The Development of Self-Brand Connections in Children and Adolescents

LAN NGUYEN CHAPLIN
DEBORAH ROEDDER JOHN*

Individuals use brands to create and communicate their self-concepts, thereby creating self-brand connections. Although this phenomenon is well documented among adult consumers, we know very little about the role of brands in defining, expressing, and communicating self-concepts in children and adolescents. In this article, we examine the age at which children begin to incorporate brands into their self-concepts and how these self-brand connections change in qualitative ways as children move into adolescence. In three studies with children 8–18 yr. of age, we find that self-brand connections develop in number and sophistication between middle childhood and early adolescence.

Research demonstrates that individuals use products to create and communicate their self-concepts (Belk 1988; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995; Sirgy 1982; Solomon 1983; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Consumer brands are ideally suited to this process given the wide availability of brands and the range of distinctive brand images they reflect (Fourrier 1998; Gardner and Levy 1955; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Consumers can appropriate associations belonging to brands, such as user characteristics or personality traits, and incorporate them into their self-concepts. In doing so, consumers form connections between brands and their self-concepts, referred to as self-brand connections (Escalas and Bettman 2003).

Although this phenomenon is well documented in the literature, virtually all of the research to date has focused on adult consumers. We know very little about the role of brands in defining, expressing, and communicating self-concepts in children. A number of questions remain unanswered, such as, When do children begin to make self-brand connections? What developmental factors precipitate the use of brands to define and express self-concepts? Are there differences in the types of self-brand connections made by younger versus older children?

In this article, we explore these questions by examining age differences in self-brand connections. Our interest lies in understanding at what age children begin to incorporate brands into their self-concepts and how these self-brand connections change in qualitative ways as children move into adolescence. We begin by reviewing research in child psychology and consumer behavior relevant to understanding the development of self-brand connections in children. Based on this discussion, we forward predictions about how self-brand connections develop quantitatively and qualitatively as children grow older. We test these predictions in three studies examining age differences in self-concepts among 8–18-yr.-olds. Study 1 examines age differences using a standard methodology, where children are asked to describe themselves in an unstructured interview format. Study 2 examines age differences using a modification of the standard methodology as well as a new method for assessing self-concepts based on collage techniques. Study 3 uses the collage method to explore the source of age differences in self-brand connections in more detail.

CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

How are self-brand connections formed? The prevailing view is that consumers engage in a matching process to identify products or brands that are congruent with their self-images (e.g., Birdwell 1968; Dolich 1969; Gardner and Levy 1955). Sirgy (1982) offers self image/product-image congruity theory as a process explanation. Product cues that evoke certain images (e.g., prestige) are viewed as activating similar beliefs about the self (e.g., high status), which prompts a comparison process to determine whether the

*Lan Nguyen Chaplin is assistant professor of marketing, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, School of Business Administration, 1206 S. Sixth St., 140B Wohlers Hall, Champaign, IL 61820 (nguyenl@cba.uiuc.edu). Deborah Roedder John is Curtis L. Carlson Chair and professor of marketing, Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota, 321 Nineteenth Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55455 (djohn@csom.umn.edu). Correspondence: Lan Nguyen Chaplin. The authors acknowledge the helpful suggestions of the editor, associate editor, and reviewers. The authors thank the staff and students of Camp Keepumbuzzi and the Marcy Open School for their participation. In addition, the authors thank our children, nieces, nephews, and neighbors for serving as pretest participants for all three studies.
product and self-image are congruent. Escalas and Bettman (2003) adopt a prototype matching view, where individuals imagine prototypical users of alternative brands and select ones that maximize similarity to their actual or desired self-concept, thereby forging a self-brand connection.

Common to these perspectives are three elements. First, consumers must possess brand associations that can be related to the self, such as user characteristics, personality traits, reference groups, and personal experiences. Second, consumers must possess a representation of their self-concept—such as the actual self, ideal self, or future self—that includes characteristics and traits that can be aligned with those possessed by brands. Third, consumers must engage in a comparison process to determine whether the perceived brand images are congruent with aspects of their self-concept.

We use this characterization to facilitate a discussion of why age differences are likely to exist in self-brand connections. We propose that self-brand connections develop throughout childhood as a result of developmental changes in the three elements identified above—representations of self-concepts, representations of brands, and comparison processes. Each is discussed in turn below.

Representation of Self-Concepts

Major changes occur in the representation of self-concepts between early childhood and adolescence (Rosenberg 1986). First, as children grow older, they conceptualize the self in less concrete and more abstract terms. Toddlers and preschoolers construct very concrete representations of observable features of the self (“I am a girl”), referred to as “single representations” (Fischer 1980; Griffin 1992). As children approach middle childhood, they are able to see connections between single representations (“I like to laugh”—“I like to joke”), although they typically do not integrate them into a higher-order construct (“I am a jovial person”). This capability emerges during middle-to-late childhood.

