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CHILDREN'S CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: A SYSTEMATISED EXPLORATORY REVIEW (2000 – 2024)

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the literature on children's consumer behaviour between 2000 and 2024 through a systematised exploratory review guided by the SALSA method (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, Analysis). In a globalised and digitalised communication context, the review analyses dominant research themes, methodological trends, and emerging gaps. The search was conducted in Scopus and Web of Science using multilingual terms related to consumer behaviour, youth, brands, and advertising. After applying appraisal criteria, 62 articles were selected. The results reveal a strong concentration of studies on alcohol, tobacco, food, and brands, while other forms of emerging consumption remain underexplored despite their growing role in adolescent identity and digital self-presentation. Most of the studies are quantitative, predominantly based in the United States, and seldom employ qualitative or mixed methods capable of capturing cultural specificities. The study proposes a more inclusive and interdisciplinary research agenda that addresses neglected areas of consumption, integrates local contexts, and combines diverse methodologies to better understand how family, peers, and digital platforms influence adolescents' consumer decisions.

KEYWORDS:

advertising, brands, children, consumer behaviour, exploratory review, youth

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1 Introduction

In the era of digital and global connectivity, social media and content platforms are transforming communication and users' consumption habits (Martínez Pastor et al., 2013). Deepening the understanding of such communication processes enables a more conscious engagement with them (Martín Algarra, 2018). In this context, younger generations play a fundamental role, as their behaviours and preferences are particularly influenced by digital environments. Recent studies indicate that adolescents develop advertising literacy and purchase intention in interactive settings, where empathy and reflection shape their relationship with brands (Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2017). These new digital consumers have assumed a leading role that requires adequate protection, and the family and school environments are essential to ensure it (Sádaba Chalezquer, 2018). Academic interest in understanding children and adolescents as consumers has produced a well-established theoretical framework. This body of knowledge builds on Ward's (1974) foundational concept of *consumer socialisation*, which describes how young people acquire the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to navigate the marketplace. Building on this, John (1999) categorised the consumer socialisation process into three developmental stages – perceptual, analytical, and reflective – highlighting how children's consumer competence evolves over time.

The presented study focuses particularly on the reflective stage, typically between the ages of 11 and 17, when adolescents develop critical thinking and a more rational understanding of consumption and the value of possessions (Chan, 2006). These theoretical frameworks were later complemented by McNeal (1987), who emphasised the proactive role of children in consumer markets, and were recently revisited by John & Chaplin (2022), who synthesised five decades of research in child marketing. However, their review also underscores the need to further explore new forms of consumption associated with identity and digital socialisation. This perspective is essential for understanding how and why interactions amongst parents, children, and brands influence young people's decisions (Moschis, 1985). Identifying the main dynamics within these interactions provides valuable insight into how youth integrate products and brands into their decision-making, as well as the messages they receive daily through both social media and other platforms (Sigirci et al., 2022).

In this context, the relationship between influencers and young audiences has transformed how this age group perceives advertising (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020). This phenomenon is framed within the growing commercialisation of media figures on social media, where influencers act as strategic agents in the digital advertising ecosystem, blending authenticity with marketing logic (Hudders et al., 2021). Nevertheless, beyond digital influences, family interactions remain a central axis in the formation of children's consumer behaviour. Previous studies (Mikeska et al., 2017) have shown that parents' or guardians' attitudes towards children's consumer socialisation are later reflected in their offspring's behaviours and opinions. Part of the literature even suggests that parents tend to underestimate their children's ability to recognise advertising messages on social media (Feijoo-Fernández et al., 2021).

These behaviours, grouped together under the process of anticipatory socialisation, have been partially shaped by the consumption habits and familiarity with brands and services that children observe and learn at home. This confirms that one of the main sources of early socialisation is the family, as parents serve as primary role models for consumer behaviour (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). In this regard, Mishra & Maity (2021) expand the theory by not focusing solely on traditional socialisation agents, but by exploring awareness and attitudes towards advertising, brands, and prices, as well as purchase behaviour through the consumer socialisation process. Their research (2021) found that peers exert the greatest influence on young people, followed by media, brands, advertising, and finally, parents. This highlights the strong impact of the external environment on minors' purchasing decisions.

