Correlates of Cool Identity: Humor, Need For Uniqueness, Materialism, Status Concern and Brand Consciousness

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Despite some advances in understanding the meaning and origin of the slang word “cool”, literature uncovering the meaning of coolness is still in its infancy in consumer research. Yet, cool has attracted the attention of many marketing practitioners. In this paper, we examine the meaning of coolness using possible consumer behavior constructs associated to the term. We propose that humor, three subscales of need for uniqueness, materialism, status concern and brand consciousness are positively related to cool identity. Our preliminary correlation analysis supports all our propositions.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15407/volumes/v37/NA-37

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Method. First, 194 participants were asked to write a happy, neutral, or sad experience which induced mood. Next, in a product survey, they were asked to imagine that they were going to buy a computer monitor, and were considering three options that differed only in viewable size and price—monitor A (17 in., $119), monitor B (19 in., $159), and monitor C (21 in., $199). After seeing the information, participants in the justification-not-provided condition just indicated their choices, whereas participants in the justification-provided condition wrote down the reasons for choices before indicating their decisions. Next, they were asked to imagine they encountered another set of options—monitor A (19 in., $159), monitor B (21 in., $199), and monitor C (23 in., $239), and then completed procedures same as those in the first scenario. These two scenarios together can rule out the possibility that participants preferred a particular product that coincided with the compromise option. In the end, participants indicated their mood.

Main Findings. For the first scenario, when not asked to provide justifications, participants were more likely to choose the compromise option when they were in a positive (50%) or negative mood (53%) than when they were in a neutral mood (24%; z-values=2.32 and 2.57, p-values<.05). In contrast, when participants explained their choices, they were similarly likely to choose the compromise option regardless of mood (44%, 40%, and 38%). Analyses regarding the second scenario provided converging evidence. When justifications were not required, choice shares of the compromise option were larger when participants were in a positive (50%) or negative (59%) mood than when they were in a neutral mood (24%; z-values=2.32 and 3.13, p-values<.05). When participants explained the reasons for choices, their choices were likely to be consistent with the decision they made in the first scenario. These findings provide initial evidence that both positive and negative moods may lead to more compromise choices than would a neutral mood under low mood clarity circumstances.

Future Research Plan. More data involving multiple product categories will be collected to validate the robustness of the findings. Whether participants assess their mood before or after the choice will be manipulated, such that a comparison between the two conditions would help further reconcile the present findings with the previous ones. Participants’ mood clarity tendency will also be measured (Salovey et al. 1995). If the proposed moderation effect of mood clarity is viable, individuals’ chronic differences in mood clarity would also have an impact on the mechanism through which mood influences choice.

References


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Despite some advances in understanding the meaning and origin of cool (Belk, 2006; Bird and Tapp, 2008; O’Donnel and Wardlow, 2000; Nancarrow et. al 2002), literature uncovering the meaning of cool is still in its infancy in consumer research. However, cool is a heavily used term by marketing practitioners. Advertising, web pages, shirts, music lyrics, book titles, business documents and above all people’s conversations are example of places where the word cool is used. For example, a simple search in Amazon.com alone produced over 300 titles of published books which have the word cool as part of their titles, primarily with its slang meaning.

The focus of this paper is to examine the meaning of cool from a marketer’s point of view. From literature, we identify possible correlates of cool identity. We conceptualize cool identity as the extent to which consumers consider themselves to be cool. One agreement among the researchers is that they consider the origin of contemporary cool to be the African American culture (Belk, 2006; Moore, 2004). It was basically an attitude adopted by African Americans as a defense mechanism against the prejudice they faced and as a form of detachment from their difficult and often insecure working conditions (Nancarrow et al., 2002). However, the meaning of cool has evolved. As Belk (2006, p.7) describes it, cool “refers to a person who is admired because she, or more often he, exhibits a nonchalant
control of emotions, a rebellious trickster demeanor, an ironic detachment from the regard of others, and a “cool” style of talking, walking, gesturing, and grooming”.

As Nancarrow and colleagues (2002) suggest, the meaning of cool has an inner layer which involves personality characteristics of individuals, as well as an outer layer involving aesthetics and lifestyle. One aspect of inner coolness is linked to irony (Pountain and Robbins, 2000). Irony refers to “a sort of humor, ridicule, or light sarcasm, which adopts a mode of speech the meaning of which is contrary to the literal sense of the words” (Webster’s, 2009). For example, one thing is said and its opposite implied, as in the comment, “Beautiful weather, isn’t it?” made when it is raining or nasty. As Pountain and Robbins (2000) posit, consumers use cool irony as a weapon in defense and important to maintain a protective cool persona. Irony is also known as sick humor and Jewish humor. Hence we propose that humor is positively related to cool identity.