Second, self-concepts become more complex as children mature, with a greater variety of self-constructs used to describe one’s self (Montemayor and Eisen 1977). Research in this area has also found that the content of self-concepts varies with age. Studies analyzing children’s descriptions of their self-concepts have found that possessions become a more salient part of the self-concept between early childhood and adolescence, while mentions of other descriptors such as personal characteristics and activities remain constant (Dixon and Street 1975; Snyder 1972; not Montemayor and Eisen 1977). For example, in the Dixon and Street (1975) study, possessions were not part of self-concept descriptions for 6–8 yr.-olds but surfaced and increased in importance from 8 to 16 yr. of age.

Representation of Brands

Children recognize brands at an early age, as young as 3 or 4 yr. of age. By the time they reach middle childhood (7–8 yr. of age), children can name multiple brands in many product categories, mention brand names as an important type of product information, and often request products by brand name (John 1999).

More changes lie ahead from middle childhood into adolescence. Instead of thinking about brands on a perceptual level—focusing on readily observable concrete features of a product—children begin to understand brands on a conceptual level—composed of more abstract brand associations such as personality traits, user stereotypes, and reference group usage (Achenreiner and John 2003). Developments in cognitive abilities underlie this shift, as children become more analytical in nature and more able to think abstractly about objects in their environment (Ginsburg and Opper 1988). Social skills in areas such as impression formation and perspective taking are also implicated. Many brand images relate to social status, prestige, and group affiliation. But, these brand meanings are understood only when children gain a better understanding of impression formation (Barenboim 1981) and are able to see how these brand cues might be used to form impressions of other people (Selman 1980). The evidence to date suggests that these changes are in place by late childhood, between 10 and 12 yr. of age (Achenreiner and John 2003; Belk, Mayer, and Driscoll 1984).

Comparison Processes

Age differences also characterize the way in which children compare concepts and objects. Of particular interest to our discussion, focusing on comparisons of self and brand images, are findings about the types of dimensions and attributes children use to compare and classify objects. Researchers find that children younger than 7–8 yr. of age focus on perceptual dimensions, whereas older children also consider more abstract unobservable attributes (Denney 1974; Markman 1980; Whitney and Kunen 1983). For example, in a study examining product categorization in children, John and Sujan (1990) found that children 4–7 yr. of age used perceptual cues (shape, package color), whereas older children (8–10 yr.) used nonobservable conceptual cues (taste) as a basis for classifying products.

Age Differences in Self-Brand Connections

Based on our discussion of developmental changes in three elements—representations of self-concepts, representations of brands, and comparison processes—we propose that self-brand connections develop in the following sequence. By middle childhood, around 7–8 yr. of age, children define themselves primarily in terms of concrete associations (e.g., physical attributes). However, they are beginning to think more abstractly, which opens up the possibility of defining themselves in more complex and psychological terms (e.g., happy, nerdy). Self-concepts also begin to include possessions, although the abstract and symbolic meanings of possessions (especially brands) are not well understood. Comparisons of the self-concept with brands take place on a concrete level, without consideration...
of unobservable qualities such as brand personalities and user stereotypes. As a result, we expect self-brand connections to be modest in number and to be relatively straightforward in nature. For example, self-brand connections might be made on the basis of simply being familiar with or owning a brand.

Late childhood, approximately 10–12 yr. of age, brings developments in the representation of self-concepts and brands, resulting in greater opportunities for self-brand connections. A heightened appreciation for subtle meanings imbedded in brand images converges with a trend toward defining the self in more abstract and complex terms. The end result is a meeting of self-concepts and brands, where brands gain recognition as useful devices for characterizing the self in terms of personality traits, user characteristics, and reference groups. We anticipate that self-brand connections will be more numerous and more abstract, reflecting personal traits and characteristics shared with brand images.

Adolescence brings an even greater appreciation of brand images along with an increased understanding of the role that brands play in defining the self for the outside world. A greater understanding of the self, combined with social pressures to “fit in” and signal group membership, leads adolescents to be more vigilant about the social implications of owning certain brands. As a result, we anticipate that adolescents will possess an even larger number of self-brand connections, which may be even more complex in nature.

Thus, we forward the following hypotheses:

**H1:** The number of self-brand connections will increase from middle childhood through early adolescence.

**H2:** The type of self-brand connections will differ by age. Specifically:

- **a)** In middle childhood, self-brand connections will be characterized by concrete and surface-level associations, such as being familiar with or owning a brand.
- **b)** By early adolescence, self-brand connections will be characterized by abstract and symbolic associations, such as personality traits, user stereotypes, and reference group membership.

