

# How children draw conclusions from the products they see

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A well-groomed man gets out of a Mercedes. He's holding a Smartphone and wearing a slick business suit and what appear to be \$400 Kenneth Cole shoes. You only catch a glimpse, but you've already drawn conclusions about him. A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* examines children's tendencies to draw conclusions about social roles from the products they see.

"Good or bad, we adults have all made similar stereotypes about people, based on the products they own," write authors Lan Nguyen Chaplin (University of Arizona) and Tina M. Lowrey (University of Texas, San Antonio). "We recognize that the meanings of products are often derived from their existence within a set of complementary products used by a social role (referred to as consumption constellations)."

The researchers set out to discover whether children can match a set of diverse products to a particular social role. They looked at how early product stereotypes develop and how they change over time.

The study found that children as young as five years old are capable of forming consumption constellations. Little developmental change in this regard happens between first and third grade. From third grade on, changes occur, but not in a clear linear fashion. From third to fifth grade, children will use [products](#) and brands to describe social roles but their views of roles tend to be more flexible.

Seventh graders use fewer descriptions than the younger children and are

more rigid in how they view roles. "Early [adolescents](#) appear to have a more myopic view of social roles," the authors explain; they will say things like, "All cool kids wear Adidas and Abercrombie & Fitch. They are also loud, have a lot of friends, and play sports."

"Our work aids our understanding of how diverse marketing cues are received by children, and helps parents, educators, and other concerned constituents understand how marketers' increasingly popular cross-promotional tactics affect children's knowledge of social roles, which can lead to stereotypes and feelings of prejudice that may carry into adulthood," the authors conclude.

More information: Lan Nguyen Chaplin and Tina M. Lowrey. "The Development of Consumer-Based Consumption Constellations in [Children](#)." [Journal of Consumer Research](#): February 2010 (published online June 24, 2009).

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