

Research Paper

From Desires to Decisions: A Qualitative Exploration of the Development of Materialistic Values and Consequential Consumer Behaviour in Adolescents

Umama Aleem^{1*}, Dr. Anjali Sahai Srivastava²

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study seeks to understand the development of materialistic tendencies and their impact on consumer behavior in adolescents. We conducted semi-structured interviews with ten urban adolescents aged 14–18, this research aimed to uncover the social, emotional, and cognitive factors influencing materialism. Thematic analysis revealed four central themes: material possessions as extensions of identity, peer influence and social comparison, media culture, and emotional consumption. Participants described consumption as a tool for self-expression and group inclusion, while also acknowledging the pressures and emotional consequences associated with materialistic lifestyles. Parental influence was seen as a recurring theme in the development of materialistic values that translate into consumer behaviour. Social media exposure amplified consumer aspirations. We also discovered how the emotion ‘Pride’ is often felt with regards to ownership of certain valued possessions. This study also highlights both the complexity and the ambivalence of adolescent materialism, emphasizing the role of social context and emotional needs. Findings suggest the need for early intervention through media literacy, parental guidance, and support to foster critical awareness and balanced consumer behavior. The research adds depth to existing literature by providing adolescent voices and real-world insights into the role of innate materialistic tendencies in our psyche, on our social identity and emotional development towards consumption.

Keywords: *Materialistic values, adolescent consumer behaviour, identity-driven consumption, impulsive vs intentional buying, peer and media influence*

In a world saturated by consumption, adolescents are increasingly exposed to values that equate personal success and happiness with material wealth.

From social media influencers obsessing over luxury lifestyles to peer groups defining social status through the latest fashion or gadgets, materialism has found fertile ground in the adolescent psyche. The teenage years, characterized by identity exploration, social comparison, and heightened sensitivity to peer validation, represent a critical stage in the formation of lifelong attitudes and behaviours—including those related to material

¹Student, Amity University Noida

²Assistant Professor, Amity University Noida

*Corresponding Author

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possessions. According to Moldes, O., et al (2024), Materialism has a greater impact on social well-being than individual well-being, with stronger effects in children and adolescents.

Materialism is often defined as the importance placed on acquiring and owning material goods as a route to happiness, status, or social acceptance, and is not just a personal trait but a socially reinforced value system. Research suggests that adolescents who develop strong materialistic values may exhibit patterns of consumer behaviour that include impulsive buying, brand obsession, and a focus on extrinsic goals over intrinsic well-being (Lim & Koay, 2024). Despite the prevalence of consumer messaging targeting youth, there remains a lack of deep understanding of how materialistic tendencies are formed during adolescence and what specific consumer behaviours they lead to.

While past studies have studied the external factors influencing materialism such as advertising, and socio-economic background, they often neglect parental influence and the adolescent's own perspective. *Understanding how young people internalize, resist, or reshape consumerist messages is vital to grasping the psychological impact of materialism during this vulnerable life stage.* The growing influence of digital culture has introduced new layers of complexity, making it essential to study the phenomenon from the adolescents' subjective experiences.

Rationale of the Study

This study is grounded in the need for an understanding of adolescent decisions and where they come from, from the perspective of adolescents themselves. Existing literature in this area is based on quantitative/ objective surveys to measure levels of 'materialism', but very few bother with the why and how behind these emergent patterns. A qualitative inquiry was needed to understand the lived experiences, meanings, and motivations that adolescents associate with their material desires and consumer behaviour.

This study responds to the call for integrating deeper, more context-sensitive approaches in understanding youth behaviour. With adolescence being a formative period, insights gained from this research could not only contribute to academic discourse but also inform educational programs, policy initiatives, and family interventions that promote healthier value systems and reduce overreliance on material satisfaction.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this research are:

1. To analyze the psychological, social, and cultural factors that contribute to the development of materialistic tendencies in adolescents.
2. To understand how adolescents express materialistic values through their consumer choices and behaviours.
3. To examine the perceived consequences, both positive and negative, of materialism on adolescents' self-concept, peer relationships, and overall well-being.
4. To contribute to qualitative and developmental understandings of adolescent consumer behaviour in contemporary society.

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Significance of the Study

This study also provides practical insights, in addition to theory. Theoretically it broadens our understanding of development during adolescence by incorporating information from consumer psychology, developmental psychology, and social science.

Using a qualitative method, the study highlights that adolescents are active, rational consumers rather than simply passive recipients of social influences.