**STUDY 1**

Study 1 had two objectives. First, we tested the prediction of age differences in self-brand connections using a standard unstructured interview format. Second, we gathered information about what general categories (e.g., hobbies, personality traits, and brands) and brand categories (e.g., clothing, beverages) children use to describe their self-concepts.

**Method**

**Sample.** Thirty participants were recruited from an elementary-middle school in the Midwest: 15 third graders (8–9-yr.-olds: seven males, eight females) and 15 seventh and eighth graders (12–13-yr.-olds: seven males, eight females). Third graders were chosen as the youngest age group based on evidence reviewed earlier that much younger children are unlikely to incorporate possessions into their self-concepts. By 8–9 yr. of age, children are also familiar with a variety of brands that could be linked to the self-concept. Seventh and eighth graders were chosen as the oldest age group based on evidence reviewed earlier that they have relatively well-developed self-concepts that incorporate possessions.

**Procedure.** Parental consent and participant assent were obtained prior to the study. Participants were interviewed individually and completed two tasks. First, they were asked to describe themselves using the “Who Am I?” test, a self-concept measure popular in child psychology (Kuhn and McPartland 1954; Stipek and MacIver 1989; Wang, Leichtman, and White 1998). Typically, participants are asked to construct 20 statements to describe themselves (“I am ___”). We modified the test to make it less demanding for younger children by allowing participants to answer the “Who Am I?” question in any format they wished. Responses provided information about the number of self-brand connections as well as the general categories children use to describe their self-concepts.

The second task involved questions more specific to brands. Participants were shown five poster boards, with each one representing a different product category: cereal, beverages, candy, clothing, and restaurants. Each board had 20 laminated labels that represented popular brand names in each product category. For example, the brands Gap and Abercrombie & Fitch were included on the clothing board, and Mountain Dew and Coke were included on the beverage board. Participants were asked which category of brands (candy, cereal, beverages, restaurants, or clothing) would be the “easiest or most helpful” in answering the question, “Who am I?”

**Experimental Stimuli.** Poster boards for each product category contained 20 brand names. Pretests were conducted to select a set of brands for each category that would be familiar to children. Most brands selected—for example, Coke and Gap—were popular across age groups and gender. However, we also included a few brands that were very popular among certain segments of our sample, such as brands that resonate with boys (e.g., Mountain Dew, Fubu) and with girls (e.g., Limited Too, Special K). Inclusion of these brands was important to ensure that there were some brands on each board affiliated more with a particular age group or gender, thereby providing a particularly salient basis for making self-brand connections.
Results

Self-Concept Descriptions. Children's responses to the question “Who Am I?” were content analyzed into five major categories: traits, favorite television-movie characters, hobbies, sports, and clothing brands. Of interest was the fact that clothing brands were the only brands mentioned. Also of interest was the finding that the number of self-brand connections varied by age group, with third graders mentioning fewer brands than did seventh and eighth graders (M’s = .47 and 1.27, t(1, 28) = –2.43, p < .01), which is consistent with hypothesis 1.

Self-Brand Connections. Clothing brands were the preferred category for making self-brand connections for both age groups. When asked which category of brands would be the “easiest or most helpful” in answering the “Who Am I?” question, the majority of participants chose clothing brands (67% of third graders and 73% of seventh and eighth graders). Clothing brands were preferred for their ability to create and express one’s self-concept. According to a third-grade boy, clothing brands “are easiest [to use to describe yourself] because if people like to wear something to show off, they can.” And, an eighth-grade boy commented “clothes have the power to make you feel good or bad about yourself . . . that just doesn’t happen with a Twix candy bar.”

In contrast, other brand categories were viewed as less appropriate. A significant number of younger children (27%) noted that they were not allowed to eat candy, and a majority of older children (53%) mentioned that they did not eat cereal. A third-grade boy commented, “I’m not allowed to have any candy, not even on Halloween. I was Batman last year and I still wasn’t allowed to have any candy . . . Why don’t you just ask kids to choose clothes?” Candy, beverages, and cereal were also viewed as less diagnostic for expressing one’s self-concept. As an eighth-grade girl noted: “I don’t think anyone cares what other people have for breakfast, though, or what kind of gum they like [laughs]. I wouldn’t think anything of someone who liked Trident gum.”