Another aspect of inner coolness is related to uniqueness. Uniqueness involves a feeling that sets individuals apart from the crowd, but in a manner that is appreciated by others. Tian et al. (2001, p. 52) defined consumers’ need for uniqueness (CNFU) as “the trait of pursuing differences relative to others through the acquisition, utilization, and disposition of consumer goods for the purpose of developing and enhancing one’s self-image and social image”. CNFU is a means for satisfying NPU by using possessions creatively, making unpopular consumption choices, and avoiding buying and consuming commonly used products. According to Tian et al. (2001), all individuals use these consumption behaviors to some extent to establish a unique social image. Several authors have identified concepts of coolness related to uniqueness. Mark of distinction, statement of separateness, refusal to accept norms, anti-authoritarian (Nancarrow et. al., 2002); deviance from the mainstream (Moore, 2004); detachment (Pountain and Robbins, 2000); authenticity (Southgate, 2003). Hence we propose that the need for uniqueness is positively related to cool identity.

We contend that the outer layer of cool is related to several consumer behavior constructs in general and materialism, status concern, and brand consciousness in particular. As Stephens and colleagues (1975, p. 275) suggested, “the importance of outward appearance—the great importance put upon the conspicuous display of wealth as represented by clothes, flashy cars, and other status conferring material goods” play a key role in defining coolness. In writing of generational shifts in values of cool, Moore (2004, p. 72) posits that “command of fashionable clothing and grooming styles were important in establishing status. Stylishness can be linked to cool not only because stylishness is good (therefore cool in a broad sense) but also because stylishness is based on a kind of knowingness and knowingness is a key feature of cool”. As Pountain and Robbins (2002, p. 28) argue once cool was “a form of social deviance and rebellion, but that it is now losing this rebellious status and becoming the dominant ethic of late consumer capitalism”. This is consistent with several concepts used to describe coolness by different authors: Nancarrow and colleagues (2002)–dress code, flashy clothes, commodities, aesthetics of designer labels, niche brands, and consumption of performance. Southgate (2003, p. 453)–“cool is the currency of all brands”. Hence we propose that: Materialism, Status concern and Brand consciousness are positively related to cool identity.

A total of 479 undergraduate students at an English medium university in UAE were asked to complete a questionnaire (in which items were randomized) as part of class exercises. The original content of this questionnaire had diverse objectives and covered more issues than those relevant for the present paper. We believe the cosmopolitan nature of students studying in UAE lends itself to undertaking this research. For example, students on average had traveled to several countries and 80% of them had traveled to a Western country. Fifty four percent were male, median age was 20 years, 59% had his/her own car, 47% had a mobile phone worth over US$ 360.

We used sexual identity scale (Stern et. al., 1987) to develop our four-item cool identity scale: “I FEEL as though I am cool”, “I LOOK as though I am cool”, I DO most things in a manner typical of someone who is cool” and “MY INTERESTS are mostly those of a person who is cool” (alpha=.62). For measuring uniqueness, we used highest loaded three items each on three subscales (creative choice counter-conformity; avoidance of similarity; unpopular choice counter-conformity) of need for uniqueness scale by Tian et al. (2001). E.g., “I’m often on the lookout for new products or brands that will add to my personal uniqueness” (alpha=.69, .62, .68). For materialism, we used material values short form six-item scale developed by Richins (2004). E.g., “I admire people who own expensive homes, cars, and clothes” (alpha=.71). For status concern, we used five items from Eastman and colleagues (1997). E.g., “I would buy a product just because it has status” (alpha=.79). For brand consciousness, we used four items from Shim and Gehrt (1996). E.g., “The more expensive brands are usually my choices” (alpha=.71). All items were measured on 7-point Likert scales.

