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Watching a Theory on the Origins of Coolness at Work in Popular Culture: Depictions of Young Women in the Film Clueless

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ABSTRACT

The popular 1995 American movie Clueless is analyzed for evidence of the O’Donnell and Wardlow (1999) theory on the origins of coolness at work among a group of adolescent women. Support for the theory’s main constructs of narcissistic vulnerability, signifying osmosis, and communal signification is found for the main character and her peer group. A semiotic code of coolness for that peer group is discussed, and evidence of a teen metacode of coolness is presented.

Josh: Hey! In some parts of the Universe, maybe not in Contempo Casual, but in some parts, it’s considered cool to know what’s going on in the world.

Cher: Thank you, Josh. I so need lessons from you on how to be cool. Tell me that part about Kenny G. again? (Heckerling, 1995)

Previous consumer researchers have examined movies as artifacts of popular culture which illustrate popularly held beliefs about marriage rituals (Kates 1998), gender roles and feminism (Hirschman 1993), and prostitution (Hirschman and Stern 1994), among other topics. Gender roles are often presented in stark relief in movies giving consumer researchers the opportunity to examine a variety of theories as depicted in a pop culture medium. The present study shines the light of popular culture on depictions of young women in the context of teenage coolness theory.

The popularity of teen motion pictures with teenagers themselves (Wolcott 1999) suggests that the beliefs, values, and consumption behaviors depicted are representative of teen viewers. As a major motivator for teen behavior, it makes sense that the search for and attainment of coolness would be a common theme in teen movies. As such, films such as Rebel Without A Cause, The Breakfast Club, Pretty In Pink, Sixteen Candles, Nowhere, Never Been Kissed, She’s All That, Clueless, and Varsity Blues all portray the desirability of being popular and cool, and the challenges faced when trying to become so if you’re from the wrong neighborhood, have the wrong interests, or are unattractive or different from those who are “cool.”

Most movies dealing primarily with young men and coolness tend to emphasize athletic
prowess as the primary indicator of coolness (e.g. All the Right Moves, Varsity Blues, She's All That, Election, Lucas). Previous research suggests that coolness in young women is more dependent on physical attractiveness (Patzer 1985) and the consumption of the right clothing, hairstyle, and body type; all themes played out in such movies as Pretty In Pink, Sixteen Candles, She's All That, Never Been Kissed, and Clueless. Female teen coolness then tends to be based more on the consumption of products which assist in physical attractiveness, whereas male teen coolness tends to be depicted as based on physical strength and athletic prowess. As applied to issues of self-esteem in teens, we find support in the literature for exactly such gender differences (c.f. Schwalbe and Staples 1991 for both literature review and empirical support).

To examine the role of consumption behavior in young women, we have elected to focus on such depictions in the 1995 movie Clueless, written and directed by Amy Heckerling. The theoretical framework through which we examine female teen coolness is the Theory on the Origins of Coolness proposed by O'Donnell and Wardlow (1999). By considering this film within the context of the coolness model, we will seek to validate the model in popular culture.

A THEORY ON THE ORIGINS OF COOLNESS

O'Donnell and Wardlow (1999) define coolness as “a set of shared meanings (e.g. language, self-presentation, artistic expression, values, attitudes) within a peer group which signify group affiliation.” Thus to understand the origins of coolness one must examine the motivations for and the processes and functionality of group affiliation among teens. Briefly stated, the O'Donnell and Wardlow (1999) theory posits the origins of coolness in a developmental stage of adolescence during which an internal schism occurs between the senses of ideal and actual self (see Figure 1 for a schematic diagram). Because this schism is psychically painful, teens attempt a reconciliation through integrative strategies involving group affiliation. Within-group semiotic codes evolve and serve a distinctive function in providing group members unique identities within the group context, in some senses serving as surrogate families. Coolness thus is a by-product of the group affiliation process. From a marketer's perspective, coolness which is amenable to broader diffusion through the general population can then be “read” across the semiotic codes of different teen groups. A more detailed discussion of the O'Donnell and Wardlow (1999) theory follows below.

