

## **STYLE PREFERENCES AND CRITERIA FOR SELECTION OF HOME FURNISHINGS BY RURAL FAMILIES**

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### **Abstract**

*Research suggests that the criteria used in making decisions about home furnishings differ among various population segments. This study identifies stylistic preferences, degree of satisfaction, and factors influencing the selection of living-room furnishings for women in rural Illinois counties. The counties were delimited by two factors: there could be no major metropolitan area in the county and populations of towns were 2,500 or less. The findings reveal a high degree of stability in home-furnishings choices of the 336 women sampled. They were generally satisfied with the present style of their upholstered furniture and expressed no desire to change styles in the future. "Style and look" was consistently noted as the most important consideration in selecting sofas and chairs. "Influence of family and friends" was listed overwhelmingly as the least important consideration.*

### **Introduction**

Residential interior designers generally serve only a small segment of the population. Consumers who choose to use the services of a trained design professional usually represent more affluent households. The typical characteristics of these households are: married, 35 to 54 years of age, college educated, two incomes, and one or two children ("Economic Trends," 1986). Homes representing this group are frequently featured in leading interior-design and architectural magazines. Therefore, much is known or can be surmised about their tastes and stylistic preferences.

For various reasons, other segments of the population do not employ the services of design professionals. As a result, little is known about their furnishing choices. A recent poll of 1,200 college-educated subjects showed that only six percent hired an interior designer (Cooper, 1988).

Several surveys, including those conducted by *Better Homes and Gardens* and a joint study by the National Home Furnishings Association and the American Furniture Manufacturers Association (Weathers, 1986), have attempted to profile stylistic preferences and shopping patterns of consumers throughout the United States. Yet, most of these studies focused on the population as a whole and gave scant attention to specific market segments. Thus, there is limited information about stylistic preferences and selection criteria among rural residents even though this group comprises over a fourth of the nation's population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1988).

Such information is of importance to marketers and advertisers seeking to capture a larger market segment (Vinson, Scott, and Lamont, 1977). In addition, information on selection criteria and stylistic preferences is relevant to interior designers. This is especially true if the profession is to draw clientele into the residential-design market through design services like those offered in furniture stores. Prerequisite to this goal is a greater understanding of and appreciation for the furnishing needs of people whose backgrounds might be different from the designers'.

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### Literature Review

Numerous researchers have determined that the home is the single-most important means of individual self-expression (Cooper, 1974; Altman and Chemers, 1984; Rapoport, 1985). Laumann and House (1970) suggested that the living room is where the family shows its "face" to the world. So, furnishings are selected more for their taste and style than for economic reasons. Amaturio, Costagliola, and Ragone (1987) confirmed the importance of both achieved and ascribed status in the selection of living-room furnishings. Nearly three quarters of the respondents in a 1985 *Better Homes and Gardens* study indicated that, of all the rooms in house, the living room was the one on which they would be willing to spend the most money (Weathers, 1986).

Despite the symbolic importance of the home, and living-room furnishings in particular, little research on selection criteria and the stylistic preferences of various consumer groups has been conducted in recent years. Even fewer studies correlate these characteristics to furnishing choices among specific segments of the population.

In a 1970 study, Good and Suchsland determined that the desire to change furniture styles was directly related to the amount of time that had passed since the item was purchased. Huff (1976), however, found that when individuals are required to make choices, they generally base their decisions on what is most familiar to them.

Macgregor (1979) attempted to establish a link between stylistic preferences and personal values. He categorized consumers into groups according to their value systems. Most rural consumers fell into what he termed the "belongers" category. For this group, the most important qualities in selecting home furnishings are comfort, durability, and low cost.

These findings confirm those of Alexander, Alexander, and Tzeng (1976), who determined that the criteria used in making furniture decisions differed in rural and urban areas. For both urban and rural respondents, appearance was the primary concern in selecting a piece of furniture. Economics ranked second. Rural respondents, however, were less likely to view furniture as a long-range, monetary investment than their urban counterparts. For this rural group, construction and function were also important criteria in making furniture decisions.

By contrast, in their sample of 155 subjects from Oregon and Washington, Thompson and Davis (1988) determined that choice of style was not among the primary considerations. Rather, the three most important criteria for furniture preference were perceived fashionability of the style, aesthetics, and prestige.

