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Bringing Children into the Sociology of Consumption: A Symbolic Consumption Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article explores children's consumption practices from a sociology of consumption perspective. The aim is to discover whether South African children, in their consumption of clothing, engage in symbolic consumption and to identify the ways in which they do so. Existing studies on children and symbolic consumption have largely excluded African children, hence this study represents an attempt to include their voices in the conceptualisation of childhood consumer behaviour. Data were collected through a survey of 192 children aged 10–14, using a questionnaire developed from the literature on symbolic consumption. The article presents the design and implementation of a quantitative empirical study into children's engagement in symbolic consumption. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to tease out the factors representing the ways in which children engage in symbolic consumption, while confirmatory factor analysis was used to verify the factor structure and test whether the data fit the model. The EFA revealed four factors that represent the ways in which children engage in symbolic consumption: identity, affiliation, perception, and image. The findings reveal that children use their clothing to create their individual identities, fit in with social groups, draw inferences about others through their clothing, and as a yardstick to gauge social image. This research furthers the enquiry into children as consumers while addressing the paucity of research related to African child consumers. The results of the study have implications for marketing practitioners, while also providing directions for future research.

JEL classification: M00, M3, M31

Keywords: child consumer, consumer culture, sociology of consumption, emerging markets, symbolic consumption.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The active role of children as consumers has received considerable research attention due to their increased participation in consumer spaces (Sigirci, Gegez, Aytimur, & Gegez, 2022; Lapierre, 2019; Šramová, 2017). This heightened interest has been inspired by children becoming a lucrative, independent consumer market, their ability to influence family decision-making, and children serving as an avenue to access adult consumers (Bertol et al., 2017; Buckingham & Tingstad, 2017; Chaudhury & Hyman, 2019). Consequently, children's consumer behaviour has experienced heightened multidisciplinary interest (Šramová, 2017). This multidisciplinary approach to understanding consumer behaviour paved the way for the "sociology of consumption" – a subfield of sociology that examines the ways in which individuals and groups use and interpret goods and services in their daily lives (Evans, 2019). However, the sociology of consumption pays relatively little interest to children (Martens et al., 2004). This is despite the new sociology of childhood demanding that children should be researched as social actors, who should be afforded a more direct voice in the production of sociological data as it relates to their consumer behaviour (Mingazova, 2018). Marketers cannot understand child consumers through the lens of adult consumer behaviour, as children have their own specific needs, values, and attitudes (Šramová, 2017). As the interest in young consumers and the child market grows, it is imperative for marketers to understand the contextual influences on the consumption practices of children (Watkins et al., 2017). The aim of this study is to bring South African children into the sociology of consumption, by interrogating and understanding the ways in which they engage in symbolic consumption.

Symbolic consumption is premised on the notion that consumption goes beyond the utilitarian and functional aspects of goods and services, to emphasise the cultural and social meanings they represent (John & Chaplin, 2019; Luna-Cortés, 2017). Children's understanding of the social value of consumption and the symbolism attached to consumption objects, gives them knowledge that allows them to form impressions of others, express themselves and play a social role through consumption (John & Chaplin, 2022). The study seeks to discover how South African children use the symbolic properties of clothing in their everyday consumption practices. Do South African children engage in symbolic consumption, and if so, how? In today's appearance-oriented consumer culture, children's consumption of fashion has become an important research field (Aberg & Huvila, 2019). For children, clothing is a central part of how and why they consume (Piacentini, 2010). For them, clothing and identity are intimately linked (Twigg, 2015). Children use clothes to define who they are and to communicate their identity to those around them. Clothing is an essential social tool in the lives of children, with clothes being seen as a way for them to survive in their social worlds (Piacentini, 2010). Clothing is an important symbolic resource for children, which helps them mark out their social position in terms of economic, social, and cultural capital (Piacentini and Mailer, 2004). A secondary objective of the study is to determine whether demographic differences such as such as age, gender and socioeconomic status play a role in children's symbolic consumption behaviour. Studies on symbolic consumption often consider the socio-demographic influences on consumption (Gbadamosi, 2015; Luna-Cortes, 2017).

This research is necessary for two primary reasons. Firstly, studies on the sociology of consumption and symbolic consumption are largely silent on African children, with most studies on child consumer behaviour having been conducted in Western societies (Senooane & Phiri, 2020). Consequently, much of the conceptualisations of child consumers are informed by Western knowledge. According to Eckhardt et al. (2022), there is a need for an epistemic shift in our marketing understanding, which requires an interrogation of the dominant Eurocentric perspective. Given the socioeconomic and cultural differences between Africa and the societies in which consumer culture studies have been conducted, research on African children is warranted.

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According to Burgess and Malhorta (2020), the socioeconomic and cultural contexts of emerging markets are markedly different from those of high-income countries, making it imperative to conduct research in the former contexts. Secondly, Africa is one of the fastest-growing consumer markets in the world (Nel, 2022; Signé, 2018). A crucial megatrend observed in the consumer marketplace is the increasing importance of African and Indian Ocean Rim markets (Burgess & Malhorta, 2020). Despite these pointers, Africa is still an under-researched and under-explored market for consumer scientists (de Kock et al., 2022), hence the need for indigenous marketing scholars to contribute to the progression of marketing science and practice (Agarwal & Malhotra, 2019; Burgess & Malhorta, 2020). Child consumer research in an African context can provide valuable insights into this unique demographic and inform the development of effective marketing strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumption is one of the central tenets of modern society (Roach et al., 2019). Modern conceptions of consumption recognise that it is not merely about the processes by which people use goods and services to satisfy wants and needs but is deeply intertwined with broader social and economic structures (Klinenberg et al., 2020). Consumption is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that has enjoyed sustained academic interest from multiple disciplines, including economics, sociology, and marketing (Firat et al., 2013; Mingazova, 2018). The study of consumption from the fields of sociology and consumer behaviour gave birth to the *sociology of consumption*. This is a subfield of sociology which explores how people's consumption patterns are shaped by social, cultural, economic, and political factors (Evans, 2019; Warde, 2015). The sociology of consumption is important to marketers because multidisciplinary approaches to the study of consumption provide a more nuanced understanding of consumer behaviour (Byrne, 2020).