Narcissistic Vulnerability

As an individual enters adolescence, a range of physiological, cognitive, and sociological changes occur which make obsolete childhood self-evaluation mechanisms. The consequent destabilization of self-esteem has been termed “narcissistic vulnerability” (Joffe and Sandler 1967; Wolf, Gedo and Terman 1972; Bleiberg 1988, 1994; Pliner, Chaiken and Flett 1990). When the individual loses the familiar referents for ideal and actual selves the result is an internal dissonance uncomfortably experienced by almost all teens. Manifestations of adolescent narcissistic vulnerability include proneness to embarrassment, shame, acute self-consciousness, shyness, and painful questions about self-worth and self-esteem. A moderate level of such psychic discomfort is developmentally functional in that it motivates teens to develop a maturing sense of an integrated self (Bleiberg 1994). One social
mechanism used to reduce the internal discomfort of narcissistic vulnerability is “signifying osmosis” (Danesi 1993, 1994).

Signifying Osmosis

Self-presentation through dressing in a certain style, listening to particular music styles and artists, appearance, behavior, and adopting specific attitudes in order to belong to a particular peer culture are strategies used by normal adolescents to shore up the faltering sense of self, and to provide a source for self validation (Bleiberg 1988). Danesi (1993, 1994) has termed this emulation of admired others “signifying osmosis,” an apt term since a teen uses symbolic signals in an effort to blend into a group context. Signifying osmosis seems to serve two functions: first, supplying new ideals for a teen which are more meaningful and appropriate than the recently abandoned ideals of childhood; and second, emulating admired peers gains a teen entry into a desired peer group. During the adolescent individuation process, polarization from past social roles, and adoption of new ones is the only way to maintain psychological integrity (Blos 1967). The adoption of new social roles, and/or the denial of vulnerability and shame about the old ones may be facilitated by two different signifying osmosis reconciliation strategies: transitional positioning and omnipotence (Bleiberg 1988).

Transitional positioning is a form of symbolic transformation of self whereby teens draw from friends and peers a transitional sense of comfort and security formerly associated with parents (Bleiberg 1988). In order to fit in, teens dress and behave like the members of the group to which they aspire to belong. In peer groups, teens find reflections of their own lives, possible new ideals, and safe havens in which they can “try on” new ideal selves without shame or self consciousness (Wolf, Gedo and Terman 1972, Blos 1967; Danesi 1993, 1994). Within this safe group context, teens use memories, fantasies, parental models, and extrafamilial objects (people and products) to construct new ideals, which are tempered by considering their own capabilities and limitations (actual self) (Bleiberg 1994).

Omnipotence is the denial of vulnerability and adoption of a false sense of bravado which adolescents experience by fantasizing that they are like their heroes (Bleiberg 1988). Idolization of heroes helps adolescents overcome the feelings of shame and self-consciousness that accompany narcissistic vulnerability and by doing so they too help restore narcissistic balance (Bleiberg 1988; Blos 1967; Wolf, Gedo and Terman 1972). The adoption of a common idol or hero by members of a group may also serve as a source of social identification, which strengthens the sense of in-group versus out-group values and beliefs, and reinforces the shared group ideal.

The use of transitional positioning and omnipotence by teens leads to an interesting paradox described by O’Donnell and Wardlow (1999) as “I want to be a conforming member of a unique group.” This concept of uniqueness through group affiliation is similar to the balancing of individuation and deindividuation described by Maslach (1974), and is further supported by Snyder and Fromkin’s (1980) observation that “when one is similar on group-defining attributes to members of one’s reference groups, that person is at the same time different from the larger nonmember population of other reference groups” (p. 68).

Communal Signification
Danesi (1993, 1994) defines communal signification as the adoption of peer-group-endorsed attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles as a means of signalling group affiliation. Group affiliation allows a substantial stabilization of self esteem (Pliner, Chaiken and Flett 1990; Simmons and Rosenberg 1971), while at the same time lending a teen credence for a new individual identity by relating it to a larger community (Erikson 1968). Shared values are a common basis for group formation and membership, though the particular manifestation of those values may vary. Visible product consumption plays an essential role in differentiating between members of the in-group and the out-group, although the specifics of which products are acceptable group signifiers vary substantially from group to group.

Teen groups develop high degrees of specialization in the areas of norms, aesthetics, and language, all of which contribute to the development of a unique group gestalt. This unique group gestalt is highly functional in differentiating and thus validating the group and its members as distinctive. The group's unique identity bolsters the discrepant individual identity and reduces the drive of narcissistic vulnerability. Coolness emerges from this group gestalt. As O'Donnell and Wardlow (1999) state:

As each group seeks to carve out a unique positioning for itself, it adopts a unique manifestation of what is cool and what is not. We believe this process to be dynamic and the group ethos persistent, though subject to the influences of progressive waves of group members and their leaders. In this way, the ethos evolves into a highly refined semiotic code of coolness which may be fathomable only to in-group members.

