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Adolescent Self-concept and Narcissistic Vulnerability: An Exploration of Gender Differences

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines gender differences in narcissistic vulnerability during adolescence. These differences emerged while researching the face validity of the ‘Theory on the Origins of Coolness’ model (O’Donnell and Wardlow 1999) which describes the adolescent process of identity construction that leads to the designation of certain products and behaviors as “cool.” Methods used were in-depth, semi-structured interviews and projective techniques. Participants were five male and five female alumni of the Urban Ranger Program, a school based alternative education program. Results indicate that adolescents do experience narcissistic vulnerability differently by gender. This paper will discuss these findings as well as implications for marketers.

Understanding what is considered “cool” or “uncool” to teenagers is therefore important for a number of reasons. Not only do they represent a lucrative market but they are also trendsetters for the population at large. Younger children look up to teenagers and adults look to them to determine what is in or “cool” (Zollo 1995). The term “coolhunting” is used to describe the process of seeking nascent trends that might gain widespread acceptance in the general population (Gladwell 1997). One of the biggest problems with research of this kind is that the notion of what is “cool” or not changes across groups and over time. Teenagers, in particular, are a “volatile and fickle audience” characterized by constant change (Zollo 1995). Once something becomes popular and widely available it is likely that teenagers will no longer consider it “cool.” Tapping into and exploiting trends before they vanish, thus provides a challenge for marketers. Since coolhunter research tends to be anecdotal and ephemeral the sources of coolness are not well understood. “Coolness” has been defined as, “a set of specific behavioral characteristics that vary in detail from generation to generation, from clique to clique, but which retain a common essence. It is firmly anchored in a symbology – a set of discernible bodily movements, postures, facial expressions, voice modulation and so on – that is acquired, and takes on strategic social value, within the peer context” (Danesi 1994 p. 38).
The ‘Theory on the Origins of Coolness’ (O’Donnell and Wardlow 1999) designates the adolescent social and psychological development process as the starting point for the origin of “coolness.” Adolescents experience narcissistic vulnerability, a chronic incongruence (Joffe and Sandler 1967) between the actual and ideal selves. They seek to affiliate with peers and peer groups in order to reduce the discomfort associated with this experience. As they adopt group-endorsed norms, semiotic codes evolve which function to maintain group identity. These within-group semiotic codes determine what is “cool” and “uncool” within the group. An aggregation of commonalities in coolness across groups leads to a ‘metacode’ of coolness which is amenable to diffusion through the general population.

**ADOLESCENCE**

Adolescence is a phase in which profound physiological, anatomical and cognitive changes take place. While earlier psychoanalytic theories emphasized the “storm and stress” of adolescence (Freud 1958), more recent research indicates that most adolescents manage to negotiate adolescence successfully (Abramowitz, Petersen, and Schulenberg 1984; Offer 1987).

The psychodynamic perspective on adolescent development characterizes adolescence as a period in which a second individuation process occurs (Blos 1967). The first process occurs during childhood when the young child first experiences the distinction between the ‘self’ and ‘other.’ The second individuation process of adolescence is an important process in the establishment of a unique sense of identity. Thus, according to the psychodynamic perspective, the loosening of ties with pre-oedipal internalized objects leads to the experience of object hunger which is satisfied by finding external love/hate objects.

According to Erikson’s (1968) developmental perspective the two stages of personality development occurring during adolescence are “identity versus role diffusion” and “intimacy versus isolation.” Identity may be described as a secure sense of self and identity diffusion is the failure to develop a cohesive self or self-awareness (Kaplan, Sadock and Grebb 1994). Becoming independent is part of the resolution of this identity crisis. The events of late adolescence challenge the adolescent’s self-concept. This precipitates an identity crisis that is resolved as the adolescent develops an integrated self-image. Adolescents cope with this identity struggle by turning to peers, popular heroes and causes. They gradually obtain a sense of identity by trying on various roles, often in the context of the group. The ability to form intimate relationships is a cornerstone of successful resolution of this phase of development.

