

I feel more like myself when I wear my velskoene: Exploring South African male millennial consumers' attachment to their velskoene

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Abstract: Due to fast fashion, the lifespan of products like footwear has shortened, with consumers discarding shoes prematurely due to poor quality or for newer options. Extending the product lifespan through product attachment offers a potential solution. While product attachment studies have explored multiple product categories, few have focused on one product within a particular context. This study focuses specifically on the velskoen, a leather footwear style known for being durable and long-lasting. The velskoen has not been formally researched in South Africa, nor has its product attachment been explored. Therefore, the study aims to explore product attachment among millennial males in South Africa, specifically velskoen attachment. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten participants and focused on four determinants of attachment: memories, pleasure, self-expression, and group affiliation. Object elicitation enabled participants to showcase their velskoene and comfortably chat about them to extract valuable insights. Participants described their memories, how their velskoene allowed self-expression, to which groups they affiliated themselves and their velskoene, the different types of pleasure their velskoene afforded, and product care practices. While memories featured strongly, physical pleasure emerged the most. More often than not, these two determinants complemented each other. Additionally, results showed that the velskoen allowed participants to express themselves and feel connected to specific groups on a cultural and national level. This suggests a notable attachment to velskoene among the male millennials in South Africa, which is linked primarily to pleasure and memories, which causes extended ownership, increased care, and improved sustainability.

Introduction

Since the 1950s, footwear consumption has increased while overall quality has decreased, resulting in higher disposal rates and more waste (Mittal et al., 2024; Mwinyihija, 2018; Sahimaa et al., 2023; Van Rensburg et al., 2020). A significant contributor to this is fast and ultra-fast fashion, which aims to produce products as quickly and cost-effectively as possible to meet demand and trend changes and accelerate lead times, leading to increased waste production (Sahimaa et al., 2023; Sumo et al., 2023). This is unsustainable, as environmental and social damages are strongly associated with the actions of the fast fashion industry, contributing to higher CO² emissions, wastewater pollution and working condition violations (Dzhengiz et al., 2023; Sahimaa et al., 2023).

Furthermore, consumers are disposing of products at a shocking rate due to the accessibility of new products, reduced product quality, and merely trying to keep up with

changing trends (Cooper, 2016; Mittal et al., 2024). The footwear industry and consumers need to change their practices to ensure longevity and prosperity for all; this necessitates the footwear industry to think beyond profits and implement more circular business operations, while consumers need to reject the throw-away culture by resisting, reducing, reusing, repairing and recycling products (Mittal et al., 2024; Sahimaa et al., 2023; Sonnenberg et al., 2022).

Recycling footwear offers an environmentally friendly way of combatting overconsumption culture; however, within the African context, the lack of infrastructure, initiatives, technology and capital hinders this method as a primary approach (Arkorful et al., 2023; De Ferran et al., 2020; Sonnenberg et al., 2022). Government interventions may provide some relief to fast fashion consumption practices, as the increase in local tariffs for imported textile products has proven helpful for South Africa in recent months as more jobs have been created

and consumption of locally produced products has increased (Nedbank, 2024; Sonnenberg et al., 2022). While technological, capital, and infrastructure-based circular economy practices like recycling are developing, addressing South Africa's overconsumption dilemma may also lie with consumers through product life extension, which could be achieved by altering their perceptions and behaviours regarding disposal and product longevity (Ackermann et al., 2018; Cooper, 2016; Sahimaa et al., 2023; Van den Berge et al., 2021).

Product attachment

Product attachment offers a solution as it extends the product's lifespan by increasing the positive relationship between the consumer and their products (Kowalski & Yoon, 2022; Van den Berge et al., 2021). This product-person-oriented model focuses on the intensity of the emotional bond between a consumer and a product, causing the consumer to retain the product, take better care of it, and refrain from its disposal to avoid the emotional loss they will endure if they were to part with it (Schifferstein & Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008; Van den Berge et al., 2021). Consequently, this could lead to less waste and fewer resources being used during the production of replacement products (Van den Berge et al., 2021).

Product attachment studies are prevalent, with some exploring various products in unknown contexts (Kowalski & Yoon, 2022; Page, 2014) or touching on the concept when assessing culturally and symbolically relevant shoes in European contexts (Hockey et al., 2013; Sampson, 2020; Sherlock, 2014). While each country is unique, South Africa's distinct cultural, economic, and social makeup may show different patterns or consumer perspectives concerning product attachment (Lappeman et al., 2020).