2.1. The Sociology of Consumption

Consumerism as a dominant way of life was one of the hallmarks of the 20th century (Miller, 2017). Contemporary society has become a consumerist culture, where social life operates in the sphere of consumption, and consumption is central to the practices of everyday life (Paterson, 2017; Roach et al., 2019). The centrality of consumption sparked research from scholars in the fields of sociology, anthropology, economics, and cultural and business studies (Mingazova, 2018; Šramová, 2017). This gave rise to the sociology of consumption. The sociology of consumption examines how larger social and cultural factors such as socioeconomic class, gender, and ethnicity, affect and reflect symbolic consumption practices. It challenges the individualistic assumptions about consumption, emphasising the social nature thereof (Klinenberg et al., 2020). In addition, it considers how consumption can either reinforce or challenge power relations and social inequalities (Tach & Amorim, 2015). The sociology of consumption assumes that there are three fundamental dimensions to consumption: *acquisition* (i.e., the ways in which people exchange, access, and experience the goods and services they consume); *appropriation* (i.e., how commodities assume meaning and are incorporated into someone's everyday life) and *appreciation* (i.e., the ways in which people derive pleasure from consumption) (Evans, 2019; Warde, 2015). In the past two decades, a key insight from the sociology of consumption has been that most consumption is undertaken to "accomplish everyday life" (Klinenberg et al., 2020). This quotidian centrality of consumption is what has driven scholarly interest. Understanding the drivers of consumer culture is key to gaining insight into consumer behaviour and societal dynamics (Firat et al., 2013).

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2.2. Symbolic Consumption

Historical references to symbolic consumption began to appear in the literature towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. The study of the concept as a marketing variable, however, only began in earnest in the mid-20th century (Luna-Cortés, 2017). This shift was precipitated by the recognition that goods have symbolic significance (Roach et al., 2019; Warde 2015). The concept of symbolic consumption is premised on the notion that people consume for reasons that go beyond functionality, but rather, that products and brands have significant meanings that consumers can utilise in their cultural ecosystem (Prónay & Hetesi, 2016). Product choices are not made based solely on the utilitarian capabilities of the products, but also on the symbolic meanings inherent in them. In a consumer society, where society is organised around the consumption and display of commodities, people gain "prestige, identity and standing" from the goods they consume (Firat et al., 2013). A variety of authors have attempted to define symbolic consumption – see Table 1 for some of the definitions that inform much of the research on symbolic consumption.

Table 1
Definitions of Symbolic Consumption

Author(s)	Year	Definition of Symbolic Consumption
Belk et al.	1984	"Tendency of some buyers to add meaning to the products they acquire"
Ger and Belk	1996	"Acquisition and possession of goods as a communicative act that is crucial to an individual identity construction"
McAlister and Cornwell	2010	"A child's ability to make judgments about the ways in which brands are used to symbolise user imagery and product qualities"
Park et al.	2010	"Intention to project status, feeling of belonging or self-worth though the consumption of goods and services that transmit symbolic values"
Lloyd Parkes and Doherty	2012	"Consumption symbolism is the understanding of meanings attached to the ownership of brands or products and is a significant aspect of the consumer socialisation process of children".
Luna-Cortés	2017	"The acquisition, creation, preservation, and presentation of our existential identity through consumption"

Source: created by authors.

Many of the definitions include three variables in their description of symbolic consumption: (i) consumer identity, (ii) the meaning of products in society, and (iii) the role of goods in human relations. These variables suggest that people use consumer goods in a variety of ways. First, goods are used as materials to create, foster, and develop individual identity (Joy & Li, 2012; Roach et al., 2019). The symbolic meaning of goods is thus adopted for use as an outward expression of an individual's self-concept. Second, people consume goods to reflect their affiliation with or connection to, particular social groups (Warde, 2015). As such, consumption becomes an important element for participating in social life, and improving one's social relations (Firat et al., 2013). Third, consumption is used to signify social distinction, with people drawing on economic, social, and cultural capital to compete for status, in what is referred to as symbolic capital (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). Ultimately, symbolic consumption represents how our behaviour, as consumers, reveals something about ourselves, where we fit in and how we distinguish ourselves from others (Roach et al., 2019).

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2.3. Symbolic Consumption in Child Consumers

Studies on children's engagement in consumer culture have shown that, from birth, they are immersed in a consumer culture that affects all aspects of their daily lives, including their social interactions (Hémar-Nicolas & Rodhain, 2017). As they grow up, children begin to understand the social aspects of products and the symbolism attached to consumption objects (John & Chaplin, 2022). Children learn about consumption symbols between early and middle childhood, and by late childhood (ages 10–11) they have a deep understanding of the social meanings associated with certain products and brands (John & Chaplin, 2019). This means they start to understand that certain products or brands are associated with particular meanings or values. For example, a child might learn that a certain brand of sneakers is associated with athleticism and popularity, while another is associated with environmentalism or social responsibility. Children may also begin to understand that certain products are associated with particular social groups or lifestyles. Just as adults use the symbolic properties of commodities, so children do the same. Children may engage in symbolic consumption in the following ways:

Identity and Self-concept: The sociologist Anthony Giddens (as cited in Soron, 2010) once argued that, in today's world, consumption choices are increasingly "decisions not only about how to act but who to be". This means that most consumption choices are about identity and self-concept (Rodhain & Aurier, 2016). Children can use products and brands to define who they are and who they want to be. Between early childhood and adolescence, major changes occur in children's representation of their self-concepts. First, as they grow older, they begin to conceptualise the 'self' in less concrete terms ("I have black hair") and gravitate towards more abstract terms ("I am active"). Growing up, they begin to develop more complex conceptualisations of products and brands and start to incorporate more brands into their self-concepts (Chaplin & Lowrey, 2010). Second, as they become older, they begin to appreciate that there are a variety of ways to communicate who they are and what they value. Consequently, they begin to understand that what they say, do and own, says a lot about who they are. Possessions can become part of a child's self-concept and can be used to "symbolise [their] personality, interests, heritage, and group membership" (John & Chaplin, 2019). As such, children can use possessions to communicate their self-concept to themselves ('self-signalling') or others ('others-signalling').

Social Group Affiliation: For consumption to be meaningful, social interaction is required. Material objects can help to define roles and behaviours for specific cultures, act as agents for in-and out-group formation, and serve as a means of communicating interpersonal roles (Rodhain & Aurier, 2016). Children may use consumption to identify with particular groups or cultures (Nairn & Spotswood, 2015). For example, a child may desire a specific brand of clothing or toy because it is associated with a certain social group, or because it is perceived as being popular or trendy. The consumption of such products can provide a sense of belonging and acceptance among peers and may help children establish their own identity within their social circle. In addition, children learn much of the symbolic meanings of goods from their peers (Elloit & Leonard, 2004). This influence is particularly heightened in relation to symbolic goods such as clothing and fashion items (Rodhain & Aurier, 2016). Studies have demonstrated the relationship between peer influence and symbolic consumption: as Hémar-Nicolas and Rodhain (2017) found, children actively use branding to fuel peer culture.

Social Status Evaluation: By the ages of 10–11, children have a well-established sense of the social meanings associated with certain products (Rodhain & Aurier, 2016). They make assumptions about others, based on the products and brands those people own (Chaplin & Lowrey, 2010; Elloit & Leonard, 2004). For example, in their analysis of extant research on children's symbolic consumption, Chaplin and Lowrey (2010) found that between pre-school and second grade, children make inferences about people based on concrete cues about the products they own, and by third grade, they start showing signs of understanding brand symbolism. Similarly,

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Piacentini and Mailer (2004) found that children use clothing to make value judgements about others. The same author found that children use clothing to create first impressions about others, with branded and non-branded clothing being used to make inferences about socioeconomic status. Thus, children engage in symbolic consumption by using clothes as a gauge of people's social status (Piacentini, 2010; Twigg, 2015).

2.4. Research on Children and Symbolic Consumption

Marketing and sociology scholars have long recognised that there are symbolic meanings embedded in consumer goods. The earliest studies on child consumers and symbolic consumption were concerned with children's recognition of consumption symbolism (Belk et al., 1982; Belk et al., 1984). For instance, Belk et al. (1982) compared the abilities of children in four age groups to assign a variety of homes and cars to the type of people who own them and concluded that the recognition of symbolic consumption began in grade school. Many of the initial studies were underpinned by developmental theories which posit that chronological age is the basis for the development of consumer behaviour (Nairn et al., 2008). Subsequent studies began to focus on the influence of brands on children's symbolic consumption (Achereiner & John, 2003; Elliot & Leonard, 2004) while others considered individual differences in children's social development (Hogg et al., 2009; McAlister & Cornwell, 2010). For example, Piacentini and Mailer (2004) found that children use branded clothing to manage first impressions and signal their belonging to groups of people who wear the same branded sneakers. Later studies began to recognise the limitations of developmental theories in understanding child consumers and adopted socio-ecological approaches (Nairn et al., 2008; Nairn & Spotswood, 2015). For instance, Nairn and Spotswood (2015) found that children develop three skills during the consumption process, namely, "social consumption recognition", "social consumption performance" and "social consumption communication". It is upon these most recent studies that the current investigation is premised. Table 2 summarises some of the seminal research on children and symbolic consumption.

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Table 2
Research on Children and Symbolic Consumption

Author(s)	Cohort	Methodology	Findings
Belk et al. (1982)	Children (4–14)	Stimulus presentation of photographs	"The ability to recognize the social implications of consumption choices is minimal among pre-schoolers, significant by second grade, and almost fully developed by sixth grade"
Belk et al. (1984)	Tweens (10–12)	Interviews and product exhibits	Children's ability to recognise the symbolic meanings associated with products varies depending on age, gender, and socioeconomic status
Piacentini and Mailer (2004)	Teenagers	Individual interviews	Clothing choices are bound to the self-concept and are used as a means of self-expression and judging others
Elliot and Leonard (2004)	Children (8–12)	Projective methods	Children form stereotypes about people based on whether they wear expensive/branded trainers or unbranded/inexpensive ones. Children want to own the same trainers as their peers, to fit in, be accepted and not be regarded as coming from a poor home
Nairn et al. (2008)	Tweens (7–11)	Group discussions and a novel cork-board sorting exercise	"Children use brand symbols in their everyday lives [through] their fluid interpretations of 'cool' in relation to brand symbols, and the constitution of gender in children's talk about iconic brands"
Lloyd Parkes and Doherty (2012)	Tweens (11–14)	Online questionnaires and projective techniques	Tweens use brands to project a self-concept
Nairn and Spotswood (2015)	Children (8–13)	Qualitative interviews and focus groups	Brands and clothes are consumed for the socially sanctioned objective of achieving and maintaining a place in the social peer hierarchy
Rodhain and Aurier (2016)	Tweens (10–11)	Individual interviews and focus groups	Social interactions with parents, peers and teachers play a significant role in the child–brand relationship
Hémar-Nicolas and Rodhain (2017)	Tweens (10–11)	Ethnography	Children actively use brands to fuel peer culture, with brands being used as criteria for inclusion in, and exclusion from, peer groups
Watkins et al. (2017)	Pre-schoolers	Flashcards and interviews	"Brand symbolism understanding starts as early as two years, and increases with age throughout the pre-school years"

Source: created by authors.