In analyzing the data, we used correlation analysis in SPSS in order to gain some preliminary insight. We averaged the items under each construct to create a single item measure. Our analysis supports all of our proposed relationships. We briefly list the descriptive statistics and correlation results as follows:

- Cool identity ($M=4.53$, $SD=1.37$) is positively related to cool identity ($n=477$, $r=.338$, $p<.01$)
- Humor ($M=4.88$, $SD=1.16$) is positively related to cool identity ($n=477$, $r=.338$, $p<.01$)
- Creative choice counter-conformity ($M=4.52$, $SD=1.37$) is positively related to cool identity ($n=476$, $r=.326$, $p<.01$)
- Unpopular choice counter-conformity ($M=3.98$, $SD=1.33$) is positively related to cool identity ($n=477$, $r=.349$, $p<.01$)
- Avoidance of similarity ($M=3.79$, $SD=1.35$) is positively related to cool identity ($n=476$, $r=.255$, $p<.01$)
- Materialism ($M=4.36$, $SD=1.15$) is positively related to cool identity ($n=473$, $r=.386$, $p<.01$)
- Status concern ($M=4.14$, $SD=1.28$) is positively related to cool identity ($n=473$, $r=.326$, $p<.01$)
- Brand consciousness ($M=4.07$, $SD=1.31$) is positively related to cool identity ($n=475$, $r=.293$, $p<.01$)

In this paper, we have attempted to examine the meaning of coolness using possible consumer behavior constructs associated to the term. We proposed that humor, need for uniqueness, materialism, status concern and brand consciousness are positively related to coolness. Our preliminary analysis supports all our propositions. Our findings have implications for researchers and practitioners. Given the rich multicultural nature of our sample, we plan to do further analysis such as differences between religion, nationality and gender.
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Social Networking Profiles & Cultural Dimensions: An Empirical Investigation
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In recent years social networking has become very popular and has propelled websites like MySpace, Facebook, and LinkedIn into the mainstream. MySpace, one of the most popular of these social networking sites, was founded just six years ago and already has over 253 million user accounts worldwide (Alexa 2009). As this phenomenon grows and becomes an even larger part of people’s lives, it is extremely important for marketers to understand this new medium and currently there is little research on the subject (Wallace, Walker, Lopez, and Jones 2009; Poynter 2008).

Schau and Gilly’s (2003) research on motivations, intentions, and strategies for constructing personal Web spaces found that many individuals construct their digital selves referencing only the intangible concepts, things like ideas, beliefs, and values. If culture is defined as everything that people in a society learn in relation to values, norms, customs, traditions, and beliefs (Terpstra & Sarathy 2000), then Schau and Gilly’s (2003) findings seem to indicate that individuals actually construct their digital selves referencing their culture. Therefore, this research investigates whether an individual’s culture is evident in their social networking profiles.

For this study we analyzed profiles from the social networking site MySpace from three different countries with respect to three of Geert Hofstede’s Five Cultural Dimensions: individuality, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance. We reviewed 300 customized profiles by looking at the “About Me” section, where users write their personal information. The three countries under investigation were Australia, Ireland and the United States (US). These countries were chosen because of the US and Australia’s similarity on the dimensions Individuality (IDV) and Masculinity (MAS), and their dissimilarity with Ireland on those dimensions, as well as the dissimilarity of the three countries on the dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI). These similarities and differences will act as our hypothesis of whether or not culture manifests itself in these profiles. If culture does play a role we should expect parallel results in terms of similarities and differences among cultural dimensions in personal profiles as we do among the countries.

The country-specific MySpace sites were used to identify the sample of 300 profiles consisting of 100 Australian, 100 Irish, and 100 US profiles with an equal number of male and female profiles for each country. Each profile page was individually printed and then specially coded on the back to indicate the country of origin. All 300 profile pages were randomized and we ensured the judges were not aware of the country coding on the back during the analysis. The “About me” written description on each profile was then evaluated on all three cultural dimensions.

An individualist (IDV) is one who exists in society only seeking their own self-interest and maybe that of their immediate family (Kale 1991). Therefore profiles were rated high on the IDV dimension if the individual primarily wrote about themselves, including but not limited to their career, hobbies, self description, and their personal likes and dislikes. Profiles were rated low on the IDV dimension if the individual wrote about themselves but also mentioned others in their profile, including but is not limited to family, friends, and/or significant others.

Distinctive Masculine (MAS) traits are assertiveness and competitiveness, and typically dominant masculine societies emphasize wealth and success (Geert-Hofstede.com). Therefore profiles were rated high on the MAS if the writing was very unemotional and the individual wrote about “liking” or “enjoying” their career, cars, and/or school but with little or no mention of or emotion towards family,