Mugge et al. (2008) proposed four determinants of product attachment, namely memories, pleasure, self-expression, and group affiliation, which designers may utilise to increase the consumer-product relationship. Additionally, a consumer may experience attachment to a specific product or a *product variant*, indicating attachment to the particular product or product type (Mugge et al., 2008; Schifferstein & Pelgrim, 2004).

Other studies explored product attachment and introduced new categories such as narrative, appearance, reliability, emotion and irreplaceability (Chapman, 2009; Kowalski & Yoon, 2022; Page, 2014). While similar concepts such as emotional durable design (Chapman, 2009) and material possession attachment (Kleine et al., 1995) are relevant, the determinants identified by Mugge et al. (2008) remain prominent and are still utilised in product attachment literature (Van den Berge et al., 2021).

The velskoen

The velskoen (skin + shoe), or the 'vellie', is an ankle-length, raw-hide type of chukka boot made using a stitch-down construction method and was first seen on the feet of Khoisan tribe members before 1652 (Du Plessis, 2004; Kwela, 2020; Strutt, 1975). The shoe was adopted, developed and refined over the past four centuries to become what it is today, a footwear style praised for its longevity and quality (Rangongo, 2020). The velskoen is available in various leather textures, colours, styles and spin-offs (Du Plessis, 2004; Rangongo, 2020; Strutt, 1975). **Figure 1** depicts the typical construction and style of a classic velskoen.



Figure 1. Classic velskoen design.

One of the first velskoen companies notes that the only downside to a velskoen is that it lasts too long, pointing out that South African consumers wear their velskoene for five to 15 years or until they physically cannot be repaired anymore (Du Plessis, 2004). While the velskoen has been present in South African dress culture since before 1652, it has steadily increased in popularity since its feature at the 2016 Summer Olympic Games (Rangongo, 2020). The subsequent escalating exports and improvement of the South African leather and footwear industry via established local brands prove its growing popularity (Dickson, 2023; Rangongo, 2020). *Clarks Originals*, a popular footwear brand culturally significant in the UK, was inspired by the velskoen when Nathan Clark first viewed it on South African soldiers'

feet (Nasson, 2012; Sherlock, 2014). Sherlock (2014) explored memories associated with *Clarks Originals* and found that the shoes' location, the environmental traces on the shoes, and the versatility and comfort participants obtained from their shoes were notable (Sherlock, 2014). When considering the velskoen's long-standing history and cultural connotations, similar results related to memory and symbolic associations were expected from this study.

Despite their growing popularity, cultural relevance, and marketing claims, velskoene remain unexplored for their sustainable value, durability, and longevity. While product attachment research identifies factors influencing attachment, it lacks context and product specificity to account for economic, cultural, and social differences. Examining culturally relevant products like velskoene may reveal unique attachment patterns, enriching product attachment theory. This study could also inform strategies to enhance footwear longevity, reduce overconsumption, and improve circular economy practices locally and globally.

This study, therefore, takes a preliminary approach to uncovering male millennials in South Africa's attachment to their velskoene by utilising the determinants of attachment theory as detailed by Mugge et al. (2008) as a base for thematic analysis.

Methodology

A phenomenological design with a qualitative approach was used to explore consumers' thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of their velskoene (Babbie, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2025). This method provided rich insights into participants' memories, associations, emotions, and beliefs (Wiid & Diggines, 2013). With nearly half of South Africa's population aged 20–44 (StatsSA, 2023), participants born between 1980 and 2004 (predominantly millennials) were recruited to align with various cohort definitions (Grace et al., 2023). Millennials value unique experiences, authenticity, and environmental consciousness (Grace et al., 2023; Louw & Steyn, 2021). While female velskoen styles and unisex options are available today, the footwear style is historically associated with male dress practices and traditions (Strutt, 1975). Furthermore, the velskoen is stereotypically associated with male

consumers in specific contexts such as farming communities (Moller, 2013). Due to these findings, the focus of this study was placed on male consumers as the velskoen is, to date, more prominent among male consumers and has not yet been as extensively adopted by female consumers.

Ten male millennial velskoen owners were invited for semi-structured interviews using purposive sampling, and object elicitation was used to facilitate discussion and gain deeper insights (O'Brien & Charura, 2024; Willig, 2017). As such, participants were asked to bring their favourite velskoene pair(s) to their interview.