Some elements of the code of coolness resulting from this process may extend across groups in a metacode of coolness (O'Donnell and Wardlow 1999), and it is this coolness metacode which is of most interest to marketing practitioners.

METHOD

As stated earlier, this study examines the theory on the origins of coolness in the context of female teens' experience as depicted in the 1995 film Clueless. As a pop culture medium, film has been described as a consumer acculturating agent (O'Guinn, Faber and Rice 1985) and as such, provides a convenient arena in which to examine this theory. The script for Clueless (Heckerling 1995) is a modernized re-telling of the Jane Austen novel Emma (1816). Director/writer Heckerling cleverly recasts in contemporary teen culture the tale of a precociously wise young woman who meets her come-uppance in a comedy of manners.

The principal analytic method employed is text analysis. The researchers independently viewed the film on multiple occasions, then jointly reviewed the film for evidence of support or refutation for the major constructs in O'Donnell and Wardlow's (1999) theory on the origins of coolness. Following multiple viewings of the film and extensive discussion of the theoretical constructs involved, the researchers obtained an annotated version of the script (Heckerling 1995) for more detailed analysis of the characters' dialogue. The authors' independent codings of the script were reconciled through progressive iterations of inductive analysis (c.f. Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 188). The researchers here acknowledge commonalities in our backgrounds (both are middle-aged, came from traditional middle-class backgrounds,
spent the greatest proportion of our lives living in the midwestern United States, and are serious film buffs), as well as differences (one author is a heterosexual woman and the other a homosexual man) which have colored our interpretation. We present our supporting evidence and discussion below by theoretical construct, and in the order discussed in the literature review.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

A brief overview of the film’s main characters and plot is useful at this point to assist the reader who has not yet seen Clueless. The modern interpretation of Jane Austen’s character Emma is high school student Cher Horowitz. As the most popular girl at Bronson Alcott High School, Cher shares with us the trials and tribulations of modern teen life as they occur in the rarified climate of Beverly Hills. Through her narration we learn that since her mother’s tragic death during routine liposuction surgery, her father (a litigious attorney by profession) has been her primary protector and guardian. Cher is the leader of a group of popular girls which includes her best friend Dionne, Sun, and Amber (a Cher wanna-be), and they associate primarily with Elton and the other popular boys at the school. Cher is used to getting what she wants because she always has, and as such she is blissfully unaware that this is an unusual state of affairs for a teenage girl. When her efforts to negotiate better grades for her report card fails, she concludes that the teachers’ lack of willingness to give in to her demands is due to their unhappy personal lives. Determined to make her teachers happier, so that they will be more inclined to raise her grades, Cher and Dionne act as matchmakers to fix up two of their teachers who are particularly tough graders. Just as Cher expects, this matchup has the intended effect of making both teachers happy and results in better grades for everyone. In addition to the improvement in her grades, Cher also enjoys the attention and admiration of her classmates for her good deed.

Inspired by her success at good deed doing, and egged-on by her step brother Josh, a socially responsible college student, Cher is determined to continue using her popularity to help others. For her next project, Cher adopts Tai, a clueless newcomer to the school, and transforms her into a popular and well-dressed girl. Throughout the movie Cher is confident and self-assured about her abilities to manage and control the lives of those around her, but we are reminded she is only a girl and that her confidence is precariously fragile when she finds she cannot win the boy of her dreams, when she fails her driving test, and when her protege Tai becomes more popular than she. The realization that she is not in control sets her reeling down a “shame spiral” of self-examination which results in the conclusion that her next project must be performing a makeover -- on herself. This makeover results in her becoming more accepting of others who are different from her including friends from different groups, and victims of a natural disaster, and also prepares her for a romantic heterosexual relationship.

As you may surmise from the above synopsis, Cher is considered one of the cool girls in her school, and we felt that an examination of the situations and dialogue of the movie might help us determine whether the coolness model developed by O’Donnell and Wardlow (1999) is reflective of the “reality” depicted in popular culture.

