leverage information to make informed purchase decisions (Belch & Belch, 2009). Furthermore, decision-making models acknowledge the complexity of different factors which influence the purchase process (Sethna, 2023). The models are visually appealing and easy for marketers to comprehend (Rousseau et al., 2010).

Notably, decision-making models have been subject to criticism. Decision-making models overestimate the rationality of consumers, despite the argument that consumer behaviour is scarcely entirely rational (Solomon et al., 2006). Subconscious consumer behaviours and reasonings behind irrational, arbitrary purchases are not well accounted for (Boshoff et al., 2001). For instance, the models neglect to explain 'shopping momentum' (Dhar et al., 2007). Next, the stages proposed in decision-making models are not always followed.

For instance, factors such as time pressure and bounded rationality often result in consumers shortening the decision-making process (Baumeister, 2004). Furthermore, ‘interrupts’ may occur which deter consumers from completing the buying process (Sethna, 2023). Lastly, decision-making models rely “extensively upon the use of abstract and unobservable explanatory variables which seldom prove amenable to empirical investigation and evaluation” (Foxall, 1990, p.96).

2.1 Perceptual Theory

Perception is defined as the process of receiving, organising, interpreting, and attributing significance to information received via senses (Pomerantz, 2006). Understanding perception is important to marketers as it directly impacts consumer attitudes (Zhang et al., 2022), purchase intentions (Xu et al., 2022), and customer satisfaction (Liu et al., 2009). It is shaped by individual experiences, motivations, expectations, and environments (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1987).

Perceptual influence impacts the five stages of decision making (Schiffman, 2018). For instance, when a need is recognised, perceptual attention is enhanced (Kotler et al., 1999) and consumers demonstrate perceptual vigilance (Davies and Parasuraman, 1982). During information search, consumers display higher attention levels and voluntary exposure to marketing stimuli (Liljenwall, 2004). The cognitive and affective interpretation of advertising symbolism occurs during evaluation of alternatives, and consumers use memory for problem solving and recollecting past purchasing experiences (Mothersbaugh, 2010). Following the purchase decision, consumers return to a state of selective attention. Perceptual defenses may occur during the post-purchase product evaluation to avoid cognitive dissonance (Eriksen, 1954).

Perceptual Exposure:

Perceptual exposure refers to placing a stimulus within a consumer's environment or the range of a consumer's sensory receptors, giving consumers the opportunity to pay attention to an advertising message (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2010).



Mailchimp effectively increases perceptual exposure by positioning a bright advertisement with bold texts at the audience's eye-level, making consumers more likely to perceive the advertisement. Tube advertisements effectively reach captive audiences (Roux et al., 2014) who are less likely to engage in ad avoidance (Mothersbaugh, 2010), resulting in increased visibility and effective advertising placement. The use of direct address encourages marketers to engage in voluntary exposure, prompting marketers to interact

with this advertisement. Resultantly, this advertisement exceeds the absolute perceptual threshold.



In this film, product placement is used to subtly advertise Kopiko products to consumers below the perceptual threshold. Whilst a single product placement may not enhance the consumer's perceptual exposure to Kopiko, repeated placements throughout the film may reinforce the brand in the consumer's implicit memory. This may gradually enhance perceptual exposure to Kopiko, increasing brand recognition and leading to positive consumer-brand attitudes (Kumar, 2017). However, recognising hidden advertising through product placement may lead to viewers developing negative attitudes towards the brand and sponsored content (Boerman et al., 2012).

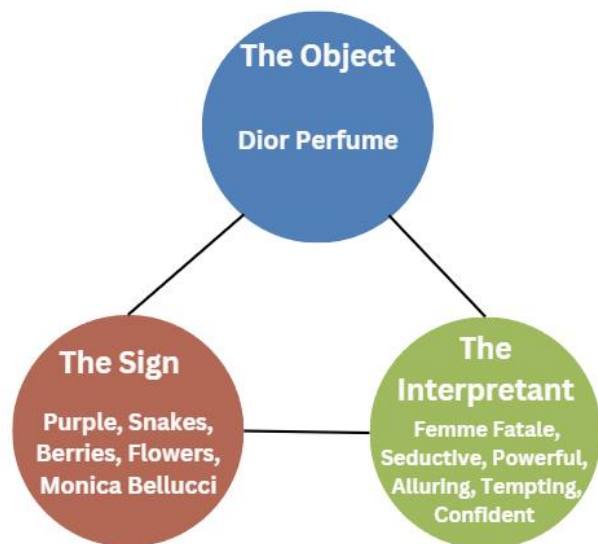
Perceptual Attention:



This advertisement effectively captures perceptual attention using various emotional appeals. Firstly, humour appeal is conveyed effectively through humorous disparagement (Speck, 1991) in the attention-grabbing headline 'You Stink.' The use of 'execution novelty' (Hirschman and Wallendorf, 1982) often leads to strong advertisement recall (Kazmi and Batra, 2009) and positive consumer-brand relationships (Keller, 1993) by attracting and retaining attention. Furthermore, distinctive colours (Gorn et al., 1997) and attractive visuals (Danaher et al., 2006) are likely to capture attention. However, using large images may divert attention away from the advertised brand (Pieters and Wedel, 2004).

Perceptual Interpretation:

Interpretation refers to the assignment of semantic or psychological meaning to stimuli (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2010). This can be done using the Symbolism Triad (Pierce, 1906). For example:



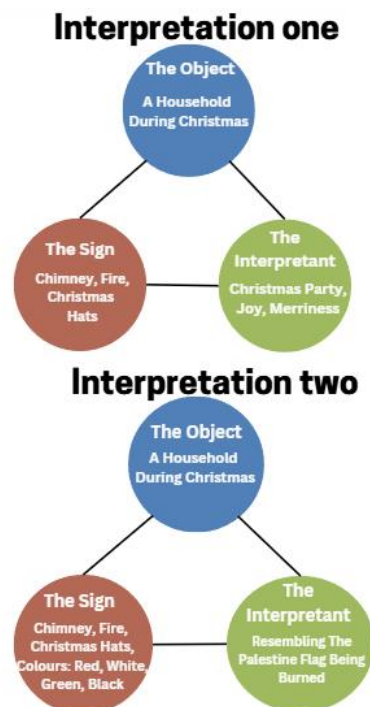
This advertisement uses signs and semiotics to associate Dior Perfume with sensuality, power, and seduction. Purple is associated with luxury and mystery (Lakshmi, 2023). The combination of a snake, flowers, and berries may be interpreted as an allusion to the forbidden fruit in the Bible, evoking associations of irresistible seductive temptation and succumbing to the ID's primal sexual fantasies. Through this advertisement, Dior Perfume is framed as a tool for consumers to embody these qualities.

Whilst marketers can influence consumers' perceptual interpretations, individual differences result in consumers interpreting marketing messages and stimuli in different

ways (Ratneshwar, 2001). For instance, consumers with high affect sensitivity are likelier to feel stronger emotional reactions when engaging with advertisements (Escalas, 2004). Failing to acknowledge the different ways advertisements can be interpreted may lead to severe backlash, damage to brand reputations, ruined consumer-brand relationships and reduced profits. Here is an example that highlights the implications of failing to recognise how marketing messages and symbols can be interpreted differently across cultures, social, or individual contexts:



**Snippet of advertisement
from Marks & Spencer (2023)**



The Advertising Standards Authority received over 40 complaints about this social media advertisement when consumers accused M&S of posting burning Christmas hats in the colours of the Palestinian flag; M&S responded by recognising the advert resulted in “unintentional hurt” (Gregory, 2023). This case study demonstrates that marketers should be aware of the social and cultural dynamics that influence interpretation, alongside individual differences.

2.2 Self/Personality/Lifestyle Theory

The self, otherwise known as the self-concept, has gathered many definitions throughout history. For instance, researchers have defined the self as perceptions individuals have of themselves, their relationships, and other individuals (Leary & Tangney, 2011). It may refer to the extent to which individuals perceive their actual selves to align with their ideal and social selves (Burns, 1979). Alternatively, it has been argued that the self-concept is too complex to define or observe (Hume, 1740; cited from Lecalano, 2002). Nevertheless, self-concept research is significant in marketing as it provides reliable consumer insights that can inform business strategies (Foxall, 1980).

