*African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance (AJPHERD)*
September 2011 (Supplement 1), pp. 43-55.

# Attitude towards materialism in sport and materialism tendencies amongst black Generation Y students

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**Abstract**

In today's media-rich world sport celebrities are viewed as potential role models and are often used as marketing vehicles. When they display materialistic tendencies they draw severe criticism as this is believed to be in contradiction to their role model obligations. Modern media has commoditised professional athletes, turning them into role models with significant celebrity status and making them a central force driving today's materialistic consumer culture. This study investigates the relationship between black Generation Y students' level of acceptance of materialism in sport and their materialistic tendencies. The black Generation Y cohort comprises African individuals born between 1980 and 1994, and constitutes a significant percentage of the South African population. Students enrolled at tertiary institutions constitute a particularly attractive target market for marketers and a powerful influential force on society in that tertiary education is correlated with a higher earning potential and a higher social class status. The study involved a convenient sample of 400 students across the four South African public higher education institutions situated in the Gauteng province.. Questionnaires, designed to measure acceptance of materialism ~~is~~ in sport and materialism tendencies of black Generation Y students, were hand delivered to lecturers at each of these campuses who were requested to ask their students to complete them. The collected data were analysed using z-scores and Pearson's correlation coefficient. The findings suggest that while black Generation Y students do exhibit strong materialistic tendencies they are not very receptive of materialism in sport and there is no significant relationship between the two constructs.

**Key words:** Professional athletes, materialistic tendencies, materialism in sport, black Generation Y students.

***How to cite this article:***
Bevan-Dye, A.L. & Surujlal, J. (2011). Attitude towards materialism in sport and materialism tendencies amongst black Generation Y students. *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance*, September (Supplement 1), 43-55.

## Introduction

Despite materialism typically being frowned upon, it is often the ostentatious display of wealth and success that serves to make celebrities so popular and encourages the materialistic tendencies that typify today's consumer society. Marketers frequently use such celebrities as product endorsers to increase the persuasiveness of their promotional messages (Ohanian, 1990) and, in doing so, often draw criticism for fuelling the materialistic leanings of society. With the ever increasing media exposure given to sport and the extravagant earnings and

consequent lavish lifestyles of professional sport people, sport celebrities are amongst the most popular as celebrity product endorsers (Bush, Martin & Bush, 2004).

Materialism, defined by Belk (1985) as being the importance that individuals attach to their material possessions, has become a global phenomenon driven by Western media and marketers (Belk, 1985; Watchravesringkan & Yurchisin, 2007; Cleveland, Laroche & Papadopoulos, 2009). Belk (1985) argues that even though it may not be possible to link marketing directly to this worldwide increase in materialistic tendencies, there is little doubt that it plays a significant role in bolstering the trend.

In today's media-rich world, celebrities, particularly sport celebrities, are viewed as potent role models, especially to the youth (Wicks, Nain & Griffen, 2007). While it is this role model potential that accounts for the popularity of sport celebrities as marketing vehicles (Bush, Martin & Bush, 2004), it is also why they are so severely criticised when they display materialistic tendencies (Sukhdial, Aiken & Kahle, 2002; Wicks et al., 2007; Massie, 2008). According to Wicks et al. (2007), modern media has commoditised professional athletes, turning them to role models with significant celebrity status and making them a central force driving today's materialistic consumer culture. Whilst marketing may reinforce materialism in society (Belk, 1985), there is no empirical indication that overt displays of materialism by celebrity sport endorsers necessarily relates to materialistic tendencies in a society. Cleveland et al. (2009) contend that this global trend of imitating the Western consumer culture may simply be the product of the inherent human need to improve living standards using material possessions.

**Sport celebrities as role models and product endorsers**

Modelling or vicarious learning is an important aspect of consumer socialisation and is defined by Schiffman, Kanuk and Wisenblit (2010) as the process whereby individuals emulate the behaviour of their role models based on the perceived positive consequences they observe their role models experiencing through engaging in such behaviour. According to Schiffman and Kanuk (2007), the term role model refers to an individual who is admired for possessing traits such as physical attractiveness, accomplishments, skills and status. In consumer behaviour terms, vicarious role models are individuals who consumers have indirect contact with via, for example, mass media who act as socialisation agents influencing their aspirations, choices and behaviour (Bush et al., 2004). Professional athletes, in particular, represent influential role models in that they often acquire a certain heroic status amongst their fans (Stevens, Lathrop & Bradish, 2003; Peetze, Parks & Spencer, 2004).

