

(Copies of the survey instrument and further statistical documentation are available from the author, Professor Frances C. Lawrence, School of Home Economics, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803-4301.)

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FACTORS INFLUENCING THE SELECTION OF UPHOLSTERED LIVING ROOM FURNITURE

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Consumers were asked in a 1985 survey what was the "most difficult" aspect of buying furniture. Cost was mentioned by 53% of those sampled; 30% indicated that it was judging quality; and 22% had difficulty in choosing a style. Construction, comfort, and durability were noted as the strongest influences on the actual purchase decision. The quality of a piece of furniture was determined by construction features (87%), brand name (67%), and wood finish (61%) [6, pp. 72-73].

Helping consumers to make wise purchasing decisions is a goal of the Illinois State Board of Education [2, p. 65]. Among the stated objectives for the unit on home furnishings are to:

1. make satisfying selections of home furnishings and equipment according to social, psychological, economic, and utility needs of self and family;
2. learn to recognize the levels of quality; and
3. become aware of the ways that shopping skills can help consumers obtain the most satisfaction for their money.

Factors which influence home furnishings choices include style, function, construction features, cost, availability, and color. Research has also shown that values and stage in life are factors that affect the decision-making process [3, 4, 5]. In addition, a study by Alexander et al. suggests that the criteria used in making home furnishings decisions differ according to place of residence in urban or rural areas [1].

The primary purpose of this research was to identify what criteria influenced the home furnishings choices of rural Illinois families. A second objective was to ascertain whether these criteria were influenced by factors such as stage in life, demographic variables, and use of interior space by individual families.

METHODOLOGY

A random sample was drawn from Illinois telephone directories for counties with towns or places having a population of 2,500 or less and without a major standard metropolitan statistical area (SMSA). Telephone screening was conducted to insure respondents in all stages of the life cycle; those surveyed had to be married and have been residents of the county for at least one year at the time of the survey. After pretesting and revising the questionnaire, it was mailed to 466 cooperating eligible households; 336 (72%) were completed, returned, and eligible for analysis and form the sample for the following discussion.

RESULTS

In all cases, the wife was asked to respond to the questionnaire. Over half (55%) had lived in the county for twenty years or more, and the mean time for residing in their present home was 11.9 years. The mean age of the respondent was 43.6 years; her husband was slightly older (46.1 years). These couples had been married an average of 21.4 years, with a mean family size of 3.36 people. For half of the women, their high school diploma was their terminal degree; this was true for 60% of their husbands. The majority of men currently were employed, with approximately one-third earning their living from farming. Just over half of the women worked either full- or part-time outside the home. Total household income was \$30,000 or less for 54% of the couples.

The respondents were asked when most of the furnishings that were presently in their living room had been acquired. Over three-fourths indicated that they were between the ages of 19 and 44; the percentage of responses was divided almost equally between the

18-26, 27-34, and 35-42 year old categories. These findings are consistent with life cycle trends revealed in national marketing studies [6]. Two-thirds of those surveyed had acquired their first sofa either before or during their first year of marriage; their current sofa had been owned an average of 8.1 years. Either one or two upholstered chairs also had been purchased for the living room during this same time frame, but not necessarily at the same time as the sofa. Although the majority of furnishing purchases appear to have been made early in the life cycle, 27% of the respondents stated that they had spent the most money at one time on their living room after they had been married 11 to 20 years. In 69% of all cases, furniture selection had been a joint husband/wife decision; 17% of the women had selected their furnishings by themselves.

Only 40% of those surveyed indicated that their home had a family room as well as a living room. A wide variety of activities, therefore, were performed in the home's principle living space including relaxing, conversation, entertaining, T.V., music, and reading (Table 1). Almost half of the respondents also used their living room for sewing, hobbies, and games. Some type of food and/or beverage service in conjunction with these activities was presumed.

Table 1. Use of Living Room by Respondents

Variables	n	%
Relaxing, Conversation	312	92.9
Entertaining	297	88.4
T.V., Music	277	82.4
Reading	276	82.1
Hobbies, Sewing, Games	152	45.2

Despite the variety of activities which took place in the living room, the respondents consistently indicated that "style" or "look" were the most important criteria in selecting their present sofa (Table 2).

Table 2. Most and Least Important Reasons for Selecting Present Sofa

Reason	Most Important		Least Important	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Cost	41	12.2	18	5.4
Function	36	10.7	11	3.3
Could Purchase Locally	6	1.8	45	13.4
Construction Features	43	12.8	4	1.2
Style, Look	135	40.2	8	2.4
Color	22	6.5	12	3.6
Influence of Family or Friends	5	1.5	181	53.9
Gift or Inheritance	20	6.0		
Other	4	1.2		
No Response	24	7.1	57	17.0
Total	336	100.0	336	100.0

Cross-tabulation revealed that those using the living room for hobbies, sewing, and games were somewhat less likely than the other groups to list style as their most important consideration; among the factors which this group cited were construction, cost, and function. In addition, the women overwhelmingly stated that "influence of family and friends" was the least important consideration in their upholstered furniture selection. The same factors noted as most and least important in the selection of the sofa were also cited for the chairs; in fact, the relationship was highly significant ($p = .000$).

The demographic variables of age, income, education, and occupation did not significantly influence the criteria for making decisions, nor did stage in the life cycle. Although the sofa and chairs may have been acquired at different times, the criteria for selection did not appear to change.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSUMER EDUCATORS

The "look" or "style" of the upholstered piece was the most important selection criteria for 40% of the respondents. Factors such as cost, function, and construction were ranked as "most important" by a smaller number of women. Demographic variables such as age, income, education, or occupation did not significantly influence the decision-making criteria; the same is true for stage in life and functions which took place in the living room. Only those who used their space for hobbies or games were somewhat less likely than the others to note "style" as their most important consideration.

The findings of this study regarding the purchasing criteria of rural residents differ from those of Alexander et al. [1]. Alexander found urban dwellers to be more interested in the appearance of their homes, with rural respondents ranking construction and function as the most important criteria.

Regardless of place of residence, consumer educators may need to further assist all consumers in making wise home furnishings decisions. Consumers should consider style **after** they have analyzed criteria such as construction features and finish, cleanability and wearability, cost considerations, and function of both the furniture and the room as a whole. A variety of styles is available at almost every price and quality range. Since furniture is a durable good, purchasers need adequate information to obtain the most from their home furnishings dollar. Consumer educators should plan comparison shopping activities to help their students look beyond style, color, and other design considerations and instead emphasize construction, quality, and cost. By equipping consumers with the appropriate shopping tools, educators can help them obtain maximum satisfaction in the selection of their home furnishings.

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