The advertising industry and brands shape people's lifestyles, as they allow users to choose their own way of life and express their mood through their consumption patterns (Bringué, 2011). At this point, it is worth noting previous research showing that adolescents with high levels of self-esteem tend to buy and consume fewer products, while those with low self-esteem tend to be more materialistic and save less (Chaplin & John, 2007; Goldberg et al., 2003).

Consequently, it is essential to understand marketing strategies targeting children, which should not be defined solely by age or educational level but also by characteristics that explain the demand for a specific product (McNeal, 1987). In this context, preventive strategies in audiovisual media should protect minors from harmful and motivational influences towards risky products, which they often consume after being exposed to advertising (Pechmann & Shih, 1999).

Children's cognitive levels, main interests, and perceptions must align with micro-objectives (Austin, 1995). Under these standards, it is important to note that young people acknowledge and accept that social media platforms contain targeted advertising, as long as it does not interfere with their browsing experience (Feijoo et al., 2022). These behaviours create an opportunity for brands seeking to connect more effectively with these audiences while respecting their consumption and browsing preferences. Márquez et al. (2020) propose the concept of the *digital learner*, which explains how young people born and raised in a hyperconnected digital environment acquire media skills and competencies and subsequently make decisions based on what they have learned. For this digital literacy to be effective, it must be accompanied by intergenerational education and values (Feijoo & García, 2017).

Although several studies have examined the state of the art on children as consumers and their various decision-making processes (McNeal, 1987; Carlson & Grossbart, 1988; John, 1999; Sigirci et al., 2022), this study aims to update current knowledge and address the following research questions using the SALSA framework for reviews:

RQ1: What are the general characteristics of the studies and their authors?

RQ2: What are the most frequently studied topics related to young consumer behaviour?

RQ3: Which methodologies have been most used to investigate young people's consumer behaviour?

RQ4: Where was the fieldwork of empirical studies on young consumer behaviour conducted?

Addressing these questions allows for a comprehensive mapping of the state of the art on underage consumer behaviour, identifying the main methodological and thematic trends, as well as the gaps that persist in current research.

2 Methodology

To address the research questions, a systematised exploratory review was conducted using the SALSA method (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis) proposed by Grant & Booth (2009). This methodology not only made it possible to explore the breadth and diversity of studies on the topic but also to identify patterns, gaps, and opportunities for future research.

The study sample was built by querying both Scopus and Web of Science (WoS). Relevant articles were identified through a search equation requiring key terms in the title, abstract or keywords: "consumer behaviour"/"comportamiento del consumidor"/"comportamento do consumidor", combined with "youth", "adolescents", "jóvenes", "jovens", and "brands", "advertising", "marcas", "publicidad", "publicidade". The search equation was deliberately designed to reflect the communicative and advertising dimensions of consumer behaviour, rather than to encompass the entire field of youth consumption studies. This focus allowed the review to identify how academic research has addressed the persuasive and media-related aspects of young people's consumption, opening a space for analysing the intersection between marketing communication and adolescent consumer socialisation. The

period of analysis for this scoping review spanned 2000 to 2024, with the aim of providing continuity to the research conducted by John (1999), who explored the consumer behaviour and socialisation of children and young people for more than 25 years. The temporal delimitation allows us to contextualise the results in an evolutionary framework, to compare recent trends, to identify gaps for future research, and to complement studies such as Mikeska et al. (2017), De Jans et al. (2019), Mishra & Maity (2021), and Sigirci et al. (2022).

In the search process, only articles complying with a standardised scientific structure were selected, specifically those including IMR&D (Introduction, Methodology, Results, Discussion) as described by Codina (2022). Theses, editorials, commentaries and opinion articles, and papers that did not contain information from the authors were excluded. Research that dealt with consumption but was not aligned with the target audience of the study was also excluded. We limited ourselves to articles written in English, Portuguese, and Spanish.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the consumption behaviours of under-18s, specifically those aged between 12 and 17, since according to John (1999), young people in this age range have developed greater logical reasoning and critical thinking around consumption. It is also supported by previous research such as that of De Jans et al. (2019), which indicates that there is a lack of studies focused on this age group. Below, we present Table 1, which compiles the background of the literature review based on Lopezosa et al. (2023) and Martin Neira et al. (2023).