The self influences the five stages of decision-making. Firstly, need recognition can be triggered by a perceived discrepancy between the consumer's actual and ideal self. The consumer's self-concept type influences the information search. For instance, consumers with interdependent self-concepts will primarily seek brands that establish their ideal social selves in social relationships (Ahuvia et al., 1998). Alternatively, consumers with independent self-concepts will seek brands that enhance their perceived actual selves (Hirschman, 2003). During the evaluation of alternatives, consumers may deliberately select certain brands to be an extension of the self (Sprott et al., 2009). In contrast, 'detached' consumers are unlikely to favour or demonstrate loyalty to certain brands (Cohen, 1967). Freudian motivations affect purchase outcomes. For instance, consumers highly driven by the ID may purchase products offering the highest level of instant gratification. Lastly, the Values and Lifestyle (VALS) segment of consumers influences the consumer's criteria for post-purchase evaluations. For example, survivors may evaluate products through durability, affordability, and perceived value for money.

The Self/Congruence:

The self-congruity theory proposes that consumers favour brands that align with their ideal selves (Sirgy, 1982). High self-congruity results in consumers using brands for self-expression (Kleine et al., 1993), integrating brands into their self-identities, and using products for self-enhancement (Sprott et al., 2009). This enhances psychological attachments to brands (Rodrigues et al., 2023), which is very profitable (Sciarrino, 2014). Resultantly, brand personalities aim to target the ideal self-concept of consumers, fostering high self-congruity and self-brand identification (Malar et al., 2011).



This advertisement effectively allows consumers to transition between their actual and ideal selves. Aspirational messaging is used to empower consumers and encourage ambitious thinking, prompting excitement from consumers. Visually depicting an athlete at the climax of her performance symbolises commitment to personal goals and a strive for self-actualisation. Her pose is metaphorical for transcending physical, psychological, and societal limitations. This advertisement creates congruity between Nike's brand personality and the ideal selves of consumers through associating the brand with aspiration, success, and superior athletic performance.

However, the complexity of self-congruence is often overlooked. For instance, it is difficult for brands to appeal to the 'situational self-image,' where consumers convey different self-images depending on situational contexts (Schenk and Holman, 1980). Furthermore, it has been speculated that the excessive focus on individual self-concepts and striving towards ideal selves has negative societal effects (Wolfe, 1976; cited from Best, 2001). For instance, consumers strive towards an unattainable sense of self-actualisation which is detrimental to the collective wellbeing of society (Gruen, 1988). Resultantly, marketers should foster realistic expectations rather than exploit consumers' pursuits of unrealistic, unattainable ideal selves.

Personality/Freud:

Unlike rational consumer decision-making models, the Freudian paradigm recognises that purchase motivations are often governed by subconscious, psychoanalytical factors.



This advertisement targets the ID. Through her roles in different movies, Margot Robbie has become associated with seduction, charm, and self-assurance. The blazer symbolises

authority, catering to the ID's desire for asserting power and control. Red prompts positive emotional reactions relating to sex and desirability (Elliot et al., 2013), exciting the ID's longing for instant gratification and emotionally enriching experiences. Through conditioned product association with Margot Robbie, Chanel implies that using this perfume increases the consumer's confidence and attractiveness.



This advertisement targets the superego by highlighting the moral responsibility of consumers. The child symbolises vulnerability and innocence. Direct eye contact is used to enhance the compassion and empathy experienced by consumers. Fear and guilt appeal are used to highlight the moral responsibilities of consumers in alleviating the suffering of malnourished children. Furthermore, the Christian Aid logo is used to associate the advertisement with religious ideals such as helping others. The advertisement conveys that without donating, consumers fail to fulfill religious and moral societal obligations. Whilst charities often target the superego by evoking guilt from consumers, the use of negative emotional appeals may lead to the avoidance of advertisements (McDonald, 2022).

Notably, Freudian research has been subject to criticism. It has been suggested that the Freudian paradigm oversimplifies consumer behaviour through implying that purchase decisions can be understood through the aggregation of individual drives alone, without considering social, cultural, and economic influences on behaviour (Bartlett, 1939).

Values, Attitudes, and Lifestyles (VALS):

Proposed by Mitchell (1987), Values and Lifestyles (VALS) segmentation was developed using credible frameworks from sociologist David Riesman and psychologist Abraham Maslow. VALS can be used to enforce brand positioning and to target desirable audience segments. For example:



This advertisement targets Experiencers. These consumers enjoy spending disposable income on extravagant, novel experiences and exclusive social environments.