Based on their role model appeal, the use of professional athletes as product endorsers is a popular marketing strategy across a range of product and service categories (Bush, Bush, Shannahan & Dupuis, 2007), which serves to heighten their visibility and celebrity status, and substantially increase their earnings (Bosse, 2008). Many of these athletes earn exorbitant amounts of money from the combination of their salaries, winnings and endorsement deals (Badenhausen, 2008), with endorsement contracts recognised as accounting for the bulk of the world's leading athletes' earnings (Badenhausen, 2008; Massie, 2008).

Star athletes who endorse products are often severely criticised as not behaving in a manner that befits them as role models (Gelman & Springen, 1993). Their substantial earnings enable them to live glamorous and opulent lifestyles, leading to them being negatively branded as sport celebrities rather than sport heroes (Stevens et al., 2003). Many of these athletes have also been portrayed as being greedy and having their very loyalty dictated to by money following their defection to better paying sport clubs that are often not even in their country of birth (Massie, 2008). In addition, well-publicised scandals that have marred the images of several of these athletes have brought into question their suitability as role models, especially to the youth (Gelman & Springen, 1993). Wicks et al. (2007) indicate that the commodified and celebrity status of professional athlete icons is a pivotal force driving materialistic tendencies in society at large and the youth in particular.

In a study conducted in the United States of America by Sukhdial et al. (2002), findings suggested that younger fans tend to be more accepting of materialism in sport and less likely to believe that professional athletes have a social obligation to be role models. This is because the younger generation have been brought up in an age in which professional athletes earning astronomical amounts of money is the norm and, thus, may hold a more blasé attitude towards materialism amongst sport celebrities. In a study conducted in South Africa, it was found that there was no significant relationship between the youth's attitude towards materialism and the role model status of national sport celebrities (Bevan-Dye, Dhurup & Surujlal, 2009).

South Africa is an enthusiastic sport nation and its passionate fans have enjoyed numerous opportunities, across a range of sports, of seeing local athletes achieve victory on the world's sport stage. However, the defection of national sport heroes to overseas teams is a particular problem. Many of South Africa's top athletes have been lured overseas by the promise of lucrative contract deals (Massie, 2008) and, in an observed twist of fate, some have even ended up competing against their own countrymen in international games. Their defections have often left local teams and, even on occasions South Africa's national teams, stranded. These athletes have been harshly criticised in the media and are portrayed as greedy turncoats.

**Materialism**

Materialism has been alternatively conceptualised as a value (Richins & Dawson, 1992; Richins, 2004), an attitude (Chan & Prendergast, 2007) and a personality trait (Belk, 1985). Richins (2004: 210) defines materialism as "the importance ascribed to the ownership and acquisition of material goods in achieving major life goals or desired states". According to Belk (1985), materialism generally has unsavoury connotations (Richins & Dawson, 1992; Kamineni, 2005) and is linked to negative human attributes such as avariciousness, envy and parsimoniousness (Belk, 1985).

While acknowledging the negatives of materialism, Richins and Dawson (1992) argued that materialism may have several positive consequences such as motivating individuals to work harder in order to increase their purchasing power and living standards. This, they indicate, in turn, may lead to increased consumer demand that translates into higher earnings for businesses which, when invested back into, for example, research and development, may foster improved living standards for society as a whole. Kamineni (2005) agrees, adding that the ongoing increase in that sale of status-laden brands contradicts society's distaste towards materialism.

Richins and Dawson (1992) developed and validated a scale to measure materialism wherein they define the three dimensions of the materialism construct as being acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness and possession-defined success.

While expressions of materialism may vary between different countries (Schiffman et al., 2010), the forces of globalisation are rapidly making it a worldwide phenomenon (Watchravesringkan & Yurchisin, 2007). Marketing practices are often blamed for arousing or, at the very least, intensifying materialistic tendencies in society (Belk, 1985). However, it may be argued that the desire to have a better material standard of living is a normal human trait (Cleveland et al., 2009) and, as indicated by Richins and Dawson (1992), may even have positive consequences. Increasing disposable incomes and greater available product assortments (Belk, 1985) make it natural for people around the world to aspire to own goods consumed in the more affluent countries, such as those in the West (Cleveland et al., 2009).

One of the major objectives of the post-1994 democratic South Africa is the socio-economic upliftment of the previously disadvantaged black portion of the population. Following the logic of Richins and Dawson (1992), it may be argued that marketing's reinforcement of materialism may indeed then lead to positive consequences in South Africa.