Table 1: Application of the SALSA method

Stages	Criteria
Search	Databases used: An exhaustive search is carried out using the combined advanced analytical tools of Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), with the aim of locating the largest number of results and gaining insight into the vision of academic research (Pastor Ramon & Rovira, 2023).
	Search equations: («Consumer behaviour» OR «comportamiento del consumidor» OR «comportamento do consumidor») AND («youth» OR «jóvenes» OR «teenagers» OR «adolescents» OR «jovens») AND («brands» OR «marcas» OR «advertising» OR «publicidad» OR «publicidade»).
	Publication period: 2000 – 2024
Appraisal	Starting study sample: 411 Final sample after applying inclusion and exclusion criteria: 62
	Inclusion and exclusion criteria: Analysis performed on articles that meet the criteria announced in the search equation stated in the title, abstract or keywords. Documents such as these, editorials, opinion articles, letters, comments and book reviews, as well as duplicates and articles with no information in their sections, were discarded. Limited to articles published in English, Portuguese and Spanish. Limited to articles published between 2000 and 2024. Articles with no precise relation to the concepts associated with consumer behaviour and young people with the age range under study were discarded.
Synthesis	A narrative synthesis was prepared and presented in the results section (García-Peñalvo, 2022).
Analysis	Components: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General characteristics of the research and its authors. - What are the most studied topics in relation to the consumer behaviour of young people? - What methodologies have been most frequently used to research young people’s consumer behaviour? - What is the geographical distribution of study samples on young people’s consumer behaviour?

Source: Data compiled by the authors based on Lopezosa et al. (2023) and Martin Neira et al. (2023)

3 Results

The findings are organised into four sections, using narrative synthesis and tables to highlight key aspects of the literature.

General Characteristics of the Research and Authors

The first analysis of this study shows that 95% ($n = 59$) of the articles reviewed were written in English, 3% ($n = 3$) of the articles are in Portuguese and there is no record of articles written in Spanish. With regard to the geographical origin of the authors of the 62 papers, most of them were carried out collaboratively by researchers of different nationalities. It is noteworthy that in 32 of them (52%) one or more authors come from universities in the United States. Table 2 shows the authorship data obtained from the scoping review and the general characterisation of the sample.

Table 2: Language of the articles and geographical origin of the authors ($n = 62$)

Original Language of the Articles	<i>n</i>	%
English	59	95
Portuguese	3	5
Spanish	0	0
Location of the University of Affiliation of One or More Authors of the Analysed Articles	<i>n</i>	%
United States	32	52
China	5	8
Australia	3	5
India	3	5
United Kingdom	3	5
Brazil	3	5
Spain	2	3
France	2	3
Italy	2	3
Canada	2	3
Republic of Korea	2	3
Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Malaysia, Mozambique, Netherlands, Oman, Pakistan, Singapore, South Africa, Ghana	1	2

Source: Own processing, 2025

We also analysed the publication timeline of the 62 selected articles to observe trends over time. Most were published between 2011 and 2020, with a peak between 2015 and 2018, largely driven by U.S.-based researchers. Earlier and more recent periods show lower production. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution across the five sub-periods from 2000 to 2024.