Experiencers participate in activities to reflect wealth and social status – this is achieved using the theme of ‘The Great Gatsby’ through the recreation of the Jazz Age and Roaring Twenties. This advertisement conveys imagery of a luxury, unique experience targeted towards hedonistic consumers and thrill seekers.

Yankelovich (1964) supported VALS through stating that values, tastes and preferences are stronger purchase motivations than the traditional demographic traits used by Marketers (e.g age and sex). However, whilst advertisements can use VALS to appeal to particular customer segmentations, this technique may not always drive sales or significant financial return on investment (Yankelovich et al., 2006).

3. The Family:

The family may refer to a “married, civil partnered or cohabitating couple with or without children, or a lone parent with at least one child, who lives at the same address” (ONS, 2024). However, there is no single universally accepted definition of family due to variations in family structure and function across cultures and school-of-thoughts (Hofstede, 2001; Hill et al., 1966).

The family influences the five stages of decision making. The initiator recognises needs. Information searches are guided by gatekeepers and the family’s communication style. For example, pluralistic parents actively listen to the suggestions of children (Sethna, 2023). The evaluation of alternatives is carried out by the decider. It is affected by influencers and factors such as generational brand loyalty in families (Olsen, 1993). The purchaser buys the product. Lastly, the user(s) consume the product, and consumer socialisation affects post-purchase evaluations by shaping consumption-related preferences and attitudes (Hawkins, 2010).

The Family Life Cycle:

The Family Life Cycle is a segmentation tool used by marketers to gain insights into purchasing behaviour and consumer attitudes through considering family compositions and income. It has been applied to tools such as the Mosaic Profiling System, which uses data from millions of family households to understand and target niche family households.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

BOOK FOR JUST
£60 DEPOSIT
PER PERSON
FULLY ATOL PROTECTED

AWARD WINNING
TOUR OPERATOR
JET2HOLIDAYS

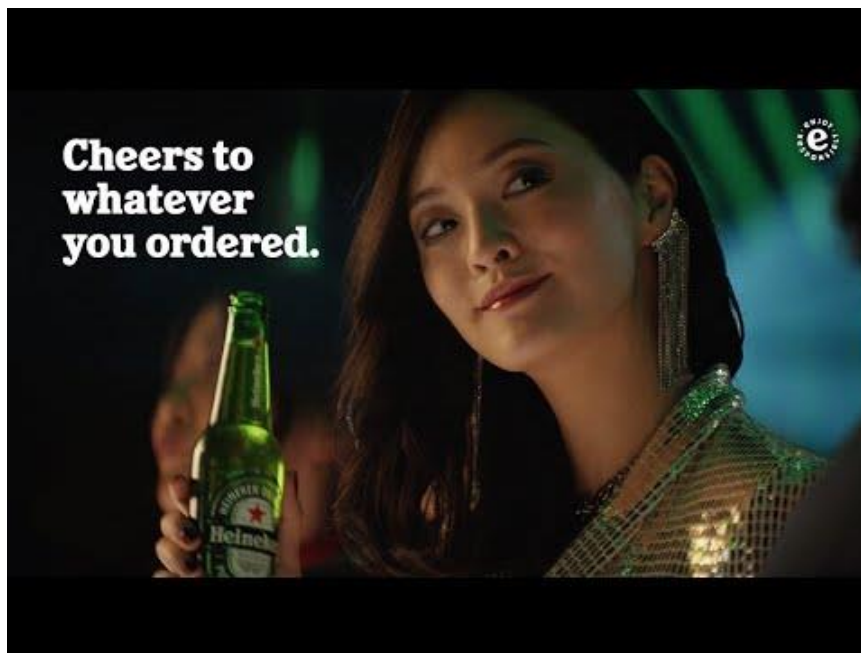
- INFANTS GO FREE*
- CUSTOMER HELPERS IN RESORT
- FREE CHILD PLACES*
- TRANSFERS INCLUDED
- 22KG BAGGAGE INCLUDED*

Jet2holidays
Package holidays you can trust

ABTA
ABTA No. Y1256

*Jet2's policy. Please see it online for full details.

This advertisement targets the parenthood stage by visually depicting the full nest I family, proposed by Wells and Gubar (1966). During this stage, the family's function is to provide children with emotional support, economic-wellbeing, and suitable lifestyles (Sethna, 2023). This advert appeals to these stages through joy appeal, highlighting affordability, and communicating safety features. Low-package holidays are particularly appealing to this family segment as family savings are limited and parents have reduced available time for planning due to childcare demands and triple shifts (Duncombe and Marsden, 1995).