Henton and Henton (1976) concluded that "no significant differences exist between the accuracy of spousal perception of home furnishings preferences of men and women" (p. 6). This suggests that a respondent's selection was likely to please their spouse. Although a 1985 study by the Market Research Bureau revealed that eight of ten respondents shopped with their spouses (Weathers, 1986), others suggest that females dominate the decision-making process (Ochsman, 1979; Altman and Chemers, 1984).

Past research suggests that the criteria used to make home-furnishings decisions may differ among various population segments. By examining the rural market segment, it may become evident that more research is needed to determine the selection criteria, stylistic preferences, and resulting degree of satisfaction among various other consumer groups. Society is often viewed as a homogeneous unit. Designers, however, should be aware of the needs and desires of both individuals and groups if they are to create satisfying environments for their clients.

### Study Objectives

The objectives of this study of rural families are:

1. to identify furniture-style choices in living rooms of rural families and how the demographic factors of age, education, and income influence style preferences;
2. to determine degree of satisfaction regarding these style choices; and
3. to determine what factors, such as aesthetics, product availability, or product cost, influenced the choice of these furnishings.

## Methodology

### **Sample**

The study population consisted of married couples who were Illinois residents of rural counties. These counties were populated exclusively with towns of 2,500 or less. The research was funded by the Illinois Agricultural Experiment Station and the School of Human Resources and Family Studies.

The criterion for eligibility was residence in the county for at least one year at the time of the survey. A random sample was drawn from telephone directories for all eligible counties. Telephone screening was then conducted for consent to complete a mail questionnaire. To compare groups, equal numbers of female respondents between the ages of 18-34, 35-50, and 51 years of age or older were sought. This allowed the identification of changes in stylistic preferences and selection criteria over time and among age groups.

A sample of 836 telephone numbers was selected and screened. From this group, 466 households met the selection criteria and agreed to participate. The distribution by age group was 136 respondents between 18 and 34; 175 between 35-50; and 153 who were 51 or older. Two refused to reveal their ages.

The questionnaire was designed to elicit information regarding criteria that influenced furnishings selection and measure the degree of satisfaction with choices made. Demographic information was also requested.

Questions were either forced-choice or open-ended and were measured nominally. Answer categories were determined after an extensive review of the literature and validated with a pretest. An "other" category was provided to modify the answer category.

After pretesting and revision, the questionnaire was mailed to the 466 households. The wife was asked to respond to the questionnaire due to the greater likelihood of her involvement in the buying process (Ochsman, 1979; Altman and Chemers, 1984). Almost three fourths (336) were completed, returned, and eligible for analysis.

## Findings

Although much of the data were descriptive in nature, categorical data analysis via contingency tables was used where possible to detect significant patterns in stylistic preferences, criteria for selection, and level of satisfaction. Contingency tables were also used to determine if these factors were related to demographic variables such as age, income level, education, and occupation. Chi-square values were considered significant at an alpha level of 0.05.

### **Sample**

The mean age of all respondents was 43.6 years. This compared to 32 years nationally. The mean age for husbands was slightly over 46 years. On average these couples had been married for over 21 years. For half of the women a high school diploma was their highest degree. The same held true for 60 percent of their spouses. These figures were just below the national median for each group of 12.6 years of education.

One third of the men surveyed earned their living from farming. Just over half of the women were employed in some capacity outside the home. Total household income was \$30,000 or less for just over half of the couples. The national median income is \$22,646. Average family size was almost 3.4 members, and the mean time for residing in the present home was 11-plus years. A little over half of the respondents had lived within the county for 20 years or more.

### **Style Choices**

**Furnishings** When asked to identify the overall style of the furnishings in their living room, the largest group of respondents, 35 percent, indicated that the furnishings were a mix of styles. The next largest group, 27 percent, identified their style as Early American. Contemporary or modern styles were chosen by 22 percent. Traditional, French Provincial, and Mediterranean styles each accounted for only a small number of responses.

To assist the respondents in classifying their upholstered pieces by style, illustrations of six sofas and eight chairs were included in the questionnaire. Although the respondents' furniture may not have been identical to that illustrated, they were asked to identify the illustrations that most closely resembled their sofa and two living room chairs.

