The commercialisation of childhood? Materialism values of South African tweens

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A B S T R A C T

The development of the child consumer market has often been criticised as the commercialisation of childhood. Marketers have been accused of targeting children and grooming them for a lifetime of consumerism. The maelstrom of marketing activities aimed directly at children has led to their being more active than ever in the consumer culture space. An unfortunate consequence of this has been children becoming materialistic because of the commercial pressures of modern childhood. This study sought to determine whether South African tweens are materialistic. Existing studies on child materialism have largely excluded African children, hence the need for the current study. Data were collected through a survey of 192 schoolchildren, aged 10-14 (tween cohort), using an adapted short material values scale (MVS-c). The results of the study revealed that while South African tweens are active in consumer culture, they are largely not materialistic. This research furthers the academic inquiry into children as consumers and active participants within consumer culture. It also addresses the paucity of research on African children within the consumer culture space. The results of the study have implications for marketers with regard to responsible marketing to child consumers, as well as for researchers with regard to acknowledging African children as a non-negotiable part of the study of consumption. The study also provides recommendations for further research on child consumers.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Over the past few decades, children’s participation in consumer culture has grown exponentially (Easterbrook et al., 2014; Roach et al., 2019). The role of children as consumers has increased in both their individual purchases and their influence on family and household acquisitions (Lenka, 2014; Lapiere et al., 2017; Chaudhury & Hyman, 2019). Over time, children have gained legitimacy as social persons and have been recognised by, and participated in, the consumer marketplace. Consequently, children are no longer outsiders to contemporary consumer culture. An unfortunate consequence of children’s being active consumers has been the development of materialism (Lenka, 2014; Baker & Chan, 2020). Materialism is a consumer orientation in which a person is overly interested in money and material possessions and sees wealth as having a central role in life (Maison & Adamczyk, 2020). Consumer advocates, policy-makers and researchers have expressed concern over the increasing materialism of children due to the commercialisation of the environments in which they are growing up (Opree et al., 2012). Scholars have argued that marketers are targeting children and grooming them for a lifetime of consumerism (Hamilton, 2009; Hawkins, 2016; Roach et al., 2019). Concerns about the effects of materialism are understandable and justified, given that studies have shown the negative consequences of materialism on children (Chaplin et al., 2019; Russell & Shrum, 2021; Opree et al., 2021). Studies have linked materialism to a variety of negative consequences in adults, while emerging research on children and adolescents has linked materialism to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, the use of addictive substances such as drugs and alcohol, and personal issues such as selfish attitudes and behaviours (Chaplin et al., 2014).

Despite children’s consumer behaviour and materialism having received considerable scholarly interest since the early 2000s, most of these studies have been focused primarily on American and European children, with very little attention being placed on the
African child. Thus, there is a paucity of research on African children within the consumer culture space. The goal of this study was to explore whether African children, particularly tweens, are materialistic. The study sought to answer the question: Are South African tweens materialistic and, if so, to what extent? Tweens are young consumers between the ages of 8 and 13, who are in be-tween childhood and adolescence (Rasmussen, 2021). Tweens were chosen as the study population because they have been described as “the most brand-oriented, consumer-involved, and materialistic generation in history” (Schor, 2004). Answering the research question will achieve several objectives. Firstly, much of the research into the consumption habits of children has been conducted in wealthier Western and Eastern countries. The result is that the voices of children from less privileged countries are underrepresented in the literature. Furthermore, most of the frameworks that describe the development and sustenance of materialism focus on materialism within economically developed capitalist Western societies (Chaplin et al., 2014; Richins, 2017; Baker & Chan, 2020, Nairn & Opree, 2021). Given that materialism is culture-specific in its development and expression (Ger & Belk, 1996; Baker & Chan, 2020), studies on other societies, especially those that are often overlooked in scholarly research, are necessary. Research into children in Western and Eastern countries cannot be generalised to children in an African context. Secondly, consumption orientations typically develop during the formative years (Baker & Chan, 2020), therefore consumer research on younger demographic segments is necessary. This is especially true because much of the understanding of the development of materialism has been informed by research on adult consumers (Chaplin & Roedder John, 2007). Understanding the material values of children may help guide interventions for reducing or eradicating materialism. Lastly, in the past decade, concerns over materialism in children have been elevated to issues of public policy, with social scientists, researchers and consumer activists calling for a restriction on marketing to children (Opree et al., 2012; Chaplin et al., 2014). This study thus provides some managerial implications regarding child materialism and marketing to child consumers.