Narcissistic Vulnerability

As stated above, narcissistic vulnerability is the painful incongruence between actual and ideal selves that occurs at the onset of
adolescence, and results in the inability to self evaluate (Bleiberg 1988, 1994). As the adolescent girl struggles through the daily changes in actual and ideal self image, we expect to see contradictory behavior as she alternately exercises her new-found freedom, and crawls back into the security and protection of the family. While our heroine often gives the impression that she is in complete control of her life, she too has a vulnerable side that seems to come out in high stress situations—such as getting her report card, getting robbed, having an unsuccessful date, seeing her popularity diminish, or taking, and failing the driving test.

In one scene after she receives a report card which falls below her expectations, Cher tries to negotiate better grades from her teachers. When her effort is not completely successful Cher experiences a discrepancy between her actual and ideal selves (as determined not by the grades themselves, but by her inability to renegotiate them) results in her feeling out of control.

Cher: I told my P.E. teacher an evil male had broken my heart, so she raised my C to a B. Then I promised Miss Giest I'd start a letter writing campaign to my congressmen about violations of the clean air act. But Mr. Hall was totally rigid. He said my debates were unresearched, unstructured, and unconvincing. As if! I felt impotent and out of control, which I really hate. I needed to find sanctuary in a place where I could gather my thoughts and regain my strength. (Cher then goes to the mall with her friend Dionne.) (Heckerling 1995, Scene VII)

Later in the film, when Cher fails to seduce the boy of her dreams she is devastated. After all, she had spent the entire day working with her friend Dionne, who was “technically” a virgin but who had more sexual experience than Cher, developing the perfect wardrobe and lighting strategy to insure her success. When Christian leaves without succumbing to her feminine wiles, Cher is once again forced to acknowledge the discrepancy between her actual self (the sexually inexperienced teenage girl) and the ideal Cosmo goddess she has imagined herself to be.

Cher: I don’t get it. Did my hair get flat? Did I stumble into some bad lighting? What’s wrong with me?

After learning that Christian is gay, Cher comes to terms with her failure, but not without expressing one final doubt about her desirability.

Cher: I suppose it wasn’t meant to be, I mean, he does dress better than I do. What would I bring to the relationship? (Scene XXVIII)

When a near-accident at the mall causes Tai (Cher’s protege) to become the center of attention in their group, Cher again faces the realization that her actual and ideal selves are not stable, her popularity is fleeting, and that she cannot control it. To make matters worse Cher takes her driving test on this same afternoon and fails, reinforcing the discrepancy between her vision of herself as proficient and in control, and reality. This double dose of bad feelings causes her to acknowledge her own sense of cluelessness.

Cher: What was happening? Dionne asking Tai for sex advice? Tai being the most popular girl in the school? It was like some sort of alternative universe! On top of everything else, I was going to take the driving test. So, I
Signifying Osmosis

Danesi's signifying osmosis (1993, 1994) is a process by which a teen adopts the semiotics of admired others in order to fit into a group, and thus establishes a safe haven for the reconciliation of discrepant self identities. Bleiberg (1988) describes two strategies which teens use to shore up their senses of self and provide self-validation: omnipotence and transitional positioning.

Omnipotence, the first of the strategies, is the denial of vulnerability and the adoption of a false sense of bravado based on fantasies of being like her heroes (Bleiberg 1988, Blos 1967, Wolf, Gedo and Terman 1972). Our heroine Cher does a wonderful job of adopting the omnipotent stance and therefore appears most of the time to be in complete control of not only her life, but the lives of everyone around her. Having grown up in Beverly Hills, Cher's omnipotence is bolstered by the fact that she lives in a beautiful house ("the columns date all the way back to 1972"), wears designer clothes (Alaia, Calvin Klein and Fred Segal), and doesn't drink coffee so that she can grow to be 5'10" like Cindy Crawford.

Because Cher is the leader of her group, her sense of bravado comes more from the knowledge that others look up to her, than from looking up to others. Her friendship with Dionne, for example, is based on the fact that they "both know what it's like to have people be jealous of" them. The ultimate symbol of Cher's omnipotent stance is her ability to remake others in her own image -- the makeover. During the course of the movie Cher manages to make over her teacher Ms. Giest, and Tai the new girl in school. While Dionne worries that Tai is too clueless to help, Cher is convinced that she is up to the challenge.
in there and make her well dressed and popular. Her life will be better because of me. How many girls can say that about you? (Scene XV)

When Tai becomes more popular than Cher for a time, Cher again takes complete responsibility for the situation, never considering that it is out of her control.