The cognitive perspective emphasizes the dramatic expansion of cognitive capabilities that occurs during adolescence. According to Piaget (1980), adolescents are in the stage of formal operations, which is marked by the development of hypothetical and abstract thinking properties as well as the use of scientific problem solving (Ginsburg and Opper 1979). Adolescents can make logical deductions and think about possibilities and consequences (Piaget 1980). Adolescence is the stage during which a self-concept develops. As adolescents construct new cognitive categories and ideals they gradually form a unique self-concept. An essential task is to construct new ideals and standards constrained by the recognition of actual capabilities and
the reality of the external world (Wolf, Gedo and Terman 1972).

From a psychosocial perspective, the central task for adolescents is “to acquire the means to function independently of their parents, assume adult roles in society, and establish the capacity to join with a partner of the opposite sex to form a new family” (Bleiberg 1988, p. 217).

While each of the theories offer a different perspective, they show the same underlying developmental processes that constitute adolescence. Adolescence contains a number of unique developmental challenges. Puberty is associated with dramatic physiological changes. Psychosocial factors push towards independence and autonomy. Cognitive structures and capacities expand. The tie to internalized objects is loosened to prepare the adolescent for functioning as an independent, autonomous individual. These developmental changes evoke changes in the adolescent’s self-concept and lead to the experience of narcissistic vulnerability.

NARCISSISTIC VULNERABILITY.

The concept of narcissistic vulnerability is a central component of adolescent development (Bleiberg 1994). According to Joffe and Sandler (1967), narcissistic vulnerability is a chronic incongruence between the actual and ideal self. The actual self refers to how a person perceives him or herself. It may be described as the conscious and unconscious sense individuals have of their characteristics, capacities, and abilities to respond to adaptive demands (Joffe and Sandler 1967). The ideal self refers to how a person would like to perceive him/herself. “The ideal self is in the shape of a self-representation associated with a sense of safety, competence, and satisfaction; it conjures up the experience of mastery, control, experiential integration, and optimal ability to meet adaptive demand” (Bleiberg 1994, p. 34). Narcissistic vulnerability leads to feelings of shame, embarrassment, self-consciousness and shyness. Adolescence is therefore a period in which self-worth and self-esteem are questioned. Narcissistic well-being or self-esteem results from the successful shaping of the actual self after the ideal self (Bleiberg 1994).

The narcissistic vulnerability experienced in adolescence is a re-capitulation of the narcissistic vulnerability first experienced in early childhood (Bleiberg 1994). During the first year of life children experience a period of self-other undifferentiation. As they grow they develop a concept of their own separateness and realize their survival is dependent on a primary caregiver. This creates a gap between their actual abilities and the degree of control over the environment necessary to feel safe. This leads to the experience of helplessness and vulnerability which causes a state of narcissistic vulnerability. Object relations literature describes how children make use of transitional objects and omnipotence to close this gap (Winnicott 1965).

During adolescence, once again there is a gap between the demands placed on the adolescent and their perceived ability to meet those demands. Adolescence is a period of rapid change in terms of biological, psychological, and psychosocial demands. These demands put pressure on the adolescent to separate from the family, gain a greater sense of independence and autonomy, and engage in sexual and emotional intimacy. “The very core of the sense of self requires reorganization to adapt to these demands” (Bleiberg 1994, p. 225). It has been pointed out that these forces are a function
of the adolescent’s internal changes as well as regressive pulls by parents (Bleiberg 1988).

In order to meet the developmental tasks required of adolescence there is a need to separate from the real and internalized parents (Bleiberg 1988, 1994). Since the sense of self is characterized by internalized objects the distancing from internalized parents leaves adolescents without a strong link to the internal mechanism that provides a sense of self and autonomy. An important part of normal adolescent development is the emergence of a new self-regulatory system.

Narcissistic vulnerability is a normal, functional aspect of adolescent development that occurs as the adolescent explores and develops a unique sense of self or self-identity. Most adolescents do not experience extreme narcissistic vulnerability. Extreme narcissistic vulnerability is dysfunctional and may manifest in self-destructive behavior, extreme violation of familial and societal rules, and overwhelming anxiety. Normal adolescents are able to construct an ideal self by using memories, fantasies, parental models, and new extra-familial objects such as peers, peer groups and products. By constructing an internal ideal that matches their real talents and characteristics to those of the external world they do not experience extreme narcissistic vulnerability (Bleiberg 1998, 1994). In addition, despite strivings for independence and conflicts with family, normal adolescence does not result in total destruction of the relationship with parental figures. “Normally adolescents maintain basically good relationships with both their real and their intrapsychic parents” (Bleiberg 1994, p.41).