Symbolic consumption can have both positive and negative effects on children. On the one hand, it can help them to fit in with their peers, to express themselves and feel a sense of belonging. On the other hand, it can contribute to social inequality, materialism, and the pressure to conform to certain norms and standards. As such, it is necessary for marketers, researchers, and theorists alike to understand how children engage in symbolic consumption. Knowledge of the ways in which young African consumers recognise and engage in symbolic consumption is important for marketers seeking to formulate communication strategies that are relevant to them, and not just an extension of marketing communications aimed at Western child consumers.

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3. METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this study was to bring South African children into the sociology of consumption by identifying the ways in which they engage in symbolic consumption. A secondary objective was to understand the socio-demographic differences between the children regarding their symbolic consumption behaviour. Many of the studies that investigate symbolic consumption in children have adopted a qualitative approach. As such, this quantitative study attempts to provide objective empirical support to the study of children's engagement with symbolic consumption. Data were collected through a self-administered, individual questionnaire involving schoolchildren in South Africa. Schools were selected as research sites, as they allow access to many children at once, and are places where children interact with their peers and engage in consumption. Schools play a significant role in the interpersonal relationships between children (Nairn et al., 2008). They are a privileged field of observation, as they allow children to be studied in their daily environment where they can express themselves freely (Rodhain & Aurier, 2016). Ethical approval was received from each of the participating schools, after which the relevant parents were asked to sign consent forms for their children to participate in the study. Once parental consent had been granted, the children were presented with assent forms, indicating that they agreed to participate in the study. The child respondents were informed that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time.

3.1. Sample

Data for the study were drawn from a quantitative, exploratory survey of schoolchildren in Gauteng, South Africa. One hundred and ninety-two (n = 192) children aged 10–14 (M = 11.40, SD = 1.31) from 5 schools, participated in the study. Many of the schools approached to participate in the study declined, hence the low number of schools. In addition, the small sample size was a result of the reality that conducting research with children requires numerous levels of consent, which negatively affects sample sizes. Prior research has shown that an increase in the number of permissions required results in a decrease in the number of respondents (Gross-Manos et al., 2021). In addition, convenience sampling was used to select the respondents, as the study included all the children whose parents had given their consent, and who themselves assented to participate. The demographic characteristics of the sample were also considered. According to Belk et al. (1984), the main determinants of consumption symbolism recognition are age, gender, and social class. Table 3 presents the demographic profile of the sample. Girls made up 64% of the respondents, and boys 36%. The results revealed that most of the respondents were black (72%), followed by white (12%), coloured (10%) and Indian (6%). While these figures are skewed in favour of one race, they are consistent with the racial make-up of this country. Most of the children in the schools involved in the study were black hence the skewness. The 10- and 11-year-olds represented the largest groups, and the 14-year-olds the smallest group. The mean score for age (M = 11.730) indicated that the average age of the respondents was 12, which is acceptable for a study on the tween cohort. The last demographic considered was socioeconomic class. The Bureau of Marketing Research determined that there are seven income classifications of South African consumers, ranging from lowest class to affluent (BusinessTech, 2016). The rest of the classes are reflected in table 3. For this study socioeconomic class was estimated based on the location of the school. Schools from different socioeconomic brackets were selected, to reflect the economic make-up of the province in which the data were collected. Schools were chosen to maintain an approximate balance of the different classes. None of the schools were in chronically poor or affluent places hence these two classes were left out. The demographic profile of the respondents is represented in Table 3.

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Table 3
Demographic Profile

Sample Characteristics	Demographic	N	%
Gender	Female	122	64.1
	Male	69	35.9
Age	10 years	49	25.5
	11 years	50	26.0
	12 years	32	16.7
	13 years	45	23.4
	14 years	16	8.3
Race	Black	138	71.9
	White	23	12.0
	Indian	19	9.9
	Coloured	12	6.3
Socioeconomic Class	Upper-middle class	45	23.4
	Lower-middle class	38	19.8
	Emerging middle class	44	22.9
	Low emerging middle	33	17.2
	Second-lowest class	32	16.7

Source: created by authors.