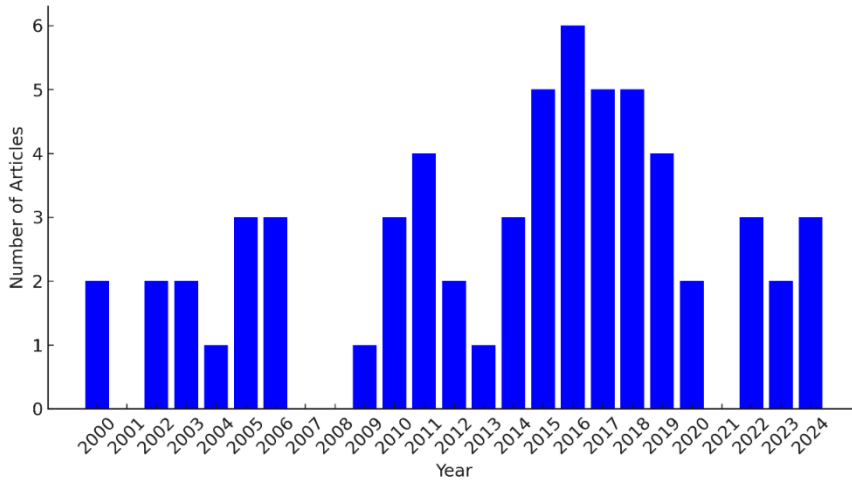


Figure 1: Distribution of articles published over the period 2000 – 2024 ($n = 62$)

Source: Own processing, 2025

Most Studied Topics Related to Young Consumer Behaviour

According to the review, 29% of the articles focus on youth attitudes towards alcohol consumption and how they are influenced by industry, media, advertising, social settings, and digital platforms. Some studies explain how young people perceive advertisements for alcohol brands and then consume those products (Collins et al., 2005; Atkinson et al., 2017; King et al., 2017; Boniface et al., 2022). Other research also indicates that the greater the exposure to advertisements for certain brands, the greater the increase in alcohol consumption (Ross et al., 2014). In this context, alcohol advertisements on television and in magazines, and at large mass events such as the Super Bowl, are particularly attractive to underage drinkers, as they reinforce their interest in particular brands, which encourages further consumption (Jernigan et al., 2005; McClure et al., 2013).

Continuing with the breakdown of data and the respective analysis, 18% of the articles focus on tobacco use by minors, from researching how young people perceive tobacco-related advertisements (Arnett, 2005), or the role of family groups who smoke and serve as role models for minors (Strong & Eftychia, 2006), to the promotional strategies used by brands to reach their audiences (Page, 2012). Previous research confirms that young people aged 12 – 17 are more likely to use e-cigarettes and menthol cigarettes as a result of television and Internet advertising (Hanewinkel et al., 2010; Giovino et al., 2015; Pepper et al., 2016).

This is followed by studies related to children’s consumer decision-making in general (18%), for example the importance of feelings and moods when choosing certain products (Shi et al., 2017), the role of the family in the purchasing process (Chaudhary et al., 2018), the degree of satisfaction with the use of cash by children (Santisi et al., 2014), and the degree of self-control when making purchases (Yu et al., 2003). Although the study by Bernstein & de Andrade (2002), was based on interviews with young people aged 17 to 37 in Brazil – our focus is on 12 to 17 – the paper analyses why this segment is deciding to use anabolic steroids and their health risks in a socio-cultural context where the construction of the body is key.

A fourth category, covering 16% of the studies in the scoping review, relates to children’s food consumption behaviours. Studies in the United States showed that children recognise fast food logos very easily, with McDonalds and Burger King standing out above the rest (Arredondo et al., 2009). This knowledge of unhealthy foods comes primarily from watching television advertisements (Harris et al., 2022), which is further reinforced by limited advertising promotion of healthy options to young people (Markovina et al., 2011).

In fifth place are issues related to consumer brands, which account for 13% of the studies reviewed. These include adolescents seeking information or valuing price and brand when choosing products (Thomas et al., 2000; Kwon & Chung, 2024). Their positive attitudes and motivations towards luxury brands and their marketing strategies are also addressed (Gil et al., 2012; Gentina et al., 2016; Pereira & Teixeira, 2018), as well as brand identities, types of

consumers and the social influence exerted on this age segment (Rawlman & Chu, 2002; Lee et al., 2010; Sahay & Sharma, 2010).

Next, with 5% of the research, is the subject of children’s education, which emphasises the importance of responsible consumption and the creation of awareness in order to be discerning about advertisements (Bestman et al., 2015; Calafell et al., 2019; Olson et al., 2019).