The paper is organised as follows: firstly, there is a literature view, which includes the conceptualisation of materialism, development and effects of materialism. Then the quantitative research methodology adopted for the study is described. This is followed by a discussion of the data analysis, which includes the descriptive and inferential statistics. The paper concludes with the discussion, conclusions, limitations and directions for further research.

**Literature review**

Various materialism concepts are pertinent to this study. In this review, the various definitions and conceptualisations of materialism are presented. This is followed by an empirical review of studies that have investigated how materialism develops in children, the effects of materialism and studies on materialism in South Africa.

**Theoretical and Conceptual Background**

**Conceptualising Materialism**

Since the advent of research into consumer culture, materialism has been the subject of debate and discourse in both economics and sociology, with scholarly research being undertaken to provide empirical understanding of the subject. Consumer researchers have defined “materialism” as a consumer orientation that reflects the level of importance that a person attaches to worldly possessions (Lenka, 2014) or the emphasis that consumers place on acquiring possessions that are considered necessary to achieve certain goals, such as happiness (Opree et al., 2012). Sociologists have defined “materialism” as “a lifestyle based on accumulating and acquiring consumer goods beyond what is necessary to meet basic needs” (Froh et al., 2011). People who are materialistic believe that owning possessions is a key indicator of success. Such people are overly interested in money and material possessions and assign them an important role in their lives (Maison & Adamczyk, 2020). Table 1 below lists a few definitions of “materialism” from various scholars. The first two definitions are arguably two of the most widely accepted among consumer researchers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belk, 1984</td>
<td>“The importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richins &amp; Dawson, 1992</td>
<td>“The importance a person places on possessions and their acquisition as a necessary or desirable form of conduct to reach desired end states”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Froh et al., 2011</td>
<td>“Materialism is a lifestyle based on accumulating and acquiring consumer goods beyond what is necessary to meet basic needs”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opree et al., 2012</td>
<td>“Having a preoccupation with possessions and believing that products bring happiness and success”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenka, 2014</td>
<td>“[The] tendency of an individual to think the material possessions as a necessity for their living”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ku, 2015</td>
<td>“A value orientation that encompasses a strong ‘extrinsic’ emphasis on money, wealth, and expensive consumer goods as aspirations, as opposed to ‘intrinsic’ aspirations”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Compiled by Author

Three main elements underpin most of the tabled definitions of materialism and it is on these elements that the most widely used materialism scales are based: (i) wealth and possessions being central to life; (ii) possessions and wealth being a source of happiness;
and (iii) wealth and possessions being the main means by which a person judges their own success and that of others (Opree et al., 2011; Kunhe & Opree, 2019; Nairn & Opree, 2021). These three facets, delineated from the common definitions of materialism, reveal that materialism can be conceptualised as a set of value-laden beliefs that guide people’s lives and their consumption choices (Richins, 2017). When studying materialism, researchers have operationalised it as either a personality trait (e.g., Ahuvia & Wong, 2002; Maison & Adamczyk, 2020) a value orientation (e.g., Richins & Dawson, 1992; Dittmar & Isham, 2022) or a lifestyle (e.g., Richins & Fournier, 1991; Rasmussen et al., 2021). Many social science and consumer behaviour scholars have examined materialism in children from various perspectives. Researchers have examined how materialism is developed and perpetuated (Richins, 2017; Baker & Chan, 2020); other studies have investigated it from the perspective of the impoverished versus the affluent (Chaplin et al., 2014; Li et al., 2018), while still other scholars have researched the role of parenting in fostering materialistic values (Richins & Chaplin, 2015; Russell & Shrum, 2021). Some scholars have researched the effects of materialism, such as lower life satisfaction, poor interpersonal relationships and poor self-esteem (Dittmar et al., 2014; Dittmar & Isham, 2022; Nairn & Opree, 2021). Most of these studies have placed the emphasis on understanding how materialism develops in children.