This advertisement targets bachelorhood, the single and “mating game” stage of the family life cycle. Single people often spend their incomes on alcohol, fashion, socialising, and leisurely entertainment (Sethna, 2023). The luxury bar setting, lighthearted messaging, and visual appeal of a young, fashion-oriented and flirtatious female conveys a spontaneous, care-free attitude typically expected of bachelors.

Notably, family life cycle segmentation has been criticised for having no more value in understanding purchasing behaviour than extraneous variables including age and other characteristics (Spanier et al., 1974). Family life cycle segmentation was originally designed to understand conjugal families. However, family life cycles are continually changing, undermining the conceptual reliability of family life cycle models (Glick, 1977).

The Family Decision Making Model:

This model highlights the different roles of family members in making purchasing decisions and the common decision-making models in families. This allows marketers to target specific family members based on consumption and purchase roles.

Firstly, children influence purchase decisions using a range of tactics (Sethna, 2023). This often includes pester power (Ekstrom et al., 1987), which is a global phenomenon (Christino et al., 2020). Marketers attempt to induce pester power through social media, television and in-store advertising (Ofcom, 2022). However, researchers argue that social influences are more impactful than advertising in persuading children to request products from parents (Chronis-Tuscano et al., 2018).



This point-of-sale marketing is effective at targeting children as purchase initiators and influencers through pester power. It contains bright colours, simplistic language, and interactive elements. This creates perceptual salience which is likely to attract children (Piaget, 1972). Products are deliberately placed within a child's reach. Animated characters are used to capture the attention of children (Acuff & Reiher, 2008). 83% of children believe they can influence parents on the purchase of sweets (Sethna, 2023). Parenting styles influence the effectiveness of pester power on purchasing decisions (Assael, 2004).

The marital roles within the family determine who ultimately makes the purchase decision. For instance, families tend to be egalitarian in North American culture (Sethna, 2023), leading to syncretic decision-making (Filiatrault & Richie, 1980). Alternatively, low involvement purchase decisions may be autonomic.



This advertisement effectively targets the deciders and purchasers of the family. It uses visual comparisons and messaging to emphasise value for money, practicality, superiority against competitors, and highlights that “generations of families” have trusted the brand. Cognitive biases, such as the anchoring effect, are activated using “2x longer lasting” framing technique. This may lead to post-purchase satisfaction as buyers perceive they have made a wise purchase.

Decision-making styles are complex as they are influenced by factors such as social class, culture, and marital role specialisation types (Sethna, 2023). For instance, Chinese children are likelier to influence parents purchase decisions (Labrecque & Ricard, 2001), and wives with higher degrees of education are likelier to be involved in major purchase decisions (Crispell, 1995). Furthermore, factors such as individual level of involvement with the product should be considered. As the factors influencing decision-making roles

vary widely, it is difficult for marketers to target consumers primarily based on this segmentation technique.

Ethical Considerations:

As the children's market continues to grow in profitability (Statista, 2024), ethical considerations have been raised regarding advertising to children.

Firstly, children lack the critical thinking abilities to make informed purchase decisions (Piaget, 1972) and often fail to understand the selling intent of advertisements (Martin, 1997). As a result, marketing techniques such as adver-games are particularly controversial. Furthermore, advertising to children imposes stress on parents. Pester power may result in family conflicts and unhappiness (Sethna, 2023). Further effects include “exasperated purchases of items against a parent’s better judgement” (McDermott et al., 2006, p.514).

Next, parents are unable to monitor the advertisements children are exposed to online (Sethna, 2023). This has led to concerns regarding the effect of inappropriate content on the values and purchasing decisions of children. For instance, children often prefer unhealthy choices and select products simply because parents disapprove (Rummel et al., 2000).

Lastly, the online privacy and data collection of children are ethical concerns for marketers. Children as young as three years old are active online (Ofcom, 2022), and unable to give informed consent for their personal data to be used for targeted advertising. Despite this, children often give out personal information online (Livingstone et al., 2009).