3.2. Measures

A review of the studies on children's symbolic consumption determined that clothing and brands were the two most researched aspects (Lloyd Parkes & Doherty, 2012; Nairn et al., 2008; Nikccvic et al., 2019; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). As such, the current study developed a questionnaire based on children' clothing consumption. Clothing consumption is important in symbolic consumption research because in children, clothing is a social tool that is bound to the self-concept, used as a means of self-expression, and used to judge people and situations (Piacentini, 2010). The research instrument used in this study was developed by the researchers, based on the literature review. Given that most related studies adopted qualitative methodologies, no scales were found (at the time of the study) that had been tested and validated to measure symbolic consumption in children. The questions were designed to measure three aspects of symbolic consumption discussed in the literature, namely self-identity, social group affiliation and consumption recognition. According to Sharma (2022) a good questionnaire should have 25-30 questions. Given that this research involved children, half the recommended number was used. The 15-item forced four-point Likert scale included four response categories, namely "No, not at all", "No, not really", "Yes, a little" and "Yes, very much". The number of items was selected based on the researcher's discretion to limit the time the children would take to answer the questions. Self-identity was measured using five items (example: "I show people who I am with my clothes"); social group affiliation was measured with five items (example: "I buy the same sneakers as my race") and consumption recognition was measured with five items (example: "People show who they are with their clothes"). A forced four-point scale was used because a systematic review of research into children revealed that four-point Likert scales yielded some of the most valid results (Coombes et al., 2021). To measure internal consistency, Cronbach's

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alpha was computed for the 15 items in the questionnaire, using SPSS 28. The composite scale met the minimum threshold of 0.7 with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.742. According to Ab Hamid et al. (2017), Cronbach's alpha values between 0.60 and 0.70 are acceptable in exploratory research. Thus, the questionnaire was deemed reliable.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Data Analysis

Data for the study were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 28. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to identify the underlying structures in the data and assess construct validity. The suitability of the dataset for EFA was examined using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. Overall KMO values ≥.70 are desired, while a significant value (>0.05) is required for Bartlett's test (Hair et al., 2019; Watkins, 2018). A KMO value of 0.744 was found, which falls within the acceptable level, while Bartlett's test rendered a significant value (p =.001), indicating sufficient correlations among the indicators to proceed to EFA. Principal component analysis (PCA) with Promax rotation was employed to uncover the latent variables and estimate the number of factors (Watkins, 2018). Only factors with Eigenvalues >1 and factor loadings >0.4 were retained. Factor loadings are sensitive to sample size; hence a higher cut-off point is needed for sample sizes smaller than 300 (Retief et al., 2022). Three of the items were discarded due to low factor loadings. According to Ab Hamid et al. (2017), factor loadings <0.40 should always be removed. Contrary to the measurement model, four factors were retained after the EFA. These factors, with three items each, were named *Perception*, *Image*, *Affiliation,* and *Identity*. Table 4 presents the four factors with their factor loadings, Eigenvalues, variance explained, and descriptive statistics.

Table 4
Factor Analysis Symbolic Consumption

Factor Structure	Factor Loading	Eigenvalue	Variance Explained	Mean	Std. dev
Factor 1: Perception		3.194	26.618		
Clothes show whether cool or not	.807			2.89	1.060
Clothes show whether rich or poor	.729			2.54	1.210
Clothes show whether popular or not	.430			2.51	1.049
Factor 2: Image		1.459	12.155		
Some clothes make you cooler	.757			2.76	1.016
Some brands make you more popular	.730			2.82	1.122
Some brands make you look cooler	.625			3.05	0.967
Factor 3: Affiliation		1.223	10.188		
Buy same sneakers as classmates	.768			1.90	1.016
Buy same sneakers as race	.676			2.04	1.038
Wear same brand as my friends	.446			2.21	1.112
Factor 4: Identity		1.144	9.535		
Can tell what kind of person by clothes	.726			2.39	1.057
Show people who I am with my clothes	.668			2.33	1.132
People show who they are with their clothes	.532			3.34	0.829
Extraction method: Principal component analysis Rotation method: Promax with Kaiser Normalisationa					

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The Cronbach's alpha values for factors 1, 2, 3 and 4 were 0.631, 0.573, 0.623 and 0.556 respectively. While these values were weak, they could be provisionally accepted, as the study was exploratory, and the scale used had never been validated before. According to Taber (2018), alpha values for individual constructs may be weak, even though the overall scale is reliable due, to the small number of observed variables. Convergent validity was assessed by evaluating whether the multiple indicators of each construct were in agreement. This was done by inspecting the factor loadings for each of the indicators, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). Values of CR $\geq$ 0.6 and AVE $\geq$ 0.5 are considered acceptable (Noor et al., 2015), yet some authors agree that if the AVE is <0.5 but the construct reliability is >0.6, then the scale is acceptable (Pervan et al., 2017; Suprapto et al., 2020). The composite reliability values for each of the factors were as follows: Image (0.750), Affiliation (0.671), Perception (0.703) and Identity (0.608). The AVE values for each of the constructs were: Image (0.501), Affiliation (0.419), Perception (0.456) and Identity (0.419). When taken together with the values for composite reliability (all >0.6), it can be concluded that discriminant validity was obtained. The results therefore revealed an acceptable level of construct validity and internal consistency for the questionnaire.

4.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was adopted for testing the proposed structural model, using estimation through the Maximum Likelihood method on SPSS AMOS 28. CFA with four latent constructs was specified for the analysis. First a test of normality was performed, considering skewness and kurtosis values. Skewness values between –10 and 10 indicate that the data are symmetrical, while kurtosis values between –2 and +2 are considered acceptable to prove normal univariate distribution (Collier, 2020; Hair et al., 2019). The four factors revealed the following values: Image ($s = -0.386$, $k = -0.758$), Affiliation ($s = 0.035$, $k = -0.797$), Perception ($s = -0.226$, $k = -0.782$) and Identity ($s = -0.148$, $k = -0.898$). Since all these were within acceptable ranges (suggesting normal distribution of the data), CFA was appropriate. For construct validity, several goodness-of-fit indices were inspected. The adjustment indexes considered were the Chi-square ratio to the degrees of freedom (x2/df), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), PCLOSE, and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI). The proposed structural model was tested and revealed the following indexes: $\chi^2/\text{df} = 1.492$ ($p < 0.015$), GFI = 0.944, CFI = 0.920, AGFI = 0.908, RMSEA = 0.541, PCLOSE = 0.456 and TLI = 0.890, with a 95% confidence interval. Some indices revealed values below the recommended thresholds. An initial test of the model revealed that two of the measured variables had standardised regression weights that were below the acceptable level (ID3, 0.22 and A2, 0.34), hence they were deleted. The structural model was left with ten measured variables, and the new model was then tested. Table 5 indicates the goodness-of-fit measures for the new model and their thresholds.