### Empirical Review

#### How Materialism Develops

Researchers have had a long-standing interest in understanding how materialistic attitudes and compulsive consumption behaviours develop (Baker & Chan, 2020). Consumption is an inescapable part of human life. Many consumer needs can be met only by things. An ice-cold drink on a sunny day, an umbrella on a rainy day and a warm coat on a cold winter evening are all things that a person may need to acquire to meet a present need. As such, consumption itself is not intrinsically bad. The motive behind consumption, and the driving force behind acquiring things, together with the way people relate to possessions are what determine whether the outcomes of consumption are negative or positive (Dittmar & Isham, 2022). Some people may end up placing a disproportionate emphasis on the material things that meet their needs while placing a high value on acquisitions as a means of achieving significant life goals (Richins, 2017). This is when materialism manifests. The desire for material possessions begins at an early age, with materialistic orientations manifesting during the tween years (Chaplin & Roedder John, 2007). Researchers have investigated the pathways to materialism, researchers have been interested in how materialism affects children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chaplin &amp; Roedder John, 2007</td>
<td>Materialism develops as children enter adolescence because of a drop in self-esteem, which triggers a focus on material possessions as a means of self-enhancement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaplin et al., 2014</td>
<td>Children from impoverished families exhibit higher levels of materialism than their more affluent counterparts and material possessions are important for their happiness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richins &amp; Chaplin, 2015</td>
<td>The use of goods and possessions in parenting (material parenting) fosters materialism in the next generation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richins, 2017</td>
<td>Daily event cycles, developmental tasks, cultural influence and family environment all interact to influence the child’s materialism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ku, 2015</td>
<td>Children who suffer from lower life satisfaction report higher endorsement of financial goal importance and materialistic attitudes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richins &amp; Chaplin, 2021</td>
<td>Childhood insecurities, such as poverty and an unstable family environment, can foster transitory attachments and materialism in children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russell &amp; Shrum, 2021</td>
<td>Television viewing is positively correlated with materialism but non-significant when parental materialism is controlled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rasmussen et al., 2022</td>
<td>“Tweens’ exposure to kidfluencers is associated with their purchase of kidfluencer-related products through a desire to emulate kidfluencers, and [that] materialism moderates this relationship.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Compiled by Author

The studies on childhood materialism listed in the preceding table reveal that there are four main pathways to materialism: (i) parenting style, where parenting styles and the materialism values of parents cultivate a materialistic worldview in children (Chaplin & Roedder John, 2010; Richins & Chaplin, 2015; Richins, 2017; Russell & Shrum, 2021); (ii) peer influence, where peers effect materialism by modelling materialistic attitudes for their friends, through peer pressure and through the ways in which they discuss material possessions (Chaplin & Roedder John, 2010; Richins 2017; Freeman & Dardis, 2022; Rasmussen, 2022); (iii) income inequality, whereby the social insecurity that comes from inequality leads to materialistic tendencies to compensate for economic deprivation (Chaplin et al., 2014; Ku, 2015; Nairn & Opree, 2021; Rozer et al., 2022); and (iv) marketing and advertising, whereby studies have shown links between exposure to television advertising and increased materialism and participation in consumer culture (Opree et al., 2012; Lenka, 2014; Opree et al., 2020; Russell & Shrum, 2021; Nairn & Opree, 2021). In addition to understanding the pathways to materialism, researchers have been interested in how materialism affects children.
Effects of Childhood Materialism

While some researchers’ interests in children and materialism have focused primarily on how materialism develops, other scholars have taken a keen interest in understanding the effects of materialism on children. While many of the studies on the effects of materialism have focused on adult consumers, a few have focused on children. These studies have revealed that there are three main effects of childhood materialism: (i) lower life satisfaction, whereby studies have shown that children who exhibit materialistic tendencies tend to have lower personal well-being and negative life satisfaction (Opree et al., 2012; Kasser, et al., 2014; Dittmar et al., 2014; Ku 2015; Dittmar & Isham 2022); (ii) poor interpersonal relationships, whereby the desire for more possessions as a means of improving a person’s wellbeing often results in a poorer quality of life (Lenka, 2014; Chaplin et al., 2014; Jiang et al., 2015; Dittmar & Isham, 2022); and (iii) low self-esteem, whereby children who experience economic deprivation tend to have strong negative emotions that can translate into low self-esteem (Chaplin & Roedder John, 2010; Kasser et al., 2014; Jiang et al., 2015; Nairm & Opree, 2021; Trzcińska, & Sekścińska, 2021). The negative effects of childhood materialism have led to calls for interventions to curb materialism in children.