Chair styles were usually the same as the style of the sofa. Further, the relationship between the style of the living room itself and the upholstered furniture was highly significant. The predominant living-room styles were Early American and Contemporary.

### **Satisfaction**

Overall, each respondent expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the style of her present sofa. Over 90 percent claimed that they still liked the style. The mean number of years for owning this piece was 8.1. Less than 10 percent of those questioned said that they planned to replace their sofas in the next year.

The findings in this study tend to support those of Huff (1977) regarding the stability of stylistic preferences. Once these rural women had selected a style for their upholstered, living-room furniture, most expressed no desire to change. Cross tabulation revealed a significant relationship ( $p < .001$ ) between the style of the present sofa and the style the respondents would select if they could purchase another sofa. Separate cross tabulations were run for each of three categories by the number of years the respondent had owned the present sofa. The data did not confirm Good and Suchsland's finding (1970) that the desire to change styles was directly related to the elapsed time since the item was purchased (see Tables 1-3). Rather, the length of time the respondents had owned their present sofas had no relation to their desire for a "new look."

Table 1. Style of present sofa (owned 1-4 years) in relation to style that would be chosen if another were purchased (N=115).

Present Furniture Style Percent of column total	Style of Future Purchase				Row total
	Early American	Medi- terranean	Con- temporary	Tradi- tional	
Early American (N)	49.0	4.0	15.0	2.0	70.0
Chose same style	84.5	26.7	44.1	25.0	
Mediterranean (N)	1.0	4.0	1.0	0.0	6.0
Chose same style	1.7	26.7	2.9	0.0	
Contemporary (N)	7.0	6.0	17.0	1.0	31.0
Chose same style	12.1	40.0	50.0	12.5	
Traditional (N)	1.0	1.0	1.0	5.0	8.0
Chose same style	1.7	6.7	2.9	62.5	
Column total (N)	58.0	15.0	34.0	8.0	115.0
Chi-square		D.F.		Significance	
78.37699		9		<.001	

No significant relationship was noted between the style of the respondent's first sofa and her present living room or sofa style. Many times, first sofas are acquired as a "hand-me-down," bought second-hand, or purchased for economic rather than stylistic reasons. The mean number of sofas owned before the present piece was 1.8.

Almost 70 percent of the respondents had acquired their first sofa either before or in the first year of marriage. Of those who still had the first sofa, 39 kept it because they liked the piece; 32 noted that they were "making do" until they could afford a replacement; and two women cited sentimental value. Once the respondents had acquired sofas of their own choosing in the preferred style, the majority showed a "significant relationship between preference and familiarity" (Huff, 1977, p. 71).

Table 2. Style of present sofa (owned 5-8 years) in relation to style that would be chosen if another were purchased (N=80).

Present Furniture Style Percent of column total	Style of Future Purchase				Row total
	Early American	Medi- terranean	Con- temporary	Tradi- tional	
Early American (N)	26.0	1.0	8.0	1.0	36.0
Chose same style	83.9	10.0	23.5	20.0	
Mediterranean (N)	0.0	2.0	2.0	0.0	4.0
Chose same style	0.0	20.0	5.9	0.0	
Contemporary (N)	5.0	6.0	24.0	2.0	37.0
Chose same style	16.1	60.0	70.6	40.0	
Traditional (N)	0.0	1.0	0.0	2.0	3.0
Chose same style	0.0	10.0	0.0	40.0	
Column total (N)	31.0	10.0	34.0	5.0	80.0
Chi-square 55.54816		D.F. 9		Significance <.001	

Table 3. Style of present sofa (owned 9+ years) in relation to style that would be chosen if another were purchased (N=117).

Present Furniture Style Percent of column total	Style of Future Purchase				Row total
	Early American	Medi- terranean	Con- temporary	Tradi- tional	
Early American (N)	39.0	1.0	6.0	0.0	46.0
Chose same style	72.2	12.5	12.8	0.0	
Mediterranean (N)	3.0	3.0	2.0	1.0	9.0
Chose same style	5.6	37.5	4.3	12.5	
Contemporary (N)	12.0	2.0	38.0	2.0	54.0
Chose same style	22.2	25.0	80.9	25.0	
Traditional (N)	0.0	2.0	1.0	5.0	8.0
Chose same style	0.0	25.0	2.1	62.5	
Column total (N)	54.0	8.0	47.0	8.0	117.0
Chi-square 104.26910		D.F. 9		Significance <.001	

Number of missing observations =2.