Practically, the findings are meant to provide an insight into juvenile purchasing behavior for educators, parents, and legislators. It also influences systems aimed at cultivating healthy values, such as parental mindfulness, media literacy and school-based value education. Advertisements targeting young people should focus on ethically sound practices and not believe their youth consumers to be an easily misled group.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are some common psychological and social factors that influence the development of materialistic tendencies in adolescents?
2. How do adolescents understand and express materialistic values in their everyday consumer behaviour?
3. In what ways does materialism impact their self-image, peer relationships, and emotional well-being?
4. How do adolescents perceive and negotiate the influence of media, advertising, and peer culture on their material values?

Definition of Terms

According to Lunenburg and Irby (2008), the definitions are significant terms key to this study. The following terms are defined in this study:

- **Materialism:** In this study, materialism refers to the value adolescents place on acquiring and possessing material goods, where personal worth and success are often associated with the accumulation of consumer products and branded items.
- **Adolescents:** Adolescents in this study are individuals between the ages of 14 and 18 years, who are in the process of identity formation and are particularly susceptible to peer influence, media messaging, and value development.
- **Consumer Behavior:** Refers to the actions, decisions, and reflective processes adolescents engage in when selecting, purchasing, or aspiring to own material goods, influenced by symbolic and emotional needs.
- **Social Comparison:** In this study, social comparison is defined as the process by which adolescents evaluate their own status, possessions, or appearance against their peers, often leading to materialistic aspirations or dissatisfaction.
- **Symbolic Consumption:** Symbolic consumption refers to the use of material goods as a means of expressing identity, group belonging, or emotional states. Adolescents may use brands and trends as symbols of social status or personal meaning.
- **Peer Influence:** Peer influence is defined here as the effect of peer groups, friends, and classmates on an adolescent's attitudes toward consumption, brand choices, and desire for material possessions.
- **Media Exposure:** Media exposure includes the consumption of content through television, social media, advertisements, and influencer culture, which collectively shape materialistic values and aspirations in adolescents.

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- **Reflective Consumption:** A term used in this study to describe moments when adolescents critically evaluate their own consumption habits, often in contrast to emotional or impulsive spending.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to understand how adolescents experience, interpret, and construct meanings around materialistic values and consumer behaviour. Phenomenology is suited for this inquiry as it centers on understanding individuals' lived experiences and subjective perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than attempting to quantify materialism, this study seeks to uncover the why behind it—the psychological, social, and emotional dimensions that shape adolescent consumption patterns.

Research Paradigm

This research is situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the perspectives of those experiencing it. Interpretivism allows for a rich, context-sensitive exploration of how adolescents understand materialism, especially in relation to their identity, peer dynamics, and digital environments. The focus is on meaning-making rather than generalizability.

Participants and Sampling

The study targets adolescents aged 14 to 18 years, representing a developmental period marked by identity exploration, social comparison, and heightened consumer exposure.

- **Sampling method:** Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide deep, relevant insights based on their exposure to consumer culture and materialistic influences.
- **Sample size:** A total of 10 participants (balanced across age groups and gender identities) were selected, with data collection continuing until thematic saturation was reached.
- **Inclusion criteria:** Adolescents attending urban schools, familiar with social media platforms, and able to communicate in English or Hindi.
- **Exclusion criteria:** Participants with diagnosed cognitive impairments that might affect comprehension or communication.

Research Setting

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), in this section, the researcher “describes and justifies selection of the research setting, thereby providing the history, background, and issues germane to the problem”. The setting of this research was New Delhi, India. At the time of the study the available participants were from several private schools in the New Delhi/ NCR Region. This region allowed the researcher access to a diverse group of participants.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews to allow participants the freedom to express their thoughts while ensuring consistency across interviews.

- **Interview format:** One-on-one interviews lasting 45–60 minutes, conducted in person or via video conferencing, depending on participant preference and accessibility.

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- **Instrument:** The instrument employed in this study was an interview script designed to ensure consistency in the questions asked (see Appendix A). Lunenburg and Irby (2008) explained, “The main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say” (p. 91). The researcher drafted interview questions in alignment with the study’s research questions. “Qualitative researchers often use open-ended interviews. Typically, these are semi-structured scripts—that is, some questions are developed in advance and some are developed as the interview progresses based on participant responses” (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 192). The semi-structured interview consisted of 10 questions with the potential for further responses as prompted by the researcher. (Lisa M. Cross, 2024).
- **Interview guide:** Questions encompass topics such as:
 - Definitions of materialistic possession
 - Attitudes towards money, brands, and status symbols
 - Influence of parents, peers, and social media
 - Reflections on past consumer decisions or desires
 - Perceived emotional outcomes of materialistic pursuits
- **Ethical considerations:**
 - Written informed consent was obtained from parents/guardians, and assent from participants.
 - Anonymity was preserved using pseudonyms.
 - Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any stage.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

According to King and Stahl (2020), in a qualitative study, the researcher must show reliability and trustworthiness in the results, and this is done by establishing four criteria: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability.