Discussion

Our findings indicate the existence of age differences in self-brand connections. Third graders mentioned fewer brand names than did seventh and eighth graders in answering “Who Am I?” However, this task requires children to retrieve and verbalize information about themselves, which may make it difficult for younger children to communicate self-brand connections that truly exist (cf. Perracchio 1992). In the next study, we use alternative ways of measuring self-concepts to provide more structure and rely less on verbalization skills. First, we modify the “Who Am I?” task by prompting responses with the five categories (traits, television-movie characters, hobbies, sports, and clothing brands) children mentioned in this study. Category prompts should reduce the difficulty of retrieving self-descriptive elements for younger children (cf. John and Cole 1986). Second, we use these five categories to design a collage exercise where participants are asked to answer the “Who Am I?” question by designing a collage using different personality traits, television-movie characters, hobbies, sports, and clothing brands. Clothing brands were chosen as the focus given our findings that both younger and older children consider clothing brands to be most relevant to self-concept description.

STUDY 2

Method

Sample. Fifty-six participants were recruited from a Midwest elementary-middle school and a summer camp in the northeastern United States: 21 third graders (8–9-yr.-olds: 12 males, 9 females), 20 seventh and eighth graders (12–13-yr.-olds: 10 males, 10 females), and 15 eleventh and twelfth graders (16–18-yr.-olds: 5 males, 10 females). In addition to the age groups used in the first study, we added an older adolescent group to explore possible developmental changes occurring between early and late adolescence.

Procedure. Participants assent and parental consent were obtained for each participant. Respondents were interviewed individually and completed two tasks that assessed their self-concepts (described below). Each task was described and then demonstrated by the interviewer to ensure understanding of the task instructions. After completing the tasks, participants were debriefed and asked to not talk about the study with their peers until everyone had completed the study. The entire procedure took 30–40 min. to complete.

Experimental Tasks. The first task was a modification of the “Who Am I?” test used in study 1. Here, we provided participants with a list of categories—such as “appearance,” “personality,” “hobbies-activities,” and “clothes”—that could be used as cues to retrieve information about themselves. Respondents were allowed to describe themselves in any way they wished—using some, all, or none of the categories provided. The number of brands mentioned by each respondent served as the measure of self-brand connections.

The second task asked participants to answer the “Who Am I?” question by constructing a collage, which would tell a story about them. Collages, used successfully with adult consumers (Zaltman and Coulter 1995), were particularly well suited to our context. Even the youngest children in our sample had prior experience in building collages and found it to be an engaging activity. We made the collage task even easier for our participants by providing them with sets of pictures and labels for building collages, thereby alleviating the need to find, cut, and paste suitable elements from magazines, newspapers, or books. Participants were shown five Post-it boards, each one representing a different theme: hobbies, television-movie characters, brand names, sports, and personality traits. Placed on each board were 20...
laminated labels and pictures that represented the theme. For example, musical instruments and ballet were included on the “hobbies” board, Gap and Nike were listed on the “brand names” board, and “happy” and “athletic” were placed on the “personality traits” board. Participants were instructed to look at the labels and pictures on each board and pull off ones unfamiliar to them, providing a measure of how familiar each age group was with the various stimuli, especially brand names.

Respondents were then asked to construct their collage by choosing among the familiar pictures and labels and placing them on their collage board, which was a blank Post-it board. The use of Post-it boards, which are the size of a poster board covered with an adhesive like the one on Post-it notes, allowed participants to easily move pictures and labels from board to board as well as to arrange the elements on their “Who Am I?” collage as they wished. To ensure that participants were not limited by the choices on the theme boards, blank cards and markers were made available for making up new entries for the self-brand collages.

Two measures of self-brand connections were computed from the “Who Am I?” collages. First, we counted the number of brands placed on each collage. Recognizing that this measure might be affected by the total number of items on a collage, with a greater chance that more brands might be placed on a collage with more total items, we computed a second measure by dividing the number of brands on a collage by the total number of items placed on the collage.

Experimental Stimuli. Pilot tests were conducted to select a set of items for each theme board that would resonate with participants of different ages and genders (see fig. 1). The final set of items excluded those not familiar to most children in each age group. For hobbies and sports, we selected activities that were popular across grades (e.g., basketball, computer games), some more popular with boys (e.g., skateboarding), some more popular with girls (e.g., figure skating), some more popular with younger children (e.g., Pokémon), and some more popular with adolescents (e.g., extreme skiing).