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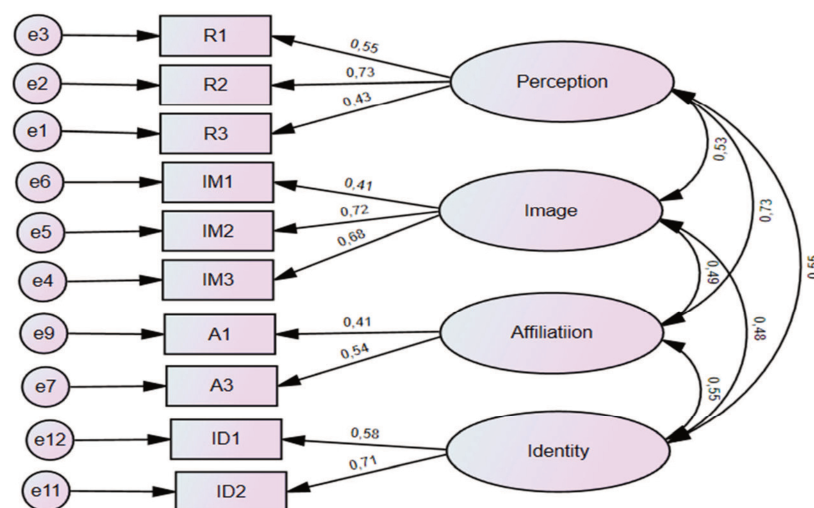
Table 5
Model Fit Indices

Measure	Threshold	Indices for Model	Comment
Cmin/df	<5.0	1.315	Acceptable
χ^2 *p*-value	>0.05	0.248	Acceptable
GFI	>0.9	0.961	Acceptable
CFI	>0.9	0.965	Acceptable
AGFI	>0.9	0.927	Acceptable
RMSEA	<0.08	0.041	Acceptable
PCLOSE	>0.05	0.648	Acceptable
TLI	>0.9	0.946	Acceptable

χ^2, chi square; df, degrees of freedom; CFI, Comparative Fit Index; AGFI, Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index, RMSEA, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; TLI, Tucker–Lewis index; NFI, Normed Fit Index.

The proposed structural model with the two deleted variables was tested and revealed the following indices: χ^2/df = 1.315 ($p < 0.015$), GFI = 0.961, CFI = 0.965, AGFI = 0.927, RMSEA = 0.041, PCLOSE = 0.648 and TLI = 0.946, with a 95% confidence interval. A statistically non-significant value for the Chi square indicates a good model (Schünke et al., 2022). The results were acceptable, since all the measures were above the recommended thresholds. The standardised regression weights for each of the ten items in the subscales ranged between 0.41 and 0.73 (see Figure 1). While AMOS reports both standardised and unstandardised values of estimates, the current study only considered the standardised estimates. Discriminant validity – which assesses the extent to which each construct is different from another, or how the measurement model is free from redundant items (Ab Hamid, 2017; Noor et al., 2015) – was assessed by inspecting the intercorrelations between the constructs. Intercorrelations between the constructs were moderate, ranging between 0.48 and 0.73. There was a slightly high intercorrelation between Affiliation and Perception (0.73). Figure 1 offers a graphic representation of the standardised regression weights, as well as the intercorrelation values for all the constructs.

Figure 1
Standardised Regression Weights in a Confirmatory Factor Analysis



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4.3. Demographics

The secondary objective of the study was to determine whether demographics play a role in children symbolic consumption behaviour. Studies on child consumer behaviour often consider the effect of demographics on children's consumption attitudes. According to Belk et al. (1984), the main determinants of consumption symbolism recognition are age, gender, and social class. The current study sought to discover whether these influenced children's symbolic consumption behaviour. The relationship between gender and the four constructs was measured using the independent samples t-test. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was used to test for homogeneity of variance. From a young age, children are given symbolic items to categorise their sex e.g., dolls for girls and construction toys for boys, which effectually reinforces gender identity and behaviour from a young age (Nash & Sidhu, 2023). This gendered behaviour is often seen in clothing choices as well. The results for Perception, Image, Affiliation, and Identity (α = 0.385, 0.808, 0.469 and 0.284 respectively) were above the recommended threshold (p = .05, Wang et al., 2017), therefore equal variances were assumed. An independent t-test was then performed on the data with a 95% confidence interval (CI) for the mean difference. There were no significant differences for the Perception, Image, and Identity constructs. For the Affiliation construct, there were significant differences (t(df) = 2.039, p = .043) in the mean scores, with the mean scores for boys (M = 2.3913, SD = .74526) being higher than those of girls (M = 2.1707, SD = .06351). This suggests that boys were more likely to engage in symbolic consumption for the sake of fitting in, than girls were.

Table 6
T-test for differences in means: Gender and symbolic consumption

Dimension	*df*	Mean Difference	*t*-score	*p* value	*α*
Image	190	.12666	1.075	.284	Non-Significant
Affiliation	190	.22057	2.039	.043*	Significant
Recognition	190	.05832	.485	.629	Non-Significant
Identity	190	.10510	.973	.332	Non-Significant

Note: * = significant at <0.05 level.