*Cher (voice-over):* What did I do? I’ve created sort of a monster. I could feel the chunks start to rise up in my throat. I had to get out. (Scene XXXIII)

When Cher becomes interested in the new guy in class, she makes sure that he is made aware of just how popular she is.

*Cher:* I did what any normal girl would do. I sent myself love letters and flowers and candy, just so he’d see how desired I was, in case he didn’t already know. (Scene XXIII)

**Transitional Positioning,** or investing people and objects outside of the family with the powers associated with old ideals, is a second strategy for dealing with narcissistic vulnerability (Bleiberg 1988, Blos 1967, Wolf, Gedo and Terman 1972). By allowing peer groups to act as surrogate families, transitional positioning provides the adolescent with the ability to experience independence from the family, within the security of a non-familial group. While Cher appears to be the leader of her group, group membership is important to her nonetheless because it gives her the opportunity to express her maternal instincts. Throughout the movie whenever Cher or her friends are unhappy, scared, or have something significant to do they seek out each other for comfort. For example, when Tai is heartbroken over the lack of attention from Elton (the most popular guy in school), her friends rally around her to cheer her up with a consumption experience.

*Cher:* I’ve got an idea. Let’s blow off seventh and eighth, go to the mall, have a calorie fest, and see the new Christian Slater. (Scene XXII)

When Tai ultimately meets another guy, her ritual burning of all things that remind her of Elton (a symbolic expulsion of Elton from the “family”) must be shared with Cher.

*Tai:* I’m really sorry you failed your driving test and all, but I am so glad you’re here. There’s something I gotta do and I really need you here when I really do it. This is a bunch of stuff that reminded me of Elton, but I want to burn it, because I am so over him. (Scene XXXIII)

And when they’ve had a fight, their separation is painful.

*Cher:* I’ve been in agony for the past week and I can’t even believe I was so unsupportive of your feelings for Josh.

*Tai:* No, you are entitled to your own opinion, alright? I’m the tart here. Cher, You’ve been nothing but super duper nice to me. .... Let’s never fight again, OK? (Scene XXXVII)

Thus both transitional positioning and omnipotence are accomplished within the context of group membership, and are necessary strategies for overcoming narcissistic vulnerability.

**Communal Signification**
Danesi (1993, 1994) describes communal signification from two different perspectives: the group-formation (or affiliation) process and the display of a group gestalt. Joining a group involves the adoption and display (or signalling) of peer-sanctioned attitudes, behaviors, and products. Through mutual display and affirmation, a group gestalt emerges which helps to differentiate the group from others.

Group Affiliation. As everyone seeks to find their own surrogate family, an increasing number of groups are formed to accommodate them all. At this point the adolescent may "try out" various groups to see where he or she fits in best. Once they affiliate with a particular group, that group will provide them with support and structure in the shape of group norms, and yet allow them to individuate themselves within the group. Cher's group consists of Dionne, Tai, Sun and Amber, who have aligned themselves with Elton and his friends, the most popular guys in the school. Fortunately for Tai, she did not have to seek out group membership, but was the benefactor of Cher's desire to "adopt her" as part of their group as a good deed. When Cher and Dionne invite Tai to "hang with" them, she is clearly grateful to have been accepted into a group on her first day at a new school. Only after they tell her does Tai realize the significance of the group into which she's been accepted.

While Tai is "adopted" into Cher's group without even trying, poor Amber is constantly struggling to gain the acceptance of the group. While the other girls find ways to create their own unique identities within the group's accepted norms of appearance, Amber makes the mistake of copying too closely, and is criticized by the group for her desperate behavior.

(When Amber shows up at a party wearing the same dress Cher had worn to school the day before.)

Tai: Cher, ain't that the same dress that you was wearin' yesterday?

Cher: Say Ambular?

Amber: Hi.

Cher: Was that you going through my laundry?

Amber: As if. Like I would really wear something from Judy's.

Cher: Do you prefer fashion victim or ensemble challenged?

Amber: Uh!

Cher: What a clone.

Tai: Cher, you looked much better in that dress than she did. (Scene XIX)

While they may "try out" a number of different groups, teens often ultimately affiliate with the group in which they feel most comfortable due to common interests, hobbies, attitudes and beliefs. As groups become more specialized, so too do group norms, aesthetics, and language. What emerges is a unique group gestalt, an ethos.
which defines a semiotic code of coolness (Danesi 1994).