The same guidelines were followed for selecting television-movie characters and brands. We selected characters popular with children and adolescents (e.g., Keenan from Keenan and Kel), some more popular with boys (e.g., Ren from Ren and Stimpy), some more popular with girls (Britney Spears from MTV), some more popular with younger children (e.g., Tommy from Rugrats), and some more popular with older children (e.g., Jennifer Aniston from Friends). Characters were also selected to represent different personalities, such as Angelica, from Rugrats, who is pushy and obnoxious. Brands were chosen that were popular across age and gender (e.g., Gap, Nike), some more popular with younger girls (e.g., Limited Too), some more popular with older girls (e.g., Express), some more popular with younger boys (e.g., Starter), and some more popular with older boys (Fubu). Finally, personality labels were selected to represent different personalities understandable to participants of all ages (e.g., “happy” and “serious”).

Results

Preliminary Analyses. The “Who Am I?” collage materials were examined to explore two issues. First, we analyzed the number of brands on the theme board that were familiar to participants. Third graders were familiar with about 75% of the brands, providing them with many choices to include on a collage. However, as anticipated, planned contrasts revealed that third graders knew fewer brands than seventh and eighth graders (M’s = 14.86 and 16.75, t(1, 53) = 2.34, p = .02), and seventh and eighth graders knew fewer brands than eleventh and twelfth graders (M’s = 16.75 and 18.73, t(1, 53) = 2.24, p = .03). Given these trends, we included the number of familiar brands as a covariate to adjust for existing age differences in subsequent analyses.

Also of concern was the possibility that the total number
of items on a collage might vary by age, with older children including more items as a result of having more complex self-concepts. Here, we did not find evidence of age differences, with third graders (M = 22.76), seventh and eighth graders (M = 23.30), and eleventh and twelfth graders (M = 24.27) including approximately the same number of items on their “Who Am I?” collages (for all contrasts, p’s > .20). Also, the number of items appearing on self-made labels on collages (M = 1.12) did not vary by age or by theme category (p’s > .10). Given these results, no further adjustments to subsequent analyses were necessary.

Number of Self-Brand Connections. Predictions of age differences in self-brand connections were tested first with responses to the open-ended “Who Am I?” task. Age differences in the number of self-brand connections were similar to those found in study 1, with planned contrasts between age groups indicating that third graders mentioned fewer brands than did seventh and eighth graders (M’s = 2.90 and 4.60, t(1, 24) = 2.17, p = .02) and that seventh and eighth graders mentioned fewer brands than did eleventh and twelfth graders (M’s = 4.60 and 5.80, t(1, 52) = 2.25, p = .02).

Similar age patterns emerged for the “Who Am I?” collage task. Looking at individual collages, more brands appeared on the collages of older children (see fig. 2). Planned contrasts between age groups were used to test for age differences in self-brand connections, incorporating a covariate for the number of familiar brands (see table 1 for means and standard deviations). Results indicated that third graders included fewer brands than did seventh and eighth graders (M’s = 2.90 and 4.60, t(1, 52) = 1.92, p = .03) but that seventh and eighth graders included about the same number of brands as did eleventh and twelfth graders (M’s = 4.60 and 5.80, t(1, 52) = 1.18, p = .12). Analyses of the number of brands as a percentage of total number of collage items revealed the same pattern (M’s = .12 vs. .20, t(1, 52) = 2.48, p < .01; M’s = .20 vs. .24, t(1, 52) < 1, p > .20).

Types of Self-Brand Connections. To examine types of self-brand connections, we asked participants to explain why certain brands were placed on their collages. As expected, explanations from third graders suggested concrete types of self-brand connections, usually referring to having or wearing clothes with the brand name. For example, when asked why she put Gap on her collage, a third-grade girl responded, “My mom buys me things from there.” In contrast, older respondents provided explanations that were more sophisticated, demonstrating knowledge of the brand’s personality or user stereotypes and how that image fit with their self-concept. For example, when asked why Gap was on her collage, a seventh-grade girl responded by saying, “Gap has really clean, preppie clothes. I like to dress preppie so I like the clothes they make.” Replying to the same question, an eleventh-grade girl responded, “The clothes there
TABLE 1

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<tr>
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<th>Study 2</th>
<th>Study 3</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third graders (n = 21)</td>
<td>Third graders (n = 18)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seventh and eighth graders (n = 20)</td>
<td>Seventh and eighth graders (n = 18)</td>
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<tr>
<td>No. of brands</td>
<td>2.90 (2.55)</td>
<td>2.39 (1.82)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total no. of items</td>
<td>22.76 (10.31)</td>
<td>20.44 (8.88)</td>
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<td>Percentage of brands</td>
<td>.12 (.10)</td>
<td>.12 (.09)</td>
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Note.—Numbers in parentheses represent standard deviations.

are me because they are really nice and not so showy—real
down-to-earth.”