### **Demographic Influences**

The data further revealed that age, income level, education, or occupation had no significant relationship to the style of furniture chosen for the living room or the criteria for making decisions. As a whole, these rural consumers were a very homogenous group.

### **Selection Criteria**

The respondents in the survey were asked to indicate what criteria were most and least important to them in the selection of their upholstered, living-room furniture. The list of choices included: cost, function, local availability, construction features, style and look, color, influence of family or friends, gift or inheritance, and other (see Table 4).

"Style and look" was consistently noted by respondents as the most important consideration in the selection of sofas and chairs. Factors such as cost, function, and construction were ranked as "most important" by a much smaller number. Although the sofa and chairs may have been acquired at different stages in the lifecycle, selection criteria did not change. In fact, there was a significant relationship ( $p < .001$ ) between the factors that were considered most and least important in the selection of both the sofa and chairs. Influence of family and friends was most often listed as the least important factor in upholstered furniture selection.

Table 4. Most and least important reasons for selecting present furniture style (N=336).

Reason	Most frequent	Percent	Least frequent	Percent
<b>Sofa</b>				
Cost	41	12.2	18	5.4
Function	36	10.7	11	3.3
Available locally	6	1.8	45	13.4
Constr'n features	43	12.8	4	1.2
Style, look	135	40.2	8	2.4
Color	22	6.5	12	3.6
Family influence	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
<b>Chair 1</b>				
Cost	40	11.9	21	6.3
Function	63	18.8	8	2.4
Available locally	2	0.6	43	12.8
Constr'n features	29	8.6	2	0.6
Style, look	101	30.1	6	1.8
Color	13	3.9	17	5.1
Family influence	5	1.5	145	43.2
Gift or inheritance	29	8.6		
Other	4	1.2	2	0.6
No response	50	14.9	92	27.4
Total	336	100.0	336	100.0
<b>Chair 2</b>				
Cost	24	7.1	20	6.0
Function	47	14.0	4	1.2
Available locally	2	0.6	34	10.1
Constr'n features	24	7.1	6	1.8
Style, look	62	18.5	5	1.5
Color	14	4.2	14	4.2
Family influence	2	0.6	101	30.1
Gift or inheritance	33	9.8		
Other	1	0.3	2	0.6
No response	127	37.8	150	44.6
Total	336	100.0	336	100.0

When the respondents were asked "who helped select the majority of furniture in your living room?", over two thirds (229) indicated that it had been a joint husband-wife decision. In almost 20 percent of the cases, the respondent alone had chosen the furniture. Instances in which the entire family participated accounted for less than 10 percent of the sample. Unfortunately, the role each of the participants played in the decision-making process is unknown. No significant relationship was found, however, between the individual that selected the furnishings and the most and least important reasons for selection.

Although "style and look" was noted as the most important consideration in the decision-making process, almost half did not subscribe to nor read with regularity any home-furnishings magazine. Of those who did subscribe, the majority read *Better Homes and Gardens*. The influence of television or movie sets on stylistic preference is also unknown. This seems an area worthy of further investigation.

### Discussion

The most significant finding of this study is that the majority of respondents expressed an overall feeling of satisfaction with their present furniture style and indicated no desire to change in the future. Thus, the data suggest a relationship between stylistic preference and familiarity. Sufficient data do not exist from previous studies to determine if the same holds true for other consumer groups.

There is little evidence from this study that stylistic preference or the criteria for furniture selection change over the lifecycle. This had been suggested in the Kroehler Report published in the 1960s (Grossack, 1964). Further research is needed to determine if preferences change over the lifecycle in the population as a whole. Such information would be important to marketers and consumer educators. As noted by Crosby, Gill, and Lee (1984), "Substantial age group differences in values are assumed to exist by many marketers and form the basis of innovative marketing strategies" (p. 202).

This similarity of stylistic preferences and overall feeling of satisfaction may be partially due to a more stable value structure in the rural community. Differences in urban and rural value systems have been documented by previous research (Willits, Bealer, and Crider, 1982; Schroeder, Fliegel, and van Es, 1983). According to Willits, Bealer, and Crider (1982), "rural areas are characterized by a predominance of personal, face-to-face social relationships among similar people and a comparative slowness in altering traditional cultural heritage" (p. 70). The stability noted in this study may be attributed to similarities in lifestyle that are unrelated to socioeconomic status, education level, or age.