To ensure the credibility and quality of findings, the following strategies were employed:

- **Expert Review:** The interview questionnaire underwent expert review by five esteemed researchers in the field of social psychology.

Their feedback was collected using a 5-point Likert scale, assessing:

1. Clarity,
2. Relevance, and
3. Appropriateness of each item.

Responses were analyzed with regard to recurrence and intensity of a concern, and necessary revisions were made to questions A1, B 4 and 5(see appendix A) to refine the questionnaire accordingly.

A clear record was kept of all interview transcripts, notes, data analysis protocols, and coded findings that were kept in a password-protected file to support reliability.

- **Triangulation through member-checking:** Participants were invited to review and confirm their statements.
- **Transferability:** Thick descriptions of participants’ contexts were provided to allow readers to determine applicability to other settings.

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- Dependability: An audit trail of methodological decisions, coding process, and theme development was maintained.
- Confirmability: Reflexivity was practiced throughout the research; the researcher documented personal biases and reflections to minimize subjective influence.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Interview responses were received in written format and analyzed using Thematic Analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Synthesis is about recasting the information gathered in the analysis into a new and different arrangement- one that is coherent, logical, and explicit (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019). The researcher used a process extracted from Creswell and Creswell's (2018) process model of data analysis.

1. Organize and prepare the data for analysis.
2. Read and look at all the data.
3. Start coding the data.
4. Generate a description and themes.
5. Represent the description and themes.

Steps of analysis:

1. Familiarization: Reading and re-reading transcripts to gain immersion in the data.
2. Coding: Generating initial codes related to materialism, identity, emotion, and social influence. The software Atlas ti was used to aid in data management and visualization of emerging patterns. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) state, "coding allows you to return to the data you want to inspect, interrogate, revisit, and reinterpret".
3. Theme development: Clustering codes into broader themes such as Understanding of material possessions, the emotion pride in attachment to material possessions, Emotion-Focused Responses to Unaffordability, Intention based Consumption v Impulsive consumption, Influence of social media/ media ads on consumer behaviour, Effect on self-esteem by perceived lack of material possessions.
4. Reviewing themes: Ensuring that themes were coherent, distinct, and grounded in the data.
5. Defining and naming themes: Finalizing thematic labels and identifying representative quotes.
6. Interpretation: Linking findings to the theoretical frameworks and research questions.

Ethical Considerations

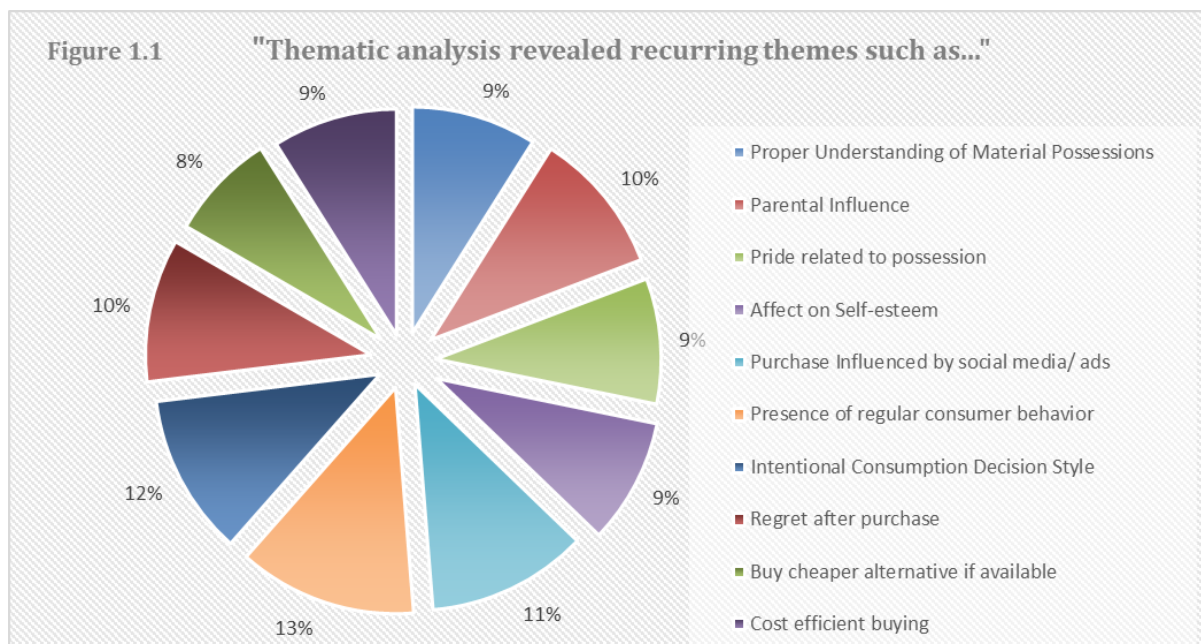
The study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for research with minors. Approval was obtained from the institutional authorities. All data was stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Overview of Findings