Finally, the list concludes with the theme of social media and marketing (5%) and children, in which the following are observed: the importance of social networking platforms for learning about, interacting with and consuming products (Bharucha, 2018; Fleming-Milici & Harris, 2020), the predisposition to use instant messaging applications where brands are present (Duffett, 2016) and exposure to products promoted by kidfluencers on social media (Rasmussen et al., 2022). Table 3 specifies the data obtained from the scoping review and the characterisation of the most studied topics.

Table 3: Most studied topics in relation to consumer behaviour in young people (n = 62)

Topics	n	%
Alcohol consumption	18	29
Cigarettes and tobacco products	11	18
Consumer decision-making	11	18
Food	10	16
Consumption of brands	8	13
Education of minors as consumers	3	5
Social media and marketing	3	5

Source: Own processing, 2025

Most Common Methodologies for Researching Young People’s Consumption Behaviour

In this review, 86% of the studies on underage consumer behaviour used quantitative methods ($n = 53$), mainly structured surveys. These focused on topics like alcohol, energy drinks, cigarettes, e-cigarettes, and cigars (López et al., 2004; Ross et al., 2015; Duke et al., 2016; McClure et al., 2018; Dunbar et al., 2019; Kobik & Aryee, 2024).

Self-administered questionnaires stand out as the most popular survey method. They were administered in schools to learn about consumption behaviours related to tobacco brand choices (Soldz et al., 2003), decisions about increased materialism in India (Chaudhary & Dey, 2020), alcohol amongst minors in Spain (Sancho et al., 2011), and the influence of influencers on e-cigarette choice processes in the United States (Vassey et al., 2023; Folkvord et al., 2019). Additionally, many of the quantitative studies were online questionnaires (Bagnato et al., 2023); for example, an online survey of 1,031 minors in North America, to learn about their reasons for consuming particular brands of alcohol (Ross, et al., 2015). In the systematic review we also manage to see that some studies correlate various quantitative surveys, such as data on advertising consumption and its subsequent correlation with alcohol consumption in young people in the United States (King et al., 2017) or the study that analysed and correlated more than 30 different global Youth Smoking Surveys conducted in 15 countries in the Middle East between 1999 and 2007 to determine the proportion of young smokers who regularly smoked Marlboro (Page, 2012). Qualitative methodologies were less common, used only in 8% of the studies ($n = 5$). Such qualitative analyses include case studies, through completion of descriptive drawings after viewing advertisements, by 177 underage students in the United States, as part of a media literacy education programme (Olson et al., 2019), and the exploration of advertising discourses targeting adolescents in Pakistan through nightly packages on their mobile devices (Ahmed et al., 2017). Under this methodology, there exists a very interesting study carried out in Ibero-America, Brazil, in which through focus groups of 33 young people aged 12 to 17, they were asked how consumption was building their identity, and one of the relevant points of the research is that the family continues to be the most relevant and imposing factor when it comes to consumption (Pereira & Teixeira, 2018). Mixed approaches, which combined quantitative and qualitative tools, accounted for 3% ($n = 3$). This included analysis of alcohol brand profiles on social networking platforms in the UK, and interactions with underage drinkers, followed by focus groups to delve into their motivations and behaviours (Atkinson et al., 2017).

The other mixed methods study examined the clothing shopping behaviour of Czech minors, starting with a quantitative phase followed by 96 interviews with young people aged 13 – 19 (Turčínková & Moisisidis, 2011). Conceptual studies and literature reviews made up the remaining 3%, providing theoretical and systematised analyses of literature related to underage drinking and alcohol advertisements involving youth-appealing content (Roberts et al., 2016; Padon et al., 2018). Tables 4 and 5 show the distribution of the methodologies used to research the area.