Adolescents use “signifying osmosis” strategies to overcome the feelings associated with narcissistic vulnerability. These strategies; transitional positioning and omnipotence, provide the adolescent with external sources of support and self-validation (O'Donnell and Wardlow, 1999). As external objects replace older internalized models, peers and peer groups become the primary sources of self-validation. Adolescents model their behavior after that of their peers to ensure support and approval. This explains findings that peer relationships assume markedly greater importance in adolescence than childhood (Simmons and Rosenberg 1975).

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SELF-CONCEPT DURING ADOLESCENCE

In examining self-concept during adolescence, research indicates that adolescents do experience difficulties with self-image (Simmons et al. 1973) and that gender differences in self-image and self-esteem emerge primarily in adolescence (Simmons and Rosenberg 1975).

Patzer (1985) indicates that self-concept is integrally related to body satisfaction as a function of physical attractiveness. Rice (1990) posits that there is a relationship between physical attractiveness and the adolescent’s positive self-evaluation. Adolescents who are less satisfied with their physical appearance and who believe themselves to be less physically attractive have been found to have lower self esteem, more problems with self-consciousness and less stable self-images (Simmons and Rosenberg 1975).

The importance of physical attractiveness to self-esteem has been found to be particularly true for women. In this regard physical attractiveness has been found to correlate positively with self-esteem for
women but not men (Mathers and Kahn 1975) and amongst college students physical attractiveness appears to play a more important role in the self-concept of females than their male counterparts. It has also been reported that female adolescents experience more difficulties with self and body-image (Bohan 1973; Offer and Howard 1972), more self-consciousness, a greater disturbance in self image and have slightly lower global self-esteem than male adolescents (Simmons and Rosenberg 1975). Research indicates that physical attractiveness is the most salient component of the self-concept of adolescent females while physical effectiveness is the salient component of self-concept in male adolescents (Lerner and Karabenick 1974; Lerner, Orlos and Knapp 1976). For females higher physical attractiveness and lower body weight has been associated with increased self-acceptance, resistance to peer evaluation and less fear of being evaluated (Adams, 1977).

Gender differences with regards to contributions made by specific body parts indicate that for males, satisfaction with their voice and chest is most important to self-esteem, while for females self-esteem is determined by overall physical attractiveness. Concern with weight is more common and a more important aspect of dissatisfaction with body image amongst female than male adolescents (Brumberg 1988; Fallon and Rozin 1985; Franzoi and Herzog 1987).

It is clear that adolescence is a period in which issues of self-image and self-concept are important. Given the review of narcissistic vulnerability literature as well as gender differences in adolescent’s self-concept it is likely that the manner in which narcissistic vulnerability is experienced during adolescence will differ for male and female adolescents. By examining adolescent narcissistic vulnerability and the manner in which the feelings associated with this experience are resolved through peer-group affiliation, important insights may be gained into gender related consumption patterns and behavior.

METHODOLOGY

This paper presents part of the results of a study that examines the face validity of the 'Theory on the Origins of Coolness' model (O'Donnell and Wardlow, 1999). The model contains various components with the starting point being the narcissistic vulnerability that is experienced during adolescence. This paper presents the findings related to adolescent experiences of narcissistic vulnerability and the gender differences that emerge.

In conventional usage, the term validity refers to the extent to which an empirical measure adequately reflects the real meaning of the concept under study. Face validity has been described as “that quality of an indicator that makes it seem a reasonable measure of some variable” (Rubin and Babbie, 1993, p. 697). Having face validity means that an item or construct appears to measure what it is intended to measure.

The research utilizes a qualitative approach, which is considered well suited for finding out the feelings and impressions of individuals from their own perspective. The aim is to generate richer, albeit, more tentative findings (Rubin and Babbie 1993). In-depth semi-structured interviewed and projective techniques are used.

The researcher is a female in her mid-30’s whose career activities include counseling adolescents. She grew up in Southern
Africa and has lived in the United States for six and a half years.