Materialism in South Africa

Studies on materialism in young consumers in South Africa have focused primarily on young adults. The findings from these studies imply that materialism develops mainly during the adolescent years. Duh (2015) used structural equation modelling to test three materialism life course theories among young adults. The findings revealed that these young consumers were materialistic because of peer communication about consumption during adolescence – evidence that supports the socialisation life course perspective. Similarly, in their study on the pervasiveness of materialism and its effects on consumer behaviour among university students at a small South African university, Ravhuhali et al. (2020) found deeply rooted materialistic behaviour among the students, indicating attitudes that had developed during adolescence. Additionally, a study of the influence of materialism and status consumption on students’ attitudes towards money and credit found these Generation Y students to exhibit some materialistic tendencies. Another study examining young adult materialism in French and South African students found South African young adults to be more materialistic than their French counterparts, with materialism developing from peer communication during adolescence (Duh, et al., 2015). While the results of these studies are consistent with findings from similar studies among young consumers in Western societies, they do not investigate materialism in younger consumers. Given that studies have suggested that materialism develops mostly in middle childhood (Chaplin, et al., 2014; Jiang et al., 2015), studies on this age group are necessary. Hence the current study investigates materialism in tween consumers.

Methodology

The main objective of this study was to discover whether South African tweens are materialistic. An empirical study, utilising a quantitative survey, was chosen to address the research question. The researcher used a self-administered, individual questionnaire to collect data from schoolchildren in the Gauteng province of South Africa. The questionnaire was designed to generate four (4) classes of demographic data, namely age, gender, grade and race. Socioeconomic status was included as a variable during the analysis stage, with the location of the school being used as the criterion to assume social class. Schools were selected from locations of varying economic status. The researcher acknowledges that this is a subjective process, which may not accurately reflect the economic reality of the study participants. The upper-middle class and emerging middle class had the highest percentages, at 23% each. These were followed by the lower-middle class at 20%, with the lower emerging middle and second-lowest classes both having 17%. Social class was considered important in this study because prior studies on childhood materialism have found it to be a factor in shaping materialistic values.

Sample

Data for the study were collected from a convenience sample of 192 primary schoolchildren (36% male and 64% female, with a mean age of 12.3 years). The sample of tweens aged 10-14 was drawn from five schools in the Gauteng province of South Africa. The highest number of respondents (26%) came from both the 10- and 11-year-old age groups, while the least (8%) was the 14-year-old group. Five schools were selected as the research sites. The data were collected from schools to increase the chances of obtaining a larger sample size. Furthermore, schools are a major socialisation site for children as they not only spend much of their time there, but it is also where they interact extensively with their peers. In addition to the gatekeeper’s letters obtained from the schools, letters were sent home with the tweens inviting them to participate in the study. The children were required to produce both a signed parental consent form and an individual assent form to be eligible to participate. Failure of the children to return consent forms from their parents was the main factor that affected the sample size for the study.

Measures

Materialism was measured using a scale with some items adapted from the Material Values Scale for children (MVS-c) by Opree et al. (2011). The original scale was developed and validated to assess the three variables of materialism simultaneously, namely material centrality (the degree to which possessions are seen as being central to life), material happiness (the degree to which the person believes that possessions bring happiness) and material success (the degree to which possessions are used to measure success in others). Previous studies have validated the full 18-item scale as well as the shorter 6-item and 3-item scales. Studies employing
the 6-item scale have found it to be valid and reliable for measuring materialism (Opree et al., 2011; Van de Molen et al., 2018; Kuhne & Opree, 2019). The current study employed a 9-item scale to determine if a slightly different version of the short MVS-c would produce similar results. The Likert scale included four response categories, namely “No, not at all”, “No, not really”, “Yes, a little” and “Yes, very much”. The happiness construct was measured with the items “Do you think it’s really true that money can buy happiness?”, “Do you believe that people are much happier if they can buy a lot of things?” and “Would you be unhappy if you didn’t have lots of things?” Material success was measured using the items “Do you like children with more money more than you like other children?”, “Do you envy things that your friend has?” and “Do other children like you more if you have more money?” The last variable was material centrality and this was measured using the items “Do think it’s important to own expensive things?”, “Do you think it’s important to own expensive clothes?” and “Do you think it’s important to own expensive brands?” Initial factor analysis revealed that two of the items, one for happiness and one for success, did not load well with the other items, hence they were discarded and a 7-item scale was used.