To compare the effect of age and socioeconomic status on engagement in symbolic consumption a one-way, between-subjects ANOVA was conducted. The test for homogeneity of variance was assessed using Levene's Test for Equality of Variances. For the age variable, the Levene's test statistics for Image, Affiliation, Recognition and Identity were 2.552, 1.177, 2.008 and 1.489 respectively while the significance results (α = .070, .332, .306 and .099) were above the recommended threshold (p = .05, Wang et al., 2017); therefore, equal variances were assumed. These results indicate that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was not violated. The one-way ANOVA revealed that there were no statistically significant differences in the mean scores between the groups for each of the constructs (α = .261, .090, .549 and .647). For the socioeconomic status variable, the Levene's test statistics for Image, Affiliation, and Identity were 1.138, 1.068, and 3.038 respectively while the significance results (α = .834, .374, and .146) were above the recommended threshold (p = .05, Wang et al., 2017); therefore, equal variances were assumed. For the Recognition variable, Levene's statistic was 3.042 with a significance value of .018. As such, the assumption of variance was violated hence a one-way ANOVA was not conducted for this construct. For the Image, Affiliation, and Identity constructs, the one-way ANOVA revealed that there were no statistically significant differences in the mean scores between the groups for each of the constructs (α = .355, .194 and .304). These results reveal that there were no age or socioeconomic differences in the responses of the children.

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5. DISCUSSION

Ever since children have been recognised as a profitable target consumer group, marketing scholars have shown a substantial interest in them. The commercial media environment surrounding children today, has increased their purchasing power and their influence on household spending patterns (Sigirci et al., 2022). The fact that many children have their own financial resources, have the power to influence their parents' decisions, and are future consumers, has prompted practitioners to take a keen interest in them. However, African children are still missing from the discussion on child consumers. This study sought to give a glimpse into the minds of South African child consumers, by understanding the ways in which they engage in the symbolic consumption of clothing. More than the functional or practical purpose that they serve, consumer goods have symbolic meaning. While clothes may be used to keep people warm or comfortable, they can also be used as a marker of social position, sense of style or even political preference (Chiesa & Dekker, 2022). Thus, the current study used children's fashion consumption as a backdrop to identify the ways they engage in consumption symbolism. An EFA on the quantitative data revealed four factors that represent the four ways in which children engage in symbolic consumption. The results of this study indicated that South African children moderately engage in symbolic consumption in the following ways:

Perception: The first factor to be extracted, perception was made up of the variables 'clothes show whether cool or not', 'clothes show whether rich or poor' and 'clothes show whether popular or not'. This construct refers to how children perceive others, based on the latter's clothing choices. Clothing can provide information about one's social status, personality, and attractiveness (Nikccvic et al., 2019). Just like adults, children make assumption about others based on the type of products and brands those individuals own. The findings of this study were consistent with those of Piacentini and Mailer (2004), who reported that clothing is a useful aid for managing first impressions and plays a role in communicating something about one's social position. One of the child interview participants in a study by Rodhain and Aurier (2016) stated that his relationship with Nike gave him important status among his peers, and said he understood when his peers did not regard him highly whenever he was not wearing the brand. The results of the study thus confirm that South African children recognise that for them, clothing choices are distinctive, and reflect one's social position in terms of economic and cultural capital. Lastly, the results revealed that there were no demographic differences in the sample with regards to the perception construct. This suggests that children's consumer behaviour in South Africa may be largely homogenous.

Image: The second factor to be extracted, image, was made up of the variables 'some clothes make you cooler', 'some brands make you more popular' and 'some brands make you look cooler'. This construct refers to the way in which children perceive how owning certain clothing creates an image about who someone is. Physical appearance has always influenced impression formation and inferences, thus having a significant impact on the judgements that one makes about others (McDonal & Ma, 2015). For children, clothing is an important symbolic resource that can be used to mark one's social position (Piacentini, 2010). According to Gbadamosi (2015) symbolic consumption reflects how people use marketing transactions to project a particular image. Research has shown that sometime between pre-school and second grade, children begin to make inferences about people based on the products they own (Chaplin & Lowrey, 2010). The findings of this study were consistent with past research that found that children make inferences about who people are, based on their clothing consumption choices. Piacentini and Mailer (2004) found that children believe that clothes provide useful information about a person, in some way or another. The results revealed that there were no demographic differences in the sample with regards to the image construct. This also supports the idea of South African child consumers being a largely homogenous in their consumer behaviour.

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Affiliation: The third construct, affiliation, was made up of the variables 'buy same sneakers as classmates', 'buy same sneakers as race' and 'wear same brand as my friends'. This refers to the ways in which children use consumption to fit in with social groups. In modern societies, consumers use symbolic consumption to achieve a sense of affiliation (Gbadamosi, 2015; Chiesa & Dekker, 2022). The findings of this study were similar to those of Piacentini and Mailer (2004), who found that children use symbolic consumption as a mechanism for conforming, with clothing being used as a signal that they are similar to the people who wear the same kind of clothes. The authors also found that fitting in with their peers is of great importance to adolescents, with clothing being used to symbolise the link between the child and his/her peers. According to Nikccvic et al., (2019) clothing is the primary means by which children can communicate their social identity and signify the values espoused by the group. Rodhain and Aurier (2016) found that children will even wear branded clothes that they do not like, just to be accepted or not to be rejected by their peers. This signifies how important clothing is to children, as a symbol of peer group connection. The results also revealed that there were gender differences on the affiliation construct, with boys more likely to engage in symbolic consumption for the purposes of fitting in than girls. Gender, as a social construct, has been associated with fashion for a long time hence gender differences in clothing consumption are of interest to scholars (Nash & Sidhu, 2023). Theorists have argued that of all the links between clothing and identity, gender has been one of the most significant factors (Twigg, 2015). The results of this study thus affirm that children's clothing consumption is closely related to their social networks.