Selection of participants was based on a snowball sampling method. The term “snowball” refers to the process of accumulation as each located subject suggests other subjects. The procedure may be described as “collecting data on the members of the target population that one is able to locate, and then asking those individuals to provide the information needed to locate other members of that population whom they happen to know” (Rubin and Babbie, 1993, p. 697). The researcher was given a list of four Urban Ranger Alumni by her research supervisors. The Urban Ranger program is a class that engages in activities such as hiking, rock climbing and ropes courses as an alternative to regular classroom activities at a high school. These participants then provided the phone numbers of other participants who were contacted until ten interviews were completed.

Five females and five males between the ages of 21 and 24 were interviewed. They were members of the Urban Ranger program between 1994 and 1997 and six of the participants had been in the 1994 class together. Enrollment in the program ranged between one to three semesters. Age during enrollment ranged from 15 and 18 years and most of the participants were 17 or 18 while in the program. During the interviews it emerged that most participants were from single parent families.

The initial interview contact was made at a local coffee shop where one of the participants works part time. Subsequent contacts were made via telephone. Once participants agreed to the interview a suitable time and location was arranged. Most of the interviews took place at the coffee shop where the initial contact was made.

The interview process may be described as semi-structured. Questions were open-ended to facilitate dialogue between the researcher and participants. These questions were modified as information was gathered and emerging themes were identified (Highlen and Finley 1996; Taylor and Bogdan 1998). The interviews were approximately an hour to an hour and a quarter in length and upon completion the interview was transcribed. Interviews were taped after the researcher gained verbal permission to do so. Participants were informed that the purpose of the interview was to discuss their experiences of being a teenager and their experiences of being a group member.

Data were transcribed immediately after each interview and read to identify emergent themes that might modify subsequent data collection. Once all the interviews were completed data were analyzed to determine categories, recurrent themes and ideas or belief systems common to the participants (Taylor and Bogdan 1998). In particular, data were coded to identify trends and themes that confirmed or discounted the face validity of the ‘Theory on the Origins of Coolness’ model.

A projective drawing technique was utilized to gather additional information about the participants' experiences of narcissistic vulnerability during adolescence. Participants were asked to do three drawings in order to explore discrepancies between their actual and ideal selves. In particular they were requested to “draw a picture that describes you as a teenager.” They were then asked to “draw a picture that describes your ideal at that time.” Finally they were asked to draw a picture that, “describes you as a
teenager when you had just completed Urban Rangers.” Once the pictures were completed they were discussed with the participants. Samples of these drawings are included in the appendix.

Each participant was also asked to list anything that they thought was “cool” or “uncool” during or immediately after they had been in the group.

**DATA ANALYSIS:**

*Adolescent Experiences of Narcissistic Vulnerability*

The starting point for the 'Theory on the Origins of Coolness' is in the narcissistic vulnerability experienced during adolescence. Adolescence is characterized by heightened narcissistic vulnerability, a fluctuating discrepancy between the actual and ideal self. Adolescence is a time of striving for independence and forging a unique identity, a period of painful questioning. Other affective correlates of narcissistic vulnerability are self-consciousness, shame, embarrassment and shyness (Joffe and Sandler 1967). Normally, adolescents cope successfully with this developmental transition, however, the feelings and experiences can be intense.

“You’re chock full of hormones, your body’s changing radically, you’re trying to be an adult you have no idea what that actually entails so you’re just like stabbing out into the dark at all sorts of things.” (Tommy)

“It was like being completely unaware of myself....It was coming to a point where I really wanted to be an older person, I wanted to be grown up and mature and I was frustrated with myself and my inability to do certain things. I had all of these feelings of being too young and not able to handle anything.” (Mary)

“I was cutting school a lot. I was drinking, you know I just was doing things I guess I thought teenagers did and to a large extent they do. I was just thinking this is probably what I’m going to be doing for the majority of my existence.... I didn’t want to put myself to any high standing goal, just wanted to keep it where I was at, thought I could just cruise by life.” (Jeremy)

“What teenager doesn’t (feel lost). I wasn’t accomplishing anything. I was not doing good in school. I was not caring. I was just into drugs and alcohol and that was all. I was at school to get high and meet up with somebody and go drink. You’re just lost, you don’t know what time it is.... Confused.... I was just confused and most of the time I was high and you’re just insecure and you’ve just got no confidence about your ability. I just had no ambition or goals.” (Susan)

“Just cutting and partying and just being a teenager. Being a teenager, usually rebelling, trying to establish your own identity.” (Melinda)

Adolescence is characterized by the emergence of a heightened sense of social cognition which leads the adolescent to construct a theory of self in relation to others (Okun and Sasy 1977). This heightened sense of social cognition underlies the acute self-consciousness characteristic of adolescence. Adolescents tend to be concerned about how they are perceived by others.