The most recurring themes across participant responses are illustrated in Figure 1.1, highlighting the prevalence of parental influence, peer comparison, and symbolic attachments in materialistic tendencies.

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Summary of Key Themes as seen in Figure 1.1

Theme	Core Insight
Material Possessions as Identity	Adolescents have a fairly good grasp of consumption and materialism and use it to communicate their sense of self.
Parental Influence and Social Comparison	Parental financial behaviour affects the development of materialistic tendencies and social comparison drives most material desires and consumer decisions.
Media and Advertisement Impact	Constant exposure to idealized lifestyles intensifies aspiration and dissatisfaction.
Emotional and Reflective Consumption	Materialism sometimes serves as an emotional coping tool, but is shortly followed by regret or ambivalence.
Intention-Based vs Impulsive Consumption	Adolescents are largely rational consumers, making thoughtful, need-based decisions, even though desire and social comparison can occasionally override logic.
Responses to Unaffordability	Adolescents display emotional regulation and practical coping—such as saving, finding alternatives, or reframing their desires—when they can't afford items.
Quality vs. Quantity Trade-Off	Cost-efficiency is prioritized by most, but quality is selectively valued based on personal utility and context, showing balanced, situational decision-making.

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These findings provide a nuanced understanding of how adolescents form materialistic values and how these values manifest in their buying behavior, self-perception, and emotional wellbeing.

DISCUSSION

Overview

This study set out to follow how materialistic values develop in adolescents and how these values influence their consumer behavior. Through rich qualitative insights, four key themes emerged: material possessions as identity markers, peer-driven social comparison, influencer/media exposure, and emotional consumption accompanied by internal conflict. These findings provide a multi-layered understanding of materialism in adolescence, situated within a broader socio-cultural and developmental context.

Identity Construction and Symbolic Consumption

The finding that adolescents view material possessions as extensions of the self aligns with Belk's (1988) theory of the "extended self," wherein individuals incorporate brands and objects into their self-concept. Adolescents in this study used branded goods not merely for utility but to signal personality, status, and group belonging. This behavior reflects Erikson's (1968) theory of identity formation, which emphasizes adolescence as a critical stage where individuals search for and express identity through external cues.

Materialistic consumption served as a means of self-expression and social positioning, echoing past studies that found adolescent materialism is often linked with appearance-focused self-worth (Chaplin & John, 2007). Participants seemed aware of this symbolic dimension, suggesting both conformity and intentionality in their consumption patterns.

Social Comparison and Peer Influence

Peer influence emerged as a central driver of materialistic values, in line with Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory. Adolescents continuously compared themselves to peers, especially in relation to appearance and ownership of trend-based products. The fear of social exclusion, desire for approval, and pressure to "keep up" were recurring narratives. This mirrors findings by Nairn and Fine (2008), who observed that peer norms shape purchasing decisions among youth. The ritualistic aspect of group shopping revealed in this study suggests that consumer behavior becomes a performative act—a way to maintain social inclusion and affirm group identity.

The Media's Role in Materialistic Aspirations

Participants described social media influencers as aspirational figures who normalize luxury and consumption. Their narratives are consistent with Cultivation Theory (Gerbner et al., 2002), which posits that prolonged media exposure shapes perceptions of reality. Adolescents internalized media portrayals of success, equating happiness with possessions, lifestyle aesthetics, and perceived popularity.

This aligns with Kasser's (2002) research, which found that frequent exposure to consumerist messaging increases materialistic values and reduces well-being. What is especially striking in this study is the emotional resonance of media influence—adolescents not only wanted to imitate what they saw online but also felt lesser when they couldn't.