**Group Gestalt.** A unique combination of ideals, lifestyles and consumption form the basis for a group’s *gestalt*, which differentiates it from other groups. As each group sets its own standards for language, clothing, music, and behavior, they define their own sense of “coolness”. Cher’s group shares a unique language of their own which includes phrases such as “as if” and “whatever.” “Snaps” are a pat on the back, as in “I had to give myself snaps for all the good deeds I’d been doing.” A “Baldwin” is a handsome guy, and a “Betty” is an attractive girl, while a “Monet” looks good from far away, but is less attractive up close. In Cher’s group fashion designers are worshipped, and the ultimate insult is to be accused of buying your clothes at Judy’s or Contempo Casual or wearing Designer Imposter perfume.

While Cher and her “crew” frequently wear very similar clothing, such as plaid pleated skirts and jackets, the girls tend to customize their looks so that they are not identical. When Amber makes the mistake of copying Cher’s look too closely, she is harshly criticized. Cher and her friends frequently wear hats, they have cell phones and cars (though they may not even have driver’s licenses yet), and they have their own handshake, which involves flicking their hair over their shoulder. The group also has a very specific code of conduct that group members must adhere to if they are to remain in the group. They are polite, they condone recreational pot smoking, but not at school, and they are “rules” girls.

**Cher:** Are you talking about drugs? Tai, how old are you?

**Tai:** I’ll be 16 in May.

**Cher:** My birthday is in April, and as someone older, can I please give you some advice? It is one thing to spark up a doobie and get laced at parties, but it is quite another to be fried all day. Do you see the distinction? (Scene XIV)

**Cher:** Make sure Elton sees you, but don’t say hi first. Look like you’re having fun and you’re really popular. Talk to someone in his eye line, preferably a guy. Make him come to you, and find an excuse to leave while he’s still into the conversation. The key is, always leave him wanting more. You got it? Let’s do a lap before we commit to a location. (Scene XIX)

**Cher (voice-over):** Anything you can do to draw attention to your mouth is good. Also, sometimes you have to show a little skin. This reminds guys of being naked, and then they think of sex. (Scene XXIII)

**Cher (voice-over):** Whenever a boy comes over you should always have something baking. (Scene XXVIII)

The distinction between Cher’s group and the other groups on campus is clearly drawn as Cher gives Tai a tour of the school. Of all the other groups at school, Cher is most complimentary of Elton and the other “popular boys” at school, who are the only high school boys with whom she and her friends like to associate.
Cher: That is Alana’s group over there. They do the TV station. They think it’s the most important thing on earth. And that’s the Persian Mafia - you can’t get along with them unless you own a BMW. And there’s Elton in the white vest, and all the most popular boys in the school.

Dionne: Including my boyfriend. Ain’t he cute?

Tai: Yeah.

Cher: If you make the decision to date a high school boy, they are the only acceptable ones... Loadies (stoners) generally hang out on the grassy knoll over there. Sometimes they come to class and say bonehead things, and we all laugh, of course, but no respectable girl actually dates them. (Scene XIV)

In addition to the other groups at her high school, Cher is also critical of her step brother Josh, a college student, because his group gestalt is very different from hers. College students, as described by Cher, listen to “maudlin music” or “complaint rock,” grow goatees and wear flannel shirts.

Metacodes of Coolness

While Cher and her friends show disdain for the other groups at school, we assume that members of these other groups are happy with their own groups, and in all likelihood they feel disdain for Cher’s group too. Because there is a finite set of choices available in terms of the clothing, music, hobbies and lifestyles they consume, various groups are forced to develop different attitudes and behaviors toward commonly consumed products. An example of one such product is marijuana. As Cher explains to Tai, smoking pot at parties is cool, but coming to school stoned or dating someone who does so, is completely uncool. This particular stance on pot smoking (a common consumption behavior across groups) is a part of Cher’s group’s gestalt which allows them to differentiate themselves from other groups whose stance on pot smoking is different.

Pot smoking is perceived as cool across groups, in spite of differences of opinion as to the appropriate times, places, and quantities consumed. In addition to pot smoking, other consumption behaviors appear to have risen above individual groups to become part of the metacode of coolness at Bronson Alcott High. Many of the girls at the school have bandages on their noses, including Amber (in one scene), indicating that they have recently undergone rhinoplasty. As Cher reveals in her narrative, this is a consumption behavior that has been passed down from their mothers (her mother, in fact, died during “routine liposuction surgery”), and it appears to cut across groups.