Table 4: Methods that were used to research young consumer behaviour (n = 62)

Methodology	n	%
Quantitative	53	86
Qualitative	5	8
Mixed	2	3
Conceptual and review	2	3

Source: Own processing, 2025

Table 5: Most-used quantitative methodology (n = 53)

Type of Quantitative Methodology	n	%
In-person survey	29	55
- self-administered questionnaire	17	32
- administered by interviewer	8	15
Online survey	19	36
Telephone survey	2	4
Social media analysis	1	2
Content analysis	1	2
Not specified	1	2

Source: Own processing, 2025

Location of the Fieldwork Results

The analysis of the location of the fieldwork performed for the studies reveals a marked concentration in the United States, which holds 50% (n = 31) of the total research on the role of minors as consumers. This predominance can be attributed to a strong research tradition in areas such as consumer behaviour, marketing and children, topics that have been researched by authors such as Carlson & Grossbart (1988) and John (1999). Other countries, although to a lesser extent, also stand out in Ibero-America, Brazil 6% (n = 4) and Spain 5% (n = 3). Table 6 shows a geographical breakdown of the data obtained in the scoping review.

Table 6: Location of the fieldwork (n = 62)

Geographical Origin of the Sample	n	%
United States	31	50
China	4	6
Brazil	4	6
Spain	3	5
United Kingdom	3	5
India	3	5
Australia	2	3
Canada	2	3
Oman	2	3
Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Mozambique, Netherlands, Pakistan, Czech Republic, South Africa, Republic of Korea, Mexico, Chile, Germany, Ghana, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Libya, UAE, Syria, Iran, Gaza, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Djibouti, Kuwait, Lebanon, Tunisia, Yemen, West Bank (one study per country)	1	2

Source: Own processing, 2025

4 Discussion and Conclusion

In the era of social media and digital environments, it is essential to examine how research on children's and adolescents' consumer behaviour has evolved. This systematised exploratory review identified significant advances and opportunities to deepen the understanding of a dynamic and constantly changing field. By analysing the most frequently addressed topics, predominant methodologies, and the geographical distribution of academic production, the study provides a clear picture of the dominant trends and persistent gaps in recent literature.

Regarding the first research question, 95% of the reviewed articles were written in English, and more than half included at least one author affiliated with a U.S. university, confirming the concentration of academic production in the Anglophone context. This finding reinforces the need to encourage research in more diverse cultural settings, particularly concerning youth consumption.

The review reveals a marked thematic concentration on the study of alcohol, tobacco, food, and brand consumption, which together account for more than two-thirds of the analysed sample. This trend reflects a traditional orientation of research towards risk consumption or products with high media visibility, leaving relatively unexplored other emerging forms of consumption with relevant cultural and psychological implications, such as sustainability and digital identity. From the perspective of consumer socialisation theory (Ward, 1974; John, 1999), these domains are related to the reflective stage of adolescent development, characterised by the search for autonomy and the construction of identity through symbolic goods (Chaplin & John, 2007).

In methodological terms, 86% of the analysed studies employed quantitative methods, mainly structured surveys. While these designs enable comparison and pattern identification, they often oversimplify complex phenomena of youth consumption that could be better explored through qualitative or mixed approaches. The incorporation of dyadic interviews (parents and children), digital ethnography, and audiovisual diaries created by adolescents represent valuable opportunities for future research, allowing for a more contextual and dynamic understanding of family decision-making processes.

The results also highlight the limited presence of studies conducted in Ibero-American countries, which account for only 13% of the total sample. This geographical gap restricts the understanding of cultural differences in consumer socialisation processes and their relationship with digital media. Future reviews should expand their scope by including regional databases such as SciELO and RedALyC, which may provide access to relevant local studies not indexed in Scopus or Web of Science.

Finally, this study is not exempt from limitations. The corpus was restricted to publications indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, selected for their methodological rigour and international comparability; however, this decision may have excluded relevant literature published in regional journals. The review also covers only the period 2000 – 2024 and articles written in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Moreover, the predominance of quantitative methods in the reviewed studies limits a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural and family variables influencing adolescent consumption.

Despite these limitations, this systematised exploratory review guided by the SALSA method provides a solid foundation for developing a more inclusive, critical, and contextualised research agenda. Future studies should examine how adolescents integrate consumption into their identity-building processes, how social media mediate these practices, and how parents, schools, and public policies can foster more effective mediation between consumption, well-being, and personal development.

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