Identity. This factor was made up of the variables 'Can tell what kind of person by clothes', 'Show people who I am with my clothes' and 'People show who they are with their clothes'. The construct refers to the ways in which children use clothing to create their own identity, to make inferences about the identity of others, and recognise that other people use clothing to create their own identity. Certain goods are valuable in that they provide "identity-utility". People's tastes, reflected in the products they purchase, the attitudes they profess and the preferences they hold, are all markers of identity (Chiesa & Dekker, 2022). Clothing as a marker of identity, is particularly important during times of uncertainty such as the transition from being a child to an adolescent (Piacentini, 2010). The link between clothing and identity has long been a theme in the study of fashion consumption (Twigg, 2015). Studies on symbolic consumption hold that clothing as a marker of identity is the most common way in which people attribute symbolic meaning to goods (Lloyd Parkes and Doherty, 2012; Nikccvic et al., 2019; Rodhain and Aurier, 2016). According to John and Chaplin (2019), studies into how children describe their self-concept have shown that they use products and brands to communicate something about themselves in a non-verbal manner. The findings of the current study revealed a link between children's self-concept and their clothing choices. Similarly, Rodhain and Aurier (2016) found that branded clothes can play a fundamental role in children's identity construction. The results revealed that there were no demographic differences in the sample with regards to the identity construct. The results of the study thus affirm that South African children's clothing consumption is closely related to their identity formation.

6. CONCLUSION

This study provides the first attempt to study consumption symbolism in children from an African perspective. This research sought to answer the question of whether South African children engage in symbolic consumption through their consumption of clothing and identify the ways in which they engage. The study also sought to discover if there are any demographic differences in children's symbolic consumption behaviour. The results have shown that child consumers in South Africa moderately engage in symbolic consumption, and that the clothes they

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wear perform various social functions. The term moderately is adopted because the responses of the children suggested that in many cases, clothing is used for functional and utilitarian reasons as well, rather than the symbolic. For those children who do engage in symbolic consumption, clothing is used to express individual identities, fit in with social groups, draw inferences about others from the latter's clothing, and employ clothing as a yardstick to gauge other's social image. The study therefore reveals that South African children recognise the symbolism that is inherent in consumption and that they engage in it. This study thus contributes to the conceptualisation of South African children as active participants in consumer culture. While studies on European and American children found that children in those cultures fully engage in symbolic consumption, the current study found that South African children only moderately recognise the symbolic meanings of consumption and engage moderately in symbolic consumption. The results of the study also revealed that except for the way children use clothing for social group affiliation, there were no demographic differences in their engagement with consumption symbolism. This suggests that contrary to the literature, age, gender, and socio-economic status have little to no impact on South African children's engagement in symbolic consumption. The results of the study thus challenge the applicability of Western theories on African consumers, given the differences in some of the findings. This supports calls for child consumer research that is culture-specific and includes African perspectives.

6.1. Implications for Marketers

Over the past few decades, children have become a major market for commercial organisations. Marketing scholarship acknowledges that children are consumers in their own right, thus insights into their consumer behaviour can help shape our understanding of consumer culture. Studies on children as consumers are necessary because the findings have implications not only for the current marketing environment but also for the future of marketing (Sigirci et al., 2022). The insights of practitioners into childhood consumption can be enhanced if they can realise that South African children consume not merely for functional reasons, but that there is some form of symbolism attached to their consumption. Marketers need to understand the social and cultural context under which children consume to better communicate with these developmentally delicate consumers. Socially responsible marketing to children should encourage them to think critically about consumption and its social implications.

6.2. Limitations

The primary limitation of the study was the sample size (n = 192). Research with children requires multiple levels of gatekeeper approval. As such, access to child respondents is restricted, due to the ethical consideration of avoiding harm to children. A consequence of the limited sample size is that the results of the study cannot be generalised to African child consumers but to South Africa only. Additionally, the small number of respondents possibly contributed to some of the questionable results from the CFA. Another limitation of the study was that much of the research on children's symbolic consumption has adopted qualitative methodologies, making it a challenge to find quantitative studies against which to benchmark the current undertaking. A methodological limitation of the study was that factor analysis was conducted with only 15 observed variables, which resulted in the extracted constructs having few observed variables, which likely had an adverse effect on the validity and reliability values.

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6.3. Future Research Directions

Data for this study were gathered from a relatively small sample (*n* = 192). As such, studies involving larger samples of African child consumers could potentially improve the findings. Additionally, studies involving children from other African countries might provide useful insights into child consumers on this continent. Much of the research on children's symbolic consumption has taken place in economically developed nations. Research on children with limited or little access to economic resources could provide useful insights into how youngsters from impoverished backgrounds differ from their more affluent counterparts in respect of their engagement in symbolic consumption. Studies on children's consumer behaviour have focused on understanding the differences between youths with differential access to economic resources. In addition, some of the current results reflected values that were below the minimum threshold, possibly because the researchers developed a questionnaire from the literature, as no scales for measuring children's symbolic consumption had been identified. As such, future research could develop, test, and validate a scale for measuring children's engagement in the symbolism of consumption, which should include more items for measuring each construct. Additionally, each construct should be measured with items that address a specific theme. The children gave answers that were very different for questions measuring the same constructs, because the questions were not worded according to themes. In future, slightly increasing the number of items may lead to higher values for Alpha.

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