Participants were also asked to explain why certain brands
were not placed on their collages. Explanations from third
graders suggested concrete reasons why certain brands were
not seen as good descriptors of themselves, often referring
to not having or wearing clothes with the brand name. For
example, when asked why she did not put Calvin Klein on
her collage, a third-grade girl responded, “Because I don’t
have any clothes from there.” In contrast, older participants
provided explanations that demonstrated a deeper appreci-
ation for brands and how they compared to their self-image.
For example, when asked why Fubu was not on her collage,
a seventh-grade girl responded, “It’s really for urban
boys—you know, the type that wear real baggy pants and
talk slang. I’m more of a prep so I go for stuff from places
like Gap.”

Discussion

Our findings support predictions of age differences in self-
brand connections occurring between middle childhood and
early adolescence. The number of self-brand connections
was lower for third versus seventh and eighth graders. Dif-
fences in the nature of these self-brand connections were
apparent as well. Third graders connected to brands on a
more concrete level related to their familiarity or ownership
of the brand, whereas older children connected to brands
based on their personalities, user stereotypes, and reference
group usage.

Recall that age differences were predicted on the basis of
three elements in the process of making self-brand connec-
tions—representations of self-concepts, representations of
brands, and comparison processes. The results of this study
point to particularly vivid differences in the representation
of brands. Younger children seemed to be familiar with a
number of brands yet lacked a sense that brands have per-
sonal qualities (e.g., personalities, user stereotypes) that
would serve as links to their self-concept. Is it possible that
younger children understand brands at a more sophisticated
level but are unable to verbalize their knowledge when asked
why they included certain brands on their collages? We
pursued this possibility in a third study.

STUDY 3

Method

Sample. Thirty-six children were recruited from an
elementary-middle school in the Midwest: 18 third graders
(8–9-yr.-olds: 10 males, 8 females) and 18 seventh and
eighth graders (12–13-yr.-olds: 8 males, 10 females). Pa-
rental consent and participant assent were obtained for each
child.

Procedure. Participants were interviewed individually.
Their first task was to complete a “Who Am I?” collage,
using the same instructions and stimuli as in study 2. This
collage exercise gave children experience in using the col-
lage materials, preparing them for the second task. Two
measures of self-brand connections were obtained to rep-
licate findings from study 2: (1) number of brands placed
on the collage and (2) percentage of total collage items that
were brands.

Next, children were asked to build a “Who Am I?” collage
for a brand, imagining “what the brand would be like as a
person.” Five Post-it boards with pictures and labels were
provided to build the collage, which allowed children to
express their representation of brands with fewer verbal de-
mands than in study 2. As before, participants could use
these pictures and labels, or make their own labels, to build
their brand collage on a blank Post-it board. A sample col-
lage for “Coke” was shown to participants to illustrate the
procedure and meaning of the brand collage.

Children were allowed to select the brand for their brand
collage from those included on their “Who Am I?” collage.
This procedure ensured that participants built a collage for
a brand familiar to them and one that they connected to on
a personal level. A single brand could have been used for
everyone, but this would have forced some children to build
a collage for a brand that was relatively unfamiliar or un-
interesting to them. Next, participants were asked to build
a second brand collage, choosing one of the brands they
were familiar with but did not appear on their “Who Am
I?” collage. Finally, children were thanked for their partic-
ipation and dismissed. The entire procedure took 30–45 min.

Experimental Stimuli Stimuli for the child’s “Who Am
I?” collage were the same as those used in study 2. Twenty pictures and labels were available for each of five themes: sports, hobbies, television-movie characters, personality traits, and brand names. Blank labels and markers were also available in case children wished to add to the premade set of pictures and labels.

Similar stimuli were used for the brand collage task. The same theme boards for sports, hobbies, and television-movie characters were used. The personality traits board was used with minor modifications. However, the brand names board was replaced with a theme board for physical traits (e.g., boy, teen, tall, and old). As before, all stimuli were placed on five Post-it boards, with the brand collages built by children being constructed on blank Post-it boards.

For brand collages, the number of personality traits was the focus of the analysis. The number of collage items from each of the five themes—sports, hobbies, television-movie characters, personality traits, and physical traits—was computed for each child for each brand separately.

Results

Preliminary Analyses. Children’s “Who Am I?” collages were examined for age differences in two aspects. We examined the number of brands on the theme board that were familiar to children of different ages. On average, both age groups were familiar with at least 75% of the brands depicted on the board. However, third graders knew fewer brands than did seventh and eighth graders ($M’s = 15.56$ and 17.61, $F(1, 34) = 4.42$, $p = .02$). We also examined the total number of items placed on collages, finding that third graders and also seventh and eighth graders were similar in this regard ($M’s = 20.44$ and 21.44, $F(1, 34) < 1$, $p > .20$). Given these results, the number of familiar brands was used as a covariate in subsequent analyses.