“I was fun. I had a lot of friends. I was also scared. You know insecurity, like I’d go away and think. ‘Did I say this? Did I say that?’” (Susan)
"Oh yeah, so easily embarrassed. I was very careful because of that, I was constantly rethinking things in my head. You know, 'in this situation what should I do so that I will not have anyone laughing at me, making fun of me, thinking I'm a dork.'" (Mary)

The heightened social consciousness prompts the adolescent to use several strategies to deflect attention away from him or herself. Danesi (1994) points out that one such strategy is humor. The use of this strategy is clearly reflected in Mary's experience.

"My way of dealing with how I felt about myself was to try and sort of be silly and pop out with whatever came into my head. So they would laugh and that would draw their attention away from looking at me and thinking there was something wrong with me. 'Oh that was a funny thing she just said'... I need to hide behind these little tricks that I have, jokes, changing the subject. I would do just about anything not to let people see what was really going on in my head." (Mary)

In spite of the strivings for independence and conflicts with family, normal adolescence does not result in total destruction of the relationships with parental figures. "Normally adolescents maintain basically good relationships with both their real and their intrapsychic parents" (Bleiberg 1994, p.41). This was evident during the interviews as both male and female participants discussed their admiration and respect for parents and parental figures.

"I loved my mother and I always felt that I was in her shadow but she had just done so much and I was just grateful. She taught me how to be grateful and not just be this overbearing kid." (Anna)

"My dad in certain ways, just for like, I admired him for his sort of outdoorsmanship, just the love of nature that he has. Also my uncle, he built his own business out of scratch, so he's a pretty cool guy." (Tommy)

"My mom and my grandmother. She would be number one. She was very tough, had a heart of gold. She was the strongest woman I've ever known in my life." (Susan)

"My grandpa, he always set a high expectation for me. I always set my expectations high because of that, because my gramps did something." (Anthony)

Gender Differences in Narcissistic Vulnerability

The projective-drawing technique further illuminated the participants' discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves. All of the female participants mentioned physical appearance either during the interviews or in discussing their drawings. Three of the female participants reported a fairly large discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves that was related to their perceived physical appearance. A fourth participant reported some self-consciousness about her appearance (weight), although not to the same extent.

Susan reported,

"I was very self-conscious about my weight..... I was very confused on how to act i.e. what was the cool thing to say and do." (Susan)

Her ideal self was described as having much more confidence. She reported,
"I would have liked to be thin because that was a big issue for me." (Susan)

Kayla chose to draw her "masks." Her first "mask" showed "a need for beauty." It also showed her interest in books and a reflection of her intelligence and "superiority." She felt lonely and was "self conscious of her body." She felt an inability to speak her mind or to disagree.

She described herself as an adolescent, "Pretty confident but I was going through the regular teenage problems. I was anorexic and was just been coming off being anorexic and I was dealing with a lot of negative body issues and trying to figure that out." (Kayla)

Her ideal self was portrayed as having a positive self-image, wisdom, being able to speak her mind and her eyes were focused on what she wanted to do.

Mary described herself as "fat." She reported that she was obsessed with feeling overweight. She hated her arms and draw them as very hairy. She saw herself as having "the biggest nose in the world."

"I felt hampered by this ugly shell. I convinced myself that in a past life I was really beautiful and I was very vain and my punishment for that was that in this life I was very ugly and would have to find a way to make people see that I was beautiful on the inside. I hated myself I really did. I thought I was the most unattractive, unnecessary human being." (Mary)

Mary’s ideal self was represented by a slim, idealized portrayal of beauty.

In describing herself as a teenager, Melinda indicated, "I think I was pretty confident, but I was overweight. I was kind of chunky so I think that was a problem, I thought it was. It wasn’t that big of a deal because I’ve always been kind of a social bug and I go off and do things, so it didn’t stop me from doing anything but then it was always kind of in the back of my mind." (Melinda)

Her ideal self was to be financially stable. Melinda indicated that she had grown up in a single-parent, low-income family and that money, working hard and owning a house was important. Her discrepancy between ideal and actual self was likely to be related to the extent to which she felt that she would be able to meet these goals.