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Emotional Coping and Reflective Consumption

Participants' reflections on using shopping as a mood regulator point to emotional motivations for materialism. This supports compensatory consumption theory (Mandel et al., 2017), which suggests individuals engage in consumer behavior to cope with negative affect or psychological deficits.

Several adolescents expressed ambivalence and post-purchase regret, indicating a budding awareness of the fleeting nature of material gratification. This critical insight suggests potential for value reappraisal in later adolescence, where the initial thrill of consumption may give way to more reflective decision-making, as proposed in developmental models of self-regulation (Steinberg, 2005).

Intersections and Contradictions

A particularly novel insight of this study is the tension between empowerment and pressure. Adolescents seemed to enjoy the identity expression and social currency that materialism offered, yet many simultaneously felt trapped by its demands. This duality reflects the complex interplay between agency and external social forces in adolescent development.

Findings suggest that while adolescents are heavily influenced by external stimuli (media, peers), **they are not entirely passive as previously thought**. Most demonstrated emerging critical thinking about consumerism and its emotional toll, indicating a potential space for intervention and education to reduce ad influence and social media comparison.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Key Findings

This qualitative study investigated how materialistic values develop in adolescents and how these values shape their consumer behavior. Through semi-structured interviews with 10 urban adolescents, four interrelated themes were identified:

1. Material possessions as identity markers: Adolescents expressed and negotiated identity through branded and trend-based consumption.
2. Peer influence and social comparison: Social acceptance and group belonging were powerful motivators behind materialistic desires.
3. Media and influencer culture: Constant exposure to idealized lifestyles via social media intensified aspirations and dissatisfaction.
4. Emotional consumption and reflective regret: Consumption often served as a coping mechanism, though several participants expressed post-purchase regret and a critical awareness of its short-term effects.
5. Parental influence and financial gatekeeping: Parents played a significant role in shaping adolescents' materialistic values, either through modeling consumption behavior, discussing affordability, or setting financial boundaries. This influence sometimes encouraged thoughtful decision-making and value-based prioritization.

These findings bring to light the complex interplay of psychological, social, and cultural factors that contribute to adolescent consumer/buying behaviour. Adolescents are not merely passive consumers but active participants navigating pressures, identity needs, and emotional experiences in consumer contexts.

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Contributions to Knowledge

This study contributes to the growing literature on youth materialism in several key ways:

- It offers qualitative depth to an area often dominated by quantitative scales, capturing nuanced, first-person perspectives.
- It highlights the role of emotional regulation and internal conflict, often overlooked in consumer behavior research.
- It suggests the possibility of value re-appraisal, where adolescents become increasingly reflective about their own material values—offering an opening for early interventions.

Implications for Practice and Policy

These insights carry several implications:

- Educational settings could incorporate media literacy and consumer education to help adolescents critically evaluate marketing tactics and influencer culture.
- Parents and caregivers should be made aware of how their own material values and buying behavior impact their children and how critical it is to model non-materialistic values.
- Mental health professionals working with adolescents may find it helpful to understand consumption patterns as a coping mechanism or a signal of deeper identity issues.
- Social media platforms and policymakers might consider youth-focused regulations on advertising and influencer disclosures to reduce psychological harm.
- Therapeutic approaches that study consumption as an emotional coping tool in adolescent mental health contexts.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations must be noted:

- The sample was limited to urban adolescents, potentially limiting generalizability to rural or low-resource settings.
- The sample only represents ideas and attitudes limited to their generation's zeitgeist.
- The self-report nature of interviews may have introduced social desirability bias, with participants potentially underplaying or overplaying their materialistic tendencies.
- Cultural nuances, especially in a diverse country like India, may mean that regional or community-specific influences on materialism were not fully captured.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies could:

- Use a variety of mixed-methods approaches to quantify levels of materialism alongside qualitative narratives.
- Analyze the long-term impact of adolescent materialism on values, financial behavior and emotional health.
- Conduct cross-cultural comparisons to examine how materialism manifests differently across socioeconomic and cultural contexts.
- Investigate the role of family dynamics, especially parental modeling and intergenerational consumer values, in shaping adolescent materialism.

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Final Reflection

This study reveals that materialism in adolescence is not a superficial trend but a reflection of deeper psychological and social dynamics. As adolescents seek belonging, self-definition, and emotional regulation, material goods often become a language through which these needs are negotiated. Understanding this complexity is essential for educators, psychologists, families, and policymakers aiming to support healthier identity development and more conscious consumer behavior in young people.

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Conflict of Interest

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