Resultantly, marketers should consider the vulnerability, privacy, and limited cognitive abilities of children. Notably, these ethical concerns have been refuted by certain schools

of thought. For instance, it has been argued that advertising towards children is a vital part of the consumer socialisation process (Ward, 1974).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the assumptions and insights attained from the study of consumer behaviour underpin all marketing decisions (Hawkins, Mothersbaugh & Best, 2010). While decision-making models provide valuable insights into the consumer purchasing process, the models have been criticised due to oversimplicity and overestimating the rationality of consumers (Bozinoff, 1982). Throughout this essay, key factors which influence consumer decision-making have been explored in detail and the implications for marketers have been discussed. Additionally, ethical considerations have been applied to highlight the responsibilities of marketers. As consumer behaviour continues to evolve (Sethna, 2023), marketing strategies should continuously be adapted, and decision-making models should be refined. This ensures that marketing practices remain effective as new touchpoints and technologies are introduced to consumers.

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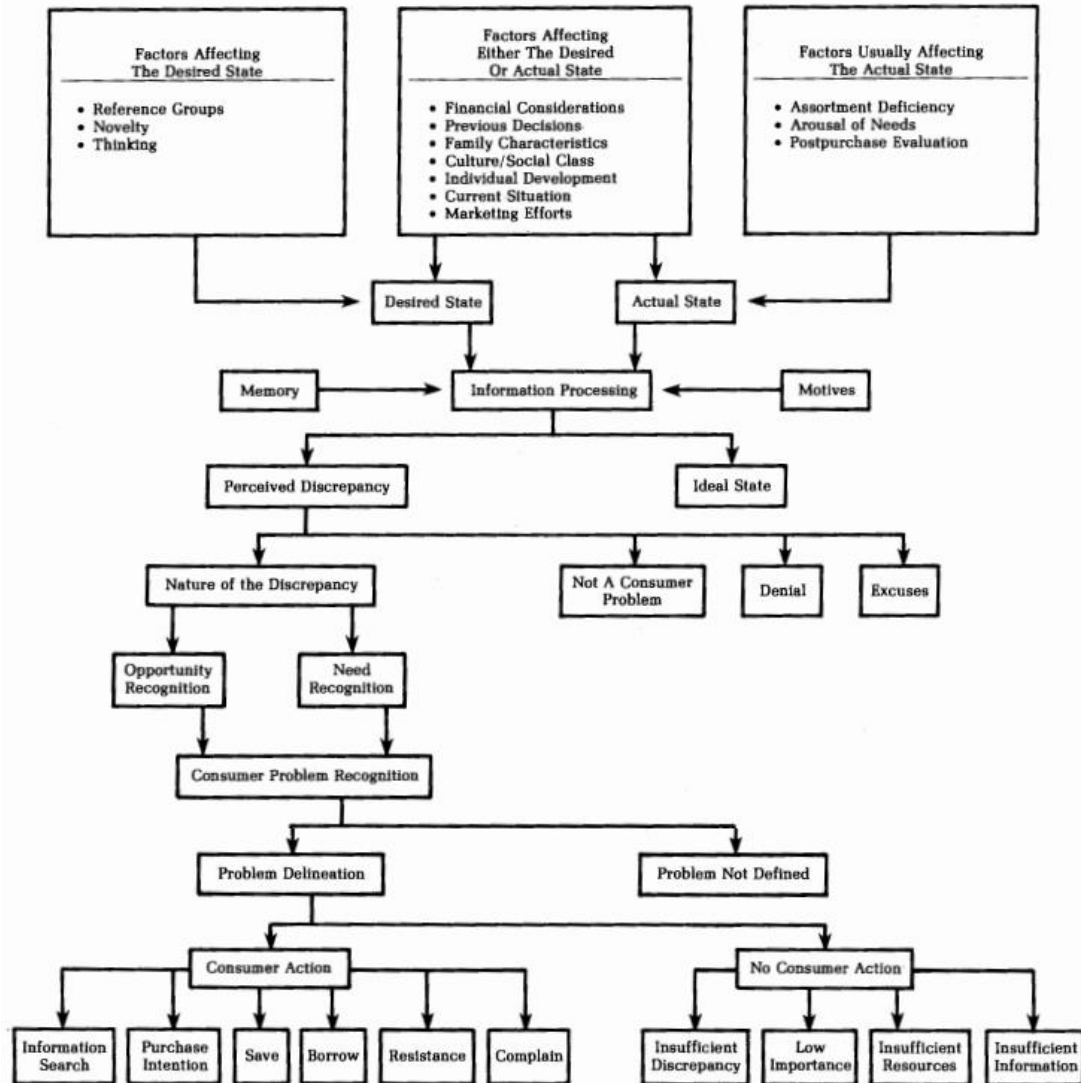
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Appendix:

Appendix 1:

Figure 1
The Consumer Problem Recognition Process



Appendix 2:

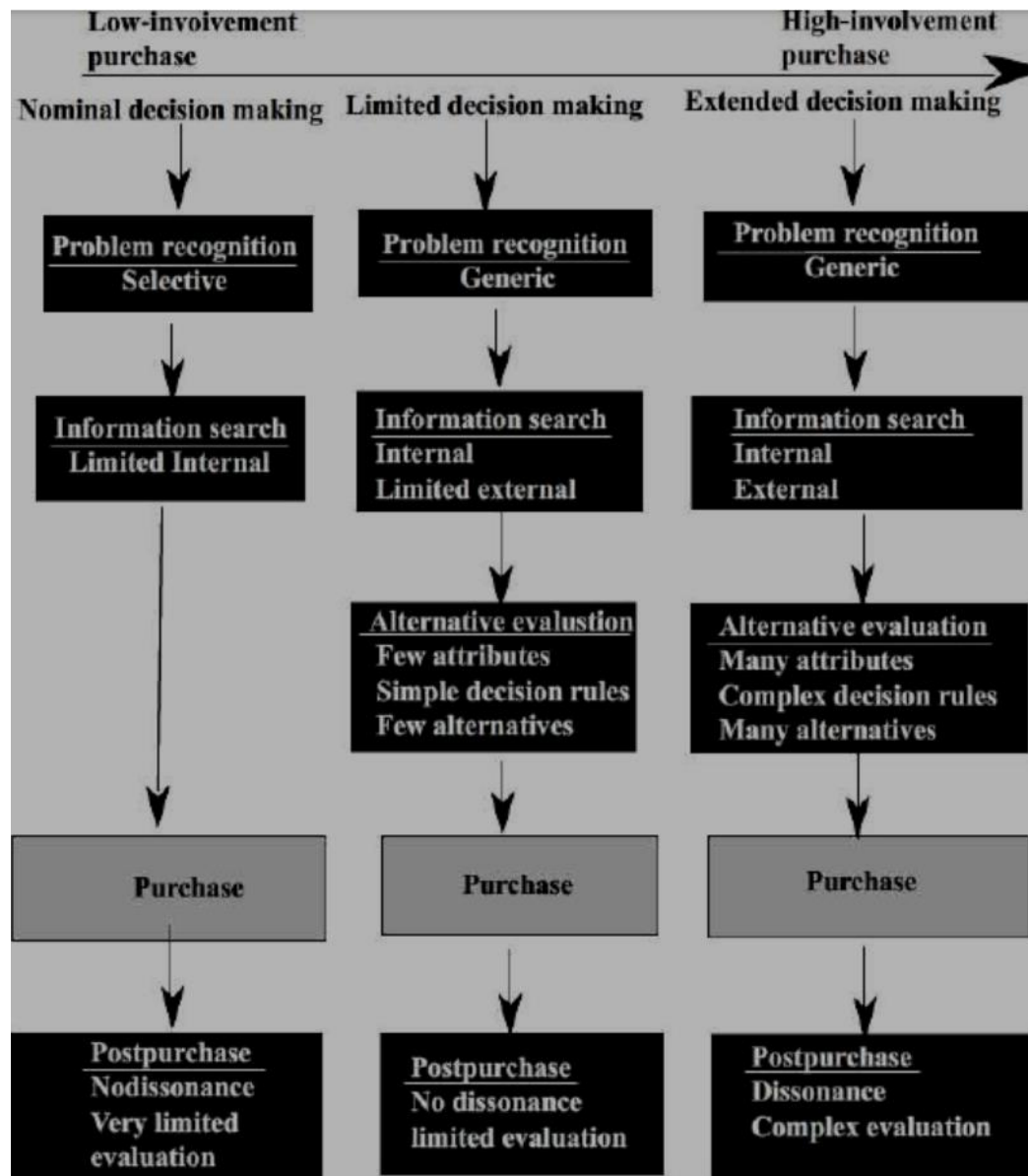


Fig. 1 — Involvement and types of decision making

Figure 10.4: The basic AIDAR model and purchase decision-making process (adapted by the author)