Anna reported being very self-confident as an adolescent. When asked to describe herself as a teenager, she stated, "I was so skinny." She continued "I never had any self-esteem problems or problems making friends or anything."

Her drawings and description, however, offer an indication of the manner in which she was experiencing narcissistic vulnerability.

"It was my world and I was the only one that mattered and everyone else was way down here. These were tiny, tiny little people, eeeny weeny weeny little people and I was this big person. I was like, ‘I’m all that matters, I don’t care how you people feel, what you guys are going through. I don’t like where I’m at and you guys have to suffer because of it, because I’m this big person, you’re this little bitty thing.’" (Anna)

This experience is likely to be the result of trying to deal with the experiences of narcissistic vulnerability by projecting the experiences of weakness and failure onto others. Her feelings may have represented a defensive retreat into grandiosity, an
omnipotent stance as she found the pressures of adolescence difficult to deal with (Bleiberg 1994. p. 225).

Anna indicated that her ideal self was “more on the level with everyone else. Trying to learn how to deal and cope and not like run away from it, just go through it, definitely.”

The second actual-self drawings illuminated the extent to which the discrepancy between ideal and actual selves was resolved:

Susan reported that “I loved myself, not in a vain way but in a healthy way.” She was no longer self conscious about her weight, “I figured, hey people are going to like me for who I am. I was like whatever, you’d laugh at yourself you know?” (Susan)

Kayla revealed that at this stage she was no longer concerned with body image. She had a “non-existent beauty image.”

“I was uptight about having unshaven legs and showing my stomach but by the end of our trip I was wearing my sports bra, going skinny dipping, I just realized it didn’t matter any more.” (Kayla)

Mary’s second drawing described herself as “not ugly, but not beautiful.”

“I was a bit more fashionable after Urban. I, cleaned up my appearance, started wearing clothes that didn’t have holes in them, paying a little more attention to style and that kind of helped when I started getting into that.” (Mary)

At that point she relays that her self-esteem had improved but she described herself as “still pretty shy.”

“I still had the feeling that I had to be careful about showing people the true self, I need to hide behind these little tricks that I have. It was still easy for me to just feel like I had done something incredibly stupid, even when it wasn’t stupid.” (Mary)

Melinda viewed herself as closer to her ideal.

“Working hard to have my ideal, to have a home and stability, like I said I worry about it. So I can have my house, I can have my car, I can have my dog and you know be able to travel and eat at nice restaurants and not have to worry about things, so my ideal still is to have stability, a good career.” (Melinda)

Anna saw herself on a level with everyone else. In this way she experienced a reduction in her experience of narcissistic vulnerability.

The male participants reported a less extreme discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves than that reported by the female participants. Physical appearance was not mentioned, instead, many of their drawings reveal a focus on physical activity or physical performance.

Jeremy indicated that his actual and ideal was,

“Someone who didn’t have to work a lick because it wasn’t going to get you anywhere anyway, but (who could) still could find a way to go sailing, drink beer, smoke weed and eat.” (Jeremy)

He experienced a shift in this self-concept that was associated with an increase in self-esteem. He described himself as,

“Self sufficient, personable. He still doesn’t have to do anything because he has someone else to do it for him, because he is sailing his client around anyway. Sailing, getting paid to go sailing is
something I wanted to do, I’ve always imagined myself being a boat bum and doing odd jobs.” (Jeremy)

Anthony chose to draw a fish as a symbol of his actual self. He indicated that he had never had an ‘ideal’ self, he had always been satisfied with himself as he was. His first picture portrays himself as a fish that he described as,

“A little fry, swimming around and trying to find out what life is all about....As a freshman high school made me a little nervous.” (Anthony)

Overall, however, he was confident, his self-esteem was “always right up there” and he was not shy, “If I had a question I was more than happy to blurt it out.” After Urban Rangers his actual self was portrayed as a flying fish.