Although "influence of family and friends" was ranked as the least important criterion in making furniture decisions, it is possible that certain status considerations are implied due to the similarity in stylistic preferences for the study population. Certain norms in furniture selection may previously have been defined for this group. Thus, the respondents recognize limited influence by family and friends on their selection process. In other words, because they have been conditioned to the norm, they know what they want and consider it to be an expression of their own personal tastes.

It was interesting and perhaps surprising that "style and look" was cited as the most important criterion in selecting upholstered furniture. This criterion is especially noteworthy in view of recent economic problems in rural areas and the relatively low, average income of the group as a whole. Yet, it is also true that "style and look" may be important because they can be easily acquired and give a feeling of prestige without necessarily paying for quality. One possible explanation may be that in times of adversity, the home takes on increased significance as a sheltering unit and a place to satisfy both physical and psychological needs.

A theoretical model of rural-consumer, decision-making criteria for furniture selection has been developed. This is shown in Figure 1. Within the framework of product availability and the subliminal influence of cultural and social values, all respondents appear to go through the same hierarchy in the decision-making process. This decision-making hierarchy held true regardless of income level, education, occupation, or stage in the lifecycle.

"Style and look" is the primary selection criteria, with factors such as cost, function, and construction playing a lesser role. Social values and norms in the form of peer pressure are indirect or unrecognized, yet may affect the process nonetheless. Likewise, all choice is limited by product availability. This, in turn, is dictated by the supply and demand of past furniture choices in the marketplace. Thus the decision-making criteria of rural consumers are reinforced by the cyclical nature of the process.

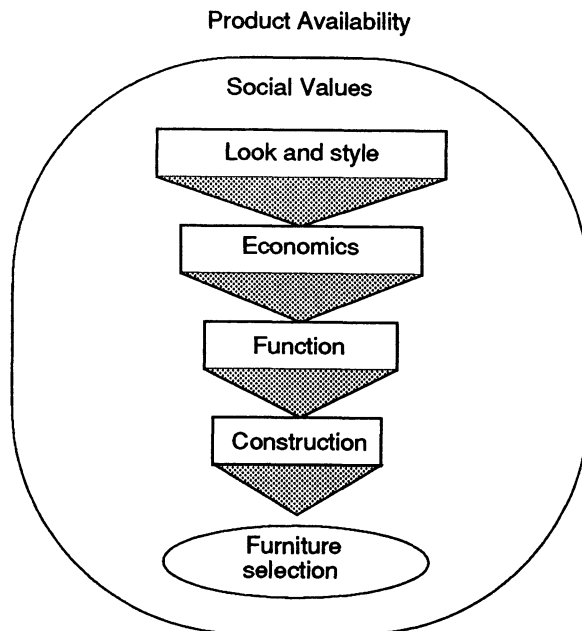


Figure 1. Theoretical model of rural consumer decision making criteria for furniture selection.

### Recommendations

Despite expressed satisfaction, the findings suggest that educational programs could be developed to help consumers identify additional factors to be considered when purchasing home furnishings. Information concerning furniture construction techniques, function, and cost should be presented to help families achieve maximum value from their furniture choices. Such information could readily be integrated into extension programs for rural audiences.

Both interior design and housing educators need to help their students sensitize themselves to the preferences of others if the designer-client relationship is to be successful. This sensitivity is particularly needed when designers are working with clients whose backgrounds might differ from their own. Many rural students have had limited exposure to home-furnishings magazines. This fact can be deduced from low subscription and readership rates in rural communities. These students may require assistance from educators in achieving greater knowledge of products and style alternatives. Prospective students may be attracted to the design profession by that to which they are exposed, but as a whole this exposure appears to be more limited. Design courses may need to be scheduled earlier in programs of study to help rural students become familiar with the variety of materials and resources available. Early scheduling of courses, in turn, may stimulate more creativity in students' design solutions.

As both educators and designers, we should be cognizant of how environment can influence design decisions. A greater understanding of our own aesthetic preferences and an increased appreciation for those of others, though different from our own, may result in the creation of more satisfying interior environments.

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