For brand collages, we explored whether age differences existed in the number of items placed on the brand collages. The larger the total number of collage items, the greater the probability that personality traits might appear. Age differences did not appear for either brand collage, with third graders and also seventh and eighth graders using a similar number of items on their collages (collage 1: $M’s = 13.44$ and 15.28; collage 2: $M’s = 11.56$ and 10.94; $F’s < 1$, $p’s > .20$). Given these results, no adjustments were made in subsequent analyses.

“Who Am I?” Collage. Children’s “Who Am I?” collages reflected the same age differences in self-brand connections found in study 2 (see table 1 for means and standard deviations). A covariate analysis, including the number of familiar brands as the covariate, was conducted for the number of brands on children’s collages as well as the percentage of brands included on children’s collages. Age differences were evident for both measures, with third graders including fewer brands on their collages than seventh and eighth graders ($M’s = 2.39$ and 4.94, $F(1, 33) = 12.06$, $p < .01$). Brands also constituted a lower percentage of the collage items for third versus seventh and eighth graders ($M’s = .12$ and .24, $F(1, 33) = 13.76$, $p < .01$).

Brand Collages. To test for expected age differences in the brand collages, we examined the number of elements belonging to each of five themes, including personality traits (see table 2 for means and standard deviations). Each set of collage data was analyzed separately, with one collage representing a brand children connected to their self-image (collage 1) and the second collage representing a brand children did not connect to their self-image (collage 2).

Results indicated age differences in the overall composition of both brand collages (collage 1: multivariate $F(5, 30) = 8.98$, $p < .01$; collage 2: multivariate $F(5, 30) = 6.99$, $p < .01$). Univariate analyses of the categories of collage elements provided more insight. As expected, the brand collages of third graders contained fewer references to personality traits than the collages of seventh and eighth graders (collage 1: $M’s = 2.06$ and 5.00, $F(1, 34) = 23.49$, $p < .01$; collage 2: $M’s = 1.61$ and 3.89, $F(1, 34) = 23.33$, $p < .01$). The same pattern was obtained for the number of physical traits, with third graders including fewer of these than did seventh

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand Collage Elements</th>
<th>Third graders ($n = 18$)</th>
<th>Seventh and eighth graders ($n = 18$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personality</strong></td>
<td>2.06 (1.30)</td>
<td>5.00 (2.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical traits</strong></td>
<td>2.83 (1.98)</td>
<td>4.17 (1.62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sports</strong></td>
<td>2.06 (1.16)</td>
<td>2.89 (3.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hobbies</strong></td>
<td>3.17 (2.48)</td>
<td>1.78 (1.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Television-movie characters</strong></td>
<td>3.33 (2.68)</td>
<td>1.56 (1.29)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE.**—Numbers in parentheses represent standard deviations.
and eighth graders (collage 1: $M' = 2.83$ and $4.17$, $F(1,34) = 4.90, p = .03$; collage 2: $M' = 1.50$ and $2.72$, $F(1,34) = 8.77, p < .01$). In contrast, third graders used more hobbies and television-movie characters in their brand collages than did seventh and eighth graders (collage 1: hobbies: $M' = 3.17$ and $1.78$, $F(1,34) = 4.17, p = .05$; television-movie characters: $M' = 3.33$ and $1.56$, $F(1,34) = 6.43, p = .02$; collage 2: hobbies: $M' = 3.56$ and $1.44$, $F(1,34) = 14.37, p < .01$; television-movie characters: $M' = 2.56$ and $0.78$, $F(1,34) = 7.96, p < .01$). The only category where third and seventh and eighth graders did not differ was the use of sports (collage 1: $M' = 2.06$ and $2.89$, $F(1,34) = 1.08, p > .20$; collage 2: $M' = 2.28$ and $2.11$, $F(1,34) < 1, p > .20$).