**Generation Y**

The concept of generational cohorts is based on the premise that each generation experiences a shared distinctive combination of circumstances and environmental forces that are prevalent during their formative years, and that these shape their behaviour and distinguish them from other generations (Bakewell & Mitchell, 2003; Twenge & Cambell, 2008). Bevan-Dye et al. (2009), following on the logic that Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964 and Generation X between 1965 and 1979 (Schiffman et al., 2010), define Generation Y as individuals born in and after 1980, with the end date taken as 1994 (Kotler, 2003; Schiffman et al., 2010).

Given the categories employed to report population counts in South Africa, 2008 represents the most suitable and recent year to give an idea of the relative size of the Generation Y cohort, as defined in this study. In 2008, Generation Y comprised 15 and 29 year old individuals and numbered 14 303 800, which represented 29 percent of South Africans. Of these 14 303 800 individuals, 11 865 800 were categorised as black Generation Y members. As such, in 2008, black Generation Y individuals accounted for 83 percent of South Africa's Generation Y cohort and 24 percent of the entire South African population (Statistics South Africa, 2008).

Individuals classified as being part of the Generation Y cohort have grown up in a media- and information-saturated world. The Internet, virtual social networking, 24/7 Global-wide television news and entertainment channels, and mobile telephony have led to this generation being more informed and more connected than any previous generation. This world of convergent technologies and multi-platform media, has resulted in them to witnessing wars, natural disasters and other newsworthy events as they occur around the world, and has meant that they have been bombarded with reports on the ever-present threats of terrorist attacks, global warming (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008) and HIV/–AIDS, which is pandemic in Africa (Walker & Mullins, 2011).

Generation Y has also been the generation to be the most exposed to lavish celebrity lifestyles and the elevated status of celebrities courtesy of paparazzi-style journalism and reality celebrity shows. These celebrities are shown living opulent lives where material possessions are central to happiness and a symbol of success. This exposure is in the face of a global financial meltdown, rocketing living costs (Thomas, 2011) and widespread unemployment, which has seen the youth, using social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, engaging in widespread civil unrest and venting their frustrations of their governments' failure to address their aspirations in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya (Naidoo, 2011) and Britain.

Generation Y members have been found to have a more materialistic outlook than previous generations (Belk, 1985; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Cleveland et al., 2009). This generation has also been found to be more status consumption oriented (Park et al., 2008; Phau & Leng, 2008) than members of other generations and they expect instant gratification and rewards (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008).

As the first generation to have grown up in post-apartheid South Africa, the black Generation Y cohort has enjoyed several advantages over previous African generations, which include educational, employment and wealth accumulation opportunities. Political transformation policies aimed at the upliftment of the previously disadvantaged have led to a rapidly increasing black middle class (Jones, 2007), labelled Black Diamonds by the UCT Unilever Institute of Strategic Marketing and TNS Research Surveys (Jones, 2007; Olivier, 2007; de Waal, 2008). Members of the Black Diamond social class are conspicuous consumers of status brands, using material possessions to signal their success (de Waal, 2008).

Characterised as being optimistic, self-confident, education-directed and highly ambitious, they represent important role models to the black Generation Y cohort to aspire to and are, most likely (Olivier, 2007), the social class to which black Generation Y students will belong in the future. Black Diamond celebrities are often criticised in the media as being overly materialistic and of being conspicuous consumers of status products (Jones, 2007; de Waal, 2008; Naidu & Piliso, 2010; Huisman, 2011). However, there are some that indicate that such criticism is unfair and that Black Diamonds have a right to lead opulent lifestyles given their previously disadvantaged backgrounds under the previous ruling party (Naidu & Piliso, 2010).

**Problem statement**

In South Africa, the use of local celebrity product endorsers, especially sport celebrities, is growing in momentum. An increasing number of advertisers are offering national sport celebrities lucrative contracts to endorse a range of products and services (Bosse, 2008), even though published research on consumers' perceptions towards sport celebrity endorsers is lacking (Sukhdial et al., 2002; Bush et al., 2004). While there are published researches on materialism (e.g. Belk, 1985; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Richins, 2004; Kamineni, 2005; Cleveland et al., 2009) and on attitudes towards materialism in sport (e.g. Sukhdial et al., 2002; Bush et al., 2007), there is a dearth of published research on the relationship between the two constructs.

Even though the black Generation Y cohort (individuals born between 1980 and 1994) represents a large percentage of the South African population (Statistics

South Africa, 2008), this cohort remains severely under researched. Students enrolled at tertiary institutions constitute a particularly attractive target market to marketers and represent a particularly influential role in society, given that tertiary education is positively correlated with a higher earning potential (Loudon & Della Bitta, 1993; Mowen, 1993; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007) and a higher social class status (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007).