Reliability of The Scales

To measure internal consistency, Cronbach’s alpha was computed using SPSS 28, while SPSS AMOS 28 was used to analyse the data set. The composite scale met the minimum threshold of 0.7, with a Cronbach’s alpha value of 0.771. Cronbach’s alpha was also computed for the individual constructs. The happiness and success constructs did not meet the minimum threshold, with values of 0.486 and 0.634, respectively. According to Eisinga et al. (2013), while Cronbach’s alpha is an accurate measure of reliability, its assumptions are rather restrictive in nature and often result in lower reliability for two-item scales. The centrality construct was the only individual construct with an acceptable alpha score of 0.872. This difference can be attributed to the fact that this construct had three items. Additionally, the data were tested for normality. The skewness tests revealed values of 0.083, 0.184 and 0.343 for happiness, success and centrality, respectively. Values between -0.5 and 0.5 indicate that the data are symmetrical (Rahi & Ghani, 2018). The Kurtosis indicated values of -0.997, -1.070 and -1.053, respectively for the variables. Kurtosis between -2 and +2 are considered acceptable to prove normal univariate distribution.

Data Analysis

SPSS and SPSS Amos 28 were used to analyse the data. Materialism was examined using a 7-item, 4-point Likert scale. To examine the distribution of cases for each item, univariate analysis was conducted. Table 3 below reveals the distribution of children’s responses to the 7 items in the scale. The table also reveals the means and the standard deviations for each of the items. An inspection of the table reveals that for each of the items, the mean was slightly above 2, meaning that a significant portion of the children’s responses in the data set fell closer to the negative for materialism. Additionally, all but one of the items had a mode of 1, meaning that “No, not at all” was the most selected response to six of the items. The last variable was material centrality and this was measured using the items “Do think it’s important to own expensive things?”, “Do you think it’s important to own expensive clothes?” and “Do you think it’s important to own expensive brands?”

A point Likert scale. To examine the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Materialism</th>
<th>No, not at all N</th>
<th>No, not really N</th>
<th>Yes, a little N</th>
<th>Yes, much N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>98.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>35.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Distribution of Children’s Responses

Source: Author (2023)
Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to test whether material centrality, material happiness and material success were first-order factors for materialism. An exploratory factor analysis was not done because the study employed scale items that have been validated before. However, because this was the first time the items were used to test materialism in South African tween consumers, it was determined that a CFA would be necessary to determine if the results would be consistent with prior studies. The use of CFA to test a material values scale for children has been used by Opree et al. (2011) and Van de Mullen et al. (2018). The discriminant validity of the model was measured by assessing the covariances between the three variables. Values below <0.5 are considered normal, while covariant indices >0.5 indicate poor validity (Rahi & Ghani, 2018). The model indicated that the values for the three factors were 0.48 (happiness and success), 0.50 (happiness and centrality) and 0.37 (success and centrality). This indicates that the model has good discriminant validity. The CFA revealed a 3-factor material culture model, as depicted in figure 1 below. Good convergent validity is indicated by factor loadings of 0.7 or higher, whereas acceptable convergent validity is indicated by factor loadings of 0.5 or higher (Van der Mullen, et al., 2018). A visual inspection of the model revealed the following factor loadings: success – 0.55 and 0.58; happiness – 0.60 and 0.77; and centrality – 0.84, 0.86 and 0.80. The results therefore revealed that the happiness and success variables had acceptable convergent validity, while the centrality variable had good convergent validity.

Figure 1: Material Values

In addition to checking the data for discriminant and convergent validity using the factor loadings, the fit of the model was evaluated using the model fit indices displayed in table 4 below. Goodness of fit indices evaluate how well the model fits the observed data (Alavi et al., 2020). A good indicator of model fit is that the Chi Square must not be statistically significant. The model’s p-value (p=0.248) is above the suggested acceptable cut-off (>0.05). This indicates a good fit. The Goodness of Fit index is .980 against a >0.9 recommended value, while the Adjusted Goodness of Fit is 0.950, against a >0.85 recommended value. The RMSEA (.0036) and PCLOSE (.608) also indicated acceptable indices. All these indices taken together indicate that the model is a good fit. Given these figures, it can be concluded that the measurement items matched their underlying latent construct.