We also observed age differences in the overall quality of the brand collages. Although our observations are exploratory at this point, we noted that older children constructed collages that were well integrated in providing an overall image, personality, or impression of the brand, whereas younger children typically did not. These differences are illustrated by two collages for the same brand (Nike) shown in figure 3. Collage A was constructed by a third-grade boy, who offers the following explanation: “Nike is shy because he runs away. Nike wears Nike shoes because they feel good. Nike likes Jennifer Aniston because she’s pretty. Nike is tall because he’s the tallest person in his class. Nike watches Nickelodeon because he likes to watch TV.” Collage B was constructed by an eighth-grade boy, who offers the following explanation: “Nike is sporty. That’s why I have all these sports on here. Sporty people are popular so I think Nike would have to be a popular person. It’s also a really popular sports name and lots of people use it. It would be active because of all the sports stuff and equipment that it has. It would be serious because the sports clothes and equipment are good quality. So, if it were a person, this person would not goof off. This person would be a serious athlete and serious worker.” Note that the eighth-grade boy’s collage provides an integrative view of the brand image (sporty) and tells a coherent story about Nike, which is missing from the younger boy’s explanation.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Our research provides evidence of the development of self-brand connections among children and adolescents. Results from three studies, using different methods for measuring self-concepts, indicate that self-brand connections develop between middle childhood and early adolescence. Self-brand connections increase with age, accompanied by increases in the depth of the connections being made. During middle childhood, children make a limited number of self-brand connections, which are based on concrete associations with the brand, such as owning or buying branded items. As children move into adolescence, self-brand connections increase as brands are viewed as being connected to one’s self-concept because the brand has the same personality, user characteristics, or reference group affiliation.

These trends provide a starting point for understanding how self-brand connections develop in children. Given the extent of cognitive and social changes that take place from early childhood to adolescence, one might intuitively expect that self-brand connections would become more evident sometime during this period. Our findings identify the period from middle childhood (ages 7–8) to early adolescence (ages 12–13) as key to understanding how children view brands in relationship to their self-images. Not only do we see increases in the number of self-brand connections during this period, but also changes in the nature of the self-brand connections being made. Our findings also suggest that older children have deeper self-brand connections because they think about brands in a very specific way—as having personalities and symbolizing group membership—that provides a natural link to their self-concepts.

What process accounts for these age-related trends? We proposed that these age differences are associated with age-
related developments in three areas—representation of self-concepts, representations of brands, and self-brand comparison processes. Our findings provide preliminary support for this view, especially with regard to the influence that the brand representation plays in the process. However, it would be premature to conclude that these three elements are the sole influences on children’s self-brand connections. It is likely that additional factors play a direct or indirect role by affecting the three elements we have identified. As children grow older, for example, they have more experience with brands and more exposure to branding campaigns, which provide strong cues about the brand’s personality, user group, or personal qualities. These cues provide fodder for the older child’s natural inclination to think about brands more conceptually, thereby producing a brand representation that is more conducive to the matching process with personal traits from one’s self-concept.

Socialization agents—such as parents, peers, and media—should also be acknowledged as important to the process of self-concept development. Children turn to these agents for information about social norms as well as confirmation about who they are. Peers play an increasingly important role in this regard as children move from childhood into adolescence (McGuire and McGuire 1987; Stipek and MacIver 1989). Although our focus in this article is on the psychological processes that influence the development of self-brand connections, a fuller understanding of this process could be gained by examining peer influence, asking questions such as, How do peers influence the alignment of self-concepts with brands? Do peers exhibit the same degree of influence on self-brand connections across age groups and genders?

In pursuing these topics, future research could also provide more insight into the process by examining the generalizability of our results. First, it may be interesting to examine the development of self-brand connections in children across different socioeconomic and ethnic groups. Our findings are based on samples of children from middle-class homes in the midwestern and northeastern United States. Understanding how self-brand connections are made for lower-income children or children from ethnic groups with a more collectivist orientation could point to additional factors that influence the process of development. Second, it may be useful to examine the generalizability of our results across children within age groups. We noticed variation among third graders with regard to brand familiarity, number and type of self-brand connections, and sophistication of brand collages. There are a few children in this age group that seem to be more similar to older children. Why are these children different from their peers? Perhaps they are simply ahead of their peers in conceptual abilities or social development. Or, it may be that their environment provides more experience with brands or more exposure to brands through older siblings or parents. By examining the sources of within age-group differences, we might be able to untangle factors related to cognitive development versus experience versus environment.

Finally, we might gain a better understanding of the process by delving more deeply into the development of different types of self-concepts in children. The self-concept literature supports the idea that individuals can maintain several different self-concepts—actual self, ideal self, future self, and possible self, to name a few. Here, we have not attempted to measure self-concepts in these different forms but have aimed at understanding changes in the actual self from childhood through adolescence. The self-concept development literature in child psychology also focuses on the actual self, probably because of the difficulty (or impossibility) of measuring concepts such as the ideal self or the future self with younger children. However, distinctions among self-concepts could be studied with older children and adolescents. In doing so, the “Who Am I?” collage methodology may be helpful in allowing children to express differences across types of self-concepts in a more concrete fashion—allowing us to gain more insight into the consumer world of children and adolescents.

[Dawn Iacobucci served as editor and Laura Peracchio served as associate editor for this article.]

REFERENCES