The objective of this study is therefore to investigate the relationship between black Generation Y students' attitudes towards manifestations of materialism amongst national sport celebrities and their own materialistic tendencies.

## Methodology

### Sample

A list of the 28 campuses of the public South African higher education institutions (HEIs) situated in the Gauteng province of South Africa was used as the sample frame in this study. The selection of the Gauteng province over the other South African provinces was based on two factors. First, it contains the highest percentage of the 23 public HEIs and the highest percentage (31%) of these institutions' 91 campuses (Note: certain HEIs have more than one campus, which may be located in different provinces). Secondly, the Gauteng province has the highest percentage of individuals categorised as being members of the black Generation Y cohort (Statistics South Africa, 2008), thereby rendering it more representative of black Generation Y students than the other provinces. A non-probability judgement sample of four campuses was selected from the sampling frame, two of which are traditional universities and two universities of technology. The representativeness of the sample was improved by two institutions being located in the country region and two in the city region.

### Sampling method

For the final study, a non-probability convenience sample of 400 students across the four campuses was taken. Lecturers at each of the four campuses were contacted and requested to ask their students to complete the questionnaire. These lecturers were requested to ensure that the questionnaires were completed strictly on voluntary basis. Questionnaires were then hand delivered to the lecturers at each of the four campuses.

### Research instrument

The self-administered questionnaire was designed based on the research studies conducted by Sukhdial et al. (2002) and Richins and Dawson (1992). In accordance with the objectives of the study, two scales were used. These scales

were designed to measure acceptance of materialism in sport (six items) and materialism tendencies (18 items) amongst black Generation Y students. Responses were measured on a six-point Likert scale, where 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=slightly disagree, 4=slightly agree, 5-agree and 6=strongly agree.

In the acceptance of materialism in sport scale, the wording of the four items in the Sukhdial et al. (2002) sub-scale was changed from "professional athlete" to "South African professional sport people". In order to avoid ambiguity, the item "Many professional athletes today are self-absorbed, indulgent and greedy" was reworded into two separate items, one pertaining to self-indulgence and one to greed. An additional item pertaining to professional sport people's loyalty to their country was included in this scale. Materialism tendencies were measured using the 18-item scale developed and validated by Richins and Dawson (1992). The questionnaire included questions pertaining to respondents' demographical information.

## Results

A response rate of 72 percent was attained, with 288 completed questionnaires received back from the initial sample of 400 respondents. Respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 24 years old. Of South Africa's nine provinces, eight were represented except the Western Cape was not represented. The majority of respondents indicated their province of origin to be Gauteng (35.1%), followed by Limpopo (27.0%). The sample contained more male respondents (50.7%) than female respondents (47.6%). The respondents' demographic information is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Sample description

| Age | Percent (%) | Gender | Percent (%) | Province | Percent (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 18 | 12.8 | Male | 50.7 | Eastern Cape | 3.4 |
| 19 | 19.3 | Female | 47.6 | Free State | 10.5 |
| 20 | 22.0 | | | Gauteng | 35.1 |
| 21 | 18.9 | | | KwaZulu-Natal | 4.4 |
| 22 | 13.5 | | | Limpopo | 27.0 |
| 23 | 6.4 | | | Mpumalanga | 6.4 |
| 24 | 3.7 | | | Northern Cape | 1.4 |
| | | | | North West | 9.0 |
| | | | | Western Cape | 0 |

The reliability coefficients for the scales in the final study were both in line with the recommended level of $a$=0.700 (Nunally, 1978), with attitude towards materialism in sport at $a$=.745 and materialistic tendencies at $a$=0.706.

A mean score above 3 was computed on the attitude towards materialism in sport (Mean=4.12). Negatively worded items in the materialism scale were reverse scored and means above 3 were computed on the overall scale (Mean=3.59) as

well as on the three dimensions of success (Mean=3.63), centrality (Mean=3.21) and happiness (Mean=4.09). In order to determine whether these computed means are significant, a one-tailed z-test was performed. The expected mean was set at X >3 and the significance level at the conventional α=0.05. Table 2 shows the calculated z-scores and p-values. A p-value of $p$ <0.05 was recorded on both constructs, as well as on each of the dimensions of materialism indicating each to be statistically significant. This infers that while black Generation Y students are not accepting of manifestations of materialism in sport ($p$ = 0.000<0.05), they do have materialistic tendencies ($p$ = 0.000<0.05)