The four determinants of attachment and literature on product care were used to formulate the relevant questions (Mugge et al., 2008; Schifferstein & Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008). The questions explored their velskoene acquisition, memories and associations, personal style, most liked characteristics, and care practices. The researcher used probing questions to encourage deeper discussions. Participants were asked to handle their velskoene, highlighting markings or unique features. Their shoes were photographed and depicted in Figure 2, where scuff marks, stains, tears, general style, and worn laces are visible. Some participants brought three pairs, while others brought only one.

Otter.ai was used to record and transcribe the interviews, after which the transcriptions were manually checked, cleaned and numbered. Any identity markers were removed to ensure anonymity. Thematic analysis was conducted in Atlas.ti using *ad priori* codes developed using Mugge et al.'s (2008) determinants of product attachment. The codes were then merged into four themes to enable interpretation and discussion.

Results and discussion

Participants' velskoene varied in style, ankle length, leather texture, stitching, eyelets, and colour as visible in Figure 2. Ownership ranged from 10 months to over a decade, with the oldest pair originally purchased in 2014. Responses revealed connections to memories, pleasure, self-expression, group affiliation, and care practices. All but one participant actively wore their velskoene. The following sections present key themes and verbatim discussions.



Figure 2. Participants' velskoene

Memories

Memories form a crucial part of product attachment development, as when a memory is associated with a product, the consumer is less likely to dispose of it (Schifferstein & Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008). All participants recalled memories during the interviews and associated their velskoene with people, places, or events.

P7 relayed how his velskoene symbolised parts of his life by being *“a reminder of where I've been, what I've seen, what I've done, what I've survived, and they've been there”*. P3 shared the same sentiment, saying that his velskoene are *“like a reminder of my first job, what I did back then”*, while P5 noted that his velskoene *“remind me of me”*. P6 connected his first-ever velskoene to other people, saying he had *“a distinct association of my vellies [velskoene] with my grandfather”*, and P9 similarly noted that his dad *“used to wear these all the time”*.

Participants linked specific markings and splotches on their velskoene to particular memories. However, these markings were not viewed as a reduction in the product's aesthetic appeal; instead, they added to the shoe's look and gave it more character, making it more unique. P9 put it nicely, saying that the *“creases”* across the shoe's bridge were what he liked most about his velskoene because he *“can't get rid of them”*. This finding supports the observations made by Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim (2008) and Page (2014), indicating that products that age gracefully and acquire marks often have positive connotations and foster greater emotional attachment. Chapman (2009) and Mugge et al. (2008) also highlight this unique trait of leather to age well and promote attachment.

Memories and pleasure emerged simultaneously in the interviews, where participants recalled certain situations and then proceeded to detail their pleasurable experiences through their memories.

Pleasure

Pleasure derived from the velskoen product properties was at the forefront of participants' reasons for choosing the specific velskoen as their favourite and a motivating factor for their length of ownership. Comfort was repeated throughout the interviews, where P7 noted, *“It's the most comfortable shoe I've got”*. P9 further expressed that his velskoene provided comfort

beyond the general physical sense, stating they were “also psychologically, mentally comfortable”. Participants also liked the aesthetic appeal of the shoe, saying things like “I love how they look” [P4] and “When I saw them on the shelf, I thought ‘this is beautiful’” [P9].

Pleasure was more strongly featured among participants with active attachment, with comfort, functionality, aesthetic appeal, efficiency, longevity, and style versatility coming up repeatedly. This finding differs from literature that suggests that pleasure decreases as the length of ownership increases (Mugge et al., 2008; Schifferstein & Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008). In the case of the velskoen, the longer the shoe is worn, the more comfortable it becomes as it moulds to one's foot, enhancing its physical appeal and uniqueness. Scuff marks or spills on the shoes, whether linked to a memory or not, did not emerge as negative feelings but contributed to the shoe's aesthetic pleasure, reinforcing the positive appeal of ageing leather (Chapman, 2009; Mugge et al., 2008; Page, 2014; Schifferstein & Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008).

Self-expression

Self-expression encapsulates all the aspects of a product a consumer uses to express themselves (Mugge et al., 2008). In this case, the velskoen's unique characteristics were strongly featured, making the participants feel special and allowing them to express themselves, as most participants viewed their velskoene as special or rare in some way. P2 detailed that despite them being unattractive, he “love(s) how they look”. P8 expressed that he “feels serious” when wearing them, and P7 noted that he felt “more like myself” and that they “represent” him. P9 detailed that the wear and tear obtained on the shoe becomes “like a fingerprint [...] this fingerprint is mine”, emphasising the shoes uniqueness. P5 sums this expression up nicely, stating that his velskoene “makes me feel quite unique”, a sentiment shared by multiple participants. These quotes highlight how the velskoen allowed the consumers to feel and portray themselves as confident, unique and express themselves through the shoe's properties.