Likewise, many of the boys in the school, including Dionne’s boyfriend Murray, wear the baggy jeans and baseball caps associated with the hip hop movement. At parties, the music of choice is hip hop. An attitude that appears to be shared by many groups is a dismissive one toward education and school. Being a good student is considered less important than being a good negotiator; tardiness is not only accepted, but applauded; and participation in activities such as gym class or helping others is considered a waste of time, unless they stand to gain from it. As such, we see that teen groups are given a variety of materials and attitudes from which they may construct their own unique versions of coolness, but which also binds them together in a more general way as teens.
Marketers must consider not only the common building blocks teens use to construct coolness within their groups, but also the more unique and complex consumption behaviors that manage to rise above the groups from which they originated, to symbolize coolness across groups. Thus positioning (and in particular advertising message strategies) which focus on the theory's main constructs are more likely to be perceived as cool than those which are oblivious to the traumatic struggle for a sense of self. For example, an acknowledgment of the experience of narcissistic vulnerability as a difficult rite of passage positions the marketer as empathic and provides a suggestion of a product as a solution to the vulnerability. This approach is in opposition to the marketer who merely claims a product to be cool.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

To the extent that elements of popular culture such as movies reflect the reality of their time and place, we find support in the film *Clueless* for the major constructs in the O'Donnell and Wardlow (1999) theory on the origins of coolness. The film's main character Cher exhibits discrepancies between her actual and ideal selves, and employs both omnipotence and transitional positioning strategies to reduce the inner discomfort of those discrepancies. These drive-reduction strategies are portrayed within the context of a peer-group of adolescents, where we see aspects of the affiliation process at work, as well as evidence of a unique group gestalt emerging. We are able to read that gestalt to discern a within-group code of coolness involving language, behaviors, attitudes, and products. From evidence provided on other peer-groups in the film, we are able to generalize components of a metacode of coolness.

We find a delicious irony in the foresight and insight of author Jane Austen in this fictional portrayal of teen life which has remained artistically robust for almost two hundred years. Austen wrote *Emma* many years prior to the development of much of the theory on which this analysis is based. Thus we suspect the underlying theoretical constructs to be rooted in the human condition.

This study has several limitations which should be noted. First, due to the lengthy creative process involved in film-making, the codes of coolness in *Clueless* must be regarded as ephemeral and not as definitive. This limitation does not affect the demonstration of the theory, but does limit the managerial applicability of this paper's specific findings regarding what is (or what is not) cool. Second, the researchers did not have access to the film's writer/director, and thus are unable to ground their findings in the original intentions of the artist regarding coolness. Third, as is the case with qualitative methodologies, the reflexive interplay between researcher(s) and the phenomenon researched must be acknowledged. For example, we have imputed motivations from fictional characters' behaviors which fit our theoretical constructs. Fourth, given the limitations of story-telling on film, we did not have the opportunity to observe the subjects in earlier stages of adolescence; thus we admittedly took the liberty of inferring certain prior experiences for the characters as a result of their dialogue and behavior. Fifth, we intentionally limited our analysis of film evidence for this model to a single film exemplar which we believed a priori demonstrated the theory. A number of film depictions of teen life were examined and rejected because they did not focus on fluctuating senses of self and the group formation process. Despite the selection of a
single film, we did not find contradictory evidence for the theory in other films examined. Finally, this film presents evidence only for the experiences of a select group of adolescent women. While it was the intent of the researchers to examine the theory only in the context of these women’s experiences, no evidence is offered in the movie for parallel experiences of adolescent men.

Future research on the O’Donnell and Wardlow (1999) theory using similar research methods to the current work should include a parallel examination of the experiences of adolescent men, investigation of teens in other socio-economic strata, and cross-cultural study of international films dealing with adolescent development issues. The authors are also currently conducting empirical studies with “real world” teens with regard to the theory of coolness.

NOTES

1) Cultural studies of myths as representative “mirrors” of their cultural milieus is an idea suggested by Levi-Strauss (1965), and extended to the use of cinema in consumer research by Holbrook and Grayson (1986). See also Hirschman (1993) and Hirschman and Stern (1994) for additional examples.

2) All quotes from the film script are Heckerling (1995).

REFERENCES


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Figure 1
Adapted from O’Donnell and Wardlow (1999)