Table 4: Model Fit Indices for Materialism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Threshold</th>
<th>Indices for model</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cmin/df</td>
<td>&lt;5.0</td>
<td>1.249</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X² p- value</td>
<td>&gt;0.05</td>
<td>0.248</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFI</td>
<td>&gt;0.9</td>
<td>0.980</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGFI</td>
<td>&gt;0.85</td>
<td>0.950</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMSEA</td>
<td>&lt;0.08</td>
<td>0.036</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCLOSE</td>
<td>&gt;0.05</td>
<td>0.608</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author (2023)

Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore whether tweens in South Africa are materialistic. Children’s materialism has drawn increasing attention from consumer advocates, parents, educators and government regulators for several reasons. Some of these include long-term studies showing a sharp rise in materialistic attitudes among college and high school students (Ravhuhali et al., 2020), the portrayal of young people in the media as hyper-consumers (Russell & Shrum, 2021) and the startling persistence in marketing
directed at children (Nairn & Opree, 2021). Much of the understanding of childhood materialism and participation in consumer culture is informed by Western scholarship. The current study therefore sought to bring South African children into the conversation about materialism. The study adopted items from an existing material values scale for children (MVS-c). This scale was administered to 192 tweens aged 8–14. Material happiness, material success and material centrality were used as first-order factors, with materialism as a second-order factor. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to determine whether the scale was appropriate for measuring materialism. Previous studies that have validated the scale have used children from Western society. The data were found to have both convergent and concurrent validity and were thus suitable for measuring tween materialism. The results of the study, and the subsequent analysis, revealed that South African tweens are not necessarily materialistic.

The results of the study revealed that South African tweens are not excessively materialistic. While the results of the confirmatory factor analysis revealed that the scale used to measure materialism is valid for measuring materialism among South African tween consumers, the data revealed that South African children are largely not materialistic. The results of the study run counter to popular notions about deeply entrenched consumerism and materialism among child consumers. The findings regarding materialism are contrary to previous research from Europe, Asia and the United States, which found the tweens in those places to be highly materialistic. These findings reinforce the need to test the validity of Western theories in an African context. Knowledge about child consumers has been vastly informed by data from European and American children. The study can help to improve theories about child consumers in African contexts and advance knowledge about child consumer behaviour across different cultures. The results of this study are evidence of the need for different perspectives from other cultures when it comes to understanding child consumer behaviour.

Managerial Implications

The results of this study have implications for the consumer behaviour of South African children and their consumption values. If South African children are not materialistic, the status quo should be maintained and managers would need to take this into consideration when developing communications for these vulnerable consumers. Concerns about childhood materialism have placed some of the blame for materialistic attitudes on marketing. Studies on the development of materialism have suggested that marketers are responsible for some of the materialistic tendencies of tweens, given the pressures for consumerism that are precipitated by advertising and marketing. The fact that tweens in South Africa are not overly materialistic means that marketers need to be cautious in the way they approach these developmentally delicate consumers. Secondly, responsible marketing towards children should include efforts to raise awareness among young consumers of the dangers of consumerism. Managers need to be cognisant of the processes that encourage materialism and avoid marketing to children that may be harmful.
**Implications for Future Research**

The current study used a short material values scale to measure materialism in South African children. Future studies with this same group could use a longer scale, which other authors have found to yield more valid and reliable findings. Secondly, findings of similar studies would benefit from population cross-validity and test-retest reliability. A third implication for future research would be a longitudinal study to demonstrate how the material values of children change as they grow older. Additionally, longitudinal studies could be conducted where interventions to curb materialism are implemented as the tweens grown older. Kasser et al. (2014) found that there was a decline in materialism when interventions were put in place. Thus, future researchers could investigate the various interventions that could help to reduce childhood materialism and then study the changes that took place in the values of the children.

**Limitations of the study**

A major limitation of this study was that there is a dearth of literature on materialism among African children and a glaring paucity of research into child materialism and children’s consumer culture in South Africa. Most of this research has been done in Western contexts. As a result, data from those studies were used to inform and guide this study. The final limitation of the study was the sample size. Firstly, the sample size was small, n=192, therefore the findings cannot be generalised to the larger South African population. Issues of access to young consumers, including the several layers of gatekeeper approval needed, resulted in a smaller sample size. Secondly, the sample was gender-biased, with females (n=123) representing a far greater proportion of the sample than males (n=69). This was a limitation for the study because prior studies have revealed that materialism is deeply gendered, with boys exhibiting far greater materialism than girls. This could be a reason why the results of the study were inconsistent with other studies on childhood materialism.

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**References**


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