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What Makes Things Cool? How Autonomy Influences Perceptions of Coolness

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We propose that the extent of autonomy from mainstream society influences the extent to which people and brands are considered cool. In three experiments we illustrate how the amount of autonomy considered cool differs across consumers and explore when consumers will be more likely to prefer cool brands.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Coolness is a socially desirable trait often pursued by consumers and marketers (Belk, Tian, and Paavola 2008; Dar Nimrod et al. 2008; Kerner and Pressman 2007). Both people and brands can become cool, although it is not well understood how this occurs. Leading theories suggest that coolness comes from conforming to behaviors desired within a particular subculture (Danesi 1994; O'Donnell and Wardlow 2000; Thornton 1996) or by quickly mimicking the behaviors of other cool people (Gladwell 1997; Lupiono-Misdorn and de Luca 1998). These theories, however, provide an incomplete explanation because they do not account for the origins of coolness nor do they explain how coolness diffuses across subcultures.

Building on prior work in cultural studies, sociology, and psychology (Frank 1997; Heath and Potter 2004; Pountain and Robins 2000), we hypothesize an alternative way people and brands can become cool: display bounded autonomy from mainstream society. In other words, we suspect that people and brands can become cool by going their own way, rather than following society's conventions. We test this hypothesis in three experiments.

Autonomy cannot be directly observed. Rather, it must be inferred by observing the extent to which a person or brand adheres to society's norms. People and brands that resist or ignore these norms will likely be seen as more autonomous than people and brands that conform. Consequently, we hypothesize that rebellion and uniqueness will influence perceptions of autonomy, which will influence perceptions of coolness.

Our first study tests whether people who are more rebellious and unique are perceived to be cooler than people who are less rebellious and unique. Furthermore, we test whether these effects are mediated by perceived autonomy. Participants read descriptions of target people who either described themselves as fairly rebellious or not rebellious and fairly unique or not unique. Rebellion and uniqueness were fully crossed and manipulated between-subjects. For example, one target person was either described as "not afraid to go against the grain" or "careful not to go against the grain," depending on whether the participant was in the high or low rebellion condition, respectively. After reading the descriptions, participants rated their perceptions of the target person's autonomy and coolness. As expected, target people who seemed more rebellious were considered cooler than target people who seemed less rebellious (M 6.9 vs. 4.6). Uniqueness had a similar effect (M 6.8 vs. 4.8). Importantly, both main effects were mediated by perceptions of autonomy.

Next we investigate whether the relationship between autonomy and perceptions of coolness is strictly increasing or curvilinear. Social norms exist in part to prevent destructive, anti-social behavior (Rousseau 1994). Consequently, we suspect that showing extreme levels of autonomy by completely disregarding these norms will not be seen as cool. Thus, the relationship between autonomy and perceived coolness will likely be curvilinear: perceived coolness will initially increase with displays of autonomy, but will begin to decrease as displays of autonomy become too extreme.

Individuals differ in terms of the extent to which they value autonomy and, consequently, the amount of autonomy they will consider acceptable. Individuals higher in counterculturalism, an ideology centered on the belief that societal institutions promote widespread conformity while repressing individuality, will likely value autonomy more than individuals lower in countercultural-

ism. Consequently, we hypothesize that the level of autonomy considered cool—i.e., the point at which the curvilinear function between autonomy and perceived coolness peaks—will be higher for consumers higher in counterculturalism.

Our second study tests whether the relationship between autonomy and perceived coolness is curvilinear, and whether the amount of autonomy considered cool varies depending on counterculturalism. Participants read about a target person who was described as displaying either a low (e.g. "she rarely would assert her independence"), moderate (e.g., "she occasionally would assert her independence"), high (e.g., "she often would assert her independence"), or extreme (e.g., "she always would assert her independence) level of autonomy. Participants rated perceived coolness of the target person and completed a scale measuring their level of counterculturalism. As hypothesized, perceived coolness initially increased as autonomy increased from a low to moderate level, but decreased as autonomy moved from a high to extreme level. Additionally, however, participants higher in counterculturalism considered higher levels of autonomy cooler than participants lower in counterculturalism.

Our third study explores when consumers will desire cool brands. Because displays of autonomy lead to perceptions of coolness, we suspect that consumers can use cool brands to signal an autonomous identity. Individualistic consumers will want to signal their autonomy, and hence will be most likely to prefer cool brands, when their identity as an autonomous individual has been threatened (Brewer 1991; Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009).

In this study we test whether American consumers whose autonomous identity has been threatened are more likely to prefer cool brands. We threatened the autonomous identity of some participants by making them feel undifferentiated from others by priming their interdependent self (e.g., Aaker and Lee 2001). Subsequently, participants indicated whether they preferred a cool winter hat brand (i.e., one displaying bounded autonomy) or an uncool winter hat brand (i.e., one displaying low autonomy). Participants primed with an interdependent self were more likely to select the cool hat brand (68%) than participants primed with an independent self (44%). Desire to express autonomy was higher for participants primed with an interdependent self, and this measure mediated the effect of the self-construal prime on brand preference.

Following subcultural norms and mimicking cool people are not the only ways to become cool. People and brands can also become cool through displays of bounded autonomy. Identifying autonomy as an additional antecedent of perceived coolness suggests where coolness originates and how cool trends diffuse across subcultures. Things first become cool when they are seen as autonomous from mainstream society and cool trends typically diffuse from outsider subcultures and consumers higher in counterculturalism to more mainstream subcultures and consumers lower in counterculturalism. Our research suggests that consumers and brands that want to be cool should be rebellious and unique, but be careful not to go too far.

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