**Table 2:** Attitude towards materialism in sport and materialism tendencies of black Generation Y students

| | Mean | Standard deviation | Standard Error | z-scores | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Attitude towards materialism in sport | 4.12 | 0.94 | 0.06 | 20.3 | 0.000* |
| Materialism: overall | 3.59 | 0.61 | 0.04 | 16.5 | 0.000* |
| Materialism : success | 3.63 | 0.89 | 0.05 | 12.1 | 0.000* |
| Materialism: centrality | 3.21 | 0.70 | 0.04 | 5.13 | 0.000* |
| Materialism: happiness | 4.09 | 0.89 | 0.05 | 21 | 0.000* |

*Significant at p<0.05 (one-tailed)

In order to determine the relationship between attitude towards materialism in sport and materialism tendencies, Pearson's Product-Moment correlation coefficient was computed. The results are reported in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Relationship between attitude towards materialism in sport and materialism tendencies

| | | Attitude towards materialism in sport | Materialism tendencies |
|---|---|---|---|
| Attitude towards materialism in sport | Pearson correlation | 1.000 | .080 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .177 |
| Materialism tendencies | Pearson correlation | .080 | 1.000 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .177 | |

The results indicate that there is no significant relationship between attitude towards materialism in sport and materialism tendencies ($r$=.080, $p$<.01).

## Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that South Africa's black Generation Y cohort have a significantly materialistic outlook, viewing material possessions as central to their lives, their happiness and success. These findings are consistent with

those reported on this generation in other countries (Richins & Dawson, 1992; Cleveland et al., 2009).

This materialistic outlook does, however, not translate into an acceptance of materialism in sport. The findings indicate a significantly negative attitude towards materialism in sport, which is in contrast to the findings of Sukhdial et al. (2002) with regard to this generation. In the South African context, this negative attitude towards materialism in sport may be attributed to the damage done to the competitiveness of South African sport teams when top local athletes defect overseas in search of more money. As such, the black Generation Y cohort may be materialistic but they are not receptive of manifestations of materialism amongst national sport celebrities.

With a correlation coefficient computed at .080, there is no correlation between black Generation Y students' attitude towards materialism in sport and their own materialistic tendencies. Their negative attitude towards materialism in sport indicates that black Generation Y students take cognisance of materialism being an objectionable value with the negative connotations of greed and a lack of loyalty. However, there appears to be no transfer of meaning between the negative value of materialism observed in others (professional athletes) and their own materialistic outlook. This suggests that while black Generation Y students find it acceptable to take the moral high ground and criticise the materialistic actions of others (professional athletes), they do not necessarily view their own behaviour in the same light. Therefore, in the South African context, overt display of materialism by sport celebrities does not appear to be a major contributor to the materialism tendencies of black Generation Y students.

From a marketing perspective, the use of local sport celebrities as product endorsers in marketing strategies targeting South Africa's black Generation Y cohort should be approached with due care. Sport celebrities do have a certain hero status and are influential role models, which makes them highly persuasive as product endorsers. This is especially true in nations as enthusiastic about sport as is the case in South Africa. However, much like other developing countries, South Africa is vulnerable to the defection of national sport stars to richer overseas sport clubs. Anecdotal evidence suggests that when such defections damage the competitiveness of South African teams, the image of that sport celebrity is damaged, which, through association, may damage the image of any brands endorsed by that celebrity. Local professional athletes that regularly abandon their teams for the sake of money, particularly when it comes to international sporting events, are best avoided as marketing vehicles targeted at the South African black Generation Y market segment.

## Limitations and implications for future research

A limitation of the current study is that being a single sample cross-sectional study. the exposure to events at the time that the study was conducted may have influenced respondents' attitudes towards professional athlete materialism, as well as the respondents' own materialistic tendencies. Future research in the form of a longitudinal study would be useful to establish the robustness of the results reported on here. In addition, this study focused on a single ethnic group and future research is suggested in order to determine if the same applies across South Africa's other ethnic groups. It would also be interesting to determine whether any differences exist between male and female samples. Further research could also be conducted to determine what factors do influence materialistic tendencies and whether or not marketing practices contribute at all to the worldwide trend of growing materialistic tendencies.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to explore the relationship between black Generation Y students' attitudes towards manifestations of materialism amongst national sport celebrities and their own materialism tendencies. It appears from the findings that regardless of the black Generation Y cohort's negative attitude towards materialistic behaviour exhibited by celebrity athletes, they still have a materialistic outlook with respect to their own lives.

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