Hockey et al. (2013) showed similar results when a participant showcased how her heels made her feel sexy and serious, while Sherlock

(2014) found that the *Clarks Originals* helped the participants feel authentic when considering the shoe's physical and symbolic qualities.

Group affiliation

Participants felt that their velskoene related to groups beyond their identities, linking them to a cultural group, ethnic group or country, which helped them form and feel part of something bigger than themselves. P8 described that he went through an initiation process as part of Xhosa traditions and received his velskoene as a gift, symbolising his transition from boy to man in the rural Eastern Cape province of South Africa, detailing “it feels like I'm part of them [ethnic group and family]”. P2 reiterated this by stating, “It's part of my heritage”, and multiple participants expressed the shoe forming part of the Afrikaans culture. The velskoen has an Afrikaans farming stereotype attached to it (Moller, 2013), and while some referred to it specifically as a stereotype, others were fond of the connotation. P5 particularly noted, “It's a very Afrikaans thing”.

The velskoen held a South African essence and appeal among all the participants. They relate the velskoen to something that belongs to South Africa, and it makes them feel proud to wear it and have something unique as part of their country and nationality. Participants further felt they represented South Africa by wearing their velskoene; P4 said it has a “South African feel”, and P7 expressed that his velskoene “represents something uniquely South African” to him.

Product care

Participants indicated that they have engaged in shoe care practices, such as P1's ritual procession of cleaning his velskoene. However, most did not take consistent or deliberate care of their velskoene. P7 summarised this notion by saying his velskoene must be able to “fight for themselves”, indicating that they should not need care and survive whatever they go through.

A typical wear cycle emerged: buy, wear, repair, wear, possibly repair again, then donate or dispose of the shoe based on its condition. Some participants had repairs done at general stores but were disappointed, preferring the original retailer for sole repairs as they place more trust in the retailer. P3

owned the oldest pair (bought in 2014), which he had repaired himself, and planned to do so again if needed. Others, less confident in their skills, preferred professional repair services or the original retailer.

All participants indicated that once their velskoene lost functionality, they would keep them as mementoes, donate them, or dispose of them if they were beyond repair. Guilt was a common subject, as many felt uneasy donating shoes in poor condition and preferred to dispose of or recycle them. This guilt around donating worn-out, attached items warrants further research.

These findings reinforce literature on how emotional connection to a product fosters greater care and improves attachment but warrants further exploration and more data as not all individuals care for their velskoene in the same way (Mugge et al., 2008; Page, 2014; Van den Berge et al., 2021; Van Nes & Cramer, 2006). Additionally, future research could explore product-service systems, as some velskoen brands offer in-house repairs (Sapmok, 2024; Wildebees, 2024). The demand for product-service systems in South Africa remains uncertain, yet this seems like a plausible business option to enhance a circular business model, potentially boosting brand loyalty, extending velskoen lifespan, and reducing waste (Ackermann et al., 2018; Terzioğlu, 2021).

Conclusions

All participants displayed the four determinants of attachment and provided great detail about each. The determinants emerged concurrently and linked, showing that each contributed to the consumer's product attachment, albeit in varying degrees. Memories were strongly associated with their velskoene, yet pleasure emerged more strongly as the determinant that made them keep it.

Participants showed a strong affinity for velskoene, with some, like P1 and P4, owning three and eight pairs, respectively, all actively worn. This attachment to a product category aligns with the *product variant* concept (Mugge et al., 2008; Schifferstein & Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008). The prevalence of multiple actively worn velskoene suggests a research opportunity to

explore why some consumers own and retain several pairs for years.

With its enduring reputation, the velskoen is a unique South African product that forms part of the consumer and cultural landscape. The male consumers in this study associate parts of their lives with their velskoene. Additionally, their shoes hold memories and allow them to express themselves through their inherent aesthetic and style, making them feel unique and confident. It allows them to connect on cultural and nationalistic planes with others, all while feeling mentally and physically comfortable. While attachment was present, more research is required to determine the degrees of attachment and explore the care practices these consumers engage in in more depth.

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