James’ drawings show himself dreaming of being in the woods. He described himself,

“At 15, before entering the group I loved the outdoors, I was tired of conventional schooling, anxious to find out what’s happening in the world, looking for options, what to do with my life. Hanging out after school with strange people all the time makes you curious. I kept promising myself I would go to class but I didn’t.” (James)

His ideal self was being in the woods and working as a ranger. He indicated that he had high self-esteem and was fairly confident as a teenager. He stated,

“I was already in my comfort zone when I joined Urban Rangers.”

Two of the male participants described their actual selves as withdrawing from society. Tommy’s experience of narcissistic vulnerability emerged as he described his drawings in the following way,

“Basically I was kind of a kid that was turning away from society, not even trying, but just of drifting, I was a sort of loner, sort of in that direction. That was, I was about to drop out of school and be a bum. I didn’t know what to feel or think. Like everything’s new, all my friends are rapidly changing, I don’t know what to count on, what not to count on, you know, I was mixed up and confused.” (Tommy)

His ideal self was a picture of someone hiking in a wooded area with big mountains and birds in the background. He described the difference between his actual and ideal self,

“The ideal self would have been feeling cocky, ...this guy (ideal self) would be confident in himself not to care.” (Tommy)

To describe himself after the completion of his time in the Urban Rangers he drew a king and described it as,

“I was on top of the world, felt like a king. I had also just graduated high school man.” (Tommy)

Larry’s drawings described his experience of being an outsider to society.

“This is a big group of people and this is kind of like me over here, watching, you know, like the outsider.” (Larry)

His ideal self was similar to his actual self,

“I wouldn’t have changed much, like I said I’ve avoided that” (socializing).
Despite the similarities in his description of his actual and ideal self, Larry explained that as a teenager he was,

“You know, pretty confused for the most part, not knowing why I was even born or why I’m here.” (Larry)

Consumption Patterns and Product Adoption

This study indicates that adolescents experience narcissistic vulnerability, a fluctuating discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves, and that these experiences differ by gender. Amongst female participants physical appearance, particularly weight, was a key factor in the discrepancy between the actual and ideal self.

Male adolescents, in this study, reported less extreme fluctuations between their actual and ideal selves than the female adolescents, and appeared more concerned with performance and physical ability than physical appearance.

As mentioned previously, adolescents use “signifying osmosis” strategies to resolve the affective correlates of narcissistic vulnerability. They affiliate with peers and peer-groups to obtain external sources of self-validation. In order to be considered "cool" and accepted by their peers they model their behavior after that of their peers and within-group semiotic codes of coolness evolve. (O’Donnell and Wardlow, 1999).

Despite their motivations for joining, group members find many different ways of distinguishing themselves from other groups’ members. As groups become more specialized a unique group gestalt emerges, an ethos which defines a semiotic code of coolness (Danesi, 1994).

The group gestalt that came to define the Urban Rangers included their activities (rock climbing, hiking), language (special words they developed), appearance, clothing (outdoor, casual clothing and hiking boots) and the values and attitudes they hold (“I can.”). This group gestalt defines the semiotic code that came to define what was “cool” or “uncool” for the Urban Rangers.

For the Urban Rangers gender similarities in "cool" products and behaviors included hiking boots, participating (in whatever activities were required of the group), rock climbing, hiking and the outdoors. North Face was a popular brand name.

With regards to gender differences, in this study, female adolescents experienced a discrepancy between their actual and ideal self that hinged on physical appearance. To resolve their experiences of narcissistic vulnerability female adolescents adopted behaviors and products that allowed the resolution of these discrepant self images. For female Urban Rangers "cool" behavior included "being strong," "not girly," and using little makeup. Products such as comfortable outdoor clothing and boots became the preferred methods of dress.

“Well I got into a sort of different style of dress, just sort of the baggy pants everybody was into at that time. There was sort of a movement towards more camouflage, wool pants and stuff because it looks really cool, and boots, a lot more boots. After the trip a lot more people I would see, and myself, coming in wearing boots, coming in not so dressed up, not so worried about makeup any more.” (Mary)

“After Urban I got more tomboyish, like I’m still a tomboy now. Like I didn’t have to put on all this crap on my face. I didn’t even want to. But I was off into the woods for 12 days and doing rock climbing and
ropes courses and taking kids on backpacking trips so your priorities are different, so my appearance changed. You know, I cared about myself, my hygiene and all that was the same but I wouldn't go into like what a girl is supposed to look like kind of." (Melinda)

“I didn’t wear as much makeup and I wore tennis shoes. I just kind of laid back a lot more. A lot of it was because of my circumstances and what we were doing every day. I couldn’t look nice, but I definitely gave up obsessing about my appearance the way that I did before in a place where everybody was golden, kind of.” (Anna)

For the male adolescents "cool" behaviors and products focused on the outdoors and on activities such as hiking, fishing or sailing. The male participants did not report dramatic changes in physical appearance.

"I wanted to be a hot shot rock climber so I looked up to a lot of those guys (extreme sports heroes). I was getting into rock climbing and outdoor sports and buying gear and that was basically my way of emulating." (Tommy)

"Me and my cousin like to fish. I could care less about anything else. We had our fishing poles and we were gone. We had our hobby, you know, so we never really got caught up in the city thing." (Anthony).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

While differences in narcissistic vulnerability have been researched since the 1970's, this research examines narcissistic vulnerability in the context of product adoption and usage. While we might expect to find gender related differences in narcissistic vulnerability, the manner in which these experiences are resolved through the group formation process offers insights into how products and behaviors come to be considered "cool" by male and female group members.

Whereas 'coolhunters' search through the metacode of "coolness" to seek trends that might gain widespread acceptance in the general population, O'Donnell and Wardlow (1999) point out that more enduring insights can be gained by an examination of how the coolness construct works to motivate adolescent behavior. By examining similarities in norms for coolness among adolescent groups, marketers are likely to gain insights into early trends that may be amenable to diffusion through the general population (O'Donnell and Wardlow, 1999).

In this regard, while products and activities that appeal to discrepant physical appearance issues are likely to gain widespread acceptance amongst female adolescents the manner in which this occurs may vary. Female adolescents may choose cosmetics, surgery, health clubs or a variety of other products and behaviors such as those utilized by the Urban Rangers that allow them to reduce discrepancies in their self-image.

Male adolescents may be more likely to utilize products and activities that reduce perceived discrepancies in physical effectiveness or that offer performance enhancement in their efforts to overcome experiences of narcissistic vulnerability.

Ethical issues regarding marketers’ use of discrepant self-images must, however, be highlighted. Advertising has been cited as a factor contributing to a “sense of inadequacy” amongst women (Pollay, 1986). In addition, research indicates that females are more receptive to cosmetic
surgery and dysfunctional eating attitudes (Burton et al, 1994). Products that appeal to discrepant self-images but focus on the development of a healthy self-concept might overcome these concerns. Groups like the Urban Rangers, for example, appear to have achieved this goal.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

This research has a number of limitations that must be highlighted. The qualitative nature of the research along with the small sample size limits the extent to which findings can be generalized to the larger population.

Participants were requested to recall experiences that had occurred a few years previously while they were still adolescents. This introduces the possibility that subsequent experiences may have affected the content and quality of material recalled; an unintentional retrospective distortion (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Further research with larger groups of adolescents in cohort groups is required to improve the reliability of this study. Reliability may be described as "a matter of whether a particular technique, applied repeatedly would yield the same result each time." (Rubin and Babbie, p. 168). Lincoln and Guba (1985) point out that "consistency" is the naturalistic researchers equivalent for reliability. In this regard factors such as the gender, age or culture of the interviewer, the small sample size and snowball sampling technique are acknowledged to be factors that may have influenced the results of this study.
REFERENCES


Websites:
http://www.teenresearch.com
Appendix A
Anthony's drawings

Little Guy swimming around, trying to find out what life is about

Flying Self/feather
James' drawings

Ready for anything to come any way.
Always taking something

I come being and to be here.
Kayla's drawings

![Diagram of a face with various markings and labels]

- Need for Beauty
- Self-preservation
- Feeling of losing control
- Lonesomeness
- Focusing on what I wanted to do
- Spreading self-image
- Focusing on what I needed to do

Labels:
- Wisdom
- To speak my mind
- Trusting my gut
- My mind, no disagree
- Forget my silly crying
- Body, feeling of body
- Face, feeling of face

Legend:
- Black: For the face
- Blue: For the other face
- Yellow: For the other face
- Red: For the other face
- Green: For the other face

Additional Notes:
- Kayla's drawings
Mary's drawings:

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